

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a dark gray color, framing the entire page.

# **The Zombie Knight**

**George M. Frost**

"1 -- I.

((Note to new readers: If you are reading on a phone, then I recommend switching to the desktop theme and holding your device horizontally. Some people do prefer the mobile theme, though, so take your pick. If you find the white-text-on-black-background hard on your eyes or just dislike the Courier New font, you can also read this story over on RoyalRoad, where those things are adjustable. Or, if you prefer the e-book format, you can find those on Smashwords and Amazon.))

Chapter One: 'O, benevolent darkness...!'

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"Hello there, friend."

"...Where am I? What's happening?"

"Easy now. Don't panic. Everything's alright."

"...What's going on? Why can't I see anything?"

"I'm going to tell you, but I need you to listen. I promise to answer all of your questions, so just try to stay calm, okay?"

"...O-okay."

"Listen. You're dead."

"...What?"

"You're dead. You don't have a physical body, anymore. That's why you can't see or move."

"...What kind of crazy joke is this?"

"I'm sorry, friend, but I'm not joking. If I were joking, you'd be laughing. I'm hilarious."

"What the...?"

"Just relax a moment and think about it. You should remember your

death.”

“But... I...”

“Do you remember?”

“I... yes... I remember... I...”

“Don’t worry. It’s alright. I was there when you died. I know what happened.”

“I’m... really dead?”

“Yes.”

“...Does that mean... this is... some kind of afterlife?”

“Not quite. You haven’t reached that point, yet.”

“...What do you mean? Why not? Is it... because I...”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Everything is perfectly normal. I just woke you up a little early, is all. Because before you move on, I have a proposition for you.”

“Proposition...? Who are you?”

“I’m called a few different things, but you’d probably know me best as a reaper. You know. The grim kind.”

“The hell...?”

“I guide and protect souls as they make the journey into the afterlife. Or oblivion. Whichever.”

“You... don’t know?”

“Sure don’t. I’m just a ferryman.”

“Oh... that’s... disappointing...”

“Hey. It bothers me, too. In fact, shut up about it. I don’t need you reminding me of my shortcomings.”

“Uh, sorry...”

“Normally, you’d never know I was here, but I had to disturb you to ask a question.”

“...A proposition.”

“Right. See, as a reaper, I have the power to keep one servant, someone who will help me with various things.”

“Servant...? You want me to be your servant?”

“Servant, partner, friend, ally, whatever you wanna call it, but yes, that’s basically the idea. I’d revive your body, and you’d be able to live again, as long as you help me out. You died very young. I thought you might want a second chance, a chance to, perhaps, live a more fulfilling life.”

“More fulfilling...?”

“Was I wrong?”

“Well... no... but... you could really do that?”

“Yes. No one’s discovered your body, yet, so there’s no problem.”

“So... you could, like, make me into some kind of billionaire or something in my new life?”

“What? No, of course not. That’s not how it works.”

“Then what the hell were you talking about just now?”

“It’s like this: your body is dead, now, but I can revive it and reattach your soul. I can’t give you a brand new body and tons of money. That’d be crazy. I’m a reaper, not a friggin’ genie.”

“Oh... so I’d be living the same life as before...”

“Almost. Well. Kind of. I mean. Things could get a bit complicated.”

“...What the hell does that mean?”

“I wouldn’t revive you for no reason, of course. I’d want you to help me out, like I said.”

“...Help you with what?”



“Saving lives.”

“...Huh?”

"3

“I’ve been around for thousands of years, ferrying souls across this rift between realms. And I’m able to observe the living, but I can’t interact with you until you die. So, as you might imagine, I see a lot of terrible things happen in your world, things that I’d like to be able to do something about. But obviously, I can’t. Not by myself. That’s where you’d come in. I’d find people who are about to die, and then you’d go save them.”

“Uh... wow...”

“Wow?”

“It’s just... I mean... are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“But... uh... That sounds great and all, but... I don’t think I’d be able to save anyone...”

“Sure you would. With my help, you’ll be unkillable.”

“Un...killable...? You mean, like, immortal?”

“Yes. You’d be my undead servant, so naturally, if you die, I’d just revive you again.”

“Whoa... undead...”

“Are you interested in giving it a try?”

“Uh... I dunno. Sounds kind of... insane...”

“Eh. That’s a little rude.”

“You said... I’d be your servant?”

“Yes.”

“...What happens if I disobey you?”

“If you decide you don’t want to help me, anymore, then I’d just release your soul and let you die.”

“You’d kill me...”

“Hey, you’re already dead. What’ve you got to lose?”

“...In that case, it sounds a little too good to be true.”

“It wouldn’t be permanent. If you decide later that you don’t like the arrangement, I’ll find someone else and let you go back to dying.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“Uh. I suppose you don’t. You’ll have to take a bit of a risk. Same as how I’m taking a risk on you.””

"4

“I don’t know...”

“Well, I hate to rush you, but you might want to decide before someone discovers your dead body. It could cause you problems if people find it before you come back to life.”

“I haven’t said yes, yet...”

“I’m aware. Please decide. I’m impatient.”

“A-alright... I’ll give it a shot. It can’t be much worse...”

“Excellent. I’ll get right to it, then.”

“...What’re you gonna do?”

“Just hold on. This might be a little jarring.”

“Hold on? To what? There’s nothing here... What the...? Whoa!”

-+-+--+--

Hector awoke with a cringe. A bolt of pain ran through him, but it vanished after a moment. He blinked away the haze in his vision and

sat up.

It was the bathroom, he saw, remembering. This was where he had died, in this little, not-so-white-tiled bathroom. At least, that's what he thought. Obviously, he wasn't dead.

The fan in the ceiling buzzed, still, just as before. He remembered that sound, remembered thinking about how it would be the last thing he ever heard, remembered how it had made him feel all the more pitiful in his final moments.

But now, hearing the sound again, the droning hum, he wasn't sure what to think. It seemed almost like a different noise even though he knew it hadn't changed.

His shirt was wet, Hector realized, and he looked down at the crimson stains in its thin white cloth. He stood and saw the floor, a pool of his own blood.

He scratched his head. "Huh..."

A mirror greeted him next, his face reflected through a slight cloud of soapy fog. Everything looked the same. The black skin, the shaved head, the somber brown gaze--all his. Somehow, part of him expected to see someone else. Part of him wanted to."

"5

His eyes fell to the sink, to the razor blade in it. It seemed a strange way to die, suddenly, by way of such a small thing, a tiny strip of sharpened metal. But then, he supposed it hadn't really been the razor so much as the long, vertical gashes along his arms, which were still there, though they didn't seem to hurt at all. In fact, he couldn't even feel them. He seemed capable of moving them just fine, but they were completely numb.

'Hello, again,' came a voice, and he turned to see a figure appear next to him, sitting there... floating there. A skeleton, it seemed to be, its bones emanating white from behind a shroud of the pitchest black he had ever seen. A scythe sat in its grip, the blade hanging low beneath its body.

Hector just kind of stared, wide-eyed.

‘No return greeting, huh? Well, fine.’ The skeleton’s jaw moved with its words, though Hector couldn’t understand how.

After a moment, he managed to conjure up a word of his own.  
“You’re...”

‘The reaper you were just talking to, yes. Nice to meet you. Officially, that is.’

“You look... you look just like I imagined you would.” He blinked a few times. “Is this really happening...?”

‘Ah, right. My appearance.’ It gave a skeletal shrug. ‘Whatever you’re seeing, right now, it’s not really what I look like. In truth, I don’t actually look like anything.’

“...What?”

‘Your brain forms an image of what I should look like and projects it onto my presence. Appearance is something for your physical reality, where I do not exist.’

“I... don’t understand...”  
"6

‘Ah, well, it’s no big deal. Oh, and before I forget...’ The reaper hovered closer and reached a gangly hand toward him.

Hector recoiled a little, but the hand still found his shoulder. And suddenly, he felt his arms begin to burn. He looked down to see the bloody gashes bulge and tighten. A groan escaped his lips as he watched the wounds close themselves, leaving only streaks of blood behind, both still wet and already dried. The pain subsided after a few moments.

“What the hell...?” He traced over his arm where one of the slits had been, brushing away the blood. Not even a scar remained. What’s more, his arms were no longer numb.

‘Might want to clean up all this blood,’ said the reaper, motioning to the

floor. 'I can restore your body, but once the blood leaves, I can't put it back. Same goes for your limbs, if they get chopped off or something. I don't reattach things. I just regrow them.'

He squinted a little. "Regrow...?"

'I can revive you, no matter how bad your injuries are,' it said. 'Even if your whole body is destroyed, I can recreate it again. That's how my power works. As long as I maintain a link to your soul, I can resurrect the physical body that accompanies it. Without the soul, though, I can't do anything.'

He wasn't sure what to say.

'It's too bad, really. If I could create a body from scratch, then I wouldn't need anyone's help. I could just make a body for myself and go be a superhero or something.'

"Uh... I-I see... I think."

"7

'But there's a lot more I should explain before we start trying to save the world and whatnot, and you should probably clean up this mess before someone sees. Unless you plan on starting things off by revealing your secret to someone.'

"Er, right..." He moved toward the door and then paused awkwardly. "Uh..."

'Maybe a mop would be useful?'

"R-right..." He opened the door and left. A narrow hallway awaited, and he couldn't help staring at it for a moment. Such a simple place. Creamy white walls and plain brown carpeting. He must have seen it thousands of times, but it seemed somehow different. Everything did, in fact. His scuffed sneakers, his baggy black trousers, even the hallway light over his head and the moth fluttering around it; everything was a reminder of himself, of who he was, of his sudden uncertainty as to whether or not he was still that same person.

He made sure to close the bathroom door behind him and went downstairs. His parents sat together in the den, watching television in the dim light of a tall lamp. They didn't bother to look at him as he

crossed into the kitchen, though he was sure they must have heard his footsteps. But then, he supposed it was better that they didn't see him. Explaining all the blood on his shirt would have been difficult. Quickly, he grabbed the mop by the refrigerator.

'Don't forget a bucket,' came the reaper's soundless voice, and Hector nearly dropped his mop, juggling it between hands for a few moments. 'Some towels would probably be good, too.'

"8

He looked around, blinking. The kitchen was empty, still. He chanced a whisper. "Where are you...?"

'Still in the bathroom,' came the reply. 'I can talk to you, no matter how far apart we are. Has to do with the fact that I'm tapped directly into your brain, rather than talking with a physical voice.'

There was a pause, and Hector just kind of squinted as he waited.

'It works both ways, you know. Say something in your head, and I'll hear you.' Another pause. 'You have to actually think something explicitly, though. Concentration is what solidifies the thoughts in our minds and makes them understandable.'

"Uh... Oh." '...Like this?' he thought, letting his gaze wander toward the ceiling.

'Yeah. Easy, right?'

'Er... sure...' He grabbed the other accouterments that the reaper had mentioned, made his way back upstairs without drawing the attention of his parents, and began mopping up the bathroom floor. With each stroke, the crimson ebbed away, leaving behind a pinkish residue as the pool of blood crowded back in on itself.

He wasn't sure how long the blood had been there, but it had begun staining the tile, so he guessed a few hours must have passed, at least.

'You've gotten quiet,' said the reaper, making Hector look up from his work. 'I thought you'd have more questions for me.'

He stared at the blood for a bit. "...They didn't notice."

‘What?’

“My parents,” he said, wringing the mop out over the bucket. “They didn’t notice I was dead.”

There was a noticeable pause. ‘You were locked in a bathroom, you know. It probably would have been a while before they discovered your body.’”

”9

“I wonder how long it would’ve taken...”

The reaper fell quiet after that. It wasn’t until after Hector had nearly finished cleaning that the conversation resumed.

‘I’m Garovel, by the way. Garovel is my name, that is.’

Hector took a seat on the edge of the bathtub and looked at the floating skeleton again. “Okay,” was all he said.

Garovel tilted his head. ‘Not much for conversation, eh? You talked more when you were dead.’

“...Sorry. I don’t... I mean... yeah.”

‘Well, don’t worry about it. There’s no need to rush things.’ Garovel drifted nearer the mirror, and Hector realized suddenly that the reaper had no reflection. ‘You don’t seem to be the very curious type, so I guess I’ll just explain. Stop me if you have a question.’

Hector waited.

‘You and I are now connected,’ Garovel said. ‘I am what sustains your life, now. Biologically, your body is alive again, but I am the only thing that keeps you attached to your body. Your soul, your consciousness, your sense of self, whatever you want to call the thing, I’m the one who maintains its connection with this world, now.’ The reaper paused a moment, considerate perhaps. ‘I suppose that might sound like a bad thing. Having your soul controlled by someone else, that is, but there are actually some pretty fantastic advantages to this whole scenario. The first is, of course, the ability to restore your body, but I already talked about that. And I believe you’ve already glimpsed the second

major advantage. That is, the ability to continue moving, even after your body is technically dead.'

He blinked."

"10

'It has to do with your brain.' Garovel tapped a long phalanx bone against his bare skull. 'Rather than having to rely on blood and flesh for all of its energy, your brain now relies entirely upon me, largely because I now inhabit your brain, so to speak. But, in terms of this physical world, your brain is now self-sustaining. Even if, say, you bleed to death or your heart stops beating or you even stop breathing, your brain will continue to work just fine.' The reaper paused again. 'Of course, it's not quite as simplistic as it sounds, since the brain is a pretty complicated piece of equipment. I did have to numb all sorts of signals that might otherwise fool your brain into thinking it needs to shut down due to a lack of blood or glucose or what have you, but you don't really need to worry about all that. I've got everything covered.'

Hector tried to say something but found he didn't have the words, so he just kind of stared with a raised brow.

The reaper tilted its head at him. 'Did that make sense?'

He merely nodded.

'Alright, then. The third advantage is, obviously, having my shining personality around whenever you need me.'

He couldn't help smirking just a little.

'Though, it's more than just my personality,' Garovel went on. 'As a reaper of death, I have the ability to sense whenever someone is on the verge of it. The verge of death, that is. Simply put, I perceive an aura of impending doom about a person's soul. It's very dramatic. Especially because I can't do anything to help them. You, on the other hand, can. So whenever I sense that aura around someone, I want you to try and save them. Understood?'"

"11



“Er, yeah...” He nodded again.

‘You should know, however, that I will always require this of you. My entire purpose in reviving you is so that you can help me save lives. So no matter how your life may change--be it a new job, getting married, having children, or anything else--if you ever become unable to help me, then I will have to release your soul and find someone else.’

“O-okay...” He squinted. “But... how could I ever become ‘unable’ to help you? I mean... I doubt I’ll ever be too busy to go save a person’s life...”

‘That’s good of you to say, but it may not always be your decision. For instance, if your brain ended up in a jar, you wouldn’t be able to save anyone. And I wouldn’t be able to get you out. Well. Maybe if it was a weak jar. I mean, a REALLY weak jar. I’m not too sure.’

He blinked a couple times. “Uh... what? Why would my brain end up in a jar?”

‘I dunno. I was just giving an example.’

That example was far too specific, Hector felt. “Are... are you gonna ask me to fight a mad scientist or something?”

‘Oh, um. I wasn’t planning on it, but I can’t say its an impossibility, either. Who knows what the future will bring, right?’

“Er... right...” Hector’s gaze drifted toward the ground for a moment, then to the unbroken skin on his arms again. “I do have a question, though...”

‘What is it?’

“If... if you can... resurrect people like this... then... why don’t you... you know... do it... for everyone?”

Garovel hesitated. ‘Uh. What? I can’t understand you. Stop pausing so much when you talk.’

“Agh...” He tried again. “If you can resurrect people, then... why don’t you just... resurrect everyone?”

‘You’re still pausing. I told you to stop that.’”

“Dammit, I’m... trying...”

‘Ah well. I understood you the second time, anyway.’

“Then answer my question, already!”

‘Hey, you didn’t pause that time. Good job.’

“I wish you had a body so I could strangle you...”

‘That’s an important question, though. Obviously, if I could keep more people alive, I would. I don’t know about everyone, but yes. The problem is, I can only maintain a stable connection with one soul at a time. If I tried to maintain it with a second person, then my energy would begin to dissipate, which would end up exhausting or destroying me. And if either of those two things happen to me, then the people I’m connected to would have their souls ripped from their still-living bodies, which would result in either brain death or a psychotic break. And a body with a broken consciousness can become rather monstrous, to say the least.’

He cocked his head back. “You mean, they’d... like... start killing random people?”

‘Among other gruesome things, yeah.’

“Wow... okay.” He folded his slender arms, and his face distorted a little. “But if that’s the case, then... why’d you pick me for this job?”

‘Well, I had to pick someone. I needed a servant, and there you were.’

“That’s it...? It was just coincidence that you picked me...?”

‘Mostly.’

Hector eyed the reaper. “And what does that mean? ‘Mostly’?”

‘I try not to petition murderers and the like for this job, so yes, there is some judgment involved, on my part. What’s more, I didn’t pick you. I asked you. You’re the one who agreed.’

“But... a second chance like this... who the hell would turn down your offer?”

‘Someone who just wants to die.’”

"13

At that, Hector hesitated. For a time, he merely sat there, letting his gaze fall from Garovel to the floor. “But,” he finally said, “I killed myself...”

‘I know. I watched you do it.’

“Then... then why didn’t you ask someone else? Someone who died by accident or something?” He breathed a curt breath. “Someone who actually deserves a chance like this...”

‘If you’d really wanted to die like that, then you wouldn’t have agreed to help me when I asked you.’

As he sat there, his head eased down between his hands. “But...” He sighed.

‘Before you died, I had been watching you for quite a while.’

He looked up. “What...?”

‘From the moment you decided to commit suicide, I could sense the aura of death around you.’ The shadows of Garovel’s missing eyes seemed abruptly more intent upon him. ‘That’s how it works. I sense death when the soul becomes directly imperiled. If you were about to get hit by a bus, I wouldn’t sense your death until you walked in front of the thing. Situations like that really suck. But for people like you, people who intend to commit suicide, I sense death when the decision is finalized in your mind.’

He blinked. “Then... you must’ve been...”

‘Yes. I was waiting for nearly seven months. That’s how long it took you to do it.’ Garovel gave a small shrug. ‘Not the longest I’ve ever seen, but definitely up there. I’d check on you from time to time, maybe two or three times a week. Eventually, I started to wonder why you were letting things drag out so much, why you didn’t just get it over with. And then I figured it out.’

His gaze returned to the floor, and his eyes eased shut as he listened.”

'The last couple weeks, I watched you quite a lot. That's when I noticed. You were always alone.' Garovel paused. 'At school, you almost never speak to any of your classmates. Maybe it's because you have such trouble communicating. Even here, in your own house, you're very distant from your parents. I don't think I ever saw you say more than a few words to them at a time.'

He squinted hard, feeling the sudden tension behind his eyes, trying to keep it away.

'The reason you waited so long to kill yourself, it was because you were waiting for someone to stop you, wasn't it?'

He covered his eyes with his hand, as if to make some vain attempt at hiding himself. "But... no one did..."

'No. No one did.'

The tears were there in full now, streaming down his face, and he couldn't make them go away, much as he wanted to.

'And then, after you died, when I asked you if you would help me, you agreed. That was all the confirmation I needed. Because like I said, if you had really wanted to die, then you wouldn't have said yes to me.'

He tried to say something else, uncertain what, but found his breath too choked to form words.

'So now you've got another chance. And this time, you'll try to help me, just like I'll try to help you.'

Chapter Two: 'Hark! Ye quiet horrors...!'

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Hector had snuck out of the house, which he had never done before and was not sure he ever wanted to do again. His room was on the second floor, so he jumped out the window and broke both of his legs, which hurt like hell, he discovered."

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Garovel laughed, promptly apologized for laughing, and then fixed him. He asked Garovel why he could still feel pain, and the reaper explained that pain was still useful in letting him know which parts worked and which didn't.

"Are you really sure about this?" he mumbled into the cool night air.

'What do you mean? Of course I'm sure.'

"But... how am I supposed to stop a serial killer...? You're not gonna... make me... kill this guy, right?"

'Oh, no. That could get messy. Serial killers are matters for the authorities, but I've been observing this guy, and in this instance, the police could use an assist. Just someone to point them in the right direction, that is.'

"Point, how?"

'An anonymous phone call.'

"That will actually work?"

'We just have to give them an excuse to visit his apartment at a particularly inconvenient time for him. The rest should follow.'

They walked for a long while in the dark, leaving the modesty of Hector's inner city neighborhood for the downtown towers. He wasn't sure what time it was, but judging by the fog gathering between the buildings, he guessed it was late enough to be considered early again. The air tram had not stopped running, though, carrying rowdy passengers above the street on its suspended rails, and loud music in the distance bridged the gaps not already filled by sirens.

People on the sidewalks and in the street paid him little mind as they laughed at each other's jokes or stumbled out of a night club or slept on the bench in front of a Nancy's."

"16

He wondered what he would do if some stranger came up to him and started talking, like what happens in every movie where a young

person ends up in a strange neighborhood late at night, and the more he thought about it, the more he resolved that there wasn't much for him to be afraid of. In fact, he almost wanted some creepy drunk person to saunter up and start a conversation, just so he could see what would happen. He figured it would inevitably be something surprising, like them turning out to be really fun and perfectly harmless, if a bit over-friendly from the inebriation. And if they tried to kidnap and murder him, well. That would be surprising for them.

'Here,' said Garovel, stirring him from his wonderment. The reaper drifted near a phone booth, and Hector entered. 'Up there.'

He looked where the reaper pointed and saw a fourth floor balcony of a high-end apartment building. A man stood there, smoking in front of a lamp over a window. Even at this distance, he could see that the man was well-dressed in a dark suit and undone tie.

"That... that's the guy?"

'Yeah.'

Hector eyed the phone in front of him. The next step was obvious enough, but he hesitated. "But... what if..."

'Hmm?'

"What if I call the police... and they come and... what if that guy kills one of them?"

Garovel looked at him heavily. 'If you're wondering why I'm not sending you in there instead, it's because this is your first try. I don't intend to give you more than you can handle.'

"But... if someone has to risk their life... then it should be me... shouldn't it?"

"17

The reaper made no response.

Hector kept pressing. "I mean, because, I-I can't die, right? He won't be able to kill me? And... because I... I already wasted my life, anyway, so... I wouldn't even be risking anything..."

‘Are you telling me you want to deal with him yourself?’

“I... uh... yeah.”

Garovel tilted his head. ‘That’s surprisingly bold of you. I thought you’d prefer to take things slower.’

“I just... don’t want anyone getting killed, is all...”

‘If that’s the case, then you should probably hurry.’

Hector’s face stiffened. “What? Why?”

‘Well, you know how I said the plan was to have the police visit him at an inconvenient time? He kills women by seducing them and bringing them back to his apartment, so the intention was to have them show up in the middle of--’

“What?!” He looked back to the balcony, but the man wasn’t there anymore. He grabbed the phone and dialed the police.

‘Now you’re calling? But you just said--’

“Hello?!” he yelled into the receiver. “There’s a guy in my building about to kill someone! He’s got a gun--”

‘He uses a knife.’

“--I mean, a knife, and ah--I heard him making threats on someone’s life from outside his apartment!”

<“What is your location?”>

“Ah--” Garovel gave him the address of the building, and he relayed it to the operator.

<“Please stay on the line, sir.”>

“Sorry, I can’t! Just get here!” He hung up and ran across the street. He barged through the entrance, and a security guard scrambled to stop him, but Hector had quite a head start. “Matter of life and death!” he shouted back as an apology.”



He bounded up the first staircase he saw and got off at the fourth floor. A pair of hallways bade him choose, so he followed Garovel's directions to the door of the murderer.

Hector pounded on the door. "Hello?! Please open up, sir! There's, ah--a gas leak, and we need to evacuate the building!"

No answer.

Garovel ventured inside. 'He's hiding her in the bathroom.'

He backed up and started kicking the door. "Please, sir! I know you're in there! This is very important!" The door didn't budge at all. It might as well have been a wall.

'He's about to slit her throat.'

"No!"

'Here.' Garovel found his shoulder, and Hector immediately felt an explosion of pain throughout his body before it vanished familiarly. 'Kick it in!'

The door flew from its hinges, ripping its deadbolt and chained lock right out of the wood and plaster.

"What the fuck?!" came a voice from the bathroom, and when the man came out and saw Hector, horror struck his face and he backed away toward the living room. "What the fuck are you?!"

And Hector was confused, because he couldn't see his own skin eating away at itself, revealing the dried, bloodless muscles of his face. He couldn't see his shaved hair gone ghostly white or his bloodshot eyes outlined in dead, blackened flesh. Hector just kept walking forward, undeterred by the knife that the murderer threw into his chest, and he grabbed the man by the throat and slowly tightened his grip. Hector could hardly believe how weak the man's struggles were. He easily kept him pinned against the wall, strangling the man until he fell unconscious."

"19

Hector looked at his hands for a second, awed and frightened of himself. He spotted a bundle of rope by the bed, presumably used on

the victim earlier. He wrapped it around the killer and tied a triple knot as tightly as he could manage.

Then he saw the woman in the bathroom. She was still alive, and conscious, even. When she saw him, she tried to scream and wriggle free, but her constraints kept her in place all too perfectly. She'd been beaten, apparently, and shallow cuts riddled her arms and face and stomach.

Hector stepped toward her and then stopped, thinking better of it. "Sorry," he told her. "I'd untie you, but... you should probably stay and explain... uh, to the police... about what he tried to do to you. Otherwise, he could... you know... get away with it... and... yeah..."

She only stared back at him, wide-eyed.

"Oh! But, uh... don't worry! The police will be here any minute. And he's unconscious now. And I tied him up just in case. So... uh... y-you're safe, now. And I-I should, I should go..."

Upon hearing sirens in the distance, he ran. Some onlookers had gathered outside, the security guard from earlier among them, but he just pushed past them. He didn't stop running until he couldn't see the apartment complex anymore.

Garovel grabbed his shoulder, and suddenly, his strength left him. He fell to his knees, gasping for breath. His deathly body, however, returned to normal. The blackened and missing chunks of flesh grew anew, becoming the livelier ashy brown color they were before. He barely felt capable of walking, as if he'd just run a marathon where the prize was getting run over by a bus."

"20 -- III.

"You didn't mention anything... about whatever the hell... you did to me back there..." This time, his pauses were attributed more to his exhaustion and strained breaths.

'I converted the energy your body would normally use to support your life into muscle strength. Which sorta makes you look like a corpse and is why that guy freaked out when he saw you.'

"Oh... okay..."

‘You’re going to feel like I ripped your muscles out of your body and replaced them with flaming needles tomorrow, by the way.’

“Joy...”

Chapter Three: ‘Thy path be not gentle...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Sneaking back into his house had been a chore. He couldn’t very well have gone through the front door; he was sure he would’ve woken one or both of his parents. So instead, he climbed up the wall to his bedroom window--a wall which clearly was not meant to be climbed. He lost count of how many times he fell. Garovel eventually just decided to empower his body again so that Hector could finally make it back up to his room and into the relief of his bed.

Too soon, however, his alarm clock went off.

‘Oops, sorry. Time to get up.’

He groaned into his pillow. “Oh, just... just fuck right off. Seriously... I wouldn’t get out of this bed right now if you set it on fire...”

Garovel tapped him on the head. ‘It’s fine. You can catch up on your sleep later.’

He felt his eyelids recede, the weight from them completely lifted. His exhaustion was gone, he realized, and he sat up. He glared at Garovel. “Why didn’t you just do that earlier?” He winced as aching pains vaulted from muscle to muscle all over his body. “And why don’t you do something about this soreness, too?”

"20 -- III.

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"21

‘Sorry, but that really needs to go away on its own. I told you to expect pain, didn’t I?’

He stood slowly and regretted every moment of it. “Agh, oww...”

‘It’s bad if I keep putting off the recovery pains and exhaustion. They’ll

just come back stronger later.'

"You can't just... ugh... keep putting it off forever?"

'Yeah, and then one day, I forget. Or we end up separated for a long time, and guess what happens? You experience pain that is so strong, it drives you actually insane.'

He sighed. "Okay, fine..."

'You're very cranky in the morning.'

Hector blinked and flushed red. "Ah--I'm sorry. I didn't, ah, I didn't mean to be rude..."

Garovel seemed amused. 'It's fine. Don't look so worried.'

He readied himself for school and left, not needing to say goodbye to his parents who were already gone, and he arrived at the bus stop just as it was pulling up to the curb. Garovel floated steadily along with him, even keeping pace with the bus right outside Hector's window. No one sat next to him.

Calman High School was notoriously cramped. It sat on a crowded high street, its seven stories paling in comparison to every building around it, and since the property was nowhere near large enough to house any fields or facilities whatsoever, every last one of the school's physical education courses and sports teams had to be exported to rented buildings. An eighth floor was being added in order to cope with the number of students, but that meager relief was still months from fruition.

Hector arrived at his morning mathematics class and took his seat in the back corner of the room, thankful at least for the walls on two sides of him instead of another pair of warm bodies breathing down his neck."

"22

It sometimes seemed a strange thing to him that he could feel so alone with so many people around, but the more he thought about it, the more he supposed that to be the exact problem. He wondered if anyone else felt as lost in the crowd as he did. And now, being undead and seeing Garovel drift among the students like the most

unapproachably frightening teacher in the world, Hector also began to wonder if a school where everyone knew one another would have changed his life. Or his death.

Garovel hung around throughout his first few classes, making the occasional remark about how no one in the room was about to die or pointing out an inaccuracy in the teacher's lecture. Honestly, Hector was glad for the company, strange as it was, but he wasn't entirely sure why the reaper was staying. Surely, Garovel had better things to do than observe a second-year geography lesson about the Eloan continent's tropical regions. Hector refrained from asking about it, however, figuring it might prompt Garovel to leave.

But as the teacher's lecture drew out and transformed into one of current events, of civil unrest and brutalities in the modern world, a more serious question began to brew in Hector's mind; and when it was time to break for lunch, he decided to petition Garovel for an answer.

'There's something else I want to know,' Hector thought, not wanting to look like the crazy kid in the corner of the refectory who sat talking to himself.

'Yeah?'

'Uh... why aren't you somewhere more important?'

Garovel cocked a bony eyebrow. 'Excuse me?'

"23

'No, I mean... uh... why are you trying to help people here in Brighton? I mean... with all the horrible shit going on in the world, aren't there lots of other places that need help...? Not that, uh... not that I think preventing murders isn't important and all, but, ah... there are whole countries at war in the southeast, you know...'

'I do know, yes. The Korgum-Dozer conflict. And the Kavian civil war in the north. And Jesbol and Horsht far to the west. I'm keenly aware.'

'Then why are you here?'

'Perhaps you think I'm the only reaper in the entire world.'

Hector blinked.

‘I’m not, just so it’s clear. I’m merely one of hundreds of thousands. And while it’s true that most of us don’t take on servants, the number of us who do still ends up being quite substantial.’

‘So... you’re saying the other reapers have the war-torn areas covered? Because that doesn’t really--’

Garovel shook his head. ‘No, no. Unfortunately, circumstances are appreciably more complicated than that.’ The reaper drifted around the side of the table. ‘Those of us who decide to take on servants and involve ourselves in the world... well, we don’t always agree with one another.’

‘Oh, you mean... oh...’

‘Yeah. It’s especially prevalent in war zones. Some of us will side with one army, while others side with the opposing army. Or some will form their own side, perhaps trying to protect people in the crossfire, perhaps... not.’

Hector sat up in his chair. ‘Wait... are you saying... some of you guys are actually trying to make things worse?’

Garovel nodded. ‘It may depend on your perspective, but... yes.’”

"24

‘But... why? I don’t...’

‘Like I said, we don’t always agree with one another. That extends to more essential questions, as well. Such as whether or not human lives are even worth protecting in the first place.’

‘That... that sounds horrific...’

‘You see? If we tread into a battlefield, we’ll almost certainly encounter other reapers with servants. And frankly, you are nowhere near ready for that. Their servants will stomp you into the dust.’

‘Aren’t I unkillable, though?’

‘You are, but I’m not. And until you’re able to protect me, we’ll be keeping our heads low. I may be a grim reaper, but I don’t have a

death wish.'

'O-okay...'

'But there is a reason why I chose Brighton specifically,' said Garovel, hesitating slightly. 'There's something... unsettling about this city.'

'Unsettling? How do you mean?'

Garovel gave a strained expression. 'I'm not sure. There's a presence in this city I've never felt before. And it's hiding. I think we may be able to draw it out, given time.'

'Oh... Hmm.'

'Did you have any other questions? Feel free to ask me anything.'

Hector bit into an apple. Chewing used more muscles than he realized, and he felt his neck and face aching in protest. 'Actually, there is something. That woman from last night... were you... I mean... were you going to let her die...? In order to catch the murderer, I mean. If I hadn't interrupted, would you have--'

'Whoa, whoa, hold on now. The plan was to have the police catch him in the midst of torturing her, not with her dead body. The reason he came so close to killing her was because you spooked him by knocking on the door. Otherwise, he would have been torturing her all night, which would have given the police ample time to arrive.'"

"25

'Oh... okay... So I... so I just screwed things up, then...'

'No, you did fine, Hector. In fact, your intervention ensured that it didn't develop into a hostage situation.' Garovel eyed him a moment. 'Make no mistake, this is risky territory we're heading into. The idea is to be smart and make the best of situations that are already terrible. Sometimes, there won't be a good option left to choose, and we'll just have to endure. Luckily, you're pretty durable now.'

A cup of chili sailed past Hector's head, and he abruptly realized that a food fight had broken out a few tables away. A half-eaten hot dog landed in his lap and slathered ketchup all over his shirt.



“Oh shit!” came a voice from the crowd. “Sorry about that, pal!” It belonged to a young man he knew to be Micah, smiling apologetically. Micah took a chunk of mashed potatoes to the face.

‘That looks fun,’ said Garovel. ‘Incredibly wasteful, but fun.’

Hector went to get up and had to stifle a groan. When not moving, he could nearly forget that every muscle in his body hated him at the moment. He made his way over to the napkin dispenser at the condiment table, but someone bumped into him. They turned, presumably to apologize, but stopped.

When Hector saw who it was, he averted his eyes and offered his own apology. “Sorry, Davia.”

She looked at him as if she were addressing a blank wall. “Why are you apologizing?” she said. “I bumped into you, didn’t I?”

Hector didn’t chance a reply.

“I’ll look where I’m going next time,” she said. “So don’t tell on me, Hector.” She left him alone.”

"26

‘What was that about?’ Garovel asked, floating closer. ‘You can’t even talk to a girl? You do remember only needing one hand to subdue a serial killer, right? Did that do nothing for your self-esteem?’

‘No, that’s not what that was. She’s... I mean... I don’t... It’s because she’s from the carpentry club and... I...’

‘Hmm? You have a history with her?’

Hector tilted his brow at the reaper. ‘You... don’t already know?’

Garovel merely shook his head.

‘I thought you knew everything about me...’

‘I occasionally followed you around a bit over the course of seven months. I don’t know your entire life story.’

‘R-right...’ Hector occupied himself with the stain on his shirt. The slash

of red reminded him of the bloodied shirt he trashed the night before.

‘So? Who is she to you, then?’

He glanced in the direction she had gone and saw her eating with a bunch of other students. ‘I was almost part of that group,’ he said. ‘We were... we were almost friends, I guess...’

Garovel followed him back to his table, phasing through a passing lacrosse player. ‘I take it things didn’t end very well.’

Hector didn’t answer.

‘Tell me what happened.’

He sighed and grabbed his fork. ‘Why?’

‘Do you remember what I said before? You would help me, and I would help you.’

‘Thanks, but... there’s nothing to help with...’

‘Even so, I’d like to know more about you.’

A wash of gratitude ran through him like a shiver, and Hector hid his face downward, as if his food could be so utterly fascinating. For an incredible moment, he thought he might actually cry, which only made him flush with embarrassment. He wished he could tell Garovel how much those words just now had meant to him, but he just couldn’t. He didn’t know what was stopping him, and he hated whatever it was, but he just couldn’t."

"27

At length, Garovel relented. ‘Well, have it your way.’

When Hector finally looked up again, hoping the red in his face was gone, he saw the aftermath of the food fight. Several students were cleaning up the mess under the supervision of teachers and custodians. Even after the bell rang, they were made to keep cleaning.

‘I’m going to go check on a few things while you’re in class,’ said Garovel. ‘I’ll meet up with you again after school, potentially with a new task, so be ready.’

Hector felt himself panicking slightly. 'Ah--um... where are you going?'

'The police station, among other places. I'd like to follow up on our serial killer's case, make sure there aren't any problems.'

'Um... please... um...'

'Hmm?'

'Please... don't leave me alone...'

Garovel paused for an extremely toothy smile. He tapped Hector on the head with the butt of his scythe. 'Don't you remember? When you talk to me in your head, I'll hear you no matter where I am. So don't frown like that. You understand? You're never alone, Hector. Not anymore.'

He nodded uncertainly.

'Unless you want to be alone, that is. Then just don't think at me.'

'Right...'

Throngs of students filed past him as he watched Garovel disappear through the wall's steely blue-and-white tile. He took a breath and proceeded to his history class.

As he sat and listened to the mousy Jeremy Voller attempting to give a report about the recent history of the Crown, Hector began to wonder why he even bothered coming back to school. He could see the instructor growing more impatient with Jeremy's every redundant word. Mr. Cormac had a reputation for candidness that made most of the students like him, and Hector might have been included in that group if he didn't find all teachers inherently frightening."

"28

"Thank you, Jeremy. That was very informative and tedious. You can take your seat, now."

Jeremy took his seat.

Mr. Cormac stood and addressed the class. "Lovely. Which one of you

delightful curs would like to bore us with your historical insights next? Hector Goffe, how about you?"

Hector shook his head furiously and tried to shrink into his desk.

"Oh come on. You did the assignment, didn't you?"

Of course he hadn't. He'd planned on being dead for today's class. In fact, not having to do any of his homework had provided all the more motivation to kill himself. And now that he thought about it, he wasn't sure if he would still be able to pass any of his classes. He wasn't sure if he should care, either.

At length, the instructor grew tired of Hector's silence and moved on.

Hector was just waiting for the day to end. After a while, he decided to try the reaper. 'Um... Garovel?'

'Yeah?'

He smiled faintly. 'Are you... er... Have you learned anything, yet?'

'The case seems to be proceeding well. Better than I expected, in fact. I thought they would only be able to get him for attempted murder of the woman you saved, but they found evidence in his apartment which implicates him in the murders he committed previously as well.'

'That's good.'

'Yes. Though, apparently you crushed the man's windpipe.'

'Oh shit... did... He's not dead, is he? I wasn't trying to--'

'No, he's alive. Somehow. I should've given you time to familiarize yourself with that level of strength.'

'If you'd done that, then... we might not have made it to her in time...'

'You make a fair point. By the way, her condition is good... Wait a minute.'

Hector looked around the classroom, as if it would somehow help. 'Garovel?'

'Uh-oh.'

'What's wrong?'

'One of the police officers. I see the aura of death around him.'"  
"29 -- IV.

Chapter Four: 'Embolden thy steeled heart...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector shifted at his desk. 'Uh... okay... So what do I do?'

'Hmm.'

'Garovel?'

'I'm thinking. He looks perfectly healthy, so it's probably not illness. I can see the aura around him--Officer Mallory, by the way--but the danger doesn't seem to be immediate. He IS in the middle of a police station, after all. I suspect the exact nature of the threat won't become apparent until he leaves the building.

'You want me go to the police station right now?'

'It looks like his shift doesn't end for a few hours. You have time. Head down here after school.'

'Are you sure...? I mean, it's a man's life at stake... and I really don't mind skipping class...'

'I'll let you know if the situation changes. In the mean time, you should probably take steps to conceal your identity. If you end up having to take a bullet for this man, it'd be best if he doesn't see your face when you shrug it off.'

'O-okay, but... I don't exactly have a mask or... anything...'

'Figure it out. Borrow something from a store along the way, if you have to.'

'I don't think that's borrowing...'

'If you can't find a mask in time, then. Well. You're just going to have to risk it. Obviously, concealing your identity is not more important than a person's life.'

Hector paused a moment, and then quietly sighed. 'I... think I know where I can borrow one...'

'Splendid.'

'It, uh, it might look really weird, though...'

'Oh. Well. Forget it, then. We can't have you looking weird.'

'You don't have to be mean...'

'It's tough love, Hector. Tough love.'"

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‘It, uh, it might look really weird, though...’

‘Oh. Well. Forget it, then. We can’t have you looking weird.’

‘You don’t have to be mean...’

‘It’s tough love, Hector. Tough love.’”

"30

A few minutes before the final bell, he slipped out of class. He could hear the instructor hollering at him for leaving early but ignored it and made his way down to the basement level. He was hoping he could get into the carpentry room before any of the club members arrived, but he ended up waiting for its last class to empty. He took to the corner, trying to be invisible, which was surprisingly easy with so many students, and when he spotted the welding mask that someone had yet to return to the storage rack, he gathered himself and reached out. He grabbed it, but so did someone else.

“Hey, what the--? Let go--Hector?”

Hector cringed, realizing it was Lance Alexander, treasurer of the carpentry club and one of the people he’d been trying to avoid.

“What are you doing here, Hector? Don’t tell me you want to rejoin the club.”

“No,” he said, pulling the mask away from Lance. “I just... need to

borrow this for a while.”

“No one’s allowed to take the equipment out of the classroom.”

“I’ll bring it back.”

“That’s not the problem.” Lance was bigger than Hector, bigger than most people, and no small measure of intimidating, but at that moment, Hector had every reason in the world to not give a damn about what he had to say.

“Report me, then.” He fled without waiting for Lance’s response.

Hector knew Lance wasn’t a bad guy. He knew Lance was just following the rules, and he knew that this would probably earn him detention for a week or two, but he didn’t see a way around it. Perhaps the drama club had masks he could borrow, but he didn’t actually know where the drama club met; and seeing as the school didn’t even have its own auditorium, he figured it wouldn’t be an easy place to reach.”

"31

He stuffed the black welding mask into his bag and left the campus on foot. He asked Garovel for directions and received them, discovering it was no short journey; but in time, he arrived and the reaper met up with him on the street corner in front of the station.

Hector took a seat on a wood-and-stone bench. ‘So, uh... have you learned anything else about him?’

‘He doesn’t get along with his partner or any of his fellow officers here. Everyone seems to think he’s an asshole.’

‘Is he?’

‘Maybe. I’ve only known him since this afternoon.’

‘I guess it doesn’t matter much...’

‘He appears to have a daughter. Unlike him, she’s a brunette and wears glasses. She looks very young, though the photo on his desk could be several years old by now. No information on the mother, yet.’

‘Wow... you’re observant...’



‘You’re easily impressed. It’s not much to go on. Mallory doesn’t seem to have an active case, at the moment. I only saw him doing follow-up paperwork, but I did discover that he’s scheduled to appear in court in a few days.’

‘For what?’

‘Not sure, but there aren’t many things that cops go to court for. If he were being prosecuted for something serious, I doubt he would still be allowed to come to work. Could be they just bumped him off active duty, but I’d guess he’s appearing as an expert witness.’

‘So... someone wants to kill him before he testifies?’

‘Seems likely. But then, killing a cop right before his court date isn’t exactly easy to cover up. If I’m right, then someone’s either very stupid or...’

‘Very influential.’

‘Yeah.’ Garovel looked at Hector and smirked. ‘Heh.’

‘What’re you smiling about?’

‘Y’know, for someone dumb enough to kill himself, you’re smarter than I thought.’

Hector’s face went flat. ‘Fuck you, too, Skeletor.’”

"32

Garovel just laughed. ‘How’s the soreness, by the way?’

He groaned a little. ‘Incredibly painful... but... I’m starting to get used to it... I guess.’

‘It’ll probably get a lot worse after today.’

“Ugh...”

They both spotted a police car exiting the station’s side garage, a uniformed officer in the driver’s seat.

‘There he is,’ said Garovel, clutching Hector’s shoulder. ‘Get ready. I’ll

follow him and give you directions. When I tell you, start running as fast as you can.'

Hector felt a blaze of vigor run through him. The soreness vanished, and he breathed deep. "Whoa...!" He could feel his muscles pulsing, his blood rushing, and a surge of so much energy that he thought he might go insane if he didn't expel it.

'You might not need it, but put your mask on just in case. And make sure you don't run into anyone. That's more important than catching up to us.'

He slid the welding mask over his face. He had to pull up the small, black visor in order to see at all. The rectangular slit of glass bore a few scratches but not enough to obstruct his vision.

The police car was pulling away. Garovel flew after it, and Hector waited. They fell out of sight, and he kept waiting. Passersby gave him uncomfortable looks as he stood there in his mask, trembling with anticipation.

'Move straight ahead five blocks and turn right. Tell me when you've reached it.'

Hector bolted forward. His legs bounded over the pavement with more force than he expected, but he could tell that he wasn't even breaching his potential yet. He broadly weaved between pedestrians, still picking up momentum, but when he saw an intersection full of passing vehicles, he realized he wouldn't be able to stop in time. So he didn't. He ran into traffic. A white town car blared its horn at him as he leapt clear over its roof and landed still running down the sidewalk."

"33

It was so easy to run, as if it required no effort, as if it was more natural to run than to walk. Someone stepped out from a shop in front of him, and he swiped past the flaps of their coat. He slowed down a little to ensure he had control, and when the turn came up, he went right.

'I reached the turn,' he told Garovel.

'Keep going straight until you see the ramp onto the highway and take it.'

People were becoming a blur, so he slowed his pace again. A crowd filled the sidewalk up ahead. Hector could see himself nearly keeping pace with the cars, so he ran into the street. Striding the white lines between lanes and not feeling winded in the slightest, he couldn't help laughing inside his mask as he searched for a road speed sign. He saw one that said "40 km/h."

Once he boarded the highway, however, the cars began speeding past him again. He pushed his legs as hard as he could, and he was sure that he was running much faster than he had been previously, but the cars still roared by, and he stuck to the shoulder of the road. The next sign he saw said "110 km/h."

Still, after what must have been at least half an hour of running, he exited the highway, per Garovel's instructions, and found himself breathing heavily but not gasping. He figured his blood still needed all the extra air, but his muscles didn't hurt or feel tired in the slightest.

He soon arrived in a quieter neighborhood. He could see the police car parked in a driveway up the street. When he saw the reaper approaching, he slowed to a walk."

"34

"How fast--" He paused to slide his mask off his face. "--Exactly how fast am I, anyway?" As he stood still, he could feel his own heart pounding faster than it ever had in his entire life.

Garovel shrugged. 'How fast can your body run without tearing itself apart?'

He scratched his head and returned with a wet hand. He wiped the sweat on his shirt, but it was similarly soaked. He wiped it on his pants instead.

'Officer Mallory is in his house. You should keep your distance until--' Garovel stopped when they both saw a black van pull up in front of the house. Five men stepped out. Two started for the front door, three circled around back. 'You'd better put your mask back on.'

'Right.'

Dashing up to the house, he saw them knocking on the door.

‘Deal with the ones in the back first.’

‘Okay.’

He snuck along the neighbor’s fence and leapt over into the backyard. The three of them noticed him immediately and stiffened their postures, hands in their coats.

“Who the fuck are you?” said the nearest one, square-jawed and younger than the others. “What’s with the fucking mask?”

“Uh... I-I heard you had some leaky pipes?”

“Get outta here before we--”

‘You don’t have time to chat.’ Garovel touched his shoulder, and that familiar pain flashed through his body. ‘Go.’

He rushed the youngest guy, who pulled a gun, but Hector flattened him before he could fire. The man stayed down. The other two pulled, and Hector took two in the chest before reaching the next man, slugging him in the face, and kicking his gun away from him. The last one fired five more times, three of which missed Hector completely, and went down with a kick to the testicles and an elbow to the forehead.

Gunfire erupted from inside the house.”

"35

He stomped the door down and found Mallory crouched behind the kitchen’s island, clutching his side with one arm, trying to reload his service weapon with the other, and staring right back at Hector. A ponytailed gunman was in the hall, and Hector walked straight toward him. A bullet ripped through the mask and pierced his neck. Hector yanked the man’s gun away and smashed him in the face with it. A few teeth flew from his mouth and hit the hardwood floor as he did.

A gunshot made him run back into the kitchen. The last thug was slumped in the other doorway, his head blown open and bleeding all over the tile. Officer Mallory took a ragged breath and looked at Hector, doubtless wanting to ask the obvious question, but he pulled out a cellphone instead and dialed. He tried to stand but slid back down against the counter, bleeding nearly as much as the dead man.

"I'm going to assume--guh--that you didn't come here to kill me," said the officer. He put the phone to his ear. "Yeah, I need an ambulance." Giving his address and eyeing Hector, he added, "And there's someone else here in even worse shape than me... I think."

He tried to speak, but the bullet in his larynx made it impossible. Garovel invoked the recovery. None of his wounds hurt, but Hector could feel flesh contracting and expanding, fractured bones shivering as they rejoined, and bullets getting pushed out of his body and clattering to the floor.

"Who are you?" the officer finally asked.

'What will you tell him?' said Garovel."

"36

Hector was abruptly thankful that his embarrassed face was hidden and decided to do what came naturally to him. He said nothing.

"Well--"" Mallory paused for a grimace. "--Thanks for your help, though I can't imagine why you did it."

'Ask him who sent these men.'

"Wh-who sent these men to kill you?"

Mallory squinted. "How old are you? You sound like a kid." At Hector's silence, he said, "Rofal. Joseph Rofal."

"Because you're testifying in court a-against him?"

"Not against him. His little shit stain of a nephew. I was there. I saw him murder that boy. No more than ten years old. Dropped a cinderblock on top of the kid's head. And then laughed. Fuckin' little bastard--" He broke off for a pained cringe and began coughing. His skin had grown pale. Sweat covered his face. "And now I'm dying 'cuz of that little fuck? I should've just... sh-should've just shot that piece of... stupid piece of shit..." The dreary look in his eyes seemed to suggest he had forgotten what he was saying. Or that he no longer cared.

'Ask him about his family.'

"Your family," said Hector. "Do you... do you think they could be in danger, too?"

Mallory just sat there, breathing slowly and staring vacantly at the yellow cabinets in front of him. Sirens in the distance told Hector it was about time to leave.

"Officer Mallory, y-your family... I can help."

'I think you should go, Hector.'

'But we need him to tell us...'

'I don't think he can hear you.'

Blood dripped from the corner of the officer's mouth."

"37

"Officer Mallory... say something. Nod if you can hear me. Blink if you can..."

'Hector...'

"Is he...? He's not... You--you'd know, right?"

'He's not dead yet,' said Garovel. 'But he's probably not going to make it.'

"You can't... do anything? Nothing...?"

'I'm sorry.'

Hector closed his eyes and sighed. "I failed to save him...?"

'We failed, Hector.' The sirens were loud enough to fill the room. 'And if you don't run right now, our failures will only increase.'

He ran. Out the back, through the rear yard, and over the fence. He cut between houses to avoid the street.

'You should take your shirt off.'

He stopped behind the corner of a stuccoed house. He looked down at

his shirt, riddled with bullet holes and soaked in blood. "This is..." He sighed. "This is going to become a thing, isn't it..."

'Probably.'

"B-but... uh... I'm not sure... a black guy running shirtless through this neighborhood will, uh... go over so well..."

'Better than a black guy running through the neighborhood covered in blood. From a crime scene, might I add.'

"But I... I don't know if... uh..."

'This is not the time to be shy, Hector.'

"You say that like it's supposed to make a difference..."

'Take off the damn shirt!'

He pulled it off. And as he looked at the wet cloth, he realized his hands were trembling. Arms, too, even all the way into his chest. It was faint, hardly even noticeable unless he was standing still, but there it was.

'Ah. Your body's gone into shock. I tried to suppress the effects, but this is to be expected.'

"What...? Why am I in shock...?"

"38

'Seriously? You were just shot five times, Hector. Not to mention you saw a guy's brain spilling out of his head. And then Mallory, too. I'm surprised this didn't happen when you were stabbed last night. Just relax a moment. Sit down. You'll be fine.'

The sirens had stopped. They'd reached the house. Sitting in the grass with his legs folded together, he just breathed and tried to think. He frowned and pulled his mask off, as well. He touched the bullet hole with his thumb. "What did I do wrong, Garovel?" he whispered. "I could have saved him... couldn't I? I screwed up... but... agh..."

The reaper floated around him. 'Do you remember what I said before? Sometimes there won't be a good option left to choose.'

“...Is that supposed to be comforting?”

‘No. It’s not. Because we’re not supposed to be comfortable. Being comfortable makes us complacent. Sloppy.’

“Then... what are you saying?”

‘I’m saying we did our best. And we don’t respond to failure with depression. We respond by becoming better. Until our best is good enough.’

Hector hesitated, but gave a solemn nod. After another moment, he asked, “What do we do now?”

‘At the very least, you need a change of clothes. Do you know how to get home?’

“Um... actually, no. I’m completely lost...”

‘Then I’ll guide you home and return on my own to observe. Hopefully, I’ll be able to find out where the mother and daughter are. Put your mask away. It’ll only draw attention. It’s a bit cold, but without your shirt, you can just look like a jogger.’

He bagged the mask and shirt both and started running, sticking to sidewalks whenever he could.”

"39

He kept going over the scene in his head. He kept questioning his decisions during the fight. Maybe it was a mistake to take out the three men, first. Maybe the gunshots alerted the two men out front and caused them to start shooting at Mallory sooner. But if he’d gone for the two front men first, then Mallory would’ve been alone against three. And even if he had somehow managed to meet Mallory before them, there was no way he could have convinced the officer that he wasn’t also there to kill him. Maybe he didn’t have to convince him, though. Maybe if he’d--. Maybe he could’ve--. Maybe...

When he arrived home, he found himself alone again. His parents were still out, probably at a restaurant, considering the hour. Garovel had left as soon as Hector began to recognize buildings.



He made his way upstairs and threw his bag on the bed. He wondered if he would have time to relax at all. He wasn't tired, exactly, but he felt like he should be. He sat down to take his shoes off. A bit of blood had seeped into his right sock.

'I'm at home,' he told Garovel. 'I'll be changed soon.'

'I'm at the scene.'

'What have you learned?'

'Apparently, the daughter was upstairs the whole time.'

'Holy shit...' Hector's brow lowered, and he scratched his head. 'Sh-she... she heard the gunshots and everything...?'

'I'm looking for her now. Word is, she saw a black male in a red shirt and a strange mask fleeing the crime scene.'

'Of course...'

There was a long pause. 'Shit.'

'What's the matter?'

'I see her. She has the aura. Rofal put the hit on her, too.'

"40 -- V.

Chapter Five: 'Beholden to thy grim task...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Night arrived by the time Hector reached the hospital. He tried to air out his freshly sweat-soaked clothes as he entered the building.

Mallory's daughter was supposed to be in protective custody for the remainder of the night, and Garovel had initially wanted Hector to get some rest. But then the reaper heard some of the officers talking privately. Each of the four guards assigned to her expected Rofal's men to come for her by night's end, and only Officer Colt seemed to harbor any notion of standing in their way. And it hadn't taken the other three long to talk him down.

Having no need of further direction, Hector waited until the man at the reception desk wasn't looking and snuck past. He held his bag close at his side and tried not to make eye contact with any of the passing attendants.

Mallory had been taken to the rear wing of the hospital for surgery, and according to Garovel, his daughter sat in the waiting room. Hector peeked around the corner and saw the four officers standing at the other end of the hall.

'I see the room,' he thought. He took a seat out of the officers' sightline.

'Good. I'm with the daughter.'

'Learn anything new?'

'Her name is Melissa. A bit on the short side, looks a couple years older than you, brown hair, ponytail in a braid, green shirt with a cute dog on it, blue pants, white sneakers--'

'That--uh--that's a lot of information...'

'You may need to know what she looks like.'

'Uh... yeah, okay. Thanks. I meant more, um... about the mother or about Rofal, maybe...'

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'You may need to know what she looks like.'

'Uh... yeah, okay. Thanks. I meant more, um... about the mother or about Rofal, maybe...'

"41

'The mother is not alive.'

'Oh...'

'The nurse asked Melissa about it. She said her mother died nine years ago. She didn't mention any other family.'

'Geez... and now this...'

'Yeah. Wait. Here comes the doctor. The surgery's over already?'

Hector held his breath.

'...They couldn't give him a blood transfusion in time. He's dead.'

He exhaled and shut his eyes.

‘Melissa’s a wreck.’

Hector ran a hand down his face. ‘You were right.’

‘I wish I wasn’t.’

They waited. Hector shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The tension was suffocating. He poked his head around the corner every now and again, wondering what the officers were talking about. Then he saw one of them walking in his direction.

The man was mumbling under his breath as he turned the corner. “--morons...” He locked eyes with Hector, who immediately tried to look away, but to no avail. “Hey, kid. What are you doing here?”

“Uh--” When he met the man’s eyes again, he was a bit surprised to see a very calm blue gaze, relaxed, or perhaps just confident. The pin on his uniform read ‘COLT.’ “I’m... just waiting for someone... Why?”

“Maybe you should go for a walk. Get some fresh air or something. It’ll do you good.”

Hector lowered his brow a little. “Thank you, but I’m fine...”

Colt leaned in. “I can’t order you to leave. I don’t have that kind of authority, and frankly, I’m a man who respects another man’s right to go where he likes and do what he wants. But, kid. It’s about to get real fucked up in here. And trust me when I say you’re gonna wish you were somewhere else.”

"42

Hector only shrunk into his chair, pulling his bag to his chest and looking at the sterile floor.

“Shit, kid. It was a warning, not a threat.” After a moment, Colt shrugged and started walking away. “Fine. Do what you want.”

He watched Colt go, watched him talk with a pair of nurses and a doctor, watched them all scurry away not long after he left them alone.

Hector didn't have to wait much longer after that. He noticed the men as soon as they entered the intersecting hallway. He counted four, walking together, all wearing sunglasses at night and dark hats indoors. He donned his own mask and stood.

'They're here,' he said.

'As am I.' Garovel emerged from the wall and grabbed Hector's shoulder. Hector was starting to get used to the pain. 'Wait until we're a hundred percent sure it's them,' Garovel said. 'It'd be awkward if you attacked a dance troupe or something.'

Hector gave him a look.

'Hey, it's possible. Maybe one of their members broke his leg during a routine, and they came to visit him in the hospital. You don't know.'

He waited until they approached the group of officers. When the uniforms started to make way for them, that was good enough confirmation for Hector. He bounded down the hallway. They turned at the sound of his footsteps, but it was far too late for the leftmost thug. Hector barreled into him. The man's body punched through the thin wall, raining plaster into Melissa's room. She shrieked."

"43

"The fuck?!" The thugs drew their weapons, which made the cops draw theirs, but Hector had already grabbed his second thug by the arm. He flung him into the third like a rag doll, and they both stayed down. Hector turned to the fourth, took a bullet in the chest, and punched the man so hard that he felt the guy's jaw break.

"Holy shit. Who the--" A gunshot cut the words short.

He spun around in time to see Colt gun two other officers down, the third already on the ground. All in the back of the head, before they even knew what happened.

Colt looked at him. "Hey, you're that kid, aren't you? What's with the mask?"

Hector was on him in a blink. He slapped the gun away and shoved him against the wall. "What are you doing?! Why did you kill them?!"

“What can I say? My boss is a family man.” Colt squirmed under Hector’s grip. “You know, you really should’ve listened--”

Hector felt the blade enter below his chin. Everything flashed and went dark.

This was a familiar feeling. Emptiness. A vague notion of being in a vacuum. No life, no breath, no light, nothing to sense or be conscious of.

And then he was back. He sat up, discovering he had been on the floor. He shook his head, blinking. “What happened...?”

‘I’m sorry, Hector... I couldn’t revive you fast enough...’

“Wh-what? I don’t--”

‘Colt stabbed you. The knife pierced your brain. You still need your brain. I had to resurrect you.’

He climbed to his feet. His mask had come off, but that wasn’t his first concern. “Where’d he go?”

‘I don’t know. I couldn’t follow him and revive you at the same time.’”  
"44

“Dammit...” Then it dawned on him, a sudden horror. What Garovel had just said. About being sorry. “Oh no...!” He barged into Melissa’s room.

She was on the floor, shot in the head.

Hector reeled back out of the room. His eyes were wide open, looking at everything around him, but the image of her was stuck there. He stumbled. Just breathing was difficult, as if the air itself was choking him. He squinted hard and gnashed his teeth.

‘I’m sorry, Hector.’

“Fu--ck!” He clenched his fists so hard that they bled. “I was supposed to save her! I was supposed to save at least her! I can’t--I don’t--! H-how--?! I have strength! I don’t get tired! I can’t even be killed! And...! And you’re telling me that’s still not enough?! Wh-what more do--?! I just...! I don’t...! Understand...!”

‘We lacked something more important than all of those things.’

“What?!”

‘Information,’ said Garovel. ‘If we’d known Colt worked for Rofal, we would have approached the situation differently. It was an act. He was testing the other officers’ sense of duty when he brought up the topic of protecting Melissa. I failed to see through it...’

Hector’s face broke in two. He started sobbing.

‘I’m sorry...’

“S-stop,” he cried. “It’s not... it’s not your fault...”

‘It is, though. You rely on me for information. Please don’t blame yourself, Hector. Please...’

He only wept harder.

It was quiet for a long time. No one came to check on them. Everyone who hadn’t already left probably fled when they heard gunshots. Garovel said nothing, just let him cry. His bloody hands were warm, throbbing, and he thought he could feel something grainy in them, like dirt, but with his vision blurred, he couldn’t tell what it was.

When the tears finally stopped, however, something else consumed his attention, something entirely unexpected. A second reaper appeared through the wall."

"45

‘Ah. Someone got here before me,’ said the other reaper. He was different from Garovel. He spoke slower, more deliberately, and somehow, his soundless words just felt different. He appeared as a skeleton as well, but his bones were lankier, his face longer. ‘Just as well. So many dead at once would have taken a while on my own.’

‘My name is Garovel. What’s yours?’

‘Bohwanox. Pleasure to meet you. Who’s the kid? The killer?’

‘No. He’s with me.’

'That would explain why he's staring at me.' Bohwanox paused and looked at the two of them again. 'Ah. Tried to have him stop it, did you?'

'Please, now isn't the time.'

'Four dead? Sure you didn't end up making things worse? How many would have died if you'd just let it be?'

'Stop talking,' said Garovel. 'You take two, and I'll take two.'

Bohwanox drifted over the three dead policemen. 'What about the morgue? That's what I usually come here for.'

'Ah. Right.' Garovel shook his head. 'I don't know. There's at least one more there.'

'Let's go there first, then. Allow these ones here the chance to go cold at least.'

'Very well.'

Bohwanox looked over them both again, perhaps considering saying more, then drifted off in silence.

'Hector,' Garovel said gently. 'I have to ferry these souls through the void, now. It's going to take me a while. I won't be back until tomorrow. You should rest.'

He stood up slowly. He stared at Garovel vacantly, face spattered with blood save where his tears had fallen.

'Come on. I'll take you home first. You can sleep all you want, my friend.'"

"46 -- VI.

Chapter Six: 'Of iron promise...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector never had such a deeply consuming sleep. The second Garovel's hand left his forehead, he was out, as if his exhaustion were



a dammed river that had finally broken.

He awoke slowly. His eyes only opened halfway as he regained consciousness. He could already remember everything that had happened, but he wasn't ready to think about it. He hid in the warmth of his bed a bit longer, the lulling tug behind his eyes telling him that nothing mattered just yet. It was all okay for a few more moments.

He took a long breath and sat up. It was still dark outside. No. That couldn't be right. He looked at his clock. It was dark again. He must've slept the whole day.

'Garovel?' He waited for an answer but received none.

He could sense the dreadful thoughts there, the familiar, anguished throes. But he ignored them. It was strangely easy--uncomfortably so, even. But at the moment, he much preferred a vaguely unsettled feeling to whatever those pangs would bring. At the very least, he wanted to wait until Garovel returned.

Hunger drove him downstairs, despite how sore he still was. He found his mother in front of the refrigerator.

When she noticed him, she frowned. "Your school called," she said. "Why did you miss class today?"

He lowered his eyes. "I... wasn't feeling well... I stayed home and slept."

"Are you being bullied again?"

"I've never been bullied..."

"You're too quiet, sweetie. If you were a bit more outgoing, I'm sure they'd stop bothering you."

"I'm not being bullied, Mom..." As difficult as it was to talk to her, he couldn't help being a bit glad, still. She was showing concern for him. That was rare enough on its own."

"46 -- VI.

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"47

Her brow furrowed. "Well, whatever the case, if you're going to skip school, then at least get good at it. I used to call the school and pretend to be my mother when I was your age."

"Are you... encouraging me to skip school?"

"Don't be stupid, sweetie. Of course you should go to school. But I can't force you to go, so if you're going to skip, then do it in a way that they don't end up calling me while I'm at work. I nearly lost a client because of the interruption today."

Hector just looked at her.

"Hold on." She left briefly and returned with a small box. "I made you plenty of notes." She handed it to him.

"Uh..." He was usually able to figure out what he wanted to say after a bit of fumbling, but this time he had nothing.

"Or you can just call ahead and pretend to be your father. Or do something creative. Whatever."

Incredulous, he stared at his mother. "Uh... is Dad okay with this...?"

"Of course. You're old enough to make your own decisions about your life, sweetie. You'll be eighteen in a couple years, and then you'll be on your own. It's best you learn to start being responsible for yourself now. Goddess knows you've been a burden on your father and I long enough, already." And she left him there.

He wasn't sure what this feeling was. At once confused, distraught, and still faintly happy to be thought of. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but he wondered if causing trouble would earn him further attention. He immediately discarded the notion."

"48

Back upstairs with turkey, cheese, and tomato on toast, he sifted through the notes she had given him. Her signature was on all of them, as were a plethora of different excuses, usually involving some kind of sickness. Impressively, some were paired with forged doctor's notes with the dates left blank. Some for P.E. Some for band. Some for

chemistry. He might have been genuinely amazed, if he were actually enrolled in any of those classes.

Still, he supposed the generic notes could be useful. He smirked. He never would have expected this from his mother. Strange as it seemed, she may have just helped him and Garovel save someone's life.

He sat back as he finished eating. Every part of him ached, but his hands had the worst of it for some reason. He couldn't remember putting them through anything worse than the rest of him. They throbbed enough that he felt the blood pumping through the veins between his fingers. He rubbed his hands together.

There it was again. That grainy feeling. He held his hands under the lamp at his desk.

His eyes narrowed. "What is this?" Specks of dirt littered his palms. Only, it couldn't be dirt. The color wasn't right. They were dark and gray, not light and brown.

Without any ideas, he wiped his hands on his pants and eyed his bed again. Perhaps there was something more productive he could do, but he couldn't think of it, so he went back to sleep, hoping Garovel would be there when he woke up. And in fact, he was.

'Sleep well?'

Hector breathed deep. "Yeah... surprisingly. How'd, uh... how'd it go with Bohwanox?"

"49

'Fine,' was all Garovel said.

He tilted his head at the reaper.

Garovel waved a hand. 'We didn't quite see eye to eye, but we were cordial. Trust me, it could have been far less pleasant.'

"About what he said in the hospital... um..."

'You're thinking he had a point.'

“Didn’t he? If we hadn’t intervened, Colt might not have killed those other three policemen...”

Garovel was quiet for a time. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘In fact, I’m almost certain he wouldn’t have killed them.’

Hector reared back. “Certain?”

‘Colt wasn’t just in disguise. He was an actual policeman. The other officers knew him. That kind of infiltration takes time to establish. It’s not something you throw away unless you absolutely have to. Rofal must have really wanted her dead.’

“Well... he got what he wanted...”

‘Yes...’ Garovel frowned. ‘How are you holding up?’

“Oh... um, I, uh... I-I’m okay.”

‘Hector.’

He rubbed his cheek with a shaky hand. “I, uh... I’ve been trying not to think about it...”

‘Better to think about it here and now, instead of when you confront Colt again. Or Rofal.’

“W-when will that be?”

‘I’m not sure. We’re in the business of saving lives, not taking them.’

Hector looked at him heavily. “You would want me to kill them?”

‘It’s too soon to give my opinion,’ said Garovel. ‘I will need to observe their circumstances much more, first.’

“But...?”

‘But... what are your thoughts on the matter? Could you purposefully kill someone? It’s not what you signed up for.’

“You wouldn’t force me to do it?”

‘No.’

“I don’t know... I don’t want to kill anyone.”

‘Few do.’”

"50

“I guess if... if... killing Rofal would spare innocent people... and if there's no other way to stop him... then... maybe I could... but I'm not sure what it would take to convince me that... y'know... there really wasn't another way...”

‘Heh. Part of me thought you'd be ready to go rip their heads off the second you woke up.’

“I mean, I am angry... but...”

‘That's not you. I know. Would have been interesting to see, though.’

Hector nearly smiled at that.

‘Anyhow, I need to gather more information. And I think I know where to begin.’

“You do?”

‘The state of play is changed,’ said Garovel. ‘Four police officers murdered in a single day. Even Rofal can't keep that quiet. All of Brighton is in shock, right now. The police will be feeling the pressure to respond. I'm sure they'll have a few leads for me.’

“Hmm. You should be careful what leads you choose to follow. I think Rofal probably has another cop in his pocket. Maybe more than one.”

Garovel cocked an eyebrow at Hector. ‘Ah... huh. Yeah, you may be right. That might explain why Colt was so quick to blow his cover. He wasn't Rofal's only agent.’

“Exactly.”

‘Well spotted, Hector. I'll keep that in mind.’

He tried not to blush. “And, uh... there's something else.” He rubbed his hands together.

‘What are you doing? Hatching an evil plan?’

“No. Just... wait a second... There.” He showed his palms to Garovel.  
“Can you tell me what this... uh... this crud on my hands is? It’s starting to bother me...”

Garovel leaned in. ‘Specks of something? Where’d they come from?’”  
"51

“I don’t know. They just keep showing up... And my hands already ache like crazy. It’s not like the normal soreness.”

The reaper’s eye sockets widened. ‘Oh...’

“What? Is it something bad...?”

‘On the contrary, this is unexpectedly good news. I guess it was a stress trigger. Do you have any idea what the specks are?’

“That’s what I’ve been asking you!”

‘Oh, sorry. They could be pretty much anything.’

“You’re not being very helpful, right now...”

Garovel laughed. ‘You’re right. Let me start over. Hmm. Essentially, what’s happening is that your ability is manifesting itself.’

“Ability? What kind of ability is this? It’s just... powdery shit.”

‘That, my friend, is the beginning of a materialization ability. Creating something from nothing, that is.’

“Uh... whoa...”

‘Right now, though, you’re only able to produce trace amounts of it.’

“Trace amounts of what?”

‘Hard to say at this stage. Let me have another look.’

He held his hands up again.

‘Materialization is typically based around raw elements. This is something dark gray in its natural form. Maybe iron? I don’t think there’s a way we can be certain yet.’

He licked his hand. "Yeah, that's definitely metal..."

'Tch. Having a sense of taste is cheating.'

"I didn't realize we were competing."

'The reason blood tastes metallic is because of iron-containing hemoglobin in your red blood cells.'

"What does that have to do with anything...?"

'I just wanted to say something smart.'

"Okay, um... about this ability..."

'Hemoglobin is what allows blood cells to transport oxygen.'

"Garovel..."

'Oh, fine. What do you want to know?'

"How does this ability work? And, uh... what can I do with it?"

"52

'What you create is yours completely. You have dominion over its existence. For instance, if you create a fully iron sword, you could then destroy it utterly, leaving no trace. But if you came upon an iron sword which already existed, you wouldn't have that same power over it, because you didn't create it.'

"What's mine is mine completely... Hmm..."

'That's the principle of it, anyway. You shouldn't get too excited, though. Servant abilities grow extremely slowly. Even very simple objects will take practice to create.'

"How much practice?"

A beat passed as Garovel eyed him. 'Shitloads.'

"Aw, c'mon..."

'The thing about servants, though, is that they don't die, which gives



them ample time to hone their abilities. Suffice to say, they can become very powerful. Frighteningly so.'

"Those other reapers you mentioned... the ones involved in wars..."

'Yeah. This is the main reason why their servants are so dangerous. And why we will keep our distance.'

"Right..."

Training was simple enough. It required concentration, Garovel told him. Focus, clear his mind, and begin by imagining simple metallic structures. He tried a sword, but Garovel said that was too complicated, so he imagined a cube. Garovel said that was also too complicated because of the straight edges and perfect symmetry. He relegated himself to an amorphous lump, in the end.

Garovel told him to maintain this state of meditation for as long as possible without letting his mind wander into anything else. He managed an hour and sixteen minutes. The reaper seemed impressed, though Hector thought he could do better.

Afterwards, the only discernible progress seemed to be that he could make the specks disappear and reappear. And seeing as he hadn't thought to try beforehand, he wasn't sure if that really qualified as progress."

"53

He wanted to try again, but there wouldn't be enough time before he had to leave for school. Instead, he stood and went for his bag. He pulled out the welding mask.

'I guess that's yours now, unless you've thought of a way to explain that bullet hole.'

He rolled the mask over in his hands. "This... isn't..."

'Hmm?'

"I need more than... just a mask... don't I?"

'What do you mean?'

"My brain is my weak point," he said. "I need something strong... something that will actually protect my head..."

'Ah! That would be fantastic. But what, exactly? And not to sound pessimistic, but I don't see how you could get your hands on anything that strong. Your metal might serve one day, but not anytime soon.'

"I have to rejoin the carpentry club."

Garovel's brow receded. 'You're just full of ideas today, aren't you? It's starting to annoy me.'

"I'm sorry... I'll be sure to act stupider from now on."

'Most of the elements in the periodic table are metals, you know.'

"That's very interesting, Garovel."

'You piece of shit,' he laughed. 'I have thousands of years of knowledge and experience.'

"I'm sure that'll come in handy one day."

'I hope you start shitting metal turds.'

"That... th-that's not really gonna happen, right...?"

'Beats me. I don't know anything useful.'

He readied himself for school. He was a bit dubious about bringing the mask with him, wondering what might happen if someone caught him with it, but he decided to take the risk. In the event of some emergency, he would be glad to have it.

To Hector's surprise, Garovel accompanied him."

"54

'I thought you had leads to chase down at the police station,' Hector said.

'What, are you trying to get rid of me?'

'Y-you know I'm not...'

‘Hmm. I guess I do.’ Garovel was quiet for a moment. ‘Honestly, I’m concerned about you. After what happened, I think you should rest a bit. We both should. Because if we go out there again, and things go badly again, I don’t want you to... well...’

‘Lose hope?’

‘Is that so ridiculous?’

Hector eyed the other students on the bus. They were rowdy this morning, hassling the driver and throwing paper. ‘I’m terrified of making things worse again...’

‘As am I.’

He met Garovel’s gaze. ‘So... what, then? We just... we just wait?’

‘Until we’re ready. Yeah. Rest is important, Hector, even for us. Take it when you can get it.’

‘But school just seems so... insignificant, I guess. Like... why am I even bothering...?’

‘I think you’re looking at this the wrong way.’

‘It wouldn’t surprise me...’

‘School is a respite.’

Hector eyed the reaper doubtfully.

‘Comparatively, that is. You’re probably going to see many terrible things, Hector. But your time in school is a chance to relieve yourself of that mindset. For a little while, at least.’

‘Hmm...’

‘Moreover, school could be of profound help to us in the future.’

‘Um... I find that hard to believe, Garovel...’

‘Well, perhaps not the methods. Your grades are unimportant. For our purposes, you don’t need a well-paying job, and going to college would actually be a major hindrance. You won’t likely have enough time for proper studying, let alone sitting through lectures.’

Hector laughed under his breath. ‘It’s a good thing my teachers can’t

hear you.”

"55

‘Though, if I’m completely honest, I actually would like you to receive a higher education, albeit more slowly. Perhaps one or two classes at a time. A small enough workload that it won’t clash with our more important goals.’

‘I’m getting mixed messages here...’

‘We respond by making ourselves better,’ the reaper said. ‘School can be a major source of information, if you allow it to be.’

Hector bowed his head at that.

‘I don’t think I need to remind you how important information can be to us.’

‘No, you don’t...’

‘You’re right to be skeptical, I suppose,’ Garovel said. ‘Most of what you learn will probably never help us in the slightest. But there will undoubtedly be a small amount which WILL be useful. You can’t really know when or where you’ll acquire it, but for our undertakings, it’s entirely worth the effort. Wouldn’t you agree?’

He stared distantly at the seat in front of him. ‘Some tiny thing could be the difference... between saving someone and... not.’

‘I’ve made my point, then?’

‘Yeah...’

‘Good.’

Hector waded through the day like bog water. Everything seemed a painful bore, but he persevered. Listening to everything that was said in class still felt like a gigantic waste of time, but he hoped that feeling would go away if he ignored it long enough. He didn’t know how Garovel could float around him so patiently the whole time.

‘Alright,’ Garovel said between classes. ‘I’m going to help you make a new friend.’

Hector shut his locker. 'I don't like the sound of this...'

'Too bad. Four hours, we've been here. I've watched you walk past about five hundred different people and not say hello to a single one of them.'

'Is that all it takes to make a new friend? Saying hello?'

'It's a start. Real friendship takes time.'

Hector tried not to sigh. 'W-what do you want me to do?'"

"56

'Don't look so scared. We'll do something easy. Just find someone you know and say hi to them.'

'...Right now?'

'Right now.'

He grimaced and looked among the passing faces. He knew quite a lot of them, actually, but he wasn't jumping at the chance to tell that to Garovel.

'How about her?' said Garovel. He pointed to blond Jenny Friedman, with whom Hector had attended middle school.

'Fuck no!'

'Why not? What's wrong with her?'

'She's a girl!'

'What?! I had no idea! Eww! Keep her away from me, Hector! Don't let her touch me with her girl-cooties!'

He pursed his lips. 'I... just... agh... There's just no way... Talking to a girl is way more difficult...'

'Why?'

'Because! They--! They're--! I don't know! It just is!'

‘Fine. What about him, then?’ The reaper pointed to Micah Chamberlain. ‘I remember him from the other day. Seemed nice enough.’

Hector’s face soured as he strained for an excuse. Nothing sprung to mind, and he gave a defeated sigh. ‘Alright, I’ll... try...’

‘You’re not moving.’

‘I’m... just... waiting for the right moment...’

‘There isn’t one. Go on.’

‘B-but... uh... what do I say after hello?’

‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll help you.’

He made his way through the crowd to Micah’s locker. When the other young man turned and saw him standing there, Hector was so afraid of looking like a deer in the headlights that he just blurted the word out. “Hello.”

“Hi,” said Micah, friendly but a bit hesitant. “Uh... who are you?”

‘Fuck me, what do I say?’

‘Your name. Say your name.’

“H-Hector Goffe.”

“Oh! You’re the guy I accidentally hit during the food fight! I’m really sorry about that. I meant to find you afterwards and apologize properly, but I forgot. I hope you’re not too mad.”

Hector was the deer now."

"57

‘Tell him you’re not mad.’

“N-no... I’m not mad.”

“I didn’t ruin your shirt, did I?”

“I’ve, uh.. I’ve had worse...”

‘Pfft.’

“Well, uh, I’m Micah.”

“Yeah, I know. We... we, um... have a couple classes together.”

“Really? I never noticed. I guess that makes sense, though. You seem like the quiet type.”

‘Pfft!’

“Yeah... I have a little trouble... uh... speaking my mind...”

‘A little, he says!’

“You should come sit with me and my friends at lunch tomorrow. I’ll introduce you to everybody. Unless you’d rather not. It’s fine, either way. Hey, you alright? You look a bit red in the face.”

Hector averted his eyes.

“Whoa, are you blushing? I’ve never seen a black person blush before. That’s pretty awesome. Kinda hard to notice, at first. Holy crap, not anymore, though. You’re like a tomato, now.” Micah laughed. “Am I making it worse? Should I stop talking about it? I’ll stop talking about it.”

Hector just stood there awkwardly, fighting the urge to flee in abject horror.

“But, um, yeah. Come sit with us tomorrow. I promise not to throw things at you. Anyway, I gotta get going. Seeya later?”

He managed a nod. He leaned against the row of lockers after Micah was gone.

‘That went surprisingly well,’ said Garovel. ‘What do you think?’

‘He’s way too friendly,’ Hector thought, wide-eyed. ‘This can only end in disaster...’

‘Oh, just calm down, drama king. If you don’t like him, that’s fine. There are plenty of other people you can be friends with.’

‘No, that’s not it at all... I mean... I’ve, um... uh...’

‘C’mon. Spit it out. You can do it.’

‘Please... stop... patronizing me... I’m trying my best here...’”

"58

‘Sorry. I know you are. What were you trying to say?’

‘I’ve always wanted a friend who was... uh... well, friendly. I mean, like, y’know... the opposite of me... Not that, uh, I didn’t want any other type of friend, but just. Really outgoing people... they always intimidate me, but...’

‘I see. So you’re thinking it’s too good to be true.’

‘Basically, yeah...’

Garovel shrugged. ‘Maybe it is. Maybe he’s secretly a total dick.’

‘What the...? This was your idea!’

‘Yeah, and it’s worth seeing through. But you still shouldn’t get your hopes up too much. Better to be pleasantly surprised than bitterly disappointed.’

Hector had to nod at that as he started for his next class.

At the day’s end, it was time to pay a visit to the carpentry club once again. Strangely, he hadn’t been dreading it. He knew it would be terrible, but something about the necessity of it, the unavoidability, made it easy to just accept.

He entered the workroom to the sight of a dozen familiar faces and a handful of new ones. He heard the chatter dull as a few people noticed him. Lance Alexander approached him straight away.

“Please tell me you came to return the mask.”

“Sorry,” Hector said. “I lost it.”

“Geez. Well, could you at least tell that to Ms. Trent? She didn’t believe me when I told her you took it. She gave me detention.”

Hector nodded. “I’ll tell her.”



Lance eyed him. "I'm sure you won't mind if I go with you."

"Just... show me where she is."

Lance led him into the back room where the club instructor sat at her desk, marking quiz papers. She looked up as they entered. "Hector?" she said. "What brings you here?"

"59

"It's like I told you," said Lance. "He's the one who took the mask. Then he went and lost it."

"Is this true?"

He gave another nod. "Yeah."

Ms. Trent glared at Lance. "Did you bully Hector into saying this?"

"Of course not!"

"You'd better tell me the truth now. If I find out later, I swear to goddess I will have you suspended."

"I didn't bully anyone!"

"He's telling the truth," said Hector. "He, uh... he tried to stop me, actually." "Why does everyone think I'm being bullied?"

'You do look very bulliable.'

"Alright," said Ms. Trent. "Lance, you're off the hook. Hector, you have three days' detention, and you'll have to pay a fine to replace the mask."

Lance took a relieved breath and left.

"Uhh... but I don't have any money..."

"Then your parents will have to pay."

Hector frowned. "W-what if they don't?"

"They'll pay if they want you to graduate. The school will withhold your diploma if you have any outstanding fines."

He didn't think that would make a difference, but he kept his doubts to himself. He could worry about it later. "I, um... I also came here for another reason."

"What would that be?"

"I'd like to rejoin the club."

"Oh, is that so? Well, all you have to do is start showing up again. I'm still not sure why you stopped."

"Ah... just... personal reasons..."

Ms. Trent wasn't the type to pry. Or perhaps she just didn't care very much. Hector had never quite figured her out. But whatever the reason, she didn't push the issue and let him return to the workroom with the others."

"60

Four or five students sat around each of the black tables, absorbed in various group projects, with a few extra people hovering around the machinery at the back of the room.

He approached the nearest group, but as soon as he got close, three people left. Only Lance and a guy he didn't recognize stayed, but after a moment of apparent confusion, the stranger followed the others.

"Popular as ever," said Lance.

"You're... not going with them?" said Hector.

Lance looked at him for a long moment. "You could've really screwed me over, you know."

Hector didn't say anything.

"Let me know if you need help with something," said Lance, and then he left as well.

With the whole table to himself, Hector glanced around again. Only the new members spared him the occasional look, and he could see a couple of them asking the others about him.

‘What’s with this atmosphere?’ Garovel said. ‘It’s annoying.’

‘It doesn’t matter...’

‘Want me to suck their souls out through their eyeballs?’

‘You can’t do that.’

‘No. I could try, though.’

He smirked faintly.

‘I’ll get you to tell me what happened sooner or later.’ At Hector’s persistent silence, he changed the subject. ‘Anyhow, are you sure you can make something for your head here?’

‘It won’t be anything amazing, but yeah... I just need some materials.’ He paused, blinking. ‘Shit. I completely forgot...’

‘Hmm?’

He looked toward the corner storage room, around which was a caged enclosure with a hatch and a countertop. ‘I’m an idiot. The materials aren’t free... If I want some metal, I’ll have to pay for it... or steal it, I guess... but I really don’t want to do that again...’

‘Aha. That time already, huh? I was wondering when we’d need to find some startup capital.’”

"61 -- VII.

Chapter Seven: ‘O, truculent fortune...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

‘How many guys are there?’

‘I counted forty-three. No, wait. I see another one.’

Hector furrowed his brow at the evening sky. ‘Uh... holy shit... I mean, are you sure I can take forty dudes?’

‘Of course you can. Probably. Oh, hey, it’s that ponytail guy.’

‘Ponytail guy?’

‘You remember. You knocked his teeth out. I’m surprised he’s out of jail already. It’s barely been two days since he was arrested.’

‘Perks of being on Rofal’s payroll, I guess...’

‘Even so, two days is a bit ridiculous. The police force must be more corrupt than we thought. Maybe lawyers, as well.’

Hector eyed the building another time. It didn’t look like a drug den. It looked like a bowling alley. And it probably was, most of the time. The men loitering around the entrance were an indicator, however. They shooed away potential customers, despite the neon sign illuminating the street.

‘Ah,’ Garovel said, ‘looks like Ponytail is here to move the money. Smart. This is probably why the police can’t seem to find any of these cash houses. As soon as they start getting close, I bet someone in the department warns Rofal’s people. Must be why there are so many of them here right now. They seem to be in a hurry. You should probably come introduce yourself now.’

‘Will do.’ He put his mask on and started down the street. The men at the front all stared at him as he passed, and when he circled around toward the back entrance, a few of them broke away to follow him. Several more were already waiting behind the building, alongside a parked truck with its engine running. A circle of Rofal’s muscle grew around him."

"61 -- VII.

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"62

‘I, uh... I went around back,’ he told Garovel.

“What are you doing here?”

“What’s with the mask? Looking for a beating?”

“Hey, didn’t Swank mention a masked guy?”

“Is that you, asshole? Huh? Say something!”

Garovel appeared from the wall and reached for him. ‘I’m not sure I

approve of all these new friends you've made, Hector.'

The strength blazed through him. He took a deep breath and moved for the door. The first man to stand in his way ate pavement. The others all took a step back at how quickly their comrade had been left bleeding on the ground, but after a moment, they seemed to find their courage again.

Three rushed him at once. He pummeled two into each other and took a metal baseball bat to the back of the head. When he turned around, shaking the disorientation away, the guy who hit him staggered back. Hector ripped the bat away and returned the favor, lobbing the man into four of his buddies.

They started pulling knives, and in the ensuing mayhem, he received six stab wounds, all in the gut, chest, and back. When there were only a few left, he was a bit surprised to see that instead of pulling guns on him, they just ran. Looking down at the blades stuck in his torso, he supposed he could understand their sentiment. He decided to leave the knives in a while longer.

Groaning or unconscious thugs riddled the alleyway, draped over the staircase, the side of the parked truck, and for one lucky winner, a 10-foot brick wall. Hector held onto the baseball bat as he went inside the building.

The first person he saw seemed more confused than aggressive, and Hector was kind enough to wait until the man attacked before punching him into next week."

"63

'The money is in the rearmost room,' Garovel told him. 'Hold on a minute.' The reaper phased through the wall while Hector waited in the dimly lit hallway. 'Six men. Oh, Ponytail is talking about Colt. Rumors, he's saying... about Colt being a psychopath... but at the same time... forced to work for Rofal?'

'Wait, what...?'

'I'm listening... Bah. They're talking about food now. They want to go get pizza. At gunpoint? What the hell is wrong with these people? Please come stomp their heads in.'

He flung the door open and kicked the first man he saw across the room.

“What the fuck?!”

“Oh, shit! You!”

Hector leapt on his second victim and knocked him out cold. Now the guns were out, but the hail of bullets didn't stop him from reaching the third and fourth men and clapping their skulls together. Only Ponytail and another thug remained, fumbling too much to reload their weapons, their spare magazines clattering to the floor.

Hector stood in front of them for a moment, considering what to do next. Bashing their faces in hardly seemed necessary at this point, and besides, Ponytail's face was still swollen blue and purple.

He walked up and pulled their guns away from them. They both just stared at him, wide-eyed and cornered.

“What the hell are you?” said Ponytail. “I heard Colt killed you.”

Hector eyed the table full of duffel bags in the middle of the room. He slung all seven bags over his shoulder with one hand.

‘You’re not going to stomp their heads in, too?’ The reaper sounded disappointed. ‘Well, at least threaten them before you leave.’”

"64

“I-I... uh... d-don't...”

‘Hector, c'mon. Scare them. Just yell or something.’

‘Yell? I can't... I don't... that just isn't--agh...’

Ponytail ran for the door.

Hector was on him in a heartbeat and kned him back into the corner.  
“Please don’t run...”

‘Wait a minute,’ said Garovel. ‘Okay, no yelling. Just talk to them very quietly. Whisper, if you need to.’

‘Really? B-but, uh...’

‘Trust me. Speak very slowly and deliberately. Make them strain to hear you. Oh, and be polite, too. Say please, like just now.’

‘Uh...’ “Please tell your boss... that I’m coming for him...”

‘Oh, that was good! Tell them that anyone else who gets in your way will be visiting the morgue.’

‘But I don’t want to kill them...’

‘Of course, but THEY don’t need to know that.’

‘Ah, okay...’ “And anyone who gets in my way... will be paying a visit to the morgue...”

Both of their faces went white.

‘Aha, look at them! This is way better than yelling.’

‘You’re starting to creep me out, Garovel...’

‘Me? You just about made them piss themselves with creepiness.’

He left the room, barely squeezing all the bags through the door. He knew there were still more men in the building, but he didn’t see them before hearing the gunshot. The bullet tore through his jaw and ripped the mask from his face. His severed chin and tongue splattered to the floor in a gory mess."

"65

Blood and drool oozed from the gaping hole in his face. Hector just turned and locked eyes with the shooter. It was a young guy, not much older than himself, holding a magnum unsteadily with both hands, but



when he saw Hector, he dropped his gun and stumbled back.

More men rushed in from the entrance, but when they saw Hector, they all stopped.

“Holy fuck...”

“What is that thing?”

Hector’s undead glare seemed enough to prevent any of them from taking another step. He waited a bit to see if they still wanted to fight, but when they merely kept staring, Hector picked up his dented mask and left.

As Garovel reconstructed Hector’s jawbone, he stood at the other end of the street, waiting again to see if any of them would pursue. None did.

‘I’m going to follow Ponytail back to Rofal. Once we know where his headquarters is, we’ll be able to launch an assault at our leisure. You know your way home, right?’

His mouth completely reformed, he said, “Yeah.”

The reaper looked at him a moment, bony fingers hovering in front of Hector’s face. ‘I’m going to bring the soreness back to let your body recover while I’m away. Are you ready?’

Hector groaned. “Go ahead...”

Pain exploded through his mouth.

“Ffff--! Kuh! It feels like my face’s been ripped off!”

‘Well. It was. Actually.’

He dropped to one knee, clutching his mouth with his free hand. “Fucking...! Agh...!”

‘On the bright side, I’m sure the rest of your body feels completely painless by comparison.’

He stood and started walking again, trying to stifle his continued groans. “Fuck this hurts...!”

‘Alright, potty mouth.’

“Fuck you! Agh! This is the worst one yet!”

Garovel laughed. ‘Only joking. You should be swearing. It’ll help you cope with the pain.’

“Fuckface!”

‘Okay. You don’t have to be insulting about it.’

“Just... ugh...”

"66

Garovel floated off to go find Ponytail, and Hector was left to grumble his way through the night by himself. It wasn’t long before he heard Garovel laughing again, however. ‘It’s fair to say we’ve stirred things up here. You left your chin behind, and it’s freaking them out.’

‘Oh... should I have... uh...’ The pain made it difficult to even think straight. ‘Should I have taken that with me?’

‘Nah.’

‘They won’t, er... try to... study it and reverse engineer my power or something?’

‘What.’

‘I mean... uh... like... I dunno...’

‘You’re afraid they’ll unlock the secret of immortality by studying your chin?’

‘Is that... stupid?’

‘Um. It’s just impossible. Your flesh is just flesh. I’m what makes you unkillable. They could study your body all they like, and they wouldn’t learn anything.’

‘Okay... good.’

‘You have a strange imagination by the way.’

‘I’m just... trying to be diligent...’

‘Right.’

‘Uh... so... how much money do you think we got, anyway?’

‘They’re talking about that now, actually. Well. Yelling about it. Ooh, seventy grand, Ponytail says.’

Hector’s eyes widened.

‘Looks like Rofal consolidated several weeks worth of cash here from all over the city. I wonder if he was planning a big purchase.’

‘Seventy thousand troas... what do I even do with this kind of money...?’

‘That’s our funding for critical purposes. No spending it on booze and hookers.’

Hector snorted. ‘What about drugs? Meth and heroin are okay, right?’

‘Oh yeah. Let’s just give it all back to Rofal while we’re at it.’

‘Are you, um... er... are you sure we can even spend this money? Isn’t it, like... being tracked by the government or something?’

"67 -- VIII.

‘No. We didn’t rob a bank. We just won’t be able to make large purchases at licensed vendors without drawing attention.’

‘R-right...’

‘We could have stolen from Rofal’s gun running business,’ said Garovel, ‘or his car theft ring, but money doesn’t change hands nearly as often in those. And stealing from the prostitution business would have probably done more harm to the prostitutes than to Rofal.’

‘But what if, uh... Rofal tracks the money himself?’

‘Hmm. Fair point. You should stop and check for devices.’

‘Alright.’ He found an alley and put the bags down to search them all. Stacks of troas filled each, more money than Hector had ever seen in his life. A single-troa note was a blue-and-white paper bill with the

bearded face of King Martinus I at the center. His great granddaughter currently wore the crown. 'I'm not seeing anything that looks like a tracking device...'

'Good. Store the money somewhere away from your house, just to be safe.'

'Okay.'

'Ponytail is finally leaving. I'm in pursuit.'

Chapter Eight: 'Where an Aberration doth grow...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Beneath the city, below the pipes and sewers and miles of cable, lay the mansion. Old wood and cold stone sat stark against the lamplight along the path to the entrance. Its turreted roof bore a pillar at the center which led up into Brighton, but the elevator therein was reserved for the Rofal family. Jeremiah Colt had to use an entrance hidden beneath a liquor store, a staircase into a lift the size of a broom closet.

The guards at the entrance stood upon his arrival and searched him, relieving him of his firearm and three knives."

"67 -- VIII.

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'R-right...'

'We could have stolen from Rofal's gun running business,' said Garovel, 'or his car theft ring, but money doesn't change hands nearly as often in those. And stealing from the prostitution business would have probably done more harm to the prostitutes than to Rofal.'

'But what if, uh... Rofal tracks the money himself?'

'Hmm. Fair point. You should stop and check for devices.'

'Alright.' He found an alley and put the bags down to search them all. Stacks of troas filled each, more money than Hector had ever seen in

his life. A single-troa note was a blue-and-white paper bill with the bearded face of King Martinus I at the center. His great granddaughter currently wore the crown. 'I'm not seeing anything that looks like a tracking device...'

'Good. Store the money somewhere away from your house, just to be safe.'

'Okay.'

'Ponytail is finally leaving. I'm in pursuit.'

Chapter Eight: 'Where an Aberration doth grow...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Beneath the city, below the pipes and sewers and miles of cable, lay the mansion. Old wood and cold stone sat stark against the lamplight along the path to the entrance. Its turreted roof bore a pillar at the center which led up into Brighton, but the elevator therein was reserved for the Rofal family. Jeremiah Colt had to use an entrance hidden beneath a liquor store, a staircase into a lift the size of a broom closet.

The guards at the entrance stood upon his arrival and searched him, relieving him of his firearm and three knives."

"68

Colt didn't much care for the way Rofal's men looked at him as he passed them in the hall. Whenever he caught one staring, he would meet their gaze evenly until they averted their eyes. Geoffrey was a different story, however.

"Mr. Colt! I was hoping to see you!" Geoffrey was a strange creature. Not yet a grown man, but he often wore tailored black suits and ties with even blacker undershirts. His dark hair was always sharply cut and combed, and his pointed eyebrows made him look perpetually and indignantly attentive.

Colt wondered if ignoring him would make him go away.

"I heard you killed five people the other day," said Geoffrey. "How was it? Did they scream a lot?"

He figured not. "No. They didn't even know what happened."

"Ah. I see. Efficiency. That's less fun, but I can appreciate the preference."

Colt squinted at him as they walked. "What do you want, kid?"

Geoffrey's brow receded a little. "Only to get to know you better, Mr. Colt. I like you. We're kindred spirits, I feel. You're not like the dullards my uncle usually has working for him."

"The dullards I used to make a habit of killing, you mean."

Geoffrey's smile was full of teeth. "My uncle says you're a true savage."

"You should hear what he says about you."

"Oh? Do tell."

"That you're an irreverent pain in the ass with no mind for the consequences of your actions."

Geoffrey laughed. "He worries too much. Still doesn't trust me to handle my own affairs. Well, he's only human, I suppose."

It was then that Colt noticed Geoffrey was carrying something.

A severed human hand."

"69

Colt at once remembered why he loathed this person. "Whose hand is that?"

"Oh, do you want it? I was thinking about giving it to you, actually. I have the other one, as well."

It was a small hand, thin fingers with long nails and pallid skin, preserved, likely taken from a corpse. "Who does it belong to?" he said, even less patient now.

"The girl you killed. Melissa Mallory."

Colt ground his teeth and glowered. "Why do you have it?"

Geoffrey tilted his head, confused. "Because I wanted it, obviously. It makes a nice souvenir, don't you think?"

"How did you even get it? You're not allowed out of the building."

"That would be telling."

"A year ago, I would have killed you where you stood for this."

Geoffrey smiled, and his eyes widened manically. Eagerly. "Perhaps we are not as similar as I thought, Mr. Colt. But then, I can't say I am disappointed. This may be even better."

"And people think I'm psychotic."

"You should be glad," said Geoffrey. "I wouldn't let you talk to me that way if I did not like you, Mr. Colt."

"I'm not afraid of your uncle, idiot."

"Oh, I know. Honestly, that is the most annoying thing about being his nephew. Everyone thinks they should be afraid of him. It tries my patience, sometimes. People are afraid of you, though, aren't they? How do you manage that, exactly?"

"Get the fuck away from me before I break both your legs and throw you in your uncle's pool."

"Intimidation. Charming. I'll keep that in mind." Surprisingly, he actually left Colt alone. The other people in the hallway were quick to get out of Geoffrey's way."

"70

Joseph Rofal's chamber was just ahead, two guards at the door, Molester-stache and Baldie, as Colt remembered them. He entered after they patted him down.

Rofal and Swank were having a heated conversation. Rofal ripped the glass lamp off his desk and threw it against the wall. "That money was for a seat at the table!" He saw Colt approaching. "You! This is your fault! You said you killed that asshole!"

Colt raised an eyebrow and looked at the swollen-faced Swank. "What asshole?"

"A guy in a mask showed up and stole seventy grand earlier tonight. Same guy I saw before."

"How do you know it was the same guy?" Colt asked.

"Well, I guess I don't, but he was definitely wearing the same welding mask. I saw the bullet hole that I put in it."

"Bullet hole." Colt thought back. "Yeah, I remember that, too. Bottom of the mask?"

"Yeah."

"Couldn't be the same guy, though. I definitely killed him."

"I don't know," said Swank, rubbing his purple cheek. "That guy ain't human. We must have shot him at least five times, stabbed him like six. He had knives sticking out of his fucking chest, man! Didn't even slow him down. I have twenty men out of commission. Broken arms, legs, ribs. Fucker gave Rogers a concussion the other day."

Rofal glared at him. "This is your responsibility, Colt."

"What the fuck do you want me to do?" said Colt. "Do you even know where he is?"

Swank shook his head and looked at their boss. "He said he was coming for you. And no disrespect to Colt, but I'm not sure he'd stand much of a chance, anyhow. The guy took down, what, an eighth of all our muscle? In the span of a few days?"

"71

Rofal sat down. "Leave us," he told Swank, who promptly exited. He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his red and gray hair. The weathered lines of his face made his expression all the more foul.

"You sure Swank wasn't followed?"

"He said he wasn't, but who knows. Do you remember anything about



this person? You said he was young.”

“Looked like a teenager. Seemed really intimidated by me. Before he started beating the shit out of everyone, anyway. But it can’t be the same guy. He must have had a partner.”

“Then what’s their objective?”

Colt shrugged. He couldn’t help grinning. “Can you think of any reason why someone would want to hurt you?”

Rofal did not look amused. “You are obviously not the person to discuss this with. Tell me how your assignment went.”

“I contacted some of my old colleagues in the department. Told them I was innocent, like you said. I’m pretty sure none of them believed me.”

“I didn’t expect them to. But now they will be conflicted. And perhaps more malleable.”

Colt furrowed his brow. “You mean to coerce them.”

“Empires are not built on alliances. They are built on conquests.”

Colt just looked disgusted.

“Three of your fellow officers and two teenagers,” Rofal reminded him. “And you felt nothing when you killed them, no? I’m sure a bit of surreption won’t pose too much of a moral dilemma for you.”

He stared back coldly. “I expect I’ll feel something when I kill you.”

“Careful, Colt. Do not jeopardize the understanding we have.”

“I apologize,” he said through his teeth.

“I’m aware of your current hatred for me,” Rofal said. “But in time, I believe you will see the situation as I do.””

"72

“Fat chance,” said Colt.

“Is it really so ridiculous? With you, I finally have someone reliable who can never betray me. With me, you finally have an employer who

appreciates your finer talents. An employer who will not hesitate to show his generosity.”

“You have a strange idea of generosity.”

“I like guarantees, Colt. A man in my position shouldn’t trust anyone when he has the opportunity not to. I’m sure you can understand that. But when I have my guarantee--” He placed a briefcase on the desk. It was full of cash. “--I am free to show my gratitude.”

Colt eyed the money. By the size of the bills, there must have been at least five thousand troas. “Money isn’t enough,” he said.

“Of course. I believe you have earned another two hours.”

Colt took the briefcase. “Where are they?”

“Today, they’re here.” Rofal motioned toward the broad double doors behind him, ornately wooden with brass lamps on either side.

“Tomorrow, they’ll be somewhere else.”

Colt proceeded through into what could only be Rofal’s bedchamber. Four guards looked up as he entered, and then put away their cards, book, and newspaper in order to watch him in silence. He approached the crib in the middle of the room.

Two babies lay sleeping, twins boy and girl. Colt took a relieved breath. He could not smile at them. Not here. He touched his son’s forehead and then his daughter’s.

Two hours, he had. It wasn’t enough. He wanted to spend it as efficiently as possible, but he didn’t know how to do that. So before it drove him mad, he decided to just sit down and watch them sleep.

Garovel merely continued observing.”

"73 -- IX.

Chapter Nine: ‘Forbearant soul, gird thyself for war...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

With all his new monetary concerns, Hector had nearly forgotten about the invitation to have lunch with Micah and his friends. On the one

hand, he was glad that he didn't end up a nervous wreck through his first few classes, and on the other hand, when he did remember, the sudden fear that came over him was akin to petrification.

Micah, Nathan, Janine, Sheryl, and Gregory were all their names; they were quick to introduce themselves. Hector had been less so, but struggled through it nonetheless. His face still throbbed something terrible, but after everything he had been through in the past few days, hiding the pain in front of everyone was easy enough.

"So what do you do for fun, Hector?" Micah seemed to be the resident icebreaker.

"Uh... f-fun...?" The question had him dead to rights.

"Yeah. You know. What do you like to do in your spare time?"

'Garovel, save me...' He could hear the reaper laughing.

'You don't want to tell them you beat up murderers and drug dealers?'

'Garovel!'

'Just pose the question back at them and listen to their answers. Then go from there.'

"Um... what do you guys do for fun?"

"Oh," said Micah, looking at the others, "well, as a group, we like to go to movies and stuff together, but they're expensive, so we can't always go."

"Yeah, but parks are free. Nathan, Sheryl, and Gregory all have dogs that they like to take."

"You remember that time when Duro started humping that one lady having a picnic?"

"Duro--that's Gregory's dog--he's massive. That lady was freaking out like you wouldn't believe. I thought she--"

'Holy shit, Garovel, you're a genius...'

'You're welcome.'

Micah looked at him. "But you never answered the question, Hector."

‘Fuck!’  
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‘Holy shit, Garovel, you’re a genius...’

‘You’re welcome.’

Micah looked at him. “But you never answered the question, Hector.”

‘Fuck!’”

"74

‘C’mon. Just make something up.’

“I... uh... I like to, uh... ah...” He could feel himself turning red.

‘Tell them you’re into metalwork. That’s kinda true.’

“I like to work with... metal...”

“Metal?” said Sheryl.

“Yeah, like... welding... and stuff...”

“That’s cool,” said Gregory. “What kind of stuff do you make?”

“Ah... I, uh...”

Sheryl giggled. “Micah, where did you find this guy? He’s so shy--it’s adorable! Makes me want to just wrap him up in a blanket and take him home with me!” She took his arm in both of hers.

Hector jolted away from her and out of his seat. His chair toppled over, and everyone at the table stared at him. “Ah--” He flushed even redder than before. “S-sorry... I just--ah. Y-you’re all s-so nice... w-we should definitely do this again, but, uh... I-I just remembered that I... uh... I gotta go.” He fled.

In the hall, navigating through the crowd, he looked back to see if any of them were following, but he only saw Garovel.

'What the hell was that?' the reaper said.

'I... I-I don't know, she just... she surprised me... and I... ugh... I really fucked that up, didn't I?'

'No, I'm sure it's fine. Just a bit unexpected. Do you also have a phobia of women?'

'N-no, I think it's just... people in general. Maybe, um... maybe girls slightly more than guys, but, um...'

Garovel sighed.

'I mean... it was th-the physical contact...'

Garovel sighed harder.

'If I'd known! That she! Was gonna--! I wouldn't have--! Agh!'

'Okay, I get it. You have trouble with friendly people. Relax.'"  
"75

He rested against his locker and took a long breath.

'That's it. You're safe now. The big bad girl can't get you anymore.'

'You... you fuck...' He gave a weak laugh. 'Why am I like this, Garovel...? Why is nothing ever easy...?'

'I don't know, Hector. But I can't say I dislike this part of you.'

'R-really? I thought it annoyed you...'

'No, no. If anything, I get annoyed FOR you. Not AT you.'

'Huh...'

'It's important you understand that. I can't really be annoyed at you when I see you trying so hard all the time.'

He nodded. 'Thanks... I guess I sorta knew that a little... but I, uh... yeah...'

‘Now you know it a lot.’

Later in the day, he paid off his equipment fine. He’d stuffed a thousand or so troa in his bag before coming to school, which was obviously more than he needed, but he wanted to be prepared. It did feel a bit odd carrying so much money around school with him. He wasn’t sure how he would explain the money if someone searched his bag, so he kept the strap around his arm or wrist at all times.

He bought a few sheets of metal from the carpentry club’s storeroom and settled at a table all to himself.

‘You’re going to make a helmet out of that? It looks pretty flimsy.

‘Thicker metal would need to be melted down and recast. Which... would be great, but... we don’t have a furnace. I need to weld multiple layers of this metal together if I want something resilient.’

‘Sounds tedious.’”

"76

‘Thinner metal is easier to cut, and I should be able to shape it with just my hands and a hammer. But I need to make sure the measurements are perfect with each layer or the welding won’t be very strong.’

‘You seem to know what you’re doing.’

‘I have some experience, and... I, uh... I did some reading last night. But, um... even though I know what to do, I’m not sure how well it’ll turn out, honestly... If I screw up too badly with the hammer, it might not even fit around my head...’

‘So you need to concentrate, is what you’re saying.’

‘Uh... yeah...’

He began drafting. He measured the circumference of his head in five different places, then the distance from the far corner of one eye to the other. He reckoned that a single slit for both eyes together would save cutting time and hopefully provide better visibility. Ear holes wouldn’t be necessary, he decided, nor would holes for the mouth and nose, but there was one major problem: the jaw.

Shielding the area under his jaw was absolutely vital. His all-too-brief fight with Colt assured him of that point.

He decided to just cut off the bottom half of the face completely and then screw it back on so that it could swing freely over the top half. It would look like some kind of gigantic underbite, but it would protect below his chin while still allowing him to fit his head into the thing.

Lance ventured over after a while. "What're you making?" he asked.

"...A, uh... a helmet. Or helm, I guess."

"Oh, that's awesome," said Lance, eyeing the sketches. "It's too bad you're not allowed to make a sword to go with it. That'd be amazing."  
"77

"I don't think I'd be able to forge a very good sword, anyway," said Hector. "It's really difficult. I mean, people used to do that as their entire profession."

"Yeah. Swordsmiths were pretty rare, though. You'd have to be friggin' legendary to make a living off of swords alone."

"Yeah..."

"It would be amazing, though."

"Yeah."

"Maybe I could make something else to go with your helm. Like a shield. Oh, or some gauntlets."

Hector raised his brow at him. "You can make gauntlets? That sounds so difficult. I mean... the links around the fingers would be brutal..."

"I bet I could do it," said Lance. "Maybe."

"W-well, that sounds awesome. I'll, uh... I'll help you if I can."

"Cool." And Lance went off to work, leaving Hector slightly dumbfounded at what just happened.

He had to get permission from Ms. Trent to use a table saw, and she



had to supervise while he worked. There was only one saw with a carbide-tipped blade, but it didn't get used much since most of the students worked with wood.

And as he eyed the blade, he realized he could save himself more time if he forewent the eyehole as its own cut and just merged it with the cut for the jaw pieces. He quickly remarked the metal and set about cutting. The carbide made short work of it, and soon enough, instead of three sheets of metal, he had six separate pieces.

A brief trip to the miller gave him the holes needed for the jaw. Next he had to mold the three head pieces into similar enough shapes that they could be securely welded together; and then do the same for the jaw pieces. He started hammering."

"78

This would be the most time-consuming stage by far, Hector knew. Welding would also take a while, assuming he managed to accomplish this part properly, but there was a tremendous amount of measuring and remeasuring and hammering and rehammering needed in order to achieve the desired shapes.

'It's time we discuss what to do about Colt, don't you think?'

Hector didn't stop hammering. 'I want to help him.'

Garovel paused. 'Are you sure about that? He killed four innocent people, you know.'

'Yeah... I know... and I'm not sure I can forgive that, but... you said he has children...'

'I did, yes. But being a father doesn't absolve him of his crimes.'

He stopped to remeasure. The forehead was still too broad. 'He's trying to protect them,' Hector thought, 'and even if... even if he doesn't deserve our help... his children still do... I mean, don't they?'

The reaper stared at him a moment. 'You continue to surprise me, Hector.'

He felt the blush coming on and stopped his hammer before he screwed up the next hit.

‘Hmm. A rescue mission, then.’

‘Yeah...’

‘And once the kids are safe from the Rofals, we can turn Colt over to the police, too.’

‘Ah... somehow, I don't think he'll agree to that, even if we save his kids for him.’

‘Well, we don't have to tell him that part of our plan. Point is, he's already got an inside track on the enemy. If we team up with him, we could bring down the whole organization in one fell swoop.’

‘You really think he'll accept our help?’

‘I don't know. His circumstances are uniquely precarious. It's hard to say how he'll respond to anything at this point. But I don't think offering him our aid will pose any risk to us. I'll be observing him without him realizing it, so if he ever tries to betray you, you'll have plenty of warning.’

‘He probably still thinks I'm dead, though, doesn't he?’

‘Yeah, probably.’

‘So he'll be freaked out to see me again.’

‘Yeah. And he may require some convincing that it's really you.’

‘You think it's worth revealing that I can come back from the dead? Just to convince him to work together?’

‘If it helps us bring down the entire Rofal operation before anyone else gets killed, then yeah, I'd say it's worth it. Sure, we could take a more attritional approach, but the victims are just going to keep piling up in the meantime. Hell, the Rofals might start trying to use hostages against us, if we take too long. Giving them time to strategize is not a good idea, I think.’

‘Hmm, okay...’

‘I'll go keep tabs on Colt while you work. Tell me when you're done.’

‘Right. But, uh... I'm gonna be here a while...’

'If you have to leave before it's done, then so be it. But keep at it until I tell you otherwise.' Garovel left, and Hector returned to his work.

He knew he would need to stay extremely late if he wanted to finish the helm. Thankfully, this was a common occurrence in the club. Members would routinely hang around several hours after other clubs wrapped up, and oddly, Ms. Trent never seemed to mind very much. As long as there were at least a couple of students still around, she would just stay in her office and read a book or some such thing, employing ear plugs for any machining noise.

It was convenient, yes, but Hector knew there were other reasons why some of his peers did not want to go home.

At length, he felt the shapes were as good as he could get them. He lathered an adhesive between the layers of the metal and positioned them into place. He checked out a welding torch, apron, gloves, and mask, and then started melting the edges together. He added lines down the center of the metal as well, both inside and out.

After a while, Ms. Trent came out of her office. "It's gotten dark out, Hector. I'm closing up shop."

He released the trigger on the torch and lifted his mask. "I-I just need a few more minutes. I'm almost done."

"Done?" She approached and assessed his work. "You didn't even have the drafting started when you came in today, right?"

"Eh, y-yeah..."

"Impressive. A bit rough still, but you work quickly."

"Ah... th-thank you... I just... I need to get it done."

"Need?"

"I mean... I really want to get it done."

"Hmm. Aren't you tired?"

He shook his head.

"You certainly know how to stay focused; I'll give you that." She smirked faintly. "A few more minutes. But then we're outta here. I've got an important home life, you know. My dogs need to be fed."

"Yes, ma'am..."

He finished up the welding, screwed the jaw into place, stuffed the helm in his bag, and exited the building with Ms. Trent.

"You okay to get home?" she asked.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine."

"You sure? We're not supposed to give students rides, but I can't just let you walk home in the dark."

"No, really. I, uh... I mean, uh... my parents should be here soon."

"Then you won't mind if I wait with you."

He grimaced. "Uh... th-that's not necessary."

"Oh, I insist," she said.

He sighed.

"They're not coming, are they?"

He had to think of something. Lying wasn't working. He decided to try a version of the truth. "No, they're not," he said. "I'm not going home yet. I h-have somewhere else I want to go first."

"Aha. Somewhere you'd rather not tell a teacher about, is that it?"

He nodded his head to the side a little. "Y-you could say that..."

"Alright," she said. "It's not my business. But stay out of trouble, Hector. You're a good kid."

He watched her go out into the parking lot and drive off in a white compact.

He pulled out the helm as he started walking and held it up to inspect. He hadn't been able to look at the finished product very closely before leaving the workroom. He turned it over in his hands.

'Wow, this looks like shit...'

Garovel laughed. 'Are you done?'

"81

'Yeah... I mean, it's functional... but the face is all dented from the hammer. I could smooth it out with the grinder, but that'd weaken the metal...'

'Substance over style, Hector.'

'These corners on the jaw piece are going to dig into my neck if I don't shave them down...'

'You want to stay and keep working?'

'I can't. The clubroom is closed. I don't think there's anyone even left in the school...'

'Then you might as well get over here.' Garovel started giving directions.

'So, uh... what's Colt been doing?'

'Sleeping, mostly.'

'The whole day?'

'Yeah. But then, he is the most wanted man in Brighton right now. I can't imagine daylight being very friendly to him.'

‘Oh yeah...’

‘But he’s awake now. Looks like he’s preparing to leave.’

‘Any idea where he’s going?’

‘No. But it must be something important if he’s risking exposure. He’s taking a gun with him.’

Hector started running. Soon, he reached Brighton’s inner city and asked for more directions. Garovel gave them, but Colt was moving now, so following was made more difficult. Hector wasn’t empowered with strength, either. His body still ached in protest every time his feet hit the pavement.

He finally stumbled to a stop when he saw Garovel.

‘You don’t look so good,’ the reaper said, grasping his shoulder.

Relief washed through him. ‘Where is he?’

Garovel pointed toward an alley behind a department store.

Hector slipped his head into the helm.

‘It doesn’t look so bad,’ the reaper observed. ‘The dents make it look a bit abnormal, but in a good way. An imposing way. How does it fit?’

He rubbed his neck. ‘Could be worse, I suppose...’ He made his way over to Colt."

When Colt spotted him approaching, the man's posture stiffened and his hand moved for his coat pocket. "Who the...? Wait. It's you, isn't it? I heard you were causing trouble. Looking to avenge your partner, are you?"

"No, I... I, um..."

Colt squinted at him.

'Calmly. Deliberately. At your own pace, Hector.'

"I... know about your children, Officer Colt."

"Do you, now?"

"I'll be brief," said Hector. "I'm going to rescue them, because... whatever I think about you... your children are innocent."

Colt seemed amused. "You're going to rescue them," he said. "And how, exactly, are you going to accomplish this feat? Do you know where they are?"

"I don't... have to tell you that..."

Colt revealed his gun, but kept it pointed low. "Hold on, kid. I'm not going to let you run in and put them in danger."

"They're already in danger..."

"The only thing keeping them safe is me," said Colt. "My actions. As long as I do what he wants, they're not in danger."

"What happens... when he wants you to do something... that you can't do?"

"I'll do anything. You understand that, kid? There are only two lives that matter to me, and mine ain't one of them."

Hector was quiet a moment. He took off his helm. "I've never had a partner," he said, holding it under his arm.

"You're lying," said Colt. "You're that kid's twin or something. It's the only explanation."

"Then shoot me," said Hector. He walked closer. "Shoot me right in the head... and then you'll see..."

“Stupid kid. Are you suicidal?”

‘Don’t answer that.’

“I thought you said you’d do anything,” said Hector.”

"83

Colt glowered and holstered his weapon. “Alright,” he said, “but I won’t waste a bullet.” He drew his knife, and Hector scarcely saw the blade coming before it drove through his eye socket.

Darkness. Hector reawoke on the pavement, Colt dragging him toward the trunk of his car. He called out to the man. “Hey...”

Colt dropped Hector’s legs. “Impossible...” He backed up against the car as he watched Hector stand up again.

“Is this... proof enough?”

Colt just stared at him, face like stone.

“I want information,” said Hector.

“You seem to have plenty of information already,” said Colt. “What else do you need?”

“Uh...”

‘The identities of other double agents. We don’t need any more surprises.’

“Tell me who else... um... who else Rofal has on the police force... or anywhere else I should know about.”



“The only other cops I know about are Toller, Robstoy, and Vance.” He paused, furrowing his brow at Hector. “But I... I can look into finding more.”

‘Get him to ask Rofal about his plans. There seems to be a bigger play.’

“Also... if you can tell me about his plans... I’ll have a better idea of what to do after your children are safe...”

“Fine. I’ll find out what I can. If that’s all, then I have an appointment to keep.”

Hector stiffened. “Appointment? If you’re going to kill someone...”

“I won’t kill him if he cooperates,” said Colt.

“Officer Colt...”

“Kid, it’s not like I have a choice here.”

“I know, but...”

‘Tell him to kill you again,’ said Garovel.

‘Why?’

‘We need to know where the children are, and the only way to do that is to have Colt give Rofal what he wants. And Rofal wants you dead.’

“Okay, Officer Colt. Here’s what we’ll do...”

"84 -- X.

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Colt was glad the kid wasn't heavier. He lugged the body over his shoulder and approached the entrance to the Rofal mansion. He held the metal helmet in his free hand. The kid had been adamant about not leaving it behind.

The guards searched him. He had hoped that carrying a dead body would allow him to forgo such formalities, but they still made him stand there and wait while they confiscated his weapons. They even searched the kid's body.

Rofal chose to receive him in the atrium, and Colt dumped the body on the floor.

Swank backed away. "It's him! You brought him here?!"

"Him?" Rofal eyed the body.

"This kid was the thorn in your side," said Colt.

"Ah, is that so?"

Swank nodded. He did not venture out from behind the staircase. "You're sure he's dead, right?"

"Of course," said Colt. He turned the kid's head to the side, revealing a bloody gash below the base of the skull. "I would've stabbed him in the face, but I wanted to make sure you could recognize him. There is a reward for this, right? Oh, generous boss of mine?"

Rofal laughed. "Spectacular! Of course I'll reward you. Have a whole day--no, two days. Incredible work. How did you even find him?"

"He came to me," said Colt. "Said he wanted my help. Thought I'd betray you and feed him information."

Rofal's smile broadened. "Let me guess. You said you would, and then stuck him as soon as his back was turned."

"Pretty much."

"I love it," said Rofal. "That's what I admire about you, Colt. That ruthlessness."

Colt merely returned a smile of his own."

"84 -- X.

Chapter Ten: 'And ye shall know fear...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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"85

“How did you kill him?” Swank asked.

Colt furrowed his brow. “I stabbed him in the back of the head. Stupid question.”

“Yeah, but...”

Colt looked to Rofal. “So how long are you going to make me wait?”

“I’ll arrange for you to meet them tomorrow.”

“Tonight,” said Colt. “I want to see them tonight.”

That gave Rofal pause. His smile lessened. “Impatient, aren’t you?” He eyed Colt again, then the body. “Fine. I suppose you’ve earned it. I will have them brought here and give you the first three hours tonight.”

Rofal had the body moved to the medical ward, accompanied with a handful of guards. Colt handed the weird helmet off to one of them, who seemed to find it amusing.

They made their way into Rofal’s office. Rofal poured Colt a glass of whiskey. He did not offer one to Swank.

“There’s something else I’d like to know,” said Colt.

“Yes?” said Rofal.

“The money that the kid stole, what was it for?”

“Why? Did you recover it?”

“No.” The kid did have a gripload of money in his bag, Colt had discovered, but Rofal didn’t need to know that. The money was stuffed

under the backseat of his car. "But you said something about it being for a seat at a table. What table?"

Rofal paused again. "Why do you want to know?"

"Let's say I've been considering my circumstances," said Colt. "And being more cooperative with you is starting to seem more advantageous."

"I see." Rofal leaned back in his chair. "Well, I would be lying if I said I did not want to tell you. However, if honesty is the game now, then I have to say, I am a bit taken aback by your sudden change of heart. And I have never been a very trusting man."

"I've noticed."

"86

"I will tell you this," said Rofal. "That money was my means of acquiring an introduction with certain... like-minded individuals."

"I see," said Colt. "Is that all ruined now?"

"For the time being, yes. A frustrating set back. But I'm sure another opportunity will present itself in time."

Colt swilled his whiskey around the glass.

--+-+--+--

"Agh... where am I...?"

"Relax. I've got you."

"Ah... this again, huh?"

"I have to hold onto your soul while we wait for Colt's children to arrive."

"Okay... but, uh... this feels... a little different from the last time..."

"Well, without sounding too corny, our souls have had time to get acclimated to one another."

"What does that mean...?"

"We've bonded."

"Aww... come to think of it... this does kinda feel like a warm hug."

"Hmm, I suppose it does."

"It's really nice..."

"Uh. Okay."

"Hold me more tightly, Garovel."

"Getting a bit weird now."

"Haha. So, uh. What's going on with Colt? I can't see anything."

"He's speaking with Rofal now. He's not getting much information out of him."

"But Rofal doesn't suspect anything?"

"Not yet. It's been a bit boring, actually. They're just waiting for the kids to arrive. Colt's asking about his plans, but Rofal is being predictably cryptic."

"So... what do you think now? You said before that you needed more time to observe, but... do you, um... do you think I should kill Rofal?"

"No, I don't think you should."

"Really? Why?"

"Because we still don't know what will happen to Rofal's business in the event of his death. Contrary to popular belief, cutting the head off the snake doesn't always work. I don't think his enterprise will just dissolve."

"87

"You're worried someone worse might take his place?"

"Until we know otherwise, yes."

"But you don't object to his death on moral grounds...?"

"Not particularly, no--hmm? Ah. Bohwanox just showed up. Hold on."

"Bohwanox? What's he doing here?"

"He's telling me."

"I can't hear him."

"Yeah, your soul isn't linked to him, so--agh, I can't carry two conversations at once like this. Just wait a minute."

"...A-alright... um..."

"There's something wrong."

"What is it?"

"Bohwanox says he followed someone here who had the aura of death. But it went away on its own, somehow. I'm not sure what he means. He says he's been investigating a series of missing persons reports, and he thinks this might be related."

"Ah, uh... w-what do we do?"

"...Bah. We need you awake. This person he followed is probably in serious danger."

"But it's too soon, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

"So, then...?"

"We make do. Get ready. Ah. Looks like they're dissecting your body."

"Wha--?"

--+-+--+-+--

Hector's eyes stuck open, and he saw a woman in blue scrubs standing over him. He looked down to see his chest cavity pried open with metal clamps, and a pair of burly thugs watching in the corner of the room. One of them was wearing his helm.

She noticed his eyes open and froze. "Uh, guys..."

Hector sat up. They all screamed.

‘Keep them quiet!’ Garovel yelled.

He bounded up and barreled into the man with his helm, punching him in the gut and yanking the helm free. The other guy slugged him in the face, flooring Hector. They jumped at the opportunity to kick the huge gash that was his chest."

"88

Hector caught one of their legs and flung the man into his partner. They both bounced off the wall and toppled onto one another. He waited for them to get back up, but when he saw them reaching for their guns, he pulled their weapons straight out of their hands and pistol-whipped them both over the head. They stayed down.

Hector eyed the medic crouching in the corner and donned his helm once more. "Please remain quiet..."

The woman nodded furiously.

More guards filed into the room, however. Hector used the first thug who entered to push through the others and create a path for himself. He made sure that they all went down before they could start shooting or call for help. A couple of them ended up caught in the rafters. He initially thought that the corridor had a typically bare ceiling, so he was confused when the first guy he kicked up there didn't come back down.

‘Well, this descended quickly,’ said Garovel.

Hector ripped the clamps out of his chest, tearing flesh and bleeding all over the marble floor. Broken ribs stuck out at jagged angles, and he touched his own beatless heart. He tried not to think about how painful this would be later. ‘So where do I go now?’

Bohwanox appeared through the wall. ‘I apologize for my imposition,’ he said.

‘Uh, it-it’s fine...’

‘Bohwanox can’t hear you,’ Garovel said as he initiated the regeneration, causing Hector’s bones to bend and snap back into place. ‘He isn’t linked to your brain like I am, so you have to talk aloud to him.’



“Oh. Uh... Garovel said that, um... you saw the aura of death go away on its own?”

"89

‘Yes,’ said Bohwanox. ‘It just vanished, with no apparent cause. Then the man it belonged to suddenly decided to come straight here, as if in a trance. I saw him go this way. Please follow me.’

Hector did so, smashing security cameras where he saw them. “I thought, um... I thought you didn’t care about saving people,” said Hector.

‘I don’t like to get involved, if that’s what you mean,’ said Bohwanox. ‘But this is something different. You’ve sensed it too, haven’t you, Garovel? The strange discomfort in this city?’

‘Mm. I have. You believe this to be connected?’

‘Not just connected. I believe it to be the root cause. I believe these missing people may be dying very... abnormally.’

“What do you mean?”

‘I’m not wholly sure myself,’ said Bohwanox. ‘These people who have been going missing, they’re all different ages, races, and genders. I couldn’t find a common thread between them all, and their disappearances don’t seem to have benefited anyone in particular. So I don’t suspect that they’re being held prisoner for sake of ransom or slavery. I believe they’re being killed. But if that’s the case, then why haven’t I found any trapped or wandering souls? It’s very strange.’

‘And troubling,’ added Garovel.

‘Here,’ said Bohwanox. ‘I saw him go through that door.’

“You didn’t check inside already?”

‘No, I...’ Bohwanox shied away from the door. ‘I was... reluctant.’

Hector tilted his head. He looked at Garovel for an explanation, but the other reaper was also backing away. “A-are you guys okay...?”

‘You feel that, Garovel?’

‘I do. I’m wondering how I missed it before...’

‘Because it’s quiet,’ said Bohwanox. ‘It’s like a shadow that doesn’t belong. You don’t realize it’s there until the person casting it suddenly moves... and it lingers.’”

"90

The reapers both fell in behind. ‘Please go first, Hector,’ said Garovel. ‘And be very careful.’

The door was locked, so he broke it down. It clapped to the floor so loudly that he was sure more guards would be coming soon, but the first things he saw in the room were two people--a young man in a dark suit staring back at him and an older, seated gentleman staring vacantly at a wall.

“Excuse me,” said the younger man, “but what the hell do you think... you are... Hmm.” He squinted at Hector. “What do we have here?”

-+-+--+

“Fine,” said Colt. “Then maybe you can tell me more about your family. I’ve only ever met you and Geoffrey.”

“Ah.” Rofal took a swig of his alcohol. “My father and mother retired successfully some ten years ago now. Great man, my father. These days, some people question his lucidity--namely, my mother--but sometimes, I can still see that brilliance of his. That ambition. One moment, he’ll be talking about his great grandfather or his dead sister like they’re in the room; and then the next, he’ll be whispering to me about some secret store room he had built thirty years ago.”

“I met him once,” said Swank. “He offered to cut my hair for me. And replace it with possum fur. I’m still not sure if he was joking.”

Rofal laughed. “Apart from that, I have a few siblings. I inherited the business because my older sister, bless her, hates everything about it.”

Colt snorted. “One of you isn’t a criminal?”

“Oh, she has the mind for it. We all know she does. But she fell in love with an electrician and decided to become a housewife, if you can believe that. Still not sure I do.””

"91

--donation bonus (day #1, post 1/5)--

“What about your other siblings?” Colt asked.

“You are very curious today,” said Rofal, laughing lowly. “If this is part of some ploy to take my family members hostage in exchange for your own, then for your own sake, allow me to dispel that plan in its infancy. You can take whomever you want. Or try to. My family members certainly do not need me to protect them from the likes of you. They would be upset if I did.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Ha.”

“What about Geoffrey’s parents? Are they dead?”

“No, they are alive. But they entrusted him to me. They struggled with him as a child.”

“I can imagine.”

“I do not think you can,” said Rofal.

Colt raised an eyebrow.

Rofal downed the rest of his whiskey and rested the glass in front of him. “There are very few people in this world who frighten me,” he said. “I am all too glad to have that monster’s favor.”

--++-+-++-

‘What the hell is that thing?’ said Bohwanox.

‘I don’t know,’ said Garovel.

Hector didn’t have time to ask for an explanation. A group of five more guards appeared in the doorway and laid hands on him. He soon

dispatched them, rendering three unconscious and two groaning in pain on the floor.

“Oh, wow! What a pleasure to meet you! My name is Geoffrey. What is yours?” When Hector did not reply, Geoffrey’s face scrunched up. “Why are the interesting people always so rude to me?”

Upon a second look, Hector noticed an unusual décor in this room. Not more than a meter to Geoffrey’s left lay a row of objects encased in glass. A foot, a hand, a nose, a little finger, a pair of eyes, a hairy scalp, a shriveled heart, a blackened brain. Various sizes and skin colors. All bloody.”

"92

--donation bonus (day #1, post 2/5)--

Hector’s expression darkened beneath his helm. He eyed the vacant-eyed man in the chair. “Who is that person?” he said.

“Oh, him?” said Geoffrey. “He is my new fetcher. My old one was starting to smell.”

“...Fetcher?”

“Yeah. I use him to bring me stuff. From the outside. My uncle does not want me to leave, and I want him to be happy, so I use fetchers.”

‘That man is dead,’ said Garovel. ‘The body is alive, but there is no soul.’

“Hmm.” Geoffrey’s eyes moved, and Hector wasn’t sure where the young man was looking. “If you will not tell me your name, then what about these two here?”

Hector blinked. “What?”

‘He can see us!’ said Bohwanox.

“Why, yes, I can.” Geoffrey grinned. “Am I not supposed to?”

The reapers backed away even further.

“You asked what ‘that thing’ is,” said Geoffrey. “You were referring to

me?"

'Yes,' said Garovel. 'What are you?'

"I am not sure what you mean."

'You are NOT human,' said Bohwanox. 'So why do you look like one?'

"Hmm. You know, I have always had a feeling I was not human. Everyone treats me like one, so I did not think much more about it, but you seem to know what you are saying. What are you, anyhow? Phantoms?" Geoffrey stepped closer and reached out to touch Bohwanox.

Hector placed himself in the way. "Did you... kill that man there?"

Geoffrey eyed Hector again. "You have not answered any of my questions, yet you continue to ask more of your own. You are trying my patience."

"Too bad," said Hector. "Did you kill him?"

"93

--donation bonus (day #1, post 3/5)--

"I suppose I did," said Geoffrey. "The soul, as your friend called it, is always destroyed when I take them for my own. Now out of my way. I wish to inspect your phantom." He tried to push past, but Hector held him back.

"I don't think so."

"Hmm. Interesting."

In an instant, something red flashed across Hector's vision, and suddenly, his forearm was gone, flesh and bone cut so cleanly off that it took a moment to start bleeding. Geoffrey held the severed limb by the wrist.

Hector remained unfazed.

Geoffrey tossed the meat over his shoulder and stared. "Did that not hurt?" he asked.

Hector clocked him in the mouth, and Geoffrey flew back, toppling over the sofa. "Did that?"

Geoffrey stood up immediately, shaking his head. "That was surprising," he said. And when he looked up, a crimson shade was covering his mouth.

Hand growing back, Hector's eyes narrowed. "What is that?"

"I see no reason to tell you." Geoffrey bounded forward and swung, but Hector just took the hit and punched him in the gut, launching him even farther back than before. When Geoffrey stood, this time the red shadow covered his stomach. He began to laugh. "Interesting! You certainly hit hard!"

Hector waited as the young man approached. The reapers fell back into the corridor, observing from beyond the doorway. "What the hell are you?"

"A good question," said Geoffrey. "I would like to know as well. But right now, I am more interested in what they are. You are not going to let me touch them, are you?"

Hector made no response."

"94

--donation bonus (day #1, post 4/5)--

"Fine." Geoffrey waved his hand, and the man in the chair sprung up and leapt on Hector, thrashing and biting.

Hector flung him off, but not before Geoffrey ran past. There was nothing between him and the reapers. They split up, and Geoffrey went after Bohwanox. Hector pursued, but they were too far ahead. Geoffrey reached out, and it seemed like Bohwanox was still far enough away, but from Geoffrey's hand, the same red shadow flew forth, jagged and fast, and it slashed the reaper's backside.

'Agh!'

"I just want to touch you!" Geoffrey laughed.

Hector was there. He grabbed Geoffrey by the collar and threw him against the wall, keeping him pinned there. He glanced at Bohwanox, who was turning over in the air. "Are you alright?!"

Ghostly black-and-white smoke rose from the wound. 'I-I'm not sure,' he said, grimacing.

'You'll recover,' said Garovel. 'But you need to leave now. You've done all you can here.'

'Y-yes, very well.' Bohwanox disappeared through the wall.

"Hey, where did he go?!" said Geoffrey. "Come back! I was not done!"

Hector made a fist and punched him in the face with all his strength. The wall cracked behind Geoffrey's head.

But the red shade was there again, and when it vanished, Geoffrey's face remained untarnished. "Your attacks hurt," said Geoffrey, "but they do not wound. Not like this." He speared Hector through the chest with a red-coated hand. Blood flew everywhere. Geoffrey's hand stuck out of Hector's back, clutching an extracted heart.

Bleeding from the mouth, Hector did not move. "...You were saying?" He headbutted him, reared back, and kicked Geoffrey through the wall."

"95

--donation bonus (day #1, post 5/5)--

Geoffrey flew into the billiards room. Wood and plaster rained down on the pool table he'd landed on. He sat up and eyed the bloody heart in his hands. "How the hell...?" His gaze locked on Garovel. "This is their doing, isn't it?" He climbed to his feet.

'Behind you!' Garovel shouted.

Hector at once knew what he meant. Geoffrey's puppet man was running at him. Hector stepped to the right, caught the man, and swung him straight into Geoffrey. The pair crashed into a ceiling fan and hit the ground in a heap of shattered glass and splintered wood.

Once again, Geoffrey stood. The red shadow covered his entire body

before disappearing again. "You are beginning to annoy me."

"I've never been very good at making friends..." Hector's chest began to reform for the second time that night.

Geoffrey waved his hand. When his puppet man did not immediately leap forth, he turned to see why.

Small cuts riddled the man's face, and his leg was bent the wrong way. He struggled even to stand, collapsing after a moment.

Geoffrey frowned. "Broken already? I just made this one." He sighed. "Oh well." A red flash cleaved the man in two. Blood didn't start spraying until his body hit the ground.

Hector scowled. "Fucker...!"

"It appears I need a new fetcher," said Geoffrey, starting closer. "Perhaps I should make things simple and just take you." The red shadow swirled free of Geoffrey's body, amassing in hulking form.

Hector dove back into the hallway, but the shadow still enveloped him. He thrashed within its grasp, expecting some kind of horrific pain or black out, but there was none. He turned to Garovel, who looked entirely unconcerned--even strangely amused."

"96

The streak of crimson bounded back to Geoffrey, and the young man stared at Hector in disbelief. "Why?! You should be mine, now!"

'Fool,' said Garovel. 'You can't have him. He already belongs to me.'

Geoffrey lashed out with a red whip.

Hector and Garovel split out of the way. Geoffrey tore after the reaper. Garovel slipped through a wall, and when Geoffrey turned, that metal helm was right in his face. Hector launched him the full length of the corridor to leave an impressive crack in the far wall. He could already see Geoffrey getting up as Garovel's skull poked out of the wall.

'Hector,' said the reaper. 'This is a losing battle.'

'What do you mean? I'm doing fine, aren't I?'



‘For the moment. But we aren’t prepared for this fight. There’s no time to explain. You need to remember what we came here for.’

Hector’s expression soured. ‘The children...’

‘Colt will probably be needing your help about now.’

He saw Geoffrey charging him.

--+-+--+--

The conversation ended abruptly when a pounding thud shook the room. The three men all eyed each other a moment.

“What the fuck was that?” said Swank.

Rofal picked up the phone on his desk.

Colt’s gaze hardened. “Who are you calling?”

Rofal looked at him but did not respond. “Report,” he said into the receiver. A brief interval passed as he listened. “I see.”

Colt shifted in his seat. He did not like the look on the other man’s face.

Rofal hung up and started dialing again.

He could wait no longer. Colt bolted up and ripped the phone from Rofal’s grasp.”

"97

“So this was your game.” Rofal was far too calm. “I am disappointed, Colt.”

Colt smashed the phone on the ground.

Rofal stood as men entered from the far door. “Congratulations,” he said. “You correctly guessed the next call I was going to make. Your children are still on their way here.”

He assessed the numbers. Seven against one. All armed, save himself.

"I suppose I could find another phone, but they should be here any minute, so why bother? Your resolve is clear to me now at least." Rofal walked around the desk. "But you know, I am nothing if not determined. I will give you one more chance."

"Is that so?" said Colt.

"When they arrive, I will allow you to choose which of the two you wish to keep."

"Like fuck you will."

"Refuse, and I will take both. And I will not kill them, Colt. They will become my children. I have none of my own, you see. I will raise them. They will come to love me. They will come to hate you. And when they are old enough, I will send them to kill you in my name."

Colt's expression alone seemed enough to slaughter everyone in the room.

"Agree to my terms, and you will be allowed to keep one child for yourself. Our amiable relationship may continue, and perhaps in time, you will be able to earn back your second child."

He clenched his teeth. "I'm going to kill you."

"You seem so determined not to leave this building alive. Perhaps you would prefer to watch as I kill them in front of you before you die as well? That would certainly save me considerable time and effort.""  
"98

--donation bonus (day #2, post 1/5)--

Another pounding thud shook the room even more violently than before. Everyone looked around nervously.

"I'm not the one you should be worried about right now," said Colt.

"Who--?"

The double doors flung open, and the kid ran into the room, metal helm looking between everyone. A red streak followed him in and

struck at him. He dodged the first couple strikes before it pierced his leg, dropping him to his knee. Red coiled around the kid like rope, swung him up, then smashed him into the floor. The kid struggled in his bindings as Geoffrey entered the room, the red source.

"Pardon us, Uncle."

"Who the hell is this?" Rofal asked.

"He refuses to tell me," said Geoffrey. "You should stand back, Uncle. He is rather dangerous. And very protective of--" Geoffrey choked the word back as the kid started pulling on the red streak, dragging Geoffrey towards him.

A jagged red blade grew from Geoffrey's other hand, and he slashed the kid. It cut into the helm and got stuck there. The kid pulled him in the rest of the way and smacked him in the jaw, freeing himself. He launched Geoffrey across the room, collapsing a table as he landed.

The kid looked to Colt. "Are they here?!" he said.

Still a bit in shock, Colt struggled to answer. "Soon!"

Back on his feet, Geoffrey's wild eyes searched frantically. He pointed to a few of Rofal's lackeys. "You three!" A surge of crimson shot forth and enveloped them. They quickly panicked, began screaming like they'd been set on fire, then all too suddenly, fell deathly silent. "Kill him!" They all bounded toward the kid, splitting up to attack from different sides."

"99

--donation bonus (day #2, post 2/5)--

Regaining himself, Colt took advantage of the chaos. While the other mooks were distracted, he ran up behind one of them. He kicked him in the back of the knee, took the man into a chokehold with one arm, and stole the gun from its holster with the other. He immediately switched off the safety and opened fire. Two shots, two dead lackeys.

The kid was tossing his three around like they were lawn chairs. For some reason, Geoffrey seemed intent on getting around the kid rather than fighting him directly, and the kid seemed equally intent on holding his ground.

Rofal scrambled through his desk, no doubt for a weapon, but when he saw that Colt already had the gun on him, he stopped and backed away. For the first time that Colt had seen, the man looked genuinely fearful. "Be reasonable, Colt... If you kill me--"

Colt shot him in the chest.

Rofal dropped, hands vainly touching the wound as he watched Colt walking closer. "No...!"

"Yes." The bullet splattered Rofal's brain all over the floor.

He didn't have long to feel satisfied, however.

"What have you done?!" someone yelled. It was Geoffrey. The red shadow boiled around him. "What have you DONE?!"

Colt opened fire. The shadow deflected each bullet, causing Geoffrey scarcely more than a momentary grimace. The magazine soon ran out.

The kid ran up and grabbed Geoffrey by the arm, then flung him back into the hall. One of Geoffrey's minions was back up, and Colt bashed his skull in with the butt of his gun.

"What the fuck is that red shit?!"

"No time," the kid said. "Where will your children arrive?"

"I don't know!"

"Think!"

"100 -- XI.

--donation bonus (day #2, post 3/5)--

"Ah--maybe the elevator in Rofal's bedroom. But it could just be the main entrance. I can't know for--"

The red flew around the door and straight for Colt. The kid jumped in front of him and took it through the chest, losing a mass of blood. The jagged shade stopped just short of Colt's stomach.

"Go!" the kid yelled. "I'll check the entrance!"

Colt didn't need to be told twice. He stopped only to rip a gun off of one of the dead bodies. The other two minions were up and barreling at him. He didn't hesitate to shoot them both in the head. He kicked the door to Rofal's bedroom open. The elevator sat on the far left side, adjacent the bathroom. The numbers above the elevator door were already lighting up in descending order.

Colt ducked into the bathroom and waited.

Chapter Eleven: 'A true flesh wound...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector's feet dangled above the floor as he hung from the red blade through his chest. He grasped the blade with both hands, trying to pull it free, but he couldn't grip it with his blood all over it.

"This little helmet of yours is curious. And annoying. Is your head your weak point, by chance?" Geoffrey's red shade coiled around the helm's jaw, tugging on it.

Hector felt himself panicking. He didn't know what else to do. The only thing he had left in mind was his iron, but that was useless. He tried it anyway. He put a hand forth, and from it came a light shower of gray particles, about as dangerous as a handful of confetti.

Geoffrey laughed. "What the hell is this?" He gently blew the powder away and laughed even more. "Are you a party clown in your spare time? Do that again! Go on!"  
"100 -- XI.

--donation bonus (day #2, post 3/5)--

"Ah--maybe the elevator in Rofal's bedroom. But it could just be the main entrance. I can't know for--"

The red flew around the door and straight for Colt. The kid jumped in front of him and took it through the chest, losing a mass of blood. The jagged shade stopped just short of Colt's stomach.

"Go!" the kid yelled. "I'll check the entrance!"

Colt didn't need to be told twice. He stopped only to rip a gun off of one of the dead bodies. The other two minions were up and barreling at him. He didn't hesitate to shoot them both in the head. He kicked the door to Rofal's bedroom open. The elevator sat on the far left side, adjacent the bathroom. The numbers above the elevator door were already lighting up in descending order.

Colt ducked into the bathroom and waited.

Chapter Eleven: 'A true flesh wound...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector's feet dangled above the floor as he hung from the red blade through his chest. He grasped the blade with both hands, trying to pull it free, but he couldn't grip it with his blood all over it.

"This little helmet of yours is curious. And annoying. Is your head your weak point, by chance?" Geoffrey's red shade coiled around the helm's jaw, tugging on it.

Hector felt himself panicking. He didn't know what else to do. The only thing he had left in mind was his iron, but that was useless. He tried it anyway. He put a hand forth, and from it came a light shower of gray particles, about as dangerous as a handful of confetti.

Geoffrey laughed. "What the hell is this?" He gently blew the powder away and laughed even more. "Are you a party clown in your spare time? Do that again! Go on!"

"101

--donation bonus (day #2, post 4/5)--

Hector had a better idea. He coated his hands in iron dust and gripped the blade again. There it was. The friction he needed. He yanked the blade out and hit the ground rolling. He could hear Geoffrey's elongated blades digging into the floor behind.

'The main entrance is straight ahead of you,' said Garovel.

He ran but felt something slowing him down. A bit of the red shadow was still wrapped around his helm, he realized. He pulled on it, but it stretched like taffy.

Geoffrey soon caught up. "Keep struggling," he said, smiling. "Perhaps you'll break it eventually." When he saw Hector turn and walk towards him, his smile disappeared, however. He slashed Hector's helm, but the sharp edge didn't hit cleanly and just ricocheted off. Hector's punch sent him bouncing from wall to ceiling to floor and out of sight around a corner.

He started for the entrance again, but Garovel stopped him.

'Wait! You have to make sure Geoffrey stays on you! He has every reason to go after Colt, right now!'

"Shit." He turned and ran back but didn't have far to go. A red streak came soaring after him, and he rolled to the side. Seeing Geoffrey again was confirmation enough, so Hector bolted for the entrance.

Past the broad welcoming chamber and outside the house at last, he found no one but Garovel. Still underground and surrounded by dark rock formations, it would have been pitch black if not for the pathway lamps showing the way to a slew of elevators some dozen meters away.

Glancing back, he saw twin red lashes gunning for him. He avoided the first but caught the second through the gut, and a moment later, the first returned to hack his leg off."

"102

--donation bonus (day #2, post 5/5)--

Hector dropped to the ground, blood spurting out of his severed limb as he wrestled the thrashing red python. 'Get back!' he told Garovel.

The reaper listened, but too late. Geoffrey had reached the doorway, and one of the streaks was already snaking toward Garovel. It wrapped around the reaper and pulled him closer to Geoffrey.

"Found you!"

'Garovel!' Iron powder gave Hector the traction he needed to rip the streak out, but he couldn't stand yet. His leg had scarcely regrown at all. "Don't you hurt him!"

“Tell me what he is, and I won’t,” said Geoffrey.

The reaper struggled to break free of his red bonds but to no avail.

“Fine!” said Hector. He could feel his leg slowly returning. “Okay! I’ll tell you...!” He made Geoffrey wait a moment longer. “He’s... a reaper. You know. A reaper of death.”

Geoffrey raised an eyebrow, turning Garovel around in the air. “Ah... I see. Interesting. I still want to dissect him, though.” He stuck Garovel through the chest.

‘Ugh!’

“No!” It didn’t matter that his leg hadn’t fully returned. Hector stomped toward him with one gory stump. He clenched his fist so hard that he thought it might break, and he felt iron gathering around his knuckles almost involuntarily.

He slugged Geoffrey square in the face with every ounce of strength in his body.

Geoffrey smashed through the front of the house, and from the sound of it, several more walls within the building.

Hector looked at his hand. A thin metal veil covered the back of his palm and fingers. It wasn’t stable. Even as he stared at it, he saw it cracking and crumbling into dust, but it was still much more than he had expected to see.”

"103

‘Agh... Hector...’

“Garovel!”

The reaper just hovered there, the gash clear as day and smoldering.

“We’re leaving.” He vainly tried to take the reaper’s arm, phasing through it like smoke. “Dammit, we have to...! You have to follow me, Garovel!”

‘The children...’



"They aren't here," he said. "They must be with Colt. We have to get out of here."

'Alright, just... listen.'

"I swear to goddess, if you tell me to leave without you...!"

'No... but I can't move. I need you to... carry me.'

"Fine, fine. How?"

'I have to attach myself to your soul... Come closer.'

"Okay. Do it."

Immediately, Hector's body felt stranger. Everything had a dull ache to it, and his strength diminished. He could feel the reaper's presence, he realized, like a cloud hanging over his shoulders, dark and familiar... and weak.

'Go quickly...'

He ran. He chose the closest elevator, but when the door didn't open as soon as he hit the button, he moved to the next. The fifth attempt yielded immediate results, and he rode the small lift up in silence, listening intently for sounds of pursuit.

The door opened again, and he found himself in a closet, which led into the back of a drugstore. No one was around, as it was still the middle of the night. He slid over the counter and made his way outside. With no key to lock the door again behind him, he felt a bit bad about it but had to leave and hope no one took the opportunity to rob the place. Then again, the store was involved with Rofal, so maybe it deserved it."

"104

Running with only one shoe soon grew awkward, so he pulled it off and threw it in a dumpster. One pant leg was also missing below the knee, but running around without pants on seemed less reasonable.

None of the buildings looked familiar. He slowed to a walk. 'Where do I go, Garovel?'

The reaper did not answer.

‘Garovel?!’

‘Mm... what?’

He took a breath. ‘You scared me...’

‘Sorry... I’m... very tired... I need to rest...’

‘I need you to tell me where to go first. I don’t know where we are.’

‘Ah... uh... sorry, I... I’m...’

‘Garovel?’ He waited for answer but received none. He stopped walking.

Everything had happened so quickly. He hadn’t had much chance to take it all in. And standing in the open street, he still wasn’t ready to. Part of him was afraid Geoffrey would find them if he stopped moving for too long. So he kept walking, aimless and barefoot over cool, damp concrete.

‘Hector!’

At first, he thought it was Garovel, but then he realized. “Bohwanox?”

The reaper descended from the sky, the wound on his back still smoking, though less than before. ‘What happened?’

“Garovel was hurt... pretty badly... he’s, um... resting now.”

‘Ah... I see.’

“Are you alright?”

‘I think so, yes. I’ve never been wounded like this before, but I only feel mildly weakened.’

“That’s good... How’d you, um... h-how’d you find me?”

‘Searching, is how. From up high. I was worried you two didn’t make it. I saw that other man leaving earlier.’

“What other man?”

‘The one you were working with. He was talking to Rofal when I found

you both tonight.'

"Ah! You saw Colt?!"

'Was that his name?'"

"105

--donation bonus (day #3, post 1/5)--

"Did he have two babies with him?"

'He did have both arms full.'

"Can you take me to him?"

'I believe so. Follow me.'

He had trouble keeping pace. His limbs were beginning to feel like lead. Bohwanox slowed down for him.

'I should thank you, Hector.'

"What for?"

'You saved my life.'

"Oh... well... I mean, I couldn't just let you die..."

'Yes, you could have.'

Hector's brow lowered within his helm. "I wouldn't have, then."

Bohwanox eyed him quietly, his bony expression made thoughtful, and a silent intermission passed. 'Are you sure Garovel is alright?'

Hector hesitated. "N-no... but then... if he dies, then..."

'So do you.'

"Yeah..."

'Do you feel like you're dying?'

"Not exactly... This isn't what it felt like before, anyway..."

‘Hmm. What happened to Geoffrey?’

“Still alive, I’m pretty sure... What is he? Do you have any idea?”

‘No, I don’t. Perhaps Garovel does. I get the impression he’s much older and more experienced than I am.’

“Really? Uh... h-how old are you?”

‘As a reaper, I’m only about seventy years old.’

“What do you mean, ‘as a reaper’...?”

‘If you count my human life, then I’m about a hundred or so, I suppose.’

Hector blinked. “You... you were human?”

Bohwanox’s skeletal brow rose. ‘Of course. All reapers were humans before they died. Garovel didn’t tell you?’

“Ah... well... we had a lot of other things to talk about. But, um... he did say that he was thousands of years old...”

‘It’s as I thought, then.’ Bohwanox circled around Hector to look at Garovel resting there.

“I just, um... I just thought all reapers were that old...”

‘Most are. I’m the rare one here.’

“Oh...”

"106

--donation bonus (day #3, post 2/5)--

‘We don’t choose to be reapers. It’s inherited, a recessive trait that barely manages to live on into modern times. The vast majority of reapers once lived among various ancient civilizations as humans.’

“Huh... why does it barely survive? Er, I mean... why isn’t it more, um... prevalent?”

'I believe it's a genetic reason, but honestly, that's about all I know. I'm sure Garovel is more informed. I generally avoid involving myself with other reapers. I've seen many who are... well, violently insane would be an understatement.'

"Eesh... Garovel said something like that, too..."

'Deluded zealotry, believing in absolute madness. And the ones who fight them aren't much better.' Bohwanox shook his head at the ground. 'I can partly understand why. This existence after death... seeing but not being seen, hearing but not being heard... it's not difficult to imagine it having ill effects on someone. Especially if that someone believed fiercely in the religions of their time.'

"Religion? What does that matter?"

'The ancient religions of the world weren't exactly renowned for their mercy and kindness.'

"Ah, right..."

'Modern religions aren't paragons of that, either, but at least society has abolished things like ritual sacrifice and slavery... well. Most societies, anyway. Horsht and Dozer are still full of stupid fucks who believe that garbage.'

"Y'know, for a spirit... you don't seem very... spiritual..."

'I will take that as a compliment,' said Bohwanox, and he stopped. 'Ah. Hold up. I saw Colt around here. Let me see if I can find him again.' The reaper flew off.

Hector had the street to himself. Only the occasional vehicle or illuminated window spoke of any other life in the neighborhood. Not that he minded. The peace was much welcomed--especially as he eyed his shredded, blood-soaked garments."

"107

--donation bonus (day #3, post 3/5)--

"Gah... I'm burning through clothes like toilet paper..." Hector felt something in his head shift, and then realized it was just Garovel's presence.

‘Did I hear... you found Colt...?’

‘Yeah. Bohwanox thinks he’s here. How are you feeling?’

‘Vaguely conscious...’

‘Y-you will recover, right?’

‘Yeah... don’t worry... But what will you do about... um... ugh...’

‘Garovel?’

‘Wha?’

‘You were saying something.’

‘Oh. Are you going to just let Colt go? He’s still a... uh... a murder...’

‘I know... And I’d like to put him in prison, but... that’d be a death sentence. Even assuming the other inmates wouldn’t kill him just for being a cop... Geoffrey’s gunning for him now.’

‘Ah... good thinking...’

‘I also don’t know what would become of his kids. I mean... would they actually be safe in foster care? Or with their mother? Who is she, even? Or is there someone else who--?’

‘Okay, shut up. I stopped listening... Handle it on your own...’

He exhaled a curt laugh. ‘Rest up, jackass.’

Soon, Bohwanox returned. ‘Found him. He’s parked around back.’

Hector followed the reaper through an abandoned terrace, paint peeling off the walls in large, leafing flakes. The ones on the floor stuck to his feet as he passed from dark room to dark room and finally out into a musty alley.

Colt spotted him immediately and took a moment to lower his gun. “Holy fuck, kid. I thought I looked like shit. What happened to you? Did you bathe in Geoffrey’s fuckin’ blood?”

“No... this is all mine...”

“Wait. You didn’t kill Geoffrey? Don’t tell me you let him live ‘cuz of

some bleeding heart bullshit. I swear, that fucking kid deserved--""  
"108

--donation bonus (day #3, post 4/5)--

"It's not that I didn't," he said. "It's that I couldn't... He's too strong. Or I'm too weak. All I know is... I couldn't even hurt him..."

"Well, fuck."

"Did you... did you get your kids?"

And Colt actually smiled--not with sarcasm, but with relief. "Yes, I did," he said. He motioned over to the car, and there they were in the backseat, both wrapped in blankets. "They were screaming their heads off the whole way here. I don't know how they're sleeping now."

"What about you?" Hector asked. "Are you injured?"

Colt revealed a gash under his left sleeve briefly. "There were three guys in the elevator."

"You... killed them?"

"I did. That a problem for you?"

Hector sighed. "I guess not... You don't have my advantages, so... I understand, but still..."

Colt tossed him something. "Here." It was a burner phone.

Hector just waited for him to elaborate.

"I thought you might find me again. How the hell do you keep doing that, anyway?"

"It's... too difficult to explain..."

"Whatever. My number's in that phone."

"Thank you...?"

"Thank yourself. I used your money."

Hector tilted his head. "Cellphone stores aren't open at this hour..."

Colt shrugged. "I may have broken a window to make my purchase."

"You're supposed to be a cop..."

"It's fine. I left plenty of money on the counter."

Hector pocketed the phone. It fell through his pants and hit the ground. He decided to just carry it. "You'll call me if you need my help, I take it?"

"Well, since you're offering, sure." Colt moved for the driver's door. "By the way, you need a ride?"

He thought a moment. "No..."

"109

--donation bonus (day #3, post 5/5)--

"Bah. Don't want to show me where you live, huh?"

"There's that... but mainly... I'd rather not be seen with the most wanted man in the country, right now."

Colt gave an admmissive nod.

"Where will you go?" Hector asked.

"Gotta get out of the city at least. Hopefully out of the country as well, but that'll be difficult." He reached into the backseat and pulled out Hector's bag. He tossed it to him. "Thanks for all your help, Hector Goffe."

Hector eyed the bag. His algebra book lay atop the mass of cash. He hadn't expected Colt to rifle through his things, but he supposed he should have. "If you're really thankful... then don't make me regret letting you go... don't ever hurt those children."

"Of course I won't."

"So you say..."

Colt's expression hardened. "What was that?"



"You're a murderer... a violent man with violent tendencies... How do I know you won't just... get tired of their crying one day and snap? Or lose your patience when they're older and beat them?"

Colt glared. "I'd never hurt them. I swear on my life. You already know I'd die for them."

They merely exchanged stares for a long moment.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you--" He glanced at Bohwanox, who nodded. "--so I'll know if you break that promise."

"I won't."

"Good... because I will hunt you down, if you do..."

Colt looked at him heavily, and then let out a brief laugh, which turned into a sigh. "You show up out of nowhere. You know all these things that no one else should. And you turn everything upside down... Just what the hell are you, kid?"

"...I haven't figured that out yet, either.""

"110 -- XII.

Chapter Twelve: 'O, vigilant heart, take heed...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector had been relieved to have Bohwanox help him find his way home again. The reaper knew exactly where Cedar Street was and had no trouble guiding him toward more familiar surroundings before flying off. He'd worried that Bohwanox would have trouble finding Colt again, but the reaper did not seem to share his concern.

Lying in bed, Hector awoke to Garovel floating over him.

'Best wake now,' the reaper said. 'People will start to wonder where you are if you miss more school again.'

He rolled over. His body felt like a sack of bricks. "It's the weekend..."

'Not anymore. You've been sleeping for four days.'

“Ugh... of course I have...”

‘I only slept for two. You’re a wuss.’

He eyed the reaper incredulously and shook his head. “So you’re all recovered, I take it?”

‘For the most part. C’mon, get up.’

He groaned and sat over the side of his bed. “I feel fucking terrible...” As usual, everything hurt, his chest most of all. It had a kind of burning ache to it that made him regret each breath he took. “Agh, Garovel... why...?” He gave a laughing whimper. “This sucks so bad...”

‘I know. I managed to mitigate some of it while you slept, but the next few days’ll be pretty rough.’

“I regret everything...”

‘No one likes a whiner.’

“I especially regret saving you...”

‘Right back at you, Hector. Right back at you.’

His laugh broke off into a grimacing smile. “Please...! Don’t make me laugh...!”

‘Sorry.’

He slowly dressed himself and half-stepped his way down stairs with wooden legs. He found his father in the dining room, overseeing a coffee and newspaper."

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By appearance alone, Samuel Goffe was certainly Hector's father. They shared their slender builds, their thin noses, their prominent brows, and their slightly darker skin tones. About the only things Hector took from his mother were her eyes and hair, but as he kept his head shaved, that left only the prior.

"Morning, son."

"Morning..."

Hector made himself a bowl of cereal. And a bowl of oatmeal. He grabbed a chocolate muffin as well. Then a banana. A glass of milk, too. Some strawberry yogurt. Peanut butter on toast. And a couple waffles for good measure. He sat down across from his father.

As he ate, he kept expecting his father to bring up the subject of his school attendance, but the man seemed content for them to sit in silence. Hector could see the coffee mug shaking as his father sipped from it.

Garovel floated around the table. 'Maybe you should ask him something.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know. How his day is going? Say anything.'

'No...'

'Why not?'

'Just... no...'

The reaper made a face but didn't press further.

His father finished his coffee and moved to the living room to watch the morning news. Hector devoured the rest of his breakfast, climbed back upstairs, brushed his teeth, grabbed his bag, and shambled off to the bus stop.

Garovel was not prepared to let the topic of Hector's father go, however. 'I know you don't have the warmest relationship with your parents, but even still. You could have at least attempted a conversation with him.'

‘There was no point,’ he said. ‘Dad’s having a bad day...’

The skeleton raised an eyebrow. ‘What do you mean?’”

"112

--donation bonus (day #4, post 1/5)--

‘My dad takes medication,’ said Hector. ‘Sometimes, he has... bad days... and... I mean, even normally, he’s not very... um... talkative. But... he likes to be alone on his bad days...’

‘Hmm. What kind of medication?’

‘Eh... honestly, I’m not sure...’

‘What?’

‘My parents have always kinda... hid it from me... I think Dad’s embarrassed by it. And Mom just... I don’t know...’

‘How could you tell he was having a bad day, then?’

‘He was home when he should have been at work, for one thing. And... I could see the tremors... in his hands. They were weak, but...’

‘Ah.’ Garovel paused. ‘Y’know, I could follow him around and probably figure it out, if you want.’

Hector’s eyes widened, and he shook his head. ‘N-no, that’s... please don’t do that...’

‘Why not? You’d rather not know?’

‘I just... That’s, um... My parents are very private people. My dad even more so than my mom. I don’t... wanna... do that to him... I mean, he doesn’t want me to know, so...’

The reaper shrugged. ‘If you say so. Personally, I think it’d be better to know, but it’s your family.’

On the bus, Hector took the seat behind the driver and stared out the window. Garovel floated right outside.

‘So do you, um... do you really not know what Geoffrey is? Bohwanox

thought you might have some idea.'

'I wish I did,' he said. 'But that creature... I've never seen anything like it. It was just so...'

'So, what?'

'Wrong.'

'How do you mean...? Like, his aura was really fucked up or something?'

'Essentially, yeah. But it didn't seem like a human soul that had become corrupted somehow. It seemed completely inhuman to begin with.'

'Hmm...''

"113

--donation bonus (day #4, post 2/5)--

'Pure evil doesn't exist,' said Garovel. 'People can only be evil insofar as making evil decisions--possessing an intent to harm or cause suffering. Evil actions. Even people who do evil things purely for the sake of amusement are still human. They're twisted, sure. They have evil tendencies, but they still aren't MADE of evil. But... Geoffrey's aura... I can't think of any other way to describe it. It was like an evil consciousness.'

Hector raised an eyebrow. 'So... you're saying Geoffrey is pure evil?'

'No! I'm saying he's NOT! Because there's no such thing!'

'So why'd you bring it up then?! You're making it confusing!'

'Because it IS confusing! I don't know what he is yet! And seeing the way he acted, it's easy to feel like he's evil incarnate or some shit!'

Hector sighed. 'Whatever... You're not making any sense...'

'Tch. I need to find out more.'

Hector looked at the reaper heavily. 'You're not going anywhere

without me. It's way too dangerous with him out there.'

'Oh, please. The odds of me randomly encountering Geoffrey are ridiculously low. And even if I did, I'd just outrun him.'

'You don't know that,' said Hector. 'If you don't even know what Geoffrey is, then you definitely don't know what he's capable of... I mean, he could still have abilities we didn't see before...'

'Hector, I've been doing this a long time. I can handle myself.'

'You're not going anywhere without me,' he repeated.

Garovel lowered his brow. 'You're being very unreasonable today.'

'I don't care... You're not gonna go out and get killed while I'm sitting through a fucking biology lesson...'"

"114

--donation bonus (day #4, post 3/5)--

'You do realize that you are the servant in this relationship, right? I don't have to listen to you. I could put you to sleep and fly to the other side of the planet, if I wanted.'

Hector just glared at him.

'Ugh. Fine. I won't wander off, for the time being. But I will need to venture out on my own again sooner or later. You're going to have to trust that I know what I'm doing, eventually.'

The bus squealed to a stop in front of the school, and Hector exited.

'Tell me how to kill Geoffrey,' he said as he walked. 'You said we weren't prepared for that fight before. So... prepare me.'

The reaper floated ahead of him. 'You're already resolved to kill him?'

'It's him or you, isn't it? That's not a hard choice. I... I would've done it before, if I could've...'

'Him or US, Hector.'

'R-right...'

‘Well. In order to hurt Geoffrey, you have to be able to break the red shadow that protects him.’

‘Okay...’

‘The reason it seemed like an impervious shield was because your attacks were only physical, whereas the shadow was both physical and mental. That shadow is something real and imaginary at the same time, which is why it seemed to constantly disappear and reappear.’

‘Imaginary? But if it’s imaginary... then...’

‘How can it exist? Because reality is relative. Take me, for instance. I’m imaginary. All reapers are. Relative to our servants, and apparently Geoffrey, we exist. But relative to the rest of the world, we don’t.’

‘But... the powers you grant me are definitely real...’

"115

--donation bonus (day #4, post 4/5)--

‘Those powers are the result of a marriage between something real and something imaginary. It’s the same for Geoffrey’s shield.’

‘I think I get it... maybe...’

‘So, in order to fight it, you have to add a mental--or imaginary--side to your attacks.’

‘And how do I do that?’

‘Oh, it’s not that difficult. Because your body has already had its soul “hollowed” out, so to speak, you’ll be able to gain a stronger sense of your own presence and even begin to manipulate your soul in different ways. You’ll be able to get the basics down fairly quickly. It’s only when you want to become genuinely proficient that things go less smoothly, but we won’t be worrying about that too much yet. For now, we’ll mainly focus on trying to grow your materialization ability. I expect that’ll be more immediately useful.’

‘Hmm.’

‘By the way, in the interest of full disclosure, there are actually two ways that your metal power can grow.’



‘Oh?’

‘The first is meditative training, just like you’ve already been doing. It takes a while, but it’s the more reliable of the two.’

‘The other way is faster?’

‘Very much so, yeah. The second method is to throw yourself into an incredibly dangerous situation, almost get us both killed, and hope that the desperation and rush of adrenaline are enough to force a breakthrough.’

‘What the fuck? That sounds...’

‘Reckless and stupid? Yeah. We won’t be attempting that one. The almost-getting-killed part is a dealbreaker for me.’

‘Huh. Okay... But, um... about this soul power or whatever. When should I, uh... start working on that?’

‘We’ll get to--’

“Hector? You okay?”

Finally reaching his locker, he turned and saw Micah standing there.  
“Uh... hi. I’m--I’m fine. Why?”

“Well, it’s just, you’re walking like you’re half-dead or something.”

“Ha... that’s, um... yeah...”

“Did something happen to you?”

‘Shit, what do I say?’

‘Uh... You fell down the stairs!’

‘That’s stupid!’

‘Just say it!’”

"116

"I fell down the stairs!" he blurted.

"Holy crap, seriously?!" Micah came closer, sizing him up and down. "Is that why you've been missing school? Did you break anything? Did you go to the hospital?"

"N-no... I'm okay. Just some... really bad bruising..."

"Wow, dude. Need me to carry your bag for you?"

He tightened his grip on the straps. "Th-that's alright... I'd rather hold onto it."

"Alright, well... come sit with us again at lunch, okay? We were worried when you didn't show up to school the past couple days. Sheryl thought she might've scared you off or something."

"Ah... yeah, okay..."

They walked to class together, and Hector was glad when he could sink into his chair in the corner of the room and just listen to the teacher talk. It was difficult to understand, having fallen so far behind on his homework, but he welcomed the comfortable normality of it. And the chair. Not having to walk anymore was amazing. He rubbed his chest and closed his eyes, trying not to groan.

'By the way,' said Garovel, 'are you feeling alright? In your head, that is. Not your body.'

Hector threw him a look. 'Excuse me...?'

'You're not feeling light-headed or disoriented at all? No inexplicable confusion or anything?'

'No... why?'

'No reason.'

'Garovel...'

The reaper hesitated. 'When I'm close to death, it will begin to affect you. Your consciousness will begin to... well... tear itself from your body. Perhaps even destroying itself in the process.'

'Ah... and disorientation is a warning sign?'

‘Yeah. I suppose I wasn’t as wounded as I thought. You’d be feeling some lingering effects, if I was.’”

"117

Hector struggled through the day. He wished there wasn’t so much damn walking. A few times, he considered skipping class to go take a nap somewhere, but he knew Garovel wouldn’t permit it. He tried to pay attention to each lecture, but he felt like he had missed more than a few things.

History class was the worst yet. Mr. Cormac was talking about the rise of workers’ unions, and people kept raising their hands to ask questions about the royal family. Hector stopped trying to follow what was going on and just shut his eyes.

Garovel, however, did not. ‘Something’s strange here...’

‘Hmm?’

‘Raise your hand and ask why everyone is suddenly so interested in the Crown.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Because I want to know.’

‘But... I don’t like to... participate...’

‘I don’t care. You can be a shy bastard on your own time.’

He sighed and raised his hand.

Mr. Cormac stared at the hand a moment, about ready to lose his patience. “Yes, Hector?”

“Uh... sorry, I was just wondering... why... everyone else was asking about the royal family...”

A few laughs rang out, and the entire classroom turned to look at him.

His knuckles went white around the edges of his desk. ‘Oh, fuck. What did you make me do...?’

"You're joking, right?" someone said.

"He really doesn't know?" said someone else.

He tried to melt into his seat. "D-did... did something happen...?"

"I know you've been absent," said Mr. Cormac, "but you didn't hear about it on the news or from your parents or anything?"

"H-hear what...?"

"Three days ago, someone tried to assassinate the Queen."

Hector and Garovel exchanged confused expressions."

"118 -- XIII.

Chapter Thirteen: 'O, blood of noble birth...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The drawing room was quiet. Helen merely continued reading in silence as the young man on the other side of the broad writing table shifted uncomfortably for the twentieth time.

Helen had forgotten his name. "V"-something, perhaps. Highborn. Ties to her cousins in the House of Carthrace. Both attributes which disqualified him.

After a while of fidgeting, the young man finally grew bold enough to pose a familiar question. "F-forgive me if I sound impertinent, Your Majesty, but is there a purpose to this visit?"

She smiled. Your Majesty was how commoners addressed her. He should have said Your Highness. It made no difference to her, of course, other than providing amusement. "What purpose need there be?" she said.

The boy's face spoke of difficulty. "Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, but it seems very strange that you would invite so many of us to sit with you individually... without purpose."

"Why should it be strange?" she said.

He had no answer, and the silence returned.

She looked at her clock filigreed in silver. "You may go now," she said. As the boy stood, she added, "Please send in the next person as you leave." She watched him go.

'It's finally the girl's turn, isn't it?' said Mehlsanz. 'Please tell me it is. I'm so sick of this waiting.'

Helen glanced at the reaper by the furnace. To her eyes, Mehlsanz was a ghostly gray thing, vaguely feminine in form, and perhaps even beautiful, in a haunting way. 'Indeed,' Helen said. 'I honestly do not care much for the waiting, either.'

'You couldn't come up with a plan that required less patience?'"  
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‘You couldn’t come up with a plan that required less patience?’”

"119

‘I would have thought a reaper of death to be well-suited to the task of waiting.’

‘Suited. Not pleased.’

When the large doors opened once more and a young woman entered, Helen stood to greet her. “Please have a seat,” she said.

The girl sat. She removed the sheathed sword from her belt and rested it by her side--a respectful gesture, if a bit antiquated due to the decline of swords among the Queen’s Guard.

Lynnette Edith was her name. Only nineteen, according to her file, but her sharp eyes and harsh cheek bones made her look older. Her caramel brown skin clashed against the white-and-blue uniform. She kept her wavy, raven hair in a braided ponytail that came over her shoulder, and she was clearly not afraid to look the Queen in the eye.

“Do you carry that weapon wherever you go?” Helen asked.

“Yes, I do, Your Highness.”

Helen did not let the silence last. “You are curious as to your presence here, no?”

“Yes, ma’am. Everyone is.”

“It is all a ruse,” the Queen said.

“Ma’am...?”

“To organize this very meeting with you,” she explained. “If I met with you out of the blue, everyone would wonder why. You would be given far too much attention, which would ruin everything. If I meet with all one hundred and twelve of my Guard, however, then this meeting here becomes a matter of course.”

Lynnette’s posture stiffened. “Why would Your Highness wish to have a secret meeting with me? What could I possibly--?”

“You are one of the few people in this castle whom I believe I can trust. Most of your peers carry obligations toward their families, which exist within a sphere of complications and nuisances, to put it mildly. Your family, however, affords me no such trouble.”

--donation bonus (day #5, post 2/5)--

"My family, Your Highness?" said Lynnette. "Because I am lowborn...?"

"Indeed," she said plainly. "Lowborn families are rare, and while I am under no delusions that this alone renders you without ambitions or unequivocally loyal to me, I believe the fact that you are also ostracized by your comrades splits the difference."

The young woman's ice blue gaze hardened. "They don't ostracize me, Your Highness. I ostracize them."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Because... ah... I must apologize, Your Highness. I spoke carelessly."

"No," said Helen, returning to her chair of velvet and rosewood.

"Please speak candidly."

Lynnette took a moment to become certain again. "They are undisciplined, elitist fools, Your Highness. They think every minor effort they put forth deserves praise and rewards."

The Queen's hands came together at their fingertips. "I knew I would like you." She could hear Mehlsanz chortling.

The girl's expression betrayed nothing of her thoughts.

Helen decided to move on. "So. What have people been saying about my sudden interest in my guardsmen? What rumors have you heard?"

Lynnette seemed reluctant but answered nonetheless. "Most people seem to think you're looking for someone to investigate the assassination attempt in secret, because you don't trust the official investigators."

"Ah. I thought as much. Is that what you believe, as well?"

"In all honesty, ma'am, I don't really listen to rumors. I find them tedious."

"That is unfortunate, because you are going to start," said Helen. "You are my secret ally. You will tell me what others are afraid to. Listening to rumors is now very much worth your time."



“But, Your Highness...”

“I believe I have made myself clear.”

She straightened, and then nodded. “Yes, ma’am.””

”121

--donation bonus (day #5, post 3/5)--

“You must tell no one of your work. Not your family. Not your friends. Not your superiors. No one can support you in these endeavors, except me.”

“What endeavors, ma’am?”

“Two days from now, you will begin to observe my brother Nathaniel’s chambers in secret.”

“Prince Nathaniel? May I ask why?”

“At that time, I am almost certain that someone will attempt to plant evidence that implicates him as the assassin. I want you to remove said evidence and then follow the person who planted it.”

Lynnette blinked. “Why would someone want to frame him?”

“Because he is guilty.”

Lynnette blinked again. “W-what? I don’t understand...”

“I have seven brothers,” the Queen said. “Nathaniel is by far the most foolish. And while that does not allow me to forgive what he has done, there is no doubt in my mind that someone is using him. I want you to help me discover who my true opponent is.”

The young woman’s expression wavered for only a moment. “I understand, Your Highness. I will do as you command.”

“Thank you, Lynnette. However, I must tell you, your circumstances will temporarily worsen, and I will not be able to improve them without revealing my intentions to my enemies. I am going to have you demoted to nightly patrols, where your absence among the Guard will

be least problematic, but it will still not go unnoticed. Your superiors may have you removed from the Queen's Guard entirely."

"I understand..."

"Endure this hardship for me, and I shall show my gratitude as only I can. You and your entire family will want for nothing. That is my promise."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"122

--donation bonus (day #5, post 4/5)--

"Please recite your task back to me."

"In two days, I will begin observing Prince Nathaniel's bedchamber. When someone arrives to plant evidence, I will remove it and follow the perpetrator, where I will attempt to learn the identity of the person responsible."

"It will likely be one or more of my brothers. I merely need to know which."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now be on your way. If anyone asks what happened during our meeting, tell them that you sat with me in silence, just like everyone else."

"As you command." Lynnette stood and returned her sword to its place on her belt.

"And please send in the next person on your way out."

Lynnette nodded and exited the drawing room.

Helen eyed the reaper. 'I would like you to accompany her when the time arrives.'

'You don't trust her to follow your orders?'

'This is not just about finding my enemies,' the Queen said. 'I need

new allies. I hope you will be able to tell me if she is as trustworthy as I think she is.'

'Alright. I suppose I don't have anything better to do.'

The next member of the Queen's Guard entered, and Helen bade him sit, allowing the quiet to return in force.

Mehlsanz floated around the new guest, eyeing him and soon growing bored. 'Do you really have no idea who convinced Nathaniel to kill you?' she asked.

'I fear I do not know my family as well as I should. I have often wondered what my father was thinking when he chose me as his successor. Surely, he must have known the ire it would earn me.'

'He must've really believed you were the best person for the job.'"  
"123

--donation bonus (day #5, post 5/5)--

'Perhaps,' said Helen. 'But the tradition of primogeniture is not so easily ignored.'

'Well, yeah. I doubt your father intended for the succession to get you murdered.'

'Given my circumstances, it now seems more likely that my father appointed me not because he believed I would do well, but because he believed others would do evil.'

'Hmm.'

'The most irritating part of it all is that I saw the assassination coming in time, and yet I could not save myself. Suddenly, my most trusted subordinates were nowhere to be found. I died, because I misjudged the true characters of my friends.'

'Ah. Hence, your determination not to make that mistake twice.'

'Yes...'

--++-++-++-

Sitting in his room, Hector scratched his head as he struggled over his algebra homework. Garovel floated next to him, reading the newspaper sprawled across his desk.

The rest of the school day had gone rather strangely. His new group of lunch friends had been extremely apologetic, even though he couldn't imagine what they had to feel sorry for. They ended up discussing television and pudding, afterwards, though Hector mostly just listened.

Carpentry club had been the real surprise, however. Word had gotten around of Hector's tumble down a flight of stairs, and when he had hobbled into the clubroom, thinking he would get a bit more work done on his helm, he had been assailed with a slew of inquiries and concerns about his health from everyone in the club. People who had ignored him for the past year were suddenly talking to him again. He handled the situation the best way he knew how. By running away. Or waddling briskly away, at least."

"124

'Turn the page, please,' said Garovel.

He did so. "How much do you know about the Queen, anyway?"

'Not much. I know she's quite young for a functional monarch. Still in her early thirties, I believe. And I know it was a big deal when she was appointed by her father.'

"Oh yeah, I remember that. It was only like four years ago, wasn't it?"

'Yeah. She's the youngest of eight direct descendants, and all seven of her siblings are male. The King broke Atreyan royal tradition in a big way by choosing her.'

"That's right... I remember 'cause everyone thought she'd rule in name only or just... have her power taken away as soon as her father died... but he died like a year later, and nothing's changed. Well... until now, I guess..."

'I wonder if one of those siblings is responsible for the attempt on her life.'

Hector's brow receded. "One of her own brothers...? That'd be so

fucked up...”

‘Well, when you have that kind of power within your reach, and you’re raised to believe it’s your destiny or some stupid shit like that, only to see it given to someone else... I mean, who knows if that’s really the case? But it’s not hard to imagine, given what a huge fuss was made over her appointment initially.’

“Geez...”

‘Shouldn’t you be focusing on your math, by the way?’

Hector sighed. “I should be meditating...”

‘You meditate way too deeply, you freak. I need you to turn the pages for me right now.’

“Maybe I can just... hang the pages from the ceiling, and you can float around them or something...”

‘Just do your damn homework. You can meditate later.’”

"125

“Ugh... Y’know, I thought you’d be a faster reader than this.”

‘Oh, I’m sorry. How many non-native languages can YOU read? Because I’m only fluent in about three hundred or so.’

Hector blinked. “Three hundred?!”

‘Well. A good number of them are dead, but still.’

“Hmm... You’re thousands of years old, though. So that’s only like one new language every hundred years. Not all that impressive, really.”

‘Oh, shut up.’

After quietly agonizing through a few problems with trigonometric functions, he was relieved to hear Garovel begin musing again.

‘Hmm...’

“What’s the matter?”

‘It’s just, this article...’

“Are you gonna start spinning wild theories, now?”

‘No.’ A beat passed. ‘Maybe.’

“Ha.”

‘It says the Queen informed her own guards of the attack an hour after it occurred.’

“Huh... Is that odd?”

‘Well. Kind of. You’d think the Queen’s Guard would be a bit more on the ball, wouldn’t you? Even if they’d been unable to stop the assailant, shouldn’t they have at least known there was one? If not right away, then surely within an hour?’

“Well... uh... maybe there wasn’t an assailant. Maybe someone just poisoned her drink or something, and no one saw who.”

‘Hmm. It says here that the Queen was “in a state of confusion” and has yet to remember any details of the attack. What the hell does that mean?’

“Yeah, I dunno about that one...”

‘Apparently, she’s scheduled a public press conference a few days from now, and they’re expecting more details then.’

“Weird... It’s already been three whole days, right?”

‘This sounds like... a reaper may have been involved.’

Hector reared back. “W-what? What makes you think that...?”

"126

‘Mainly, the fact that it took her an hour to report the attack, but also the fact that no one else seems to know anything about it. Perhaps the reason she waited so long was because the assassin actually succeeded in killing her.’

“Damn... a reaper revived the freaking Queen?”

‘There could be some other explanation I’m not thinking of. But it’s not unheard of for reapers to take on people in positions of power and try to use that person for some purpose.’

“Holy shit... are you saying what I think you’re saying...?”

Garovel looked at him heavily. ‘If a reaper is controlling the Queen, then we’d better find out what their intentions are.’

“They could... they could start a fucking war, couldn’t they?”

‘It’s a possibility.’

“...What do we do?”

‘Hmm.’ Garovel moved away from the paper. ‘It’ll be dangerous, but I think we should go to the capital and try to see the Queen.’

“Really? But, um... should we, uh... should we really just leave Brighton? I mean... what about Geoffrey? He could be hurting people. I feel like we should... uh, stay and... kill him...”

‘That’s another reason why I want to go, actually. I’m wondering if the Queen’s reaper can tell us anything about what Geoffrey is. If they chose to revive a queen, then they’re probably more informed about circumstances around the world than I currently am.’

“Hmm. But even still... there’s no way we’d be able to get an audience with the Queen. I mean... even if someone hadn’t just tried to kill her...”

‘I can go in alone.’

Hector just lowered his brow."

"127

‘Don’t give me that look. Meeting her won’t be dangerous. If she’s just been revived, then she won’t be able to hurt me yet. But I definitely want you to escort me everywhere else. We might not be the only reaper and servant to pay her a visit.’

“You think so? Do you, uh... do you think I’m ready to fight another servant?”

Garovel fell quiet a moment. 'We won't engage anyone like that unless we absolutely have to. But all the same, you'd better start meditating.'

"Right..."

'Oh, but before you do, lay out the classified ads for me.'

"What for?"

'I'll see about finding you transport. Sescoria is a good four hundred kilometers away. You can't just run there.'

"So I'll take a train."

'Yeah... Problem with that is, we might have to leave Sescoria in a hurry. If we're getting chased, you won't exactly have time to stand around waiting for a train to arrive.'

"O-okay, but... I don't even have a driver's license..."

'I'll give you a day to practice.'

"Oh, gee, a whole day?"

'Twenty-four hours of nonstop practice should be more than enough to get the basics down.'

"Uh, but it's still illegal..."

The reaper shrugged. 'Eh.'

He sighed. "This is gonna end with me impaled on a fencepost or something, isn't it...?"

'Probably.'

"Ugh..." Hector rubbed his face. "This whole thing feels like a terrible idea..."

'I know it does. But a hell of a lot of lives could be in danger. And if they aren't, then so much the better. It could still be an opportunity to make a valuable ally.'

"Yeah... I guess you're right..."

'We only have a few days before her public appearance. Let's not waste them.'



He nodded."

"128 -- XIV.

Chapter Fourteen: 'Foul souls, gather ye wits...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Timothy Swank ducked into an alley and held his breath. In a cold sweat, he listened for the footsteps to pass. They did not.

"Are you trying to hide from me?"

He saw the figure there and screamed. "Please...! D-don't...!"

"Oh, stop your shrieking," said Geoffrey. Only, it wasn't Geoffrey. It was one of his expressionless puppets. This one was a girl, and she might have been cute before, but now her sickly pale skin and listless eyes just made Swank want to run away. "I am not going to kill you, Mr. Swank. You are much more useful to me alive." The rest of her face didn't match the words coming out of her mouth at all.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to shrink into the brick behind him. "You can make them talk," he said, trying not to tremble too visibly. "You weren't doing that yesterday..."

"Yes, I know." The puppet girl's smile made Swank cringe.

"I s-still don't know where Colt is... so, u-um... I mean, I'm looking. Of course I'm looking. But he's just--no one's seen him, so, ah, I d-don't... please..."

"I see. How unfortunate. I just wanted to check in. I am about to go into a meeting, but please keep searching in the meantime." A red vapor released from the girl's skin like a kettle just gone off, and she collapsed to the ground, twitching.

Swank thought he might vomit.

The past few days had been hell. He'd barely managed to escape the Rofal mansion with his life. Between Geoffrey, Colt, and that freaky kid in the mask, that place had been an absolute minefield, but somehow, shitting his pants in the corner of the room had been enough to render

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Geoffrey was decidedly not his uncle. Joseph Rofal understood that killing his employees for failure served no purpose. Geoffrey did not. Or perhaps he did and just didn't care, because simply fleeing was also out of the question. Two men tried to leave the city the other day. Geoffrey had their heads in his office now.

The search for Colt had not been much better. Of the three men that Swank sent to retrieve Colt's personnel file from the police station, only one returned, delivering a message to stop looking for the man. Geoffrey killed the poor bastard anyway.

He had no idea what to do at this point. The Rofal empire was a sinking ship, and its new captain didn't give a shit, because he was a fucking shark.

Swank left the girl's body where it was. He pulled his coat's collar up around his neck and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he walked. He had been on his way to a bar, and now, the idea of getting hammered out of his mind seemed even more appealing. It wouldn't do much to settle his stomach, but that wasn't really the point, anyway. He turned into his usual place, the neon green sign reading Bart's Bar. It was an arm-pit of an establishment, but he had yet to find a place with cheaper booze. He took the first seat he saw and petitioned the bartender for a bottle of vodka.

Not long into his drink, however, a man on the other side of the room got up and ventured over. "Are you Swank?"

Swank nearly told him to fuck off, but after reflecting for a moment on his recent string of luck, he decided he'd try not to piss off a total stranger. "Yeah. Who are you?"

"130

"Oh, I'm no one important," the man said. "But I've been waiting here because I've heard you're the guy to ask about getting certain jobs done."

Swank could not imagine a more annoying answer. Still, he restrained himself with another mouthful of vodka and said, "That so?"

"I hear your boss is a man with discreet interests."

Swank rolled his eyes. "I guess you haven't heard that he's also dead now."

For some reason, the man took that as an invitation to sit down. "I'm sorry to hear that. Does that mean you're in charge now?"

"No."

"So you have a new boss, then. Perhaps I can meet him, instead."

He held back a laugh. "Trust me, guy. You don't wanna meet my new boss."

"Oh, but I do. The sooner the better, in fact."

Swank eyed the man. Something about the guy's face annoyed him, really clean-shaven with a chiseled jawline and a condescending look in his eyes. Swank took a longer swig. "On second thought, I'd like to see that, too."

--++--++--

Geoffrey tilted his head as he laid eyes on the lone pancake house. He hadn't been sure what to expect. Having to leave Brighton for some little town called Chesterville was strange enough to pique his interest on its own, but when he had also seen that the invitation was from the CEO of Boulder Inc., Geoffrey had been positively brimming with curiosity.

Alone under a luminous moon, he entered.

Five people sat around a pair of joined tables. They all turned to look at him--as did the five accompanying reapers.

Geoffrey gave an open-mouthed smile as he looked over everyone."  
"131

"Have a seat, boy," said an older gentleman on the right.

Geoffrey approached them, and the reapers all edged away from him. To his eyes, each reaper looked very human, except a bit blurry and flickering like an old video recording. "Why did you invite me here?" he asked.

"Because I liked your uncle," the same man said. "Now be quiet. You haven't earned the right to speak at our table."

Geoffrey's smile tightened. "I do not like being told what to do."

The man held up an open hand and clenched it into a fist. "I said be quiet."

The air escaped from Geoffrey's lungs. His eyes bulged as he struggled for breath and found none available. He glared at the man and ran forward, but an invisible pressure held him back, sturdy as if a wall had been there.

Geoffrey lashed out with red, snaking around the room and across the table at the man's reaper.

The man stood and speared the shadow through the center with only an index finger. The shadow crackled and died. "I didn't know you were a monster when I invited you here," said the man, "but it changes nothing. You will learn respect, boy."

Geoffrey fell to his knees, able to breathe again. He scowled at all of them, but they paid him little mind.

"What were we talking about?" said someone with a low, scraping voice. This one was an even older gentleman, oily smudges all over his face and faded overalls. "Vincent?"

The man from before acknowledged his own name. "This business with the Queen," he said. "Each of our enterprises will likely suffer if blame for the attack is shifted to a criminal body."

"132

"You think so?" said a younger man. This one looked like a common office worker in a plain gray suit and black-rimmed spectacles. "Isn't that why we refused that idiot prince's request in the first place?"

"Yes," said Vincent, "but if the investigators don't realize it was his

doing, then the result is the same. And I'm betting the prince will make sure they don't realize."

"Fair point," said one of the two women at the table. She was younger as well, with a plump, rosy face. "If the public believes some random criminal tried to kill the Queen, then there'll be a wave of support for stricter legislation and law enforcement across the board. Things'll only get harder for us."

"But the Queen must have her own plans as well," said the other woman. "She has clearly been taking her sweet time with this whole ordeal. She might just expose the true culprit on her own."

"Perhaps," said Vincent, "but if we can assist in that, we should. Or at least ensure a suitable scapegoat takes the fall."

"You want us to help the Queen?" said the oldest man. "Us?"

"She is young," said Vincent, "and likely now a servant as well. If she were to become indebted to us, our position would be much improved, wouldn't you agree?"

"Are you serious?" said the man in glasses. "That woman is going to have a target on her back, and not just from her brothers. If she really has a reaper now, then the Vanguard and Abolish must be watching her. One or both of them could send someone to kill her. Are you suggesting we get in the middle of that shitstorm?"

"133

"I'm not saying we should stick our necks out for her," said Vincent. "But I do think one of us should go to the capital and observe the situation. If things go badly enough, it may be best to pull up our roots and move to a new country."

"Fuck that!" said the man in glasses. "Atreya is my home. I'm not leaving for anyone."

The others all eyed him.

"That is your choice," said Vincent.

"We already have plenty of eyes in the capital," said the plump woman.

“Yes, but only a servant’s eyes will do. It has to be one of us.”

A brief silence fell over the group. “Are you volunteering?” asked the oldest man.

“If that is the group’s wish,” said Vincent. “But truth be told, I was hoping Roman would do it.”

The man in glasses cocked an eyebrow. “Why me? Gerald lives in the capital.”

“He can support you, but your ability is ideal for the task. If you need to kill anyone, you’ll have the easiest time making the body disappear.”

Roman frowned. “I do have my own affairs to run, you know.”

“I’m sure your second-in-command can handle things while you’re gone,” said Vincent.

“Ugh. Fine.” Roman looked at the old man in overalls. “Mind if I temp at your garage, then?”

Gerald looked similarly displeased. “Just as a cover, right? You won’t be doing actual work, will you?”

“I don’t even work at my real job. You think I want to touch your shitty cars?”

“As long as that’s clear. I have an actual clientele depending on my mechanics.”

Roman laughed. “Right. You just spend time with us because you like our personalities so much.””

"134

“A good reputation is easiest to maintain when part of the business is both legal and public,” said Gerald.

“Whatever, old man,” said Roman. “Vincent’s the only one of us who really needs a legitimate business.”

“A certain degree of independence is also important. But I don’t expect a thief to understand a businessman’s thinking.”

Geoffrey despised listening to this drivel. None of it was of any concern to him. Eyeing the reapers again, he wondered why none of them ever said anything. Perhaps they were hiding their voices from each other for some reason. Or from him. Unlike their human associates, the reapers seemed particularly wary of his presence, which pleased him to no end.

The people kept talking, but Geoffrey had ceased paying attention. Instead, he made a game of staring at the reapers, trying to see just how unsettled he could make them. His game came to an abrupt end, however, as Roman grabbed him by the neck and pinned him to the floor.

"My friend doesn't like you," said Roman. "And I'm inclined to agree with her."

"Stop," said Vincent. "The Rofal boy is my guest."

"This thing isn't even human," said Roman. "I don't see a reason to let it live." Roman's fingers dug through the red shadow and reached Geoffrey's skin.

His neck started to burn. The man's hand felt like acid against his flesh. Geoffrey cringed in real agony. But after a moment, he began to laugh. "You can actually hurt me!" he said, eyes widening eagerly. "Aha! More!"

Roman obliged, and Geoffrey's laughter turned to coughing.

Vincent stepped closer but did not intervene. "It's true that he requires discipline, but he could be a useful pet. And we can use him to leverage the Rofals for support. Killing him would certainly burn that bridge."

"135 -- XV.

Roman let up. "I'm not so sure these fucking things can be tamed, Vincent. Just look at him."

Each breath felt like swallowing fire, but the pain only delighted Geoffrey further. "Do you people know what I am?" he asked, voice raspy and torn. "Tell me!"



“Ah.” Vincent pulled the boy to his feet. “Learn to obey, and I will tell you all I know.”

Geoffrey’s expression soured.

Chapter Fifteen: ‘Behold! Thy deathly steed...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

‘This is the address that was in the ad,’ said Garovel.

‘I still think this is a terrible idea...’

‘Just ring the doorbell.’

Hector pushed the button and heard the chime go off inside the house.

A brawny, middle-aged bloke opened the door. He scratched his head as he looked at Hector. “Yeah?”

“Ah, I, uh... I’m the one who called earlier, uh... about your ad...”

“Ugh, you?” The man frowned. “Why ya gotta waste my time like this, kid? I thought you sounded young on the phone, but hell.”

“No, I, uh... I want to buy it for my dad.”

“Yeah, sure you do.” He started closing the door.

Hector stopped it with his hand. “Please, just...” He dropped a duffel bag full of cash on the doorstep.

The man eyed the money, and then Hector. “A gift for your dad, huh? Let me show you to the garage.”

Hector picked the bag back up and followed him around to the rear driveway. They entered a standalone shed where the man pulled a tarp off of a motorcycle.

“Here we are,” the man said. “You know much about bikes, kiddo?”

“N-not really, no...”

“Well, like the ad said, this is a Revenant Softail RS1800 Cruiser.”

“Right. Um... w-what do all those words mean, exactly?”

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"136

He squinted at Hector a moment, perhaps debating whether or not he wanted to answer that question. "Revenant is the name of the manufacturer," he explained. "Softail is a type of rear suspension-- basically means it's not as bumpy as other bikes might be. RS1800 is the model number. Cruiser is just a general type of motorcycle, as opposed to say, a sport bike or a touring bike or something."

"Ah... okay..." Hector eyed the bike's silver frame and black leather seating.

"It's about eight years old, now, and it has a hundred and eighty thousand kilometers. It's been good to me, but keeping it maintained has become more of a hobby than a need, these past few years."

Garovel started laughing. 'I hope you like skulls, because this thing has them all over the gas tank.'

"It, uh... it does actually run, right?"

The bike seller retrieved the key from a rack by the door, as well as a helmet and a jacket.

Hector tried to watch as carefully as possible while the man started the bike. He saw the guy turn the key in the ignition first, then turn a tiny spindle at the neck of the handlebars, then hold a metal clutch with his left hand, and then finally slam his foot down on the ratcheting lever beneath the seat. The engine roared to life, and the man took the bike out of the garage.

Hector watched him ride it up and down the street, and that was good enough for him. The money changed hands, as did the key and helmet, and Hector was soon wheeling the bike down the sidewalk.

The man told him that all the paperwork was in a compartment beneath the saddle, but Hector wasn't terribly concerned about it, and after seeing the money again, neither was the man.

He pushed the bike all the way to the empty parking lot of a long-abandoned department store. He took a deep breath as he stared at the machine."

"137

'Try not to wreck it before we even get it on the road,' Garovel said.

"Yeah, thanks..." He whipped his leg over the side and steadied himself. He was abruptly thankful it wasn't taller, because his feet barely reached the ground. He attempted to mimic what he saw the guy do before, but Garovel stopped him as he went to turn the spindle below the handlebars.

'Don't do that,' the reaper said. 'That's the choke. It enriches the fuel-air mixture in order to make the engine start more easily, but you only want to do that when the fuel is cold--or in other words, when the engine hasn't been started recently. Otherwise, you're just wasting fuel.'

"Oh... how the hell do you know anything about motorcycles, anyway?"

'I had a passing interest in them a few years back. I remember when I first saw one. Looked like a lot of fun. Then the guy riding it crashed into a hedge.'

"How comforting..." He started the engine.

'My knowledge is pretty spotty, though. You'll be shocked, I'm sure, but I've never actually ridden one personally, so you'll kinda be on your own with some things.'

With the engine roaring, Hector reverted to thought. 'Great... can you, um... can you at least tell me how to start moving?'

'Shift into first gear, and it should start going on its own, I think.'

'Uh... how do I shift into first gear?'

'There's a lever by your left foot. Push it down.'

He did as Garovel said, and indeed, the bike began to drift forward, slow enough that he could walk with it. 'Now what?'

Garovel hesitated. 'Um...'

'Really? That's the extent of your help?'"

"138

'Try the throttle,' said Garovel. 'Under your right hand. The brake is there, too.'

The bike surged forward, faster than Hector expected. He pulled on the brake, and the back tire came up. He fell out of the seat. The bike skidded slowly into him on its side.

Garovel floated over to him. 'Well. I guess the paint job wasn't important.'

The plan was to spend the entire day learning, of course. Garovel had allowed him to skip school, even, which gave Hector some idea of how important the reaper considered this trip to be. And as expected, the going was quite slow. He first practiced low-speed turns. Garovel advised him that for this type of motorcycle, turning at higher speeds would require countersteering, but to even reach those higher speeds, he had to be able to shift gears in a passable manner, which was perhaps the hardest part.

Shifting gears was an actual skill that he had to develop. It meant closing the throttle, holding the clutch, moving the lever with his left foot into the correct position, then easing off the clutch and throttling to pick up speed. Hector often released the clutch too quickly and ended up stalling the engine, but after a while, he started to get the hang of it.

Before attempting higher speeds, however, they decided to take a break. Hector had to fetch more fuel, anyway, and not being confident enough to actually ride to a gas station meant walking all the way there, purchasing a pair of canisters, filling them up, and overpaying the bearded clerk so that he didn't think too hard about what Hector wanted it for. He also grabbed a bite to eat and took the opportunity to meditate for a little while."

"139

‘Alright, try hitting me,’ said Garovel.

‘What?’

‘That’s how we’ll gauge your progress. If you can hit me, then you can hit Geoffrey. Or another reaper.’

‘Are you serious...?’

‘Hey, I’m not thrilled about it, either. Why do you think I didn’t have you practicing this as soon as I revived you? Once you get it down, you’ll be able to kill me.’

‘Then I definitely don’t want to practice on you...’

‘Oh, please. You’re not going to kill me on accident, Hector. Give me some credit.’

He pursed his lips. ‘Alright... here goes, then...’ Hector inhaled deeply and closed his eyes a moment. He made a fist and focused on it. Like anyone, he didn’t need to see his own fist in order to know where it was, but there was more to it now. He could place a presence into his fist, and it felt as if his entire arm had doubled in size. It hadn’t, of course, but there was a weight in his mind there, and he knew it was ready.

He smacked Garovel in the torso.

Garovel eyed him a moment, not looking particularly fazed. ‘Hmm. Well, I felt something at least. That was kind of pathetic, though.’

‘Gah...’

‘You sure you’re not holding back on me?’

‘I... I don’t know, I mean... I really don’t want to hurt you, Garovel...’

‘Okay, okay. Fine. How about just aiming for my perimeter, then?’

‘Huh? Perimeter?’

‘Yeah. You said you see me as a skeleton, right? So I have hands and feet and everything?’

‘Uh... actually, I’m not sure whether you have feet or not. I see hands, though, yeah. You want me to punch your hand?’”

"140

‘Yeah. Anywhere but my center, and you won’t hurt me.’

‘You’re sure about this...?’

‘Duh.’

‘A-alright...’

‘Don’t hold back. This is important, Hector. If you don’t learn this properly, we are both going to die. You understand? The only way to really stop a servant is to kill the reaper, and reapers can’t even touch each other, so it has to be you. Sooner or later, we will find ourselves in that situation, and if you can’t kill them, they will kill us. There is no doubt here.’

Hector nodded slowly. ‘Okay. I, ah... I won’t...’

Garovel’s brow lowered. ‘Excuse me? You won’t? Hector, what the--’

‘N-no, I meant, ah... I won’t let anyone kill you. I’ll protect you. Definitely.’

For a moment, the reaper just looked at him. ‘Well, prove it, then.’ He held out his skeletal hand.

Hector gathered his focus again. He envisioned the presence in his hand again. Determination colored everything in his mind. This had to work. Garovel’s life depended on it. He felt the massless weight, stronger than before. He threw the punch.

Garovel’s hand obliterated on impact. The reaper reeled back. ‘Agh, fuck! You asshole!’

‘Oh, shit! I’m sorry!’

‘Only joking.’

‘Agh, wha...?’

‘That was better, though. Good job. You’ve pretty much got it down, already, but you should keep practicing until it becomes second nature.’

‘You dick...! I really thought I hurt you!’

‘Oh, c’mon, that was funny.’

‘But your hand is gone! How does that not hurt?!’

‘Yeah, about that, um. It’ll grow back. And I don’t really feel pain. At least, not in the same way you do. It’s more like an extreme unease. It’s painful in the same way that a sudden surge of anxiety or fear is painful.’”

"141

Hector looked at him unhappily. ‘Geez... don’t do that again...’

‘Sorry.’

He looked at his fist, opening and closing it. ‘You were right, though. That was kind of easy...’

‘Yep. All it really takes is an acknowledgement of your imaginary mind as something real. Which, y’know, isn’t very difficult, given everything you’ve already experienced. But that’s just for the basics.’

‘Hmm. Why can’t normal people do this, again?’

‘Because the soul has to be carved out of the body first, which is something only accomplished by death.’

‘Does that mean Geoffrey died before, too?’

‘Egh, I don’t know. Maybe. But I got the impression he had been that way his whole life.’

Hector wanted to try materializing iron next, but Garovel said that could wait, so he returned to riding practice instead. He donned the riding helmet and mounted the bike. It was time to start picking up real speed.

He had not been looking forward to this part.



After going around in a circle and achieving his previous pace, Hector throttled up and shifted gears when Garovel told him to. The bike responded, and soon, he was going much faster than was comfortable. But that was the point of the exercise.

He sped across the massive parking lot, coming up to the edge and knowing he would have to make a gradual left turn. He moved the handlebars to the left, but the bike resisted and leaned the other direction.

‘Countersteer!’ said Garovel.

‘Oh, shit! But--!’ He struggled, and the bike just went straight.

‘Too late. Try to protect the bike, if you can.’

‘Fuck!’

The front tire hit the curb. The bike flipped, and he went flying."

"142

Hector hit the dirt head first. He tumbled over himself and landed just perfectly enough to see the bike sailing toward him. In the split second he had to react, he decided to embrace the madness and put his arms out wide to catch the bike. The rear tire crushed his ribcage, but his hands grasped the metal frame and held on.

Eyes wide, he set the bike down. He looked down at his caved-in chest and tasted a mouthful of blood. ‘It doesn’t hurt...’

‘I got to you just in time,’ said Garovel. ‘You’re welcome by the way. And nice catch.’

Practice resumed. By the time daylight began to wane, Hector had crashed several more times, though none so bad as before. When Hector finally felt as if he had acquired a passable degree of competence, the bike was hardly recognizable anymore with all its new dents and scratches.

As the engine began to make a fresh clanging noise, Hector slowed to a stop. ‘That can’t be a good sound...’

‘Yeah. But it’s fine. We don’t need the bike to last that long. It’ll probably get destroyed one way or another, anyhow.’

‘Really? It’s starting to grow on me, though...’

‘Don’t get too attached. I’ll be shocked if it’s not a smoldering pile of scrap in a couple weeks.’

‘Aww...’

--++--++--

“I h-have someone here who wants to meet you...” Swank squirmed under Geoffrey’s gaze.

“Oh? Show them in, then.”

Swank exited the room briefly and returned with the person in question.

“You are the man in charge?” said the stranger, smiling in a groomed, confident way. “You’re much younger than I anticipated.””

"143

Geoffrey was not in the most amiable mood. Mr. Vincent Boulder had told him to go home and talk to his family, which in itself was no terrible thing, but even so. Geoffrey was being told what to do again. And perhaps worse, he couldn’t actually refuse.

So when he set his sharp eyes upon this strange man, the first thought through Geoffrey’s head was that he would very much like to torture this person. So he did.

There was no need for a chair. Geoffrey pinned him to the floor with a blanket of red and stood over him, smiling and trying to decide which body parts he wanted next. Swank, of course, had left the room shortly after the agonized screaming began.

“Why are you doing this?!” the man kept saying. His face looked much better now, Geoffrey thought. Replacing the eyebrows with bloody gashes made him seem much less condescending. “What possible reason could you have for doing this to me?!”

"Hmm." Geoffrey stroked his own chin a moment. "How much do you like your nose, exactly?"

The man shrieked. "Please! Stop this! I'll do anything you want! Just--! Please! I only wanted to talk!"

Geoffrey's brow perked up. "Oh, right. What did you want to talk about, anyway? If it is something boring, you will not be leaving this room alive."

The man whimpered. "I-I'm an advisor to Prince Nathaniel... and I was asked to find someone who w-would... u-um..."

Geoffrey placed a red blade under the man's nose.

"Kill the Queen!" he said. "He asked me to find someone who would kill the Queen!"

"Aha." Geoffrey smiled curiously. "And you want me to do it?"

"I-I think we thought you'd just, ah, s-send someone else to do it..."  
"144

"Oh. Well, no deal then."

"Y-y-you can do it yourself, if you like! It's fine! Do whatever you want! I'm sure Prince Nathaniel would appreciate that kind of can-do attitude!"

Geoffrey thought a moment. "By chance, did you ask anyone else to do this before me?"

"Uh, y-yeah, I did. But they refused. So I came all the way out here to Brighton, because I heard of the Rofal family's reputation--and might I just say, you have lived up to it most admirably. You certainly have. Why, I'm sure you're a much better person for the job, anyway. I don't know why I didn't come to you first, in fact. How silly--"

"Please stop talking."

The man just nodded.

Geoffrey frowned. "I suppose I should not kill you, then. My dear uncle

said it was bad business to kill your employer, unless you wanted their job, and I certainly do not want yours.” He released the red shadow and used it to prop the advisor up on his feet. “When do you want me to do it?”

The man hesitated. “You don’t want to know why he wants her dead?”

“Not really, no. When do I kill her?”

“Ah--as soon as possible. Preferably before her press conference two days from now.”

Geoffrey just grinned.

“W-we tried to kill her before, you see, but we failed, and now Prince Nathaniel is worried, um, that-that she is going to expose him, so--”

“Yeah, whatever. Do I only get to kill the Queen, or can I kill some of the other royals, too?”

The man’s eyes bulged. “J-just the Queen, please...”

“Oh, very well.””

"145 -- XVI.

He had not forgotten what he heard the night before. Those five people with reapers had wanted the Queen to live, of course; but then, neither had they expressly forbidden him from killing her. So as far as he was concerned, he was not technically disobeying Mr. Boulder.

Geoffrey’s grin only widened the more he thought about it. “This is going to upset some people I know,” he told the advisor as they exited together. “But that only makes me want to do it even more. I wonder what they will do.”

Chapter Sixteen: ‘Trust thy suspicious heart...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The last day of meetings with the Queen’s Guard had begun. Helen sat across from yet another discomfited young man in abject silence.

Having Mehlsanz observe the castle for the past few days had been a rather convenient means of gathering information. Only two of Helen's brothers, Nathaniel and David, lived with her in Belgrant Castle, but all seven brothers were currently visiting. They had, of course, rushed to be by her side as soon as they heard the news of the assassination attempt. In fact, one of the reasons she had decided to employ this strategy was for the peace it afforded her from their incessant "advisement."

To her mind, the most likely culprit was her oldest brother, Prince Gabriel, as he had been the presumed heir to the throne before her ascension. And yet, according to Mehlsanz, Gabriel was not behaving strangely. If he was guilty, then he was hiding it well enough to fool someone he couldn't even see. However, Mehlsanz could not keep eyes on him at all times while still observing the others as well.

The young Lynnette Edith had thus far proven loyal. Mehlsanz had not seen her tell anyone of Helen's orders, even when asked by her comrades, but again, Mehlsanz could only give an incomplete account of events."

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"146

The drawing room's side door opened, and a blond-bearded man popped his head through. He looked directly at Helen. "I know you wished not to be disturbed, but I need to speak with you."

Helen excused herself and stepped into the adjacent room with him.

This man was William Belgrant. He was her husband. And in the event of her death, all the power of the Crown would pass to him.

According to Mehlsanz, he had been working harder than anyone else to find the assassin, but that somehow made him more suspicious in Helen's mind. If she was honest, he was the very last person she wanted to be responsible for the assassination attempt, but that was emotion talking, not reason, and she refused to let that blindside her.

Still, it made little sense for him to desire her death. Yes, he was the King consort and not the King regent, but there was no terrific discrepancy between the two, unless his political views were wildly different from what he claimed they were. And surely, fourteen years of marriage had taught her something of this man's heart. He may have had the biggest motivation to kill her, but she couldn't imagine him doing such a thing. At the moment, anyway.

Taking long, slow blinks with bags under his eyes, William led her to the other end of the L-shaped chamber, and motioned to the rather broad, elderly woman standing there--his aunt, Duchess Jezebel Belgrant. "She told me something that I thought you should hear," said William.

"I believe I know the assassin's motivation," said the duchess.

Helen merely waited for her to elaborate.

"It has to do with your tendency to... ignore certain members of your council. Most members, in fact."

"147

"I am not certain as to what you are referring," said Helen.

Jezebel frowned, and the many wrinkles on her plump face turned down as well. "You know there is considerable support for the expansionist movement, yes?"

"We believe your opposition to the movement is what prompted the attack," said William.

"Ah," said Helen. They weren't telling her anything she didn't already know. There wasn't much else that would spur one of her brothers to kill her. But these two probably didn't know that her brothers were responsible. All the same, she guarded her tongue. Until she knew their true loyalties, she saw little reason to give them information needlessly.

"I'm surprised you needed us to tell you," said Jezebel. "A queen should know her court better." The woman had never been short of criticism.

Helen gave a squinting smile. "I will take that under advisement. Can you tell me who leads the expansionist movement?"

"I'm afraid not," said the duchess. "There are at least a dozen council members supporting it, all of equal standing."

From the corner of her eye, Helen saw Mehlsanz phase through the wall. She decided to thank the duchess and the King for their

information and return to the drawing room, reaper in tow.

‘You really think your husband did it?’ said Mehlsanz. ‘He seems like a decent man.’

‘I must be certain. I never gave it much thought before--and perhaps I should have--but I recall William being initially reluctant to marry me.’

‘Oh? And you weren’t?’

‘I... quite fancied him.’

‘Aha.’

‘He has never been terribly affectionate. But then, neither have I.’

‘Y’know, I had an arranged marriage, too. Though, I was a slave, so my parents didn’t really have a say in it, either.’”

"148

Helen took her seat again. ‘You were a slave?’

‘Only until I was old enough to give birth,’ said the reaper. ‘My master sold me off straight away. Little did they know that I was infertile.’

With the young guardsman still present in the room, the Queen just glanced at Mehlsanz.

‘Anyhow, you should really get some meditating done.’

‘I still do not understand how you could need me to protect you from anything.’

‘Yeah, well. The world is a bigger and scarier place than you yet realize, Your Majesty.’

‘Please do not call me that.’

‘Helen of the House Belgrant?’

‘Simply Helen will suffice.’

‘Okay, Simply Helen.’



'You...'

'Sounds like the title of a movie. "Simply Helen. Come along as one woman discovers what it means to be herself." I bet you'd go see it, too, you generic old biddy.'

'You are insufferable...'

'Yeah, you definitely would.'

'Please return to observing the castle.'

'Fine. Do your meditation while I'm gone.'

'Very well.'

The reaper left, and Helen attempted to do as she was asked, but she found it incredibly difficult to meditate with a stranger watching her. Surely, the guardsman must have thought she was sleeping, and the idea that he would then return to his comrades and tell them of how he saw the Queen sleeping on the job was more than enough to disturb her focus.

At length, however, Mehlsanz interrupted her vain efforts. 'Oh no...'

'What is it?'

'I found a wandering soul in the basement. Someone died down here. And recently, too.'

'How recently?'

'Hours, at most.'

-+--+--+--

Hector didn't mind the highway so much. The turns were long and gradual, and there wasn't much traffic this early in the morning. The only bad part was having to avoid road debris. He couldn't just run over a blown-out tire or a plastic jug and expect to keep control of the bike."

Save the dwindling towers of Brighton, rolling green hills filled all horizons as he sped across the road. White and dark clouds spotted an otherwise blue sky, and Hector could see a faint drizzle gathering on the visor of his helmet. Garovel had pointed out that it was unsafe to continue using a helmet that had already been involved in a collision, and Hector had promised to find a new one at the earliest convenience, since they were obviously so safety conscious.

He couldn't remember a time when he saw the Atreyan countryside so clearly. The most mundane things drew his gaze. A massive, lone tree, branches sprawling higher and wider than anything he'd seen in Brighton. A quaint flock of sheep grazing on a hill, shepherd and dog not far away. The faint shadow of eastern mountains on his right, thankfully not between him and Sescoria.

Then he felt the bike shake beneath him and realized he was straddling the yellow ridges in the middle of the road. He corrected his course and decided to save his gawking for later.

'There are some things I should tell you before we get there,' said Garovel.

'Things?'

'In particular, names. I don't know what we'll encounter in the capital, but I figure this'll become relevant eventually, anyway, so I might as well tell you now.'

'Okay.' Hector was just trying to keep his eyes on the road.

'With reapers, there are two big entities: Abolish and the Vanguard. The balance of power shifts between them. Though, for all I know, there could be a third major power these days. I'm a bit out of the loop, if that wasn't already obvious.'

'Hmm. These two sides are at war?'

'Constantly. All over the world. Been that way for ages.'

'Geez... what are they fighting about?'

"150

'Well,' said Garovel, 'you remember how I said that some reapers are

trying to make things worse?’

‘Yeah?’

‘I was talking about Abolish. That’s what they do.’

‘Why?’

‘The main reason is that they all want to “move on” into the afterlife. See, they believe that the reason reapers exist is to ferry human souls into the afterlife; and moreover, they believe that once there are no more souls left to ferry, our “purpose” will have been fulfilled, and we will then be able to proceed into the afterlife ourselves.’

‘But... is that, I mean... is that true?’

‘No. It’s bullshit. There’s absolutely no reason to believe we’d be magically transported to another plane of existence just because everyone on Eleg dies.’

‘Y-you’re sure?’

‘Even if we suppose that it is true, I still think it’s fucking crazy to use it as justification to destroy humanity.’

‘Eesh... They really wanna destroy the human race? I mean... that’s just so...’

‘Stupid?’

‘It’s just... you guys can still die, right? I mean, if these Abolish guys wanna get to the afterlife so badly, then why don’t they... y’know... have one of their servants kill them or something?’

Garovel sighed. ‘Because they believe in that fucking thing called “destiny.” They think a higher power has ordained us to be reapers, and if we kill ourselves to avoid that divine responsibility, then we get punished in the afterlife. Or some shit like that--I dunno. It’s all very disturbing. And also, because they’re cowardly, deluded bastards.’

‘But... wouldn’t a higher power or whatever... have a problem with them killing everyone?’

‘One would think. Hey, I told you they were fucking crazy.’

‘Gah...’

‘Though, I imagine that some reapers have actually done that before-- just trained up a servant in order to end their own lives. But obviously, those reapers would be dead now, and not causing problems for us.’

‘Mm, good point...’

"151

‘And honestly,’ Garovel went on, ‘I don’t think all the members of Abolish actually believe it, either. I think some of them just relish the opportunity for destruction. Which, y’know, I can almost understand. Destroying things is fun. But not when it causes wanton misery and death.’

‘That kinda sounds like... someone we already know...’

‘You noticed that, too, huh? I’ve been wondering if Geoffrey is somehow tied to Abolish, as well. But if he was, you’d think that he would’ve already known what reapers are before he met us.’

‘Maybe he was lying.’

‘Eh, that’s a strange thing to lie about. And I’m not sure Geoffrey even knows how to lie. He was more than happy to talk about his murders.’

‘Ah... so then, what about this, uh... Vanguard group? They’re trying to protect the world?’

‘Yeah. You have to understand, though, that both groups can be broken down into tons of smaller factions, each with slightly different goals or variations on the beliefs of the whole. While we might be able to find allies in the Vanguard, we can’t count on them to always be friendly. I remember a few reapers there that we really don’t wanna be around.’

‘Wait. Are you a member of the Vanguard?’

‘I used to be. My last servant and I worked with them for a long time, so I know a lot of reapers there.’

Hector’s brow perked up. ‘Your last servant... what happened to him? Or... her?’

‘We’d been together for a while, and he’d grown tired of it all. He

decided that he was ready to die, so he asked me to release him. And I did.'

'What was he like?'

'Some other time. Right now, you need to know the big names--the most powerful servants in the world, that is. The names that everyone knows not to fuck with, including us.'

'Ah, uh--okay...''

"152

'There are four names you need to be particularly aware of. They are Dozer, Morgunov, Sai-hee, and Sermung.'

Hector squinted. 'Dozer...?'

'You know how there's also a country called Dozer, right?'

'Yeah...?'

'That's not a coincidence.'

'Oh...'

'Morgunov and Dozer both lead Abolish, even though they're said to hate each other. Sermung leads the Vanguard by himself, and Sai-hee is neutral.'

'This Sermung person fights two at once?'

'It's not just them, remember. They have armies of reapers and servants supporting them, and even though they might be the most famous, their highest ranking subordinates are also extremely powerful. But yes, Sermung is an absolute monster.'

'I see...'

'Age is generally the determining factor. These four people have been emperors of the community for, I dunno, two or three hundred years now; and that's because they've survived the longest. I think Sermung is about six hundred years old, and I think the others are all similar.'

‘Eesh...’

‘I know a little more about Sermung, because I actually met him before--him and his reaper, Tenebrach.’

‘Whoa, what were they like?’

‘They were a fiercely impressive pair. Honorable, intelligent, and... they had this odd presence that was just... overwhelming to be around.’

‘You said... he’s six hundred years old, but... isn’t that actually kind of young? I mean, if the oldest servants are the most powerful, then I would’ve thought he’d be like... as old as you, basically. Y’know, thousands of years.’

‘Ah. Yeah. Well. There’s a long and complicated history, but suffice to say, the most powerful people in the world tend to get killed, eventually. The longer an empire exists, the more prone to corruption and so forth it becomes. Sooner or later, new generations rise up; a massive power shift takes place; and then it’s utter chaos until a new balance of power is achieved.’

‘But not in the past couple hundred years, you said?’”

"153

‘Things have reached a kind of stalemate, I suppose. Big shifts in power generally require these rising stars--that is, servants whose power is skyrocketing because they’re constantly involved in huge conflicts. Which happens quite a lot, actually, but I think the trouble nowadays is that the emperors are all paying close attention to this. When they see some young gun making waves in the world, they don’t just ignore that person.’

‘What, so they just kill them?’

‘Or recruit them, yeah. That’s the deadliest time period in a servant’s growth. You suddenly have four giants breathing down your neck, and you’re left with a choice: pick a side, or try to survive long enough to become an emperor yourself. Which isn’t exactly a fun dilemma to be in. I know a lot of reapers intentionally release their servants before they reach that threshold just so they won’t be targeted.’

Hector’s eyes widened, and he shifted his hands. ‘A-are you gonna do

that with me?’

‘Don’t be stupid. Of course not.’

‘But then... are you saying you want me to join the Vanguard? Or... become an emperor? Because I wasn’t really planning on, uh... I mean, I...’

Garovel laughed. ‘I just want you to stay alive, Hector.’

‘I... I mean, you’re talking about all this crazy stuff, but... I just wanna protect people... y’know, if I can...’

‘That’s good enough for me. We’ll worry about it later.’

Abruptly, Hector noticed a highway police truck coming the opposite direction. His posture went rigid, and he held his breath as he waited for it to pass. It did, and he watched in his side mirror, making sure it didn’t suddenly turn around.

After a few minutes, he relaxed again. Then he took the next turn too wide, ran off the road, and flipped the bike into a ditch."

"154 -- XVII.

Chapter Seventeen: ‘Hold thee dear...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector proceeded on, though the cruiser now sported a bent kickstand, a grass-smudged dent in the gas tank, and a missing left side mirror. His helmet had cracked open like an egg, and now he could feel the wind brushing the top of his head.

He soon stopped to refuel. He looked for a new helmet in the shop, but it didn’t have any.

‘Maybe you should just use your helm,’ the reaper suggested.

Hector reached into the satchel over the rear tire and pulled out the helm. The large gouge across the top right temple abruptly reminded him of his fight with Geoffrey.

‘Then again, maybe not.’

Hector pursed his lips to one side. 'I think I... hmm...' He pressed his palm to the metal and slowly moved it across the cut. In his hand's wake, the sundered metal was filled in. Once finished, he held it up to look at his work. His iron was clearly darker than the rest of the helm's sheet metal, so it looked like a kind of jagged scar with specks of iron splaying outward.

Garovel tilted his head. 'Hey. Since when have you been able to do that?'

'Uh... just now, I guess. I didn't really think it'd work, honestly...' He tapped a finger against it, and the iron rattled. 'Ah, it's loose, though. I couldn't make it fit perfectly...'

'Oh, why don't you just cover the whole thing?'

'Huh?'

'Instead of just filling it in, add an entire layer of iron.'

He blinked. 'That's a great idea...' He breathed deep and moved his hand all across the helm until it was completely darkened. The dents from the original molding were no longer visible. The new coating stuck fast, one solid chunk. 'Wow... it's a lot heavier now, but it's a lot stronger, too...'

'And it doesn't look so shit anymore.'"

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"155

Hector snorted a laugh. He considered coating the inside of the helmet as well, but he figured it fit his head snugly enough already. He did add smoother corners to the jaw, however.

‘Hmm. What else can you do with your iron?’

‘Uh... I’m not sure, actually...’

‘Try creating something from scratch. Like a replica of your helm.’

His brow receded at the idea, but he nodded and returned the helm to its satchel. He rubbed his hands together a moment, then slowly pulled them apart until it was as if he were holding an invisible ball between them.

Gradually, he could see the dust appear on his skin, gathering into powdery chunks, then into one larger mass, like grains of sand forming a tiny hill and climbing it.

But it didn’t take shape properly. Hector squinted as the iron amassed into an amorphous lump, far too small and nothing like the image in his head. He frowned at his work.

‘Wow,’ said Garovel. ‘You really did start shitting out metal turds.’

‘It doesn’t look like...’ His frown deepened. ‘Actually, it kinda does...’ He let the lump drop from his hand and made it disintegrate before it touched the pavement. ‘Specific shapes are too difficult,’ he said. ‘Just giving things a thin coating is way easier.’

‘I suppose that’s to be expected,’ said Garovel. ‘It’s like the difference between tracing a picture and drawing something completely new. But your skill is definitely growing. And iron coating could prove immensely useful. How much coating can you create?’

‘Let’s see.’ Hector stuck his arms out as if hugging the air in front of him. He concentrated, and the metal began to swirl around his fingertips. Iron powder collected together, covering his hands completely in lustrous metal, running up his wrists, reaching for his elbows. It stopped before touching his shoulders, however, and he shut his eyes, shaking his head. ‘I think that’s all I can get...’

"156

‘Well. Color me impressed, Hector.’

‘R-really?’

‘Yeah. Unless you’ve just trapped your arms in your own metal, that is.’

He smirked and annihilated the iron. He stretched his arms and

popped his knuckles.

‘By the way, those people are staring at you.’ Garovel pointed to the pump station behind Hector, where a family of four was gawking with varying degrees of confusion.

Hector flushed red. “Uh... I was, uh... that... mgh...”

‘Time to go?’

‘Y-yeah.’ He donned his helm and gave the family a stilted wave before roaring out of the gas station.

His helm didn’t have a visor like the riding helmet, so he had to get accustomed to squinting against the bit of wind that made it through.

He came upon an amusement park with a big green sign that read ‘Serpent World’ in swirling letters. He’d forgotten it even existed out here. The place was famous for its winding coasters and snake exhibits. He remembered wanting to visit as a kid.

Seeing the park meant they were close to the capital, he recalled, and sure enough, no more than ten minutes later, he could see Sescoria’s skyscrapers in the distance. A couple of suburban towns still lay in the way, but they soon fell behind him.

Traffic picked up as he entered the city, and he stiffened his posture, trying to watch the road even more carefully. He eased to a stop at the first intersection. ‘So, um, how do I get to the royal palace?’ he asked as he waited for the light to turn green.

‘The Queen doesn’t live in the palace,’ said Garovel. ‘She lives in Belgrant Castle.’

‘Oh... then what’s the palace for?’

‘Ceremonies, international receptions, that sort of thing. Though, I’m sure she could’ve lived in the palace if she wanted. Some of her relatives probably do.’

‘Huh...’

‘You really should know more about your own country, Hector.’

‘I, ah... yeah, okay...’

‘Just keep going until you see Belgrant Avenue and turn right. Should lead us straight there.’

Hector had only been to Sescoria once before, years ago for a field trip in elementary school, and he didn’t remember much--just some museum, an old knights’ monument, and the palace itself, which was a massive, turreted affair with people always bustling through it. The city center, he discovered, was oddly similar in that regard. Pedestrians and vehicles filled the streets, and buildings were often rounded, if not perfectly cylindrical, with flat rooftops and arching windows.

Blue was a frequent color, he noticed. Sky blue brick here, pale blue wood there, even the sidewalk turned a faint blue as he rolled up toward the Belgrant Gatehouse.

To Hector’s eyes, Belgrant Castle was certainly no less impressive than a palace. Through the gaps between the fence’s thick, white bars, he could see a lush garden sprawling across an entire city block and a fountain splitting the center walkway up to the main entrance. The castle itself was a multi-towered structure, rising up four stories and flying Atreyan flags on both ends. He’d also heard that the rear of the castle extended out onto a small lake, but he couldn’t see it from this angle.

Passersby were starting to give him strange looks, so he removed his helm and held it under his arm. He saw two lines in front of the gatehouse: one for vehicles and one for foot traffic.

He looked at Garovel. ‘What’s the plan?’

‘You wait here, while I scout the situation.’

‘That plan sucks.’

‘No arguing. I’ll tell you if I need you.’

‘How would I get to you in time? Just climb the fence in broad daylight?’

‘Yes.’ Garovel grabbed Hector’s shoulder. ‘I don’t care if you have to break into the castle live on television. You get your ass over there and protect me.’”

Hector felt the vigor course through him. He inhaled deeply and exhaled a laugh. "Okay, I will," he said, drawing more discomforted glances. The sudden energy made every muscle in his body anxious. 'How long does this boost last?'

'Should last about half an hour before I need to renew it. So, I won't be long.'

He looked through the fence another time and saw numerous guards patrolling the grounds. 'Keep me updated.'

'Of course.'

-+--+--+-

The guards found the body stuffed into a storage locker. They said it was a young man named Mark Stockton. She remembered him. He was a serving boy, no more than seventeen. He often brought her meals. She doubted that was coincidence.

Helen decided to cancel the rest of her silent meetings. Time was no longer her ally, she realized. And besides, Mehlsanz refused to leave her side now, apparently afraid to chance upon the murderer without Helen to protect her.

She found her husband just outside their bedchamber. She dismissed the attendant he was talking to and pushed him into the room, shutting the door behind her. "I need to know something, and I need to know it now," she said.

The King straightened and met her gaze. "Yes?"

"Were you the one who tried to have me killed?"

His expression turned over on itself. He blinked and opened his mouth but hesitated. After a moment, his eyes narrowed. "Is that why you have been so distant these past few days? You suspect I had something to do with it?"

"Yes."

He lowered his brow and breathed a short laugh. "I always did like your

candor.”

“I do not see what is amusing,” she said. “Goddess, William, if you had that boy killed because of some quiet grudge against me, then I--”

”159

“I did no such thing! Helen! How can you even think that I--?!” He stopped himself, pensive. He took a breath and scratched his brow. “No. I understand. This is just like you, isn’t it? Suspecting everyone. And as well you should, I suppose. But I promise you, I had nothing to do with it. Any of it.”

“Convince me,” she said.

His expression hardened. “Fine. What are your reasons for suspecting me, then?”

It was her turn to be reluctant. “Well, firstly... you did not wish to marry me.”

“Helen, that was a lifetime ago...”

“What was the reason? Or reasons. Tell me the truth, William.”

He cast his eyes at the floor briefly, frowning as he looked back up at her again. “I had feelings for another woman when we met. She was a commoner. My parents did not approve and so organized my marriage to you.”

A familiar story. Her brother David experienced something similar, though he did not go through with the marriage--or rather, he had gotten the woman to hate him so much that she refused to go through with it. As for William, Helen could believe him. She remembered how timid he was in those days, particularly around his family.

“I never resented you,” he said. He took a deep breath. “In fact, I... I’ve never loved anyone more in my life.”

Her eyes widened, and she turned red.

‘Wait, what?’ Mehlsanz floated around the two of them. ‘Why the hell are you blushing? You’ve been married to this guy for years, already.’

Helen struggled for the right words. "I did not realize you felt that way..."

"I often find it difficult to tell you my feelings..."

'Are you fucking kidding me?'

"William, I also... love you."

'Hold on, this is a trick, isn't it? You're trying to trick him, somehow.'

The King smiled.

The Queen smiled.

'Holy shit, it's not a trick.'"

"160

Helen's smile weakened. "I also thought you might resent me for never wanting children."

"Honestly, I never wanted children, either," he said. "My family wanted an heir, of course, but I was quite content with upsetting them by then."

'What the fuck is happening right now?' said Mehlsanz. 'You do remember that there's a murderer loose in the building, don't you? More than one, if you count Nathaniel.'

That brought Helen's attention back to the present, and she looked at William again. "If you are not the one responsible, then the most probable suspect is Gabriel."

The King blinked at her. "Gabriel?"

"Nathaniel poisoned my wine," she said. "I have known all along that he was the assassin, but I do not yet know who convinced him to kill me." She could see the gears turning in William's head.

He pressed a hand to his temple. "Gabriel... yes... He has been trying to convince me to support the expansionist movement for months now. He wanted me to talk to you about it. He thinks you don't listen to him."

"That is because I don't."

“His nationalism must be even stronger than I imagined if he would go so far as to have you killed. His own sister...” He straightened. “This changes things. I need to meet with my aunt again. She probably knows more about Gabriel than I do.” He moved for the door.

Helen stepped closer. “Before you do, can you find a guardswoman named Lynnette Edith and tell her to come see me?”

“Lynnette Edith?”

“I do not wish to see her in public, but I need to amend my orders for her.”

He nodded. “Very well.”

They paused a moment, standing by the door together, both abruptly realizing that their conversation had ended. Then the King kissed her, and they let it linger.”

"161

“Please be careful,” she said.

“You as well.” And he was gone.

Helen turned away from the door, rubbing her flushed face and trying not to look at Mehlsanz.

‘Well, aren’t you just adorable.’

She stiffened. ‘I was merely trying to ensure his cooperation.’

‘No, you weren’t.’

‘W-we are often apart, traveling internationally. Our relationship has-- has been very--oh, why am I justifying myself to you, anyway?’

Mehlsanz just laughed.

‘Excuse me,’ came another voice.

They both turned to see a second reaper hovering by the window.

‘I apologize for the interruption, but I’d like to inquire... Wait. Aren’t you Mehlsanz?’



'I am.' She tilted her head. 'Garovel?'

'You remember me. So it was you who revived the Queen, then?'

'Indeed.'

'I didn't think the Vanguard was in the habit of reviving royalty. Wasn't there a rule about that? Affecting the living world too greatly or some such?'

'I left the Vanguard,' said Mehlsanz.

Garovel floated closer. 'Why?'

'It's a long story. Reviving the Queen was my attempt to stop the Vanguard from hunting me down.'

'They want to kill you?'

'They don't just let you leave, anymore. It's not like it was when you were there, Garovel. I attached myself to her because now killing me also means killing her.'

'Ah.' Garovel eyed the Queen. 'A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty.'

Helen nodded. "Likewise."

'What are you doing here?' said Mehlsanz.

'I was worried that whoever revived the Queen wanted to exploit her influence. I'm relieved to see that's not the case. Or is it?'

'Of course not. Did you bring a servant?'

'I did.'

'How powerful?'

'Why do you ask?'

Mehlsanz hesitated. She looked between Garovel and the Queen. 'I was backed into a corner. They were going to kill me. You understand?'

'I don't. What're you getting at?'

‘The Vanguard won’t come after me,’ she said. ‘But now... Abolish probably thinks that the Vanguard is trying to seize Atreya.’

“Give the lady a prize,” said a voice beyond the bedchamber door. A man entered, dressed as a butler. He had a reaper with him. “That is indeed why we have come.””

"162 -- XVIII.

Chapter Eighteen: ‘O, crashing pyre...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

She didn’t recognize his face. He was a redhead, young and stocky, and the butler’s suit barely fit him. She could see blood on his sleeves, as well as a guardsman on the floor in the hallway.

“Finally,” the man said, not even bothering to close the door behind him. “We’ve been waiting all day for a chance to talk to you alone.”

‘Less alone than we expected,’ said his reaper, eyeing Garovel. ‘And just who are you? You didn’t identify yourself as Vanguard, either.’

Garovel chose not to reply.

“Perhaps we are being rude.” The man pressed a hand to his chest. “My name is Desmond,” he said. “This is my friend, Ezmortig.”

‘Frankly,’ said Ezmortig, ‘we are relieved to hear that you are not with the Vanguard. And yet, after coming all the way here to Atreya, it would be a waste to leave now.’

“What do you want?” said Helen.

Ezmortig looked to Mehlsanz. ‘Your cooperation, of course. Having Queen Helen on our side would smoothen the transition.’

“Transition to what?”

‘War,’ said Mehlsanz.

Helen’s brow lowered. “I think not.”

“Now, now, Your Majesty. Hear us out.”

‘We’re listening,’ said Garovel.

Desmond stepped forward. “See, your brother, Prince Gabriel, he thinks he hired us. He doesn’t realize that we found him. And while he seems like a cunning man, I think everyone here can agree that he’s in a bit over his head, now.”

‘We don’t care who’s on the throne,’ said Ezmortig, ‘just so long as they’re ours.’

“The Prince wanted us to waltz right in, kill you, and be done with it,” said Desmond. “Which, admittedly, I’m still more than happy to do, but my friend here says that killing the Queen would cause a bit of a stir-- both politically and publicly. And I’m inclined to agree, because if it comes to a fight, I might accidentally destroy half this castle. So we thought we should at least give you a chance to make things easier for everyone. And hey, the best part is, you all get to live.”

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"163

She saw Garovel and Mehlsanz exchange looks.

'Very well,' said Garovel. 'What exactly do you want the Queen to do?'

Helen was about to protest when Mehlsanz's voice silenced her.

'Listen. Only you can hear me,' she said. 'We're merely stalling, so don't fight. That man will kill all of us.'

"Well, the expansionist movement is a good start," said Desmond. "Greater militarization efforts would--"

‘Stop,’ said Ezmortig. ‘That was far too easy. I don’t know about this Garovel here, but Mehlsanz was Vanguard. She wouldn’t cooperate so easily.’

Desmond frowned. “What’re you saying?”

‘They’re up to something. Kill them now.’

Desmond smiled. “Can do.”

‘Wait a minute,’ said Mehlsanz. ‘We acknowledge that we’re no match for your servant. We’re simply--’

‘You’re lying,’ said Ezmortig.

Desmond approached, and Helen put herself in front of the reapers.

Mehlsanz touched Helen’s shoulder. ‘No helping it.’

Desmond held an index finger up to her face. “You don’t even have an ability yet, do you?”

Helen grabbed the finger, intending to break it, but it snapped right off. It darkened in her hand and started sizzling as Desmond backed away.

‘Get rid of it!’ Mehlsanz shouted.

She tossed it. The finger exploded in mid-air. Helen staggered back, half the flesh gone from her face.

‘He has a transfiguration ability!’ said Garovel.

“That’s right.” Desmond was there, and he grabbed the Queen by the neck, lifting her off the ground. “You’re not much of a fighter, are you, Your Majesty?”

Dizzy, Helen could only see through one eye, the other just a bloody gash, slowly growing back.

‘Behind you, Desmond.’

Lynnette’s sword hacked the man’s arm clean off, and Helen hit the ground. Desmond spun to swing at the swordswoman, and she hacked the other arm off as well.

He looked at his two stumps, then at her, and laughed. “Impressive. But you’re out of your depth, girl.”

Lynnette brandished her two-handed blade. Desmond dodged the next slash smoothly and swept at her legs, but she was ready, bounding back a step and slicing his foot off.

The foot was already sizzling, however, as it rolled to a stop in front of Lynnette's confused gaze. Helen tackled her to the ground, and the explosion rocked the whole chamber.

Helen's back and legs smoldered, sundered muscle and snapped bone under shredded cloth, but Lynnette was tucked safely beneath her, dazed and intact. "Please stay back, Lynnette," she said softly.

Desmond pulled her off Lynnette with his one returned arm. "I thought the guards were supposed to protect the Queen, not the other way around."

A heavy thud made the walls tremble.

"What was that?" said Desmond.

Helen elbowed him in the nose, making him release her, and she hit the ground flat.

Desmond shook his head and scowled, but another thud made him pause. He looked to Ezmortig. One more thud, and the ceiling gave way on top of him.

Through the rubble, a thick marble slab fell toward Desmond. He raised both sleeveless arms and caught it full on, making the floor crack beneath him.

A black figure was crouched atop the slab, grasping its broad edge with both hands and staring down at Desmond through a metal helm.

"You must be that other reaper's servant." Desmond grinned up at him, still holding the marble steady. "Nice entrance."

--++--++--

Desmond chucked the slab across the room.

Hector bounded off of it, coated one shoe in iron, and punted Desmond into the far wall, stuck waist deep.

‘Kill the reaper now!’ Garovel shouted.

Hector lunged for Ezmortig, swiping at him with iron-tipped fingers, but the reaper sunk through the floor first.

‘Nice try, bastard.’

Hector growled and looked back toward the others.

Lynnette was helping the Queen up, bloodying her uniform in the process. Helen steadied herself and saw Hector there."

"165

It was the first time Hector had ever gotten a good look at the Queen. Even on television, he'd only caught the odd glimpse of her. But perhaps now wasn't the most accurate depiction, either. She didn't look like she was having the best day, what with her blue-gray pantsuit in tatters and her makeup smeared with blood.

‘Introductions later,’ Garovel said preemptively. ‘We should leave.’

‘Your servant can't defeat Desmond?’ said Mehlsanz.

‘I don't know, but I doubt he can kill the reaper before Desmond brings down the building.’

Hector nodded. “Okay, we'll meet you at the bike.”

‘No,’ said Garovel. ‘There could be other enemy servants. We stick together.’

“Who is he talking to?” said Lynnette.

Desmond broke himself free of the wall.

‘Go now!’ said Garovel.

The Queen ushered Lynnette out of the room, and Hector brought up the rear, seeing Desmond starting toward them.

‘What did you say his ability was?’ Hector asked as they ran.

‘Transfiguration. He can make his body parts explode. I’ll explain if we make it outta this alive.’

A swarm of guardsmen were waiting in the foyer.

‘Tell them to get back!’ said Mehlsanz.

“Do not engage!” Helen yelled as they pushed through. “I order you all to move away from here!”

Hector looked back again and saw Desmond’s entire severed arm flying toward them.

‘That’ll kill everyone here!’ Garovel yelled. ‘Hector!’

He understood and jumped. He caught it by the wrist and pulled it tight against his chest. The darkened flesh crackled, burning. Hector rushed to cover his torso with metal.

The explosion ripped his arms and legs off. His metal shredded like paper. He flew over the crowd of guardsmen and smashed into a chandelier. Glass shattered and rained down on marble tile as he hit the floor and rolled up against a limestone pillar."

"166

Everything was red, presumably from blood in his eyes. He couldn’t breathe and was pretty sure he’d ruptured both lungs. He knew his limbs would soon grow back, but he couldn’t help panicking at not being able to feel them at all. Not being able to move. Not being able to speak. Barely being able to see or hear.

But after a moment, he felt someone pick him up. The numbness in his ears quickly subsided, and he turned his eyes up to see the Queen’s face there.

“I have you, young knight.”

“How is he still alive?! For that matter, how are you, Your Highness?!”

They made it out into the courtyard. More guards were there, and the Queen yelled at them to disperse as they pushed through.



Desmond was soon to catch up. However, he stopped, as did everyone else, when they saw the gatehouse crumbling ahead of them.

“Aww,” said Desmond. “I wanted to do it on my own.”

A broad-bellied man lumbered out of the rubble, arms like tree trunks. His red hair was a bit darker than Desmond's, and he could not have been any less than two meters tall. A reaper followed him.

‘Did you really have to destroy the gatehouse?’ said Ezmortig, overlooking the scene from the sky.

‘You made a mess first,’ said the new reaper.

Desmond laughed. “Hey, I tried to tell them we weren’t the people for this job.”

The big guy seemed to have nothing to say. By the look on his flat face, he scarcely seemed aware of what was happening.

Hector still needed more time to regenerate. He’d barely recovered his knees and elbows.

Aside from Lynnette, one of the guards had yet to flee as ordered. He was a bespectacled man, and he stepped toward the giant, fiddling with the black brim on his officer’s cap. “I really hate you Abolish guys,” he said. “Always recruiting these poor simpletons as servants. Aren’t there enough crazy assholes like that guy over there?”

‘Who the hell are you?’

“I’m Roman. And you fuckers aren’t welcome in my country.”

"167

‘And I’m Voreese.’ Yet another reaper appeared, straight out of the ground. ‘This is our land, you shitheads.’

“Oh, shut up,” said Roman. “No one cares what you have to say.”

‘Fucking brat! I’m the important one here! You’re just my servant!’

“You’d be dead if it wasn’t for me!”

‘No, you would! I’d have found a different servant! One who didn’t give me so much lip, you four-eyed fuckwit!’

“Imaginary bitch!”

The Queen set Hector down as his hands and feet began to form, bones emerging before the flesh around them.

Desmond rolled his neck and cracked his knuckles. “We’re more than happy to kill you newcomers along with everyone else.”

The big man charged at Voreese.

Roman slammed his foot down. The ground heaved up and flipped the big man toward Desmond like a pancake.

Desmond just moved out of the way.

Roman tossed his white coat to Hector. “C’mon, kid. This is no time to be free-ballin’ it.”

Hector turned beet red and hurriedly wrapped the cloth around his waist. He held it there with an iron band.

Another sizzling arm flew at the group.

Roman swatted it straight up into the air, and it exploded harmlessly. The big guy’s gut bulged, and a second later, he vomited acid.

The left side of Roman’s face and torso melted away, revealing raw bone and gooey, bubbling muscle. Undeterred, he raised a fist. It trembled and started crackling red, creating visible smoke. He put the hand out. Orange flames poured forth.

Their opponents split up to avoid the fire, and Roman pursued the big man.

‘What kind of ability does that guy have?!’ Hector was back on his feet.

‘Vibration of some sort. Keep your eyes on Desmond.’

Hector saw him approaching from the side. Desmond was still regrowing his arm. “I’ll hold his attention,” Hector whispered to the ladies. “Try to get behind him and take his head off.”

“Very well,” said Helen.

Lynnette nodded and readied her sword."

"168

Hector moved first, a frontal assault. Desmond dodged the punch and delivered his own to the gut, knocking Hector back a few steps.

Hector kept pressing. He coated both hands in iron and swung. Desmond caught the left hand and ripped it off at the wrist. He slammed Hector into the concrete, making a small crater.

Abruptly, Lynnette was there. But Desmond saw her and smacked the flat side of the blade before it could connect with his neck. Off balance, she struggled to maintain her grip, and this time, Desmond succeeded in sweeping her legs out from under her. She landed on her back, and Desmond left a severed hand in front of her face. For an instant, Lynnette and Hector could both see it darkening.

She didn't have time to crawl away. She was going to die. Hector knew it. Someone else was about to die in front of him.

The memory of Garovel's words flashed in his head.

Respond by becoming better.

Hector flexed his one hand. He focused on Lynnette, desperately demanding more from himself, more iron, more concentration, more everything; and for a moment, all the pain in his body wasn't numb anymore. Agony hit like a tidal wave. But the iron responded.

Powder materialized on her body, gray spots clustering together, and within seconds, the woman was entirely covered.

Desmond's hand exploded. Lynnette went flying and clattered to the concrete walkway. Hector hit the central fountain, reddening the waters with his blood.

His body in shreds again, he heaved himself out of the pool and clung to the side of the fountain. He saw Lynnette and released the metal. She did not stir.

Desmond and Helen were clashing now. With both arms again and only one hand missing, he was getting the better of her. He smashed

her skull open against the ground. Her body went limp.

Desmond turned to Mehlsanz and Garovel."

"169

"Run away!" Hector told the reapers. He pulled himself out of the fountain, soaked and crawling.

"They won't run," said Desmond. "What do you think'll happen if they abandon you here? Eventually, you'll stop coming back to life on your own, and they won't be able to find new servants, because they're still bound to you. I'll put your brains in nice little jars, and then hunt the reapers down at my leisure. And besides--" He pierced his own chest with his hand. "--I've got something for runners." He pulled out his heart. Its pulsing, crimson flesh began to darken.

Mehlsanz and Garovel went underground.

"That won't save you!" Desmond laughed, rearing his arm back.

Hector gritted his teeth and pumped his fist sideways.

Desmond's throw had the force of a cannon. The heart did not leave his grasp, however. He looked at his hand and saw it enveloped in metal. "Aw, you fuck--!"

The metal turned to dust just before the heart exploded. Desmond's body blew apart like a watermelon wrapped in dynamite.

Hector rolled over onto his back. 'I got him...'

'Really?' Garovel poked his head out of the ground. 'Wow, Hector... I thought we were dead for sure.'

He just took a heavy breath. The Queen's head was regenerating, and Lynnette was still motionless.

'Did you kill Ezmortig, though?'

'No.' He saw Ezmortig in the sky. 'And I can't reach him, either...'

'Then we only have a few minutes,' said Garovel. 'We should leave while we can.'

‘Maybe that other guy can reach--’

Roman came tumbling past, bouncing across the walkway and skidding into a tree. So much of his skin and muscle was melted off that half his skeleton was visible. Green and yellow steam hissed around his body. He could still move, however, and wore a scowl on what remained of his face."

"170

‘What the hell are you doing?!’ said Voreese. ‘That guy is beating your ass!’

“Shut up!” Roman’s lungs convulsed in his ribcage. “It’s the acid! It’s really hard to move when I don’t have any fucking muscles!”

‘Don’t be a wuss, Roman!’

“Fuck off!”

The big man stomped toward them. Roman slammed a bony fist to the ground, and the giant sunk through a sudden hole in the concrete. Up to his belly, he struggled a moment, then tore his way out of the ground, preparing another swell of acid in his gut.

Hector covered the man’s mouth in iron.

Acid spewed forth and ate through the metal, but not before splashing back onto his face. His eyes boiled out of his head.

Roman blinked. “Nice one, kid--”

The man lumbered forward anyway and vomited more acid on him.

“Fuckin’ dammit.” Roman struggled to raise a steaming hand as the man drew closer.

Lynnette’s sword exploded out the giant’s forehead. She clung to his back as he hit the ground face-first. Everyone stared at her as she wiped her blade on the dead man’s shirt.

“Where’s the other guy?” said Roman. “If we get both their brains, we can stop them from regenerating.”

“He blew up,” said Hector. “I’m pretty sure his brain isn’t in one piece anymore...”

“Shit. Then his reaper can remake him anywhere.”

‘If Desmond is coming after us again, then we should prepare to receive him in a more favorable location,’ said Garovel.

‘Agreed,’ said Voreese. ‘Roman?’

“Alright, follow me everyone. Carry the Queen, kid.”

‘His name is Hector. And mine is Garovel.’

Hector dragged himself over to the Queen as the last of his broken bones repaired themselves. Lynnette offered assistance, but he was strong enough again to carry Helen on his own.

“Dammit.” Roman stood over the big guy’s corpse. “The acid seeped in and started melting his brain. This guy’s gonna be remade somewhere else, too.”

"171

Roman led them over the ruins of the Belgrant Gatehouse. Abandoned cars lined the street, doors left ajar. No doubt people had fled after seeing the gatehouse fall and hearing the subsequent explosions. Sirens in the distance warned of an imminent police presence.

Roman shambled toward a tour bus at the tail end of the traffic jam. He was still missing a quarter of his flesh. He no longer wore a cap, and his undershirt was gone, save only his left sleeve.

“Oh, I don’t even have to hotwire it,” said Roman. “Keys are still in the ignition. You drive, sword girl. I’ll tell you where to go.”

Lynnette stared at him, perhaps wondering if he was even human. “Why can’t you drive?” was all she asked.

He waved a hand in front of his face. “I don’t have my glasses. They melted.”

The Queen stirred in Hector’s arms, and he set her down in a chair

behind the driver's seat. She shook her head, blinking a few times.

'Welcome back,' said Mehlsanz.

Hector took the seat across from her as the engine started.

"What happened?" the Queen said.

"We survived," said Roman. "But the enemy will be back. We're going to my associate's garage. We'll be in better fighting shape with his help."

'Who are you people?' said Garovel. 'Vanguard?'

'No,' said Voreese. 'Are you?'

'No.'

'So we're all independent here.'

'Seems that way.'

The bus hit a curb, and everyone eyed the driver.

"...I've never driven a bus before," she said over the noise.

"Just turn right when you reach Willard Street."

Mehlsanz tilted her head. 'That girl is strangely understanding, considering she can't see the three of us.'

"She is a good soldier," said Helen.

'I'm sure you'll have fun explaining the situation to her later,' said Mehlsanz.

"I am still not sure I understand the situation myself."

"172

The journey was a short one. The tour bus pulled up to a quite well-kept auto body shop, and everyone exited. Fully regenerated, Roman led the group inside.

There were people in the waiting room. They eyed the new arrivals uncomfortably.

Roman rang the bell at the front desk. "Gerald! Get your crusty old ass out here!"

The others all exchanged glances.

The door behind the counter opened, and the elderly mechanic stepped through. He took one look at Roman and sighed. "Alright," said Gerald. "I'm sorry to everyone who was waiting, but we're closed now. I need you all to leave."

"What?" said one man, standing. "But you have my car. I need it tomorrow--"

Roman stepped in, smiling. "I know it's inconvenient, but trust me, pal. This is for your own good." He grabbed a pad and paper off the counter and scribbled a quick note, handing it to the customer. "Here. Go to this address and give this note to the cute blond girl there. She'll provide all of you with new vehicles, free of charge."

The man's expression faltered, and he read the note. "Wha--this address isn't even in Sescoria. This is a hundred kilometers away!"

Roman's smile waned. "Then I guess you'd better get going."

"This is ridiculous!"

Helen intervened, and the stranger did a double take. "Please listen to him," she said. "Some very bad people are coming here. They will kill you if you stay."

It didn't take much more convincing after that. The customers soon filed out of the building.

"So who's coming to kill us?" Gerald asked.

"Abolish," said Roman. "Two members, both pretty strong, but nothing we can't handle."

Gerald's expression darkened, and he looked over the group another time.

Roman scratched his bare chest. "By the way, you got any spare clothes?"

"173 -- XIX.



## Chapter Nineteen: 'Come forth, ye jubilant devils...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

A line of police officers stood in Geoffrey's path. "Sorry, this area is closed off," one of them said.

Geoffrey's green balloon-hat waggled as he ogled the mass of rubble and abandoned vehicles behind the line. "What happened?"

"We can't disclose that information," the officer said. "Please turn back."

Geoffrey frowned, but obliged.

The prince's advisor, whose name Geoffrey had still not bothered to learn, was waiting for him at the nearest street corner--as was an enormous yellow-and-green boa constrictor. The man was clearly a wreck, and having the snake at his feet was doing him no favors.

"It seems we missed all the fun," Geoffrey said sadly. "Maybe we shouldn't have stopped at that amusement park after all."

The advisor watched the boa slither up Geoffrey's body and coil around the young man's shoulders. "I still don't understand w-why that thing listens to you..."

"Oh, it does not listen. It simply has no will of its own anymore." He scratched the snake's head. "Normally, animals tend to dislike me, you see. I was never very good with pets, but they did provide valuable practice."

Abruptly, a red-haired man turned the corner. "Over here, you said?"

'Yeah. Should be--ah, there it is.'

Geoffrey's brow rose as he spotted the reaper approaching from behind the stranger. "Why, hello."

The stranger returned a wide smile. "Wow, it really is an aberration! Hello there, little fella. How'd you get all the way out here to Atreya? Not lost, are you?"

Geoffrey tilted his head. "Excuse me? Who are you?"

“Ah, I’m Desmond Grantier. This is my friend, Ezmortig. I assume you can see him, yes?”

“I can. Why do you seem to know about me?”

“Oh, we belong to Abolish.”

“Abolish?”

Desmond blinked at him. “Don’t you even know where you come from?””

"173 -- XIX.

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"174

It was Geoffrey’s turn to blink. “Where I come from?”

‘Oh, Heavens, child! Don’t tell me you think you’re human!’

“No, I know I’m not. But I can’t say I know what I am, exactly, either.”

“You, my delightful friend, are what is known as an aberration. You are the offspring of the Void.”

“The Void? What are you talking about?”

“It’s a place,” Desmond explained. “The Void is what we call the space between this life and the next. It straddles the line between realities. Ezmortig here, he always has one foot in the Void, so to speak.”

‘But it’s also a consciousness,’ said Ezmortig. ‘People might tell you otherwise, but don’t you believe them. The Void has a silent will of its own, and it spawned you and all your kin. With a little help from Abolish, of course.’

“There are others like me?”

“Of course. You thought you were alone this whole time?”

Geoffrey just shrugged, making his balloon-hat bob.

“If you’d been born into Abolish’s care, that never would’ve happened.”

‘Interesting. I didn’t think aberrations could be born in the wild. Perhaps you were simply separated from Abolish by way of some mix up.’

Geoffrey cocked an eyebrow and chuckled. “Are you saying I was switched at birth?”

‘That’s possible, too, but not quite what I meant. While I don’t understand the finer details of the birthing process, I do know that aberrations are created after the fetus has already started growing in the womb. Maybe your mother received the treatment without her knowledge.’

Desmond smirked. “You think the research divisions have taken their work to public hospitals?”

The reaper paused. ‘Actually, now that you say that, I don’t think so. I doubt R&D would have been deployed to this country without a combat division for protection. There must be some other explanation for this boy’s presence here.’”

"175

“Curious.” Desmond eyed him again. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen. Why?”

“Ooh, older than I thought. How many people have you killed?”

“I have not been keeping track, honestly. A couple dozen, perhaps?”

“Not bad,” said Desmond. “Maybe you haven’t realized yet, but your

power grows as you consume souls.”

“Oh! That would explain why I feel stronger lately.”

“Yeah, aberrations are great that way. But you should be careful not to kill too many people too quickly, or you’ll end up drawing the attention of the Vanguard.”

“What is that?”

“Our enemies. They know about aberrations. They fear you guys, and rightly so. If they realize you’re here, they won’t hesitate to send one of their strongest people to kill you.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Oh, it can be, but only when the time is right. Aberrations are all about momentum. You can grow in power much more quickly than we can, but you have to kill a lot of people while still staying hidden. Otherwise, you’ll be stomped into oblivion before you ever get a chance to become a genuine threat to the enemy.”

“Hmm, I see. I suppose killing the Queen of Atreya would be doing exactly that, then.”

Desmond laughed. “You’re here to kill the Queen?”

“Yes.”

“No kidding! We came to kill the Queen, too!”

“Really? Oh! Are you the ones responsible for all that destruction over there?!”

“Yep! Sadly, though, she managed to escape. Some other servants got in our way.”

“Servants?”

“People with reapers. We’re a bit outnumbered, actually. Why don’t you join us in hunting her down? If you stick with us, we’ll keep you hidden from the Vanguard. Or protected, at least.”

“That sounds wonderful!”

“Excellent! I really like your snake by the way.”

“Thank you! They were upset when I took him, but the hat was simply not enough of a prize for me.”

“Entirely understandable.”

-+-+--+

“I wanted to thank you for saving Her Highness’s life,” said Lynnette.  
“As well as mine.””

"176

The young man had been given short-sleeved coveralls to wear, which were at least a size too big for him. He’d rolled the legs up around his ankles and tightened the denim around his torso with a strip of metal.

Lynnette had caught him in the midst of restoring the metal of his helm. Just one more thing on her list of questions to ask.

When he looked at her, though, his brown eyes widened, and he averted his gaze.

“I’m Lynn. I didn’t catch your name.”

“I, uh... it’s... I’m... H-Hec...”

Her brow tilted as she waited.

“H-Hector.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Y-yeah, I-I... I’m, ah... I...” He just gave up this time.

She scratched her cheek. “Um. How are you not dead, anyway? And how are you molding metal with your bare hands?”

“Ah--that... ah... I’m not... uh... agh...”

“Are you alright?”

He turned away and donned his helm before looking back at her.  
“Yeah, I’m--I mean... I... fagh... I still... can’t...”

Lynnette just frowned.

The ensuing silence soon grew uncomfortable, and Lynnette decided that Hector probably wanted her to leave him alone, so she went to check on the others.

--you should give Vincent and the others a call, just in case," Roman was saying to Gerald. "If we find somewhere to hole up while they come to Sescoria, then we'll be able to minimize our risks and overwhelm the enemy easily."

As Gerald looked over their group another time, his expression hardened. After a moment, he went into the garage, with everyone following uncertainly. "Hey!" he shouted at his mechanics. "You're all fired!"

They clearly didn't understand.

"I said you're fired! Get the fuck out of here right now! I'm not joking, assholes! Get out!"

"What're you doing?" said Roman. "There's no need to fire anyone. Just send them home while we take care of things."

"177

"Don't be stupid," said Gerald. "The others won't come to your aid. And neither will I."

Roman's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"The opponent is Abolish. You think killing two of their members will make them give up?"

"It will," said Roman. "Think about it, Gerald. They only sent two servants. Atreya obviously isn't a priority for them. They're busy waging, what, three different wars? More? We don't have to win. We just have to make conquering us more trouble than it's worth."

Gerald shook his head. "Foolishness. We don't know how valuable they deem this country. If they believe it could be of real strategic value in winning one of those wars you mentioned, then killing the ones already here will just make them send stronger people to deal with us. Imagine if they send Ivan or Dunhouser or Jercash or any of a dozen

others. Forget about causing trouble. We wouldn't even be able to run away."

Roman furrowed his brow. "If we do nothing, they'll destroy Atreya."

"All the more reason to leave the country."

The Queen had been watching quietly. "Please," she said. "I assure you that your assistance would not go unrewarded."

Gerald smirked. "You don't even know who we are, do you, Your Majesty?"

She merely eyed him stolidly.

"I'm a smuggler. The best one you'll ever meet." He pointed to Roman. "This idiot is a thief. Probably the best, also."

Helen folded her arms. "I believe such transgressions are inconsequential at this point."

"Indeed," said Gerald. "But I want you to understand that he and I are greedy bastards and that your offer does not fall on deaf ears. And that I am still not going to help you. If you're as intelligent as I think you are, Your Majesty, then you'll take this chance to flee the country, as well."

"You must not think me very intelligent at all, then.""

"178

Gerald frowned. "Still too young for the crown, I see."

"A thousand years would not be enough to make me agree with you," Helen said. "You are mistaken if you think Atreya is meant to protect me. I am meant to protect it."

The old man just snorted.

There was a pause, and Lynnette noticed Hector had joined them. Everyone seemed to be looking at him--or just above his head, perhaps. She couldn't tell what was happening, but after a moment, Gerald broke the silence.

"There are plenty of places for us to go," he said. "Any neutral territory



will suffice. If necessary, we'll throw our support behind Sai-hee. At least she has enough sense to stay out of the others' messes."

Roman scowled. "You fucking coward."

"Don't let sentiment cloud your judgment, Roman. Atreya is already dead."

"So much the better, then," said Roman. "Dead things suit us just fine."

Gerald rolled his eyes. A few of his mechanics lingered behind him, no doubt waiting for a chance to speak to him, but when he saw them there, he flew into a spitting tirade until they fled. He moved to the rear wall and hit a row of buttons. The garage doors all began to close.

The old man took a deep breath. The shelf next to him reached all the way to ceiling, bearing boxes and tires and all manner of tools. He clutched its central pillar with both hands and pulled the whole thing a few paces to the right. A door in the floor was revealed.

Gerald lifted it open. "I'll offer you one small aid only. I suggest you take it." He descended out of view.

Roman and the Queen followed immediately. Lynnette and Hector exchanged glances before pursuing.

--++--++--

It was an underground garage. Bright white lights filled the chamber, and Hector could see grooves in the ceiling where mechanics topside could work beneath cars.

Gerald was already pulling tarps off of the various vehicles parked here."

"179

"The green Porsche is mine," said Gerald, "but you can take any of the others. The keys are all by the stairs."

Roman approached a black pickup truck, eyeing the driver's side door before looking back at Gerald. "We're not going to flee with you."

"I didn't think you would. But you shouldn't stay here. They'll find you

before long.”

Helen stood by a blue convertible. “Will they? Did we not escape them well enough?”

“Probably not,” said Roman. “Reapers are annoyingly good scouts. They probably still have a vague idea where we went, at least. And they can search areas very quickly.”

In the driver’s seat, Gerald started his Porsche. The far corner of the ceiling began opening, and it became abruptly apparent that the long ramp there led outside.

Gerald stuck his head out. “Roman. Everyone. Good luck to you.”

Roman gave him the finger.

The old man drove away, his unIntroduced reaper following.

‘What now?’ said Voreese. ‘Our plan’s been shot to hell.’

Roman took a heavy breath. “I hate to say it, but I think the old bastard was right. We shouldn’t stay here.”

Helen’s brow lowered. “You would have me flee, as well?”

“Look, it’s a bit pathetic, but without my glasses, I’m fighting with a disadvantage. You don’t have any combat experience or training yet, and while I’m impressed with the sword girl’s abilities, she’s still just a normal person.” Roman looked at Hector and Garovel. “What do you two think? The bulk of the fight would be in your hands.”

With everyone looking at him again, Hector took a step back.

‘It’s too risky,’ said Garovel. ‘We should leave Sescoria and come up with a new plan.’

The Queen frowned. “If we concede the capital now, we may never be able to retake it. We do outnumber the enemy, and Hector seems capable of--”

Garovel cut her off. ‘With respect, Your Majesty, this is not your decision. It’s mine. Hector has helped you more than enough already.’”

”180

Hector looked at his friend. 'Garovel...'

'We won't abandon you, Your Majesty,' the reaper added. 'But we're not prepared to die for you, either.'

"I was not asking you to die for me," she said.

'Yes, you were,' said Garovel. 'Perhaps you didn't realize it, but you were.'

Annoyance flashed across the Queen's face, but then she closed her eyes a moment and nodded. "Very well." Her gaze passed over Hector. "You know your limits better than I do. I thank you, Hector, for protecting us, and I will ask no more of you. Except, perhaps, might you tell me your full name?"

Hector was a statue. His mouth wouldn't move, and neither would his hands or his feet. 'G-Garovel! I--this is--! Help!'

Garovel broke for a small laugh. 'His name is Hector Goffe.'

"Goffe. I shall remember. But can he not speak for himself?"

'He wants to talk to you, but he's extremely shy.'

Her expression flattened, and she exchanged glances with the others. "You are joking."

'I'm not, no. He's a great kid. He just has trouble talking to people. And seeing as you're the Queen, I imagine that only makes it about a dozen times more difficult for him. Through no fault of your own, of course.'

Hector could feel his face burning so much that he was worried it would show through his helm.

Helen just blinked, unable to come up with words of her own.

Voreese busted out laughing. 'That's great! Roman, why can't you be like him? You'd be way cuter.'

"Great idea. Hey, Garovel, is there any way I can swap with Hector? I'd rather be your servant."

'No, you stupid dick! You're stuck with me!'

‘She’s right. And besides, I’m quite content with Hector.’

Roman looked at Mehlsanz. “How about you? I don’t even know your name, but please save me from this living nightmare.””

"181

Helen and Lynnette were busy observing the keys together.

“I have not driven a car in eighteen years.”

“Then perhaps I should drive, Your Highness.”

Hector waited for them to choose before looking at the board himself. There were two rows, each key hanging below the logo of the accompanying vehicle’s manufacturer.

Garovel pointed at the logo of a smoking, ghostly wheel. ‘Get that one. It’s Revenant.’

‘Revenant?’ said Hector, grabbing the key nonetheless.

‘Have you forgotten? Revenant makes motorcycles.’

‘Oh!’ He bit his lip. ‘And... oh. I just realized... we left that bike behind, didn’t we...?’

‘We sure did. Whoops.’

The key belonged to a motorcycle tucked away at the back of the garage. It was a cruiser, just like the previous bike, though a bit smaller and bearing a steely blue gas tank. It seemed sleeker to Hector’s eyes, perhaps even custom-built, and he noticed that the speedometer went higher than the other one.

Abruptly, the lights flickered, and everyone looked up. The center of the ceiling went black, and a hissing sound filled the silence. Stone and plaster melted away, dripping acid onto the Corvette below.

A darkened arm fell through the hole in the ceiling.

Hector immediately slammed his fists together, trying to coat the severed limb in iron. It exploded halfway through.

The fire lit up the chamber. But it did not spread. Hector squinted through the opening in his helm and saw the explosion being held at bay by apparently nothing. It just floated there in the middle of the room, a boiling bubble of flames and smoke.

Roman's arms gripped the space in front of him, trembling. The strain of it ate away at his flesh, bloodying his arms and face. "Need some help here, Hector!"

Hector breathed deep and refocused. He spread his arms out wide and brought them together again. Iron spots gathered around the bubble, expanding, clustering, and soon became a completely metal orb, as big as any car in the room. It dropped on the Corvette like a wrecking ball."

"182 -- XX.

Roman let go, and the sphere jumped in place. Huge dents distorted its shape, and Hector and Roman both scrambled to keep it suppressed.

'You can't smother an explosion like that,' said Garovel. 'You'll have to try and redirect it.'

'How?!' asked Hector.

'A funnel. Broadside up. Do it now.'

He wasn't sure he could actually pull such a thing off, but there was no time to second guess himself. He did the best he could, twisting his hands between one another as his mind warped the metal sphere, adding crude walls around the top like a misshapen crown. It grew clumsily toward the ceiling, worrying him with its awkward form. But it reached. And that was all that mattered.

Hector annihilated the top of the sphere within the walls and nodded to Roman, who already seemed to understand the goal here.

The explosion was free to rip upward, back through the hole Desmond had dropped it from.

Hector annihilated the rest of the makeshift funnel, releasing a cloud of smoke and dust.

‘Wow, Roman,’ said Garovel. ‘I didn’t realize you could suppress explosions like that.’

Roman rolled his shoulders. “Honestly, I wasn’t too certain, either. Nice work with the--”

A second arm dropped through the hole, but Roman was ready this time. He stamped the floor, and the Corvette flew straight up through the ceiling, taking the arm with it. The explosion shook the building, making the walls crack and shift.

Roman grinned like a maniac. “Time to go, everyone.”

Hector mounted the bike, and everyone else gathered in the black truck with Lynnette at the wheel. She went first up the ramp and disappeared outside, and when Hector rode up the ramp himself and saw the truck again, it was flipped and skidding across the road.

The big man was there. As was Geoffrey.

Chapter Twenty: ‘Thine unyielding aegis...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

He didn’t need time to process or question it. Hector barreled into Geoffrey with complete resolve.

Red tendrils sprung forth, wrapping around the motorcycle and Hector both, slowing them down, and as the force of the impact pushed Geoffrey back, the two young men came face to face.

Geoffrey’s eyes widened, and he grinned as their tangled mess eased to a stop, the bike’s front tire still grinding harmlessly against his red shield. “It’s you!”

“It’s me.” Hector ripped himself free of the shadow and grabbed Geoffrey’s face. Crimson immediately came between them, but Hector just covered the young man’s head with iron.

Geoffrey fell to the ground, scratching at his solid mask. Red poked through the metal, trying to break it apart but only meagerly succeeding.”

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"183

Hector gathered his focus and punched Geoffrey in the chest. He broke through the shadow and felt a rib snap. Geoffrey cried out in pain.

The sound of pounding footsteps made Hector turn just in time to see a massive fist pummel into him. He flew and hit the overturned truck, rocking it as the others were still trying to get out. Garovel was there beside him and grabbed his shoulder. Hector felt his creeping fatigue vanish completely.

The big guy helped Geoffrey up and tore the metal off like it was wrapping paper.

Hector stood and saw Roman rounding the vehicle.

"Mr. Roman!" said Geoffrey, holding his chest but still smiling. "A



pleasure to see you again!"

Roman squinted. "Voreese, is that who I think it is? I can't see the face very well."

'Yeah, it is,' said Voreese. 'What the fuck are you doing here, you red brat?!'

"I am here to kill the Queen."

Voreese thrashed at the air. 'Agh! I fucking hate aberrations! But no! Leave it alive, he said! Fuck Vincent! We're never listening to that asshole again!'

"Works for me." Roman looked at his palms. They began to tremble and burn.

'What are aberrations?' said Garovel.

And Hector couldn't listen to the other reaper's response. The big man charged at them, spitting acid first. Roman flipped the pavement up as a shield, and when the acid ate through it, he poured fire into the hole, roasting the giant alive. It wasn't enough to stop the man, however, so Hector took his cue to uppercut him in the jaw with an iron fist. The giant tumbled through the air and crashed down onto a parked car.

Geoffrey, however, was no longer in sight.

'He went around!' said Garovel.

There came an agonized scream from the other side of the truck, and Hector knew that it belonged to Lynn. He ran."

"184

A swarm of crimson engulfed both women, holding them in the air. It was a larger shadow than Hector had yet seen from Geoffrey, but he dove into the mass head on regardless. The red coiled around his limbs, slowing him down but not stopping him. Then it started digging into his flesh and lifting him off the ground, taking away all his leverage.

Geoffrey turned away from Lynn to look at Hector. "Why did you bring this normal girl here?" he said. "Is she a friend of yours?" He held up

an eyeball, freshly removed. "Please tell me she is."

Blood and shadow obscured Lynn's face. Geoffrey had covered her mouth to muffle her cries, and a meaty gash occupied the place where her right eye should have been.

The Queen acted before Hector could, however. Speared through the gut, she had pulled herself down along the shadow while Geoffrey's attention was held on Hector. She smashed him over the head with her fist. He hit the ground flat, and the entire mass of crimson shuddered and released everyone--but it did not altogether disappear.

Geoffrey was quick to get up, and Hector was there to meet him. He swung for Geoffrey's chest again. The red mass wove around his arm and held it back, struggling.

"I should make her my friend, too," said Geoffrey. And the crimson began to expand again.

Hector used his other fist to clock him in the face. It wasn't focused and didn't break the shadow, but it sent Geoffrey flipping head over foot across the road and into the side of a building.

"Lynn?!" Hector rushed over to her.

She held a hand over her eye socket, cringing. "I'm okay," she growled through gritted teeth.

"Please stay close," said Hector.

She just groaned and nodded, dripping more blood on her uniform."  
"185

'Roll it back over!' said Mehlsanz.

Helen obliged, and the battered truck's tires met pavement again.

Roman came flying overhead with Hector's motorcycle on top of him. He hit the ground, and the bike popped his gut open like a balloon, spilling entrails all over the road.

The giant bounded over the truck as well and started stomping toward Roman, but then he spotted Mehlsanz and swatted at her. She ducked

under his hand and phased into the ground. Gushing acid followed her, melting through the road.

Hector and Helen double-teamed him. He covered the man's face in iron and gave her the opening to land a punch with all her might. The big guy soared through a lamp post and all the way into Gerald's garage.

'Everyone in the truck now!' said Garovel. Mehlsanz appeared behind him, smoldering slightly but not complaining.

The Queen jumped into the driver's seat while Hector went to retrieve Roman and the bike.

Lynn climbed into the back. A massive, yellow-green boa reared up over the edge of the truck bed, hissing at her.

"You will be my friend!" came Geoffrey's distant shout.

The snake lunged for her, and she hacked its head off.

Geoffrey opened his mouth as if to say something but just ended up frowning instead.

Helen pulled up next to the boys. Roman could barely stand, so Hector helped him into the back with Lynn.

'I see Desmond!' Mehlsanz warned.

Hector climbed in himself, and Helen slammed on the gas. He looked back to keep his eyes on Desmond, but what he saw instead was a red streak, flying toward Garovel. It snagged the reaper and yanked him back.

Hector leapt from the vehicle as it sped away.

"Hector?!" Lynn yelled after him. "What are you doing?!"

"186

Before he even hit the ground, he had Garovel covered in iron. Geoffrey's red blade dug in, but only just, and Hector ran toward them, trying to cover Geoffrey as well.

Metal and shadow competed. Red slashed through gray, both contracting and expanding on top of one another, wrestling for dominance over Geoffrey. The shadow won out just as Hector drew close and stopped his punch cold.

“So your name is Hector, is it?” Geoffrey cut into Hector’s body at multiple points. “I didn’t think we would meet again so soon.”

Hector ripped the red spears out each time they pierced him. He coated his own legs and feet in metal to maintain his foothold and pushed through.

But it was simple for Geoffrey to keep his distance. The shadow couldn’t stop Hector, but it slowed him down enough that Geoffrey could just back away.

And then Desmond was there. “Allow me.” He left an arm clutching the iron that protected Garovel. He pulled Geoffrey away as it darkened.

Hector tore through the remaining crimson and grabbed the arm. There wasn’t time to throw it.

--+-+--+--

Geoffrey watched the explosion leave a crater in the street. He used his shadow to fan the cloud of dust away. Body parts littered the lawns on either side of the road, but Hector’s metal head remained in the crater. “Aww, are they dead?”

“Don’t think so,” Desmond said as they approached. “Yeah, see? The reaper’s barely alive, still. Kid got in the way.”

The sound of a vehicle drew their attention, and they saw the truck returning in reverse. Roman and Lynnette stood together. She glared at them with her one eye.

“They’re actually coming back for him?” said Geoffrey.

Desmond dug into his chest. “I’ll handle--”

A sword flew into his face.”

"187

Geoffrey watched Desmond fall over, dead again. "Wow. No wonder Hector wears a helmet."

The truck screeched to a halt. Geoffrey lashed out with red.

Roman took the cuts and stopped the streaks that went for Lynnette. He gripped two tendrils, one in each hand, and made them tremble. They burst apart, and their remains shrank back to Geoffrey. Roman jumped out of the truck, smashing the pavement with both feet.

The ground flung Geoffrey up. He tumbled through the air.

The big man caught him. He set Geoffrey down and ran for the truck, spitting as it started to drive off. The acid would have reached the girl if Roman hadn't shielded her with his back.

And then they were gone.

Geoffrey walked over to the big man and patted him on the shoulder. "Good effort, Mr. Giant."

He returned a pat of his own on Geoffrey's head.

"What a disappointing day this turned out to be. Lost my balloon-hat. Lost my snake. And I didn't even get to kill the Queen. That advisor-guy will be upset, if we ever see him again. I wanted to feed him to the snake after he paid me, but I suppose that won't be happening, either."

The big guy just kept patting him on the head, and Geoffrey began to feel like some sort of dog.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

The giant looked at him vacantly.

"How about a name, then? Do you have one?"

The man's reaper arrived, descending from the sky along with Ezmortig. 'His name is Moss,' the reaper said. 'And mine is Ozmere. Moss can't speak. And even if he could, he wouldn't have much to say. He's a rather simple fellow, but he's good at following instruction, and that's what matters.'

They waited, and soon, Desmond revived. They started the walk back to Belgrant Castle together."

“Is it really okay to not chase after them?” said Geoffrey.

‘We could,’ said Ozmere, ‘but Ezmortig and I would have to keep track of them over very long distances while you all catch up. And that could be dangerous for us.’

Ezmortig nodded. ‘If we really needed the Queen dead at all costs, then it might be worth the risk, but we don’t. As long as she stays hidden, she won’t be able to hinder us politically.’

“And if she’s stupid enough to try something, then we’ll go hunt her down,” said Desmond. “We might wanna put in a request for reinforcements, though. Bit of insurance wouldn’t hurt.”

‘True,’ said Ezmortig. ‘We did encounter more resistance than expected.’

Desmond rolled his neck, stretching it. “Anyway, Geoffrey, are you alright? You don’t regenerate like we do, and that kid got you pretty good.”

Geoffrey rubbed his chest. “Pain is an interesting feeling. I don’t completely dislike it, though it is a bit distracting, I suppose.”

“That’s not what I meant. Aberrations never seem to mind pain very much. But that doesn’t make you immune to injury. If your body starts becoming sluggish, you should find yourself a new one.”

Geoffrey tilted his head. “A new body?”

“Oh, can you not do that yet? Well, I’m sure you’ll figure it out soon.”

“Really? Do all aberrations have abilities like mine?”

Desmond deferred to Ezmortig.

‘Your shadow powers, yes. Your ability to control things, no. Aberrations have varying kinds of secondary abilities. We call yours Domination. Unfortunately, it’s not terribly useful against servants. At least, not until you develop it to dizzying degrees.’

“What other kinds of abilities can we have?”

‘They always revolve around the consumption of souls. And they can be quite strange. I know of one aberration who can create black fire. And one who can turn people into glass. Oh, and the most famous example is probably the one who could create localized singularities. He’s dead now, though. I think Sermung had to take him down personally.’

“Hmm. I see.”

"189 -- XXI.

“So now you understand why we value aberrations so much,” said Desmond. “Apart from just being so incredibly fun to work with, I mean.”

Geoffrey laughed.

“What do you want to do now? We have a mission to attend to, but if you come with us, we can introduce you to some fun people. They’ll help you grow your powers more quickly and safely than you can on your own. And they’ll definitely keep you entertained.”

“That sounds amazing!” Geoffrey’s grin lessened, however. “But there is something else I want to take care of first.”

“Oh?”

“Perhaps you can help me. How good is Abolish’s information network?”

“You won’t find better. Why?”

“I would very much like to find someone. A man named Colt.”

“Tell me more.”

Chapter Twenty-One: ‘Alliance of calamity, capitulate not...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Roman had been pleasantly surprised to discover a first aid kit in Gerald’s truck. Dressing wounds wasn’t his forte, but Voreese and Mehlsanz were able to provide apt instruction. And when he finished,

he thought Lynnette's cotton-white bandage looked quite skillfully applied.

For the first hour or so of driving, Lynnette's questions were unrelenting, but given all she'd been through, he wasn't about to spare her any explanations. And after she seemed to have wrapped her head around imaginary beings and undying people, she started asking why Hector was not regenerating like before.

"Because his reaper is severely wounded," Roman explained. "He won't start regenerating again until Garovel recovers."

Lynnette eyed the half-destroyed helm containing what remained of Hector's head. She couldn't see Garovel's unconscious, shriveled form clinging to the back of it, but Roman could.

To his eyes, reapers looked like ethereal birds. Crows, precisely--but at the moment, Garovel was no more than a dark smudge. He would have to take Voreese's word for it that reapers could still recover from such a state."

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"190

Mehlsanz and Voreese had both been actively scouting to ensure they were not being followed, which meant flying up extremely high for visibility. They didn't report anything, and after a while, Roman finally began to relax.

'That fight should have gone smoother,' Voreese said privately. 'Maybe we've been avoiding conflicts for too long.'

Eyes closed, Roman rested his head against the window of the truck's

cabin. 'You said you wanted to keep a low profile and build an empire.'

'I know. But this country is important to you. And apparently, we picked shitty allies. If I'd known you had something you wanted to protect, I would've pushed you harder to become stronger.'

He peeked at Voreese with one eye. 'I didn't think my feelings mattered to you that much.'

'Then you're an even bigger idiot than I thought.'

He smirked and closed his eyes again.

Soon, they reached the city of Walton. His hometown was a welcome sight, even if it was blurry without his glasses. Voreese gave the Queen directions to Roman's midtown mansion. They exited the vehicle in the underground parking complex and took the elevator up.

"Why don't you two get some rest?" Roman said to the ladies. "Make yourselves at home, and we'll reconvene later to figure out our next move."

"I am ready to discuss it now," said Helen.

Roman looked at Lynnette.

She glanced at the Queen. "I think I'd like to rest, if you don't mind..."

"Of course. And thank you, Lynnette. Your help has been invaluable."

"I'll make a call," said Roman. "I know a good private doctor."

The elevator doors opened, and a petite blond woman was waiting for them. "Master Roman!" she said. "You look like hell! What happened?"

"Lots. We have guests, Gina. Treat them well."

"191

Gina frowned. "Why didn't you call ahead? I would've had everything prepared already."

"Phone was destroyed. Please show Lynnette here to one of the bedrooms."

“Sir, are you--is that a head that you’re carrying?”

“It belongs to an acquaintance. I’m keeping it safe for him. Now, please.”

She stiffened, but nodded. “As you say. Please follow me.”

“Oh, and bring me a new pair of glasses.”

Gina immediately retrieved a pair from her vest pocket.

He took them. “Ah, finally!” He looked around, blinking happily before cocking an eyebrow at Gina. “Why did you have my glasses on you?”

“Because you are very needy, sir.”

He shoed her away, and Lynnette followed. He showed Helen to the kitchen and began scrounging for food.

“I still do not know who you are,” the Queen said. “Or why you decided to help me.”

Roman tossed her a premade sandwich. “My name is Roman Fullister,” he said, biting into his own. “As for why I helped you, eh... I suppose that’d be part national pride and part business.”

“Business,” she said. “You mean thievery?”

Voreese gave a snort. ‘Roman is to thievery what you are to Atreya.’

Roman’s brow lowered. “That’d make me the queen of thieves, Voreese.”

‘Oh, you know what I meant.’

“Please, just let me do the talking.”

‘No, fuck you! Roman only steals from the super wealthy! And nobody knows it, but he takes care of the poor, too! He’s a great guy!’

Roman scratched his head. “I don’t know about that. I do live pretty comfortably, as you can see.”

‘Psh! You’re talking to the fucking Queen, Roman. She’s not impressed by your shiny floors and fancy sinks. This place probably looks like a crack house to her.’

It was Helen's turn to furrow her brow."

"192

Roman sighed and leaned against the refrigerator. "Point is, I have an organized operation here in Atreya. A number of highly-skilled people work under me. And while I might be able to take advantage of the chaos that Abolish's plans will bring, it would only hurt my business in the long run."

'And Roman grew up in Atreya, so he has a soft spot for it.'

"Yeah, I guess I do."

'He was an orphan, too.'

"Well, I don't see how that's relevant..."

'Lived on the streets for a long time, he did. It's a real rags-to-riches story.'

"Voreese, what the hell? They don't care about any of that."

'Well, they should! Our previous allies obviously didn't care, and look at what dicks they turned out to be!'

"We knew they were dicks when we aligned with them."

'Yeah, but we didn't know how much! They were mega-dicks!'

"You'll have to forgive Voreese," said Roman. "She tends to hold grudges. Not that I disagree with her on this one."

Mehlsanz floated behind Helen. 'What should our next move be? We've been run out of the capital. And it doesn't seem like we have the power to take Sescoria back.'

Voreese nodded. 'And we definitely don't have the power to keep Sescoria. Even if we killed the ones already there, more might show up like Gerald said.'

"Then we require more power," said Helen. "Where might we find it?"

A brief silence fell.

Roman's expression soured. "Can anyone think of something that isn't the Vanguard?"

Helen looked over everyone. "I am not sure I understand what this Vanguard group is. They protect people from Abolish, no?"

"They do, yeah. And if we go to them for help, they'll probably give it. But afterwards, they won't just send us on our merry way. They'll want our support, too."

"That only seems fair," said Helen."

"193

"Maybe so," said Roman, "but you should understand, Your Majesty. You might very well lose control of Atreya to them."

"We will see about that."

'And besides, she's already lost it to Abolish,' said Voreese.

'There's another problem,' said Mehlsanz. 'I abandoned the Vanguard. I'm not sure how welcoming they'll be. They may try to kill us.'

'Oh. Delightful.'

"Then maybe we should go to Sai-hee for help," said Roman.

Voreese gave a winged shrug and tilted her bird's head. 'It's worth looking into, but I wouldn't hold my breath. I doubt Sai-hee will break her neutrality and attack Abolish just because we ask her to.'

'Getting in contact with her will not be easy.'

Helen folded her arms. "Why does Abolish want war, exactly? And what kind of war will they try to create?"

"If nothing else, their motives are always easy to understand. They want to cause as much destruction and death as possible. Whatever their plan is, it'll be designed to maximize those things."

'Their plan is obvious enough,' said Mehlsanz. 'They want Atreya to instigate war with another country in such a way that even more countries will be dragged into the fighting.'

‘That’s not an easy thing to do,’ said Voreese. ‘Most countries have learned their lessons about forming dangerously dependent alliances.’

‘But that is what they will aim for,’ said Mehlsanz. ‘In their eyes, even if they fail to pull more combatants, they’ll still have a war like they wanted. And they’ll make it as bloody as possible.’

“I see,” said Helen, and she ventured into the next room and turned on the television. It didn’t take her long to find a channel where a reporter was standing confusedly in front of Belgrant Castle with police and firefighters in the background. “They will try to use this,” she said. “My disappearance will soon be discovered, and they will rally for public support.””

"194

“You really think they’ll be able to blame the attack on some other country?” Roman asked.

“I am not sure. Perhaps there is some video footage of the attack which will exonerate any accused parties.”

‘They’ll wait and see what the media learns before making their move,’ said Voreese.

“Even if they fail to garner public support,” the Queen said, “they can simply go to war anyway, and such a ludicrous act could prompt an armed rebellion.”

‘And then it’d just be a civil war, instead,’ said Mehlsanz. ‘All roads lead to war in some way.’

“Unless we kill those assholes and get you back on the throne,” said Roman.

Helen rubbed her forehead and sat down on the black couch. She closed her eyes. “My husband will undoubtedly try to oppose them...”

Mehlsanz floated closer. ‘They won’t kill him.’

Everyone looked at her, all sharing unconvinced expressions.

‘They won’t,’ she insisted. ‘With you gone, power falls to him. It’s too

suspicious if you vanish and he dies at the same time. They want public support, remember? To make their war as large as possible, they'll need him alive.'

The Queen sighed. "I hope you are right."

Roman and Voreese exchanged glances, and everyone was silent for a while, simply listening to the news reporter drone on about how little they knew at this time. Roman sat down and placed Hector's head on the small table next to him.

Voreese spoke first. 'We do have one thing in our favor, at least. They need time to organize their war. Which means we have time to stop them.'

"True enough," said Roman. "How long do you think we have?"

'Hard to say,' said Voreese. 'I can't imagine it taking more than six months, though. What do you think, Queenie?'"

"195

"Coordinating an initial assault would take less than a week," said Helen. "Preparations for a long war would require more time but not likely more than a month. However, if they truly intend to win the people over first, then yes, we do have more time. I would guess four months, if no other complications arise, which is also doubtful."

Roman adjusted his spectacles. "Well, in any case, we shouldn't dawdle here."

'Agreed,' said Voreese. 'We should leave Atreya as soon you're prepared.'

"And go where?" Helen asked.

'As far as I know, the nearest Vanguard forces are in Korgum. They do have their hands full with Dozer, though, so they might not want to spare us any soldiers.'

Mehlsanz hovered around Helen. 'Eh... I'd really prefer not to meet anyone in the Vanguard again.'

"Why did you desert them?" said Roman.

Mehlsanz paused briefly. 'My previous servant, she grew up in conflict. Even before I resurrected her, she had lived through two wars as a child soldier. It was all she had ever known. And then one day, we found out that her sister had become a servant for Abolish.'

Roman's expression darkened. "Let me guess. The sister was mentally ill."

'Yes. Her sister wasn't psychotic, but she didn't really understand the consequences of what she was doing. And her reaper took advantage of that. But of course, the Vanguard had to stop her. She was killing innocent people. And my girl--Valencia was her name--she was just torn to pieces by this knowledge. She wanted to protect her sister, but she couldn't. She didn't want to fight her, either, so the higher-ups moved us to a different battlefield. But it didn't make much difference, at that point. Valencia didn't want to fight at all anymore. She just wanted to go somewhere and live peacefully.'

'Fucking Abolish motherfuckers...'

"196

--donation bonus (day #6, post 1/5)--

Mehlsanz nodded. 'I wouldn't normally agree to such a request, but after all Valencia had been through, I wanted to give her a chance at a quiet life. For a while, at least. I thought maybe she could find someone to fall in love with, and I'd let her grow old with that person, and then afterward, I'd release her and return to fighting Abolish with a new servant. And besides, I sort of wanted a break from the fighting, myself.'

"I'm guessing that didn't go over so well with your bosses."

'They refused. If she wouldn't fight, I had to release her, no exceptions. I protested, and then they imprisoned me and told me that if I didn't release her, they'd have to kill me. So I released her. And at the first opportunity, I fled.'

'And they didn't come after you?'

'I hid for a while, with decreasing levels of success. And now, Helen's status is the only thing protecting me. The Vanguard won't kill the ruler



of a nation that's not under Abolish's control.'

"You've had it rough," said Roman.

Helen frowned. "I am sorry for all you have had to endure, Mehlsanz, but I must do whatever I can to protect Atreya--even if it means aligning with people you do not approve of."

'I know.'

Voreese tilted her ghostly, feathered head. 'The Vanguard didn't used to be like that. They've always been self-righteous pricks, but I've never known them to go that far. What changed?'

'I'm not sure, honestly. I first noticed their harsher rules a few years ago. I can't recall a particular incident.'

"I'd always heard the leader of the Vanguard is a pretty decent guy," said Roman. "Is that not the case anymore? Or maybe it never was?"

'I wouldn't know,' said Mehlsanz. 'I only met Sermung once, and that was fifty years ago.'

"197

--donation bonus (day #6, post 2/5)--

"Hmm." Roman looked over everyone and adjusted his glasses again. "Well, we don't have any idea where Sai-hee's people are, so I still think we should try the Vanguard in Korgum, first."

"I agree."

Mehlsanz ruffled her feathers but nodded. 'We must be very cautious.'

'What about Hector and Garovel?' said Voreese. 'They're gonna be out of commission for at least a week. Probably more.'

"We can't wait that long," said Roman. "I wanna be out of here within two days."

'You could just carry Hector's head with us,' said Voreese.

"Eh. I don't think we should take them out of the country without their

permission. They might have a reason to stay in Atreya. How much do we even know about them?"

'Not much,' said Mehlsanz. 'I worked with Garovel some thirty years ago, and he seems more or less the same. Which is a good thing. But I know nothing about Hector.'

Helen looked at the helm. "We know that he protected us. That is not nothing."

"We also know that Garovel said they weren't prepared to die for you," said Roman. "And then they were both nearly killed."

Helen gave a slow nod.

"They can stay here. Gina will take care of them. And besides, I really don't wanna try to smuggle a severed head into a foreign country. I hear people frown upon that sort of thing."

"Very well."

"What about your sword girl? Should we take her?"

"I cannot send Lynnette back to Sescoria. Abolish will kill her."

"Oh yeah."

"If she wishes it, then I would have her accompany us."

"Alright." Roman stood and stretched his arms. "I already have plenty of spare identities for myself, so we'll only need two more."

'You have someone who can provide fake documentation?' Mehlsanz asked."

"198 -- XXII.

--donation bonus (day #6, post 3/5)--

"Have someone?" said Roman. "Please. I do all my forgeries myself."

'Ah, of course.'

"That's why I said two days. I need time to work."

‘Make me one, too!’

“Not this again. Voreese, I swear--”

‘C’mon. Just the ID. You can skip all the other stuff.’

“No!”

‘Tch.’ She turned to Helen and Mehlsanz. ‘He refuses to make me a fake ID, even as a joke. It wouldn’t even be that much work for him. He’s so lazy. Doesn’t care about my happiness at all.’

“Y’know what? Fine. One day, when the entire country isn’t in danger, I’ll do that for you. Okay? Happy now?”

‘Yes!’

“And for your photo, I’ll use a picture of an actual bitch.”

‘Maybe you should change yours to a picture of an actual cock!’

Chapter Twenty-Two: ‘Quiet guardian, take respite...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

First, the chin regrew. Bone cracked into existence, followed by arteries and muscles, then tendons, cartilage, meager fat, and dark brown skin. His neck drew out, down to the shoulders, then the chest and arms. And soon enough, Hector’s body was restored in full.

He did not wake immediately, however. He lay lifeless for several days more before his eyes finally opened again.

He sat up. He was in a bed, he saw, and a rather large one at that. The room held an air of wealth and comfort, but he didn’t spare it much attention as he saw Garovel there next to him.

The image of the reaper was weak, almost transparent, like a cloth stretched thin enough that light shone through the weaves.

‘There are clothes on the chair behind you.’

It wasn’t exactly his typical wardrobe. The black jeans felt soft and expensive, but they were too broad, so he had to use the accompanying belt with its flashy silver buckle.

‘Thank you for protecting me. I certainly would have died if you hadn’t shielded me the way you did.’”

"198 -- XXII.

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"199

--donation bonus (day #6, post 4/5)--

"Y-you're, ah... you're welcome..." The silky white shirt fit him better, though the sleeves were a bit long, so he rolled them up to his wrists. "It couldn't have been enough, though. They saved us, I guess?"

'Seems that way. I'm not sure where they are. I've been in and out of consciousness.'

He wasn't sure if he wanted to wear the dark gray waistcoat as well, but after a moment, he opted to, and then started on the socks and shoes. "You don't look so great, by the way."

'I'm just tired.'

Abruptly, a blond woman entered the room. She jumped when she saw him. "Ah! Whoa! Okay, then! Hi there!"

"H-hello."

"You are Hector, yes?"

"Ye-yeah..."

"I'm Gina. It's a pleasure to meet you. I believe you met my employer, Master Roman."

"I, ah... yeah."

"Are you hungry?"

He nodded hesitantly.

"Please follow me, then."

He grabbed his battered helm, and she escorted him through a series of hallways.

'Ask her how long we've been here.'

He tried to speak but faltered, achieving no words at all.

'Oh, come on, Hector. She can't see me. You have to be the one to ask.'

"Um... h-how, ah..."

She stopped and turned. "Yes?"

He flinched at her sudden gaze. "H-how long have I, uh... I mean..."

She tilted her brow at him. "Um. You've been here for two weeks. Well, your head has, anyway."

'Ask where the others are.'

"W-where, uh..."

"You're in Walton. You came from Sescoria, right? It's east of there, if you didn't already know."

"Ah. But. Where are the others? Roman and..."

"Oh, they left the country."

'What?'

"W-why?"

"Ah." Gina reached into her vest and pulled out a small notepad. She handed it to him. "Master Roman left this for you. I believe it will answer your questions."

--donation bonus (day #6, post 5/5)--

He flipped through and noticed quite a few pages full of text. Gina led him to the kitchen and began whipping up a meal while he sat down to read.

The first few pages said that they believed Atreya would go to war in a matter of months and elaborated upon their decision to seek the Vanguard's help. Roman advised Hector not to follow, as they apparently didn't know where their travels might lead them.

The later pages were in different handwriting, more feminine, and it soon identified itself as Voreese's words through the Queen's pen. It offered details on aberrations.

'Ah,' said Garovel upon reading it from over Hector's shoulder. 'Voreese remembered my inquiry. She's more thoughtful than I would have expected. I'll have to thank her the next time we meet.'

'Aberrations grow stronger the more people they kill,' Hector summarized.

'I suppose that explains why Geoffrey seemed more powerful.'

Hector's mouth twisted as he scowled. 'He's been killing even more people... and he's not going to stop.'

'With everything that's happened, you may be the only person in Atreya who can kill Geoffrey right now.'

'I'm not so sure I can. It's been two weeks. He's probably even stronger now.'

'It doesn't really matter as long as Abolish is protecting him.'

'I need to train...'

'Let's go back to Brighton first. You've been gone too long, as it is.'

Gina placed a plate full of pancakes in front of him. Then came eggs, sausage, waffles, hash browns, toast, strawberries, cantaloupe, wheat

cereal, and a single banana.

He watched her as if she were bringing him solid gold bars.

“Master Roman said you’d be hungry.”

“You... are amazing...”

“I know.”

He dove into his meal.

Gina sat down to eat with him. “So what’s your deal, anyway?” she said, biting into a waffle.”

"201

--donation bonus (day #7, post 1/5)--

“W-what do you mean?”

“Master Roman didn’t seem to know much about you, but he still wanted me to treat you like an honored guest.”

“Ah, uh... well... I don’t know much about him, either.”

“Hmm. Where are you from?”

He glanced past her at Garovel.

‘You should tell her. Roman and the Queen may need a means of contacting us when they return to Atreya. Gina may be able to help us with that.’

“I live in Brighton,” he said.

“Pretty far away. Why were you in Sescoria?”

“I just... wanted to help...”

She paused to tilt her head at him. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen...”

“And how long have you been undead?”



He blinked at the question.

'Tell her five months,' said Garovel.

"Uh, five months or so..."

"I see."

'Why'd you make me lie? It's only been a few weeks...'

'You're stronger than you should be. And it's better if people don't know.'

'I... uh--'

"Well, Master Roman said you're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Ah, I should actually get going soon..."

"You have business in Brighton?"

"S-sorta, yeah..."

"What do you do there?"

"N-nothing special..."

She pursed her lips at him.

He poked a pancake with his fork and let it linger there. "But, ah... do you have a pen?"

She gave him one.

He scribbled his phone number onto a page of the notepad and ripped it out for her. "In case, uh, Mr. Roman wants my help..."

She took it and then wrote a phone number of her own. "Same goes for you, then."

He tried not to blush and failed.

They finished their meal, and Gina showed him to the garage beneath the house. She handed him a key.

"Master Roman said you're a motorcycle guy." She motioned to a red cruiser with black and white flames painted on it."

--donation bonus (day #7, post 2/5)--

Hector looked at Gina. "Mr. Roman is just giving this to me?"

"Yep."

"Ah--wow..."

"There should be some gas money in your clothes, by the way."

He felt his waistcoat and found a small roll of bills in the inside pocket.

"Th-thank you."

"Sure."

'I didn't realize that guy was so generous,' said Garovel. 'Hope he doesn't care about this bike too much.'

'Um. Third time's the charm?'

'Chyeah, right.'

'This one's not a Revenant.'

'I don't think the manufacturer was the problem, Hector.'

'I'll just blame you, then.'

'Delude yourself all you like.'

Gina opened the garage door for him.

He favored the riding helmet over his helm and mounted the bike. He kickstarted it, and the sound of the engine filled the chamber. Gina gave him a wave. He returned his own and rode out.

He stopped just short of the first intersection, before riding out into traffic, and blinked. 'I just realized something,' he said. 'I'm not in pain.'

'I restored your body long before waking you up,' said Garovel. 'I needed extra rest, so I used the opportunity to let your pain be relieved, too.'

He turned his hands over in front of his face. 'My body feels so light...' He smiled inside his helmet. 'This is fucking great! Oh, man! I forgot what this was even like!'

'Ha. You're welcome.'

He went to turn onto the road but stopped himself again. 'By the way, uh... where the hell do I go?'

Garovel gave him instructions, and he soon found the highway leading south.

Mountains lay across the horizon, the very same ones he passed on the way to Sescoria. At this distance, however, he could see the occasional snow-capped peak.

'Let's go around those,' said Garovel. 'I'd rather not see you ride off a cliff.' A beat passed. 'Okay, yes, I would like to see that, but it'd still be really inconvenient.'

"203

--donation bonus (day #7, post 3/5)--

Hector roared down the highway. Traffic was a bit heavier than before but still nowhere near as uncomfortable as the city. After a while, he remembered another question.

'Desmond's ability,' said Hector. 'Didn't you say you'd explain?'

'Ah, yes. Desmond's ability falls under the category of transfiguration. I think the big guy's did, too.'

'Which means...?'

'Transfiguration abilities allow the user to replace body parts with a particular element. In Desmond's case, I would guess that element was sodium.'

'Sodium? That doesn't explode... does it?'

'When mixed with water, it does.'

‘Oh. So he was using... hmm.’

‘Technically, it’s not the sodium itself that’s responsible. Heat from the chemical reaction ignites the hydrogen that is expelled as a result.’

‘I... okay.’

‘Sodium and water can explode quite violently, but even so, Desmond’s explosions seemed more powerful. I assume he was also employing a soul-strengthening technique to give them an extra punch.’

‘Soul-strengthening... That sounds... useful.’

‘It’s basically just enhancing physical qualities through the application of mental force. It’s something you can only do when your imaginary power grows stronger.’

‘I’m guessing it’s not as easy as that first step was.’

‘It’s not easy or hard, actually. And unlike your iron ability, it can’t grow in sudden bursts through mental stress. Imaginary power is based upon the manipulation of your soul.’

‘So, what? More meditation, then?’

‘No. After the first step is taken, the only way to increase your imaginary power is time.’

‘Wha?’

‘See, I have control of your soul. In order for you to manipulate it, too, you and I have to spend more time together. Gradually, your soul and mine will become more synchronized.’

‘You mean, like... through the power of friendship or some shit?’

Garovel laughed. ‘No. Friendship doesn’t really factor in, unfortunately. It’s just a kind of natural osmosis that happens over time.’”

"204

‘Huh. So... no training, then?’

‘Nope. It’ll just sorta happen on its own.’

‘I guess that’s one less thing to worry about, anyway.’

‘Yeah.’

‘But, um. What about Roman’s ability? Do you know what that was?’

‘I believe his was an alteration type ability. Transfiguration and materialization are similar in that they revolve around elements, but alteration abilities are different. Rather than creating something or replacing something, alteration merely applies some force in order to change the physical state of existing matter. A real force, that is. Not an imaginary one. And the force varies between users. Roman’s force, I think, is particle vibrations.’

‘That, uh... sounds... complicated.’

‘Well, judging from how he was able to both create shockwaves and generate heat, it seems like the only explanation. And if I’m right, then that is an incredibly powerful ability.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yeah. If he were stronger with it, he’d be fucking terrifying.’

‘I guess it’s a good thing he’s not our enemy...’

‘Indeed. Hmm. Hey, pull over for a bit.’

Hector slowed down and eased into the road’s shoulder. ‘What’s the matter?’ he asked as the bike stopped.

Garovel floated off to the right, and Hector watched him, squinting. ‘There you are,’ the reaper said softly. ‘It’s okay. I’ve got you now.’

‘Who are you talking to?’

‘A wandering soul,’ said Garovel. ‘Someone died out here.’

Hector blinked. ‘What? Way out here? How?’

Garovel pointed behind him. ‘Look back there.’

‘Where? I don’t--’ And then he saw the skid marks on the road. Two

sets. Intersecting.

‘Happened a few days ago, judging by the state that this soul is in.’

Hector just frowned.

‘Let’s take a break at the next gas station. I need a couple hours to ferry this one across the void. You can use the time to meditate.’

‘Okay...’

They proceeded on, and it wasn’t long before a gas station came into view. Hector stopped, and Garovel disappeared into thin air after assuring Hector of his return."

"205

--donation bonus (day #7, post 5/5)--

He refueled and then wheeled the bike around the side of the building where no one else was. He sat down on the sidewalk and closed his eyes, letting the sound of cars on the highway bleed into background noise.

He focused on iron shapes. He wasn’t sure what else to think about. Apart from merely coating things, nothing else came to mind, and he found himself wondering to what other degrees his power might develop. He shook the thoughts away and concentrated.

After a while, he opened his eyes again, and Garovel had still not returned, so he tried making iron. A silver lump materialized in his palm. It was almost spherical, surprisingly, but still smaller than he had imagined. He went back to meditating, and when he opened his eyes again, he saw Garovel there.

They set out again, and it wasn’t long before a new topic arrived.

‘There’s something I’d like to know,’ said Hector.

‘Yeah?’

‘Back when, um... when we first met... I know you said that you didn’t know, but... do you believe that an afterlife exists? I mean, like, any kind at all?’

Garovel was slow to answer. 'No,' he said, 'I don't.'

'Why not?'

'I've never found anything that convinced me. Do you believe one does?'

'W-well, uh, not really, uh... I mean, I don't know. Aren't you kinda... experiencing an afterlife? You died, right? But you're still alive, sort of...'

'Ha. I suppose it depends on your definition of the afterlife, then. I certainly don't believe in heaven or hell. Reincarnation seems more appealing at least, but I don't see any reason to believe it's true.'

'So then... after we die, you think there's just... nothingness?'

'Yeah.'

'Then why, um... why do you bother reaping? If you think you're just carrying souls into oblivion, then... why not just leave them alone?'

'Because that would be a great cruelty.'

'What do you mean?'

"206

'On its own, a soul will soon decay,' said Garovel. 'Within a day, it will become a confused mass of semi-consciousness. Within two, it will become a prison of raw agony.'

'Oh.'

'Ferrying souls is a task we take upon ourselves not because a higher power has ordained us to, but just because it's the right thing to do.'

'I see.'

'And besides, what the fuck else are we gonna do with our time? It's a good way to relieve boredom.'

'Wow, Garovel...'

‘Hey, it’s true.’

The sun drew up higher in the sky as Hector sped across the landscape. The journey was quiet for a while longer until Garovel initiated the next topic.

‘I’m sorry this trip turned out so chaotic,’ the reaper said. ‘I certainly didn’t mean for you to be gone so long. I’m not sure how we should explain your absence to your parents and your school.’

Hector hesitated. ‘I’m... not so sure my parents will notice...’

‘Oh, come on. It’s been two weeks. How could they have not noticed?’

For a while, he merely listened to the motorcycle and the wind roaring together. ‘When I was younger, uh... my parents both struggled to find work. They’d often have to take jobs in separate cities--I guess because the bills were piling up or something. They were always trying to readjust things so that they could both get a job in the same place. So, ah... we ended up moving around a lot. And there was this one time... when I was about ten... and, um... ah... b-basically, they, uh... they left me behind.’

Silence drew out, and Garovel waited for Hector to continue.

‘I spent, like, almost a month in foster care, I think... and then the police found me. My parents thought they’d lost me somewhere in the new city. They didn’t, uh... they didn’t realize I was missing until like a week after the move...’

"207 -- XXIII.

--donation bonus (day #8, post 1/5)--

‘A week is rather specific,’ said Garovel. ‘How do you know it took them that long?’

‘Well, on the way back, the cops were really happy. Um... they told me it was amazing, because I’d been missing for three weeks... and I knew it had been longer.’

Garovel was briefly quiet again. ‘Well, shit, Hector. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was that bad.’



'I... it's not, I mean... if I'd been able to explain to the foster care people, then maybe... but I... I just--'

'No. Stop that. It's definitely not your fault. What I want to know is how Child Services never took you away from your parents.'

'Ch-Child Services? I, uh... I don't, ah...'

'Bah. How did they not realize it was a case of neglect? Was the incident reported as a child abduction? Or maybe they just thought you ran away?'

'I don't know about any of that, um... I mean, n-neglect? R-really, it's not like... uh...'

'Hector. It's one thing for your parents to be a bit distant from you or not really take an interest in your life as a teenager. It's sure-as-fuck something else for them to forget about their ten-year-old son in another city.'

The bike started drifting toward the shoulder, and he had to correct its path. 'It-it's fine, though. I mean, I've never thought of it like that, so...'

'Of course you haven't. It's how you've grown up. But that doesn't make it okay.'

Hector had no response.

Chapter Twenty-Three: 'Thy beloved kinship...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The remainder of the journey was quiet. Garovel took the chance to rest, with the advisement that Hector should wake him should he get lost, but it was a straight shot the rest of the way, so Hector wasn't too concerned.

Rather, he was more worried about Garovel's obvious disdain for his parents. Even as he saw Brighton's towers appearing over the horizon, it was still bothering him."

"207 -- XXIII.

--donation bonus (day #8, post 1/5)--

'A week is rather specific,' said Garovel. 'How do you know it took them that long?'

'Well, on the way back, the cops were really happy. Um... they told me it was amazing, because I'd been missing for three weeks... and I knew it had been longer.'

Garovel was briefly quiet again. 'Well, shit, Hector. I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was that bad.'

'I... it's not, I mean... if I'd been able to explain to the foster care people, then maybe... but I... I just--'

'No. Stop that. It's definitely not your fault. What I want to know is how Child Services never took you away from your parents.'

'Ch-Child Services? I, uh... I don't, ah...'

'Bah. How did they not realize it was a case of neglect? Was the incident reported as a child abduction? Or maybe they just thought you ran away?'

'I don't know about any of that, um... I mean, n-neglect? R-really, it's not like... uh...'

'Hector. It's one thing for your parents to be a bit distant from you or not really take an interest in your life as a teenager. It's sure-as-fuck something else for them to forget about their ten-year-old son in another city.'

The bike started drifting toward the shoulder, and he had to correct its path. 'It-it's fine, though. I mean, I've never thought of it like that, so...'

'Of course you haven't. It's how you've grown up. But that doesn't make it okay.'

Hector had no response.

Chapter Twenty-Three: 'Thy beloved kinship...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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lost, but it was a straight shot the rest of the way, so Hector wasn't too concerned.

Rather, he was more worried about Garovel's obvious disdain for his parents. Even as he saw Brighton's towers appearing over the horizon, it was still bothering him."

"208

--donation bonus (day #8, post 2/5)--

Hector couldn't make the thoughts explicit, for fear of waking up Garovel, but the ideas still brewed quietly in his mind, never forming conscious words but still unsettling him nonetheless.

He didn't want to think ill of his parents. They'd taken care of him his entire life. They'd kept a roof over his head, clothes on his back, food in his stomach. They'd given him toys and games and books, his own television, his own computer. Maybe that wasn't much to some people, but he knew that to others, that was a lot.

And they had never been abusive, which was more than could be said of other people's parents. He'd seen kids with parents like that. Those were the kids who had it rough, not him, and they endured their pain much better than he did. Surely, they'd love to have parents like his.

He rode the bike to a cemetery and parked it behind a mausoleum, under the shade of a line of trees. He checked inside the building, its stony walls encasing two chambers across, and was a bit surprised to still find the money that he had stolen from Rofal. He fully expected someone to have taken it after two whole weeks, but he supposed this place was an even better hiding spot than he thought. It was dark and peaceful inside, but Garovel had previously given him grief for choosing it, as if he had been trying to make some morbid joke, even though, really, it was a very convenient location.

From here, he made the short walk back to Cedar Street. Seeing his house again, under the amber pull of the evening sun, brought a sense of relief. If nothing else, he was at least glad to have finally made it.

He entered and found his father sitting alone in the den, watching television."

"209

--donation bonus (day #8, post 3/5)--

His father looked at him. The man did not get up. "Hey, son," he said, utterly flat and casual. "Haven't seen you around the past couple days."

Hector waited a moment longer, wondering if there was more, but his father had finished talking. He was suddenly glad that Garovel wasn't awake to hear. "...I found a job."

"Oh. That's good."

Hector tried not to frown. The temptation to let the conversation die was strong, and perhaps it was even the wisest course of action, but that previous worry was still there like an itch. "...Where's mom?" he tried.

"Sleeping. She had a long day at work."

"D-did something happen?"

"Just the usual, I'm sure. Clients being prima donnas and so forth."

Hector's expression strained as he struggled for another topic. It felt almost physically painful, as if his body wanted to leave but his brain wouldn't allow it. "D-do you wanna... um... do something together sometime? The three of us, I mean."

"Like what?"

"I don't know... maybe we could... go see a movie?"

He spared Hector an odd glance. "Wouldn't you rather go with your friends?"

"N-no..."

"Really? I know when I was your age, I didn't want anything to do with my parents."

Hector had no clue how to respond to that. His father's wry smile did nothing to comfort him.

The man shrugged and looked back at the television. "I'll see what your mother thinks about it."

"Okay..." And with that, the conversation seemed well and truly beyond revival. He gave up and went to his room.

He lay on his bed for a bit before deciding to practice creating iron again. Soon, he felt Garovel stir.

'Ah,' the reaper said, detaching himself from Hector. 'We're already here.'

"Yeah. You look a little better."

'I feel a little better. And you're already training, I see.'"

"210

--donation bonus (day #8, post 4/5)--

"Yeah... so, uh... we're back in Brighton, but... what the hell do we do now?"

'Well. Roman's note said we have a few months before Atreya goes to war. So. I think the only logical thing to do is to focus on increasing your ability with iron until our allies return to retake Sescoria.'

"We just leave Abolish and Geoffrey to run wild? They're going to be slaughtering people..."

'What's the alternative? Rush in to stop them on our own? We'll die, and then there really won't be anyone to protect the civilians here.'

"I guess so..."

'But in a way, you're correct. We can't just sit here and have you try to meditate your way to victory. That's not going to work. Meditation is okay for steady growth, but it's not fast enough. To stand a chance, we need to press you harder.'

"And how do we do that?"

'Simple,' said Garovel. 'We go looking for trouble.'

Geoffrey's return to the Rofal mansion had been a decidedly quiet one. Desmond had wanted him to stay in Sescoria, but Geoffrey thought he should be in Brighton in order to continue the family business. To his great disappointment, however, no one was here to meet him. For the past few days, he'd had the entire house to himself.

So he fixed that.

Dozens of living puppets wandered the corridors. He made a game of it, controlling them all from his office, seeing through their eyes, rifling through their minds, and putting on a veritable play by having them interact with each other in various ways--sometimes peaceably, most times not.

It amused him while he waited for the phone to ring, but then there came a delightful surprise when one of his puppets saw someone venture through the front entrance, someone not under his control."

"211

--donation bonus (day #8, post 5/5)--

The stranger was an elderly gent, shriveled and gray but wearing bright eyes and a big smile. And he had a reaper with him.

Geoffrey immediately forgot about his human toys and went to greet them.

"Hello and welcome!" Geoffrey said cheerily. "Might I ask what brings you here?"

The old man looked at him eagerly. "Boo!" he said, shaking both hands in front of him.

Geoffrey just blinked. And then realized that he couldn't move his body. He struggled, but an invisible force held him fast.

The old man laughed. "Just kidding!" He released him, and Geoffrey stumbled back a step.

'Sorry,' the reaper said. 'He's just excited to meet you. You are Geoffrey Rofal, yes?'

“Yes. Who are you?”

‘I am Feromas, and this is Damian Rofal. He is your grandfather.’

Geoffrey blinked again. Then a few more times.

“Howdy, Grandson! How’s the business?! Not so great, by the looks of things! Aha! Did you kill all your subordinates?! That’s not a very smart thing to do, you little scamp!”

“You are truly my grandfather?”

“Of course!”

‘I hope you’ll forgive us for not attending Joseph’s funeral. The family doesn’t usually tell Damian things anymore. They think he doesn’t know what they’re saying.’

“They think I’m a lunatic! Aha!”

‘Which is only half-right.’

“Shut your hole, Feromas! I’m sharp as a tack, I am!”

The reaper eyed Geoffrey. ‘We figured you’d need some help running things. The family doesn’t have any other willing participants who aren’t also scared shitless of you, and Damian’s been restless lately, anyway.’

“I’m like a caterpillar!”

‘Oh, he’s gone again. Don’t mind anything he says for the next twenty minutes or so.’

“Would you like to see a magic trick, young man?! Bring me ten rabbits, ten hats, and one machete!”

Geoffrey smiled. “I like your style, Grandpa.””

"212

--donation bonus (day #9, post 1/5)--

Damian returned a quizzical expression. “I like your style, too,

Grandma. Your eyebrows are pointier than I remember.”

‘Seriously. Don’t mind him. Please.’

Damian looked at Feromas. “So who do you want me to kill?”

‘No one, right now, Damian. Please just relax.’

“Okay, Boss. You’re the boss, Boss.” And he stood next to the reaper, rigid as a wooden plank.

“You want him to run the family business?” said Geoffrey. “Is he capable of such a thing?”

‘...Please don’t ask me such difficult questions. Do you want our help or not?’

Geoffrey scrunched his mouth together, thinking a moment, and then shrugged. “Sure, okay. Everyone else already ran away, though, so I’m not sure what you plan on doing.”

Feromas stared at him for a long moment, then just gave a massive sigh.

“It’s okay!” said Damian. “I know all sorts of great people!”

“Is he lucid again?”

‘Not sure...’

“Like the Tooth Fairy!”

‘Ah, there it is.’

“We’ll build a tooth-fortress! No one’ll be able to get in! Unless we want them to, of course. We’ll need a tooth-drawbridge. And maybe some tooth-horses.”

Geoffrey cocked an eyebrow. “How often does he get like this, exactly?”

‘Once or twice a day, perhaps. It varies.’

Abruptly, Geoffrey heard the phone ring. He rushed back to his office to pick it up. “Yes, hello? Desmond?”

<“Heya, Geoffrey. Got some info you might like. In a little town out



west, we got a report of a man going around with two babies.”>

“Excellent!”

<“Town’s called Battonburg. Info’s a bit old, so he’s probably not there anymore, but you might be able to get a lead on him if you pay the place a visit.”>

“Thank you, Desmond! I will do just that.”

<“Have fun out there. And give me a call if you need anymore help, yeah?”>

“Of course. You are too kind.” He hung up and looked at Feromas and Damian. “Okay. I have to go. Um. Enjoy building your tooth-fortress or whatever.”

“Will do!””

"213

--donation bonus (day #9, post 2/5)--

‘Hey, hold on a minute,’ said Feromas. ‘Don’t you have questions for us?’

Geoffrey paused. “Mm, not particularly.”

‘But... aren’t you curious about what I am? Or why you’re so different from normal people?’

“I already know both of those things. You are a reaper, and I am an aberration.”

Feromas furrowed his brow. ‘How the hell do you know that, already?’

“I met some people from Abolish. And they--”

Damian snapped back. “Abolish is here in Atreya? Ah, were they behind the incident in Sescoria a couple weeks back?”

“Yeah. I was there with them. It was a lot of fun.” Geoffrey tilted his head. “Though, I suppose I am curious as to why I am only meeting you just now. If you knew I was an aberration all this time, then why did

you not tell me when I was younger?"

Feromas nodded. 'That's because of this asshole. He created you without me knowing and then completely forgot about you. It wasn't until your aunt visited him a couple days ago to inform him of Joseph's death that your name came up.'

"And I suddenly remembered!" said Damian. "How is your mother, by the way? I haven't seen her in ages."

"Neither have I," said Geoffrey. "But wait a minute. You created me? How?"

"Oh, did your friends in Abolish not tell you?" said Damian. "It's a delightful process, see. First, you have to capture a reaper. And make sure they don't have a servant's soul attached to them, or it just complicates things. Then, you need a man and a woman, and they both need to possess the reapers' genetic trait. And then, after the woman becomes pregnant, you perform a soul-transfusion, carving out the emerging soul of the child and replacing it with the reaper's soul you captured earlier. If all goes well, the resulting soul will be reborn with a new mind and a new body, and you will be rewarded with a wonderful little aberration baby.'"

"214

--donation bonus (day #9, post 3/5)--

Geoffrey raised an eyebrow. "Reapers' genetic trait?"

'The trait that makes us live on after death,' said Feromas.

"Yes, it's a recessive gene and terribly rare these days," said Damian. "Luckily, I'm a carrier myself, as are some of my children, including your mother. The real trick was getting her to have a child with someone who was also a carrier. She's rather headstrong, you know, and was determined to marry for love. I had to orchestrate events extensively so that she fell in love with just the right man."

'That's what you were doing? Why didn't you ever tell me? I thought you were just being a dick when you sabotaged her relationships.'

"I wanted to surprise you!" said Damian, grinning.

Feromas sighed again. ‘Of course. For a second, you made me forget that you’re a fucking idiot.’

“Huh,” said Geoffrey. “So, if you had not performed this soul-transfusion on my mother, I would have been born as a normal human?”

“Seemingly, yes. But you wouldn’t just be a carrier of the reaper trait like your parents. It would actually manifest in you. So when you died, you would have become a reaper like Feromas here.”

“Oh!”

“Unfortunately, with two parents who are only carriers of the trait, the success rate is about twenty-five percent. If the child is merely a carrier as well, then the transfusion will simply kill the subject. You might have had a couple of older siblings, otherwise.”

‘No wonder she never comes to visit you.’

“Hmm,” said Geoffrey. “I am not sure what to think. Is being a reaper more fun than being an aberration?”

‘I doubt it. Boredom is a real problem for a lot of us.’

“Then I must thank you, Grandpa.”

“No problem.”

‘By the way, I’m Damian’s great grandfather. So you should thank me for your genetics, too.’

“I see! Thank you both, then!”

"215 -- XXIV.

--donation bonus (day #9, post 4/5)--

Chapter Twenty-Four: ‘Be not troubled...’

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Hector’s eyes drooped as he listened to his mathematics teacher talk about something he didn’t understand in the slightest. Garovel was

resting on his shoulders, so there was no one to stop Hector from drifting off.

It had been an eventful night. It was the first time they had patrolled the city without a specific purpose. And finding trouble at random was not as easy as Hector thought it would be. Garovel found a building fire, but by the time Hector reached it, firefighters already had it under control. They followed a police car around for a while, but it only led them to places where people had called in noise complaints or some such thing.

After a while, however, they switched tactics. Garovel haunted a series of seedy bars and strip clubs until he heard rumors of some river operation on the east side of town. And by the end of the night, Hector had trounced three dozen thugs, sunken a boat full of illegal weapons, and fled from the police. His motorcycle had earned a few bullets holes, which he patched with iron. There was no saving the paint job, though.

He'd argued with Garovel briefly about attending school. Hector thought it was a waste of time with everything else going on, but the reaper seemed adamant that he at least make an appearance, if for no other reason than to abate worry from people who hadn't seen him in two weeks. Hector agreed, but only on the condition that Garovel use the opportunity to rest.

So far, Hector had yet to see Micah or any of the others, but the day was still young. And as soon his first class let out, Sheryl came up to him."

"215 -- XXIV.

--donation bonus (day #9, post 4/5)--

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"216

--donation bonus (day #9, post 5/5)--

"Hector!" said Sheryl, smiling. "How have you been?! We were starting to think you moved away or something!"

He averted his gaze as she cornered him against a wall and a line of lockers. "I, uh..." Garovel wasn't awake to help him. He froze up.

"Is everything okay? Am I making you uncomfortable again?"

He definitely did not want to answer that.

She frowned after a moment. "I'm sorry," she said. "I get it. Don't worry. I'll just leave you alone from now on." She started walking away.

“N-no,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Please don’t... um...”

She turned. “What?”

“You’re not, uh... I mean... I don’t want you to leave.” He tried to look at her face, but her renewed smile was too much for him.

“So why haven’t you been around school, then? Were you sick or something?”

That would be a serviceable lie, of course, but he decided to stick with one story. “I got a job. It’s been, uh... very demanding.”

“What sort of job requires you to miss school? Like a family business type of thing?”

“N-no, it’s, um... well, it’s difficult to explain.”

“Oh yeah?” She looked at her watch. “Well, I do actually have to go. I’ve got tennis. Um. Tell me more about it at lunch, okay? I’m sure everyone else is curious, too.”

“Ah--okay...”

And she was gone again, disappeared into the passing stream of students.

‘Smooth,’ said Garovel.

Hector’s brow lowered. ‘You’re supposed to be asleep.’

‘I was awoken by the sound of you lying yourself into a corner. What the hell are you going to tell them, exactly?’

‘I have an idea... I think.’

‘Is that so? Don’t tell me, then. I want to be surprised.’

‘Go back to sleep, already.’

‘Fine. But wake me up at lunchtime.’

Hector smirked faintly. ‘Okay, I will.’”

He waited for lunch to arrive, barely staying awake for his next class and giving up entirely for the one after. None of the teachers mentioned his absence at all, but he supposed he should have expected that, given how overcrowded each class was. They surely had more important things to worry about than the whereabouts of a single student.

When lunch arrived, he found himself seated at the table with everyone, receiving their questions and intrigued faces. After all that had happened to him, he had to remind himself of their names. Nathan, Janine, Gregory, and then of course Sheryl and Micah.

“...I got a job in private security,” Hector explained.

‘Really? I was guessing you’d go with metalworking.’

“Security?” said Sheryl. “You mean like a bodyguard?”

“Kinda, yeah...”

“I didn’t think people under eighteen could get work like that,” said Micah.

‘Oho. What now, genius?’

“It’s... an unusual arrangement, um... just... It’s difficult to explain.”

‘What a cop-out! Boooo!’

“What do you mean ‘unusual’?” Gregory asked.

‘Ha!’

Hector looked between everyone. “Um. Well, uh. This wealthy guy... he hired me. D-don’t ask me why. I don’t really know. But um. It’s pretty rewarding work. I mean, I enjoy it.”

‘Wow, Hector.’

“There’s just one problem,” Hector added. “My boss. He’s kind of a jackass.”

‘Oh, you dick.’

Micah’s brow rose. “Has your boss been making you miss school? That’s not legal, is it?”

"N-no, I've been choosing to miss school..."

"That's no good!" said Sheryl. "You shouldn't skip so much. What if you aren't able to graduate?"

Hector frowned. "Ah, uh... I-I think that ship may've already sailed, actually..."

Her eyes bulged. "What?! You're kidding!"

Hector flushed with shame and looked down at his food. It was some kind of meat-like blob covered in sauce, and the sight of it didn't do much to make him feel better.

"Do you need a tutor?" Micah asked.

"Yeah, do you need a tutor?" Sheryl echoed.

"Um, I, ah..."

'Uh-oh. Where is this going?'

"218

"What do you need help with?" said Sheryl. "I'm pretty good with geography. Gregory's a math nerd."

"Hey, I'm not--"

"Yes, you are, shut up. Micah, you're good at something, aren't you?"

"Hell no."

"Yeah, you are! Biology! You're good at biology!"

"No, I'm not! I cheat, I swear I do!"

"Yeah, right, you goodie-good! Nathan, Janine, what are your best subjects?"

'Hector, what have you done?'

'I don't know, but I'm scared...'



“Hector!” said Sheryl, making him flinch. “C’mon! Give us your address, and we’ll take turns tutoring you!”

--+-+--+--

Battonburg was a quiet little town. Buildings were architecturally ornate but never more than three stories. The small roads remained quiet, even in the middle of the day, and as Geoffrey looked for a place to park, he spotted a familiar reaper waving him down. He pulled into a diner and got out of his sleek, white sports car.

Ozmere floated over to him, with Moss lumbering not far behind. ‘Hello again,’ the reaper said.

“Hello. What are you doing here?”

‘We wanted to make sure you didn’t wipe out the entire town.’

Geoffrey pouted. “Aww, but that is the easiest way. I do not need to ask around about Colt if I just consume all their souls and read their minds.”

‘Geoffrey, please. That sort of thing will attract the attention of the Vanguard’s aberration hunters. And trust me when I say that would not be fun for you.’

“Bah.”

‘Don’t be like that. We’ll make a game of it. We’ll talk to various people and if someone seems like they know something useful, THEN you can eat their soul. Agreed?’

“Oh, very well.”

‘Good.’

“Is Desmond here, too?”

‘No, he and Ezmortig are still in Sescoria. There is still much that needs overseeing. Our reinforcements arrived the other day, and Desmond’s been trying to help everyone get situated without drawing too much attention.’”

"219

“How is your plan going, by the way?” Geoffrey asked.

‘Well, Prince Gabriel has been cooperative, though he doesn’t know the full extent of our plans, of course. The King, though, has been resistant. To his credit, he didn’t concede any ground until Desmond ripped his arm off.’

“Ooh! Can I have the arm?!”

‘Um. I’m not sure what we did with it. Sorry.’

“Aww.”

‘If you’d stayed, you could’ve torn it off yourself.’

“There is no need to rub it in.”

‘I’m pretty sure we’ll have to kill the King sooner or later. You can still come back and be a part of that, you know.’

“Hmm. Let us find Mr. Colt quickly, then.”

They visited the diner first but found no useful information. Geoffrey immediately wanted to kill the last person they talked to out of sheer disappointment, but Moss hoisted him over his shoulder and left the diner.

It would be some hours before they finally found a candidate. The elderly receptionist of a ratty motel paused to think a moment when Geoffrey asked about a man with two babies.

“Hmm.” The man smirked. “Perhaps if I had something to refresh my memory...” He tapped the wooden counter in front of him.

“That will not be necessary.” Geoffrey looked at Ozmere, who nodded. He grinned as the red shade poured forth.

The man’s scream died in his mouth, and his eyes hollowed out into flaming shadows.

Geoffrey could see the memories. An entire life--dimensioned and complicated, sad and happy, regretful and grateful.

It bored him.

He searched for the face he wanted to see, as simple as if the

memories had been his own. "Ah!" said Geoffrey. "Hello, Mr. Colt."

'Do you know where he went?'

"I know who to ask next."

'Lead on, then.'

--+-+--+--

Hector made it to the end of the school day. He was anxious about carpentry club, as he figured it to be the only other place where his absence might have been noticed."

"220

To Hector's surprise, he was not hounded with questions from the other club members as soon as he entered the room. He received an occasional glance and nothing more, which stirred a mixture of emotion in him. On the one hand, he was all too glad to not be the center of attention again; but on the other, it reminded him of lonelier days, of that old feeling in his chest, as if his heart were being slowly squeezed.

'This shit again,' said Garovel, shaking Hector out of his morass. 'They were worried about you when they thought you'd been injured, but I guess that's worn off now.'

'It's fine. In fact, it's probably better this way.'

'Okay, Hector, it's time to tell me why the hell they're ignoring you like this. It's annoying me, and I want to know.'

'Ugh...'

Lance entered the clubroom, saw Hector, and immediately started walking over.

'Aw, dammit, c'mon!' Garovel pointed a bony finger at Hector. 'You're gonna tell me before we leave here today!'

'Okay, fine...'

"Hey, Hector," said Lance. "I was starting to think you'd quit the club

again.”

“No, I’ve... just been, ah, busy.”

“Mm.” Lance smiled. He put his backpack on the table and rummaged through it. “Have a look.” He pulled out a pair of gauntlets.

Hector’s eyes widened. The ornate lines along the interlocking finger parts were particularly impressive, he felt. The fingertips were all pointed, almost like claws, and he could see that Lance had used more than one type of metal to achieve the varying tones of gray. “Wow...”

“Told you I could do it.”

“You sure did...” He went to pick one up, then confirmed Lance’s nod before inspecting it more closely. “How’d you get the metal so smooth? You couldn’t have just used a hammer.”

“No, I used my uncle’s furnace and molded all the big pieces from a melted state.”

“That’s really awesome...”

“Thanks. What about you? Did you ever finish your helm?”

"221

A bit hesitant, Hector retrieved the helm from his bag and put it on the table.

“Whoa,” said Lance. “This is really smooth, too. Cast iron, isn’t it? You have access to a furnace, too?”

He wasn’t sure how else to explain it, so he just said, “Y-yeah.”

“Are you gonna add some ornamental lines to it?”

“Uh... m-maybe.”

“What do you think about making a full suit of armor?” said Lance, and Hector blinked. “It’d be a pretty big project for just one person, but between the two of us, I think it’d be manageable. Maybe enter it into a competition or something.”

“Uh... that, uh...”

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine. I was just thinking of making some greaves next and got to wondering.”

“Ah, no... I mean, uh, sure. That sounds... pretty cool.”

“Yeah? Awesome. I was thinking we’d make various parts independently and then piece them together later.”

“Hmm.” Hector scratched his forehead. “But, uh... well, that could be a problem if we don’t, um... correlate our measurements or whatever.”

“Ah, you’re right. Maybe we should make the breastplate together, then. Once that is done, we can take proper measurements and then split up to make the smaller stuff like the gorget and pauldrons and such.”

“Gorget is for the neck, right? What’re pauldrons for?”

“Shoulders. There are lots of other parts to choose from, too. Vambraces for the forearms. Couters for the elbows. And tons of others. We could probably spend the rest of the school year making all the different things.”

“I see.” Hector eyed the gauntlets again as a quiet thought struck him.

“We can get started tomorrow, if you like. Just come over to my uncle’s place after school. He’s got lots of scrap metal we can melt down and use.”

“Ah, o-okay...”

"222

Lance gave Hector the address and then ventured off again.

Garovel floated over his shoulder. ‘Looks like you’re going to be a busy man from now on.’

‘I, ah...’

‘This is basically what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? Having friends to spend time with and so forth?’

Hector glanced at the reaper, then back down at the address. 'Y-yeah...' He couldn't help smiling. 'I just never thought it could actually happen...'

'Heh.'

Ms. Trent poked her head out of her office. "Hector," she called out. And he thought he was in trouble until she added, "Glad to see you're back."

He gave a blushing nod.

And then he was alone again. He looked across the other club members, wondering if any of them were going to approach him, but when none did, he decided that he had satisfactorily fulfilled Garovel's request to make an appearance. He started for the exit.

'Hector,' said Garovel. 'You said you'd tell me your history with these people.'

'Fine...' He took a breath as he entered the hall. 'Basically, ah... well, one thing you have to understand about the kids in the club is that, uh... they're very... well, they're very close-knit. They, um. I mean, I wouldn't call them a clique, exactly, but... they have some of those qualities, I guess.'

'Go on.'

'And, uh... there's this couple. Katrina and Jamal. They're sort of like the group's leaders. The alpha couple. And, um. One day, I, uh... I kinda... I mean, I... ah, man, this is... just...'

'Hector, c'mon. Spit it out.'

'I, uh... I saw them having sex in the clubroom.'

Garovel stared at him a moment. 'Uh. Huh.'

'Yeah... I mean, I just walked in on them and... yeah...'

'What did you do?'

'I ran away. Which... probably wasn't the right thing to do. They'd seen me. So... maybe I shoulda just talked to them, but... I... that... there was just no way...'

'I can imagine.'

"223

Hector proceeded outside through the front of the school. 'But, um... anyhow, to make a long story short, uh... I mean, I wasn't going to tell anyone about what I saw... but I kinda... ended up telling Ms. Trent.'

'Ah. Damn, Hector.'

'Yeah... I-I tried not to tell her, but... uh... Ms. Trent already had her suspicions, I guess... and... she sorta cornered me... and I just... I don't know. I couldn't lie about it. And I should have...' He shook his head. 'I really fucking should have...'

Garovel gave a sympathetic shrug. 'You just told the truth. Why does everyone in the club hold that against you?'

'Because... Katrina and Jamal were both expelled, and now they have to repeat a year.'

'Oh. Yikes.'

'I hadn't, uh... I hadn't actually done anything wrong, so... they couldn't kick me out of the club, but...'

'They ignored you until you just left on your own.'

'Pretty much...'

'Is that when you decided to kill yourself?'

Hector sighed. 'When you put it like that... it sounds even more pathetic...'

'Sorry.'

'It's fine...'

'Well. They sound like the kind of friends you're better off without, anyway.'

He shook his head again. 'Garovel, no offense, but... you don't know what the fuck you're talking about.'

The reaper raised an eyebrow at him. 'What?'

'I'm sorry, but... that's the sort of thing that people only say when they already have friends that they're comfortable with. It's not the same when you're rejected and completely on your own... "Just find new friends," people say. "Friends who will treat you better." Yeah. Right. As if that's so fucking easy. I mean, that's the whole problem to begin with...'

'Hmm. I see your point.'

'And besides... isn't it still better to, y'know... try to accept your friends for who they are? Faults and all? I mean... it's not like I'm perfect, either...'"

"224 -- XXV.

'You're surprisingly opinionated about this,' said Garovel.

'S-sorry.'

'No, it's fine. I understand. But those club people still seem like a bunch of dicks to me. And having sex in the clubroom was a stupid thing to do, anyway.'

'They're not dicks,' said Hector. 'They're just... very protective of each other. A lot of the kids in that club have pretty rough home lives. So they rely on each other a lot. And the two people I got expelled... from what I'd overheard, um... they were having sex at school because their families didn't want them seeing each other anywhere else.'

'You learned that much about them just from listening?'

'Y-yeah. I mean, I could kinda... infer some stuff, but yeah.'

'Hmm. Well. I'm sorry you weren't able to become friends with them. But if you had, then you and I probably wouldn't have met.'

Hector paused a moment. 'If only.'

'Fucking cheap shot.'

Chapter Twenty-Five: 'A maelstrom doth brew...'



Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Between school, metalwork, getting tutored, meditation, and beating the tar out of criminals, the next few days were a juggling mess. School tended to take the worst of it, as Hector would show up in the mornings and then employ doctors' notes to skip out on the rest of his classes. After the events in Sescoria, he had nearly forgotten about the box of excuses that his mother had given him, but now he was quite thankful for it.

He was also relieved that the first tutoring session was with Gregory. Hector wasn't sure he could've handled it if Sheryl or Janine had shown up. Having someone else in his room was terrifying enough, but having that someone be a girl was an impossible notion to him--and realizing this after the first session, he arranged for the second to be at a burger shop instead."

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"225

Hector's time with Lance was decidedly less nerve-wracking, however. Working with metal somehow made things easier, perhaps because Hector felt it was more immediately useful. He couldn't simply take the armor that he worked on with Lance, of course, but there was something about the process of making it. Ideas arose almost involuntarily.

Even before getting started, he took inspiration from Lance's gauntlets. Replicating them from scratch was still beyond him, but he realized that he didn't have to do that. Instead, he ventured to a hardware store and purchased a pair of thin, well-fitting gloves. From there, he created an iron framework for them. Rather than making a simple coating, he began by materializing multiple rings around each finger. Then he filled in the gaps, excepting the joints, and suddenly, all of his fingers were covered with iron, yet he could still move them, just like real gauntlets. Nothing held the metal together, however, so the pieces slid right off when he put his hands to his sides.

And that was the trickiest part. He had to form tiny spikes in each piece, all with corresponding holes, so that they would interlock and

stay in place.

Then, it was only a matter of covering the forearms and the backs of his hands with metal. The palms were left bare so that he could still make a proper fist, but at that point, he looked at his work and smiled. He had actual gauntlets. They might not have been as intricate as the ones Lance made, but they were probably more comfortable thanks to the gloves. And they were functional. Mostly. Coating the forearms in iron rendered him unable to remove his hands from the gloves.

He annihilated his work and started over. Garovel told him to use it as a form of practice, to concentrate and see how quickly he could correctly form all the individual pieces. And it was far more difficult when he pressed himself for speed. Interlocking all the pieces was of course the most agonizing part. Even after hours of practice, he was still taking upwards of fifteen minutes to form everything correctly."

"226

The most valuable ideas, however, came from the actual work--seeing and experiencing the process of melting metal down and making casts for the armor. Apart from simply enjoying himself, Hector began to conceptualize the creation of his iron differently. He tried making it into a process as well. Rather than merely visualizing some iron shape in his mind, he instead visualized it being melted down from a powder and then reformed and cooled into the desired shape.

And to an extent, it actually worked. It took longer to form something, but when the iron appeared in his hand, it was a quite passable cube. He did it again with a sphere, then a pyramid, then a rectangular prism. Garovel made him try for an icosahedron, and after finding out what it looked like, Hector struggled for about half an hour before Garovel started laughing at him, at which point he gave up and flipped the reaper off.

Practical experience also seemed to help. Hector made a concentrated effort to take criminals down using mainly iron. If firearms were a factor, he made them into iron bricks first, and then went about binding the attackers' limbs. If a victim or witness was involved, then Hector escorted them to the nearest police station along with the subdued perpetrator.

Unfortunately, it did not always go smoothly. More than once, he

accidentally broke a criminal's arm or leg, even when all they had done wrong was a bit of burglary. Garovel tried to only focus on murderers, but those were not nearly as easy to find, even with the reaper's ability to see deathly auras.

'Most murders are crimes of passion after all,' said Garovel. 'And in those cases, I won't see an aura of death around the victim until maybe a minute before they die.'

'That kinda sucks, Garovel...'

'Hey, it's the best I've got.'

"227

They spent considerable time near the local police station. Garovel wanted to scour for information, and after a while, they learned of an apparent resurgence of activity in the Rofal family.

'I doubt they're talking about Geoffrey,' said Garovel. 'He doesn't seem like the very organized type.'

'Who do you think could've stepped in, then?'

'No idea. Perhaps we should follow up. I heard someone mention there being a suspected drug den a few kilometers from here.'

'Tell me where to go.'

Soon, Hector had another ten thousand troas in small bills. He considered dropping it off at a homeless shelter or some such place, but Garovel told him that stolen drug money would attract dangerous attention to whomever he gave it.

Part of him expected to see Geoffrey pop up out of nowhere again, but even after a few days of attacking various Rofal cash houses and business fronts, Hector never saw the aberration.

He did not enjoy wondering where Geoffrey was.

--++--++--

Jeremiah Colt looked over the wall of baby food another time. His cap and sunglasses hid his face pretty well, and his dark beard was finally

starting to come in.

He'd already bought diapers, baby powder, and a fresh bottle for Stephanie. Some guy with a mohawk had smacked her old one out of Colt's hand when he asked about the nearest place to find milk. Perhaps the guy was just trying to impress his friends, but when Colt saw the bottle land in a pile of dog shit, he made the guy swallow his own teeth. The guy's friends weren't very forthcoming with information, either, but Colt eventually found the local grocery store on his own, anyway.

Baby food was perhaps the trickiest part. Stephanie seemed to like applesauce, but only certain brands, and Thomas' preference still seemed completely inconsistent. Compounded with varied pricing and purported nutritional value, Colt always ended up spending a good twenty minutes trying to decide."

"228

Colt picked up a carton of milk last. He had been trying to wean the twins off baby formula and onto normal milk, as they were already thirteen months old. All the parenting message boards suggested mixing formula and milk together in order to ease the transition.

He made his way to check-out. The clerk commented on him wearing sunglasses indoors, and Colt ignored him. As he exited the building, a brisk afternoon wind caught him across the face, and he pulled up his coat's tall collar. He started walking to his motel.

The city of Delroy was not known for its impeccable weather, and the past few days had only furthered its reputation for gray, drizzling skies. Colt had come to this coastal town in hopes of finding someone who would sneak him out of the country via watercraft. So far, he had found no prospects.

Trying to get out of the country had been one problem after another. With the bounty on his head, keeping his identity a secret was almost impossible; whenever he brought out the two infants, all attempts at secrecy flew out the window. And at that point, the people whom he had approached would either refuse to help him or try to take the bounty for themselves.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, the recent chaos in the capital had

only made border patrols even stricter. Colt was starting to wonder if he would have to just stow away on a freighter or some such thing. Certainly, if he had been by himself, he would have done that already.

He reached the edge of the alley that led into the motel's rear parking lot and stopped. He peeked out from behind the corner's black-and-red brick, checking the area. Caution had kept him alive these past three weeks, and he wasn't about to forget it."

"229

Colt saw the idiots from earlier, gathered around his car and looking up at the motel.

"Hey," said Colt, a bag in each hand. "Get the fuck away from my car."

They all turned at once. Their expressions were utterly vacant and lifeless. "Aha," said the one on the right. "You look different, Mr. Colt."

This was, abruptly, much too familiar. Colt remembered these expressions from that night in the Rofal mansion, the faces of mindless puppets. And of the few people who knew his name, only two called him 'Mr. Colt.' The first was Geoffrey, and the second was Hector. And this was most definitely not Hector.

Colt scowled. "You look much more different than I do," he said.

An unnatural smile crossed the puppet's lips. "Just wait there for me," said Geoffrey. "We will have a proper reunion in a few minutes."

Colt slowly set his bags down on the wet pavement. There were three of them. Reaching his gun would require two swift motions--unzipping his coat and pulling the weapon out of its holster. This was why he didn't like underarm carrying, but these days, he couldn't very well keep it holstered at his hip for everyone to see.

He unzipped his coat, and they all lunged for him. He rolled to his right. The gun came free. The safety switched off.

One of them had Colt's leg. "Go ahead and try to run!" he said for Geoffrey. "It'll be more fun for me that way!"

Colt smashed his face in with the butt of his gun. The other two fell to a bullet each, one in the neck, one in the forehead.

He stood. There were buildings all around. No way to tell who--or what--had seen that just now. He threw the baby supplies in the back of his car and ran for the motel."

"230

Colt bounded up the outdoor staircase and unlocked the door to his room. He barged in and grabbed his sleeping children. They both awoke and stared at him curiously as he wrapped them together in the same blanket and heaved them into his arms. Combined, the children were actually quite awkward and heavy, but Colt had ample strength for the task. He shifted most of their weight onto one arm in order to free up the other for his gun.

Everything else in the room was abandoned. He hurried back down to the parking lot.

The one puppet whom Colt had not killed was back up, his smashed-in face still just as vacant amidst all the blood.

At this distance, Colt wasn't confident that he could get a headshot with only one hand, so he shot him in the chest instead. And when the guy dropped, Colt walked up and blew his brains out.

Stephanie and Thomas both started crying.

"Sorry about the noise, kiddos." He fastened them into the backseats of the car before jumping behind the wheel and driving out of the parking lot.

He got on the highway. It didn't really matter where he went, as long as it led out of the city, so he chose west. After a minute, however, he had to slow down.

Traffic was deadlocked ahead. He could see a massive pileup of vehicles and an overturned 18-wheeler.

Colt growled. He doubted the coincidence. He backed up, cars honking at him as he pushed them out of his way. Then he drove over the median in the road and started back the other direction. He exited the highway, searching for a small street out of town. Before long, he had to stop again.

A line of three police vehicles blocked the road. Six uniformed officers exited their cars in perfect unison.

Colt switched to reverse and slammed his foot on the gas pedal. Gunfire pierced the windshield, making him duck his head and squint as he turned backwards onto a side street."  
"231

A car was coming from the other direction, and Colt swerved up onto the sidewalk. He hit the brakes and pulled the wheel hard to the right. The vehicle spun back onto the street as Colt shifted to neutral and hit the gas again. He could hear the kids crying their lungs out, but he was glad for it. He didn't have time to glance back at them, and silence would've been far more worrying.

He kept going straight for several blocks. He could see people on the street who seemed normal, at least insofar as not staring blankly at him as he passed, but he could also see flashing lights in his rear-view mirror. He turned right and soon saw more flashing lights bearing down on him, so he quickly turned left again.

They were building a net around him, he knew. Or maybe they already had one. There was no telling how many people Geoffrey had after him, but the bastard had obviously come prepared.

Colt decided it was time to change tactics. A clothing outlet came up on his right, and he turned into the parking lot. He stopped in front of the entrance, exited the car, and looked over the small crowd of people. He couldn't tell if they were possessed or just confused, so he raised his gun and shot the store's giant neon sign. When they shrieked and started fleeing, he figured they were normal enough.

His pursuers entered the parking lot as Colt popped the trunk of his car. A long, black case lay inside, and he lifted it open to pull out his emergency fallback--an assault rifle mounted with an under-barrel grenade launcher, already prepped for immediate use.

The first police car stopped in front of him, and he saw Geoffrey's minions stupidly pointing their weapons at him instead of exiting first. A grenade ripped through the cabin before they could fire."  
"232 -- XXVI.



The other officers pulled up next to the smoldering vehicle, and Colt mowed them down without hesitation, giving them no chance to retaliate. In a matter of seconds, the last two cars were both riddled with bullet holes.

He paused with a smoking gun barrel, waiting to see if the puppets were really dead. After a moment, he was satisfied.

Colt slung his rifle over his shoulder and grabbed his kids. He knew this victory wouldn't last. As long as Geoffrey was alive, the minions would keep coming; or worse, Geoffrey would show up himself. In fact, the latter seemed far more likely. No doubt, this was a game to Geoffrey--it always was. Geoffrey would want to kill him personally, but not without tormenting him first.

To Colt's mind, all options were bad. Fleeing, fighting, hiding--they all ended with him and the children dead. All except one, perhaps.

He entered the clothing store, ignoring the screaming people. He shed his cap and glasses and started searching for a new coat. And then he pulled out his cellphone.

## Chapter Twenty-Six: 'Thy desperado's heart...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector shambled into his room and collapsed onto his bed. It had been a long night, and the following morning had not been much better.

Garovel had found him a triple homicide in progress, and while Hector did manage to successfully prevent any deaths, the intended victims never realized they were in danger to begin with. So instead of being grateful, they thought Hector was some kind of blood-soaked monster, and thus, he had to spend a few extra hours evading and hiding from the police.

By the time he made it home, he had already missed the school bus. He intended to just skip, but one of his friends decided to pay him a morning visit. Apparently, Nathan lived quite close by and wanted to offer Hector a ride."

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"233

Hector thought about simply refusing Nathan's offer--Garovel even gave permission--but he couldn't bring himself to. He worried what his new group of friends thought of him, what with how he always made it difficult for them to help him with anything. So he went to school.

But before even his first class finished, Hector had to leave again. Garovel had found him a nice, heaping plate of early morning gang violence--and not even that far away from Calman High, either.

It was a group of ten or so guys, all pretty young, and masked with scarves and hoodies. They'd been raiding a rundown apartment complex, terrorizing the residents with knives and handguns. Without incurring injury, Hector bound them all in iron and stole their weapons. An elderly tenant offered him an apple pie. He quietly refused, of course.

Garovel was quick to find more people in distress. There had been a spike in violent crime over the past couple days. The police largely attributed it to the Rofals, but they also seemed keen to blame Hector, even if they couldn't determine how just yet.

And now, having not slept more than a total of four hours in the past three days, Hector finally lay in bed again. It was the middle of the day, but the nights tended to need him more, anyway.

Through the growing fog that was his fatigue, he could still feel faintly wondrous at the lack of pain throughout his body. It was a welcome change, to say the least, though he did not expect it to remain that way for very long.

Sleep was a warm cloud, unconscious bliss. And then a voice broke through.

‘Hector, wake up. Your cellphone is beeping.’

His eyes slit open. “Cellphone...? Who would be--?” He sat up.”  
"234

Hector rummaged through his bag until he found it--the burner phone Colt had given him. At Garovel’s behest, he hadn’t taken it with him to Sescoria. The reaper had posited that if Colt were to call while they were in the capital, then there would be nothing Hector could do about it; therefore, it was better to leave it here in Brighton, where it would not get destroyed if things went badly. Certainly, one of the reaper’s more prophetic suggestions. Garovel had to remind him to recharge it as soon as he had returned home.

There was a single text message, received less than two minutes ago. Hector read it.

He immediately grabbed his bag and bolted out the door.

--++--++--

Another row of cars blocked the way, and Colt was forced to turn again. Nearly an hour had passed since the clothing store, and he had been drawn into a losing game of cat and mouse. Much as he tried to find a way around, the minions were slowly forcing him toward the port.

He knew their plan, but there wasn’t much to be done about it. They obviously wanted to corner him against the water, where he would have nowhere left to run unless he intended to commandeer a boat; but if that were even an option, it would probably just be an even worse trap.

Colt just wanted to buy time for Hector. Delroy was nearly two hours away from Brighton. The kid had texted him back, but Colt hadn't found the opportunity to stop and read it, much less reply. His hands were busy trying to prevent a car crash as he weaved his way through the streets.

He could often see a silver-white car in the rear-view mirror, along with a big, red hand waving hello from out of the driver's side window. Colt would lose him, only to see the car reappear a few minutes later.

At length, he ran out of road. The Gulf of Emerson filled the horizon, and only a long shipyard lay between Colt and the turbulent waters."

"235

Colt drove onto a footpath. Dock workers lined the water, hoisting crates and tanks up via pulley. They yelled at him as he passed, and he spared them a couple gunshots--not hitting them, just getting them to flee.

He looked for an area without people. He saw an empty cruise liner and decided to abandon his car in front of it. Hopping the rope and running up the stepped path, he found the entrance shut, so he riddled it with bullet holes and kicked it open.

"Mr. Colt!" came Geoffrey's not-so-distant voice. "Where are you running, Mr. Colt?! Isn't it about time we brought this little chase to an end?!"

Colt knew Geoffrey was right. He was out of options. Even if he could somehow steal the boat, it sounded like Geoffrey was already on board. Colt ran for the bow of the ship.

Rows of chairs and small tables surrounded a covered pool. Colt approached the edge of the ship and climbed up over the guard rail. The waters must've been a good ten meters below him, and the way they crashed against the hull certainly did not look inviting.

He gathered his courage and jumped.

And he stopped in midair. Pain exploded throughout his body. The red shadow had pierced his chest and leg, holding him in place.

“No, no,” said Geoffrey, turning Colt around to face him. “Let’s not turn this into a swimming competition, Mr. Colt. That would be so tedious.”

The pain was worst in his chest. Colt could feel the shadow there, tearing through muscle and bone, coiling around his heart. He screamed, and the shadow wrapped around his mouth, too.

“Shh. Come on, Mr. Colt. I need you to listen. You can still hear me, can’t you?”

He struggled, tasting blood in his mouth. The pain was maddening, but he was determined to keep his focus until the end. With his right hand, he could still feel his rifle.”

”236

“By the way--” The red shadow expanded out, much larger than Colt had ever seen, and shot back behind Geoffrey, disappearing over the side of the ship. After a moment, it returned. With Colt’s car. “I believe you forgot this.”

Colt’s eyes widened at the sight of the vehicle there, held in place as if stuck in a crimson tree.

Geoffrey smiled. “And I must say, Mr. Colt. I am surprised at you. Pleasantly surprised. You left your children in your car, didn’t you? Were you hoping they would distract me long enough to let you get away?”

The red broke through the car door and filled the backseat. It pulled out the bundled blanket, holding it up to see. The blanket flapped open. There were no children inside.

It took Geoffrey a moment to process, confused blinking turning to abrupt rage. He glared at Colt. “What did you do with them?!”

And Geoffrey caught a grenade with his face. The explosion knocked him back, making him release both Colt and the car at once.

A gaping hole in his chest, Colt still managed a bloody smile as he fell into the rolling waves.

--++--++--

Geoffrey scowled through the smoke as it cleared. He ran up to the guard rail and looked out. He couldn't see the man in the water.

Ozmere and Moss approached from behind.

'What happened?' the reaper asked. 'Did you get him?'

The anger dissipated from Geoffrey's face and became a frown. "I did get him, yes." He brought down one of the red tendrils. Colt's coat hung from it, dripping with blood. Geoffrey peeled back the cloth to reveal the man's still-beating heart. "But he was not supposed to die that quickly. I wanted to torture him much more, first."

'Aww. I'm sorry.'

"And he hid his children from me, too! How did he do that?! I was going to make him watch them die! But no! Mr. Colt, you were a real bastard!"

"237

'Well, at least you got to kill him,' said Ozmere. 'He was a wanted man, right? Imagine if someone else had gotten him before you.'

Geoffrey just pouted.

Ozmere frowned as well. 'I suppose I could go find the body, if you want, but we really should be leaving now. You've made quite the stir here. We need to get you back to Sescoria where Abolish can protect you.'

"Really? But I was holding back. I only killed a few dozen people."

'Yes, but that is more than enough to make national news. And if it makes international news, then the Vanguard's aberration hunters will definitely come to investigate.'

"Well, if that is the case, then I might as well just devour the entire city before they get here. There are at least a hundred thousand people in this city, right? That should make me quite strong, yes?"

'No! If you do that, they'll send their very best warriors! Which would ruin all of our plans for Atreya!'

“Bah. Fine then.”

‘If you want to eat an entire city, then we’ll arrange that for you somewhere safer.’

“Mm, okay. Oh, but before that, I need to go back to Brighton and tell my grandpa that I will be leaving with you.”

‘Your grandfather, huh? What’s he like?’

“He has a reaper, too, actually. Why don’t you come with me to meet him? He is a lot of fun. I am sure you would like him.”

‘Hmm. Alright. Lead the way.’

--++--++--

Hector pulled into the parking lot and hopped off the bike. He eyed the address on the far corner of the building and double-checked Colt’s text message:

delroy. 8133 sampson st. life/death. keep them safe

He left the engine running and ran inside the outlet store. Garovel followed."

"238

The place was a mess. Toppled shelves and scattered clothing riddled the floor. Hector stopped in the center aisle, looking around. ‘I don’t see anyone.’

Garovel floated ahead of him. ‘There was obviously a struggle here. Did everyone run away? You’d think there’d at least be police officers here.’

“Wait...” Hector heard a faint squeal. A baby. He followed the sound to the back of the store.

Two shelves had been pushed together, leaving only a small crack between them. Hector pulled them apart to see the twins there.

‘He really left them here for you...’



"I'm afraid of what that could mean..." Hector took them in his arms. They started crying louder as he carried them back out to the motorcycle.

'What do you want to do with them?'

"Uh..." Hector eyed the bike again. "First things first... how the hell do I carry them both on a motorcycle?"

'Make yourself an iron carriage around your chest.'

He sat on the bike with both arms full, and then did as Garovel suggested. The metal formed from his back, grew around his torso, and gradually enveloped the children, freeing up Hector's arms.

They didn't like it and kicked against the metal, so he expanded it out a bit, giving them slightly more space. They had enough room to move their arms and legs a bit, but their bodies fit snugly into place. Then he added a pair of tiny iron helmets, as well as caps for their knees and elbows.

He pulled out of the parking lot again and started back the way he had come.

'You're going to take them home with you?'

'What else can I do?'

'Hmm.' Garovel paused. 'I suppose that will be fine for a few days. But is that a long-term solution? We don't know if Colt will be coming back for them.'

'Well... I don't know... but he asked me to keep them safe, so...'"

"239 -- XXVII.

Garovel gave a nod. 'I suppose that's all that matters at the moment.'

Hector didn't get on the highway yet. It had been blocked on the way into the city, and he doubted it had been cleared already. Instead, he followed the street beyond the city limits and waited until he saw the open country before getting on the larger road.

The kids took a while to adjust to the ride, crying for a good half hour

before settling down.

‘Do you, um... do you think this was Geoffrey’s doing?’

Garovel was slow to answer. ‘That might explain why we haven’t seen him in Brighton. But you’d think Colt would have mentioned Geoffrey in his text.’

‘I don’t think he had much time, seeing as he never replied. And... if it was Geoffrey, then Colt might’ve been worried that I’d go after him instead of getting the kids to safety...’

‘Hmm.’

With a clear, open road ahead of him and a setting sun over the horizon, Hector eyed the children another time. They both stared back at him, chubby-cheeked and curious.

Hector frowned inside his riding helmet. ‘Garovel... what the hell are we gonna do...?’

--++--++--

“Hello.”

“...Agh? Hmm? What’s happening?”

“Easy there. You’ve had a rough day.”

“Where am I? Who are you?”

“You’re dead. My name is Bohwanox. And there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven: ‘O, implacable father...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Colt opened his eyes. Dark waters greeted him. As did a shark, its teeth already digging into his chest.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Bohwanox, touching Colt’s shoulder. ‘The current carried you into shark-infested waters, by the way.’

Colt would have yelled at the reaper if he could. Burning aches shot through his body, regrowing muscle, restoring flesh faster than the

shark could tear it away. He punched the fish in the nose. It released him but didn't flee, and after a moment, it lunged for him again. He kicked the beast with all the strength he could muster, and it torpedoed into the murky blackness."

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"240

Colt swam up to the water’s surface, where things were no calmer. Waves kicked him up and tossed him around like a pool toy.

‘If you want to talk to me, then just think the words inside your head,’ said Bohwanox.

‘Gah! Fuck you!’

‘Good job. Also, there’s another shark behind you.’

Colt could barely turn in time to see the dorsal fin disappear. He couldn’t feel the jaws clamp down on his leg, but getting dragged back under was informative enough.

He sent the shark flying out of the water. ‘I don’t have time for this shit!’

‘Are your children still safe?’

‘Hopefully, yeah. They should be with Hector, unless something went

wrong.'

'Ah! Hector, huh? That's good, then. I had to keep my distance while Geoffrey was chasing you, but Hector is the reason I was keeping tabs on you in the first place.'

'Hey, which way's the shore?'

Bohwanox pointed.

The reaper was clear as day to him, even in the nightly waters. Light seemed to make no difference, despite the fact that Bohwanox was an already dark figure. To Colt's eyes, the reaper seemed not to have a face, being entirely obscured by a pitch black cloak. Even the hands and feet were hidden.

Colt started swimming, staying under the waves. The current fought him, but he plowed through. 'So Hector is your servant, too, is that it?'

'No, no. Reapers can only have one servant. Hector's reaper is named Garovel.'

'Hmm. I guess now I know where the kid's inhuman power comes from.'

'Indeed. And you're quite fortunate, by the way. If Geoffrey had consumed your soul, I wouldn't have been able to resurrect you. I was just going to leave and tell Hector what happened until I saw that your soul was still intact.'

"241

Yet another shark drew close, and Colt punched it back into the darkness. 'Well. I am grateful to you, just so it's clear.'

'Don't be,' said Bohwanox. 'That's not why I revived you.'

--++--++--

'Nice place you got here,' said Ozmere. Moss followed close behind as usual, marveling silently at the mansion's spacious corridors and ornate woodwork.

"Thank you." Geoffrey had kept Colt's heart and coat both. Even if the whole affair had proved a disappointment, he could at least expand his

collection of souvenirs.

He was a bit surprised to see the mansion's halls full of people again. He hadn't even been gone a week, but apparently, his grandfather had been busy. Most of the people were obviously new hires, as they did not scurry out of his way whenever they saw him coming. One of the lackeys even bumped into him. The guy made a face, as if about to say something quite rude, but when he saw Moss's hulking form stop behind Geoffrey, the mook seemed to think better of it and apologized instead.

The three of them found Damian and Feromas in the main study.

"Hello, Grandpa!"

"Hello, Grandson!" Damian returned a smile, which waned as he saw Geoffrey's guests. "And who are they?"

"My friends! Ozmere and Moss. They're from Abolish! Neat, huh? I am going to go with them so that they can help me get stronger. There are a lot more members in Sescoria, too! Ozmere said they would feed an entire town to me. Can you imagine that? An entire town!"

Abruptly, Geoffrey noticed the tension in the room. Damian's face held none of its earlier mirth, and Ozmere's expression was one of confusion. Even Moss had become attentive, and for a time, no one said anything.

Feromas broke the silence. 'Dozer or Morgunov?'

Ozmere hesitated. 'Morgunov.'

More silence."

"242

Geoffrey looked between everyone again. "Why did you all go quiet?"

'Because your friend Ozmere recognizes me,' said Feromas. 'Isn't that right?'

'You are Feromas...'

'I am.'

‘And is this...?’

‘His name is Damian Rofal, now. But he is the same servant, yes.’

Ozmere floated back toward the door, and Moss stepped in front of him. ‘L-look,’ the reaper said, ‘I have nothing but the greatest respect for someone of your caliber. We have no quarrel with you.’

“That’s too bad,” said Damian.

‘No, please! St--!’

Damian raised a hand. There came a sudden flash and a great crunch as Ozmere and Moss were both obliterated.

Wide-eyed, Geoffrey could see the air visibly distorted in the spaces where their bodies used to be. A shockwave passed over Geoffrey as the air refilled the vacuum, and all that remained was a thin vapor. After a moment, that too disappeared.

It took Geoffrey a second to even begin understanding what had happened. “Grandpa, what the hell?!”

“I’m sorry, Geoffrey. I know they were your friends. I should have told you before not to bring any members of Abolish here.”

“Why did you kill them?!”

‘Because no one can know that Damian and I are still alive,’ said Feromas.

Geoffrey eyed the empty space again. “But! What did you even do to them?!”

“I reduced them to little more than dust particles,” said Damian.

“Though, I suppose in the reaper’s case, there is genuinely no trace left, as there was no body mass in the first place.”

Geoffrey just stared at him.

“If you like, I don’t mind you going to Sescoria to play with the other members of Abolish,” the old man said, “but they can never know of what happened here. In fact, don’t even tell them that you have a grandfather.””

‘But it may be difficult to explain why those two never returned,’ said Feromas. ‘Perhaps it would be better if Geoffrey simply stayed in Brighton with us.’

Damian gave a shrug. “Eh. Geoffrey can do what he likes. He’s old enough to make his own decisions now.”

“Grandpa, who are you, exactly? Why were they so afraid of you?”

Feromas answered before Damian could. ‘No offense, Geoffrey, but you don’t seem very good at keeping secrets. I think you already know more than enough.’

“And besides,” Damian added, “the porcupines would be upset if I told you their baking recipes. Very stingy creatures, they are.”

Geoffrey blinked dully.

‘Well, at least he’s lucid when it matters.’

Sour-faced, Geoffrey left them alone. He returned to his room and tossed his keepsakes of Colt on a bedside table. When the coat hit wood, however, it made a hard sound, harder than mere cloth should have made. He rifled through its deep pockets and soon found a variety of objects. A few coins, some spare bullets, bubblegum, a handkerchief, a granola bar, a flick knife.

And a cellphone.

--++--++--

Hector ended up getting pulled over by a highway trooper on the way back to Brighton. After taking a moment to absorb the sight of the motorcycle and helmeted person with two babies wrapped in metal, the uniformed officer seemed to have difficulty explaining precisely how illegal and stupid the whole thing was.

Hector, of course, was even worse at explaining his circumstances--not that there was any way he could have talked his way out of it. At length, he made the officer’s gun an iron paperweight, broke through his handcuffs, and apologetically destroyed the radio in the trooper’s car.



Garovel suggested he slash the vehicle's tires as well and then call a tow truck for the guy, but Hector thought that would be overkill. Disarmed and without backup, the trooper did not seem particularly interested in pursuing him any farther, so Hector let him be and rode off toward Brighton again."

"244

As he neared his house, Hector kept trying to think of how he would explain the children to his parents. He considered trying to sneak them in, but that didn't strike him as very practical, considering the kids could simply cry and alert his parents at any time.

He left the motorcycle in the cemetery again and carried the children to the house in his arms.

When he entered, he found his parents in the den. His mother was sleeping against his father's shoulder. The man saw him and the children, and Hector could see the thought process taking place on his father's face.

The man gently woke his wife. They stood and approached him together. "Hector," his father said, "why do you have two babies in your arms?"

'You got this under control?' Garovel asked.

'We'll see,' thought Hector. "A friend of mine is having, uh... kind of a... a family emergency. He needed someone to look after his kids. And, um. I'm sorta the only person he could rely on..."

His mother cocked an eyebrow. "Who is this friend?"

"He's a cop..."

"A cop?" she said. "How did you become friends with a cop?"

"Ah... a school program thing. He and some others were doing... like a... seminar type thing..."

His father folded his arms. "And that was enough for him to entrust you with his children, was it?"

"I, uh... well, I sorta got more involved than the other kids did. Visited

the police station and... yeah.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “And what sort of family emergency are we talking about here?”

“I’m not completely sure about that, myself... but he needed my help, so...”

“How long does he want you to look after them?” his father asked.

“Uh... a few days, maybe? That’s sorta unclear, too...”

Samuel and Vanessa Goffe exchanged looks. Then they both eyed the children another time.”

"245

His mother frowned. “Are you sure this friend of yours didn’t just abandon these children?”

“...He’d die before doing that.”

She raised a doubtful eyebrow. She put her hand up to the baby girl, who grabbed it. Smirking, she looked at Hector again. “Where are the supplies?”

“What?”

“The baby supplies. Surely, your friend gave you a bag. Bottles? Powder? Diapers, at least?”

“Uh... um...”

“Ugh, wow. Okay. Looks like I’m making a trip to the store tonight.”

Hector blinked. “Ah--I’ll take care of it... It’s my responsibility.”

“Pfft,” said Vanessa. “What does a sixteen-year-old know about taking care of a baby?” She grabbed her coat by the door. “I’ll go get the essentials. Back in a jiffy.” She kissed her husband and was out the door.

“I’ll make some little beds for them,” his father said. “Won’t exactly be a crib, but it should suffice for the time being.”

“Uh, but--you don’t have to do that--”

“Oh, they’re still sleeping in your room. Don’t you worry about that. You can handle the midnight crying and feeding, thanks.”

Hector followed him to a hallway closet, where the man retrieved a set of fresh blankets. And with a pair of large laundry baskets, the beds were complete.

“This cop friend of yours must trust you a lot.”

“Y-yeah.”

“There’s really no one else, huh?”

“No...”

In his room, they found a nice spot by the foot of the bed. And as they placed the children in their new beds, Hector saw a gentler expression on his father’s face than he could ever recall.

“...Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Um... w-what was I like? As a baby, I mean.”

“Oh, you were horrible,” he said. “Cried all the time. Couldn’t take you anywhere without making a scene. Really picky eater, too. Annoyed the hell out of your mother.”

“Oh... s-sorry.””

"246

“Eh, don’t be,” said Samuel. “Bothersome as you were, it was still kind of fun, in a strange way. And besides, you really mellowed out after you turned two or so. It got a bit boring then, actually.”

“Boring?”

“Yeah. Potty training you was a breeze. Same with teaching you to dress yourself and tie your shoes. Never made a fuss about your food anymore.”

“Y-you wanted me to be more difficult...?”

“I don’t know about that. Boring can be a good thing.” He started back for the door.

Hector frowned. He had another question, and he had to struggle to get it out. “Dad, uh... why didn’t you and mom have any other kids?”

He turned and tilted his head. “What’s with all the sudden questions?”

“I, ah... just... I don’t know, uh...”

The man took a moment to scratch his cheek. He eyed Hector again. “No big reason. Neither of us loved the idea of having more kids, and your mother really hated being pregnant.”

“But... you both... I mean, just now, with the babies... you both seemed like you were kinda... enjoying yourselves.”

“Not sure what gave you that impression.”

“I... ah...”

“You shouldn’t try to read so much into things, Hector. You’ll drive yourself crazy.”

And his father left.

Hector gave a quiet sigh. He exchanged glances with Garovel, who looked as if he had something to say but remained silent.

Alone again, he watched the kids sleep for a bit before deciding that he should make use of his downtime. He wasn’t about to leave the children unattended, but there was something he had been meaning to practice with his iron.

He sat in the middle of the floor and made an elongated chunk of metal. He gave it a pointed tip, and suddenly it was a dagger, though still very primitive. But that wasn’t his goal.”

"247

Hector focused his mind, felt his soul there, and pushed it into the iron. “Garovel,” he said. “Come here for a second.”

The reaper floated over, and Hector poked him with the tip of the blade. Garovel flinched. 'Hey. Careful with that thing.'

"Aha. It really works..."

'Congratulations. Now stop stabbing me.'

"Stay there for a minute. There's something else I need to try." He scooted away and sat on his bed.

'How did I become your guinea pig?'

"Just don't move..."

'I liked it better when you were terrified of hurting me.'

He tossed the dagger. It phased through the reaper with no effect. "Bah..."

'Hmm.'

"So... I can focus the iron with imaginary strength like it's an extension of my body... but only if I'm touching it, apparently..."

'I see. You wanna be able to focus iron at a distance, the same way that you can create it at a distance.'

"Yeah. Then I could throw things that'll hurt reapers. Or trap them in cages, maybe."

'You and I aren't synced enough, but that's definitely possible.'

"Good to know at least... because if I can't do that, then... I don't know how I'll ever manage to catch an enemy reaper. You guys always stay out of reach... and even when you do get close, you're so damn quick..."

'True. That was the whole problem in Sescoria. But it'll be a while before you can pull that off. Projecting your soul will require significantly more control than you currently have.'

"And you said before... there's no way to speed up the syncing process?"

'Correct.'

He practiced with iron a while longer, until he heard his mother return. She showed him how to change a diaper, and he made sure the children were fed before putting them back to bed."

"248

Hector thought about asking his mother the same questions that he'd asked his father, but that seemed wrong, somehow, like subjecting them to some kind of secret test. Then again, it was also frightening, the idea that she might answer differently. He honestly wasn't sure he wanted to know if his father had been lying in some way.

So he stayed quiet. And soon enough, his mother was gone again.

His eyes fell upon the children another time. "Garovel... what do you think I should do with them?"

'Tough to say, really. We don't know if it's even safe to put them into foster care. Presumably, Colt would've done that if he thought it was best for them, but who knows?'

Hector frowned. "We're lacking in information again..."

'Yes, we are. I suppose that means we shouldn't make any hasty decisions, then.'

"But... sooner or later..."

'Yeah. You've bought yourself a few days, as far as your parents are concerned. For now, I think the only thing we can really do is wait. Hopefully, Colt will get back to you soon.'

"I guess so..."

'But it's worth thinking about what we'll do if Colt never comes for them.'

"Hmm..."

'The way I see it, we will essentially have three options. Option one: we put them into foster care. Obviously, that could be dangerous, but even if we can't eliminate the danger, then we could at least mitigate it by placing them in different homes.'

“Wha? Separate them?”

‘I know it’s not exactly ideal. But twins suddenly showing up in the system is a dead give away to anyone who’s looking. It would be far safer for them if we split them up.’

“I don’t like that option at all...”

‘Fair enough. Option two: we find them a new family on our own.’

Hector gave the reaper a slanted look. “How the hell...? That sounds impossible.””

"249 -- XXVIII.

‘Maybe it IS impossible,’ said Garovel. ‘Obviously, a good family wouldn’t just take them without asking any questions. Maybe we could explain somehow or find some other way to pull it off, but... at the moment, nothing springs to mind.’

“Ugh, geez... and what’s the third option?”

As Garovel was about to answer, however, Hector’s phone began beeping. It sat inside the coat on his desk, and they both turned to look at it there.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: ‘Beware thy shadow...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector checked the messages. The conversation read:

unknown\_sender: delroy. 8133 sampson st. life/death. keep them safe

user: r u ok?

user: what happened?

unknown\_sender: im fine do u have the kids?

“He actually answered,” said Hector.

‘That’s a relief. Ask him what happened again.’

Hector did so. They didn’t have to wait long for the reply.

a lot. easier to explain in person. lets meet up asap

“Hmm.” He showed the message to Garovel.

‘There’s no reason to tell him where you live. Pick somewhere else.’

“The cemetery?”

‘Eh, that’s too close. You know that park west of here? About two kilometers or so?’

“Uh... Nelson Park, right?”

‘Yeah.’

“Okay...” He sent the message.

ok heading there now

Hector’s brow receded. “In the middle of the night...? Geez. I guess he’s eager to get his kids back. I suppose I would be, too, if I were him...”

He wasn’t sure if he should sneak out through the window. It seemed like a bad idea with two babies in his arms. He knew his parents both had early starts in the morning, especially his mother, so he checked downstairs and was relieved to find that they had both gone to bed already.

He slipped out through the front door with the children, bringing the baby supplies just in case. As he approached the motorcycle, he made a fresh iron carriage for them."

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"250

Hector soon arrived at Nelson Park. He saw no one immediately around, save a young couple walking by the entrance and an occasional passing car.

"It's pretty dark," said Hector. "You mind helping me find him from the sky?"

'Sure thing.' Garovel flew above the trees, which were dense enough that Hector had trouble following where the reaper had gone.

'But, uh... stay in my line of sight, please...'

'Yes, Mother.'

Hector moved toward the center of the park, where there was a manmade pond with a small fountain. He stopped under a tall lamp along the main footpath, but he decided not to sit on the bench there.

'Hmm,' Garovel said after a few minutes. 'I don't see him. Do you?'

'No. Guess we're waiting...'

--++--++--

Nestled behind a tall air vent on the roof of an apartment complex, Geoffrey found his spot. It was rather far, but he could see practically

the whole park from here. He pointed his binoculars at the moving glimmer in the sky, and he saw the reaper. Hector's reaper.

Geoffrey grinned. "Aha. I thought it might be you two who helped Mr. Colt." He panned down across the park. "Now where is Hector...?"

He saw the dark figure below a streetlamp. Geoffrey touched the sore lump on his chest. It was no more than an occasional nuisance, so he had never bothered to get it looked at by a doctor, contrary to Desmond's wishes. Rather, Geoffrey enjoyed the feeling, enjoyed how it reminded him of Hector--his very special friend.

Honestly, he wasn't sure if he even wanted to kill Hector. Thinking about all the potential hostilities that they could have, the violent clashes and innocent casualties and long sessions of torture, Geoffrey couldn't help but smile. Hector seemed like someone who could amuse him for a very long time."

"251

But at the same time, Geoffrey knew that he could not let things draw out too much. There was one insurmountable obstacle that would surely end all the fun sooner or later. His grandfather.

Damian was rebuilding the family business. Hector was an active hindrance to that effort. Their clash seemed inevitable. And obviously, stopping Damian was no kind of option. So the more he thought about it, the more Geoffrey realized that even if he didn't exactly want Hector dead, he certainly didn't want someone else to get the kill. That was, after all, why he had told Feromas and Damian nothing before coming here. If Hector had to die, then Geoffrey had to be the one responsible for it. Simple as that.

He saw Hector pull out a cellphone and begin texting. Colt's phone started beeping soon after. The message read:

where r u?

Geoffrey thought a moment and then wrote back:

sry. cant make it. reschedule for tmrw?

There was a long pause. He returned to watching the reaper as his patience began to wear thin, and then Hector's next message read:

fine. but tell me what happened

Geoffrey pursed his lips as he considered what to write next. "Ah, here we go..." He wrote:

geoffrey attacked me but i got away. hiding from cops now

He laughed to himself. "And people think I'm not smart."

Hector sent one more text, suggesting they meet back up in the afternoon, to which Geoffrey agreed, and then Geoffrey watched them leave the park. Hector was too difficult to follow in the darkness, but the reaper was clear as day.

Geoffrey kept his distance, bounding between rooftops, splashes of red carrying him along as he maintained his view. And it wasn't long before he saw the reaper slow. He looked through his binoculars again and watched the reaper disappear into a two-story house.

"So that is where you live," said Geoffrey. "Interesting."  
"252

For a while, Geoffrey merely sat and watched the house.

"What should I do?" he mused. "Hmm. I do not want to just rush right to the good part. It has to be something special. Obviously, I need to make him watch his reaper die, but what else? Umm... oh! The children! Of course the children! I couldn't make Mr. Colt watch them die, so I can make Hector watch, instead!"

Geoffrey furrowed his brow and folded his arms. "But wait. He is much stronger than Mr. Colt. Removing the children from his possession without killing him first could prove difficult... Maybe if I lure him away from the house...? Well, let me think. It is the middle of the night... and he is rather protective... How can I get him to leave without taking the

children with him? Hmm..."

-+-+--+

Back in his room, Hector sat practicing with metal, trying to improve his speed in the creation of gauntlets again. He'd found an old stopwatch and decided to time himself. After a few attempts, he discovered that he had managed to shave a whole second off the process.

"Only another fourteen and a half minutes to go," he mumbled.

He was about to give it another try when a distant pop interrupted him. A small tremor passed through the room, and the light from his desk lamp flickered and died.

"What was that?"

'An explosion, if I'm not mistaken.' Garovel flew up through the ceiling.

Hector waited in the dark. 'The power isn't coming back on...'

'It's not just your house. Several blocks just went completely dark. I think we can assume the blast came from the power plant.'

'What do you want me to do? Should I go check it out?'

'I'm thinking so, yeah.'"

"253

Hector looked at the twins in the darkness, still asleep in their makeshift beds. 'But... what about the children?'

'Do you think you should stay?'

His expression strained. 'I don't know... people could be hurt out there, right? Trapped under rubble or something?'

'That they could.'

He stood and ran a hand across his face as he started pacing across the room. 'What do I do? If someone's dying over there, and I could-- agh--but I just--!'

'Take the kids with you.'

He watched Garovel float back down through the ceiling. 'What?!'

'You could be gone for hours, depending on how things go. Shouldn't leave babies unattended for that long.'

'But it's fucking dangerous!'

'You'll keep them safe.'

He was incredulous. 'You can't know that! What if I fuck things up again?!'

'Hector,' said Garovel. 'I know you still lack confidence, but there is no doubt in my mind that you will protect them. Need I remind you of all the people you've already saved?'

He looked at the floor and frowned.

'I do need to? Okay, well, let's see. There's Bohwanox, me, Colt, these same children, me again, those people from the apartment complex the other day, Lynn, Roman, Mehlsanz, the fucking Queen of Atreya, me a third time--oh, and that girl from your first night as my servant, remember her? Come on, there are so many that I can't even remember them all. And guess what? You're stronger now than you've ever been.'

'I... ah... but if they get hurt...'

'They'll always be in danger of getting hurt. But right now, one of the safest places they can be is by your side. Just don't use them to reflect bullets, and I think they'll be fine.'

Hector was silent.

Garovel waited, and then said, 'How about I go scout out the situation first, then?'

He looked up. 'N-no. I don't want you going anywhere without me, either.'

'I'll be careful.' The reaper moved toward the wall.

'No, you're right. I'll... I'll keep the kids safe... and I'll keep you safe, too.'"

'Then let's hurry,' said Garovel.

Hector gathered up the children.

--++--++--

Walking all the way back to the motel from the port had been irritatingly slow. He'd wanted to just steal a car--as apparently Geoffrey had thrown Colt's into the water--but Bohwanox wouldn't allow it.

Yellow tape lined the parking lot, but after waiting for the last squad car to leave for the night, Colt was relieved to discover that his room had not been ransacked by the police. His money, clothes, and travel supplies were all safe.

'I suppose this means the cops weren't able to identify you,' said Bohwanox.

"Could be that someone heard gunshots but no one actually saw me." Colt exchanged his torn shirt and pants for fresh ones, finding a lone shark tooth in the collar as he threw the old clothes away. "That, or the cops here are just stupid--which is honestly more probable."

'I thought you'd think more highly of the police.'

"Not in this fucking country." He gathered his things and headed back outside.

'Then why did you even bother becoming a police officer in the first place?'

'Because I thought I could be useful,' said Colt. It was the dead of night, so almost no one else was on the street, but he decided to keep their conversation quiet anyway. 'Tried the military for a while, but it was all training and bullshit. Had to spend all my time with a bunch of dumbasses, and we never even left the country. Got back to Brighton, which was up to its eyeballs in criminal shit, and the law was doing absolutely everything it could to help the assholes get away with it. So I started using the law to fuck them over every chance I got.'

'And that's when the Rofals took notice?'"

Colt raised an eyebrow. 'You know about that, huh? How long have you been following me, anyway?'

'Since Hector helped you and your kids escape from that underground mansion.'

'I see.'

The reaper tilted his shadowed face at him. 'You don't strike me as the type of person who wants to improve society. No offense.'

'I am not a good man,' said Colt. 'A good man would regret a lot of the things I've done, I think. But I've known good people. Or at least, people who deserved a lot better than what they got. And I figured that I could do things that good people can't.'

'Things, huh? Care to elaborate?' said Bohwanox.

'No.'

'We are going to be spending a lot of time together. It would be best if we learned to get along.'

'I think we'll get along just fine without knowing every little thing about each other.'

'You're not curious about me, then?'

'Tell me whatever you want. I'm not stopping you.'

'Hmm. So you'd prefer a business-like relationship.'

'Hell yes.'

Bohwanox paused. 'I'm okay with that. As long as you don't disobey me.'

'Fine.' Colt stopped, looked around the open street, and then eyed Bohwanox another time. 'Look, I know you're against it, but I really need to steal a car if I wanna make it all the way back to Brighton by morning. How about if I steal it from someone who deserves it?'

'I suppose that would be okay. But can you actually find someone like



that?’

An hour later, he had a car. Annoyingly, Bohwanox made him drive the drunken idiot home first.

Next, Colt found a pay phone.

‘Calling Hector?’

‘Yeah. I memorized his number in case of emergencies.’

‘Quite prepared, aren’t you?’

‘Not enough, obviously.’ He listened to it ring.

A few beats passed. ‘He’s not picking up,’ said Bohwanox.”  
"256 -- XXIX.

‘The kid’s probably just busy.’ Colt hung up and scratched his beard, eyeing the phone up and down. ‘Bah. This thing doesn’t have SMS. I gotta find another cellphone so I can text him.’

‘How long is that going to take?’

Colt abruptly noticed the mobile phone store at the far end of the street. ‘Couple minutes, I’m guessing.’

Chapter Twenty-Nine: ‘Forth unto ruin...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector pulled the motorcycle around a corner and shut the engine off. From afar, he could see floodlights lining the street, trying to light up the otherwise pitch dark rubble. Teams of emergency services already surrounded the collapsed building.

Garovel proceeded on while Hector waited beyond the police officers’ line of sight.

‘Maybe I should go with you,’ said Hector. ‘For all we know, Geoffrey could be in there.’

‘He’s not,’ said Garovel. ‘If he were that close, I’d be able to sense his presence.’

'You're sure?'

'Sure as I can be. If I scream for help, come save me.'

'Gah...'

'Relax. I'll be cautious.'

Before silence could return, however, he realized that his phone was beeping. He reached around the children attached to his torso and read the message:

r they safe?

"What the...?" He squinted through his helm. The ID of the sender was different from the one earlier. Hector asked why and waited for the response.

new phone. r they safe? lets meet

Hector's face scrunched up. He could chalk the repeated safety question up to fatherly concern, but he couldn't understand why Colt suddenly wanted to reschedule again. Garovel interrupted his train of thought, however.

'Hector, there's someone trapped in here.'

'Shit.' He forewent his questions for Colt and simply typed the address of the power station into the phone.

And Garovel was suddenly there in front of him again, reaching for his shoulder. 'Follow me. I don't think the rescue team will find him in time.'

He started running as he hit send. 'Okay.'

"256 -- XXIX.

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"257

The kids fit tightly enough into their iron carriage that they did not jostle as Hector headed toward the police line. The uniformed officers saw him spring out of the darkness and bound over the hood of a vehicle. He could hear them radioing it in but paid them no mind.

Aside from a few blown out windows, the front of the building was still more or less intact, but the inside was another story. A team of rescuers with shovels and hatchets spotted Hector immediately. They shouted at him, but he didn't stop to chat. He followed Garovel through a side room and down a flight of concrete stairs.

Halfway to the basement, however, he found the narrow staircase blocked.

'It's safe to punch your way through,' Garovel said from the other side.

Hector made an iron bubble around his torso, ensuring the children were completely enveloped. He reached into the rubble with metal hands and ripped open a path for himself. Splintered wood, crushed plaster, and torn metal all tumbled down the steps, and he kicked it out

of his way as he reached the basement floor. He opened the iron bubble again to make sure the children had air.

‘This way.’

He passed through a corridor and then two more rooms, seeing holes in the ceiling and huge cracks in the walls. The floor trembled, and he had to stop running for a moment to keep his balance.

‘There he is.’ The reaper pointed toward the next room over, where Hector could see the entire ceiling had caved in.

“Help!” came a yell from beneath the pile of wood and concrete.  
“Someone!”

A network of metal beams hung above the man, all torn and bent, some even dangling as if ready to fall on top of him.

‘Both his arm and leg are pinned,’ Garovel explained. ‘Hurry and lift those blocks there.’”

"258

Hector went to move a block, but the others all shifted as soon as he touched it. The pinned man winced in pain. Hector took a step back.

‘Hmm.’ Garovel floated around the scene. ‘It’s more of a mess than I thought. You’ll have to take it slowly. Follow my directions carefully.’

The reaper pointed out each individual block to move in sequence. Hector tried to be both gentle and quick, but it still took upwards of ten minutes before he reached the last chunk of concrete. Hector lifted it off the man’s leg, allowing him to crawl free.

Before the victim could thank him, however, another tremor shook the room, and all the metal beams overhead shuddered. One fell straight for the man. Hector leapt up and swatted it away, feeling his own arm snap in the process.

“Can you walk?” said Hector, hearing more beams creaking and bending.

The man scrambled out of the room instead of answering.

Two more beams fell at once, and Hector caught them both on iron shoulders. The floor cracked under his feet.

And for a moment, as he struggled under the weight, he could see the twins' faces. "I can't believe you're not crying." He shrugged the beams off and sprinted for the open doorway. The rest of the room collapsed behind him. He shielded the children from the flying debris.

Through the dust, he saw them again. They both just stared at him, more curious than upset. He looked for Garovel, but the reaper had already disappeared in search of more survivors.

Hector couldn't help smirking at the kids. "Not impressed by loud, dangerous things anymore, is that it?"

The girl started crying, and the boy soon joined in.

"...I jinxed it."

'Found two more people,' said Garovel.

'Show me where.' He frowned at the kids. "Just a little longer, you two. I know it's scary."

"259

The next two people were trapped in a broom closet. They'd presumably tried to take shelter there, only to have a massive line of shelves fall and block the door. Hector cleared it easily enough. One of them couldn't walk, so Hector hoisted the man over his shoulder and carried him all the way out of the building.

Police officers were waiting for him at the entrance, and Hector was briefly afraid they would try to get in his way. Instead, they took the injured man off his hands, carrying the guy to an ambulance.

Another officer offered to take the twins away as well, making Hector deliberate a moment before deciding to run away with them. He leapt over the police line and ducked into a narrow side street.

Under cover of darkness, he listened for Garovel's next orders. When none came, he asked the obvious. 'See anyone else trapped?'

'I'm double-checking, but I think that's everyone.'

‘Really? I thought there’d be more...’

‘I imagine the power station doesn’t have a large night crew. And I bet a lot of the place is automated.’

‘So... all the people made it out safely?’

‘Well. No, unfortunately not. There’s a fire near the far end of the building. Looks like some poor guy burned to death.’

Hector frowned and sighed. ‘I could’ve... if I’d...’

‘I don’t think it was possible to save everyone here, shitty as that sounds. You’d need to have been ridiculously powerful, and you’re already stronger than normal, given your age as a servant.’

Hector had no response. He waited for Garovel to finish up searching. The reaper made a third pass to ensure no one had been missed.

‘Looks like there was only one casualty,’ said Garovel. ‘Firefighters got a couple people out, too.’

‘I guess that’s... something...’

"260

‘I need a couple hours to take care of this soul,’ said Garovel. ‘You should head back home. The sun will be up soon, and you’ve got school.’

‘Alright...’ Before starting the motorcycle, however, he stopped himself. ‘Actually, I think I’ll see if Colt shows up first.’

The reaper did not answer.

‘...Garovel? Okay. See you later, I guess.’

After a few minutes, he decided to circle the block a couple times. After an hour, he was about to text Colt again when a familiar voice caught his attention.

‘Found him.’

Hector turned and blinked at the long-faced reaper there. “Bohwanox!

What are you doing here?"

'Helping someone find you.'

"Wha?"

Colt rounded the corner. "There you are."

Hector looked between them, struggling to ask the necessary question.

Bohwanox got there first. 'Yes, Colt can see me. I resurrected him after Geoffrey killed him.'

Colt cocked an eyebrow at Hector. "What the hell kind of baby carriage is that?"

"Ah--uh--" Hector released the iron around the children, taking them both into his arms. He immediately handed them over to their father.

Colt looked even more confused as he took them. "Where'd the metal go?"

"It's, uh..." Hector scratched his helm as if it were his head. He looked to the reaper for help.

'I'll explain later,' said Bohwanox.

Hector gave a grateful nod and eyed Colt again. "Why'd you reschedule the meet again, anyway?" he asked. "I thought you were hiding from the police."

"Reschedule? What are you talking about?"

"Your text. We agreed to meet at noon tomorrow, but then, uh... you, uh..."

Colt's brow lowered. "I don't follow."

Hector exhaled a curt breath and pulled out his phone. He showed the conversation to both of them.

"...I didn't send any of those first texts there," said Colt. "I'm not sure what--" And the realization hit him. It left his mouth hanging open, and for a moment, he merely stared at Hector, speechless."

"261



“What’s the matter?” said Hector.

“When Geoffrey killed me, I lost my phone,” said Colt. “And I think he must have taken it and sent you those text messages.”

Hector squinted, still confused and looking between Colt and Bohwanox. “What’re you...? But then...”

Colt reread the messages. “Did Geoffrey not attack you?”

“N-no, I...” And then he, too, understood. The sudden horror was a lightning bolt through his chest. He could only whisper his next words. “He followed me home...!”

Hector ran for the bike.

“I’ll go with you,” said Colt.

“No!” Hector yelled as the engine roared to life. “Geoffrey would kill all of you!”

“I can help--”

“No, you can’t!” Hector had no patience for the man. “Just! Get out of the city! I’ll call you when it’s safe!” He punched the throttle, and the bike tore down the street with screeching tires.

The sun had already risen. Traffic was growing, but he still had enough room to weave between cars without much trouble.

‘Garovel, if you can hear me... I think Geoffrey knows where I live. I think he might be there right now.’

He reached the house. He let the bike fall on its side and ran through the front door.

His father was in the kitchen, washing his hands in the sink. The man stood facing the small window, whistling calmly, as if nothing were wrong at all.

Hector looked around. Everything seemed normal. He’d expected the worst--blood, destruction, hostages or even dead bodies--but there was none of that. No sign of violence that he could see. No sign of Geoffrey, either.

Hesitant, uncertain, he slowly approached his father. "...Dad?"

The man turned and saw him. "Whoa there. Um. Hector? You're..." He dried his hands with a towel. "Hmm. What's that on your head?"

He decided to ignore that question for now. "Dad, is... is everything okay?"

"What do you mean?"

He stared at his father's face. It wasn't vacant and lifeless like one of Geoffrey's puppets, and Hector was silently relieved. "Did, uh... did anyone come to the house?"

"Just your friend."

He stiffened. "Which friend?"  
"262

"Oh, you know the one," said his father. "The kid who's been taking you to school in the morning."

"...Did he tell you his name?"

"I don't know."

"Dad, this is important. Was it Nathan? Or Geoffrey?"

The man smirked. "Son, I honestly couldn't tell you."

Hector's jaw clenched.

"I think he went up to your room."

He eyed the staircase just beyond the kitchen door.

His father walked around him. "I have to go to work now, but I will be stopping by your school today."

"What?"

"You have been skipping class, haven't you? Your school has called several times, already, and I think I should follow up."

"Uh, that's not, ah... I mean--"

"Anyway, I will see you later."

"Dad, wait--uh."

The man stopped and turned.

"Please, just. Stay there for a minute." He moved toward the staircase. "I gotta check on something in my room first, but... just... give me one minute, okay? D-don't go anywhere."

He folded his arms. "Fine. Just don't keep me waiting."

Hector scaled the steps in a hurry, making iron around his forearms as soon as his father was out of sight.

And there was the door to his room. It was closed. He had not left it that way. He opened it.

The first thing he noticed was the stench. And then he saw the body. It was human, limp and mounted on the wall. It had been eviscerated. Blood and entrails spilled onto Hector's bed.

And perhaps it was because he was too appalled and disgusted, but at first, he didn't realize who it was. It just looked like a mutilated corpse. But then the face registered.

It was Geoffrey.

He didn't understand. Geoffrey was already dead? Hector's head spun, trying to figure out how. Or why. Or anything at all. What the hell had happened here?

And then he noticed the message scrawled next to the body in blood. It read:

~For Hector~

I finally got myself a new body. You can have my old one. ~Love, Dad"  
"263 -- XXX.

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Hector was in shock.

He wanted to run from the room, but his legs refused to work. For a time, he could only stare at the red words in disbelief. It didn't feel real. It couldn't be.

But there was more. Horrifically, he saw another bloody message, this time on the sliding doors to his closet. Simply:

open -->

He didn't want to. He dreaded what he would see in there. But he had to look. He had to know what Geoffrey had done. And when he slid the door back, he saw a second dead body.

This one was Nathan. The young man had surely come to offer Hector a ride to school. And Geoffrey had torn him to pieces.

And still another message was scrawled onto the rear wall of the closet:

See you at school, son.

Hector could hardly breathe. He wanted to cry. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to scream. But more than anything else--he wanted to kill Geoffrey. As the seconds passed, as he regained his mind, his breath, Hector soon decided that the only thing that mattered now was ensuring Geoffrey never hurt anyone ever again. All other concerns came second. His grief and disgust and shock, it would all have to wait.

Tears in his eyes, he bolted back downstairs. Geoffrey had already left, of course, but Hector checked the rest of the house to be sure. He still saw no sign of his mother.

Back on the motorcycle, he pressed the machine for all the speed it could give him. He tried to think. What would Garovel do? Probably try to assess the situation calmly. Hector didn't know if he could do that right now. He'd never felt this kind of mind-numbing anger before, this unfiltered hatred. But Garovel wasn't here to talk sense into him. And

he could not afford to be stupid about this, or even more people would end up dead."

"263 -- XXX.

## Chapter Thirty: 'No quarter...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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"264

What's more, Hector feared himself when he was this angry. Most of all, he feared that he might accidentally hurt someone innocent.

So he suppressed the fury, smothered it in his mind until it was only a vague heat, a passenger to his thoughts instead of the driver. And he focused. All that meditation had not just been for imaginary power. At the very least, he knew how to clear his mind.

Hector knew Geoffrey's power had grown. That was simple enough to deduce. And without Garovel, Hector had no access to regeneration or enhanced strength. But he still had his iron. And he sure as fuck wasn't about to run away. Iron alone would have to do.

He arrived at the school, taking the side entrance into the building. His helm drew strange looks as he rushed through the halls. There were not as many students as usual, but searching was still a chore. He tried to be both quick and thorough, eyeing people carefully, searching for the vacant expression of a puppet.

Then he heard a series of shrieks and ran toward them. A group of students were fleeing from a long streak of blood that snaked into the boy's bathroom.

He walked in on a scene of three people crouching over another. Crimson stains were everywhere. Hector recognized the dead body on the floor. Micah Chamberlain. The three people on top of him looked up in unison. All obviously puppets. Bloodied, ripped flesh hung from their lips.

"There you are," one of them said for Geoffrey, spitting out a red gob.

"I'm in the teacher's lounge. Come meet me, and then we can--"

And they were completely encased in iron, all three at once, thick enough to render them entirely immobilized.

Hector left them there to suffocate."

"265

He paused as he came out of the bathroom. A crowd of students was staring at him, and he briefly lost concentration again. And Micah's face flashed in his mind. 'No,' he told himself, squinting inside his helm. 'Not yet...! Don't think about it yet!'

He took a wavering breath and stepped forward. The crowd shied away from him, and he saw their terrified faces. They were scared of him, he suddenly realized. Of course they were.

But there was no time. Hector ran for the teacher's lounge, as fast as his unenhanced legs would allow. He soon grew winded, but that wasn't enough to slow him down. The sight of Sheryl, however, made him stop.

She was still alive. Geoffrey hadn't gotten to her yet. Hector ran toward her. She seemed frightened of him, too--or of the helm at least--but she couldn't see the puppets stalking her from behind.

Four of them. The closest one leapt at her. Hector tackled it to the ground.

He tried to encase the other three in iron, but he was only able to seal their legs. The one below bit him above the elbow and tore out a chunk of flesh. Hector grit his teeth and made a metal knife. The puppet flailed, trying to throw him off, and he buried the blade into its eye socket. Blood spurted onto Hector's helm and gloves as he held it there until the puppet stopped thrashing.

The other three had all fallen over without the use of their legs, but they still crawled toward the fleeing Sheryl. Hector finished encasing them and then ran after her.

"Wait!" he yelled. "Sheryl! It's not safe!"

"Stay the fuck away from me!"

"It's me! Hector! Please stop running!"

She did not seem interested in listening."

"266

Another puppet sprung out at Sheryl as she passed an intersection. It grabbed her and dragged her to the ground as she shrieked and tried to pull herself away.

Hector coated the attacker's face. The groove for its mouth bumped harmlessly against Sheryl's neck, but the puppet still thrashed. Hector completed the coating and then shoved the iron statue off of her.

She tried to get up and flee again, but he grabbed her hand.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

"It's okay!" He pulled up the jaw of his helm, revealing his face. "Sheryl, look at me!"

Her glance turned to a stare. "H-Hector!"

"That's right."

"But you! Y-you killed that other guy! And--and--"

"He would have killed you," Hector said. "Or someone else."

"Why?! Who was he?! What the fuck is going on here?!"

"It's--agh--it's really hard to explain," he said. "Please, you have to stay close to me. I have to--" And he realized that he wasn't sure what to do with her. Just getting her out of the building didn't seem like it would be enough. As long as Geoffrey was alive, she would be in danger. And so would the others. "Where are Gregory and Janine?" he asked.

"W-why? Are they in danger, too?"

"Yes." He tried to keep his voice calm, for her sake as much as his own. "Do you know where they are?"

"Well, I--ah--" Trembling, she took a moment, squinting as she thought. "We usually come to school together, but uh--today it was just me and



Micah. I, uh--I figured it was because of the power outage last night. A lot of people d-didn't come to school today, because, b-because of that. Or I th-thought that was why, but m-maybe--"

"That's good," said Hector. "They're safer at home."

"Oh, that won't make much difference," said another voice, belonging to yet another of Geoffrey's minions as it approached them from the rear corridor."

"267

Hector placed Sheryl behind him and pulled the helm's jaw back down. He tried not to acknowledge the face of Geoffrey's puppet, but he had known Jenny Friedman for years. He had never been friends with her, scarcely even acquaintances, but still. Seeing her like this, blank-faced and mindless, was enough to make his stomach turn.

"I already know where Gregory and Janine live," she said for Geoffrey. "And you will not be able to reach them before my fetchers do."

"You're lying," said Hector.

"How do you think I know who your friends are? Everything Nathan knew, I know. And Micah. And Samuel. Everyone I have taken has provided me with a wealth of knowledge."

Sheryl flinched. "Nathan and Micah? What's he talking about?"

Geoffrey ignored her. "I have learned some delightful things about you, Hector. And I would quite like to share. So please. Let us not drag this out any further. Come to the teacher's lounge."

"Stop attacking people, and I will."

"Oh, very well. But bring Sheryl with you."

"No. Let her go."

"Honestly, Hector. Even if I agreed to do that, would you actually trust me to follow through? I would like to see her reactions, as well, so just make this easy and bring her with you. Refuse, and Ms. Trent will be dead before you get here."

Hector scowled. "Fine."

"Excellent. Follow me."

They started walking, Jenny's lifeless body leading the way.

"Hector," Sheryl whispered. "What happened to Nathan and Micah?"

He couldn't answer that. He couldn't even look at her.

"A-are they... dead?"

His silence was answer enough.

"Oh, goddess...!" She started shaking even more violently than before.

"I..." He had to say it with confidence or she wouldn't believe him. And he needed her to believe him. "I won't let that happen to you."

Geoffrey overheard. "Oh, Hector. Don't lie to the poor girl."

"Shut the fuck up."

"268

They soon arrived. Jenny entered first and joined Geoffrey by his side.

As soon as he saw the aberration's face--his father's face--Hector had to hold himself back. The urge to attack immediately was so strong that it made every muscle in his body go taut. If it hadn't been for Sheryl's presence, for the notion that her safety trumped killing Geoffrey, then the fight would have already begun.

"You are bleeding," Geoffrey observed. "Why have you not healed yet?"

He could hardly feel the wound on his arm, even though he was sure that it must've been throbbing like crazy. But instead of answering Geoffrey's question, Hector chose to reassess the situation. Ms. Trent was pinned to the wall, covered from neck to toe in crimson shadow. Her mouth was covered, but according to her wide, panicked eyes, she was still herself.

Geoffrey smirked after a moment. "You have always been a difficult

person to read, haven't you? Even your father--well, your previous father--even he never really felt like he understood you. But then, he did not take a very active role in your life, did he? I am honestly curious as to what you thought of him. The whole reason I took his body was because I thought the two of you were close, but according to his memories, that does not seem to be the case. And yes, I know I said we should not drag things out, but I think we need to have a nice father-son chat before we finally settle matters here. Don't you?"

Hector had no intention of responding. All he wanted was an opening.

"Ever the quiet one. Hmm. Then perhaps you will be interested in what I have to say. For instance, did you know that your father suffered from quite vivid hallucinations? Your parents never told you, right?"

"269

Hector felt the fury bubbling up to the surface again. He didn't even try to put it into words. That was probably what Geoffrey wanted him to do.

Geoffrey just kept talking. "They could be quite scary, these hallucinations. One time, when you were just a baby, he saw a bomb. Strange, right? Just this simple canister with a digital timer on it--very obviously reminiscent of his days spent defusing such things, not that he ever told you about that, either. The point, however, is that not only was it not a bomb, but it was actually you!" Geoffrey laughed. "He almost threw you out of a window! If you hadn't started crying, he might not have snapped out of it in time. And he never told your mother about it."

"...Why are you doing all this?" Hector finally asked. "Why do you enjoy seeing people suffer?"

"Hold on, I'm not finished with my story. See, your father used this condition of his as an excuse to keep you at arm's length, under the pretense that he was afraid of hurting you or some such nonsense. He convinced himself that this was the case. But really, the truth of the matter--the thing he would never admit--was that you simply did not interest him. Because he didn't love you. Isn't that something?"

Hector's chest trembled. "...Why would I believe anything you say?"

“Because it’s so surprising! I may not be human, but even I know what love feels like. And your father never felt it. Well, not for you, at least. Your mother, sure. He was fiercely in love with her. But you. You were always just. Sort of. There.”

Hector fell silent again. He tried to think. How to save Ms. Trent. How to keep Sheryl safe. Anger got in the way of every burgeoning idea.

“So that is why I’m curious. Was this mutual? Did I just waste my time? Or did you actually love him?” He laughed again. “Or maybe you hated him! Perhaps I did you a favor in killing him! How fantastic would that be?!”

"270

Hector turned his head toward Sheryl, just enough so that he could still keep an eye on Geoffrey. “Please,” he whispered to her, “move to the corner there...”

“W-why?”

“I don’t want anyone sneaking up behind you while I’m... distracted...”

Sheryl nodded, and Hector stayed in front of her while they repositioned themselves away from the open door.

“Still refusing to answer me, I see,” said Geoffrey. “I will take that to mean you really did love your father, after all. Honestly, though, I cannot understand why. You know what the funniest thing is? I actually care more about you than he did.” He grinned with Samuel’s face. “And of course, I will be a much more attentive father.”

Hector clapped his hands together, and a wall of iron sprung up between him and Sheryl, as thick as he could make it from floor to ceiling. He took a step forward and then added a second layer, just as broad as the first.

“Ha. She will suffocate in there, you know.”

“You’d slip through any air holes.”

“I will just have to break it down, then.” The red shade shot toward him.

Hector made a shield--a crude slab of metal over his arm--and the

shadow splashed against it, spraying outward before swirling around to Hector's backside. He slashed with a focused dagger, but more red was already on the way. Within seconds, it had him entirely enveloped.

The shadow faltered against the iron wall, however, cutting into it but not nearly deep enough. "Eh. Too much hassle. I am not interested in Sheryl, anyway."

Hector struggled, but without his undead strength, he couldn't even move.

Ms. Trent popped off the wall, suspended in midair. "How about a bargain?" said Geoffrey. "Tell your reaper to show himself, and I will allow this woman to live."

"271

Hector coated his own body, focusing the iron with his soul. From his chest, a metal spike tore through the red shade, but a moment later, the shadow cut it off and filled the hole back in. He could feel it tightening around his body, digging through metal and scratching his flesh.

"How dull," said Geoffrey. "I am so much stronger than you now. But we both know that killing you alone is useless. So come on. Bring your reaper here."

"I can't," he said through clenched teeth.

"You would let this poor woman die to protect someone who is already dead?"

"No... I mean I can't contact him right now."

Geoffrey frowned. "Oh. Well, that is unfortunate. Perhaps we will try again later, then."

Hector tensed, knowing that wasn't all.

"I have had quite enough of waiting, however, so this teacher of yours will have to die in the meantime."

"No!" He thrashed, creating metal frantically, fighting vainly with the red again. "Don't you dare hurt her!"

"Then stop me," said Geoffrey. "Give me a real fight, at least. Amuse me. Fail, and this will not end with Ms. Trent. When we are done here, we will go visit your mother at work and try again. Hopefully, your reaper will be ready by then."

He needed more. Burdened under panic, he could barely keep focus. This feeling, this desperation, he knew it well. He just had to make that same mental leap again. So why was it taking him so long? Why wouldn't it just fucking work already? So many people had died. This stupid metal power. It had to evolve again. There was no other option. With every ounce of pressure in his mind, he demanded more. A growling scream exploded out of his mouth. His throat shredded itself.

And finally. He felt it there. The response.

A metal coat enveloped Hector in a flash. Massive spikes shot out all over his body, ripping dozens of holes into the shadow."

"272

The lacerated crimson sunk back to Geoffrey, and he recoiled away from Hector. The shadow retained its grip on Ms. Trent, however, pulling her closer to his body. He started laughing as he looked at Hector. "Well done! But now I have to kill your teacher, of course."

Ms. Trent let out a muffled scream as the red tightened around her. And then the metal coat was there for her as well. Unlike Hector's, the spikes around Ms. Trent could not tear the shadow. Instead, they merely pushed it out, like taffy stretched across a bed of needles.

Geoffrey's brow lowered. "Now that is just unfair."

Hector had to annihilate his own coating in order to move again, but he kept iron around his chest, shins, and forearms. He put a gloved fist out to his side, and it shook as he concentrated on what he wanted. Around the fist grew fresh metal, but it did not stop with mere coating. It extended out, half a meter, until it reached a sharpened tip, and suddenly, instead of a right hand, he had a thick blade--a full sword with crude, jagged edges. It was heavy, weighing his arm down at first, but adrenaline helped him lift it.

He ran forward, sword held wide, and met the next wave of red with a

spiked shield. He tore a path toward Geoffrey, who backed away; and instead of pursuing, Hector diverted toward Ms. Trent and slashed clean through the shadow. Her spiked cage clattered heavily to the floor as the shade retreated to Geoffrey. He freed the teacher from her metal bindings. She rolled over on the floor, gasping for breath.

“Aha, wow! How scary!” And a brief silence fell as the sound of nearby sirens filled the room. Geoffrey’s grin only broadened. “I think we need some more playmates.” He fled into the hallway with Jenny.

Hector freed Sheryl, told her to barricade the door, and then gave chase.”

"273 -- XXXI.

Chapter Thirty-One: ‘The dance of shade and darkness...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector had to destroy his metal. It only weighed him down, and Geoffrey was already faster, able to ride the red shadow like a wave through the corridors while carrying Jenny at his side.

They reached the school’s front entrance, and Geoffrey did not hesitate to rush through the sliding doors to meet the police force there.

Still inside, Hector could see the officers scrambling for their firearms at the sight of Geoffrey’s red mass. Their bullets would do nothing, of course. He had to protect them.

Hector slapped the tiled floor with his hand, and an iron wall shot up in front of Geoffrey, curving over his head like an immobile tidal wave. Cut off from the policemen, Geoffrey tried to circumvent the wall, but Hector kept adding to it until the metal met the school’s pale brick. And abruptly, there was nowhere for the aberration left to go, except through Hector.

Geoffrey returned to the entryway, Jenny at the shadow’s heels.

Hector reforged his sword and shield.

“Always trying to spoil other people’s fun,” said Geoffrey. “I thought I

raised you better than that." Metal promptly clapped around his face, which the shade immediately burst through; but when Geoffrey could see again, Hector was nearly on top of him. The sword barreled toward Geoffrey's chest. He dodged but not completely.

Hector's blade caught the side of Geoffrey's ribcage, taking flesh with it. The reds mixed, blood and shadow confused.

Geoffrey slinked back and sicced Jenny on him, but Hector encased her in iron before she even took three steps. The red shadow lunged again, breaking upon Hector's shield before being slashed apart by the sword.

"This is not very fun," Geoffrey complained. "I don't think you are being very--" He had to stop and flee when he saw that Hector was not going to wait for him to finish talking."

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"274

Before Geoffrey could reach the west hall, a metal wall appeared in his path. He leapt away from Hector’s sword, bounding over the reception desk and rushing for the east hall, but another sudden barrier cut him off. Even the chamber’s windows clapped shut with iron.

“I see you are determined to end this now.” Geoffrey swerved out of Hector’s reach. “Then I might as well oblige.” Metal blocked his vision again, but Geoffrey was prepared. The shadow tore it off while two other streaks shot toward Hector from separate directions.

Hector rolled to the side and took one streak with his shield. The other swirled back around, and he slashed horizontally but missed. The shade caught him under the arm. He had a thin coat of metal there, but the impact still knocked him off his feet, and he felt a rib snap. The shadow coiled around his torso, making him groan as it tightened, and he could see several more red snakes gunning for him.

He again resorted to full defense. Spikes jutted out all across his body, reaching even farther than before and shredding every shadow that got too close. He could hear Geoffrey snickering as they shrunk back

to him.

“Good! Don’t make it too easy for me!” The shadow spread out around him, gathering into a swirling cluster like some sort of hydra. He sent them all at once.

Hector made a wall in front of himself. The shadows slammed into it, leaving dents and pushing the whole mass of iron backward. Scowling against the wall, Hector slapped his hand on the largest dent. A pillar shot out from the other side and tore a path straight through the red.

Geoffrey avoided it easily enough and then circled around to Hector’s side.”

"275

--donation bonus (day #10, post 1/5)--

The problem was Geoffrey’s mobility, Hector knew. A mere iron coating had proved useless, but thick barriers had not, so that was what he went for when he saw more red snakes reaching for him. And with another wall in the way, he couldn’t see Geoffrey, but he didn’t need to. He only wanted to limit the aberration’s options. He steadily placed more barriers around the room, soon creating a small maze, and each time the shadows managed to find him again, he hacked them down.

“I see what you are trying to do!” Geoffrey said from beyond a wall. “It will not work!” An iron pillar shot out at him, and he narrowly slid out of the way, going right. Another pillar appeared, this time blocking the path rather than attacking, and Geoffrey ducked under it, only to find still another metal beam there. He turned around, and abruptly, Hector was at his side, replacing the wall that stood there a moment ago.

Geoffrey reeled back and barely avoided the sword. “You will trap yourself before you trap me,” he said, bringing his shadows to bear. A red cluster whirled at his side, forming a spinning drill. It dug into the wall next to him, expanding the hole quickly.

Hector had a different set of shadows to contend with. While ripping through them, he merely tried to keep Geoffrey in sight, eliminating walls as he ran and making new ones for Geoffrey to tunnel through.

"You will grow tired before I do, you know!"

Hector slipped an extra wall in--not in Geoffrey's path, but rather just beside it, seemingly unworthy of attention. And when their chase made a complete circle, Hector was ready. He pulled his fist to his shoulder, and an iron block popped out of the wall as Geoffrey passed. It shoved him straight toward Hector."

"276

--donation bonus (day #10, post 2/5)--

Geoffrey's eyes widened as he watched the sword close in, as he realized that he didn't have his balance, that he couldn't dodge this one. Shadows rushed to his defense. They might as well have been paper.

Hector gored him through the stomach.

Geoffrey was not smiling. Dumbstruck, he tried to speak and only coughed up blood. His shadows all shuddered as Hector ripped the sword back out, taking flesh with it. Geoffrey staggered back.

Hector stared at his work, still tensed to the point of trembling. He almost couldn't believe his eyes.

"How careless..." Geoffrey's shadow caught him stumbling and propped him up. "This body is already done for..."

Hector raised three walls around the aberration, boxing him in. Only the space between the two of them was left open.

Geoffrey spared a glance at the walls. "Ha... you wouldn't be willing to let me find a new body, would you?" A red cloud poured out of Geoffrey's face.

Hector cleaved it in two.

The red shriveled and shrunk back to him, making Geoffrey spasm violently. And even now, he still managed a bloody grin. "Damn... I wanted to see my power grow more. Desmond--" He stopped to hack up more blood. "Desmond told me--he said... that one day, I would be able to turn my slaves into monsters. I was really looking forward to that, you know..."

It was nearly done, Hector knew. Geoffrey was down. The shadow was contained. He wasn't sure if aberrations could die from blood loss like normal humans, but didn't intend to wait that long. And yet, the sight of his father's body, his father's face--it made him hesitant. And even though he knew it had to be done, a small part of him didn't want to deal the finishing blow."

"277

--donation bonus (day #10, post 3/5)--

"You bastard," said Geoffrey. "Are you not even going to say anything? After everything we have been through together?"

He had no desire to respond. It seemed too respectful.

Geoffrey gave a hoarse laugh. "What if I told you... that I wouldn't hurt anyone anymore? In fact, what if I even agreed to help you? I would... I would listen to you--do anything you say."

Hector's eyes bulged, and his mouth twisted beneath the helm. He could hardly believe how much those words angered him. He'd tried to remain calm throughout the fight, to not let anything Geoffrey said get to him, but this--this was ridiculous. An appeal to his better nature? As if there was anything which could convince him. After all the murders. All the lives destroyed. All the families.

The motherfucking arrogance.

Rage came rushing back to him, blindingly strong. He almost couldn't even hear Geoffrey's next words.

"If you just--kagh--just spared my life... I would do that. Yeah? What do you say?"

"Fuck no." Hector raised the wall between them, completing the box. He touched the metal with both hands. He could hear Geoffrey shouting from inside.

Hector skewered the box with a dozen metal pillars, all focused with his soul. Geoffrey's agonized cries still rang out. He added a dozen more. The noise stopped.

He opened the wall. There lay Geoffrey. A crumpled heap with metal bars stuck through it, piercing the chest, neck, skull, stomach, every limb multiple times. The last bit of red shadow shriveled up and evaporated into nothingness.

He stared at the body, waiting, half-expecting it to spring back to life and attack him again. He kept waiting.

Geoffrey was dead. Finally.

Hector breathed. He could only feel so relieved, however. This was not just the proof of Geoffrey's death. It was also the proof of his father's. And as that sunk in, as the urgency and adrenaline of battle wore off, Hector slowly broke down."

"278 -- XXXII.

--donation bonus (day #10, post 4/5)--

Hector destroyed the metal around his father's body and dropped to the floor, unable even to stand. He was exhausted and in pain and nothing made sense. Nothing, except for the fact that everything hurt.

The weight of it all washed over him--a series of horrible waves. His father. His friends. His home. His school. Everything that was supposed to be normal about his life. Everything that was supposed to be safe. He couldn't think of a single thing that had not been destroyed. Obliterated.

He wept. He didn't know what else to do. His brain felt numb. He couldn't sort anything out.

'Garovel?' he tried. 'Are you back yet...? Please be back...' He waited for a response but received none. He sighed. 'I could really use your advice right now...'

At length, he remembered Sheryl and Ms. Trent. If nothing else, he could at least go check on them. Maybe he could figure out what to do after that.

Groaning, covered in blood, and clutching his ribcage, Hector struggled to his feet again.

Chapter Thirty-Two: 'Steadfast heart, expect not refuge...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Hector kept his helm on in front of the ladies. Even if it was splattered with blood, he still preferred that to revealing his haggard, tear-stricken face. He honestly wasn't sure he would be able to talk to them right now without something to hide behind.

"So it's safe now?" Sheryl asked. "It's r-really safe? You're sure?"

"Yeah..."

Sheryl seemed reluctant with her relief. "And the police--where are they?"

"Out front," he said. "I'll take you to them."

"N-no," she said, backing away. "I'll go on my own. It's safe, right?"

"Y-yeah, it is..."

"Don't get me wrong," said Sheryl. "I'm grateful. You saved me. But. But you. Please, just--just stay away from me from now on. I don't--I mean--please..."

"278 -- XXXII.

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"279

--donation bonus (day #10, post 5/5)--

Hector frowned beneath his helm. He tried to extend a hand toward her, but she flinched.

"No, please! This is all just too much! I don't want anything to do with you!" She ran away from him. "I'm sorry!"

He watched her go. He couldn't really blame her. He was the reason she was in danger to begin with. It was probably better this way, honestly. He just wished it didn't feel so awful.

"She's just traumatized," said Ms. Trent. "Give her some time."

He doubted time would make much difference. He looked at his teacher.

Small cuts riddled her face. Her hair and clothes were all a mess. She didn't look any less traumatized than Sheryl, really.

"H-how are you feeling?" he asked her.

"Alive. Thanks to you."

"Don't be too grateful. I... I'm the reason he was trying to kill you..."

"I don't understand," she said as they began walking. "What was he trying to accomplish, exactly? That was your father, wasn't it?"

"That thing was not my dad. It was... a monster. It killed him and took his body..."

She hesitated. "I wish I couldn't believe you. But after... well... I'm not about to doubt your word."

"It was trying to... hurt me, I guess..." He took a quiet breath. "It's dead now, but... it sure as hell succeeded..."

"Why did it want to hurt you? Because you're the Darksteel Soldier?"

Hector paused at that. "...The what?"

"Oh, come on. I've seen the news. A young, black male in a metal helmet, terrorizing criminals around the city. You can't tell me that's some other guy."

"Yeah, o-okay, that's me, but... the Darksteel Soldier?"

"Isn't that what you call yourself?"

"Uh... no..."

"Well, that's what they're calling you. You didn't know?"

"I, uh... I haven't really... been paying attention to the news lately..."



--donation bonus (day #11, post 1/5)--

"Hmm." Ms. Trent eyed him again. "I started seeing the reports a couple weeks ago, and I had my suspicions about you, y'know. I remembered that helmet you made. And you'd been missing a lot of club meetings. But still. I didn't really think it could be you. You're just. So..."

"Y-yeah, I know... I'm still surprised, myself..."

"Never can tell with the quiet ones, I suppose."

For both their sakes, Hector avoided hallways that he knew would have dead bodies, but they still had to pass his group of four metal statues from earlier. Ms. Trent looked directly at them, and then at him, but she did not ask the obvious question. Perhaps she already knew all she wanted to.

He escorted Ms. Trent out to the side parking lot, where he'd left his motorcycle, and found a large crowd of students and police officers. He was quietly relieved to see that so many people had made it out safely.

A sudden shriek drew his attention, and he saw a group of students pointing at him from behind the line of police officers.

"That's him!" one girl shouted. "I saw him kill someone!"

"Just look at him! He's covered in blood!"

"He killed that boy in the bathroom!"

The police pulled out tasers and started toward him, all seven of them at once.

"No!" yelled Ms. Trent. "He's not the murderer! He protected us!"

The officers exchanged uncertain glances but still persisted. "Please come with us," said the closest one. "We just need to sort all this out."

Hector looked over the crowd another time, across a myriad of angry

and terrified faces. He could also see the motorcycle laying on the sidewalk, no more than five meters away from him. Suddenly, he had a decision to make.

Now more than ever, he wished Garovel were here."

"281

--donation bonus (day #11, post 2/5)--

Hector took a long, tired breath. Fleeing from the police right now seemed exhausting. He almost let them arrest him on that impulse alone. But he had not forgotten. He'd killed several "people" today. And explaining that to the police seemed not only tiresome but downright impossible.

He would have liked more time to deliberate, but the cops didn't look prepared to oblige. So he turned their tasers into metal bricks and ran for the bike during the confusion. Ms. Trent yelled something after him, but he couldn't hear what it was.

One of the officers ran toward him with a nightstick as he started the bike. Hector raised a wall before the man reached him, and then peeled off the sidewalk. He circled wide around the crowd, hugging the edge of the parking lot until he found the road.

An unpleasant surprise was waiting for him, however. He passed under a police chopper, and when he looked back, he saw it turning around to pursue him.

He returned wide eyes to the road ahead. "How the fuck do I lose a helicopter?!"

He didn't even know where he was going. It wasn't like he could just go back to his house. And after a few minutes, he heard more sirens and saw flashing lights in his rearview mirror. The police must have also been clearing the streets ahead of him, because traffic soon became nonexistent--which was helpful insofar as ensuring he didn't crash into anyone, but he figured it also meant they'd set up road blocks for him.

Sure enough, within a matter of minutes, he spotted a police barricade dead ahead. Four massive trucks filled the street and sidewalks, lights

flashing with uniformed officers waiting, weapons drawn.

He only had one idea. And it felt like one of the stupidest things he'd ever thought of."

"282

--donation bonus (day #11, post 3/5)--

He wanted a bridge, one that would go above the police trucks and then back down. But he had never created such a thing before. He had never materialized an actual structure, let alone one that needed to support the force of a motorcycle hurtling uphill at 150 km/h.

But he did his best, creating iron steadily ahead of the speeding bike. He made it extra wide, expecting the tires to lose traction against the metal, and then he ramped it up, perhaps a bit too steeply as he felt the bike jolt. And as he climbed and the metal began to buckle, he added crisscrossing support beams.

The bridge sagged as he passed over the blockade. He was too afraid to give it proper support, not wanting to accidentally skewer one of the cops below on a sudden pillar. But he reached the other side quickly enough and tried to give it beams again; only, it was too steep now, and the tires started sliding. The bridge crumpled behind him as well, and he annihilated it before it crushed someone.

The bike hit the road, front tire first, and for a second, he thought it would flip over, but then the rear tire met pavement, and he found his balance again. The engine started grinding as he sped away.

He soon saw cars on the road again and had to slow down. Then he noticed an upcoming traffic jam. And the sheer number of pedestrians meant that mounting the curb was also out of the question. He could try to slip between stopped cars with the motorcycle, but he wasn't entirely sure it would fit. Instead, he decided to stop altogether, turning the front tire and placing one foot on asphalt as he looked back toward the helicopter."

"283 -- XXXIII.

--donation bonus (day #11, post 4/5)--

The chopper was certainly persistent. Clearly, as long as it remained in pursuit, police cars would keep finding him. If he couldn't flee from it, then he needed to neutralize it--without harming whoever was inside, of course.

Hector waited for the helicopter to draw closer. Then he attached four metal pillars to its landing skids and looped the other ends around separate streetlights. He added a fifth to the tail and attached it to a fire hydrant. He turned the bike around and rode off in a different direction, this time without his pursuer.

He just went straight. He didn't know what else to do. The more he tried to think, the worse he felt. After a while, he ran out of city. He kept going.

Barren grasslands filled the horizon, save the occasional rise of boulders. He pulled into the road's shoulder, then into the grass and dirt, and finally stopped next to a cluster of rocks.

And it was finally quiet. He finally had space to breathe. To think. He got off the bike. He pulled off the helm and let it drop from his fingers while he looked out, Brighton in the distance.

He collapsed. Unconsciousness embraced him then and there.

When he awoke, his face was in the dirt. Blue sky and white clouds greeted him. The sun had only just begun to wane.

Hector shut his eyes. '...Garovel?'

'Hector! Where are you?! What the fuck happened?!'

He started sobbing.

Chapter Thirty-Three: 'O, solemn child...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

For a time, he couldn't even respond.

'Hector?! I... I went to the house, and I saw Geoffrey's body. And Nathan's. And. I checked the school and--I... Hector, talk to me.'

'Everything went wrong, Garovel... everything is... it's all... I can't...'  
"283 -- XXXIII.

--donation bonus (day #11, post 4/5)--

The chopper was certainly persistent. Clearly, as long as it remained in pursuit, police cars would keep finding him. If he couldn't flee from it, then he needed to neutralize it--without harming whoever was inside, of course.

Hector waited for the helicopter to draw closer. Then he attached four metal pillars to its landing skids and looped the other ends around separate streetlights. He added a fifth to the tail and attached it to a fire hydrant. He turned the bike around and rode off in a different direction, this time without his pursuer.

He just went straight. He didn't know what else to do. The more he tried to think, the worse he felt. After a while, he ran out of city. He kept going.

Barren grasslands filled the horizon, save the occasional rise of boulders. He pulled into the road's shoulder, then into the grass and dirt, and finally stopped next to a cluster of rocks.

And it was finally quiet. He finally had space to breathe. To think. He got off the bike. He pulled off the helm and let it drop from his fingers while he looked out, Brighton in the distance.

He collapsed. Unconsciousness embraced him then and there.

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‘Everything went wrong, Garovel... everything is... it’s all... I can’t...’  
"284

--donation bonus (day #11, post 5/5)--

‘Okay, just tell me where you are first,’ said Garovel.

‘I don’t really, uh... I think I went south...’

‘You gotta give me more to go on, Hector.’

‘I’ll... I’ll make you a guidepost.’

‘What do you mean?’

Hector stretched his arms. He took a hard breath and rubbed his hands together. ‘Fly up high and look south.’

‘Er, okay...’

He placed both hands against the ground. A metal beam exploded out of the ground in front of him. He continuously added to it, wider and wider layers at its base, and soon, he had created the tallest needle he’d ever seen. ‘Do you see it?’

‘Um. See what?’

Hector furrowed his brow. He took a step back and added even more. It shot up into the sky, becoming a tower.

‘Holy shit,’ said Garovel. ‘You didn’t just... Did you really just make that gigantic needle there?’

‘Yeah...’

‘Oh, wow... I’m on my way. Now what the hell happened?’

Hector still wasn’t sure where to begin. He closed his eyes and tried to think. ‘The cellphone,’ he thought. ‘The text messages... they were a trap. By Geoffrey.’

‘Not sure I understand...’

Hector elaborated at length. He told the reaper everything. He fumbled over the worst parts. His father. Nathan. Micah. At least a dozen students. His throat swelled up as he talked further. He was practically choking by the end.

And Garovel listened patiently to it all. Perhaps too patiently. The reaper hardly said anything. His skeletal face spoke of abject horror. Evening arrived by the time Garovel spoke again. ‘How could...? I was only gone for three hours... three-and-a-half, at the most...’

Hector leaned against a tall rock and rubbed his swollen eyes. “What do we do now, Garovel? I’m just... I’m so fucking lost...”

For a long while, Garovel had no answer to that. But then he said something that made Hector stare. ‘...Who still needs you?’”

"285

“I...” His gaze hardened and fell to the ground. “I have to go find my mom.”

‘Hector, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.’

He looked up with a furrowed brow. “Why not?”

‘I visited the police station while I was looking for you. I saw your mother there. She was very distraught and confused, but she... agh, I’m not even sure how to put this...’

“Just say it.”

Garovel eyed him heavily. ‘When I saw her, she was under the impression that you murdered your father. I don’t think she wants to see you.’

“The cops told her that I...?” He sighed. “Of course they did...”

‘I’m sorry.’

“But...”

‘Hector. I think it’s time we left Brighton behind.’

He was silent at that.

‘Your life here... it’s been destroyed. Between the crime scene at your house and the crime scene at your school, the police have pieced together your identity. I saw them in the station. They’re not just hunting for some guy in a metal mask. They’re hunting for Hector Goffe.’

“I can’t just leave my mother behind...”

‘Hector...’

“I’m all she has left, Garovel. I have to... try to... make her understand... somehow...” His expression searched for the right words. “I have to see her again. I just. I have to...”

The reaper floated around him. ‘You are easily the most wanted person in the city. Going back there right now is--’

“Do you know where she is?”

The reaper was hesitant to answer.

“Garovel, don’t lie to me...”

‘Yes. I do know. She’s in a hotel with a police detail.’

“Take me to her.”

‘What if you can’t convince her?’

“I don’t know. But I’m not leaving without trying.”

‘And what if you do convince her? What difference will that make? You’ll still be wanted for murder.’”

"286

--donation bonus (day #12, post 1/5)--

Hector’s expression faltered. He shut his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “She... I... I’ve never been sure if she actually, um... if she actually cared about me. But... I’ve always known that she loved my dad. The two of them were--” He shook his head. “--They tried really



hard to stay together. Their entire lives revolved around one another. And... now..."

Garovel frowned.

"Mom doesn't have any siblings. And her parents died years ago. So I'm... I mean... I think I'm the only family she has left..."

'You don't want to abandon her. I understand. But even still--'

"It's not just that. I... I get that we shouldn't stay. I do. School is... I can't just... go back there... and I can't go home, either... But I don't want her to think that I... that I... did all those horrible things... If she thinks I killed Dad, then... agh..." He sighed.

'You want a proper goodbye.'

"Y-yeah..."

Garovel was briefly quiet. 'I still think it's a bad idea. But alright. I'll take you to her.'

"Thank you."

Hector destroyed the needle tower, and once night fell, Garovel guided him back into the city. They stopped by the cemetery along the way and picked up the five remaining bags of money. There wasn't much room on the bike, so Hector dropped four of them on the steps of the nearby police precinct. He tried to keep to the shadows as much as possible, prepared to flee again if someone spotted him, but no one did.

They arrived at the hotel next. It stood fifteen stories tall and had no balconies to climb.

'Her room is on the seventh floor,' said Garovel. 'There are four cops in the adjacent rooms and two more in the lobby. If you go through the front door, you'll alert them and have to fight your way to her. So please don't do that.'

"287

Without his helm, he scratched his head. He looked up at the building from the rear parking lot, crouching behind a dumpster. "Can I scale the wall?"

'Maybe. I think a seven-story platform would be quieter, though. Just let me scout the area for prying eyes, first.'

"Okay..."

After a spell, Garovel returned and showed him the exact spot to stand. He created a broad pillar below his feet, raising himself to the window of the reaper's designation. It was shut, of course, and locked as well, but he could see the tiny latch that he needed to move. He pressed a hand to the glass and made a small pillar on the other side, starting from the windowsill, then growing out and pushing against the latch. He heard the shunk, pulled the bug screen off, and slipped inside, disintegrating his metal.

His mother was in the bathroom. He could hear her crying.

He sat on the end of the bed and waited for her.

A hundred thoughts swirled through his mind. He still wasn't sure how to explain everything to her. The truth sounded so ridiculous, but it seemed like the only thing that could vindicate him. And then he just started recounting everything in his head. By the time she came out of the bathroom, Hector was crying again.

Vanessa Goffe stared at him, her own eyes still puffy and red. She looked like she didn't know whether she wanted to scream or not.

Hector just went for it. "I didn't kill Dad."

She did not react.

He tried again. "I didn't kill him. Mom, you have to believe me. I would never hurt him. Or you. I... I w-wouldn't..."

Her face was tear-streaked stone, now. "What do you want from me?" was all she asked.

"I just..." He grit his teeth, angry with himself. Now was not the time to struggle for the right words. "I want to explain what happened... and... and..."

"288

--donation bonus (day #12, post 3/5)--

"Explain, then," she said. "Why do the police think you killed Samuel?"

"Because... uh..." He looked at the floor. 'Garovel, help me...'

'You didn't kill him, but someone made it look like you did.'

He gave a tiny nod and glanced up at his mother again. "Someone made it look like I did it..."

She merely listened.

"S-someone came to the house... after you left for work... and... they took Dad h-hostage and... brought him to my school... which was where he was... killed..."

"Why would they do that?" Her voice trembled. "Who were they?"

"A lunatic... His name was Geoffrey Rofal."

"You knew this person?"

He cringed at the question.

'Don't lie about being a vigilante. She already knows. The police told her.'

"Geoffrey was a... he was a criminal... he and I fought before... a-and, ah... he, uh--"

"During one of your outings, is that it?" Her anger showed through now. "One of your little adventures fighting crime, right? It came back to bite us. You went and got involved in something you shouldn't, and now your father is dead because of it. My husband..." She breathed hard. "Because of you! You got him killed, didn't you?! That's what happened, isn't it?!"

Hector couldn't look at her.

"Answer me! You didn't kill him yourself, but you're still responsible for it, aren't you?! Well?! Just tell me!"

"...Y-y-yes. I... I'm..."

‘Hector, please. It’s not your fault. Don’t let her convince you that it is. That won’t help anyone.’

There came a knock at the door. “Ma’am, is everything alright in there?”

Vanessa settled her breathing. She looked at the door, then back at Hector.

He could see her considering what to do. He stood, preparing to run as her gaze lingered on him.

She answered the door."

"289

--donation bonus (day #12, post 4/5)--

Hector was surprised when she didn’t ask the officers to enter and arrest him. He watched her block the doorway so they didn’t spot him, watched her reassure them of her safety, watched her close the door behind her. He couldn’t understand what she was thinking. “Mom--”

She held a hand up. It clenched into a fist. She put her knuckles to her mouth and closed her eyes. “Just. Go.”

“But... please, just listen--”

She glared at him, furious tears in her eyes. “I don’t care what your reasons were,” she said shakily. “I don’t even care how you got in here. Just leave. And don’t come back. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

His face cracked. “Y-you, you don’t mean that...”

“Get out.”

“Mom, please...!”

“Don’t test me, Hector. If you don’t leave right now, I will turn you in.”

‘Do as she says,’ said Garovel. ‘Just for now, that is.’

He slowly backed away.

‘We’ll see her again, Hector. It might be a long time, but we’ll visit her and sort all this out, one day. I promise. I’m sure she’ll be ready to listen then.’

Hector wasn’t sure he believed the reaper, but he sure wanted to. He stopped in front of the open window and looked at her one last time. “I love you, Mom...” And he jumped out the window.

He raised a pillar up from the parking lot and gave it a sloped edge, expanding it out into a gigantic slide. His landing was a rough tumble, and Garovel started healing his broken leg as he limped the rest of the way to the motorcycle.

‘You’re doing the right thing,’ Garovel told him.

Hector made no response. He still wanted to cry, but the tears had stopped falling a while ago. As he mounted the bike, he pulled out his phone and looked for Colt’s number."

"290 -- XXXIV.

--donation bonus (day #12, post 5/5)--

Chapter Thirty-Four: ‘Blighted warriors, quell thy fury...’

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Hector let Garovel do the explaining. He stared vacantly past Colt and Bohwanox, not really listening to the conversation. They'd met up north of Brighton, just off the main road. Colt leaned against his car as he listened, his kids lying right behind him in the backseat.

"So you really killed Geoffrey?" said Colt.

Hector just looked at him. Ice cold.

Colt cocked an eyebrow but seemed to get the hint. He turned back to Garovel. "What do you plan on doing now, then?"

'I think we should travel together,' said Garovel.

'Agreed,' said Bohwanox. 'We'll be safer in a group.'

Hector decided to speak up. "Bohwanox."

'Yes?'

"I thought you said... that you didn't like to get involved."

'I did.'

"So why did you revive Colt, then?"

Bohwanox gave a small nod. 'I suppose you changed my mind about taking on servants. After you protected me--after I realized that there were beings like Geoffrey out there, I started to come around to the idea.'

Hector folded his arms. "So you're not interested in helping people, then. You just wanted someone to protect you."

Bohwanox blinked at him. 'Well, yes. I guess you could say that.'

Garovel eyed Hector. 'There's nothing wrong with that.'

"Fine, sure," said Hector. "But why did it have to be him?"

Colt furrowed his brow. "Excuse me?"

He returned the man's gaze evenly. "Did you think I'd forgotten about Melissa Mallory? And those three cops?" He could feel his irritation steadily growing, becoming genuine anger. He looked at Bohwanox.

“Did you know that this guy murdered innocent people? Hell, you were there at the hospital that night. Did you not realize that Colt was the one who killed them?”

Colt's expression darkened. “You know I had no choice in that.””  
"290 -- XXXIV.

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"291

--donation bonus (day #13, post 1/5)--

Bohwanox looked between the two servants. 'I was not aware that Colt had killed innocents. But even so, it hardly matters now.'

"What?" said Hector.

'Colt will not be killing anyone without my permission. As far as I am concerned, his past deeds are of no consequence.'

Hector ground his teeth. "That's not the point!" he said. "You should have revived someone more deserving of it than him! Someone who wasn't a murderer!"

'It makes little difference to me,' said Bohwanox.

"What the fuck is your problem?" said Colt.

'I think Hector has a point,' said Garovel. 'There is no shortage of potential servants. While I don't think you should be too judgmental of how people lived their lives, you really shouldn't resurrect murderers.'



It was Bohwanox's turn to look annoyed. 'Colt is a skilled fighter. He is a very practical choice as a servant. And what of his children? Does depriving them of their father mean nothing to you?'

'Maybe. But then again, they might be better off in someone else's care.'

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," said Colt.

"Oh no?" said Hector. "How much danger have they been put in because of you, huh? And then you went and... y-you fucking... dragged me into your shit... and now..."

Everyone fell quiet for a time.

"So that's what this is," said Colt. "You blame me for the deaths of your friends and your father. Is that about right?"

Hector just glared at him.

"Fine." Colt removed his coat and tossed it on the hood of the car.

"Blame me. Get mad at me all you like. I can take it." He walked up a grassy hill, motioning for Hector to follow. "So come on. Come beat the shit out of me. If you can.""

"292

--donation bonus (day #13, post 2/5)--

'Hold on now,' said Garovel. 'Colt, you don't even have an ability yet, do you? Hector would destroy you.'

"So what?" the man said. "It's not like he can kill me, right? If it makes him feel better, then bring it on."

'Even so... what do you think, Hector?'

The thought was admittedly tempting. But he sighed and shook his head. "It wouldn't change anything... and violence doesn't really make me feel better..."

Colt folded his arms. "Come on. Don't be a bitch."

Hector rolled his eyes and turned the man into a statue. "Happy now,

jackass?"

Bohwanox floated over and reached through the metal. After a moment, Colt broke out, tearing the iron from his body.

"Just stop," said Hector. "Fighting won't make a difference."

Bohwanox drifted higher. 'Actually, it might. Why don't you let Colt teach you about basic combat?'

Hector lowered his brow, blinking.

'That's not a bad idea,' said Garovel. 'Hector might be able to show Colt a few things, too. Fighting with enhanced strength is quite different, y'know.'

Colt stretched his arms. "Sounds good to me. You up for it?"

He looked between everyone for a moment. "Alright..."

'You have to refrain from using your metal powers,' said Bohwanox. 'At least until Colt develops his own ability.'

"Fine."

They sparred. Even Colt's hand-to-hand techniques were brutal. He broke Hector's bones numerous times, even killing him once by jamming a thumb through the eye socket and reaching all the way to the brain. Hector, on the other hand, was able to demonstrate what new openings could be found when he could ignore body shots and broken limbs. It did not take Colt long to adapt and develop the advantage. After half an hour, however, the enhancements began to wear off, and Colt took the wave of pain and exhaustion much harder than Hector did."

"293

--donation bonus (day #13, post 3/5)--

"What the hell?" said Colt, panting. "I beat the crap out of you, so why am I the only one about to collapse here?"

Hector wiped the blood from under his eye. "I've had a lot worse than this."

'You should both rest,' said Garovel. 'And get something to eat. Hector, you must be starving by now.'

"Ah... yeah..." He looked at Colt another time. Hector had calmed down, but he didn't feel like apologizing for what he said--not when Colt had never apologized for killing Melissa. But for now at least, he decided he would just try not to think about it. "The kids... probably need to be fed, too, right?"

Colt hoisted himself up. "Yeah."

They took to the road together, Colt's car out front with Hector's motorcycle following close behind. It wasn't long before Garovel struck up another conversation.

'How're you holding up?' There was a weak echo to his voice, and Hector recalled that being indicative of the reaper speaking privately.

'I don't know,' said Hector. 'I just... it feels like I'm... like I'm angry at... just... everything.' He squinted hard at the road ahead. 'Am I losing my mind...?'

'On the contrary, I think that makes you quite sane.'

He frowned. 'How did all this happen, Garovel...? Could I have... done something different? Was I careless?'

'Hector. You can't blame yourself.'

'Maybe... those text messages... if I hadn't been so trusting--if I'd been more suspicious of the possibilities--'

'We couldn't have known. We had every reason to think those messages were from Colt.'

'If we'd thought to... work out some sort of... texting code with Colt beforehand... or something...'

Garovel opened his mouth but stopped himself. After a moment, he gave a small sigh. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe we could have been more cautious.'

'We respond... by becoming better.'

'Heh. You remember.'

'Of course...'

--donation bonus (day #13, post 4/5)--

'I'm glad you're able to keep a clear head about things,' said Garovel.

Hector took a long breath and listened to the motorcycle's clanging engine. After a few minutes, a new question occurred to him.  
'Garovel...'

'Yeah?'

'My iron ability, um... will it always be able to grow stronger when I'm under stress? Because when I confronted Geoffrey, I was... I was in a really bad spot, and for a minute there, it felt like... like my power wasn't going to grow... like I was just fucked... and everyone was gonna die and...'

'That's precisely the heart of the problem,' said Garovel. 'Your power can grow by leaps and bounds during a moment of extremely high stress. But such moments become increasingly difficult to achieve--and not because the amount of stress needs to increase. Rather, it's because of your own mind. Over time, you become complacent--you begin to expect your power to suddenly grow and save you at the last moment. And guess what happens, then? Those very expectations reduce your level of stress, which in turn means that your power doesn't grow when it otherwise would.'

'Oh, what the--my expectations? What do I even do about that?'

'That is the question, isn't it? It's a nasty psychological cycle, and I've known a lot of servants and reapers who've struggled with it. There's been all sorts of research and experimentation with it, trying to figure out concrete ways around it. Some even believe that such growth can be instigated artificially if a scientific solution is found.'

'Artificially...?'

'Oh yeah. Imagine it. If you could force a servant's ability to grow whenever you wanted, then the possibilities are--well. Personally, I find that prospect terrifying. If it could be done on a large scale, then the war between Abolish and the Vanguard would either finally come to an end, or escalate worse than ever before.'

‘Holy shit...’”

"295

--donation bonus (day #13, post 5/5)--

‘I’ve spent a fair amount of time researching the growth process,’ said Garovel. ‘The study of “emergence,” they call it. There was a time when the prevailing theory was that emergence could be achieved via a strong enough outpouring of emotion, but that’s only part of it. The real key stems from a sense of need--a powerful rejection of the immediate circumstances, as well as a strong desire to change them. The confusion about it being completely dependent on emotion comes from how the initial manifestation of the ability can be hastened by a sudden outburst, but that doesn’t extend to the growth cycle. Which, of course, caused all sorts of essential problems with experimentation, delaying our understanding of emergence for quite--’

‘You’ve lost me, Garovel...’

‘Oh. Ah. Sorry. But it is pretty fascinating, y’know.’

‘Yeah, okay, uh... what can I actually do about it, though? Is there anything?’

‘Well, in theory, the trick is to find a way to manage your expectations so that emergence can occur when you need it to. Ideally, you would have no expectations at all, but that’s easier said than done. Merely acknowledging the possibility of emergence will create some degree of expectation, even if it’s very small. Which might make you think that me even bringing this up in the first place is a bad idea, but on the other hand, NOT acknowledging emergence will definitely build up a subconscious expectation naturally, which is far more--’

‘You’re losing me again...’

The reaper sighed. ‘Well. Okay. In simplest terms, you just can’t rely on your ability to suddenly grow more powerful and save you all the time, because the minute you start relying on it is the minute it stops working.’

‘Yeah, I understood that part. I wanna know how I can manage my expectations or whatever.’

‘Fuck, I don’t know! It’s a subtle art of individual psychology! You have to figure it out for yourself!’

"296

‘What the--?’ Hector blinked. ‘Why didn’t you just say that from the beginning?’

‘And pass up an opportunity to impress you with my wealth of knowledge? No way.’

‘...That was supposed to impress me?’

‘Oh, fuck right off.’

For a moment, Hector was able to crack a meager smile.

--+-+--+-

Damian Rofal picked his nose as he watched the coroner pull back the sheet, revealing Geoffrey’s pallid face.

‘Must you do that right now?’ said Feromas.

‘Do what?’ To Damian’s eyes, the reaper looked like a sour-faced jester. The colorful, motley attire had never matched Feromas’ personality very well.

‘Forget it.’

“Yeah, that’s him,” Damian told the coroner. “Except, it’s not him, is it?”

“Eh--sir?”

Feromas floated over the body. ‘Hmm. Did we ever learn what Geoffrey’s power was?’

“It was Domination,” said Damian, thoughtless of the other person in the room. “Don’t you remember all the puppets he left behind?”

‘Right, of course. So he really could have body jumped, then.’

Damian tilted his head. “How many other bodies arrived yesterday?”

“Oh, um--” The coroner stiffened and adjusted his glasses. “There

were quite a few, actually. Would you care to see them, Mr. Rofal?"

"Please."

They entered a much larger room. A good three dozen tables stood from wall to wall, and upon each was a body. Damian and Feromas took separate aisles, searching.

"Most of them appear to have died via suffocation," said the coroner. "But there were also a few cases of dismemberment and disembowelment. Are you, perhaps, looking for one in particular, sir?"

Damian ignored the man. "Ah! Found him!"

Feromas floated over. 'So he really is dead after all.'

"Shame," said Damian. "I had high hopes for him."

'This changes things,' said Feromas.

"Indeed."

"Ah, that one is--umm--" The man flipped the card by the foot to read. "--Samuel Goffe."

"I don't care," said Damian. "Please be quiet."

The coroner backed away without another word."

"297

'Well now,' said Feromas, 'do you intend on avenging our grandson?'

Damian scratched his jowly cheek and shrugged. "Eh. I'd rather not. Unless you feel strongly about it."

'Doesn't matter to me. But without Geoffrey, there is not much reason to stay in Brighton--or in Atreya, for that matter.'

"Perhaps it's a good time to leave the country," he said.

'Abolish has started moving here, too. It'd be annoying if they found us. And at that point, we'd have to leave anyway, as well as cover our tracks.'

“Ho-hum...”

‘What are you thinking?’

“This whole family business thing hasn’t really worked out for us, has it?”

‘That’s because you have trouble sticking to plans. You let your family run wild and do whatever they want. You could have fostered greatness in them, but now they are just normal people whom you barely ever see.’

“You’re right. Of course, you’re right. And I got a bit too comfortable in that community home, didn’t I?”

‘Ugh, don’t remind me. I almost released your soul because of that fucking place.’

“I’m gonna miss that pudding. And the board games. Oh, and that Nurse Beatrix.” He thought a moment. “Hey, you wanna go back there?”

‘No, goddammit! I’ll kill you!’

“Fine...” He stretched his neck. “I guess I’ll go gather the kids up, then.”

‘Really? They are not going to just abandon their lives and leave with you.’

“Who said I’d give them a choice?”

And abruptly, a broad grin split the reaper’s face. ‘Now that is more like it.’ He eyed Samuel Goffe’s body. ‘Don’t forget to scrap Geoffrey for parts, too.’

“Right.” Damian turned to the coroner. “I need a body bag for this one.”

The man blinked at him. “E-excuse me?”

“I’m taking--what was it, Mr. Goffe? I’m taking him with me.””

"298 -- XXXV.



Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

A pair of waiters scurried between tables, attending to the truck stop diner's morning rush. The place was busier than Hector might have expected. Perhaps being in the middle of nowhere worked in its favor. There were maybe two other places to eat over the next hundred kilometers or so.

Colt sat across the table, his kids right next to him.

"What are their names?" Hector asked.

"Stephanie and Thomas." He poked at the baby girl, and she grabbed his index finger. "Thank you for keeping them safe, by the way. Didn't get the chance to say that before."

A waiter arrived before Hector could respond. The man began to look rather concerned as they told him their orders, scribbling through several pages of his notepad. He advised them that it would be a long wait and disappeared again.

Hector struggled with finding something else to say. Colt wasn't exactly his favorite person right now, but the man was an ally, and Garovel had reminded Hector at length about how important that could be. Yet even still, Hector couldn't come up with anything that wouldn't surely start another argument, so he decided to remain quiet. Colt didn't seem too worried about keeping up a conversation, either.

Thankfully, the reapers soon returned from scouting the area.

'Didn't find any cops,' said Garovel. 'You?'

'I saw a pair of highway troopers a few hundred meters north of here, but nothing else.'

"So we can relax," said Colt.

'Yeah.' A beat passed as Garovel looked between the other reaper and servant. 'I'm curious to know what your long-term plans are.'

Colt and Bohwanox exchanged glances.

'I have none,' said Bohwanox. 'Other than following Colt for my own protection, my only intention is to continue reaping souls as I normally would. Why? What are your plans?'

"298 -- XXXV.

## Chapter Thirty-Five: 'Tremulous friends, be wary...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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‘I have none,’ said Bohwanox. ‘Other than following Colt for my own protection, my only intention is to continue reaping souls as I normally would. Why? What are your plans?’”

"299

Garovel floated around Hector. ‘How much do you two know about what’s happening in Sescoria?’

‘Are you referring to that incident a few weeks back?’ said Bohwanox.

‘I know the Queen’s gone missing,’ said Colt. “Why do you ask? Don’t tell me you plan on getting mixed up in all that.”

“We already are,” said Hector.

‘Hector and I were there when Belgrant Castle was attacked. We helped the Queen escape.’

Colt and Bohwanox shared equal surprise.

‘The attack was Abolish’s work, which I’m sure they’ve kept quiet. They’re looking to seize control of Atreya--or rather, I suppose they already have. As far as we know, the Queen has been looking for reinforcements in order to retake the capital.’

“Abolish?” said Colt.

‘A very powerful group of reapers and servants,’ Bohwanox explained. ‘Assholes, the lot of them, but not the kind of people we’re prepared to fight.’

‘Then you’ll have to leave the country, because they plan on destroying this one.’

“What the fuck?” said Colt. “What are you talking about?”

‘You already know, don’t you, Bohwanox? Abolish only wants to cause as much destruction and misery as possible.’

Bohwanox confirmed Colt’s inquiring glance with a nod. ‘You and Hector intend to do, what exactly?’

‘Hector will train while we observe the situation. We don’t know the details of Abolish’s plans, but supposedly, we have a few months before things will really start to get bad. Even if you don’t intend to fight them with us, it could be quite helpful if Colt and Hector trained together.’

‘Ah. I see.’

‘I’m sure you want Colt’s power to grow as quickly as possible, too.’

Bohwanox hesitated. ‘That would be agreeable. And I have never had a servant before. I could benefit from your insight into the matter.’

‘Very well.’

‘But I do not intend to have Colt fight Abolish.’

Hector furrowed his brow at the other reaper."

"300

Bohwanox looked at Hector. ‘If you have something to say, then say it.’

He held his tongue. It didn’t sit well with him, but Hector already knew where their priorities lay. Even if Bohwanox were willing, Colt would surely not want to leave his children behind to go fight in some war with an enemy he’d never met. And for that, at least, Hector could not fault him.

Garovel picked up the conversation, first looking at the children, then at Colt. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask--where is their mother?’

Colt took his time answering. “She’s in an institution for the criminally insane.”

Hector blinked at that. He noticed the reapers exchange glances.

“And now you’re wondering why,” said Colt. “It’s because she tried to kill the children.”

“...W-why would she do that?”

“Doctors said the pregnancy made her snap, but I don’t know. She had always been violent with me. I just put up with it. And that was

obviously a mistake, because one night, she decided to grab a knife. Attacked me first, then moved on to the crib. She managed to cut Thomas under the arm here.” Colt pulled the boy’s shirt up, revealing a scar along the right side of his ribcage. It was not a small scar. “I just about killed that bitch.”

Hector could only stare, mouth half-open.

“It went to court. My case didn’t play very well to the jury. I did beat the shit out of her, after all. Wasn’t hard for her to make it look like I was the one who cut Thomas.”

Everyone just listened.

“She was about to get full custody. I was about to go to prison. And that’s when Rofal showed up, telling me he could make sure I won the case.” Colt’s eyes fell to the table, and he scratched his forehead. “I’m still not sure how much of it he’d planned. He had her lawyer and the judge in his pocket. I suspected members of the jury, too.”

‘And then he quietly got a hold of your children?’ Garovel asked.

Colt nodded. He seemed like he was done talking. He merely watched Stephanie play with his thumb.”

"301

Their breakfast began to arrive in increments, the waiter apologizing for additional delays on certain dishes. Hector welcomed the distraction, and apparently so did Colt.

At length, however, Garovel revived the topic. ‘I hate to ask this, but who else knows about your wife?’

“We never married,” said Colt. “And why do you ask?”

‘Because you might make enemies who would use her against you,’ said Garovel. ‘Her mental state would only make her more appealing to Abolish as a potential servant. If they learn about her connection to you, then you could find her trying to kill you one day.’

Colt snorted. “I would enjoy that.”

‘What?’

"It'd give me more than enough of a reason."

A silence fell after that, but Garovel's words began to nag at Hector. He soon turned to meet the reaper's gaze, deciding to keep his next question just between the two of them. 'Abolish will go after people we care about?'

'Yeah.'

'But then... Garovel, I...'

'Your mother will be fine. For now.'

'...And what about later?'

'Depending on how things go, and if she's still unwilling to listen when we return for her, then. Well. You may have to kidnap her for her own safety.'

'Aw, man...'

--+-+--+--

Desmond Grantier scratched his chin, eyeing the checkerboard in front of him. It was not a complicated game, but Desmond liked to take his time in deciding his moves.

The person across from him did not seem interested in playing.

"More of a chess man, huh?" said Desmond. "How's the pain today?"

The King of Atreya merely returned a haggard expression. The man's silky white shirt hung loose over his missing left arm. Most of the shoulder was gone as well.

"We can get you more meds, if you like. Just no hospital. You need to look strong and presentable." At William's continued silence, Desmond shrugged.

Ezmortig had gone off to discuss strategy with the other reapers, leaving Desmond by himself on babysitting duty. It was a dull job and not one he would have chosen for himself, but none of the other reapers wanted to leave their servants alone with the King."

--donation bonus (day #14, post 1/5)--

There were currently eight servants in Sescoria, including himself. Whenever Moss finally returned, it would be nine, but Desmond was starting to wonder if that would even happen. He'd tried calling Geoffrey, as well, but to no end. Normally, he would be tasked with hunting them down and confirming their deaths, but he was told that the mission took precedence this time.

Desmond turned when he heard the door open.

Two men entered, each with a reaper at his back. Stoker was the taller man with a shaved head and swirling tattoo on the side of his face. Karkash had bronzy skin and a thin beard, as well as one of the most penetrating stares Desmond had ever seen. Their female reapers were Nize and Hoyochté, respectively--which, to Desmond's eyes, were wispy, black-cloaked entities with white masks instead of faces.

These four were different from the other reinforcements. They were on loan from the other side of Abolish--the 32nd Anti-Air Division under Dozer, to be precise. They had been added to the mission at the last minute, supposedly as "goodwill ambassadors," but Desmond would have sooner proceeded without them if he could have. The key difference, he had always found, between the Morgunovs and the Dozers, was that the Morgunovs knew how to have a good time, while the Dozers were a bunch of uptight, joyless shitbags. And these ones here had yet to prove themselves as exceptions.

Still, they were allies, so he put on a smile for them. "How are the air defenses?"

"Will be completed soon," said Karkash. His thick accent put a roll in his l's.

"What brings you back here, then?" said Desmond.

Karkash reached into his sashed coat and retrieved a gray folder. He nodded toward the King. "Need stamps and signatures."

Desmond shrugged and made way for them.

Karkash tossed the folder on the King's desk. "Sign."

William opened it slowly and began reading."

--donation bonus (day #14, post 2/5)--

"Don't waste our time," said Stoker. "Hurry up and sign them." His accent was much fainter than Karkash's, and his voice had a rougher base to it.

"I do not sign things without reading them first," said William.

Desmond rolled his eyes. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Your Majesty. I can't rip off your other arm, but I'm more than happy to find creative alternatives."

'Please,' said one of the reapers, 'there is no need to hurt him.' It was Nize.

Everyone but the King turned to look at her, even her own servant.

'Look at him,' she said. 'He will do as you say. Just have a bit of patience.'

The King picked up his pen, but a remnant of his stubbornness still lingered. "Please, just tell me what I am signing..."

"No." Karkash placed a hand on the desk's varnished wood. "Sign now, or I will bring your children here. I will torture them in front of your eyes."

The King met his gaze evenly. "I do not have children."

Desmond snorted, earning a glare from Karkash.

"I will find someone else," said Karkash. "Whoever you care for. They will suffer. Until you sign."

Nize left the room on her own. Stoker eyed the others hesitantly before following her.

"What's with them?" said Desmond.

'Do not concern yourself with them,' said Hoyoté.

"Uh. No. That's sorta my job here."



'It is not your place,' she said. 'We will see to the matter ourselves.'

The door opened again, but instead of Stoker and Nize, a little blond serving girl appeared. She paused when she saw the King's guests and then proceeded with the offerings of tea. Desmond took a cup, but Karkash, having now acquired the King's written approval, ignored her and left without another word.

William accepted a cup, as well.

Desmond eyed the girl. Her long bangs hid her face rather well, but he liked what he saw. "You're a cutie."

"304 -- XXXVI.

--donation bonus (day #14, post 3/5)--

The serving girl cast her eyes down to the floor and said nothing.

"Haven't seen you around before," said Desmond.

Still, she persisted in silence.

"What's your name?"

"Leave the poor girl alone," said William. "Go on," he urged her. "You are dismissed."

Desmond frowned but let her go. "Pretty little thing like that should be careful around here."

--++--++--

The serving girl shut the door behind her and leaned with her back against it for a second. She took a long, quiet breath, trying to steady her nerves again. That had been more interaction than she bargained for.

Gina knew that Roman would be upset if he knew she'd come here. She was starting to regret the decision herself. But the bug she had just planted in the King's office would make it all worth it. Roman and the others needed someone to gather information on the enemy, and even though it scared the hell out of her, even though she knew that

any one of the servants could kill her in a heartbeat, she was quite certain that there was no one better suited to the task than her.

Regaining herself, she straightened and proceeded down the hallway with her empty tea tray. She tried to avoid eye contact as much as possible. She especially avoided spying on the servants directly. There were beings around which she couldn't see, and if they found her trying to eavesdrop on someone's conversation, that would be the end for her, without a doubt. Which was why she had been putting listening devices around the castle all morning, instead.

Now it was time to get the hell out of this place.

Chapter Thirty-Six: 'O, restless ones...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Over the next few days, Hector and Colt did not stay anywhere for long. Several of the small towns they happened across had police cars waiting by the main road. After a brief confrontation with a beat cop, Hector learned that the police were on the lookout for his motorcycle and ended up having to abandon it."

"304 -- XXXVI.

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"305

--donation bonus (day #14, post 4/5)--

"This car is stolen by the way," said Colt, eyes on the road. "We'll have to get a replacement soon. Maybe we can find you a new bike, too."

Hector frowned. "I'd, uh... I'd rather not steal anything..."

"Most thieves would probably say the same thing, y'know. And besides--you telling me that bike wasn't stolen?"

“It was a gift.”

“Right.”

They passed through Reese, Norca, and stopped in Rizo for a day, briefly debating crossing the Atreya-Rendon border. Hector and Garovel demonstrated their resolve to stay in Atreya, and Colt and Bohwanox soon acquiesced. They headed toward Klein next, taking their time in Battonburg and Tulma. Colt was adamant about maintaining a full stock of supplies.

All the while, Hector and Colt held thrice daily training sessions--two for sparring, one for meditation, the latter of which Colt absolutely despised. Though in all honesty, Hector wasn't enjoying them as much as before, either. Any long period of silence left him unsettled. Whenever he tried to relax his mind, it became all too easy to remember everything that had happened. Nathan. Micah. Dad. It varied from day to day, which of those three hurt the most. Sometimes, it was difficult to remember if he had even been able to protect anyone at all.

Sleep became difficult, as well. Hector often stayed up with the reapers to watch the kids sleep, catch up on news, or just practice creating metal.

They found a vacant warehouse on the outskirts of Klein and, after exploring the place thoroughly, decided to squat in it for a while. Apart from being a steady drain on funds, motels were always a bit chancy with all the people around.

“Maybe we should get the cops to kill us,” said Colt.

Everyone gave him a look.

“No, listen. We go down in a hail of bullets, let them confirm everything and bury us, and then you two resurrect us. If we do it right, then all this heat will completely die down, yeah?”

"306

--donation bonus (day #14, post 5/5)--

‘What do we do with the kids while you’re dead?’ said Bohwanox.

"We can take turns." Colt looked at Hector. "I can trust you to take care of them for a few days, right?"

"Of course, but..."

"But what?"

'It might make a difference for you and Bohwanox,' said Garovel, 'but for Hector and me, it wouldn't really matter. It's not like we'd go live off the grid somewhere afterward.'

Colt gave a sideways nod. "Hmm."

'Even if we do your plan, Hector's just gonna end up drawing attention to himself again. The police would still come after us. They'd just be really confused about it. In fact, it'd probably draw even more attention to Hector. From truly dangerous people.'

"I see your point."

"And besides, uh... I, ah..."

"Mm?"

Hector scratched his brow. "I don't want my mom to believe I'm dead... unless, y'know... I actually am."

"Fair enough, I suppose."

'But if you two wanna do that, it's your call, of course. I'd ask you to wait until we're ready to part ways, though. Otherwise, we might accidentally ruin your cover by leading the police back to you.'

Bohwanox eyed them both. 'You are going to start fighting crime in Klein, now?'

'Of course. It's also a good way for Hector to train.'

'You will only alert the police to our location again.'

'Probably. Be ready to leave in a hurry when we get back.'

And despite Bohwanox's displeasure, Hector and Garovel soon ventured out into the city. Without a motorcycle, it was slow going. Hector remembered this feeling of having to run everywhere. He didn't mind it terribly, but he could have done without all the sweat.

It was a long night, but Garovel found him plenty to do. Klein's criminal element seemed no less active than Brighton's, but the highlight of the evening was when Garovel stumbled upon an imminent murder--made clear to the reaper by the aura of death surrounding the would-be victim."

"307

--donation bonus (day #15, post 1/5)--

Rather than simply coating the attacker in metal, Hector decided to try something more elaborate. First, he stomped down the door to the apartment and then forced himself between the two. He earned a hatchet in the chest for his trouble. His lack of concern for it, however, brought the altercation to an abrupt standstill, and he seized the opportunity.

Metal gathered around the attacker's torso, accumulating and crawling all over the man's skin like a million fleas before two cylinders took form, one for each arm, with iron rungs binding them together. Gray dust extended down his back and stomach, completing a kind of straitjacket.

It wasn't the most impressive thing in the world, he supposed, but it was certainly one of the more intricate things he had created. And though not altogether intentional, he had added little protrusions from the neck down. They served no function, and for a moment, he wondered why he even put them there. Then he realized that he had unconsciously mimicked a straitjacket's buttons.

After the assaulted woman called the police, Hector turned to leave, but Garovel made him wait around a bit longer.

'Just being diligent,' the reaper said. 'We don't actually know why this guy attacked her.'

'Does it matter?'

Garovel shrugged. 'We're uninformed intruders in this situation. For all we know, she could suddenly decide to kill him after we're gone.'

'You think so?'

'No. But that's not the point. We're making assumptions about the

situation which are PROBABLY correct, but let's at least wait until we hear sirens before leaving, eh? Better safe than sorry, y'know.'

'Hmm. Alright.'

Sirens soon arrived as expected, however, and Hector took his leave.

His mind returned to those unintended buttons again. They'd seemed like a minor thing, just a collective error on his part. But as he thought about it, he began to understand; they were not an error. If anything they were the opposite. They were extra. He'd created something which had more to it than expected.

And that had never happened before."  
"308

--donation bonus (day #15, post 2/5)--

Hector's creations had always been underachieved approximations. Unless he stopped and concentrated hard for several minutes, he could never make anything more than a crude outline of what was in his head. But this was evidence of a change, evidence that his power had grown stronger than perhaps he thought. A frightening thought, in a way... but honestly, he found it more exciting than anything, as if his iron was now stronger than he was. And if that were true, then he only need catch up to it.

He wanted to try again. More elaborate still. Once they'd returned to the warehouse, he set to work. The rear sandlot provided ample space for just about anything he wanted to try, and the tall fences, weathered as they were, would ensure privacy.

His imagination ran wild with the possibilities. "What should I try to make?"

'I'm not even sure how powerful you've become,' said Garovel. 'Why not try for something really outrageous? Something you don't even think you can do, that is. Establish an upper limit, then work backwards to find where your ability caps out.'

"Hmm... uhh... Oh, how about a catapult? You think?"

'I was gonna suggest an orbital satellite, but whatever.'

He took a deep breath. He imagined a catapult in his head--or at least something that seemed like a catapult--and then pressed his gloves to the sand.

A slew of metal pillars shot up together. They clanged together, trying to connect with one another and failing, and then fell over in a noisy heap.

‘Huh. Well, that was underwhelming.’

“I don’t... think that was my power’s fault...”

‘Hmm?’

“I just... umm... I thought it was simple, but... I don’t really know how a catapult works, to be honest...”

Garovel stared at him a moment. And then burst out laughing. ‘Great! Real smart, Hector!’

He flushed with embarrassment but couldn’t help smiling a little. “I thought if I just imagined a catapult-shaped... thing, then it’d just kind of appear, but--agh, stop laughing!”

"309

--donation bonus (day #18, post 3/5)--

‘I understand what you were thinking,’ said Garovel. ‘But no, that’s not the way it works. If you wanna create a machine--or any complex structure for that matter--then you have to know all the parts of it, as well as where they go. Essentially, a blueprint in your head.’

“Damn...”

‘And you should probably know how each piece functions as part of the whole.’

“Yeah, okay...”

‘Also, a basic understanding of how the fucking thing works in the first place might be helpful.’



"I get it, geez..."

'I can tell you all about catapults, actually. You've got the ballista and the springald and mangonel, but those all need rope or twine to operate. Maybe you could figure a creative solution around that, but you're probably better off going for a trebuchet. Then again, a really good trebuchet would use a sling AND a counterweight, which could be problematic, but hey, if this is just for practice, then what does it matter, right?'

"Uh. Th-that's nice, but I don't, um..."

'Yeah. Not very helpful without diagrams to look at. We can go find a library tomorrow, if you like. I'm sure they'd have plenty of useful reference books, catapults or no.'

"Guess I should..."

'In the meantime, though, why don't you try to make something that you actually have a proper idea about?'

"Right." He decided to go for something he'd practiced before. He held his gloved hands up in front of himself and concentrated. The metal gathered quickly and took form--the exact form, this time--and to his surprise, the gauntlets were completed in a fraction of the previous time.

'Wow,' said Garovel. 'That used to take you fifteen minutes, but just now--that couldn't have been more than thirty seconds.'

Hector waved his arms to see if the metal plates stayed linked together. They did. He added pointed fingertips, stubby metal claws. He grinned.

'I am sufficiently impressed. But also curious. C'mon. What else can you do?'"

"310

--donation bonus (day #15, post 4/5)--

Hector spent the rest of the night and morning practicing--or perhaps, playing--with metal. He made a sphere without any trouble, growing it into a wrecking ball. He hollowed it out, rendering it a mere wireframe,

and climbed inside, wondering if he could push it around like some kind of giant hamster ball. The frame was not structurally sound, however, and collapsed on top of him.

He also made a dome over the entire sandlot, which seemed to impress Garovel, especially when Hector demonstrated that he could empower it with his soul so that the reaper couldn't phase through.

After a while, though, he moved on to weapons. He reforged the same sword and shield that he had used against Geoffrey, same jagged edges and spikes. They were so much heavier than he remembered. Garovel helped him out with enhanced strength.

The sword and shield were both very crude, of course. He wondered how he might be able to rework them. The sword's jagged edges seemed somewhat useful, but they gave it more tearing power than cutting. He smoothed the blade out and detached it from his gauntlet. It fell tip-first into the sand. He gave it a metal hilt and picked it back up. 'Hmm. You don't have any training with a blade, do you?'

"Uh, n-no..."

'Want a few pointers?'

--++--++--

Stoker tried to keep his gaze nonchalant as he looked around the room another time. Karkash and Hoyohté were right there next to him. He eyed Nize again. 'You've gotta stop talking like this,' he told her in Vaelish. 'If Karkash hears you...'

'I know,' she said privately, also in Stoker's native tongue. 'But I can't take this anymore. Everything I've done--made my servants do--in the name of the Void. Purposeless brutality. Three hundred years, blindly doing whatever--'

'I get it,' said Stoker 'You're having a crisis of faith. But it will pass if you just relax and follow our orders.'

She stared at him. 'Such promises are a fool's comfort.'

"311

Stoker tried to ignore her remarks, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. She held his life in her hands, after all. If she truly ended up defecting from Abolish, he would have no choice but to follow her, lest she release him and find someone else--not that it would make much difference, if he had to fight Karkash. That was one thing he wanted to avoid at all costs.

Karkash was busy with their guest--a local reporter who had been badmouthing the government's sudden, unexplained increases in military expenditures. Stoker and Karkash had invited the man here to show him precisely where the money was going.

The bunker's old storage facility was a maze of ceiling-high shelves and crates, all containing decommissioned equipment that had been quietly imported from various foreign powers. It was still a work-in-progress by their Morgunov comrades, but Stoker was impressed nonetheless. He'd browsed the wares earlier and spotted a few RPGs and so forth, but the most appealing sight had been the pair of anti-aircraft batteries tucked away in the corner. Of course, such equipment was not strictly needed, given his and Karkash's abilities, but he quite appreciated the extra firepower. And from what he heard, more were on the way, which had not pleased Nize, of course.

To Stoker, Nize and the other reapers were large, hulking dragons--though, in truth, they looked like snakes, but given their propensity for flight, he had come to think of them more as dragons.

"I was surprised when I received your invitation," said the reporter. He gave a curt laugh, though it retained a nervous hint. "I'm still rather curious as to why you've showed me all of this. Are you two trying to blow the whistle on your bosses or...?"

"Not quite," said Stoker. "You are free to write whatever you like about what you see in this place, but we were hoping that you would change your views after this visit."

"312

"I'm sorry, but why would I do that?" said the reporter. "Not to be too blunt, but if anything, this visit has confirmed all of my worst suspicions."

“A moment,” said Karkash. He left the room, then soon returned. With the reporter’s son.

Slowly, the man’s expression became wary.

“You are free to write whatever you like,” Stoker repeated. “But your opinion holds weight with the public. We would appreciate it if your next article spoke fondly of what you have seen here today.”

“This--this is--! You can’t do this!”

Karkash held up the boy’s hand. “Do what?”

The kid looked terrified.

“W-whoa,” said the father. “Just--okay. Please don’t hurt my son. I’ll do as you ask.”

“We ask nothing,” said Karkash. “You do as you like. We do as we like.”

The man nodded shakily. “I understand. Please.”

‘He says he understands,’ said Hoyohté, ‘but that is doubtful. Break the boy’s finger.’

Karkash did so.

The boy shrieked in pain.

“I said I would cooperate!” the man yelled.

‘There was no need for that!’ said Nize.

Karkash ignored her. “I am clumsy.” He released the boy into his father’s arms. “In future, I will be more careful. As should you. Leaving city, for instance. Trying to hide. That would be clumsy.”

The man stood in front of his crying son. “I understand,” he said again. “I do. Believe me.”

A brief silence took hold until Stoker broke it. “We are not keeping you here. You may leave whenever you wish.”

They scurried away. After they were gone, however, the quiet returned, stronger than before while Hoyohté eyed Nize.

‘You are displeased again,’ Hoyóhté said in Vaelish. She floated around Karkash. ‘It seems we have a fundamental disagreement. Perhaps it is time we worked it out.’

Stoker looked at Nize. ‘Don’t.’

‘Your methods are needlessly cruel,’ said Nize for all to hear.

Stoker’s posture stiffened.

“I barely hurt the child,” said Karkash, much more fluent now in Vaelish. “And what difference does it make? Why do you think we came to this country?”

"313

‘Please,’ said Stoker. ‘If you want to leave Abolish, then fine, we’ll do that. But not like this. We have to be smarter.’

Nize let his words sink in. She looked at the others. ‘I suppose you are right,’ she told them.

Hoyóhté’s gaze lingered, however. ‘You have no complaints, then?’

Nize glanced at Stoker. ‘The extra violence didn’t sit well with me, but then, they are all going to die, anyway.’

“Your reluctance has not gone unnoticed,” said Karkash. “Are you truly prepared to act as the Void wills us?”

“Of course we are,” said Stoker.

“She demonstrated no such hesitation before. So why does she now?”

“She doesn’t. She understands perfectly.”

‘Yes,’ said Nize. ‘I was mistaken to speak so unthinkingly.’

It took a bit more silence, followed by more reassurances, but Hoyóhté and Karkash finally dropped the matter, and at length, the four of them exited the bunker together. Atreyan soldiers paid them frequent stares, no doubt because Stoker’s and Karkash’s sherwani coats stood out so prominently from all the blue-and-white uniforms.

‘We will flee at the soonest opportunity,’ Nize said to him.

He nearly sighed. ‘What prompted this change of heart, anyway? We’ve been together for almost two years now, and you didn’t start acting this way until a couple months ago.’

‘It was Germal’s doing,’ she said.

‘Germal? That guy with the horn in his head? Seriously?’

‘He made me doubt the Void--doubt that I can truly feel its presence. And now, I... I’m certain that I can’t. It’s all been a lie. I used to believe it so strongly, but that was only because I wanted to hear it, to know its grandeur. I was pretending--so much so that I even fooled myself. But the Void isn’t real. It’s a mad dream.’

‘Wow. Good thing I never bought into that shit in the first place, then.’

‘What? You didn’t? But you said you did. You took all the oaths and swore your allegiances to me and Abolish.’”

"314 -- XXXVII.

--donation bonus (day #16, post 1/5)--

‘Of course,’ said Stoker. ‘I wanted to live. I’d have said whatever you wanted me to say.’

‘What?’ said Nize. ‘But... but the oaths...’

‘Yeah. Um. You’re incredibly gullible, by the way. Not sure if you knew that about yourself.’

‘I am not!’

‘Uh-huh. Anyway, you do realize what running means, right?’

‘They will hunt us down, yes. But certain groups among the Vanguard might be willing to shelter us. Assuming we can find them.’

‘Don’t get your hopes up. I think we should just go find a place to lie low.’

‘First, we need an opening to escape. It won’t do to have seven

servants chasing after us right from the start.'

'Yeah, I'd prefer to avoid that, too.'

Chapter Thirty-Seven: 'Avail thyself...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Colt sat feeding Stephanie by the spoonful. She had only puked on him once in the past few days, so he was wondering if this new baby food agreed with her better.

It had been six days since their arrival in Klein. The nights were cold out here, and the warehouse had no electricity or heating, but between the campfire he made and the mountain of blankets Hector brought back, there was ample warmth to go around.

Hector was gone most of the time, even during the day. It seemed like he only ever returned to train or deliver supplies. Colt wasn't even sure if the kid was sleeping. On the fourth night, he showed up in a bloody shirt with no less than two dozen bullet holes in it and just collapsed in front of the fire. And as soon as he woke up, he went right back out again. On the fifth day, even Garovel was telling him to slow down.

Bohwanox sometimes ventured out with Hector as well, but Colt was quite content to stay with the children around the clock. It wasn't the most exciting thing, but he'd had his fill of excitement lately. And besides, Hector had brought him a portable television to keep updated on events."

"314 -- XXXVII.

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"315

--donation bonus (day #16, post 2/5)--

When the news wasn’t talking about the military budget or international



tension between Rendon and Kahm, it was talking about the most wanted criminal in the country gallivanting around Klein without being caught. Colt wondered if all those bullet holes had been the police trying to bring him down.

Of course, the news didn't seem to care much about all the other criminals that had turned up in jail cells; but perhaps the police were happy enough to take the credit there.

Colt was impressed that Hector had managed to avoid leading his pursuers back here, but regardless, he figured that wouldn't last much longer. Or he hoped so, because the warehouse didn't have running water or even a bathtub. Instead, he'd managed to rig up a crude shower, of sorts, consisting of an old hand pump, a broad hose, and several jugs of water from the nearby gas station. It worked, but a single pumping motion equated to a single burst of water. He had never experienced a more annoying method of wash.

He could hear Hector stomping around in the sandlot out back. Every now and then, the ground would shake, making him wonder what the hell the kid was doing. But he stayed put. He wasn't feeling his best at the moment, and Stephanie needed to finish eating, anyway.

The day's meditation had left Colt with aching pains in his head and hands both. He wasn't the type to complain and so kept it to himself, but as the evening drew on, he began to find it increasingly bothersome.

Then a sudden tremor spiked through his fingertips. The spoon in his hand snapped in two. He looked at the pieces, confused.

Bohwanox was quick to take notice. 'Colt, put Stephanie down.'

"Why?"

Stephanie's arm began to bleed where Colt was holding her, and she started crying.

'Put her down now!' said Bohwanox.

He set her next to Thomas and stepped away.

'I believe your ability has manifested,' the reaper said."

--donation bonus (day #16, post 3/5)--

Colt looked at the blood on his fingers. It wasn't a lot, thankfully, but the fact that it belonged to his daughter was already too much cause for concern. "I hurt her? What the fuck did I just do?!"

'Wait right there. My knowledge here is limited.' Bohwanox left and soon returned with Garovel and Hector.

Hector went straight for Stephanie.

Garovel floated around Colt. 'Show me your hands, please.'

He held them out.

'Hmm. No trace elements. Not materialization. Hector, how is she?'

"Uh... I think she's okay. It's just a little cut. The bleeding's almost stopped already."

'A cut?' Garovel moved to examine the girl's arm.

Colt was afraid to even get close to her again.

'Ah,' said Garovel after a spell. 'I see. You have a destruction ability.'

'What does that mean, exactly?' said Bohwanox.

'The destruction type is considerably simpler than the other types, because all such abilities are basically the same. Essentially, you have the power to rip space apart.'

Colt cocked an eyebrow. "...'scuse me?"

'At the moment, of course, your power is still quite weak, but it is nonetheless dangerous. You shouldn't hold the children until you're able to get it under control.'

"How long will that be?"

'If you focus on your meditation, it shouldn't be more than a couple days.'

"Um," said Hector, "sorry to interrupt, but... Colt can rip space apart? Ah, is that...? I mean--how the fuck?"

‘Destruction type abilities make a kind of “path.” That is, a path which should not otherwise exist.’ Garovel eyed Colt. ‘Theoretically, no matter how tough or durable something is, you can still destroy it, because you attack the space it occupies, rather than the thing itself.’

Colt eyed his hands again. “Hmm.”

‘This is also called the “geometric” type by some, because the “path” you make always conforms to some two-dimensional pattern. Right now, it’s too early to tell what your shape is, but it doesn’t really make much difference. Whether you destroy things with squares or circles or some crazy polygon with a thousand sides, the end result is the same. It’s still destroyed.’”

"317

--donation bonus (day #16, post 4/5)--

“Destruction, huh?” Colt made two fists. “I can work with that.”

‘There are very few things which can withstand spatial distortions,’ said Garovel. ‘And with sufficient development of your power, there will likely be NOTHING that can.’

“Cool. So I need to get meditating, then?”

‘Yeah.’

“Before that,” said Hector, “there’s, uh... something I’ve been meaning to ask. These, ah, servant abilities... how many different kinds are there?”

‘Six,’ said Garovel. ‘That is, there are six broad categories. As for individual abilities, there’s no set number, as far as I know. But the six categories are called materialization, transfiguration, alteration, destruction, mutation, and integration.’

“I remember you mentioning the first three before,” said Hector. “I’m materialization, right?”

‘Right. You already know people with the first four. Desmond is transfiguration; Roman is alteration; and of course, Colt is destruction. As far as the other two types are concerned, mutation is by far the rarest type, so it’s not surprising that you haven’t met someone with it

yet.'

"Why is it so rare?" said Hector. "Is it, like, really powerful or something...?"

'Actually, it's kinda the opposite problem. The mutation type has a reputation for being weaker than the others--which isn't actually true, by the way. But a lot of reapers don't like it, because it's much more of a double-edged sword than any other type. See, mutation abilities allow the user to make PERMANENT changes to their body. Unlike transfiguration, which changes one's body chemistry temporarily, mutation will cause the servant's regeneration power to maintain its changes. This means that even just learning to control the ability is dangerous, because the servant could end up accidentally disfiguring or disabling themselves.'

"Yikes..."

'Yeah. And even if it's a problem that normally could be fixed with surgery, the servant will still just regenerate to its mutated state. The only potential solution is to induce a second change which counters the detrimental effects of the first change--and that can easily end up making the problem worse.'

"Damn," said Colt. "Glad I didn't get saddled with that shit."  
"318

--donation bonus (day #16, post 5/5)--

Garovel nodded. 'Sometimes, mutation users screw their bodies up so badly that there's no hope of fixing it anymore. Which can be quite horrific. And at that point, releasing their soul is a mercy. I also know that the general stigma around the mutation type makes it so a lot of reapers won't even bother with a servant who has it. Because like I said, they see it as weaker than all others and not worth the trouble.'

"Gah... but, ah, how do they change themselves? I mean, like, what's an example of a mutation type power?"

'Oh. Um. Admittedly, I'm not too clear on that, myself. Mutation is the one I know the least about. The rarity makes it difficult to study. You'd have to talk to a specialist.'

“Really?” said Hector. “But... you’ve been alive for thousands of years. Not to sound rude, but... you never found the time to learn about it?”

‘Well,’ said Garovel, ‘take materialization, for instance. We know that it’s centered around elements; but of course, before mankind discovered those elements, we had no idea that was the case. That knowledge revealed critical details about the way materialization works. Similar discoveries have been made in relation to all the types. So it’s not like the knowledge has just been sitting around in a book somewhere, waiting for me to read and suddenly understand it all.’

“Oh...”

‘Hell, a thousand years ago, we thought the mutation type was some kind of awful disease. Some reapers might even still believe that.’

“I d-didn’t mean to imply you were lazy or anything...”

‘I know. But I’ll admit, in recent years, I haven’t been quite as studious about the abilities as I used to be.’

‘Hmm,’ said Bohwanox. ‘I remember hearing somewhere that alteration types are typically the strongest. Is that true?’

‘I’ve heard that, too,’ said Garovel. ‘I’m not sure how much truth is in it, though. They’re certainly versatile, but strongest? That seems like a useless generalization. Dangerous, too.’”

"319

--donation bonus (day #17, post 1/5)--

‘Dangerous?’ said Bohwanox. ‘What do you mean?’

‘We shouldn’t try to measure the worth of our servants by the abilities they possess. I despise reapers who discard their servants because they think the ability isn’t good enough.’

“What about the other type mentioned?” said Hector. “What was it? Integration?”

‘Hold on,’ said Bohwanox. ‘I’d still like to know more about why people think alteration is the strongest.’

Garovel hesitated, looking between the two. 'Well, um. Alteration allows the user to employ a specific force to essentially anything. Depending on what that force is, the results can be quite intimidating. As for integration, that involves the combining of materials. People with integration are very highly valued among the big factions, because they tend to provide support as weapon makers and so forth. They're generally protected from having to see combat, but I'm sure their abilities could be useful in a fight, too.'

Hector tilted his head. "So... someone like that could be a really useful ally, then."

'Yep.'

Abruptly, Colt realized that Stephanie had stopped crying a while ago. She just seemed to be looking up at Hector as he cradled her in his arms.

"Hey, kid. You're pretty good at that."

"At what?"

"That. Look how calm she is."

Hector looked at her. He winced as she started screaming again, right into his face this time.

Colt squinted against the noise. "Could be wrong, I s'pose."

They moved on to meditation together. Garovel advised him to focus on imagining a kind of "tunnel," supposedly representative of whatever his "path" of destruction would be.

'It'd be helpful to imagine your geometric shape digging the tunnel,' said Garovel. 'And since we don't know what yours is yet, just go through a variety of them in your head.'

"Spray 'n pray, huh?"

'Pretty much, yeah.'

His hands still throbbed. If anything, they felt even worse. And when he opened his eyes again, he found his palms covered in blood. The skin was practically shredded."

"320 -- XXXVIII.

--donation bonus (day #17, post 2/5)--

Bohwanox invoked the regeneration, relieving the pain as well, and Colt returned to meditating.

It was not long before Hector stopped his own meditation and left. Garovel followed, though not quickly.

Colt could imagine what silent conversation the two were having. "Damn that kid. He's gonna lose his mind if he doesn't fucking relax."

Bohwanox's faceless hood tilted a little. 'Are you worried about him? I thought you only cared about your children.'

Colt just frowned.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: 'O, burgeoning snare...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Stoker followed Karkash into the King's office again. He didn't know what had gotten the other man so upset. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to find out, either, but Karkash did not seem willing to allow otherwise.

Karkash laid a newspaper out on the desk, and Stoker and Desmond both looked at it. There was an article on the third page, talking about the so-called Darksteel Soldier, now known to be a criminal by the name of Hector Goffe.

"This person is a servant," said Karkash.

"Oh, yeah," said Desmond. "I was meaning to go and kill that guy, but I haven't had the time."

"You know him?" said Stoker.

"I think so. We fought a few weeks back. I didn't catch his name, but I've heard about him using metal, so I'm pretty sure it's the same guy."

"You let him get away?" said Karkash.

Desmond just shrugged.

Karkash's eyes were daggers. Desmond seemed immune to their effects, however.

'You should have hunted him down already,' said Hoyohté. 'What if he returns with reinforcements?'

Desmond laughed, and his eyes widened. "I hope he does! I've been bored out of my skull!"

Ezmortig floated around his servant. 'Come to think of it, this Hector Goffe could be the reason Ozmere and Moss have not returned.'

Desmond's brow receded. "Hmm, you think so? He didn't seem strong enough to take down Moss."

'Perhaps he is more dangerous than we realized,' said Ezmortig. 'It is strange that he is not hiding like the Queen.'

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"321

--donation bonus (day #17, post 3/5)--

"Oh!" said Desmond, grinning. "You're right. It's like he's taunting us with all this media coverage, isn't it? Maybe he wants us to come after

him, eh? If so, that's pretty damn ballsy."

And suddenly, Stoker saw the opportunity there. On a silver platter. Right in front of his face.

Nize got there before him. 'Stoker and I will go hunt him down.'

Desmond looked at her. "Really? It's not like he's actually important. Even if he is giving us the middle finger, right now."

'No,' said Hoyohté. 'Karkash and I will go.'

Desmond blinked at her, too. "Why are you all raring to go kill someone you've never even seen? I told you he's not important. Don't you have more pressing matters to attend to?"

'That is why we will go by ourselves,' said Hoyohté. She turned to Nize and Stoker. 'We will only be gone a day--two at the most. You can handle matters in the meantime, yes?'

"Of course," said Stoker. 'This works, too,' he thought. 'As long as we don't have Karkash breathing down our necks, sneaking out of the city will be simple. The others won't notice until we're long gone.'

Nize privately concurred.

'You shouldn't go alone,' said Ezmortig. 'We don't know how strong the enemy is.'

"Not necessary," said Karkash. "We know he uses metal."

'...So?'

"So he's already fucked," said Stoker. "Karkash can control electromagnetic fields."

--++--++--

Colt's meditation went surprisingly smoothly. He hated it, but now that it had become the difference between being able to safely hold his children and not, he started taking it much more seriously. Within a day, he was able to not only keep his power subdued, but he could also target an object half a meter away from him. However, its actual destructive power still seemed incredibly weak. He couldn't even break a solid pane of glass on the first try. He took to practicing his aim against a chalk circle he'd drawn on the wall."

--donation bonus (day #17, post 4/5)--

Aiming was also a bit awkward for him. The path of destruction sprung from Colt's hands, but just putting an open palm forward was too clumsy and inaccurate, he felt. He tried putting two fingers forward like a childish pistol, but that wasn't doing it for him, either. In the end, he just used an unloaded gun and adjusted for the slightly off-center firing point for its invisible "bullets." He found it much more comfortable.

After a while, though, he stopped. He did find the power interesting, but at least for now, a regular gun was still much more useful. The only upside he could see to this was that it didn't require ammo. He supposed another plus might be that it didn't have the potential to jam like a normal gun did, but Colt always made sure to take proper care of his firearms and stayed away from models that were prone to operating problems, anyway.

He bathed the kids in a wash basin one at a time, gave them fresh diapers, and then fed them.

'I'm curious,' said Bohwanox. 'What do you intend to do with them when they are older?'

For a time, Colt didn't answer. That was a question he had been dreading. "I'm not sure," he eventually said.

'Have you not given it much thought?'

"No, I have. I just. Haven't come up with a good answer."

'Hmm. If you intend to stay on the run indefinitely, what kind of life could you provide for them?'

Colt only stared at them.

'I'm guessing you don't see a foster home as a viable option.'

"They aren't going to grow up in a place like that. Not as long as I'm still breathing."

'What's wrong with foster homes?'

Colt eyed the reaper. "Go haunt one for a few years and then ask me that question again."

'Is that personal experience I'm hearing or just the jaded view of an ex-cop?'

His mouth twisted distastefully. "Both.""  
"323

--donation bonus (day #17, post 5/5)--

'I am sorry to hear that,' said Bowhanox.

"I was fine," said Colt. "Other kids weren't."

'...Because you beat the hell out of them?'

"What? No! Believe it or not, I was actually a pretty good kid."

'Not believing it.'

"I might've had a thicker skin than most kids, and I might've gotten into a few fights, but I wasn't a fucking bully."

'Let me guess. You beat up the bullies, instead.'

"Pfft, no. I was like nine. They kicked the shit out of me."

'But you tried to beat them up, yes?'

"...Yes."

'I knew it.'

"What the fuck happened to keeping this relationship strictly professional?"

'Oh, relax. Tough guy can't even handle a bit of friendly ribbing.'

Colt just grumbled.

'I am sure we could find a much better foster home, you know. Stake it out for a while, make extra sure that the caretakers are not hiding any monstrous secrets or anything.'

“Tch. Even if that were possible, what the fuck would I do without my kids, huh? What would my life become?”

Bohwanox hesitated. ‘Uh... gallantly protecting me from monsters?’

“Go fuck yourself.”

The reaper snorted a laugh. ‘I get it. They are your reason for living. But is that what is honestly best for them?’

“I’ll figure something out.”

‘Hmm. Then I will do my best to help with that.’

Colt cocked an eyebrow at the reaper. Their conversation was interrupted, however, when Garovel’s voice broke in.

‘Hey! You two!’ he said, descending from the roof.

They waited for him to elaborate.

‘So there are three helicopters and an army of cops chasing Hector right now.’

Colt had to snicker.

‘He’s on foot. I’m sure he’d appreciate you and your car.’

“We finally gonna leave this town?” he said, moving to gather their things.

‘Yeah, I’m thinking we should.’

“About damn time.”

--+-+--+-

‘Colt is en route,’ came Garovel’s voice from the other side of the city.

‘That’s nice.’ And not for the first time today, Hector tumbled off the roof of a building with more than twenty floors.”

"324

He pulled a pillar up from the ground to meet him, giving it a curve and turning it into a giant, spiraling slide. He swirled down, rolling over himself and banging against its iron siding until it spit him out onto the open road. He could feel his spine repairing itself as he struggled to his feet again.

He spotted a police chopper ahead, along with a fleet of trucks turning onto the street.

Hector ran up to the adjacent building and pulled a sudden iron tower up beneath his feet. He shot up, reaching the roof in seconds and then destroying both the slide and platform before running off again.

The police had been making it increasingly difficult to protect people--and for that matter, so had the people themselves. All the media coverage about the identity of the Darksteel Soldier and why the police were having so much trouble catching him had of course revealed Hector's usage of metal to the general public; and once details of the Calman High massacre began to circulate, connections were soon made. Geoffrey's puppets had suffocated because of freakish metal encasing, after all, and there wasn't much hope of explaining that they were already dead and being used to kill even more people.

As such, the Darksteel Soldier had been labeled as no longer just a criminal, nor even just a killer. Now, he was a mass murderer. And that was enough attention so that almost anyone who saw him would immediately call the police. Even people he had just saved were quick to lose it and scream for help. Hector wasn't looking for their praise, but it was still frustrating and tiresome all the same.

Garovel asked him for his location, and Hector gave it as best he could. He soon spotted all three helicopters still following him and jumped off the roof--this time intentionally--and landed on a shorter building. From there, he could leap down to the next street over without splattering against the concrete."

"325

Hector dropped right in front of a group of policemen. They already had their weapons drawn and fired a slew of rounds at him before he could render their guns useless with iron. And even without their weapons, they still seemed intent on taking him down, moving to surround him. He didn't want to go back up to the rooftops with the

helicopters, so he just ran through the last gap in the police line.

More cops were waiting around the corner, however. And word must have gotten around about the ineffectiveness of bullets, because they were holding tasers instead. Six pairs of charged electrodes flew toward him on conductive wires. He stopped five with iron walls, but the last one found his shoulder.

He dropped to his hands and knees. The electricity didn't hurt, of course, but controlling his limbs was abruptly difficult. He pressed a hand to the ground, and an iron pillar launched him up and over the officers. His landing was rough, but he was back on his feet quickly enough and running away again.

Next, four white-and-black SUVs skidded to a stop in front of him, but Hector just wrapped the vehicles in metal before the tactical teams could exit. He ran past and released the metal after turning the next corner.

Finally, he saw Colt's car and ran toward it.

More cops got in his way, however.

A flash of anger ran through him. Why couldn't they be this persistent about catching actual criminals? He'd delivered a local mob boss to their doorstep the night before, along with a whole cabinet of incriminating documents, but did that matter now? Of course not.

He covered their tasers in metal, then their legs, just enough to incapacitate them. He ran for the car again, but two more cops appeared and jumped on top of him. The anger returned, stronger.

He flung the first cop off, then grabbed the other's arm and broke it. The man screamed out in pain.

Hector stopped, suddenly horrified with himself. That shouldn't have happened. He wasn't supposed to hurt cops."

"326

For a moment, Hector could only stare at the cop writhing on the ground. He'd broken normal people's bones before, but those had at least been violent criminals. This guy was just doing his job.

‘Hector!’ came Garovel’s yell. ‘Hurry up!’

More cops were coming. He knew he couldn’t stay. He threw the injured man a last look. “I’m sorry!” was all he could manage. He ran off and jumped into Colt’s car.

They sped off, but Hector could still see more helicopters and vehicles in pursuit.

“Can you put a barricade behind us?” said Colt.

“I don’t want to make them crash!” said Hector. “That could kill someone!”

Colt grumbled under his breath, and then said, “Fine. I’ll do it the hard way. Climb into the backseat and hold onto the kids for me.”

Hector did as the man said. The babies started whining as he nestled them in his arms, wrapping them in iron along with himself. He could feel the car’s speed climbing rapidly. They soon encountered a police blockade.

“Keep going,” said Hector.

“You sure?” said Colt.

“Yeah.”

Bridge structure was the first thing he studied when he visited the library the other day. Committing a few general designs to memory had been no great feat, and this time, the bridge he constructed was much sturdier. The ramp leading up to it was solid iron all the way through, providing ample support for the extension over the blockade, and the ramp leading back down was just as smooth. Hector annihilated the bridge behind them.

Colt had the reapers scout ahead for him, aiding his efforts to lose the helicopters. The man’s driving was frightening, yet still somehow precise. He could navigate around parked cars in narrow streets without losing much speed, and Hector frequently lost sight of the choppers between the tall buildings, which likely meant that they were having the same problem.

“You’re really good at driving...”

“This car’s a piece of shit.””



Bohwanox found them a tight intersection with a small underground tunnel, no doubt meant to let cars pass below the train tracks at ground level. Colt went into the tunnel, stopped the car when they were out of view, and then doubled back and turned down a different street.

The reapers soon confirmed that there was no one following.

Colt headed northeast. "So where the hell do we go now?" he said as they reached the city's outer limits. "Still think we shouldn't leave the country?"

The two reapers kept pace with the vehicle on either side.

'Garovel, what do you think?'

'I vote for Zeke.'

'Why?'

'It's on the way to Walton, where we might have a friend.' He looked at Hector. 'Perhaps it's time we gave Gina a call.'

"Who's Gina?" said Colt.

'Admittedly,' said Garovel, 'we don't know all that much about her. But she and her boss helped us out before. She might not be so welcoming with all the attention Hector's gotten, but it's worth trying.'

Hector found her number in his cellphone, but the call didn't go through. "I don't have reception..."

'Try again when we get to Zeke.'

"Right."

The cabin grew quiet for a while. Hector removed his helm and watched the long stretches of tawny grassland pass by the window, flat as far as the eye could see with only the occasional tree to break the pattern.

‘How are you feeling?’ Garovel said privately.

Hector frowned. ‘Garovel, I hurt a cop...’

‘I saw.’

His frown only deepened.

‘It was an unfortunate accident,’ said Garovel. ‘Don’t get hung up on--’

‘No, I... I mean, that’s just it... I did it on purpose.’

The reaper was quiet a moment. ‘What?’

‘For a second there, I... I was just so pissed off... because of... because of everything, I guess.’ He rubbed his forehead and took a long breath. ‘The guy was like the hundredth person to get in my way, and I just... I lost my head... I wanted to hurt him. And I did.’”  
"328

‘What are you saying?’ said Garovel, abruptly more seriously. ‘Hector, are you saying you don’t regret hurting that man?’

‘What? No! Of course I regret it! That’s what I was trying to say!’

‘Good. That’s the way it should be. Shit, you really had me worried for a second.’

‘What’re you--?’

‘Hector, listen to me. You’ve been through a lot. You made a mistake. You’ve acknowledged it. Now just don’t do it again.’

He furrowed his brow, blinking. ‘I mean, ah... of course, I’ll try, but what if I can’t? That’s what I’m worried about.’ He looked at his hands. ‘Honestly, I’m kinda scared of myself right now...’

‘You’ve been far too high-strung, lately. You know you have. Are you so surprised that it ended up affecting you?’

‘But... I didn’t think I’d hurt an innocent person...’

‘Well, you did. And don’t forget it. Remember this as a lesson. You have to take care of yourself, too. You’re not invincible. I know

sometimes it might seem like you are, but you're not. You have to keep a clear head.'

He gave a slow nod. 'Is this... because I've been neglecting my meditation?'

'I wouldn't blame it all on that, but I do think meditation would certainly help you relax. As would some fucking rest.'

'I, ah... I guess you're right.'

'Duh. Don't you know by now how ridiculously wise I am?'

Hector tried to get some sleep. It did not go smoothly. Even after the enhancements wore off and the exhaustion kicked in, his brain still wanted to stubbornly hold on to consciousness. With nothing else to do, he just started to meditate right there in the backseat. And after a time of forcing himself to empty his head, he was finally able to fall asleep.

When he awoke, Stephanie and Thomas were both fidgeting in his arms. Then the smell hit him, hard enough to make his eyes water. Someone needed their diaper changed. Perhaps two someones."

"329

Thankfully, they'd already stopped at a gas station, and Hector was quick to seek refuge in the air outside the car.

Colt was filling up the tank. The man smirked when he saw Hector. "Was wondering if you'd be able to sleep through that."

Hector enjoyed another gulp of fresh air before responding. "Where are we?"

"Nearly to Maxwell," said Colt. "Maybe you should try to call your friend again."

"Ah... I could help you change the kids, if you want."

"You know how to change a diaper?"

"Yeah. My, uh..." He frowned. "Yeah, I know how."

"Mm. Still, you should call your friend. I'm fine changing them both."

Hector nodded and pulled out his phone. To his surprise, he already had several missed calls from Gina. She'd sent a few texts, as well, all warning him that she thought someone might be coming to kill him. Not exactly news, generally-speaking, but she had details. Karkash. A man who could control electromagnetic fields.

Garovel floated over his shoulder, reading. 'Looks like Gina's been busy.'

He decided to give her a call.

She picked up after a single ring. <"Hector!">

"Uh, h-hi."

<"You got my messages?">

"Y-yeah."

<"I'm not completely sure that they're coming after you, to be honest. It sounded like they were talking to reapers, so I only caught half the conversation, but they mentioned someone who uses metal being in trouble because of Karkash--who, by the way, does not sound like a very nice person. After seeing you in the news, I figured the metal guy was you. What the hell happened to you, anyway? You didn't actually kill all those people, right?">

Hector blinked a few times. "N-no, of course I didn't. How do you know about this Karkash, anyway? It sounds like you bugged someone or--"

<"Yeah, I planted bugs all over Belgrant Castle. The people who are holding the King hostage--I've been listening to their conversations.">

"What?!"

"330

<"I know,"> said Gina. <"I risked my life for this intel. You're welcome, by the way.">

"Er, thanks, but--agh, you shouldn't have done that. It's way too dangerous."

<“I’m being careful. Got myself a cozy little underground lair. Anyhow, it’s you who should be careful.”>

‘Ask her what she’s learned about their plans,’ said Garovel. ‘And put her on speaker so Colt and Bohwanox can listen, too.’

Hector held the phone out as Garovel invited the other two over.

<“I’ve only been listening for a few days, but I know that there are eight servants in Sescoria right now. And they’ve been torturing King William, but you probably guessed that by now.”>

Hector clenched his jaw. The King’s sudden loss of a limb had of course been major news. The media attributed it to a freak infection, whereupon the arm had to be amputated in order to save his life. Hector and Garovel hadn’t bought that pile of horseshit for a second. “Do you know which one of them took his arm?”

<“It was definitely the guy called Desmond. He really likes to talk about it.”>

“I’ve met him,” Hector said lowly.

<“But that’s not the juiciest thing I’ve learned. In two weeks, they’re planning to destroy an entire town and make it look like Rendon is responsible. Right now, they’re still trying to prepare public opinion. You’ve probably seen some of the media coverage about how hostile Rendon and Kahm are, supposedly. Or maybe they ARE that hostile. It sounds like Abolish might have agents in those countries, too.”>

‘A multinational conflict,’ said Garovel, eyeing the others. ‘Ask her which town they intend to destroy.’

“Which town?”

<“It’s called Harold. Northwest of Sescoria. It’s not very big. Hopefully, I can find out who they’re sending and what their abilities are.”>

Colt tilted his head. “Why Harold? Why don’t they just stage the attack in the capital?”

<“Who’s that talking?”>

“Sorry, this is Colt. He’s... an ally. You can trust him.””

<“Hmm. Well, anyway, to answer your question, I’m pretty sure they want to use Sescoria as their base of operations. They’ve been stockpiling weapons and building a perimeter around the city. It wouldn’t make much sense to attack it.”>

‘At least not yet,’ added Garovel. ‘Ask her about Roman.’

“Is there any news from Roman?” said Hector.

<“He contacted me a couple weeks ago, but only to say that their leads in Korgum didn’t pan out.”>

“Ah--are they okay?”

<“He didn’t go into detail, but it sounded like they’ve had a rough time of it, as well. I’ll let you know if Master Roman contacts me again. I’m sure he’ll be interested to hear about your situation, too.”>

“Th-thanks.”

<“Is there anything else I can do for you?”>

“Ah--we were just on our way to Walton, actually. We were, uh, hoping for a place to stay. Temporarily, I mean.”

<“I would take you in, but I’m not in Walton, right now. I’m in Sescoria. And I doubt you want to come here.”>

“Right...”

<“If you want, I could make some calls and find you a different place.”>

Hector eyed the others. Garovel shook his head, and Hector said, “No, that’s okay. We’ll figure something else out.”

<“Alrighty.”>

“Thank you for the information,” he said. “And please, um. Be careful.”

<“Same to you. I’ll call you whenever I learn anything useful.”>

“And if you, uh--if you--ah...”

<“What?”>

"I-if you get into trouble, then please call me. I'll come help you."

She paused for a giggle. <"You'd never reach me in time, but thanks.">  
And she hung up.

"Pretty brave friend you got there," said Colt.

"Yeah..."

--+-+--+--

Stoker concealed the tattoo on his face under a gray hood as he drove. There weren't many ways out of Sescoria, at the moment. All the major roads were being watched, and the smaller ones had been closed off. It was fortunate, then, that Stoker was supposed to be the one watching the southern gate.

Or at least, it seemed fortunate--right up until Nize informed him that Karkash was standing in the middle of the road straight ahead. Arms folded. Waiting."

"332 -- XXXIX.

Stoker evaluated his options. Traffic was rather heavy. A high speed chase would be difficult, at best, and Karkash's magnetism had a range of thirty meters. Any car within that distance would not be going anywhere unless Karkash allowed it. And if Nize abandoned Stoker to flee on her own, Karkash would surely kill her with soul-infused lightning; or, supposing she fled straight downward, Karkash would still be able to reach her underground with a soul-strengthened magnetic field.

However, given that Karkash had not already attacked them, perhaps a fight was yet avoidable.

Stoker pulled over and exited the vehicle. He stepped onto the grassy median with Karkash. The noise from the cars all around them meant he had to get closer to the man than he would have liked in order to exchange words.

"What are you doing out here?" Stoker said in Vaelish. "You were supposed to be hunting down the servant with metal."

‘Have you truly not realized, even now?’ said Hoyóhté, floating behind her servant. ‘We were never going to hunt that person down. He is unimportant. This was only ever a trap for the two of you.’

Stoker eyed them both carefully. He decided to feign innocence until there was no other option. “A trap? Why would you need to set a trap for us?” In the meantime, however, he took note of the cool afternoon air. That could prove helpful.

Karkash ignored the question and asked his own. “Where were you going?”

‘We received new orders while you were gone,’ lied Nize. ‘Our presence was requested in Kahm.’

‘Then I am sure you will not mind returning to the castle and having the others confirm that for us.’

‘Of course.’

‘After you, then.’

No one moved.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: ‘O, turbulent cloud...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Stoker met Karkash’s stare evenly. In truth, he was afraid of the man, but there was no room for fear now. And he wasn’t weak, either. He could fight. If he played smart, he might even win. So that’s what he did.

Stoker slowly put both arms up as if to surrender."  
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"333

Karkash did not take the bait. Electricity gathered in his fist, and Stoker only had a moment to shield Nize from the attack.

The current ripped through his body, explosions of pain everywhere, but Stoker was no stranger to such agony. He used transfiguration, after all, arguably the most painful class of servant abilities.

Transfiguration was a power for the thinking man. It required practice, precision, and chemistry. Its true strength was lost on the simple-minded.

Stoker could replace any part of his body with hydrogen--not so threatening a power as Karkash's, to be sure, but like most transfiguration abilities, it was prone to being underestimated, as others had learned to their cost.

Stoker's back and arms sizzled beneath his clothes. Hydrogen bonded with the oxygen in his blood and skin to create water en masse, which vaporized immediately; and when it hit the cool air, the result was a sudden fog, expanding quickly out from Stoker's flesh. He retreated into its pure white cover and added his soul to the cloud in order to prevent Hoyohté from sensing him.

Nize, on the other hand, could still sense Karkash and Hoyohté perfectly. Stoker's soul permeated the mist in a confused mass, but their souls remained clear beacons.

Stoker's missing flesh left a lingering burn, like being set on fire, but it did not last. Nize initiated the regeneration and enhanced his strength, then attached herself to his back to conceal her soul within his.

He needed an answer from her. 'It's only Karkash here, right? No other servants?'

'Yes,' she said privately.

Fleeing was perhaps still an option, he realized. He merely needed to leave Karkash's range, preferably with a new car. It would have been nice if letting Nize go deep underground were an option, but he knew that even if she managed to escape Karkash's reach, Abolish's subterranean net had already been completed. Just as Stoker and Karkash provided aerial defenses, another team specialized in below ground tactics. A gigantic, soul-empowered net was often used to prevent enemy reapers from infiltrating cities and regenerating their servants from scratch. Of course, it also prevented friendly reapers from leaving cities by the same means."

"334

'Karkash is lashing out,' said Nize. 'Careful on your right.'

A car flew toward him, and Stoker ducked under it. The cracking boom of lightning made the fog shudder and swirl. Magnetic waves shifted the air and flipped more vehicles, making traffic in both directions come screeching to a halt.

Stoker ran left, widening and deepening the fog. Sparks flew through the cloud, stirring the air, brewing up a storm. This was, after all, why Stoker and Karkash were anti-air specialists. Given time, their combined abilities could create weather more ferocious than any conventional aircraft could withstand.

A silver pickup truck appeared through the fog much too suddenly. It slammed into Stoker, knocking him clear off the road and through the wall of a grocery store. Debris and produce left people fleeing in all directions.

Stoker's fog subsided as his concentration did, as he was more concerned with struggling back to his feet while half the bones in his body shifted back into place and repaired themselves. He shoved the truck out of the way, its bearded driver either dead or unconscious at the wheel. He made his way outside again.

The violent changes in air pressure had already kicked up a small wind, and he knew that his cloud would soon be pushed away. He decided it would be wiser to attack before making more.

The miniscule amount of acid in his stomach would be of no great use

alone, but he could tunnel through his own body with hydrogen in order to reach the extra chlorine in his kidneys and the oxygen in his blood and lungs; and when strengthened with imaginary power, his acid would be both strong enough and voluminous enough to eat through even concrete within seconds.

‘Where is he?’ Stoker asked.

‘Straight ahead five meters, left two more, and you will be behind him.’

The acid swelled up as he ran, eating him from the inside, and as soon as he saw Karkash, he spat out a sizzling, bloody glob.”

"335

Hoyohté must have warned him, because Karkash was able to avoid the brunt of the acid. It splashed the side of his face only, and when Stoker threw a punch with all his strength, Karkash simply caught it. With his one unmelted eye, Karkash turned to look at Stoker.

He spat more acid. A bolt of electricity cut through it, igniting the hydrogen. Both men’s clothes caught fire, but Stoker took the worst of it as the flames relished the chance to spread throughout the hydrogen in his body. He dropped and rolled until the fire extinguished. He climbed to one knee as flesh all over his body was returning.

‘Nize,’ he said, running again, ‘are you alright?’

‘Y-yes...’

‘Where’s Hoyohté?’

‘She’s staying in front of him where he can protect her. I’m sure she’s also watching his back for him.’

Stoker growled. He was hoping they would have split up, but they apparently knew better. Their formation was ideal for low-visibility combat, because if Hoyohté had gone above the fog or below, she wouldn’t have been able to eliminate Karkash’s blind spots, which would have meant the advantage for Stoker. Wishful thinking, it seemed.

Another car came reeling through the fog, and Stoker had to sidestep it. He ran south, making more fog behind him. He knew that he could

take Karkash down with a simple bath of hydrogen gas, as the sparks in the air would make it explode immediately; but the problem was avoiding the explosion himself. A double-down scenario was certainly not ideal. He decided it was time to flee again.

He passed an overturned police car, and for a mad moment, considered stealing the officer's firearm before remembering the reason he hadn't brought his own to this fight.

Finally, he reached a part of the road where none of the vehicles were tumbling through the air. He picked a big blue truck and yanked the hapless civilian out.

Before he could jump in the driver's seat, however, a lightning bolt pierced his chest. His entire body spasmed violently, and he looked back to see Karkash in the distance, risen above the fog, hovering toward them."

"336

It was no great surprise to see the man flying. Karkash always kept enough metal under his clothes to support his own weight, and from there, it was merely a matter of manipulating magnetic fields around himself. Stoker spared it no thought, just like the hole in his chest.

In the driver's seat, he backed the truck up against oncoming traffic. He cut over the median and spun the wheel around until the truck was facing the open road. He floored it.

Karkash dwindled in the mirror. But he didn't disappear. And after a moment, Stoker saw lightning leap toward the truck and crash just behind it.

He stuck his arm out the window and left a trail of fog. It wasn't much, but at least it would make his giant metal deathtrap more difficult to hit.

'Nize?' he thought while his ribcage filled back in.

'I... agh...'

He couldn't exactly look back to check on her. 'Talk to me, Nize. Are you wounded?'

'Losing consciousness... just keep going...'

A wall of white filled the rearview mirror, but from what Stoker knew of Karkash's flying prowess, this truck probably wouldn't be enough to lose him.

-+--+--+-

Hector had to wait in the trunk while Colt booked a room at the Sunny Days Motel--a name which, by the look of the place, was perhaps more fitting ten years ago. No longer planning to go to Walton, they'd stayed on the outskirts of Maxwell, in want of a better destination.

Hector knew that he must have looked like hell, because there was only one bed in the room, and Colt conceded it to him straight away.

He managed to get some more sleep, letting the aches and fatigue wash over him again, but he was soon awoken by his phone. It was Gina.

<"Are you watching this?"> she said. <"Or are you already there?">

Hector glanced across the others. "What are you talking about?"

<"Are you near a television?">

"Yeah. Hold on..."

"337

Colt switched the TV on and found the live news broadcast almost immediately.

Hector stood. "What the hell is this...?"

Freak weather moving south of Sescoria, it said. Reports of deadly, ground-level thunderstorms. And of a flying man. And of numerous casualties.

'It's them,' said Garovel. 'No doubt.'

'Are they already making their move?' said Bohwanox. 'Your friend said we had two weeks.'

"Gina?" said Hector. "What do you know about this?"

<“Nothing. Sorry. If they planned this attack, then they did it somewhere I couldn’t overhear them.”>

He watched the helicopter footage. A giant trail of fog followed the highway, cutting through suburban towns south of Sescoria. He could see overturned vehicles on the side of the road, even lodged into the sides of buildings. The reporters were warning people in the vicinity to remain in their homes.

“That’s not very far from here,” said Hector.

‘You still need rest,’ said Garovel.

“Garovel, we both know I’m going. Let’s not waste time arguing.” He looked at Colt. “Let me borrow your car.”

‘You don’t even know how to drive,’ said Garovel.

“I’ll figure it out.”

Colt stood as well. “I’ll drive you.”

“Are you kidding? The kids--”

“We’ll keep our distance,” he said, gathering them in his arms. “But if it comes down to it, I will abandon you. Understood?”

“Of course.”

They left.

--++--++--

The small town traffic made the highway easier to navigate until he felt the truck start to slow. There was plenty of gas. His foot was all the way down. It wasn’t a problem with the vehicle. Karkash had finally gotten within range again. Soon, the truck was barely even moving forward, tires smoking against the pavement.

Then the flash of lightning came. Stoker was only partway out the door before the electricity ignited the gas tank, and the truck exploded. He went flying in one direction; his legs went in another."

"338

Stoker toppled through a fence, gaining a plank of wood through the neck, and crashed into a children's playground, mangling the jungle gym's metal frame with the force of his broken body.

Not looking so great, he had to admit. He could see Karkash in the distance, closing in for the kill.

His legs needed time to return, but he still had his arms. He removed the wooden spear from his esophagus and eyed it a moment. He grabbed the jungle gym's blue frame and ripped out a long chunk, which he then broke into two pieces. Three objects now: one wood, two metal. He gathered all the strength he could muster into his throwing arm.

The two metal pieces went first, one after another, flying toward Karkash at cannonball speed. Each time, they slowed and stopped in the air, ineffectual before being ripped apart by the invisible magnetic field. The third piece, however, flew straight and true, and gored Karkash through the chest. Stoker had conditioned him to expect metal, and even though the attack was certainly not enough to stop the other servant, the surprise made the magnetic field falter, and Karkash dropped out of the sky, cracking the asphalt as he landed.

And that bought Stoker precious time.

He grabbed a handful of gravel. There was one aspect of his transfiguration ability which he had only recently developed: control over the physical state in which his hydrogen appeared. Specifically, temperature. Heated hydrogen easily melted the tiny rocks in his hand into a solid, flaming mass.

Hoyohté was simply impossible to hit at this distance, so he again launched at Karkash. And then another. And then continuously, several more times, until Karkash flung a cement truck at him.

Stoker's legs were back, however, so he dove out of its path, leaving the jungle gym to be obliterated completely.

It was time for fog again, he decided. He had another trick up his sleeve, one that he hadn't wanted to try earlier because it was perhaps too volatile. But now, circumstances seemed appropriately dire."



Liquid hydrogen was a curious substance, Stoker had discovered. It was even colder than its more famous cousin, liquid nitrogen, and could likewise freeze objects in mere seconds, including his own flesh if he wasn't careful; and yet despite its temperature, hydrogen in this state was still incredibly reactive to oxygen. As soon as it touched the air, it would ignite with a colorless flame--which, in other words, rendered the flame nearly invisible.

Before he could put it to use, however, there was something else he needed to do. His muscles were growing heavy again. He was slowing down, and he could feel faint pain throughout his body. 'Nize, can you hear me?'

There was no answer.

'The enhancements are expiring,' he said.

Still nothing.

He could feel her presence there. He concentrated and flexed his soul--an imaginary muscle, pressing against her.

'Ah... Stoker?'

'I need you to renew the enhancements.' She didn't answer, but after a moment, Stoker felt the vigor resurge through him. All pain vanished again, and he took a deep breath. 'Can you tell me where Karkash is?'

'...Other side of the building on your left...'

'Okay.' He darted through the alley ahead of him. He could hear crashing booms nearby--perhaps a building being demolished. He tried the next door he found. It was a small restaurant with numerous people huddled together, all deathly silent as they stared at him. This would do fine, he decided, ceasing his fog production. 'I need you to detach yourself from me now.'

'What? But I can't move on my own...'

'My next attack will hurt you if you stay on my back.'

'But your fog only hides your soul from Hoyoté... It won't hide mine if I'm not attached to you...'

'I know. But we're low on options, and these people's souls should

hide yours for a little while. I'll kill Karkash before he reaches you.'

She hesitated, but then said, 'I trust you.' She removed herself from him."

"340

Stoker could see the chunks missing from Nize's elongated body. She simply floated in place, her snake eyes looking at him briefly before easing shut.

He couldn't dawdle. There was no telling how long the ruse would last. He had to be the one to engage. He ran back outside.

Liquid hydrogen required more concentration than any other aspect of his ability. He held his hands up in front of him and flexed both arms hard enough to make them tremble. After a moment, his skin disappeared, and even though the hydrogen was invisible to the naked eye, he knew he had succeeded. That combination of freezing heat was unique: warmth against his face while his bones felt like ice.

The flash freezing element was the trump card here. If he could bathe Karkash's head in this liquid hydrogen, the man's brain function would cease, and Stoker would be instantly victorious. He would keep Karkash's brain frozen indefinitely--something no amount of regeneration would fix. If he wasn't able to kill Hoyohté at that point, it would make no difference.

The problem, of course, was getting close enough. His best hope was to catch Karkash from behind. As he drew close to the location Nize had specified, Stoker crouched as low as he could.

He had to stop abruptly as the cement truck from before passed right in front of his face. Then a bank vault. Then a refrigerator. And more, he saw. Cars, lamp posts, pipes, mailboxes, they all swirled together with increasing speed, and Stoker understood what Karkash was doing. It was a metal tornado. The vortex was pulling Stoker's fog in and dispersing it elsewhere. Soon, there would be no hiding.

He took his chance and leapt through the moving wall of objects, landing safely. He looked up and saw Karkash directly above the tornado.

And Karkash saw him, as well.

Not the confrontation he had wanted. But it was too late to complain. Every object in the tornado was already sailing toward him. The moment was now."

"341

Stoker gathered strength in his legs and jumped, rocketing up toward Karkash.

He would bet it all on this. Not just his arms. His torso, too. Beneath his skin, there was an icy core, waiting to be released. It was so much hydrogen that if Karkash chose to detonate it with lightning at this range, the explosion would certainly blow both servants to pieces; and if Karkash chose otherwise, the freezing would take effect.

Karkash chose the latter. He caught Stoker with one arm, held by the neck. The arm froze immediately, and Stoker reached out, replacing his hand entirely with liquid hydrogen. Not even bone remained. The invisible hand scraped Karkash's face, and Stoker saw it freeze instantly.

But that was as far as it went, because before the hydrogen could douse his skull completely, Karkash cut off his own arm--the arm which was holding Stoker in the air. And that decided everything.

Stoker fell. Both feet hit the pavement. He tried to flee, and a bolt of lightning cut through his right leg, lopping it clean off. Hydrogen escaped all around him, some of it liquid, some of it gas.

So much of his body was gone now. He lay on the road in a heap, half-bloody, half-frozen.

Karkash descended, peeling the icy flesh from his face and letting it regrow anew. The metal vortex slowed, and the objects therein all crashed into the ground and surrounding buildings, invoking civilian shrieks.

It was over, Stoker knew. He couldn't even run anymore--not that it would have made much difference now that the fog had dissipated. And with so much of his body converted to hydrogen, Karkash could detonate him at any moment with a simple spark.

‘I found Nize,’ said Hoyohaté.

Karkash deliberated a moment, and then forewent the explosive deathblow. Instead, he made his way toward the building Hoyohaté pointed to. Through the large window, he saw Nize among the group of terrified people. He raised a hand.

Before the lightning could flash forth, however, a sudden spire appeared and drew the electricity to it, dispersing it harmlessly into the ground.

And Stoker saw the person responsible--a young black man staring down at them from the adjacent rooftop.

“If you two want to kill each other, that’s fine... but please leave other people out of it.”

"342 -- XL.

Chapter Forty: ‘A treacherous clash...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector was not wearing his helm--or any metal for that matter. It was obvious enough that the dark-skinned man down there was the one Gina had warned him about. Wearing armor would only be to Karkash’s advantage.

It had certainly been a surprise to see the two men fighting. Hector had expected to find someone merely laying waste to the town for no other reason than enjoyment, but now, he wasn’t sure what to make of the situation. Garovel had wanted him to wait for an opening before intervening, but that idea had been sufficiently squashed as soon as he saw Karkash about to fry that restaurant full of people.

“Please help!” yelled Stoker.

Hector didn’t know who the man was, but he was surprised to hear such a plea. Was this guy really Abolish? Karkash certainly was, but maybe this other servant was Vanguard.

He didn’t have much time to think about it. He saw Karkash’s hand move toward Stoker, and Hector made another spire. Again, it caught the lightning and dispersed it.

The lightning itself was a mere flash--much too quick to react to. So instead, Garovel had advised him to watch Karkash's hands. At the moment, Hector couldn't imagine a more valuable piece of information.

Garovel had stayed close, floating just behind him. 'Good. That man could be an ally.'

'He could also be an enemy,' said Hector.

'That he could. Be very cautious.'

Abruptly, Karkash seized both of Hector's spires and launched them at Stoker. Hector barely annihilated them in time.

'As expected,' said Garovel, 'he can use your own metal against you.'

'This fucking sucks...'

Karkash glared at Hector now, granting his full attention.

He half-expected Karkash to stop and say something, to tell him how irritating he was being or ask him why he was here, maybe. But the man did no such thing.

Lightning came for Hector and was diverted with a rooftop spire. And once the electricity subsided, he could see Karkash already flying toward him."

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"343

Hector ducked under the electric fist and pulled up a bed of iron

spikes. The metal distorted away from Karkash, bending around an invisible bubble. So Hector just added more--spikes upon spikes, all branching out, each one bending against the magnetic field. They quickly formed a metal sphere, and rather than becoming trapped, Karkash merely tore open a hole to continue attacking.

Hector expected as much, however; he caught the man's arm and tore it off.

Karkash burst backward and shoved the metal sphere into Hector, knocking him off the roof along with a slew of shingles.

Hector hit the pavement of the adjacent road--which meant Stoker and Karkash were alone. He launched himself up with a sudden metal platform, up and over the building, and sure enough, he saw Karkash already tearing into the other man with lightning.

As he fell, Hector tried to coat Karkash in iron, but the metal dust wouldn't accumulate against the man's skin. It was little more than a nuisance as he decapitated Stoker.

A metal box was Hector's next choice. Four walls shot up around Karkash, far enough from him that they didn't immediately distort, but Karkash just shoved them into the surrounding buildings, crashing through windows and doors.

He had the man's attention again. Karkash soared toward him, and Hector made another wall, double his own height. He expected Karkash to seize control of it and was not disappointed. The wall moved straight back toward Hector, and he annihilated it, because he'd already gotten what he wanted: a moment where Karkash couldn't see him. And when the iron wall turned to dust, Karkash was clearly surprised to see Hector already right there in his face.

Full strength, Hector landed a crushing punch, enough to shatter his own fist along with the man's face.

Karkash rocketed through a line of buildings.

Hector's arm was absolutely wrecked from the impact, even crackling with sparks from a last second electric surge. He could see Hoyohité fleeing toward Karkash but couldn't do much to stop her. That wouldn't be the end of this fight, he knew.

He glanced at Garovel, who was merely staring at him, eye sockets even wider than usual. Hector took a ragged breath and went to check

on Stoker."

"344

It was a strange sight. Stoker's head had been removed from his body, and Stoker was clearly still conscious. He didn't seem capable of speech quite yet, but his body was regenerating--which was the oddest thing, Hector felt. Stoker's body wasn't growing a new head. His head was growing a new body. After a moment, Hector figured that it only made sense that the regeneration should work that way, considering how important the brain was to servants, but even so--it was almost like there would be two Stokers now. Except one was dead. And headless.

"Someone help!" came a sudden plea from the rubble of a nearby ice cream parlor.

"Help!" came another.

And still another. Several more. All around him.

There were too many. Hector knew he didn't have time to help all of them before Karkash showed up again. But he could at least get to a few.

First was a little girl trapped under a staircase. Then a man in an overturned delivery truck.

"What are you doing?!" came a man's voice. It was Stoker, fully regenerated and clothed. "Just leave them! We have to go kill Karkash!"

Hector ignored him.

Garovel spoke up in his place. 'Where is your reaper?'

At that, Stoker ran off toward the restaurant from before.

Garovel remained close to Hector. 'He does have a point, though. Rescue crews should be here soon. The priority is still Karkash.'

An iron dome formed over a couple of battered teenagers, shielding them from a collapsing roof. Enough space was left for them to escape safely.



"I know," said Hector, "but if I can just--"

Colt rolled up in his car, the twins in the backseat and Bohwanox on his tail. "Need some help?"

"What're you doing?" said Hector. "You said you'd keep your distance!"

'You just worry about keeping that electric asshole occupied,' said Bohwanox.

"But--!"

"Just shut up and take my help," said Colt. "I already owe you way too much, as it is.""

"345

'Colt will look after the people here until emergency services arrive,' said Bohwanox. 'Then I'll have him provide long range support.'

'Long range support?' said Garovel.

"Found a gun store while you were busy," said Colt. "Owner wasn't very cooperative, but I got my hands on something nice."

'Bullets won't be much use against Karkash.'

"Even if all they provide is a distraction, you'll be better off." Colt looked at Hector. "Remember our sparring. Fight smart. Dirty, if you have to. Make him think you're doing one thing, and then do something else."

'I don't think he's forgotten,' said Garovel. 'Let's go, Hector.'

They left Colt and Bohwanox behind in order to find Stoker. It was not a long search; Stoker found them first, holding his half-destroyed reaper in his hands.

'You can't stir her awake?' said Garovel.

"Won't matter," said Stoker. "She's too wounded to move on her own, anyway."

'Why were you fighting Karkash?' said Garovel.

Stoker was reluctant to answer that.

"Are you Vanguard?" Hector asked. And he noticed Garovel frown.

"Yes," said Stoker. "Are you?"

'No.' And then privately to Hector, the reaper added, 'Please let me ask the questions.'

Hector didn't bother replying. He had no problem remaining quiet.

'I can sense Karkash approaching,' said Garovel, pointing north. 'Let's move west. We need an open area, away from civilians.'

They started running.

"An open area will leave us exposed," said Stoker.

'Hector will provide you with cover. What's your ability?'

"Hydrogen transfiguration."

'Try not to blow us up, please.'

"I'll do my best."

--++--++--

Colt could hear the crack of thunder again. No more than a kilometer away, he figured. Sirens were close by as well, but this town was tiny. He was sure it wouldn't have more than a handful of emergency personnel.

Bohwanox had found him a house with a car sticking through the second floor wall. An elderly woman was either dead or unconscious at the wheel, while a young girl, perhaps her granddaughter, screamed for help from the backseat.

Colt wasn't entirely sure how to get them out safely. He was starting to regret his earlier confidence. Surely this would be no trouble for Hector. The kid would've just made a metal staircase or something."

"346

From inside the building, Colt approached the vehicle slowly. It was

wedged nose-first through the wall, and as he stepped closer, he could hear the floor boards groaning under its weight.

The girl yelled out as soon as she saw him. "Help! Please!"

Colt held both hands up in front of him. "Quit moving around," he said, perhaps a bit too firmly, because she immediately froze up.

Bohwanox circled around. 'Nice one. Try to be a bit more reassuring, will you? The poor girl's terrified.'

The doors wouldn't be able to open unless he broke through the wall to make more room, but given how precarious the car's position already seemed, Colt didn't know if that would be the best method. A shock like that could make the floor collapse.

'Use your ability to break the windshield,' said Bohwanox. 'You won't jostle the car that way.'

Colt pressed his hand to the shatterproof glass. He concentrated, and a moment later, a small crack appeared. He kept it going, tracing all along the edge of the windshield, as far as his arm would reach, until the glass sunk inward. Then he pushed on it lightly, and it gave way, falling against the dashboard and then into the passenger seat.

He reached through, extending his hand to the girl. "Alright, now," he said, trying to be gentler than before. "Slowly, take my hand and come over the front seat."

"How did you--?!" She broke herself off and grabbed his hand with both of hers. Gingerly, she started to climb over.

The car dipped forward against the floor, making the wood moan, and Colt grabbed the car's front bumper with his free hand. Bohwanox gave him the strength to support it. And as his life force was converted into raw strength, his dark beard began to turn gray and bristly. His flesh started eating away at itself, skin peeling off and blood drying up in his non-essential muscles.

The girl saw him and went even paler than before. "What's wrong with your face?!"

Colt raised a deteriorating eyebrow. "What?"

'Oh, whoops.' Bohwanox invoked the regeneration as well, and Colt's face quickly restored itself. 'Sorry. I'm still a little new to this.'

"347

"It's okay," said Colt. "I've got you."

The girl hesitated. "No, but--what was that just now?"

"Not important. I'll tell you later if you want. Now come on."

"Wh-what about my grandma?"

"I'll get her out, too," he said. "But I'm gonna have to go in after her, so I need you to come out of there first."

She gave a shaky nod but did not seem ready to move.

"Anytime now," said Colt.

"I-ah... are you really trying to help me?"

Colt's face tightened. "Yes. I am."

"But--"

"Look, I can't be waiting out here all day for you. I've got shit to do."

'Colt, what the hell? You're a father. What if that was your daughter in there?'

'My daughter wouldn't be taking this long.'

'But what if she was? What if that was Stephanie and she was too scared to move?'

Colt looked at the girl again. No more than eleven years old, surely. And that look on her face--about ready to cry. He took a silent breath. "I gotta get you outta there, kiddo. And to do that, I need you to trust me. Okay?"

She nodded again and started moving.

"That's it. You're almost there."

And she was out, sliding along the hood and grabbing onto his arm.

He lowered her down. "Now. I need you to go downstairs and outside. You'll see a black car in front of the house. Go stand next to it. You'll be safe there, so go and wait for me while I get your grandma out. And shout to me when you get there. Understand?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding and scurrying off.

"Careful down the steps!" he called after her. He waited for her to get clear, exchanging looks with Bohwanox in the meantime.

'You're really just a big softie, aren't you?'

Colt returned a flat stare. He couldn't see the reaper's face through the dark hood, but he could practically feel the smug grin hidden there.

"Make yourself useful and tell me how to get the old lady out."

'Use your love for all mankind.'

"I fuckin' hate you."

"I'm by the car!" came the girl's yell."

"348

'You'll have to unbuckle her seatbelt before you can get her out of there,' said Bohwanox.

Colt made his way over to the driver's side door, careful with each step as he maintained his grip on the vehicle. Whenever he felt a floor board give too much under his foot, he retreated and tried to step farther.

He reached the door. With one hand placed firmly above the front tire, he pressed the other hand to the side window and began breaking it. He pulled the glass out instead of letting it fall against her.

She was a stout woman, not likely to fit through the unobstructed half of the window. Colt checked her pulse. She was alive, at least.

His arm could just barely reach the belt buckle. It clicked free, and he slowly removed the belt from around her body.

"Now what?" he said. "The wall's still blocking the door."

'You're going to have to break the wall in order to open it, and then get her out as fast as you can.'

"That could bring down the roof," said Colt, "which could make the floor go, as well."

‘That’s why you’ll have to be quick.’

He deliberated for a few moments but saw no better options. He took a deep breath and prepared himself, tensing up, feeling the strength course through his body.

He hit the wall. It crumbled. The ceiling began to give way, and he ripped the car door clean off. He could feel the floor shaking as he wrapped his arms around the old woman and pulled her out. He leapt away as the roof caved in, wood and plaster clattering against the car’s hood.

They’d made it to the staircase. The car was going through the floor now, kicking up a storm of rubble. Colt hoisted the woman under one arm and caught a busted plank with the other, immediately crushing it in his hand. From everything else, he just shielded her with his body.”

”349

Colt waited for the house to settle, for the sound of breaking wood to cease. He cleared the dust away with his free hand and tried to assess the damage.

The bottom half of the stairs was gone. Oddly enough, the upside-down car had made a path through the rubble. He could hear the little girl yelling outside.

“Oh no!” she said. “Grandma!”

Colt took the grandmother in both arms again. With a few smooth hops, he made it out through the gaping hole in the front of the house.

The girl came running.

Colt rested the woman on the ground.

“I saw an ambulance down the street!” said the girl. “We gotta take her to it!”

“No,” said Colt. “We shouldn’t move her any more than necessary. Listen, I’ve gotta go help someone else now, so you have to run over there and tell the people in uniforms about your grandma.”

“Ah--okay!”

“Make sure they hear you. Bite their ankles, if you have to. Got that?”

“Got it!” She ran off toward the flashing lights.

‘I’m not so sure about that last piece of advice.’

“Eh, she’ll do fine.”

He returned to his car and checked on the twins. They both stared at him quietly from their rear-facing car seats when he poked his head through the back door. He squinted at them, uncertain. He was glad they didn’t seem terribly stressed by the situation, but at the same time, he was beginning to wonder why they looked so calm. They hadn’t made much of a fuss about getting into the car, either.

‘We don’t have time to linger,’ said Bohwanox.

Colt popped the trunk and grabbed the new rifle there. The man at the gun store hadn’t been so keen about letting him leave with it immediately, but Colt had been rather insistent. He needed something with more range and a scope.

Before he could even take a step, however, another cry for help caught his ear.”

”350

Colt paused, exchanging looks with Bohwanox, and for a moment they both merely listened to the plea.

“Anyone!” it said, faint and muffled, as if through a distant wall. “Help me!”

Colt growled and put his gun back in the trunk. “This better not take as long as the last one.”

--+-+--+--

The fight was not going very well. Out here on the open ground, away from the buildings and civilians, Karkash’s superior mobility was a much greater threat. Just providing cover from lightning strikes was enough to keep Hector completely occupied.



It soon became a game of feints. Karkash was clearly no fool and began to make the hand motions for his lightning, only to produce none, throwing Hector off and choosing instead to fling the metal into Stoker. Hector was constantly creating and destroying his iron while Stoker tried to close the distance and attack, but Karkash's unimpeded flight made that task nearly impossible. Twice already, Stoker's hydrogen had been detonated by a spark that Hector couldn't catch in time, leaving Stoker to regenerate huge chunks of his body.

Of course, Nize also required Hector's constant protection. She was unable to move, and Stoker couldn't carry her around with as much fire as he was drawing.

'We have to shift this momentum,' said Garovel.

Hector couldn't even spare the reaper a glance. 'Great! How?!'

'Circle around and use the fog.'

'What about the hydrogen guy?!'

'He's a servant. He can take a beating.'

Stoker kept his fog away from Hector and Garovel, no doubt to avoid hindering their view. Nize would be safe for the moment with two lightning rods protecting her, so Hector moved across the battlefield, putting the fog between himself and Karkash.

'Stop here,' said Garovel. 'Straight ahead of you, aim slightly upward. Wait for my word.'

Hector made a javelin, two-and-a-half meters of sharpened iron.

'Now.'

His form was far from perfect, but the throw had more than enough power to compensate."

"351

The spear pierced the fog and came out the other side. The magnetic field made it careen away from Karkash completely. The next javelin came closer, and the third, Karkash had to stop before it reached him.

Stoker chose that moment to leap out of the fog and attack, but Karkash merely launched the javelin at him. Stoker caught the spear with both hands just before it cut through his face. And the magnetic force was still there, carrying him all the way back down to the ground until a lightning bolt sent Stoker toppling through the dirt and grass.

Hector threw one more javelin according to Garovel's direction and then launched himself with a platform. But Karkash was prepared this time, and when Hector broke through the fog, he was greeted with a fist wreathed in electricity. Hector barely avoided taking the hit with his skull, and it instead pummeled into his chest. Several bones snapped at once, and Hector flew straight into the ground, leaving a crater.

He was exposed and didn't have time to worry about recovering, so he immediately constructed a dome over himself. Before it was even half-done, it absorbed the lightning strike that had surely been intended for his head.

Karkash lost interest in him, more concerned with going after Stoker.

'Make as much metal as you can,' said Garovel. 'And drop it on him.'

'I'm not sure how much I can make,' said Hector.

'Then it's a good time to find out.'

He hesitated no further. Hector's hands crashed together, demanding all the concentration he could muster. He constructed his largest object ever, placing it as high up as he could force it.

The sky above Karkash darkened.

Metal accumulated and grew quickly, shooting outward. Mass was all it was--all Hector could make it be. A rough orb at best, fifty meters deep of solid metal.

And Karkash caught it. Strained, weighing him down--but all the same, the man stopped its freefall in mid-air."

"352

The magnetic force that kept the orb aloft required two hands from Karkash. Hector and Stoker both saw the opportunity and jumped at

him. Karkash was forced to bring one hand down to make lightning.

He correctly chose to zap Stoker down first, giving Hector the time to get close. And for an instant, they met one another's gaze.

The man's face was an angry wall--stern and attentive with gritted teeth.

Karkash reeled back, avoiding a cranial blow, and took Hector's punch square in the chest. He went flying backwards and bounced off the orb. Karkash spun toward the ground before stabilizing himself in the air, and when he saw the orb falling down again, instead of trying to stop it, he merely flew out of its path.

Hector was the only one in its way. It was so large that he couldn't annihilate it all instantly. Instead, the mass disintegrated in giant swathes, swirling around its body, taking a few seconds to finally destroy the last bit at the center.

After that, the three combatants were all on the ground together, and a silent intermission passed. Battle conditions were reset, each servant fully regenerated.

Karkash returned to the air, no doubt thinking he had the advantage at a distance, and Stoker took the opportunity to make his way toward Hector.

"Can you not trap his reaper with your metal?" Stoker asked.

"I'd have to get close to her," said Hector.

"That's not going to happen."

Lightning interrupted them, but Hector had a spire waiting to absorb it.

"Do it again," Stoker told him. "The giant sphere."

'You have a plan?' said Garovel.

Stoker gave a nod. "Force him into my fog, and I will take him down."

Karkash gave them no more time to discuss the matter, deciding to seize the two spires that had been protecting Nize. Stoker immediately bolted toward her. Hector first had to construct new spires to absorb the imminent lightning, which left Stoker alone to deal with the two flying at him. And to the man's credit, he did so admirably, somersaulting over the first one and melting the second with a glob of

acid."  
"353

Stoker reached Nize, as well as the momentary safety of Hector's spires. He spat at the ground, making a large ring with his acid, and then jammed his hands into the melted cracks. He yanked a mound of rock and dirt out, bigger than his own torso. He broke it into two pieces, then three, then four, and Hector kept him covered as he started firing them off.

Karkash avoided the rocks simply enough, but it bought Hector the time he needed.

The iron asteroid took form, quicker now, and Karkash was not pleased to see it again, forcing him to stop what he was doing.

Stoker moved below, creating a stream of fog as he ran, readying its white grasp for Karkash.

Hector tried to maintain the shape. He could see giant ripples washing through the metal--waves from Karkash's magnetism, attempting to tear it apart. It was a competition, Hector trying to fill in the cracks faster than Karkash could make them.

And Hector was winning. It was all Karkash could do to keep the mass afloat.

A rock flew up from the fog, and Karkash had to move. The mass shifted, pushing him down a dozen meters before he could stop it again. Then another rock. Even closer to the fog now, which was also rising up to meet him.

"No!" came Karkash's hoarse yell. It was the first time Hector had heard the man say a single word, and it cut across the entire battlefield--not with desperation, but with authority. With refusal.

And then, after a terrible moment, it happened.

Sparks flew out of Karkash's arms in huge clusters, climbing up the metal orb and spreading all the way across it.

'Oh no!' said Garovel.

And the asteroid moved up. Cracks formed all along its iron body, shifting the metal, breaking it. Lightning tore across the surface, rending the metal and then leaping off into the sky, making the very air shudder with each thunderous boom.

Hector stared, horrified. 'What the fuck is happening?!

'Emergence,' Garovel said gravely. 'Karkash's ability has grown stronger.'"

"354 -- XLI.

Chapter Forty-One: 'When the Thunder doth roll...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector watched his metal break apart. Truck-sized chunks of iron circulated around Karkash, all connected by a web of lightning, crackling with emergent energy.

They went spiraling toward Stoker's fog.

Hector rushed to annihilate everything, but he couldn't get to it all fast enough, and Stoker was forced out of his cloud by a tumbling iron boulder.

Stoker kept making more fog, but it was an obvious stream behind him now, no longer obscuring his position. Everyone knew what was coming next. Hector raised two spires in Stoker's defense, and when the lightning struck through the air, it was undoubtedly more powerful in every way--brighter, thicker, certainly louder. It crashed into the spires, making the dirt around them explode into dust, and the ensuing sonic boom nearly ruptured Hector's eardrums.

The force of the impact sent Stoker toppling head over foot through the dirt, away from the supposed safety of the spires. So Hector made more, and he made them larger, sturdier. They took a half-second longer, which was precious time in this fight, but they absorbed the electricity better.

Karkash shot up into the air and rained lightning down from above. The sparking branches were so numerous that they formed a kind of cage around the spires, and Karkash increased the voltage even further. Stoker was trapped, and the electricity closed in, lashing against his

body, making him convulse and sending him to his knees as his flesh began to smolder and burn.

Hector made to increase the size of the spires even more, but Karkash apparently predicted as much and abruptly ceased his attack on Stoker in order to focus on Hector instead.

He barely made half a spire before the lightning smashed through it, making the ground explode directly in front of him. He went flying. His hearing was gone, ears bleeding from the deafening boom, and he hit the dirt again with a numb thud."

"354 -- XLI.

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Hector watched his metal break apart. Truck-sized chunks of iron circulated around Karkash, all connected by a web of lightning, crackling with emergent energy.

They went spiraling toward Stoker's fog.

Hector rushed to annihilate everything, but he couldn't get to it all fast enough, and Stoker was forced out of his cloud by a tumbling iron boulder.

Stoker kept making more fog, but it was an obvious stream behind him now, no longer obscuring his position. Everyone knew what was coming next. Hector raised two spires in Stoker's defense, and when the lightning struck through the air, it was undoubtedly more powerful in every way--brighter, thicker, certainly louder. It crashed into the spires, making the dirt around them explode into dust, and the ensuing sonic boom nearly ruptured Hector's eardrums.

The force of the impact sent Stoker toppling head over foot through the dirt, away from the supposed safety of the spires. So Hector made more, and he made them larger, sturdier. They took a half-second longer, which was precious time in this fight, but they absorbed the electricity better.

Karkash shot up into the air and rained lightning down from above. The sparking branches were so numerous that they formed a kind of cage

around the spires, and Karkash increased the voltage even further. Stoker was trapped, and the electricity closed in, lashing against his body, making him convulse and sending him to his knees as his flesh began to smolder and burn.

Hector made to increase the size of the spires even more, but Karkash apparently predicted as much and abruptly ceased his attack on Stoker in order to focus on Hector instead.

He barely made half a spire before the lightning smashed through it, making the ground explode directly in front of him. He went flying. His hearing was gone, ears bleeding from the deafening boom, and he hit the dirt again with a numb thud."

"355

Hector looked up immediately, expecting another attack from Karkash, one he wouldn't be able to mitigate at all, but that was not what he saw.

Instead, Karkash was going for Nize, yanking away the spires that protected her. And he saw Stoker, charred and battered, but standing in front of her, ready to take more lightning.

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Stoker knew he was outmatched--if not from the start, then certainly now.

He had the idea in his head, a chance at how to improve his odds. And he knew his power was lacking. He had never accomplished this particular feat with his hydrogen before. He'd never had enough control.

It began with selfishness. The instinct to survive. A kind of personal and glorious greed. He knew it well, even before becoming a servant. And of course, he knew how easily that instinct could fail. Before meeting Nize for the first time, he remembered being so determined to go on living, to make it through that battle--only to be killed anyway. Terrible luck, it had been. An ill stroke of fate, as his supposed comrades might say.

So he knew this desperation, this helplessness. And likewise, he knew

the desire to do more, to be more.

Emergence was no complicated thing in itself. It was at once acceptance and rejection: acceptance of one's helplessness, and rejection of the notion that this helplessness should warrant quitting. It was a perfect concoction in one's mind, to know an imminent demise and to still refuse to go quietly.

And that was what he had now. That was how he achieved counter-emergence.

Controlled combustion was the idea. Stoker set his back ablaze, hydrogen mixing violently with the oxygen in his cells, heated with precision. And his flesh exploded, just as desired--not enough to destroy anything unwanted, but just enough to propel him forward. It gave him speed, and he did it again, more this time, and he kept doing it, until he was hurtling over the ground so quickly that his legs couldn't keep up."

"356

He barreled toward Karkash at rocket-speed, giving up on running to simply flying across the ground. But it was not exactly a surprise attack. Karkash dodged smoothly and flew away. And Stoker followed.

He leapt up and made the soles of his feet explode. Bone and flesh blew apart, and the force carried him higher, as if he'd jumped a second time in mid-air. And he did it again, destroying the rest of his feet. And after climbing all the way up to Karkash, everything below Stoker's knees was gone.

He sacrificed a forearm next, converting it entirely to liquid hydrogen and reaching out. Karkash jolted left, losing an arm of his own to the freezing temperature, and swung an electric fist, detonating Stoker's hydrogen and sending them both reeling in opposite directions.

Stoker fell back toward the ground in a bloody heap. He needed time to regenerate, and Hector was busy trying to provide it. Karkash couldn't yet use the left side of his body, but even without it, he could still tear Hector's metal apart before it even finished forming.

Stoker could see Hector struggling to maintain the protection on Nize, but it wasn't long before Karkash regained enough use of his arm that



Hector had to withstand two-handed lightning. Another dirt explosion, and Hector went flying. But most of Stoker's flesh had returned now. That would have to do.

With jets of hydrogen exploding out of his shoulder blades, Stoker accelerated back into the fight. Karkash soared up. Stoker kept pace with him, zigzagging as each explosion corrected Stoker's course. Karkash spun and knocked him back, and Stoker regained his momentum with an explosion from his elbow. And before he could start falling again, Stoker sacrificed the rest of his legs and launched himself the remaining distance. He caught both of Karkash's forearms and squeezed, snapping bones.

"Enough!" Karkash roared. Sparks gathered around his eyes, then flashed across his skin, and lightning shot out, everywhere at once.

Electricity cut through Stoker's body like a dozen blades, leaving holes in his chest and arms, even his face."

"357

He couldn't tell if Karkash had purposely avoided his brain or if it was purely coincidence, but with his body in tatters, Stoker plummeted back to the ground. He could see Hector struggling on his own now, but the kid could barely protect himself. The lightning ripped the metal apart on impact.

Stoker put a ruined arm forward, scratching at the dirt and trying to crawl toward Nize.

But it was too late.

The last of Hector's defense was stripped away from her, and Karkash thrust two fingers toward Nize.

Stoker watched the lightning tear into her.

She vaporized.

He just stared, wide-eyed. His hearing was already shot, eardrums in the midst of repairing themselves, so it was all a numb sight, making it somehow harder to believe.

He'd failed. She was dead. His body was still regenerating, but he

could already feel the shift taking place in his mind. Stoker blinked, eyes blurring and then refocusing. And he saw Karkash and Hoyóhté there, both looking back at him.

He wondered if they would even bother to finish him off. It would make little difference, so he doubted it. For all this chaos, Stoker knew that Karkash took no pleasure in killing him. This had all been Karkash's duty, nothing more.

Sure enough, after a few moments of their silent deliberation, Karkash leapt into the sky with booming force, and they flew off together. They soon vanished beyond the horizon.

Stoker climbed onto his knees and elbows. The reverberations in his chest were growing stronger, stealing his breath away in increments, and his whole body flashed between sweltering warmth and shivering cold.

His muscles convulsed. Everything went dark. And he saw a life.

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A boy. Growing up in Vaeland. A country of water. More sea than land. The city of his birth floats more than it stands. He learns to swim. He learns to fish.

It was once a prosperous nation, he hears, back when his parents were young."

"358

Life is hard here. But not for the boy. He is lucky to belong to one of the wealthiest fisher families in the city. And he knows his fortune. He sees his schoolmates. He sees their patched clothes, their skinny arms and legs. Childishly, he thinks fortune makes him better than them. It is difficult to make friends. He is not sure he even wants them.

The boy is eight years old when his parents remove him from school. He has a private tutor now. It is rather boring. He wants to go outside, but he is rarely allowed to. Only in the company of his parents.

The boy is ten years old when the riots start. He sees them through the

window. People in masks, burning cars, looting buildings. More than once, they break into his house. They steal. They destroy. They terrify him. But they do not hurt him.

His parents consider leaving. This city is dangerous and frightening. But there is nowhere to go. And the military is here now. He likes the soldiers. They keep him safe. They make the scary people go away.

His parents say the riots will stop soon, that it will be safe to go outside again. And they are right. He gets to go play outside again. But the soldiers stay. He does not mind.

The boy is twelve when civil war breaks out. The soldiers force them to leave the city. They have nothing now. His parents do not know where to go. They spend a long time talking about it.

They find a refugee camp. Everyone here looks sad, save the very young children. But that is only because they do not understand anything. They annoy him.

The boy is thirteen when the camp is attacked. It is utter chaos. Gunfire. People running everywhere. Blood and dead bodies. He is told to flee, and he does.

He makes it to the forest. There are many children with him. He does not know where his parents are. There is only one adult here. And she is wounded."

"359

The children are all panicking. The boy is no exception. The only adult is too injured to move and bleeding profusely, but she tries to direct them. She tells them to find help but to also stay hidden. The boy is the oldest of the group. She appoints him to look after everyone. He is to lead a search. He is more terrified than he has ever been. She tells him to be strong for the others.

They set out. Hours pass without results. The others are complaining. They are tired and hungry. He leads them back. When they return, they find the woman dead. The children who remained with her are now missing. The others are losing it.

Four more children appear. They had been hiding. Soldiers came and

took everyone else, they say. After killing the woman.

Including himself, there are eleven children. They look to him for guidance. He has no idea what to do. The fear does not go away. But neither does the hunger. He has everyone split up and look for food. When they reconvene, there are only ten. They look for the eleventh and find his body.

A week later, there are nine. A month later, there are eight. That one was not lost to the wilderness. That one was killed by a stranger. They had found the edge of the forest, found a ransacked town, thought the lone man there would help them. That was not the case.

They flee back into the forest.

Four years pass.

There are five of them now. Mira, Loren, Kaul, Trill, and the boy. Sickness took the others, but these five have survived. The boy has taught them to fish. Loren has taught them to hunt. Mira has taught them to climb. Together, they have learned to build shelters. Together, they have also learned to steal. And to kill.

There is a road along the western edge of the forest. Asking travelers for help has never gone well. They have learned not to trust outsiders. They are bandits now."  
"360 -- XLII.

They acquire a few comforts of their previous lives. Food, clothing, books and baubles. And a few weapons. Knives, mainly, not much better than the wood and stone shanks Loren has already fashioned for them, but they are appreciated.

Another year passes. They occasionally loot newspapers. Vaeland has been at war all these years. No longer civil. Now the country is caught in a different fight. It is the battleground for Intar and Dozer. Warnings of immortal soldiers afoot. People of terrifying strength. The young forest bandits soon see for themselves.

The young man is eighteen when they try to rob the wrong vehicle.

It is only an old man, they think. All by himself. Easy.

Mira feigns injuries and waves him down. When he stops, the rest of them descend upon him. Loren goes in for the kill. He is stopped by a monstrous creature, appearing as if from nowhere. It is humanoid, perhaps, yet still a thing like nothing they have ever seen. Black scales cover its body instead of flesh.

They make to turn and flee, but four more people arrive, blocking their paths and pinning them down.

"It is okay," says the old man. "They are but children. Not the prey we were looking for."

And the monster speaks. "What shall we do with them?" Its voice is low and vibrating.

The old man looks over the young bandits. "You are homeless, no?"

No one dares answer.

"They can come with us," the old man says.

Loren is braver than anyone else when he asks, "Who are you?"

The old man eyes him. "My name is Dozer."

Chapter Forty-Two: 'Thy forgotten history...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The Abolish encampment is full of frightening people. The monster's name, they soon learn, is Gohvis. And he is not a monster, but a man. All the same, even the scary people seem scared of him.

"There is no need to do this yourself," says Gohvis. "This is why we have initiators."

"Yes, but I want to," says Dozer. "I find these children amusing.""  
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"Yes, but I want to," says Dozer. "I find these children amusing."  
"361

The encampment is filled with hulking machinery. He does not know their exact functions with their varied sizes and shapes, but the large wheels and long cannons are common enough fixtures that he can guess their general purpose.

The largest tent in the encampment belongs to Dozer. It is spacious and furnished like a rather plain bedroom, excepting the far corner, which is littered with metal and computer parts.

"Tell me why you are alive," says Dozer. The way he presents himself is suddenly very different. His attire is featureless and unassuming, but his expression is sharp and clear. He seems somehow larger than before, more imposing. The air in the room is heavier. Breathing is harder. It felt strange before, why a monster like Gohvis should be subservient to this person. It does not feel that way now.

Mira speaks for their group, though her voice shakes. "What do you mean?"

"Why do you want to live?" says Dozer.

Everyone hesitates.

"Answer me."

It is Loren who speaks this time. "Why do we need a reason?"

Dozer stares at him again. "Because only insects do not have a reason."

"Then maybe we are insects," says Loren.

The old man smiles faintly. "Insects do not have your willpower, boy." He steps closer.

Loren pulls back, but Gohvis is suddenly there behind him, holding him in place.

Dozer places a hand on Loren's shoulder. "You have a reason. A very simple one." He reaches back. "You want to live only because you fear

death. There is no shame in this. In fact, you are very wise to think so.” His arm flashes and cuts into Loren’s chest. Blood splatters against the old man.

Loren crumples to the ground. Dead.

The four of them stare at the body. Then at one another. The young man sees horror on all of their faces, but after a moment, their expressions slowly change. Silent agreement runs between everyone. Collectively, they leap to attack the old man.

Dozer catches Mira by the throat. Gohvis pins the other three down instantly, a limb for each.

“Calm yourselves,” says Dozer. “Your friend will be reborn.””  
”362

“There are only two spare reapers here,” says Gohvis.

Dozer is silent. He and Gohvis both look at nothing.

At length, Loren stands back up. They each stare at him, and he returns a similar expression of disbelief. They are not given long to understand what has happened.

“Now, your first test,” says Dozer. He allows Mira to return to the others and then motions to Loren’s four companions. “Kill one of them.”

Loren’s eyes widen, and he looks at the old man.

“They will not remain dead,” Dozer clarifies. “Just as you have been resurrected, so will they be. You have my word.”

That is not enough to convince Loren. He does not move.

“Test not my patience, boy. If you refuse, then I will choose for you. And I will not have them return. They will remain dead forever.”

Loren grows angry. “Why?! What is the point in making me do this?!”

“As I said, it is your first test.”

“How is this a test?!”



“A test of faith. Have faith in me--in my word--and all will be well. No harm will come to your friends.” Dozer folds his arms. “It is a very simple task, unless you make it otherwise.”

Loren looks between them all again. Pain crosses his face as he deliberates.

Dozer takes a step forward.

“Stop!” says Loren. He moves toward Mira. “I’ll do it!”

Dozer waits.

And the young man sees their exchange.

Loren apologizes to her. She tells him that it is okay, that he is right to choose her, that she does not mind. And Loren kills her. He is quick and precise. She falls into his arms.

The following silence is agony. He watches Loren’s frantic stare, locked on something invisible.

And Mira revives. Her return is met with relief and confusion.

Dozer divides their group now. The forest bandits are no more. Mira and Loren remain behind, and the other three leave on a boat to the northern town of Rohit.

The boat is a slaver ship, but they are not slaves."

"363

Kaul, Trill, and the young man are treated as guests, unlike the people kept in the underbelly of the ship.

In the next few days, he sees more of Vaeland than he has seen in all of his life. Long stretches of sea. Lush tropical islands. Open blue skies. And smoldering wreckage. Ruined towns. Bodies in the water.

Northern Vaeland is in chaos. Thrice, the ship is attacked, but there is an immortal warrior aboard who annihilates the enemy each time. She is the captain, and though she is ferocious to the slaves and even to her own crew, she takes a shine to the young bandits--to him in particular. He decides not to resist her advances, fearing the

consequences. She marks his face with a tattoo much like the several she has herself. She tells him not to forget her. When they reach Rohit, he is not sad to see her go.

Rohit is a fortress town, half-destroyed and in the midst of rebuilding. Within hours of their arrival, it comes under attack. He witnesses much of the battle, but it makes little sense to his eyes.

Bombs fall from the sky, as do a few planes. Buildings catch fire, then immediately go out. Water rises up from the middle of the forest, only to evaporate before reaching the town's walls.

Then comes the explosion that kills him. He is caught in its blast radius but does not die right away. Scorched and in agony, he must spend his last hours trapped under debris.

Nize finds him. She wants him to join Abolish. He wants to live again.

He awakes and pulls himself from the rubble. He finds himself in a crater where twenty buildings used to be. Soon, he learns that Kaul and Trill have both perished. He expects them to revive, but they never do. It seems the reapers meant for them were killed. He buries them. It is more than most who have died today receive."

"364

Abolish is rather light on the training regimen and rather heavy on the propaganda. Only now does he realize just how important old man Dozer is. The name is never uttered without reverence, and yet, when he mentions having met Dozer personally, almost no one believes him.

Apparently, the country of the same name was founded by Dozer.

Three hundred years ago, that was.

The old man was its original dictator, and though the public believes he died more than two centuries ago, he has continued to rule in secret all this time. His great grandson serves as the country's public face.

From there, the legends surrounding the old man grow even more ridiculous. Tales of his invincibility, of his masterful strategies, of his cataclysmic clashes with someone named Sermung. It is all rather difficult to buy into, he feels, but this is not a common sentiment. Some of these people even seem to think the old man is not of this world,

that he is a god of the Void made flesh.

And this "Void" is also puzzling. It is supposedly a realm of nothingness, yet everyone speaks of its "will" or of its "consciousness." He does not understand how nothingness could "be" anything, let alone sentient. But they take it very seriously. There are numerous ceremonies he has to endure in order to be accepted. He would sooner not bother, but Nize seems adamant about the whole endeavor, and he is not about to argue with her.

After nine months with Abolish, he meets Karkash. They work many missions together, but they do not speak much, which is fine by him. He does learn, however, that Karkash is four years his elder and a native of Vaeland's northern isles. And after seeing the scars on the other man's chest, he understands that Karkash has lived no easy life, either. In this way, at least, he comes to know a small sense of camaraderie...

--++--++--

Hector sat up and waved at the cloud of dust. His ears were still ringing and his eyes still burning from that last flash of lightning, but he could feel his senses repairing themselves.

'Karkash is gone,' said Garovel, appearing out of the ground next to him.

'What?'

"365

'He killed the other reaper,' said Garovel. 'You'd better get up, Hector. Karkash may be gone, but this fight isn't over yet.'

Hector stood. 'What do you mean?'

But Garovel didn't have to answer. Through the settling dust, Hector saw the other man appear. It was Stoker, and yet, perhaps not so.

Stoker was on his feet again and fully regenerated, but his shoulders were slumped forward, his arms hanging limp in front of him. His mouth was half-open, his eyes half-drawn, and his head twitched from moment to moment, looking one direction, then another, as if searching for something.

Hector edged in front of Garovel. 'What the fuck is wrong with him?'

'This is what happens when the reaper dies while the servant still lives. His body works just fine, but his consciousness is broken.'

'Agh...'

'Be extremely careful. It will die on its own within the next hour, but if we just let it go, then it will seek out people to kill.'

'But... why? If he's mindless, then why would he...?'

'It's only driven by a sense of self-preservation now. Its soul is destroyed, so it will try to take someone else's in order to repair it. Which won't work. But that won't stop it from trying.'

'Isn't there, uh... I mean, there's no way to help him?'

'No. Listen to me, Hector. It's not even "him" anymore. That thing is a monster now. And if you don't destroy its brain, it's going to go over to that town and slaughter dozens of people.'

Hector gave a painful frown as he watched the man. 'But he's just... standing there... I can't just kill him.'

'Then watch it closely, and you'll see.'

Stoker's breathing was increasingly erratic. His body flexed, small chunks converting into hydrogen gas and leaving bloody gashes behind, which soon regenerated. He looked toward the town, then toward Hector and Garovel.

'Oh right,' said Garovel. 'We're a lot closer to it than the town is, aren't we? It'll want to kill us first.'

Hector's brow lowered. 'Exactly how dangerous is this thing?'

"366

'I'm not sure how strong it is,' said Garovel. 'You should armor up while you can.'

'Right.' Hector held both fists in front of him and concentrated. He had yet to recreate his helm from scratch, but he was sure it was possible--

he'd designed the thing himself, after all. It was just a matter of imagining it precisely enough in his mind.

The metal accumulated around his head, fitting a bit more snugly than he anticipated. He forewent the movable jaw entirely, letting the metal cover his mouth and extend partway down his neck. The rest was roughly correct: smooth, dark metal with one large slit for both eyes, allowing himself a wide field of view. Next, he began crafting his gauntlets.

'Try to keep your distance, if you can,' said Garovel. 'It will be fast and unpredictable. Be wary of the hydrogen, especially. Consider every part of its body dangerous and go for the brain.'

As the gauntlets completed themselves, he went to work on an iron breastplate, but by now, he had piqued Stoker's curiosity. He saw the man moving closer, shambling toward him.

But only at first.

Stoker shot forward, accelerating with hydrogen jets. Hector made a wall. Stoker leapt cleanly over it, then rocketed back down to the ground.

He tried to coat it in metal, but the creature was much too fast. And just like that, there it was, right in Hector's face. It lunged for his neck, biting and drooling. Its teeth hit metal and chewed ineffectually.

He pulled back, and Stoker grabbed him by the gauntlet, trying to bite through that, too. He could feel its beastly strength, but as he looked at the man, Hector couldn't help frowning. "Please don't make me hurt you..."

'Stop hesitating.'

Stoker looked up at the reaper and made to swat at him, but Hector caught the man's wrist.

Garovel backed off and flew up to observe from above. 'This isn't a game, Hector. You have to kill it. Letting it live on like this is not a mercy.'

Stoker's hand converted to hydrogen and exploded, tearing through the gauntlet and taking most of Hector's arm with it."

Hector staggered back before regaining his footing and saw Stoker gunning for him again. He created another wall for the creature to leap over, but this time added a platform beneath himself and rose up to meet the man with his fist.

It saw him at the last moment, however, and jetted to the side. Hector's punch missed completely, and Stoker zigzagged through the air, coming back around toward him. But before it could even reach Hector again, a hydrogen jet from its shoulder misfired, exploding and sending the creature spiraling into the dirt.

Hector watched from atop his platform. 'What the hell?'

'Transfiguration is difficult to control,' said Garovel. 'It's running purely on reflexive memories now, so it won't be able to make adjustments like a conscious mind can.'

'Ugh... this is just... horrible...'

'I know.'

It was back on its feet. It looked up at Hector, the expression on its face still half-asleep.

'Don't underestimate its reflexes. They're much faster now that it doesn't have any normal thought processes slowing it down.'

Then came the fog. White clouds erupted from Stoker's back, expanding quickly across the battlefield.

'Uh-oh,' said Garovel.

'Keep your distance,' said Hector, deciding to finish his breastplate instead of remaking his gauntlet.

The reaper flew up even higher. 'I can't sense it at all. It shouldn't be able to sense you either, but just. Uh. Be careful, Hector.'

'You don't have to keep telling me...' Hector let the fog envelop him as well. He looked around, barely able to see arm's length in front of him, so he tried listening for the sound of footsteps, but the churning fog muffled everything.

‘Still don’t see it,’ said Garovel. ‘Can you flush it out?’

Hector clasped his hands together--one gauntleted, one bare--and created a metal slab above the fog. Two meters thick, fifteen meters both wide and long. It fell, pressing into the fog like bread on a sandwich, and Hector made just enough of a gap for himself--a cylindrical hole where he could stand safely. The metal slammed down and made the ground shake."

"368

Hector filled in his cylinder with a platform and was soon atop the slab. Fog roiled violently around the edges of the metal, but for the moment, he had a perfectly clear view of the sky and Garovel.

‘It fled on your right,’ said the reaper. ‘Oh joy. It’s coming after me now.’

From outside the fog, Stoker came rocketing up toward Garovel. The reaper started back down toward Hector, and when Stoker’s swiping hands caught up with him, Garovel smoothly dodged a string of attacks. Then the creature had to back off when a javelin sailed between them.

Hector pressed his hands to the slab, and a curving wall leapt out of it. Garovel phased through the metal half-dome, and Hector expected Stoker to come flying over the top. He was proved correct and threw another javelin as soon as he saw the man. But even still, Stoker jetted out of its path, zigzagging to safety.

Hector growled. ‘How do I hit this damn thing?!’

‘You need to trap it,’ said Garovel. ‘If it can avoid your attack, then it almost certainly will. So come up with something unavoidable.’

He only had a moment to consider his options before Stoker barreled into him, carrying him away from the slab and fog both. Stoker bit into his arm, and Hector just ignored it, instead taking the opportunity to encase the man in metal.

They hit the dirt together, and Hector rolled away from the iron statue. And for a moment, when he saw Stoker again, he thought that might have been enough. But the coating didn’t last. Stoker broke out with

brute force. Chunks of busted metal scattered around the creature as it returned to its feet.

Once again, Hector met its hollow gaze.

Then, without warning, there came a distant crack, and the creature's body jerked backward as something tiny whizzed past its head.

Hector blinked. 'What was that?'

'A gunshot?' said Garovel. 'I think it came from the town.'

'That was--? But it--wait. So this thing just dodged a fucking bullet?!'

Another gunshot, again avoided. Stoker looked in the direction of the town and then promptly sped off toward it.

'What the--?' And Hector realized. 'Colt!' He bolted after Stoker."  
"369 -- XLIII.

## Chapter Forty-Three: 'O, creator and destroyer...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Through the scope of his rifle, Colt saw the creature turn to look directly at him, as if the distance made no difference. He didn't hesitate to continue firing, but Stoker was moving far too quickly to track with the zoom on the lens, so Colt stood up from his rooftop perch and prepared for its arrival.

It didn't take long.

Colt unloaded his handgun, and even at close range, Stoker dodged every last bullet and tackled Colt through a brick chimney. They rolled off the roof together, Stoker biting bloodily into Colt's arm. The pain was non-existent of course, so he tried to bash the thing's skull in with the butt of his gun, but that too proved fruitless. Stoker's head bobbed out of the way of each strike, returning only to rip another chunk of flesh out of Colt's neck or shoulder or chin. And Colt soon grew irritated enough to change tactics.

He resorted to a grapple hold, repositioning himself to its side and wrapping his half-eaten arm around its neck. The enhanced strength



coursed through his body, and Colt yanked. But Stoker's neck resisted and, in fact, turned the other direction to look at Colt. It gnashed at him, perhaps trying to bite his nose off. Colt buried a thumb into Stoker's eye socket, jamming and twisting enough to make blood spurt out.

Liquid hydrogen replaced the creature's face, and Colt's hand froze instantly. Stoker bit into the icy flesh and shattered it, and Colt could see Stoker's skull through missing flesh and eyes. No doubt, it had blinded itself, but its hand still found Colt's cranium. He could feel the force of its grip beginning to crack his own skull.

Metal gathered over Stoker's face and body, courtesy of a still-distant Hector. Stoker thrashed free of the iron, but it had been slowed enough for Colt to land a quick punch, throwing the beast off of him."  
"369 -- XLIII.

Chapter Forty-Three: 'O, creator and destroyer...!'

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Metal gathered over Stoker's face and body, courtesy of a still-distant Hector. Stoker thrashed free of the iron, but it had been slowed enough for Colt to land a quick punch, throwing the beast off of him."  
"370

Colt wanted to ask who this guy was, or perhaps what, but it didn't seem like the best time. Stoker's eyes were quick to regenerate, and they fell upon Bohwanox next. The creature's body was still in tatters, but that didn't stop it from pressing after the reaper. Bohwanox flew back as Colt and Hector both intercepted.

Hector swung an iron fist, which was of course avoided, and Colt just tried to grab hold of the monster, but Stoker simply rocketed away from his grip at the last moment.

"Slow him down for me," said Colt, "and I'll kill him."

Hector nodded. A flurry of metal gathered around Stoker's regenerating skin. Iron dust left a trailing path as it zagged across the open road, slowing him hardly at all, but then the metal walls started shooting up all around it. The sudden obstacle course forced Stoker to adjust and gave the metal coating precious time to accumulate. The coating broke almost as soon as it formed, but Hector just kept at it, and Colt was able to close the distance.

He just needed one punch. One good, concentrated punch. To land it, though, Colt knew he would have to suppress the opponent's movement, so he tackled Stoker to the ground first. Stoker thrashed, nearly throwing him off, but Hector's metal clapped around the thing's head and arms. And that was the moment he needed.

Colt focused the ability into his hand, the spatial destruction power

adding to his already enhanced muscle strength. And when his fist hit the metal around Stoker's head, it went right through the iron and obliterated everything. Blood, bone, and brain matter all splattered across the road.

His eyes widened, and he blinked at his red-soaked knuckles. He hadn't expected it to be quite so effective as that.

He could see a deep impression in the bloody asphalt and, after a moment, realized that it had a particular shape to it. A clear rhombus, it was. And a very strange sight, he felt, but he supposed now he knew what the shape of his path was."

"371

Hector joined Colt by his side, and they both lingered on the sight of Stoker's headless body.

"He's really dead, right?" asked Colt as the reapers floated over to them. "I never can tell anymore."

'Yeah,' said Garovel. 'You can tell because the body has stopped regenerating.'

Colt stood up from his messy work, wiping the blood on his pants. "Who was this guy, even?" He started for the nearby alley where he'd parked the car.

Hector followed, annihilating his helmet and frowning at Garovel. "Ah... we never learned his name..."

'We only know he was fighting with Karkash.'

"He did say he was Vanguard," Hector added.

'He was probably lying,' said Garovel.

Hector raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think that?"

'When Abolish and the Vanguard clash, it's a big deal. One-on-one fights are extremely rare. I'm guessing he told us that because he figured we'd be more likely to help him.'

Colt checked on the twins in the backseat of the car. Stephanie was

standing at the window with her little hands pressed to the glass, and he opened the door to meet her. Thomas was sat contentedly on the other side, and they both looked at Colt, just as calm as earlier. He patted their heads and bellies, tickling them while he double-checked for anything to be worried about. They giggled at him, babbling a few half-words but nothing more.

Hector and Garovel were still occupied with their conversation. "I wish we could have helped him... Because that was just... agh..."

'Yeah. Assuming he was being hunted down because he and his reaper were traitors to Abolish, then I'm sure he would've been able to provide us with valuable information.'

"I don't understand why, um... well, I mean... if they really were Abolish, then I get why Karkash was after them, but... I don't get why Karkash just kinda... left. Why didn't he come after us, too?"

"372

'That's what makes me think they were traitors,' said Garovel. 'That fight wasn't about trying to eliminate all opposition. If it was, then Karkash definitely would have stayed to continue fighting us. But he didn't. And given his advantageous position at the time, the only way that decision makes sense is if he had already achieved his goal. Or, I suppose, if he received new orders that instructed him to leave, but I didn't see any evidence of that.'

"But still... I mean... not that I'm complaining, but... it was kinda sloppy to leave without killing us, too, wasn't it? Somehow, I doubt he was just being merciful..."

'Actually, leaving was tactically the wisest decision.'

"H-how do you mean?" said Hector.

'There was no guarantee that he would've been able to win against you. Continuing the fight meant running the risk of allowing you to achieve emergence as well--or otherwise turning the tide of battle back in your favor. So unless the objective was specifically to kill us, then fighting you was an unnecessary risk. Karkash understood that. Or his reaper did.'

“Hmm...”

‘Clearly, they don’t have the same bloodlust as some of our previous enemies. Which might sound like a good thing, but in a way, it’s worse, because it means they’ll make more intelligent decisions. They’re less likely to go on random killing sprees, but at the same time, they’ll be smarter when it comes to real strategy. Against us, that is.’

“Ugh... but I guess that’s... kinda good. I’d prefer that to the other way around, at least.”

Colt sensed the opportunity to interject. “We should probably leave now.”

Hector looked at him. “Oh! What about the civilians? Is there anyone who still needs help?”

‘They’re receiving it,’ said Bohwanox. ‘We saw an entourage of emergency vehicles arriving from the north of town. Sescoria sent lots of people.’

Garovel flew up a few meters to look over the town. ‘Ah. I see flashing lights all over the place.’”

"373

“That’s good, but, uh... er, we might still be able to help a little, right?”

Garovel floated back down. ‘I know your heart’s in the right place, but we’re a little too famous right now. With all the police around, we’d probably just create chaos if we tried to get involved any further.’

“Agreed,” said Colt. He opened the driver’s side door and stuck one foot inside. “C’m on, Hector. We’ve done all we can.”

Hector glanced over everyone, then gave a nod and took a seat in the back with the twins. The car’s seatbelts didn’t fit the kids properly, so Hector had gotten into the habit of keeping his arms around them. They didn’t seem to mind terribly, though Stephanie occasionally tried to pick his nose for him.

It wouldn’t be a very long trip back to the motel in Maxwell, but Colt saw Hector pull out his phone. It only had to ring once, and Hector put it on speaker for everyone.

<“So you’re on the news again,”> said Gina. <“They’re already blaming the Darksteel Soldier for what happened.”>

Hector took a heavy breath. “Seriously? How did they even... I mean, so soon?”

<“Eye witnesses, so far. I saw one guy defending you, but the reporter just kinda dismissed him. They’re also saying they’ve got footage of you from someone’s camera phone, but they haven’t shown it yet.”>

“No mention of Karkash?” Hector asked.

<“Oh, they’re talking about him, too. I’m assuming he’s the ‘flying lightning man’ they’re referring to, yeah?”>

“Yeah.”

<“He’s gotten some attention, but they don’t know who he is, so they’re focusing on you. In fact, they’re speculating right now that he was trying to stop you from hurting people.”>

Hector shut his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “You gotta be kidding me...”

Colt just kind of snickered, and when he saw Hector giving him a look in the rearview mirror, he returned a blithe shrug.

‘That might be to our advantage, actually,’ said Garovel.

Gina interrupted before anyone could ask what he meant. <“So what really happened?”>

"374

“Uh, well... a lot happened, so, uh... I’m not sure what you wanna know...”

<“You got into a fight, didn’t you? Is everyone okay? What was the fight even about?”>

And suddenly, Colt found himself listening to Hector stumble his way through an explanation of events. To say that it took longer than necessary would be an understatement, but after several agonizing

minutes, Gina was up to speed. More or less.

<“Okay. So. The guy who was fighting Karkash is dead, and you don’t know who he was?”>

“Y-yeah. But we think that, um... that he, uh... was, ah... er, well, uh--”

“Hector, I swear by the goddess’s tits, if you don’t finish that sentence in the next five seconds, I’m gonna drive this car into a fucking tree.”

Shockingly, that didn’t seem to do much for Hector’s composure. He merely flushed red and fell painfully silent.

Colt instantly felt like a piece of shit. That was decidedly not the reaction from Hector he had been going for.

Garovel floated in front of the windshield and glared at him. The reaper’s face wasn’t visible, but somehow, that didn’t seem to matter.

‘Great,’ said Bohwanox privately. ‘Amazingly helpful, Colt. Not like the kid’s been through anything traumatic lately. Not like he’s helped us out at all or could use any kind of encouragement from perhaps his only living friend in the entire world right now. I’m sure there’s nothing you could--’

‘I get it! Fuck!’ He looked at Hector in the mirror, who was nowhere close to making eye contact again. “Look, um. I didn’t mean to, um. Uh. I’m--mm. S-sorry, I wasn’t...”

‘You’re killing me with this irony right now,’ said Bohwanox.

‘Aw, fuck! I’m an asshole!’

‘At least you acknowledge it.’

<“Hello?”> said Gina. <“Uh. You still there?”>

Colt decided to just fill in for Hector. “Yeah, we’re here. The guy from earlier, we suspect he was a member of Abolish. A traitor.”

"375

<“Ah, well, if he was a traitor, then I’ll probably be hearing more about it. I know Desmond wasn’t happy to see Karkash on the news.”>

“Let us know if you find anything out,” said Colt.

<“Of course. But what are you guys going to do in the meantime?”>

Colt eyed the reapers briefly. “We’ll probably just lay low for a while.”

<“Hmm. You sure I can’t help with that? I know what you said before, but I don’t mind making a few calls.”>

“No offense, but I’d rather not trust some random friend of yours unless I have to.”

<“Fair enough.”> There was a pause, and then she said, <“Well, if that’s all, then I’ll leave you to it.”>

‘Ask her about a new motorcycle,’ said Garovel.

“Can you help us find some new transportation? Hector could do with a new bike, and a car with fresh license plates wouldn’t hurt, either.”

<“Aha. That, I can do. Master Roman has a few different garages you can use.”>

Colt raised an eyebrow. “Just how rich is this Roman guy, anyway?”

<“I’m not sure he would want me to answer that.”>

“Right. Where’s the closest one, then?”

<“Let’s see, um. You’re somewhere around Maxwell, right?”>

“Yeah.”

<“Then go to Walton. There are three there, but you probably want the one that’s just east of the city limits. Let me know when you get close and I’ll give you the exact coordinates.”>

“Will do. Thanks.”

<“Sure. Anything else you need?”>

Colt stared at the winding road ahead as he thought, watching the frequent curves among the grassy foothills. “There’s one other thing,” he said, “but it might be difficult to find.”

<“What is it?”>



"I'd like to consult a doctor. And obviously, I can't go to a hospital."

<"I can find you a very discreet doctor easily enough, but why would you need to see one? You don't get hurt, right?">

"Not that kind of doctor," said Colt. "I wanna see one who specializes in child care."

There came another pause, longer this time. <"...You have a child with you?">"

"376

"I have two," said Colt. "Twins. Little over a year old."

<"You didn't... kidnap them, did you?">

"What? No! They're my children!"

<"That was going to be my second guess.">

Colt shook his head. "Kidnap... what kind of people do you think we are?"

<"Well, y'know. Kidnap, rescue--who can tell the differences these days?">

"I'm pretty sure I can."

<"Anyways, why do you want a doctor? Is something wrong with them?">

"I'm not sure. And that's the problem."

<"I see. Hmm. Admittedly, I don't have a child doctor on standby. Not exactly the kind of personnel I was expecting to need. And I can't imagine that black market pediatrics is a booming industry, either. I'll look into it for you, though. Give me a couple days.">

"Alright. Thanks."

The conversation soon ended, and Colt hung up the phone. He abruptly realized that Hector hadn't even said goodbye to Gina, and when he looked in the mirror again, he saw Hector sleeping while the

twins prodded his face.

Colt was starting to feel his own enhancements wearing off as well, muscles growing stiff with sharp and aching pains alike. He could only imagine how bad it was for Hector. The kid had already been exhausted even before fighting Karkash.

Bohwanox hovered outside the driver's side window, keeping pace with the car as it sped across the highway. 'What makes you think something might be wrong with the twins?'

"I don't know. They're just very... calm, I guess."

'Hmm.'

"Maybe it's nothing. Maybe they're just little weirdoes and it's perfectly normal. I just want to consult someone who knows about this sort of thing." He glanced between the two reapers. "Do either of you know anything about child development?"

'Not really,' said Garovel.

'Sorry,' said Bohwanox.

"Figures."

After a few more minutes, they arrived back at the motel. Garovel offered to wake Hector up, but Colt just made a second trip and carried him into the room, too."

"377

By now, Colt was dead tired as well, but he couldn't allow himself to pass out just yet. He changed the twins' diapers, then laid a plastic sheet down before feeding them. As expected, they made a mess of their simple juice and hash meal. He cleaned up after them and left the television on for the reapers while he finally drifted off to sleep.

Bohwanox woke him up in the middle of the night.

"Ugh--what is it?" Colt rubbed his face and sat up. "Are we about to be attacked or something?"

'Nah, we just wanted you to change the channel,' said Garovel.

His face flattened. "What."

'We're really sick of watching the news,' said Bohwanox.

"Don't--you--" It took him a moment of deliberation, but Colt decided against killing them. "What the hell did you do before television was invented?"

'Follow people around,' said Garovel. 'Or read. If you've got any interesting books on you, then feel free to stay up all night and turn the pages for us.'

"Pass. Why don't you do some scouting? Make sure we're safe here?"

'We did,' said Bohwanox. 'Five times. There's nothing around here. This town is way too peaceful.'

"Share your life stories with each other, then."

'Shut up and change the channel,' said Bohwanox.

"I'm tempted to refuse on principle alone."

Bohwanox bobbed his head at him. 'Okay. Then no sleep for you.'

'You can stay up and entertain us.'

Colt grabbed the remote control and flipped through channels until the reapers stopped complaining. It took a while. There wasn't much on at two in the morning. They settled on a program about the kilometers of underground caves near Gray Rock.

He checked on the kids again, but they were asleep as well, so he drifted off again.

In the morning, Colt was the first to wake. Still feeling yesterday's soreness, he fetched some breakfast for everyone from the nearby gas station."

"378

Garovel had to wake Hector up in order to eat and get changed. Colt watched the young black man shuffle stiltedly into the bathroom as if his limbs were made of wood.

Soon, they were in the car again. Hector went right back to sleep, and Colt stared at an open road as they headed for Walton. At length, Bohwanox had a few private words for him.

‘When I asked you before about how you intend to raise Stephanie and Thomas, you said you’d figure something out.’

‘I remember.’

‘We both know that’s not much of an answer. We have time, so I didn’t press you on it. But if this child doctor doesn’t have good news, then we might have to answer that question a lot sooner than we expected. You understand?’

Colt glanced at Hector and the twins in the mirror. ‘...Yeah. I understand.’

--++--++--

It was a snug fit, to be sure. There was barely room to move around, but Gina had everything she needed in this modest basement. She had a checker-print bed, a bathroom with a shower, a mini-fridge, an air conditioner, a heater, and even a kitchenette. Computer equipment took up most of the available floor space, and everywhere else lay scores of boxes, all filled with food that would last a very long time, if she needed it to. Hopefully, she wouldn’t need it to.

She figured that most people would hate having to live in a place like this for very long, but for her, it mostly just brought back memories. Nowadays, she preferred more fresh air and physical activity in her life, but she didn’t mind falling back into old habits. As long as she had internet access, she could survive just fine down here.

She gnawed on a stick of beef jerky with her hair in a half-combed tangle when, abruptly, her phone rang. She checked the number, but it wasn’t one she’d seen before. She answered it. “Hello?”

<“Hey, Gina,”> came Roman’s voice."

"379 -- XLIV.

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Gina sat up in her chair. "Master Roman! Where are you? You haven't contacted me for weeks."

<"Yeah, my phone kind of blew up. It's no big deal. I've got a new one now.">

"How did your phone get destroyed?"

<"Oh, um. I dropped it.">

Gina squinted. "You dropped your phone, and it exploded."

<"Yeah. That's a thing that can happen. I don't see what's weird about it.">

"Master Roman, why are you lying to me? And moreover, why are you sucking at it?"

<"I have other things on my mind right now, okay? Dammit, Voreese! Shut up! I'm trying to talk to Gina! Agh--she can't hear you! You know she can't hear you, so you're just being annoying for no fucking reason! Stop already or--"> There was a pause, then a sigh of exasperation. <"Voreese says hi.">

"Hi, Voreese."

<"Gina says hi. Yeah. Great. Now shut up. Yes, I know you can't let go of me right now! Just be quiet!"> Another pause, and Roman cleared his throat. <"Sorry about that. It's been a stressful week.">

"Did something happen?"

<"We met up with some more Vanguard forces, but they weren't very forthcoming. They were giving us the run around and just generally being unhelpful pricks.">

"And?"

<"And Lynnette stole something from them, and they got all pissed. Then I stole a bigger something. An airplane-shaped something.">

"You stole a plane from the Vanguard?!"

<"Yeah!"> laughed Roman. <"Stole the pilot, too. Pretty nice guy. Bit jumpy, but nice.">

“Wait.” Gina’s brow lowered. “What happened to your private jet?”

<“Oh, um. Yeah, don’t worry about the private jet. It’s fine.”>

“It’s not fine at all, is it?”

<“It’s at the bottom of a swamp.”>

“How did that happen?!”

<“That’s not important.”>

“I think it is!”

<“Everything is under control. I only called to let you know that we haven’t died horribly yet.”>

“Fantastic. In that case, I have news for you, too. You remember Hector, yes?”

<“Yeah?”>

"379 -- XLIV.

Chapter Forty-Four: ‘Hark! Thy distant troubles...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Gina sat up in her chair. “Master Roman! Where are you? You haven’t contacted me for weeks.”

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"Did something happen?"

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"And?"

<"And Lynnette stole something from them, and they got all pissed. Then I stole a bigger something. An airplane-shaped something.">

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<"Oh, um. Yeah, don't worry about the private jet. It's fine.">

"It's not fine at all, is it?"

<"It's at the bottom of a swamp.">

"How did that happen?!"

<"That's not important.">

"I think it is!"

<"Everything is under control. I only called to let you know that we haven't died horribly yet.">

“Fantastic. In that case, I have news for you, too. You remember Hector, yes?”

<“Yeah?”>  
"380

“Everyone in Atreya thinks he’s a mass murderer,” said Gina. “He’s gotten pretty infamous. And Abolish may or may not be trying to kill him now.”

Again, there came a pause. <“Huh,”> was all Roman said.

“He got into a fight with them just yesterday.”

<“Is he okay?”>

“I think so. He’s not alone, anyway. There’s another servant with him.”

<“Oh? Who?”>

“A man named Colt. He has two young children with him.”

<“Hmm. Does he seem trustworthy?”>

“Hard to say. Hector seems to trust him, though. I’ve been trying to help them as best I can.”

<“Good. Don’t let them do anything crazy. They could be valuable allies.”>

“Also, more importantly, I’ve learned that Abolish intends to destroy a small town called Harold and blame the attack on Rendon.”

<“Mm. That’s about what Mehlsanz predicted.”>

“They’re going to do it thirteen days from now. I thought the events from yesterday might’ve changed their minds, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. Desmond’s been yelling at Karkash but not to much effect.”

<“Who are Desmond and Karkash?”>

“Two of the Abolish guys. I believe there are now seven Abolish servants in Sescoria.”



<“Ugh. Seven. That will be problematic.”>

“Where are you heading next? Do you have a plan?”

<“We’re flying to Intar right now. We’re hoping to find a more reasonable faction of the Vanguard there.”>

“One which won’t mind that you stole a plane from their allies?”

<“We might have to leave that part out of the discussion.”>

“Then you’ll have to ditch the plane or hide it somehow.”

<“Yeah, I know.”>

“How is the Queen doing?”

<“Good, as far as I can tell. She was the first one to see through the Vanguard’s bullshit. Would’ve been nice if she warned me a little earlier about her plan to have Lynnette rip them off, but I suppose it would’ve turned into a clusterfuck either way.”>

“They attacked you?”

<“No.”>

“Master Roman…”

<“Okay, maybe a little.”>

"381

Gina’s brow furrowed. “Sir, how much danger are you in?”

<“Oh, not much. Don’t worry.”>

“Stop telling me not to worry. I know you’re lying. Just tell me the truth.”

<“Sorry, I can’t hear you very well. I’m going into a tunnel.”>

“Your plane is going into a tunnel?”

<“It’s a very tunnel-like cloud. You’re--kerrghh--breaking up--kerrghh. Sorry--kerrghh.”>

“You’re pathetic, Master Roman.”

<“Kerrghh--talk to you later--kerrghh.”> He hung up.

She shook her head and set her phone down. After a few moments, however, it started ringing again, and she picked it back up.

<“How did you find out so much about Abolish’s plan?”>

It was her turn to hesitate. “I inferred it from watching the news.”

<“Bullshit! You named names and gave me a timeline!”>

“The reporters were very thorough.”

<“Fuck! You went to Sescoria to spy on them, didn’t you?! Don’t you know how dangerous that is?!”>

“Don’t worry, sir. Hector is here with me.”

<“Oh yeah? Let me talk to him, then.”>

“He’s busy with something. I don’t want to bother him.”

<“Gina, you--!”>

“Oh, look at that. I seem to be going into a tunnel now, too. Bye.” She hung up.

Roman called back immediately, and Gina just let it ring. Then it fell quiet for a minute, and just when she was getting back into her work, it started beeping. She checked the text messages.

i forgot to tell u sumthing important

She called him back. “Now what?”

<“It’s about Lynnette. She’s probably headed back to Atreya.”>

“Huh? By herself?”

<“She got separated from us. We don’t know where she is, and she doesn’t know where we’re going, so the Queen figures that Lynnette will go back to Atreya. Which sounds about right.”>

“You want me to track her down?”

<“No need. I gave her your contact details a while back as a precaution. I’m betting you’ll get a call from her as soon she gets hold of a phone. Help her out if you can.”>

“Yes, sir.”

"382

<“And look, I understand why you went to Sescoria. And I’m grateful for your information. But you’ve accomplished your goal now, so go back to Walton.”>

“I’m sorry, sir. I can’t do that.”

<“Gina, that’s an order. Go back to Walton.”>

“What, are you going to fire me?”

<“Gina.”>

“Master Roman, the information I’ve gathered isn’t enough. We need the names and powers of all the enemy servants, along with any kind of actionable details about their plans. Just knowing that they intend to destroy Harold doesn’t help us. As things stand, we can’t beat them in a straight fight, especially without knowing what they’re capable of.”

There was a long pause. <“You’re not wrong,”> he admitted. <“And we probably won’t find reinforcements in time to save that town, either.”>

“By the way, I recorded yesterday’s news footage of Karkash. It’s not much, but it might help you convince the Vanguard of Abolish’s presence in Atreya.”

<“You only now remembered?”>

“I would have sent it to you later.”

<“You’ll have to hold off. This phone can’t play video, much less receive it from another country.”>

“Let me know when you get your hands on a better device, then.”

<“Right.”> Roman gave a sigh. <“You’re really not going to leave

Sescoria, are you?">

"No, sir."

<"Bah. You're at least being careful, aren't you?">

"Actually, sir, I intend to let them kill me for no reason."

<"That's not funny.">

-+--+--+-

'Wake up,' said Garovel.

Hector's eyes popped open, and he looked around. The twins were with him in the backseat, and when he locked eyes with Stephanie, he saw her face scrunch up and knew she would start crying if he lingered. He decided to exit the vehicle.

He met a harsh sun and a barren landscape. Not a single tree could be seen in any direction, though the waves of heat over the horizon made him wonder if his eyes could be trusted.

"Over here," said Colt."

"383

Hector turned to see Colt reach into the dirt and pull. A huge door rose out of the ground. Dust kicked up all around the man as he revealed a manmade hole in the ground. They both looked down at the ramp leading into the darkness.

Still groggy and aching all over his body, Hector scratched under his eye. "W-where are we, exactly?"

Colt thumbed behind himself. "East of Walton."

Hector squinted, only then noticing the buildings in the distance. They fluctuated on the horizon, seeming almost a mirage against the heat.

Colt fetched the children from the car, along with a flashlight, the latter of which he handed off to Hector. And all together, they ventured underground, Hector leading the way while the reapers brought up the rear.

The ramp curved gradually right as they descended, and soon, they discovered an even floor. Hector found a switch on the wall and flipped it. Incrementally, flood lights in the ceiling illuminated a much larger chamber than Hector had expected.

There had to be upwards of fifty vehicles in this place.

"Damn," said Colt. "Some friend you got here."

The reapers began browsing.

Hector looked at Colt again. "So I guess... you talked to Gina while I was asleep?"

"Not for very long. Only to get the coordinates to this place. She did say to call her back when you were awake, though."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why didn't you just wake me up, then?"

"She said it wasn't urgent."

Bohwanox floated up behind Colt. 'He's lying. He told Gina all about how you needed your rest.'

Colt's glare only seemed to make the reaper happier.

'It was very touching,' said Bohwanox. 'He cried.'

The man rolled his eyes and walked away.

Bohwanox lingered with Hector. 'Alright, so maybe he didn't cry.'

Hector tried to reply but found no words available. He wasn't sure he understood Colt and Bohwanox's relationship. He wasn't sure they did, either."

"384

As he wandered toward Garovel, Hector pulled out his cellphone, but he was interrupted before he could find Gina's number.

'Hector, look,' said Garovel, pointing. 'A Revenant cruiser. And look! A wall you can crash it into!'

Hector shook his head, fighting a grin and losing. "Hey, I didn't wreck

the last bike. Um. Much.”

‘I’m convinced that was only because it wasn’t a Revenant.’

“Then by that logic, I shouldn’t choose this one.”

‘No, by that logic, you definitely should.’

He just laughed.

‘You have to pick it. It’s so shiny and silver. And it’s got knives painted on the gas tank.’

He had to admit, it was an attractive machine. It seemed more beastly than the previous bikes, both wider and longer to his eyes. Twin exhaust pipes curved smoothly out from below the engine and reached all the way past the rear tire, and judging from the digital instruments below the handlebars, the bike was a newer model.

He nodded at the reaper and turned away to call Gina, putting her on speaker again as soon as she picked up.

<“Hello,”> she said cheerfully.

“H-hi.” He glanced at the others as they gathered around to listen.

“We, uh. W-we found the garage.”

<“Oh, good. Before that, though, I wanted to tell you that I spoke with Master Roman.”>

Hector’s brow perked up. “Oh, what’d he say?”

<“I told him about the attack on Harold, but he isn’t very hopeful that he and the Queen will make it back to Atreya in time with reinforcements.”>

He frowned. “Hmm.”

<“So if you intend to save that town, then you should expect to be on your own.”>

“Shit...”

<“Give me time to find out more details before you commit to anything. I can’t have you going off and getting yourselves killed.”>

“Yeah, we’d, uh... we’d like to avoid that as well...”

<“Anyway, that garage is part of a bunker. There should be some rooms in the back with beds, along with a bathroom and a stocked kitchen.”>  
"385

“Why, um... ah... why is this place, uh... um...?”

<“...Yes?”>

Blushing again, Hector looked to the others, partly for help, partly to see if they were annoyed with him. Their faces seemed more pitying than irritated. He wasn't sure that was any better, honestly.

Colt intervened. “I think Hector's wondering why your boss has a bunker full of cars way out here.”

Hector breathed deep and nodded thankfully.

<“Ah.”> Gina paused. <“I suppose if Master Roman doesn't mind you using the facility, then he won't mind me telling you what it's for. My understanding is that these bunkers were Voreese's idea. She wanted places to go in the event of an attack on the mansion in Walton.”>

“Voreese is...?” Colt shifted his grip on Stephanie, trying to prevent her from grabbing onto his lower lip. He succeeded, and she tugged on his beard instead.

“Voreese is Roman's reaper,” said Hector.

<“Voreese was also planning to use the bunkers for certain business ventures.”>

“Business ventures?” said Hector.

<“Underground delivery and rebranding services, I believe.”>

Colt snorted. “So a black market, basically.”

<“I wouldn't know anything about that.”>

“Hector never told you that I used to be a cop, did he?”

Gina was quiet a moment. <“So like I was saying, those bunkers are

for emergency shelter only.”>

“Nice. You know, it’s not like I’m in any position to arrest you.”

<“Right, so. Anyway, you can stay there, if you like. In fact, please do stay there, even if it’s only for the next few days. It’ll be easier for me if I know where you are.”>

Colt raised an eyebrow. “Easier for you, how?”

<“I’m expecting a call from Lynnette. She’s apparently on her way back to Atreya, and I’m thinking it would be good to have her meet up with you.”>

“Who’s Lynnette?”

“Oh!” said Hector. “Lynn, you mean? She’s--wait a minute. She’s coming back on her own?”

<“That’s what Master Roman said. She might need a ride, or she might already have her own. I have no idea how she’ll be getting back into the country.”>

"386

“Uhh. W-why is Lynn on her own?”

<“I’m not too clear on the details. You should probably just ask her yourself.”>

“I, uh... mgh...”

<“Or have Colt ask her. Whatever works.”>

“Any progress with that child doctor?” said Colt.

<“Sorry, not yet. I should get back to that, actually. Give me a ring if I can help with anything else.”>

“Roger that,” said Colt.

The conversation ended there. Colt and Bohwanox went off to explore the rest of the bunker. Hector, on the other hand, wanted to get some training in. He was sure he’d fall back asleep if he did practically



anything else. He went up above ground again with Garovel, and the first thing he did was make a giant half-dome to shield himself from the sun. Then he began some simple sword practice.

As his thoughts drifted back to his battle with Karkash, Hector soon began thinking about his own ability, about some of the things he still wasn't sure he fully understood.

"I've got a question..."

'Yeah?'

"If, um... well, for instance, if I make a metal box or something--" He paused to do just that, materializing a large iron cube directly in front of him. "--what happens to it if I just... like... leave it there?"

Garovel tilted his head. 'What do you mean?'

"Ah, like... if I don't destroy this cube here, and then I just go somewhere else, um... somewhere really far away, I mean... then will the cube, um... stay? Or will it destroy itself when I get too far away?"

'Oh. It'll stay. You didn't know that, already? Even after all those criminals you left coated in metal for the police?'

"Well, I kinda figured that's what happens, but I just... uh... wanted to be sure, 'cuz... now I have a follow-up question."

'Alright.'

"So I can go like a hundred kilometers away from this cube, and it'll stay here, but... what if I try to destroy it WHILE I'm that far away from it? Would that work?"

'Ah! No, that wouldn't work, but you bring up an important point.'

"I do?"

"387

'It's a matter of proximity,' said Garovel. 'The distance over which you can create your iron is exactly the same as the distance over which you can destroy it. Obviously, you can't create something from a hundred kilometers away, so you wouldn't be able to destroy it from

that distance, either.'

"Hmm..."

'Think of it as if you're always standing at the center of a giant bubble. That bubble is your "sphere of influence," so to speak. Anywhere within that space, you can create and subsequently destroy your iron.'

"Okay..." Hector annihilated the crude sword he had been using and crossed his arms. "So then... if someone is standing within my range, could I create metal inside their body?"

'Ah. You're thinking if you could materialize iron directly into a servant's brain, you could kill them instantly, right?'

"...Yeah, pretty much."

'As far as I know, that's not possible. I definitely would've told you to do it earlier if I thought it was.'

"Why isn't it possible? Er, why don't you think it is?"

'Because the mass that you're creating has to accumulate before taking form. And it can't do that within a space already occupied by a solid object. There's too much physical resistance for the atoms and molecules to gather properly. Within a gas or a liquid, though, it's fine. There's not enough resistance there to cause a problem.'

"Mm..." He wiped his brow. Even in the shade, he'd been sweating for a while.

'That's the idea, anyway. Emergence is always a bit of a wild card, but I've never heard of a materialization user who could do that.'

"But, umm... haven't I already done that, kind of?"

'What're you talking about?'

"I've cut into flesh with my metal before. I know I have. I mean, it didn't start inside the body, but once the metal went through, it kept going and came out the other side. Doesn't that sort of count? Or...?"

"388

‘Cutting into flesh isn’t the same,’ said Garovel, ‘because I’m sure you were growing the metal from the back.’

“From the back?”

‘Yeah, you make the tip of a blade, for instance, and then add onto it from the back. Because the tip is already formed, it can cut through the body, and it can keep cutting through because you then keep adding to the metal from outside the person’s body, where it can form properly.’

“Eh... I’m still not sure I follow...”

‘You can test it on yourself, if you like. You won’t be able to make a blade grow OUT of, say, your brachioradialis muscle, but you WILL be able to grow a blade INTO the muscle.’

“Brachio... radialis muscle?”

‘It’s in your forearm. Primarily allows you to flex your elbow.’

“R-right. Uh...” He eyed his forearm. “Maybe I’ll test that out later. Or maybe I’ll just... trust you.”

‘You mean you don’t wanna stab yourself for the sake of science?’

He exhaled a curt laugh.

Garovel scratched his bare skull. ‘I don’t remember you ever doing that before, though. Growing your metal into someone’s flesh, that is.’

Hector’s eyes drew down, and he looked at his hand, closing it into a fist and then opening it again. “It’s how I killed Geoffrey.”

‘Oh.’

Hector lingered on the memory a moment before brushing it away and looking at Garovel again. “What about, um... what if I tried to flood a person’s blood vessels with metal? Blood’s a liquid, so it would work, right?”

‘Gruesome thought. It might be possible, but it would require a hell of a lot of precision on your part. And even if you could make such a complicated network of iron, I don’t think it would be very useful. It definitely wouldn’t be enough to stop a servant.’

“It wouldn’t? Even if I flooded the blood vessels in their brain?”

‘It’s good that you’re thinking creatively about how to use your ability, but remember, a servant’s brain doesn’t require blood to function. As long as the brain is more or less in one piece, it should work just fine.’ The reaper thought a moment and then added, ‘Unless you freeze it or something, I suppose.’”  
"389 -- XLV.

--donation bonus (day #18, post 1/5)--

“Hmm. Then what else...?” Hector rubbed his face, trying not to focus on how tired he still was or how everything still ached. He took a deep breath and thought back. “I already know that there’s a limit to the amount of iron I can make, so... well, how does that work, exactly? I mean, I know the limit can increase as my, uh, as my proficiency does, but... uh...”

‘The volume limit is also reliant upon proximity. Anything you create is counted towards that volume limit as long as it’s within your range.’

Hector tilted his head. “So... if I’ve maxed out on the amount of iron I can create, then... to make more stuff, I have to either destroy something or... move away from what I already created?”

‘Correct.’

“Interesting...” He looked out across the wavering horizon. “Maybe I should figure out what my range is.”

‘Not a bad idea. Your range will grow over time, but it could still be useful to know what it is currently. And there’s plenty of space out here to work with.’

“Time for some tests, then...”

Chapter Forty-Five: ‘O, noble men of the Crown...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

King William Belgrant was simultaneously restless and exhausted. Sleep had been a fleeting rarity of late. The best he could hope for was the numb, groggy feeling that accompanied his meds.

He had a host of doctors checking up on him regularly. He didn't look his best, but his pallor was nothing that a few cosmetics couldn't fix.

Mostly, the King's presence had become a façade for the public. Prince Gabriel had assumed the vast majority of Helen's responsibilities, which William knew to be far from ideal, but he was in no position to do anything about it. It was difficult enough just trying to understand what was going on. These monstrous people of Abolish rarely bothered to explain anything to him. It was always a choice between doing what they said or being tortured. Or watching someone else be tortured."

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"390

--donation bonus (day #18, post 2/5)--

Abolish had established quite quickly that there was no standing against them. The three guard captains of Belgrant Castle were all dead now. One of the first things Desmond did was bring their heads to William.

Appalling as it was, the King expected it to attract attention. Surely, three well-known individuals with the same job suddenly disappearing would not go unnoticed. And yet, here he was, over a month later, and he had seen not a single word of their deaths mentioned on the news. He didn't understand how these people could have achieved such a hold over the media in so short a time.

He had not left Belgrant Castle, either. Despite all the rubble from Abolish's attack on the building, Desmond insisted that the King stay here. It seemed odd at first, but then he noticed that among the construction workers who arrived to repair the castle were more of Desmond's comrades. And since then, the repairs to the castle had provided them with an easy excuse to keep the public out. No tours, no reporters, no prying eyes.

Desmond never left the King's side, despite clearly wishing to. About

the only privacy he found was in the lavatory, but Desmond would wait just outside the door. Even when William saw Desmond sleeping, if he tried to sneak away, Desmond would immediately wake up and follow him every time. And the way that these people tended to stare at or even talk to apparently thin air was more than a little unsettling. Moreover, William still wasn't sure what they were even trying to accomplish with all this. It was obviously some type of coup, but they clearly had designs beyond those of Gabriel's. And as chatty as Desmond tended to be, the man had a strangely guarded tongue, rarely revealing anything of importance.

Each day seemed to bring some fresh horror with it. Perhaps the only piece of potentially good news he encountered was when he saw Karkash on the news."

"391

--donation bonus (day #18, post 3/5)--

He'd certainly heard tell of this Darksteel Soldier already, of the horrible crimes attributed to the young Hector Goffe, so William couldn't speak to the boy's character, but even so, it was enough just knowing that someone out there was able to actually fight these monsters.

Beyond that, there wasn't much to do. William didn't get many visitors. If they weren't staff, medical consultant, or Abolish, then they were generally forbidden from seeing him. The only exceptions were the princes. Abolish allowed them to roam freely and do as they pleased, which was telling enough on its own. Only one prince ever bothered to come see the King, however. Prince David, it was. And of Helen's seven brothers, David was perhaps the last one William would have expected, but admittedly, William didn't know the man very well. It was mainly David's reputation that informed the King's opinion of him.

"So how are you, Your Highness?" David pulled up a chair next to Desmond and joined them for their midday meal. He was quite the portly gentleman, almost too wide for his seat, even. Always full of smiles, he seemed, and often able to earn them in return, if begrudgingly.

"What do you want?" said William, trying not to sigh.

“Only to check on the health of my dear brother-in-law,” said David. “Why? Are you unable to say? Perhaps you can tell me in code, then. Clap once for good and twice for bad.”

Desmond snorted so hard that he spilled tea all over himself.

William was not nearly so amused. “I appreciate your concern,” he said flatly.

David flashed teeth through his full beard. “I do hope you are cooperating with our fine guests,” he said, and he reached across the table to take William’s lone hand in both of his own. “It would be such a shame if they had to kill you.”

The King was about to give an irritated response when he felt the piece of paper in his hand.”

"392

--donation bonus (day #18, post 4/5)--

David pulled back, still smiling as he glanced at Desmond, who was busy wiping himself off.

William’s palm turned, and his eyes went to the paper. It read simply:

Ignore my tone. Listen to my words.

The King blinked. His hand closed around the note again.

“I’m sure Helen would be upset if anything happened to you,” said David. “In fact, so would I. You may be a softhearted dolt, but you are my brother. It would grieve me to learn that our friend Desmond here was forced to kill you. You understand, yes?”

He looked at Prince David with fresh eyes. “I believe I do.” This was not David’s first visit, and suddenly, William was thinking back to each one prior. How long had David been waiting for an opportunity to slip this note to him? He tried to remember everything David had told him in those conversations, but there wasn’t much. He’d mostly ignored David’s visits, finding only depression therein.



"Your aunt agrees with me," David added. "I spoke to her earlier, you see. We spent most of our time talking about more important matters, but she briefly expressed her concern for you."

So he was working with Aunt Jezebel, then. Good to know. "I have already given up on resisting," said William.

"Oh," said Desmond with a mouthful of grilled lamb chop, "I suppose I can just leave then." He shared a laugh with David.

After a moment, the fat prince addressed William again. "By the way, have you heard about Jezebel's niece?"

William tried not to sound too eager as he said, "No, I have not."

"She went abroad for school, as you know, and apparently, she has made quite a splash there. When she returns to Atreya, I'm sure she'll have become a fine woman. Jezebel is already thinking about having a husband ready for her when she gets home."

"I see." He stiffened in his seat, concealing the sense of cautious relief that washed through him. It hardly qualified as news, but it was more than he had heard all month long."

"393

--donation bonus (day #18, post 5/5)--

Helen had been at the back of William's mind every minute of every day. He tried his best not to worry about her too much, but he wasn't particularly successful. Strangely, despite how sudden her disappearance had been, it wasn't exactly difficult to figure out why she'd fled. The red-haired foreigner sitting in front of him was obviously the cause.

"How old is this niece?" said Desmond. "Is she hot?" The fresh tea stain on his suit was quite obvious, but he didn't seem to care anymore. He still took the appearance of a butler, but by now, everyone in the castle knew he wasn't one.

"I'm not sure we would be the best judges of that," said David. "She is family, after all."

"Mm." Desmond chewed loudly as he thought. "But I thought you royal

types fucked each other all the time.”

William couldn't tell if David's laugh was genuine. If it wasn't, then the man should've been an actor.

“You're thinking of ancient royalty,” said David.

“Nah, I'm pretty sure there are some modern royals who fuck each other, too.”

“Heh. Well, I assure you, we're not among them.”

“If you say so.”

David eyed his golden watch. “Ah. Gentlemen, I must go.” He stood.

“Aww, already? You're gonna leave me here with this sad sack?”

“Alas, I have a meeting to attend. Important princely business.”

“Tch.”

After he was gone, it was just Desmond and the King again. An interval of silence passed as they continued eating.

“Seriously, though, is she hot?”

--+-+--+--

David was the last to arrive. He took his designated seat at a long table in a closed room.

The seven brothers of House Lumenbel were all here. In order of age, they were Gabriel IV, Nathaniel II, Charles III, David III, Martin V, Luther, and Meriwether.

David remembered asking his mother why the two youngest had such different names.

“Because mercifully, your grandmother was dead by then, and I no longer had to listen to her.”

That was perhaps when he began to understand what kind of family he had been born into.”

“Brothers, welcome,” said Gabriel. Whatever else could be said of the man and of his kingly ambitions, he certainly looked the part. His black hair was offset by the occasional streak of gray, and he always kept his broad chin cleanly shaven. He filled his scarlet vest quite well, and a golden trim along his white sleeves traced his shoulders perfectly.

“Why are we here?” said Meriwether. He was the smallest man in the room, yet somehow still the loudest. His voice had no trouble carrying across the table. “Our last meeting was a mere five days ago. Must you constantly seek our approval like some uncertain rube?”

“There is news of Helen Belgrant,” said Gabriel.

That last name was a particularly sore point for everyone, David knew. To him, it was a mere formality, but to his brothers, and indeed, to most members of the House Lumenbel, the name Belgrant was the one that stole the title of the Royal House of Atreya. Which wasn’t even the Belgrants’ doing, really. Helen and William had been married long before she became Queen, and the Belgrants surely never expected the marriage to make their son a king.

David remembered Helen’s ascension fondly, though he suspected no one else in this room shared that sentiment. As often as he’d been at odds with their father, appointing Helen was one of the wisest things the man had ever done, as far as David was concerned. It was also, without a doubt, the most hilarious. Gabriel had always been the pretentious, overeager fool he was to this day, and seeing him suddenly lose his right to the crown was one of David’s most cherished and satisfying memories.

So when he learned that Gabriel was responsible for the assassination attempt and subsequent departure of the Queen, David had been far from pleased. But by that point, the wheels were already in motion, and he realized that the only thing left to do was to climb aboard. And perhaps see about sabotage later.”

"395

--donation bonus (day #19, post 1/5)--

“I have received word that Helen was spotted in Korgum,” Gabriel

explained. "She was seen consorting with the local militia, which leads me to believe that she intends to return here with an army."

Silence fell across the table. David gauged the others' expressions. Most were calm, if a bit unsettled, but Nathaniel's mousy face was horrified. David always thought the man to be rather slow-witted but ultimately goodhearted. He wasn't so sure about the latter anymore.

"From the report," Gabriel went on, "it seems she did not acquire their assistance. But she is most probably looking elsewhere now."

"This would not be a problem if those fools did not let her escape," said Charles.

"Bah." Martin glared at Nathaniel. "That would not have been a problem if this fool had killed her properly."

"There is no use casting blame now," said Gabriel. "We are where we are. I propose we shore up our defenses and deploy more of the AFA to find her."

Nathaniel nodded furiously. "Agreed!"

"Agreed," added Charles.

Nine years ago, the Agency of Foreign Affairs secretly cannibalized the RIB (His Majesty's Royal Intelligence Bureau). David recalled it being the result of a particularly bad scandal involving the bribery of a Rendon ambassador. Rendon demanded that the RIB be shut down, even threatening military action. He also recalled the incident being largely Gabriel's doing.

David wasn't sure what the AFA had been up to under Helen's rule, but he wondered if it also had some role in the attempt on her life. It certainly had been quick to follow Gabriel's orders as soon as she was gone. He'd have to consult Duchess Jezebel about that later.

At the moment, however, David wanted to interject. "Why do you all sound so worried?" he laughed. "What is there to fear? You've all witnessed the power of our delightful guests from Abolish. Army or not, they will doubtlessly crush anyone Helen returns with."

That sent a mumbling ripple across the table."

--donation bonus (day #19, post 2/5)--

"I do not trust these guests," said Meriwether. "You should not have involved them in our affairs. It has become a needless complication."

"So you keep saying," said Gabriel. "But they have cleaned up our mess. David is correct to trust in their strength, but we must not become indolent in their presence."

Meriwether scoffed. "They obviously have plans they are not telling us about."

"They are a means to an end," said Gabriel.

David took note of Luther, who had thus far said nothing. The bespectacled man was not so pristinely groomed as the others, and though he was by no means thin, neither was he as portly as David.

Luther's quietude was expected. Even before all this chaos, he was a man of few words. David wanted to take extra care to not forget about him, and he could see that Luther was not forgetting about him, either. Luther returned David's gaze evenly, but the man's face was as indecipherable as ever. David wished he knew whether to be unsettled or hopeful.

"We should do more than just send the AFA," said Nathaniel. "We should send assassins, preferably from Abolish."

"Idiot," said Martin. "They will not leave Atreya just because we ask them to. We have no control over their actions."

Nathaniel frowned. "But if we explain the danger she poses, then surely--"

"Martin is right," said Gabriel. "I already requested they send someone after her. They refused outright. I would not have called this meeting if they agreed."

"Why would they refuse?!" said Nathaniel.

"Resources," David offered. "No?"

Gabriel nodded.

"A problem we too face," David continued. "If we expend resources

tracking Helen down and attempting to kill her again, then that leaves fewer tools at our disposal for this war of conquest you have planned. Not to mention that whomever we send after her will probably fail anyway.”

“What makes you think that?” said Gabriel. “She is only a woman.”

David smiled for everyone. “Yes, well, that woman has survived two assassination attempts.””

”397 -- XLVI.

--donation bonus (day #19, post 3/5)--

“Third time is the charm,” said Charles.

David’s smile waned. “You might disregard Nathaniel’s bumbling work, but don’t forget that she also escaped from Desmond and that big fellow whose name I forget. If they could not kill her, then do you honestly believe some grunt you send after her will?”

Nathaniel furrowed his thin brow. “So what then? Are you truly suggesting that we ignore her until she returns for our heads?”

“You misunderstand,” said David. “I’m merely saying that, perhaps, we should have more thought for the future. Helen surely intends to bring a war to our doorstep in order to reclaim her throne, but we also plan to start our own. My dear brothers, if we are to fight two wars at once, then let us not waste our time, money, and skilled personnel on pitiful assassination attempts.”

Again, a low rumble ran across the table.

Ideally, of course, Atreya would not go to war with anyone, but that was looking less and less likely every day.

“I must agree with David,” said Luther, and everyone turned to look at him. “Conservation is the wisest course of action.”

David caught Luther’s gaze again. It still told him nothing. He had been rather convincing, after all. Even he’d started to believe his own bullshit.

Gabriel folded his arms. “I do not agree. We must do everything we

can to prevent her from returning.”

“Agreed!”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed here, as well.”

“I have no opinion on the matter,” said Meriwether.

David relinquished a shrug, admitting defeat. But after the discussion began to move forward again, his eyes returned to Luther, who was already looking back at him.

Chapter Forty-Six: ‘Devoted protector, choose well...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Over the next day, Hector trained as much as Garovel would let him. And it took a while of measuring, but he eventually discovered that his materialization ability currently held a range of eighty-eight meters.

Give or take one or two.”

”397 -- XLVI.

--donation bonus (day #19, post 3/5)--

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"398

--donation bonus (day #19, post 4/5)--

Still, it was pretty incredible, Hector felt, being able to create something from nearly a football field away. He noticed, however, that close to the edge of his range, precision became more difficult.



‘That’s to be expected,’ Garovel told him. ‘To an extent, your ability is also dependent on your sight. When you can’t clearly see what you’re making, it’ll probably end up less like you wanted.’

Hector closed his eyes and materialized a cube in his hand. When he looked at it, he found a perfect box, just as desired. He smirked at the reaper.

‘Hey, that’s too simple. Try something more difficult. Like an animal. Oh, make a tiny giraffe. I like giraffes.’

He destroyed the cube and did his best. When he opened his eyes again, he found that his work still looked very much like a giraffe. Maybe the spots were a bit off, but he wasn’t entirely sure how to picture those in his head anyway.

‘I see how it is. You’re trying to make me look stupid.’

Hector snickered, letting the knickknack disintegrate between his fingers.

‘Make a baby monkey playing a banjo while riding a dinosaur.’

“Oh, come on, I wouldn’t be able to do that even with my eyes open.”

‘Fine, then just make something big. Like a giant dildo.’

“I’m not gonna make a giant dildo...”

‘A cock and balls, then?’

“Garovel...”

‘What?’

“You’re... you’re way too old to be laughing at penis jokes.”

‘Hector, please. One can never be too old to laugh at penis jokes. And I don’t think you appreciate how valuable the materialization ability is for pulling pranks.’

Hector ignored him and closed his eyes again. He chose to make a wide chamber around himself, four walls with a door and a window for each. He added a pointed ceiling with four different support beams. Abruptly, however, he heard the metal groan.

‘Look out,’ came Garovel’s lazy warning.

The ceiling caved in on top of him.

‘A cock and balls would’ve been a lot safer, you know.’”

"399

--donation bonus (day #19, post 5/5)--

Hector annihilated his metal and stood. He brushed the dirt off his coat as the bones in his neck and shoulders realigned themselves. “Okay,” he said. “I guess you were right.”

‘Indeed.’

“By the way, um... I was wondering about Colt’s ability...”

‘Yeah?’

“He can really destroy, like... anything?”

‘I believe so, yeah. Once he develops it more, that is.’

“But, uh... I mean, don’t servants in Abolish have that power, too?”

‘I’m sure some do, yeah. Why?’

“They wanna destroy the entire planet, don’t they? And if one of them has the destruction power and they develop it enough, wouldn’t they be able to, y’know, actually pull it off?”

‘Oh. Well, first off, the destruction ability has a range limit as well. I think the strongest destruction user I’ve ever heard of could make a path about... I wanna say, two kilometers. Length-wise, that is. Increasing the width of the path is much more difficult. I think the max width was only about two meters.’

“Really? That’s such a huge difference...”

‘The path projects outward from the user, kind of like a drill. It’s easier for it to move forward and backward than horizontally. Positioning and direction are both very important for destruction users.’

“Hmm. But they could still use that to, like... drill to the planet’s core, couldn’t they?”

‘That’s actually happened before,’ said Garovel, smirking. ‘It requires a special kind of nutjob, though, even by Abolish’s standards. Most servants--even the maniacal, murdering bastards--DO still want to live. So they understand that destroying the planet might not be the wisest course of action. But occasionally, the stars will align, and just the right idiot will acquire the destruction power and get just the right opportunity to develop it. Most of them don’t realize, however, how gigantic or how hot Eleg’s core is.’

“Oh...”

‘I do recall one incident, though--an actually organized effort to get down there and cause problems before being vaporized.’

“Yeah?”

"400

‘You have to understand,’ said Garovel. ‘The planet’s core is thousands of degrees Celsius and larger than most continents. Even if you somehow managed to drill into it, that’s not gonna do very much. At most, you might cause an earthquake, but it’d still be so far underground that it wouldn’t affect anyone on the surface. You certainly wouldn’t cause the entire planet to explode or collapse or anything so cataclysmic. That is, unless you spent weeks or months down there, carving out a large enough chunk of the core to actually have an impact.’

Hector scratched his head. “And someone tried to do that?”

‘Yeah. Abolish conducted an expedition. I don’t know how they intended to make it through the extreme temperatures. We’re talking four or five times hotter than a fucking volcano here. It seems utterly impossible to me. If they had some kind of technology to protect against that, then I’ve never heard of it. And a servant’s body is NOT going to regenerate in temperatures like that. Your flesh will burn or melt much more quickly than it will grow back.’

“Huh.”

‘But the Vanguard intercepted them anyway, so it didn’t even matter in the end.’

“How would the Vanguard even know what Abolish was doing...?”

Garovel opened his mouth to answer but stopped himself. And after a moment, he gave a skeletal smirk. ‘Oh, that’s right. You wouldn’t know, would you?’

“Know what?”

‘Hmm.’

“Garovel...?”

‘Eh. I don’t feel like telling you.’

Hector’s brow lowered. “What? Why not?”

The reaper’s smirk only grew. ‘Because it’ll make for a nice surprise one day.’

“But... aww, c’mon. W-what if we die before I get a chance to find out?”

‘Gee. I guess we better not die, then.’

“Bullshit... I bet you don’t even know the answer.”

‘Could be. Who knows? Oh wait, I do. Eheh.’

“Dammit, what the hell?! You’ve never done this before! I don’t like surprises!”

‘That’s too bad. Because I do.’

“Agh!”

"401

--donation bonus (day #20, post 1/5)--

‘If it were something critically important, I’d just tell you,’ said Garovel.

“Right...”

‘Why don’t you go get some rest? I think you’ve trained enough for today.’

“Fucking... jerk...”

Garovel just laughed.

Hector's room was little more than a closet. The walls hugged the bed, and there was scarcely enough space to open the door. It couldn't be much of a step up from just sleeping in one of the cars, but he wasn't about to complain. A bed was a bed.

After a while, Garovel woke him up so that he could eat.

Colt's cooking was a decidedly unique experience. The man made some kind of indistinguishable gray slop, and yet when Hector tried it, he discovered that it didn't taste that bad.

“What do you call this?” Hector asked.

Colt shrugged.

Hector cocked an eyebrow. “What's in it?”

“Gravy.”

“...And?”

“And some other stuff.”

“What other stuff?”

“Just be glad I'm good at making gravy.”

Whatever it was, Stephanie and Thomas didn't seem to mind eating it.

Hector couldn't keep up much conversation, still feeling tired and sore all over, and Colt didn't seem all that interested in talking, either. Halfway through the meal, however, Hector's phone rang. He answered it.

<“Found you a doctor,”> said Gina. <“Dr. Marcus of Walton General apparently moonlights for some, shall we say, less-than-upstanding citizens. He's got a pretty foul reputation, though. Organ trafficking and the like. That okay?”>

“Yeah,” said Colt. “Did you make me an appointment, or do I need to make my own?”

<“This guy doesn't really do appointments. You'll have to go to him.

And he may not be particularly welcoming unless you've got cash on you. A few thousand troa, at least.">

"Alright. Tell me where to find him."

--+-+--+--

The old clinic stood at the foot of a hill. Its boarded up windows and broken, unlit sign suggested that it no longer served patients, but that was probably the whole idea."

"402

--donation bonus (day #20, post 2/5)--

Colt parked around back, seeing Hector's motorcycle pull up next to him. He told Hector and Garovel to stay behind and rest, but they insisted on coming along. Maybe they wanted to make sure the twins were safe. Maybe they wanted to make sure he didn't kill anyone. Probably both.

He didn't like Walton so much. If it wasn't for the reapers, he would've gotten lost at least twice on the way here. The city's night life seemed annoyingly vibrant as well. He could hear a party going on a few streets over.

Hector was kind enough to go first while Colt had his hands full with the children. Instead of going through the building's rear entrance, Hector lifted the door to the storm cellar and descended. Colt followed.

They came upon an underground hallway and another door. Hector knocked. After a wait, a deep voice asked, "Who is it?"

According to Gina's directions, the correct response was, "Someone in need of an especially skilled yet underappreciated doctor." Colt spared Hector the torture of having to say it.

The lock clicked open, and they were allowed entry. Hector stood off to the side and allowed Colt to approach the small man in a white coat.

The first thing Colt noticed was the cellar itself. It hardly seemed like a sterile environment for medical procedures. With the dank air and stone gray walls, it was practically a dungeon, though perhaps better lit. And the apparent doctor wasn't alone. Two bulky men sat on either side of him, their holstered firearms displayed clearly at their hips.

"Oh, wow," said Dr. Marcus. "I don't usually get children this time of night. Why, exactly, can't you bring them to me during normal business hours?"

"Does it matter?" said Colt.

The man's smile was not friendly. "Anyone who does what I do has to have at least a mild affection for children." He waved a hand, and his two bodyguards stood. "I don't take very kindly to kidnappers."

"403

--donation bonus (day #20, post 3/5)--

"I'm their father," said Colt steadily. "I didn't kidnap them."

"And if I asked you to prove it?"

"I'd say take a paternity test."

"Those aren't exactly quick. And they're not my forte, either."

"Look," said Colt. "All I want is a normal check-up for them. Just tell me if there's anything I should be worried about."

"Then answer my question. Why are you bringing them to me now?"

"Because I'm wanted for murder."

The man didn't lose a beat. "Are you guilty?"

"Yes."

The doctor paused to exhale a laugh. "You're very honest."

"Are you gonna check them or not?"

"Did you kill a child?"

"No."

The man stared at him. "Did you bring money?"

Colt showed him a backpack full of cash.

"Alright, then." The doctor took a step forward, and then he stopped, his eyes lingering on Hector. "Who's he?"

"My babysitter. Don't worry about him."

"No, no," the man said. "Take off your helmet. Let me see your face."

Hector glanced at Colt, and Colt shrugged. Hector removed his riding helmet.

The doctor backed away a few steps, as did his two bodyguards. "I recognize you," the man said, not shaken, but not pleased, either. "You've been all over the news."

"Don't worry about him," Colt repeated. "If you're wondering whether or not he's guilty, too, then I'll save you the trouble of asking. He's not."

The doctor tilted his head, loosening up a little. "Really now? And yet he's working as your... babysitter?"

"He and I have a complicated relationship. Are you done asking questions now? I didn't come here to be quizzed."

Dr. Marcus threw a last look at Hector before saying, "Very well. Follow me, please."

They all began walking together, heading for a staircase at the far end of the cellar.

"Tell me about your children," the doctor said. "Surely, you felt it was a risk coming here. Is there something about them that has been worrying you?"

"404 not found jk guys

--donation bonus (day #20, post 4/5)--

"They're strangely calm," said Colt. "Nothing seems to faze them anymore."

"So you're concerned about their mental health, rather than their physical health."

"Yeah."



“How old are they?”

“Little over fourteen months. They’re twins, if you couldn’t already tell.”

They ascended the steps into a whiter hallway, then took the first door on the left into a more conventional room. Old anatomical charts and reassuring posters filled the walls where cabinets didn’t. Colt set the twins on the waist-high table in the center of the room.

Dr. Marcus hovered around them both with a stethoscope, checking their heartbeats and breathing. After a bit, he moved on to checking their mouths, eyes, and ears. “Are they walking on their own yet?”

“Not really,” said Colt. “I’ve seen them stumble around a little, but that’s it. They don’t tend to move around on their own much. It even seems like they crawl less than they used to.”

The doctor helped Stephanie stand up on the table, holding her hand. He waited, watching her steady herself, then let her back down and did the same for Thomas. “Have they said their first words?”

“Yeah. A while ago.”

“Are they using words meaningfully? Any at all?”

Colt thought back. "Not that I can recall, no."

"You're sure?" said the doctor. "So when they speak, you only ever hear babbling?"

"Yeah."

The doctor pointed at the floor behind the twins. "Stand there please," he told Colt. And when Colt was out of the twins' view, the doctor added, "Call them by their names."

"Stephanie," said Colt. "Thomas." Neither one turned to look at him. "Stephanie. Thomas." Still nothing. The doctor handed him a large book to drop. When it hit the floor, the twins both turned to look.

The doctor stroked his bare chin. "Have you been using their names to address them?"

Colt hesitated. "Not really, I guess."

"Start."

The inquiries continued for a long while. While he performed repeated physical examinations, Dr. Marcus asked about their eating habits, sleeping habits, fine motor skills, games they liked to play, general sense of curiosity, as well as when they last received vaccinations."

"405

--donation bonus (day #20, post 5/5)--

At length, Colt had to ask, "So what do you think? Is there something wrong with them?"

"Yes," the man said plainly. "They clearly demonstrate a lack of development. Something has stifled their mental and emotional growth. At the moment, I'm not sure what. There doesn't appear to be any physical cause. I can perform more invasive procedures, but I'm not convinced they're necessary just yet. Can you tell me what their home life is like?"

"Well, at the moment, we don't really have a home."

"Ah. Then I suggest you find a place to settle--and soon. For now, the

effects are not so bad. It's nothing you can't resolve with a few simple parenting techniques, but your children need a stable environment to grow up in or their development could be further stigmatized, which could have more lasting consequences. What about their mother? Is she in the picture at all?"

'You have to tell him,' said Bohwanox.

Colt knew there was no avoiding it. "Their mother tried to kill them."

Dr. Marcus blinked at that. "Oh."

"Also, they were kidnapped by a mob boss for nearly a month."

The doctor blinked several more times. "Ohhh... I see. Well, then. I guess I don't need to run those tests, after all. Um." He paused to rub his forehead. "Geez. I wish you'd told me that at the beginning."

"It's not the kind of information I'd like spread around."

He exhaled a sigh. "Alright, well. Clearly, they've been through a trauma. More than one, from the sound of it. What was the nature of their kidnapping?"

"What do you mean?"

"Details. What was their captivity like? Who was looking after them? How were they being treated?"

Colt fell quiet at that. He eyed Bohwanox. 'I don't suppose you know the answer to that, do you?'

'Sorry.'

"You have no idea," the doctor surmised.

Colt gave a strained expression. "They had a crib, I think. Some thugs looking after them. They were kidnapped by Joseph Rofal, if that means anything."

"406

The doctor smirked. "I figured as much. You know, I heard there was a hefty reward for finding the person who killed him."

Colt's icy blue stare seemed to tell the man everything he needed to know.

"Heh." He threw an unsteady glimpse at Hector. "I would never sell out such fine gentlemen, of course."

Truth be told, Colt was a bit surprised the man hadn't sicced his bodyguards on them earlier. But surely, by now, there was little remaining doubt that Colt really was the twins' father. It would have been rather difficult for anyone else to answer all of the doctor's previous questions.

Dr. Marcus cleared his throat. "So the short of it is, you don't know what this Rofal person subjected your children to." He scratched the back of his head. "Assuming the kids would've developed normally otherwise, I think I can tell you what they went through."

Colt's brow rose. "Go on, then."

"I don't think they were beaten, fortunately. But they were terrorized in some way. Most likely, they were discouraged from speaking at all, as their captors probably wanted them to be quiet. Any kind of curiosity the children displayed was likely met with anger. And I'm certain that they were kept confined to a small space and not allowed to crawl or roam freely."

The more Colt listened, the more he wished Rofal were alive so that he could kill him again.

"It's very good that you got them out of there when you did, but now you need to be thinking about the future. Like I said, they need a stable home environment."

"I get it. What else?"

The doctor hunted down a pen and paper. He started scribbling as he talked. "Speak to them directly as much as you can. Use their names. Also, encourage them to walk and explore. Help them stand and keep their balance. They should pick that up quickly enough on their own. And just try to stimulate their minds as much as possible. Toys, books, music, even just opening a bag of snack food can be turned into a game. Remember that you're making up for lost time here. They're at a critical age, and given that they're already behind, they definitely need your full attention now."

--donation bonus (day #21, post 1/5)--

Colt took the note, reviewing the bullet points, and from there, the check-up drew towards its conclusion. Dr. Marcus gave the twins their vaccinations and gave Colt his phone number in case there were any further concerns. The cash changed hands, and when Colt and Hector left, they found a waiting line had formed outside the cellar's entrance.

The drive back to Roman's bunker gave Colt plenty of time to think. He discussed his intentions with Bohwanox privately and found the reaper in agreement.

When they arrived, Colt waited until everyone was gathered in the garage again. With a child in each arm, he said, "I need to tell you something."

Hector and Garovel both turned to look at him.

And though he knew what he had to say and how he wanted to say it, Colt found himself reluctant. The words didn't want to come. He had to force them. "We have to go our separate ways."

Garovel's face was obscured by the reaper's hood, but Hector didn't seem especially surprised. Perhaps they'd been expecting this.

"I wish I could help you more," Colt went on. "And I'm grateful. For everything you've done for me. For my kids. But I--" He faltered, gritting his teeth and looking at the floor. He hated this feeling. Running. Fleeing. Especially when he knew what was at stake, when he'd seen first hand the kind of monstrous people they were fighting. "My kids come first," he said, partly to himself.

There was a pause, and then Garovel said, 'We understand.'

"Yeah," Hector added. "We know how important they are to you."

Of course they understood. The bastards. Why couldn't they get angry at him? That would've made this so much easier. Maybe he would've been able to storm out and never look back. Colt shook his head. No. Probably not even then.

'Where are you going to go?' asked Garovel. 'If you can't stay with us, then I assume you intend to leave the country, no?'

--donation bonus (day #21, post 2/5)--

Colt looked at Stephanie out of the corner of his eye as she patted his cheek with her tiny hand. "Little country out west called Snider. It's where my grandparents immigrated from. Back then, things were unstable there, but they've since improved. Lots of villages where we can get a fresh start."

'How do you plan to get out of the country? Don't tell me you're going to just drive across the wilderness. That's a good way for your car to breakdown and leave you stranded in the middle of nowhere.'

"I know. I was trying to leave the country even before all the shit in the capital happened, and it was a pain in the ass. But this time, I can fake my death pretty easily, and hopefully ask Gina for the name of someone who can forge some new identities."

"Are you sure you have to leave?" said Hector. "Couldn't you, uh... just... find someplace quiet here in Atreya?"

'Too risky,' said Bohwanox. 'Colt's only gotten more infamous since becoming your known accomplice.'

"Ah... s-sorry..."

"Don't be."

'Then how do you intend to fake your death?' said Garovel.

Colt shrugged. "Rob a bank, I guess. Get the cops to shoot me. Shouldn't take them more than three days to bury or cremate my body. I can count on you to look after the twins while I'm gone, yeah?"

"Of course."

"Thanks."

Chapter Forty-Seven: 'O, loitering chaos...'

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As well as he managed to conceal it, David wasn't exactly comfortable

around these Abolish foreigners. Desmond was comparatively pleasant. That man, at least, seemed to have some level of restraint, but these other ones had moods that could flip in an instant. David hadn't yet been able to learn all of their names. He was a bit reluctant to, in all honesty.

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"408 -- XLVII.

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"409

--donation bonus (day #21, post 3/5)--

They could all be terrifying, he knew, but the young woman named Nola Pauls was uniquely so. Affectionately so. For whatever reason--or perhaps for none at all--she'd taken an interest in David, often rubbing his large belly and remarking that doing so would grant her various wishes. She was joking, he was fairly certain, though he didn't know what about it was supposed to be funny. Foreign humor, he figured.

She was not a small woman, and like most of her comrades, she was red of hair. Her pale face, however, held far more freckles than anyone else's.

"Hey, fat prince!" she said, running up to catch him from behind.

He tried not to wince as he turned to greet her. "Hello, Nola."

"Look, look!" She kept one hand behind her back and, with the other, held up a lock of a black hair. "Guess who this belongs to!"

Her games always started like this, with something seemingly innocuous. "Allow me a hint?" he asked.

She grinned, showing her uneven teeth. "It's someone you know."

"I know a lot of people. Does it belong to one of my brothers?"

"Nope," she said. "It's someone who works for you."



"Is it my tailor?"

"Nope!"

"My driver?"

"Nope, nope! Give up yet?"

"Yes, I give up."

"It's your nanny!"

"But I don't have a nanny." David tilted his head. "I don't have children."

"Oh." Nola's face scrunched up. "Well, then who's this?" She brought her other hand around, and in its grasp was the severed head of a black-haired young woman.

Instinctively, he turned away and closed his eyes, struggling to maintain his composure. He tried to focus on not retching in the middle of the corridor.

"Is she someone else's nanny?" asked Nola. "I saw her walking around with some fat kids, so I thought she was yours."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know who she is."

"You sure? I don't think you got a very good look. C'mon, open your eyes."

"410

--donation bonus (day #21, post 4/5)--

"The fuck're you doing?" came another voice. It belonged to Nola's partner, Andres Geth. Andres was a lanky man and a bit slimy to look at, darkly red hair slicked back and a tan face with a greasy shine to it. His voice, on the other hand, was quite weighty and penetrating. "Nola, you can't just go around killing random people."

"Fifty rigols says I can. Or wait, what's the money called here?"

Andres ignored her question. "Dammit, girl. Conall and Tessa are

gonna be pissed at us. They're the ones who're gonna have to make sure people don't get too curious about what happened to this girl."

Nola shrugged. "Eh, fuck 'em. Anyone gets curious, Conall and Tessa can just send them to me."

"That's not how it works. More bodies make for more questions."

"So they say. But I think with enough bodies, the questions will start to go back down."

"Nola."

"Aw, c'mon. That's so boring. We finished the net weeks ago! I need something to do! And Desmond won't let me near the King!"

Andres frowned. "I know. I feel the same way. This castle is so stuffy with all of us in it."

"See? It could definitely do with losing a few people. Thin out the crowd a little, yeah?"

"Hmm. Y'know, maybe you're right."

"Ah--" Prince David held up a hand. "Please don't kill anyone else."

They both looked at him. A beat passed, and they started laughing.

"Aha, good one!" said Nola, patting David's belly. "I told you he's the best prince, didn't I?!"

"You did! He's hilarious! Pretending like he can give us orders! When he obviously knows better!" Andres waved a finger at him. "If anyone else'd said that to us, we'd have torn their fucking head off! But not you! Not the cheeky prince!"

"Ha! Cheeky! He's cheeky! Like, literally cheeky!"

"He is! Look at him!"

David often made a point of trying to "out laugh" them. It wasn't easy. Andres could reach an absolutely heinous pitch."

--donation bonus (day #21, post 5/5)--

David watched them leave. The hallway had mysteriously emptied of all its previous occupants, and only after a minute of walking did he begin to see people again.

There were usually three Abolishers here at any given time, while the rest patrolled the city or attended to duties elsewhere. He sympathized with all the people who were not allowed to leave the castle. At least he could come and go from this madhouse as he pleased. More than once, he considered never returning, and even now, he wasn't sure why he was still here. A smarter man would've fled by now, he felt. He'd always tried to be that smarter man, but this was something different. A sense of obligation, perhaps.

How Gabriel had managed to get involved with these maniacs in the first place, he didn't know. Why Gabriel still seemed to think it was a good idea, he couldn't even fathom. Surely by now, the man knew what a mistake he'd made. It had to be a façade. If not, then Gabriel was even more demented than he thought.

He completed the rest of the journey to Luther's chambers. He knocked on the white door.

"Enter," said Luther.

David found the man at his desk, overlooking an assortment of documents. A massive window with scarlet curtains sat behind him, providing a tremendous view of Lake Belgrant. The waters shimmered under the morning sun's amber grasp.

Luther looked up at him. "Ah, David. I was meaning to speak with you."

"Were you now? What about?"

"You first. You went to the trouble of coming to see me, after all."

"It was no trouble at all. I had no great reason for coming here. I merely wished for a pleasant conversation."

Luther paused, letting his gaze linger a moment. "I see. In that case, I wanted to ask your feelings on our current predicament."

David allowed a smirk. "My feelings? Of what importance are they now?"

Luther stood and circled around his desk. "You seem of a different mind than the others."

"When is that ever not the case?"

"You were the last of us to learn of Gabriel's plot against Helen. I am wondering if your heart is truly in this, or if you are merely along for the ride."

"Would the latter be so terrible?"

"No. Nor would it be unlike you. But if that is so, then I find it strange how you are so vocal in our meetings."

"You would be the first to be surprised by my candor."

"Candor? Perhaps not. That would imply that you were being completely honest with us."

"You suspect I wasn't?"

"Not at the moment," said Luther. "But I do find you an oddity. The brother I know would have shown little interest in our affairs."

"Perhaps you are confusing me with yourself. Luther, surely, you're the one who rarely speaks."

"You have always used many words to say very little."

David lowered his brow and chuckled. "Dear brother, I find that quite hurtful."

"I am sure you do."

David adjusted the cuffs of his suit. He enjoyed trying to at least look the part of a prince, unlike his brother here. "For someone who complains about the way I speak, you're certainly taking your sweet time getting to the point."

Luther leaned back on his desk, folding his arms.

David's expression soured. "Do you require me to move the conversation along myself, then? Fine. Let's not mince words. You

think I am a traitor of some sort, no?"

"Oh, I do not know about that."

"Then what is your point?"

"Allow me to ask you something. Why do you think Gabriel is so obsessed with these ideas of expansion and conquest?"

"He believes it is Atreya's destiny. And, of course, he wants more power."

"Yes, but that is not all there is to it."

"I'm listening."

"413

Luther took his time, searching the ceiling for his words. "This was many years ago, and back then, you were often abroad, but you at least remember how Gabriel was always being groomed for the throne, yes?"

"Of course."

"Well, one summer, that extended much further. Father explained to Gabriel that one day Atreya would become a global superpower, that it would be Gabriel's responsibility to see that dream realized. Father's reasoning, he said, was that Atreya needed two things--the first of which was time to flourish. And you may have noticed, it has done just that. Our people have grown quite wealthy in recent years. I attribute that to our father. The second thing Atreya needed, he said, was land. He believed that the country's growth would inevitably plateau so long as we possessed so little land and so few people. And on that matter, I believe he has also been proven correct. And given that the Age of Exploration is long dead, there are only two methods by which we might acquire more land."

"Purchase or conquest," David finished.

"Both options are expensive. Worse, the prior is often not an option at all. Good land is usually not for sale, and bad land makes for a bad purchase. Hence, we arrive at our current dilemma. So you see, Gabriel's obsession is not his own. He carries on our father's will, who

carried on our grandfather's will."

David eyed him doubtfully. "Why would Father never tell me of these intentions himself?"

"Oh, I was not meant to hear him speak of it, either. He only intended for Gabriel to know. I overheard purely by chance."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"I suppose you would. In his final years, Father obviously had a change of heart. Helen's appointment was a pitiful effort to undo the mistake that he spent his entire life creating."

"So you say. Yet you offer nothing in the way of proof."

"414

"Proof?" said Luther. "You are correct. In this, I can offer you none. However, I can offer you personal testimony that our father was not the man you thought he was."

"Haven't you already done that?"

"I assure you, this is something different. Do you remember a young woman named Rita Zannis?"

David thought back. He was about to say no when the name abruptly registered. He eyed Luther anew, beginning to sense where this was going. "You had a courtship with her, unless I'm mistaken."

The other prince snorted. "I am not sure 'courtship' is the appropriate word. She was a commoner. Our correspondence was hardly formal. But I was certainly infatuated with her. More than any other woman I have ever met."

"Excluding your wife, of course, yes?"

And Luther just looked at him. The man was not known for his warmth, but the stare he gave now had to be among the coldest David had ever seen from him.

David's head reared back. As enigmatic as his brother was, that one expression told him more about Luther than anything in the last ten

years.

Luther chose to move on. "My relationship with Ms. Zannis came to an abrupt end, you may recall. It was her decision. Or so I was led to believe."

"You're telling me Father was responsible?"

"Yes."

David frowned. "Then you have my sympathy, but not my surprise. You are not the first of us to have had his love life distorted in such a way."

"I was planning to elope with her," Luther added. "I was ready to give up my status and flee the country, if necessary."

"Again, my sympathies, but--"

"Father learned of my intentions. He told her that he would have her entire family killed unless she refused me. And the only reason I know this, is because Father confessed it to me himself. On his deathbed, no less. Mere days before the end."

That made David stop."

"415

"I had trouble believing it as well," said Luther. "After father's funeral, I found Mrs. Zannis again. She has also been married for several years now--and quite happily, it would seem. But indeed, she confirmed the truth of Father's confession."

David could only listen.

"Before he died, I asked him why he did it. He said that, at the time, he believed I was too valuable to the family, that Gabriel would need my help to rule." Luther's expression darkened. "I did not like that answer. But of course, by then, it was far too late for me to seek any kind of meaningful retribution against him."

"And you've kept this secret for over three years now?"

"I have."

"Then why are you telling me now?"

"Because I want you to understand me when I say that I do not side with Gabriel. And, I suspect, neither do you."

And there it was. Said plainly at last. David took a breath, considering how to respond. He was prepared to give ground now, but a question lingered. "Am I then to assume that you want Helen back on the throne?"

"No," said Luther. "Returning Helen to power would be a step backward. I was the one who orchestrated Gabriel's little coup, after all."

David blinked. "What?"

"I do not want to overthrow the Crown. I want to destroy the Crown."

David stared at him hard. Those were not the words he'd wanted to hear.

"This antiquated form of governance is barbaric and has no place in today's world. A single person should never possess the power to ruin an entire people."

"So, what? You wish to spread democracy, then?"

"I suppose not," said Luther, shaking his head. "While I do believe those flowery words to some extent, the visceral truth is that I simply despise our kind."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Our kind?"

"Royalty."

David clenched his jaw. Suddenly, he could feel this conversation spiraling out of his control, off in some direction for which he was unprepared."

"416

"Gabriel's fall is inevitable," said Luther. "I have already ensured that much. His war with Rendon will ruin House Lumenbel and House



Belgrant both.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“Abolish will deliver the chaos I asked of them. It is the one thing upon which we may rely.”

“Unless Helen returns and eradicates them first.”

“A highly doubtful outcome, but one I have considered, also. If she does somehow succeed, we will simply turn on Gabriel to prove our loyalty to her, and she will welcome us back to her court. It would prove an irritating setback, of course, but I am confident that another opportunity would present itself in time.”

The man wasn’t wrong, he knew. That contingency plan would probably work, if David didn’t fully intend to sabotage it. But hopefully, he wouldn’t have to wait that long.

Luther seemed to be growing restless as he asked, “So may I count on your assistance?”

Certainly, Luther was no ally. The only question now was how much of a threat the man truly was. “You may,” said David. “But it sounds as if you have matters well in hand. What is it that you want me to do?”

“You are an unambitious man,” said Luther. “You always have been. Father saw that as a great flaw, but it is precisely for that reason that I am likened to trust your judgment in developing a new power structure for Atreya.”

“Excuse me?”

“Once the dust settles, I believe that, together, you and I can set the cogs in motion for lasting reform. Not to become leaders ourselves, mind you, but to make room for newer, worthier people.”

David took a moment to consider the other man’s words. “For all your planning, you don’t know what the next step is?”

“I do not.”

“Rather reckless, don’t you think? You risk subjecting our people to utter lawlessness.”

“Even anarchy would be preferable to monarchy.””

"417 -- XLVIII.

David had to refrain from grimacing. His brother was possessed of a deeper hatred than he had ever realized. "The Crown is an institution. Even if you destroy both of the royal houses, this will not change. New houses will simply take our places."

"That is precisely why I am requesting your help, David. I am hoping you have an elegant solution to this problem."

"What if I don't?"

"Then I will crush any other houses which assume the throne. By whatever means necessary."

So many pieces were already in motion, and now Luther wanted to present him with a new one--one which could not be ignored, unfortunately.

David offered the man a nod. "Rest assured, then. I will give the matter due thought."

Chapter Forty-Eight: 'Thy diverging ways...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

In their own strange way, the next few days were surprisingly restful. Stephanie and Thomas required near constant attention, leaving Hector little time to actually sleep, but he didn't find it so terrible. Certainly, compared to fighting for his life, it was a much welcomed change of pace. And whenever he did manage to get some sleep, Garovel was there to watch over the children for him.

Colt's death made the news. They didn't show him actually getting shot and killed, of course, but it wasn't long before Bohwanox briefly returned to the bunker to confirm that nothing had gone wrong--which was incredibly nice to hear, for once. These days, it seemed like everything and everyone was out to either kill them or get in their way. It was good news, or at least, halfway decent news.

So he had three days with the kids, which meant following the directions that the doctor had originally meant for Colt. Stimulating their minds was the idea. At first, Hector just tried to turn anything and everything into a game, but that didn't go over so well. The kids would

just kind of stare at him, apparently unaware that he wanted them to participate."

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"418

He found a box of reading material in one of the bunker's closets, but there wasn't anything suited for toddlers. There was barely even anything suited for him. Almost every book seemed to require a very high reading level, which only served to remind him that he would probably never finish high school. He wasn't sure it made much difference, though. He'd never been especially comfortable in any of his language classes.

Hector did, however, manage to get his hands on some music. Scrounging through all the cars in the garage paid off quite handsomely. He seemed to recall hearing somewhere that classical music was best for child development, so he tried to stick with that as much as possible. And in the meantime, he worked on getting the kids on their feet, which was easier than he expected.

Stephanie and Thomas were quite ready to walk, as long as Hector held their hands. They stumbled all the time, but usually got right back up or just resorted to crawling for a little while. He could hardly believe how adorable the whole thing was. It was entirely too easy to understand why people wanted to film stuff like this. He tried to give the kids the opportunity to walk on their own, but they weren't quite there yet. They were happy enough to crawl toward him, though.

The other big thing was conversation. Also not Hector's strongest area, but with a bit of encouragement from Garovel, he did his best. He talked to them pretty much nonstop, using their names, trying to listen and respond whenever they babbled back at him. It didn't seem to be doing much, but he supposed it was too soon to expect any kind of result.

The twins seemed to enjoy watching him make and unmake iron. It held their attention, the way the metal suddenly accumulated and then disappeared again. It got them to look at him with those wondrous little expressions of curiosity, which as Garovel reminded him, was immensely important."

~~Holiday Special (Day 1/7, Page 1/6)~~

Hector practiced making metallic toys for them. Small and intricate, was how he began, but when Thomas started gnawing on the dorsal fin of an iron shark, Hector decided to retry with larger, more rounded figures. Probably not the most efficient method of training for combat, but at the very least, it gave him the opportunity to work on his precision.

When Colt showed up again, he looked like hell. His clothes were a complete mess, caked with dirt and mud where they weren't already riddled with bullet holes and bloodstains.

'Welcome back,' said Garovel. 'How'd it go? Did you have a nice vacation?'

"Would've been a lot easier if they'd just cremated me," said Colt.

'Yeah,' agreed Bohwanox. 'I would have been able to come back here and remake him from scratch. But on the plus side, I did get to witness Colt rising from the grave like some kind of unholy abomination. That was quite enjoyable.'

'Be thankful they didn't need to preserve your body for a funeral,' said Garovel. 'It'd take days to get the embalming chemicals out of your system. They would've oozed out of your face, mostly.'

'I want to see that.'

Colt ignored them, more concerned with Hector and the twins. "How were they?"

"Amazing," said Hector, and he helped them walk over to their father.

Colt bent down, smiling but keeping them at arm's length. "Guess I should get cleaned up first."

"Alright."

Colt ventured off to shower and change.

Bohwanox turned to Garovel. 'So tell me more about embalming

chemicals.'

'Oh, well, there are all sorts. Some are dyes meant to maintain tissue color. Some are pumped into the body arterially. They have all sorts of different effects.'

'Would they have oozed out of anywhere other than his face?'

Hector pursed his mouth to one side and figured that was a good place to stop listening. He turned his attention back to the children."

"420

~~Holiday Special (Day 1/7, Page 2/6)~~

After all the time Hector had spent with Stephanie and Thomas, especially these past few days, it was a bit strange to think they wouldn't be around anymore. In truth, he hadn't given the matter much thought, which was perhaps a good thing in its own way, but now the reality of it was beginning to hit him.

He was going to miss them.

And he frowned, but not in his usual way. He frowned in a way that was almost a smile. Because while he was sad to see them go, he was also glad that they could go, that they'd be away from him, where it was safer. It was a strange mixture of emotions, one he'd felt before but never this ardently. He didn't hate the feeling. There was a welcome sense of relief in there somewhere.

'Oh, and before I forget,' Garovel was saying, 'how much do you know about Sai-hee?'

Bohwanox bobbed his head to the side. 'The name sounds familiar. Who is that again?'

'Sai-hee is one of the four servant emperors. She stays out of the fight between Abolish and the Vanguard--or at least, that's how it was the last time I checked, which admittedly, was many years ago.'

'I see. Why do you bring her up?'

'I know that you don't want to get involved in major conflicts. If Sai-hee's reputation is to be believed, then neither does she.'

‘You are suggesting Colt and I go to her for refuge?’

‘No, no. I just mean, it might be something you’d wanna look into. I’d definitely suggest gathering more information before deciding anything.’

‘Mm. I’d rather keep a wide berth of any emperors. I’m sure Colt would feel similarly.’

Garovel offered a shrug. ‘Still, if worse comes to worst, you should know your options.’

‘I’ll keep it in mind.’

The wait wasn’t much longer. Colt returned to the garage with luggage in hand."

"421

~~Holiday Special (Day 1/7, Page 3/6)~~

Hector helped load the bags into Colt’s chosen vehicle, a midnight blue Pontiac. Afterwards, they shared one last meal together. It was a rather quiet repast, like all the others, but after a while, Colt broke the silence.

“Don’t die,” he said.

Hector looked up. “What?”

“When you’re out there,” said Colt. “Don’t die.”

Hector just tilted his brow at him.

Colt nodded toward the twins. “I want them to meet Uncle Hector when they’re actually old enough to remember him.”

His eyes widened at that. His mouth opened, but he didn’t know what to say. He glanced at the reapers, who both started laughing, which only made Hector flush red.

‘We’ll do our best,’ Garovel said in Hector’s stead.

Colt reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “I’ll get myself a new one to use for other things, and I’ll keep this one in reserve just for

you guys. If you ever want to come find us, just give me a call.”

‘Alright.’

“Don’t lose the number. I’m guessing your phone will get destroyed one way or another, so keep my number some other way.”

‘I’ll remember it.’

Colt cocked an eyebrow at the reaper. “You’ll remember? Even if it’s five years from now?”

‘Oh yeah. Don’t worry.’

‘We have very good memories,’ said Bohwanox.

Colt gave a nod.

“W-we should, ah... we should have a code.”

Everyone looked at Hector.

“I mean, uh, y’know... just in case... because... I don’t want a repeat of... before.”

There was a brief silence, and then Colt said, “That’s a good idea. We’ll keep it simple. I won’t contact you at all from now on. You’ll call me if you want to talk. No texting. Speak directly to me or leave a voice mail. If there’s something wrong, but you can’t tell me what it is, for whatever reason, then use my first name. Jeremiah. That’ll be our code.”

“Uh. O-okay...”

‘Jeremiah,’ confirmed Garovel. ‘Got it.’”

"422

~~Holiday Special (Day 1/7, Page 4/6)~~

“Are you sure you understand?” said Colt. “This is important. If you call me Jeremiah, OR if you text me, then I’ll know you’re contacting me under duress. And moreover, I’ll know to expect some type of trap.”

“Alright, um.”



‘We understand,’ said Garovel.

“But, uh... what if, uh... if you’re the one under duress?”

“That wouldn’t happen, since you’d be the one calling and not me. But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to have a plan for that, too. If I’m in trouble but can’t say so, then I’ll do the opposite. I’ll call you Mr. Goffe.”

“Er. Okay.”

From there, the meal and conversation both drew toward their conclusions. There was no more putting it off.

Everyone said their farewells, and Hector and Colt shared a firm handshake. On foot, Hector followed the Pontiac up the ramp and out into the early afternoon sun. He offered a last, sweeping wave goodbye as he watched Colt drive west toward Walton. A cloud of yellow-brown dust followed in the car’s wake, lingering for a while after it was gone.

‘Welp,’ said Garovel after a spell. ‘Looks like it’s just you and me again.’

“Yeah...”

‘It’s okay. They were cramping our style, anyway.’

Hector smirked and started back down into the bunker. “So what do we do now?”

‘Still waiting on a call from Gina. Hopefully, she’ll have some information for us soon. In the meantime, you should sleep. We’ll get back to training in a few hours.’

“Alright.”

--++--++--

These past couple days had been hellishly dull. Listening to the audio recordings out of the castle was more than a full-time job, yet somehow still mind-numbingly tedious. Whenever Gina slept, that meant she would be several hours behind upon waking up, and even with fast forward, trying to listen to every recording from every room she’d tagged was an organizational nightmare. A solid ninety percent of the recordings were either complete silence or just normal people talking to each other.”

~~Holiday Special (Day 1/7, Page 5/6)~~

Fortunately, Gina had a variety of underlings to help her sift through everything. Less fortunately, everyone involved had gotten a lot more from this job than they bargained for. After a while, a few of them outright refused to help her, and she couldn't really blame them, either.

The problem was what some of those normal people in the recordings were talking about. Oftentimes, there would be long conversations of trembling voices trying to console one another, if not merely bemoaning their wretched fortune. All of these people were trapped in that place with at least a half dozen psychotic murderers. Horrifically, one audio log had even captured the agonized screams of someone who was probably being killed.

Listening to all of these things, interspersed between gigantic bouts of nothing important whatsoever, was more than some of her employees could bear.

As for herself, Gina had mainly been listening to the King's chamber, but there hadn't been anything noteworthy since mention of Karkash being able to control magnetic fields. Abolish clearly didn't care to tell the King anything of importance.

Apparently, they weren't really after Hector, either. They didn't seem to count him as a credible threat, since he was so greatly outnumbered. A few of the servants had expressed interest in hunting him down, but none of them had any idea where to look and causing trouble just to bait him out of hiding would hinder their greater warmongering efforts.

None of this information was worth a phone call to Hector, she felt. She was waiting on more valuable details regarding their abilities or their movements.

Having more or less given up on the King's chamber, she spent most of her time browsing through all the different available audio feeds.

Abruptly, Karkash's voice came over the wire. <"What is it?">

Gina perked up in her chair.

“Turn that frown upside down,” said Nola. “You get to go with us to Harold! Aren’t you excited? I know I’m excited.””

"424

~~Holiday Special (Day 1/7, Page 6/6)~~

Karkash was not wholly pleased by the woman’s manic smile. “How many must go?”

“Five,” she said. “You, me, Conall, Tessa, and Hanjir. Andres is staying behind with Desmond, who is stuck babysitting the King as usual. Poor guy. I offered to fill in for him, but nobody seems to trust me. I don’t know why.”

‘Why do you need Karkash?’ said Hoyohté. To Karkash’s eyes, the reaper was an orca. Her huge, black-and-white body loomed to the right above his head, casting no shadow whatsoever, and her giant mouth did not move at all when she spoke.

Nola’s reaper floated down to answer, but her dorsal fin still stuck through the ceiling. As Karkash recalled, this one’s name was Vennek. ‘It’s not just about destroying the town,’ she said. ‘If it was, just one servant could do the job. We have to stage things carefully and make sure Rendon is blamed for the attack, which means controlling the flow of information afterwards. Karkash can make that a lot easier for us by knocking out electronics around the town. It’d be annoying if some random bystander captured footage of our activities on a camera phone or something. All the footage that gets leaked has to be of our making.’

Hoyohté gave a nod. ‘I see. Very well. We will accompany you.’

“Great,” said Nola, grinning again. She wrapped an arm around Karkash’s shoulder. “How about we grab something to eat, huh? Get to know each other a little better, yeah?”

Karkash silently removed her arm and walked away.

--++--++--

Hector awoke to Garovel’s insistence that he answer the phone. Gina’s call didn’t have a whole lot of information for him, but there was only one thing that he needed to know.

Five of them were going to be in Harold.

His heart sank as he heard that number. There was no way he could fight five servants by himself. He knew this, and by the look on the reaper's skeletal face, so did Garovel."

"425

~~Holiday Special (Day 2/7, Page 1/6)~~

<"I've also learned all of the servants' names now,"> Gina was saying.

<"There's Desmond and Karkash, of course. The others are named Conall, Tessa, Nola, Andres, and Hanjir.">

"Th-thanks. That's helpful."

<"Eh. I know it's not much. There were really long periods of silence where I guess reapers were talking.">

"Don't worry about it. You've been, uh... you're, ah... very, um... I mean--"

Gina chuckled. <"Stop. I get the idea.">

"S-sorry..."

<"Oh, and I learned earlier that the one who was killed was named Stoker. Thought you might like to know.">

"Ah... I see." If nothing else, it was nice to be able to put a name to the man's face. Even if he'd been a member of Abolish, Hector couldn't help pitying him. It was clear enough, at least, that Stoker had been trying to escape from them, and while Hector didn't know the reason, it was easy to think of a few good ones.

<"But, um, anyway."> There came a long pause. <"I hope you're not planning on going to Harold, still. You understand that there's nothing you can do there, right?">

He exchanged looks with Garovel.

<"Even if Master Roman and the Queen were here, the three of you still wouldn't really stand a chance. And there's barely a week before the attack, so... I know it sucks, but you just. Um. You can't. Please

don't go there.">

"Uh. Y-yeah. I know. Don't worry."

Gina sighed. <"Good. We really need you to stay alive right now.">  
She'd already been disappointed to learn that Colt wasn't going to help them fight. She didn't need more bad news, Hector felt.

"Well, um. C-call me if you learn anything else."

<"Of course. Talk to you later, then.">

"Bye." After he hung up, Hector eyed Garovel again. "So?"

Garovel folded his arms, holding his scythe over his shoulder as he floated. 'You still want to go, don't you?'

Hector bobbed his head to the side. "I don't know about want to, but... I mean..."

"426

~~Holiday Special (Day 2/7, Page 2/6)~~

'I won't allow it,' said Garovel. 'Gina's right. We can't go to Harold.'

"But, Garovel... we can't just let Abolish destroy an entire town full of people."

'Hector, we're not "letting" them do anything. They'll do it whether we're there or not. Either we don't go, and they destroy the town, or we do go, get killed, and then they destroy the town, anyway. That's the reason we're not going--because our presence won't make a difference.'

"But... maybe we could... help some people escape, at least?"

'At the cost of our own lives?'

His expression weakened. "You want me to just... sit this one out?"

'I'm sorry, but yes. We could try to come up with something that'll make the town evacuate, but even if we succeed and get away before Abolish shows up, they'd just pick some other town to destroy.'

He sighed and ran a hand over his head. His hair had grown out a little, as he hadn't cut it since fleeing Brighton.

'Listen. I know you don't place much value on your own life. And to be honest, we're oddly similar in that way. I don't place much value on mine, either. I've lived for a very long time already, and while I don't want to die, I won't mind terribly when I do, especially if it's for a good cause. And at times, it's helpful that we feel this way. Makes us a bit fearless. But now is not one of those times, because our lives can still help save many others. We don't have the best options in the world right now, but we have to choose the one that has the potential to do the most good.'

"Fuck..."

'However,' Garovel said slowly, 'we do have an opportunity here to do something else. It'll be dangerous, and it won't save Harold, but if we succeed, it'll definitely throw a motherfucking wrench into Abolish's plans.'

Hector's gaze hardened. "Sounds good so far. What do you want me to do?"

'It's gonna sound crazy.'

"Tell me."

'I want you to kidnap the goddamn King.'"  
"427 -- XLIX.

~~Holiday Special (Day 2/7, Page 3/6)~~  
Chapter Forty-Nine: 'Thy converging ways...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

"Kidnap the King, huh?" Hector scratched his head. It didn't sound as crazy as he expected, honestly. But after a moment, he found himself wondering how he'd managed to reach a point in his life where kidnapping anyone--let alone a king--no longer sounded completely mad. He shook his head and tried to return to the conversation at hand. "Uh... how would I even pull that off?"

'We already know that five of them are going to be in Harold at once,' said Garovel. 'That only leaves two guarding the King.'

“So I’ll have to take on two servants...”

‘I did say it would be dangerous. But two is more manageable than five. Ideally, we could find a way to sneak through and get the King out quietly, but yes, we should obviously be prepared for a difficult fight.’

“Hmm.” He rubbed his neck. “It’s kinda fucked up, though... Sorta feels like we’ll just be using the deaths of all the people in Harold.”

‘Yeah, well. We kind of will be.’

He felt an inkling in the back of his head, a faint idea, still unformed but nagging at him. And then it hit him fully. His eyes widened, and a broad grin split his face. “Garovel!”

‘What?’

“Everyone hates me!”

‘Uh.’ Garovel looked at him confusedly. ‘Don’t be so hard on yourself?’

“No! Garovel! Everyone’s scared of me!”

‘Er. Wait... Oh!’

“Abolish wants to destroy Harold and blame it on--uh--some other country, right? But what if the Darksteel Soldier makes a public threat to destroy Harold beforehand?!”

It was the reaper’s turn to smile. ‘That might work! If Abolish destroys the town anyway, then it gets blamed on you and not a foreign country, thereby averting their trigger for war! And if they don’t destroy the town, then obviously, that’s even better!’

“And if they destroy a different town, then it’ll probably still get blamed on me!””

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"And if they destroy a different town, then it'll probably still get blamed on me!"



~~Holiday Special (Day 2/7, Page 4/6)~~

Garovel laughed. 'Not sure I've ever seen you this excited before.'

He looked for Gina's number in his phone. "We just got done talking, and I gotta call her back already..."

It started ringing, and she answered as quickly as ever. Hector struggled through explaining the general idea.

<"That's a nice thought, but there's a major problem with it.">

"W-what?"

<"When Karkash made the news a few days ago, Abolish really tightened their grip on the media. Nothing makes it to air without their approval now.">

"Shit."

<"I could put your threat up on the internet, but it wouldn't get nearly enough exposure.">

"Agh..."

'Ask her if she knows which servant is controlling the media.'

Hector did so.

<"There are two, actually. Conall and Tessa seem to be the ones responsible for public affairs, but from the sound of it, the others sometimes pitch in as well.">

'And does she know if they'll be among the five going to Harold?'

He asked her.

Gina paused. <"Actually, yeah, they will be. Are you thinking when they leave, we'll be able to sneak it through as breaking news?">

"Uh. Yeah, sure."

<"Hmm. That could work. It'll be a tight timeframe, though. The citizens of Harold won't have much time to evacuate, but I guess the only

alternative would be to give them no warning at all.”>

‘That’s unfortunate for Harold, but it works out better for us,’ said Garovel. ‘Waiting until they leave ensures that our window for kidnapping the King also remains open. You should probably mention that plan to her, as well.’

“Oh, and, uh... I’m gonna try to, uh... to kidnap the King, too.”

<“Wait, WHAT?”>

--++--++--

The cloak was no longer the pristine white it had been when she procured it, but she’d wanted it more for protection against the elements than for style points.

She’d been walking for days, sleeping under the stars, hunting and gathering food but never straying too far from the road that cut through Lorent’s wide open grasslands.”

"429

~~Holiday Special (Day 2/7, Page 5/6)~~

She supposed hitching a ride with someone was too much to ask. Cars were rare out here, and none of the drivers seemed especially interested in picking up a cloaked stranger. She tried pulling down her hood the next few times but still found no luck. Maybe the eye patch was off-putting. Or maybe it was the sword.

Thus far, she’d still not encountered even so much as a village. She knew Lorent was a big country, but this was getting ridiculous. All she wanted was a working phone, but she would have settled for just a bit of food that she didn’t have to kill first. Her sword wasn’t meant for hunting.

Gradually, the landscape on the left side of the road changed into wooded greenery. It would likely prove a better hunting ground, she decided, so she ventured into it. Before she found anything to eat, however, she spotted a house. It was hidden among a group of trees and would have been entirely concealed if she’d stayed closer to the road.

She approached eagerly, getting a better look at the building. One

modest story, it had, along with perhaps a small attic, if the oval window beneath the roof's apex was any indication. A cobblestone chimney sat toward the back, and much of the house's white wood was overgrown with verdant moss.

She knocked on the front door, as it had no bell to ring. "Hello?!" she called, removing her hood again.

The door did not open, but someone shouted back, "Whaddy want?!" A man's voice. Elderly, too.

"Sorry to bother you," she said loudly, "but I was hoping I'd be able to use your phone!"

"Phone don't work!"

She frowned. "Then could I trouble you for a ride to the nearest town?!"

"Car don't work!"

"A place to rest, then?!"

"Bed don't work!"

She pursed her lips.

"Ain't got no food, neither, so don't ask!"

"Sir, please! My name is Lynnette, and I've been traveling for several days on foot!"

"430

~~Holiday Special (Day 2/7, Page 6/6)~~

"Then it looks like you'll be traveling for several days more!" the old man yelled. "And I don't give a damn who you are!"

Lynnette's eye throbbed. It tended to do that at the most inconvenient times. "Sir," she tried, quieter this time in hopes of luring him closer to the door, "I very much need to use a phone. I'd be quite appreciative of any help you could--"

There came a hastened rustle from inside the house, and a moment later, the door swung open. The balding old man was pointing a

shotgun at her. "Young lady, in what capacity have I failed to make myself clear?"

She eyed the double-barrel, not concerned in the slightest. "Sir, you don't want to do that."

He barked a laugh. "Oh, don't I?"

"Please put the gun down, sir."

"Can't you tell when a man wants to be left in peace?! You think I live out here because I like visitors?! How'd you find me, anyway?! Are you from the government?! After all these years, now you decide to take me away?! Is that it?!"

"Sir--"

"You dogs'll never take me alive! I ain't goin' back to prison, so just get on out of here before I do something dramatic! I'm unstable, ya hear?! I'm crazy!"

"Yes, I can see that. But I really do need to use your phone."

"Woman! Are you fuckin' deaf?! I will rip you in half with this here buckshot!"

"Sir, you can try, but that's not gonna work out well for you. Trust me."

"That a threat?! You threatenin' me now?!"

Lynnette sighed. "Well, if you're gonna shoot me, then allow me to move over here so you don't accidentally kill yourself." And as she took a step to the right, the man pulled the trigger.

From no more than a meter away, she took the shot square in the chest. And instead of tearing into her, it met a sudden purple shadow and bounced right off, leaving Lynnette entirely unharmed."

"431

~~Holiday Special (Day 3/7, Page 1/6)~~

The rebounding blast clipped the old man's shoulder. He dropped the gun and fell to the ground, groaning in agony.

"I feel a little bad, but I did try to warn you."

The man clutched his shoulder and growled, "What are you?!"

"I'm not too sure myself anymore," she said. "But look, you're wounded. I'd be happy to call you an ambulance. Or would you rather I went to find help on foot?"

"Argh...!" His groaning protests soon became breathy whimpers. "In the den. The satellite phone."

"What's the number for the emergency services around here?"

"7-5-1."

"Hang in there, sir." She wasn't terribly concerned over his condition since the wound didn't look very bad, but all the same, she decided she should make the emergency call first.

She found the phone exactly where he said it would be and raised her left hand up to dial, and upon that left hand was a rather special thing.

A kind of half-gauntlet, it was. It did not cover her fingers, nor was it made of metal. Instead, it was crafted from bone.

She spoke to a woman and warned that the driver should take special care to look for the house hidden in the woods, and the operator said it would be about twenty minutes before they arrived.

Lynnette decided to rummage around the house for some bandages and dress the man's wound just in case. He hadn't bled that much, but there was no harm in the extra caution, she figured.

And at length, she was able to dial the number that Roman had given her. The long-distance call took a little while to connect, but it eventually went through. And for her trouble, she received a busy signal. "Oh, come on! This can't be happening!" She tried again. "Gina! I swear, if you don't take my call--!"

<"Hello?">

"FINALLY! Goddess above!" She collapsed into a rocking chair.

<"Who is this?">

"It's Lynnette Edith. Gina, if you say you don't remember me, I'm going to lose my shit right now."

~~Holiday Special (Day 3/7, Page 2/6)~~

Gina laughed. <"Don't worry, I remember you. In fact, I've been expecting your call for a while. Where are you?">

"I'm in Lorent. On foot. Please tell me you can help me fix that."

<"What's the nearest town?">

She turned to the old man. He was resting on the sofa now. "Hey, what town is the ambulance coming from?"

He groaned at her but said, "Linkerton."

"Which hospital?"

"There's only one clinic."

"Thanks. You get that, Gina?"

<"Yeah. Let me call Hector real quick and put him en route to the Linkerton clinic. I'll call you right back.">

She waited, rocking the chair back and forth. The motion of it made her contemplate a nap then and there, but Gina called back before she drifted off too far.

<"Okay. He's on his way. So tell me. How've you been? I'm guessing terrible.">

"That's pretty accurate. What about you?"

<"Oh, I'm doing just fine. Spying on Abolish. Learning all their secrets.">

Lynnette blinked. "What?"

<"I planted listening devices all over Belgrant Castle.">

"Are you serious?"

<"Yep. Don't worry. It's super fun and in no way terrifying.">

"You don't have anyone there to protect you? Or is that what Hector's been up to?"

<"Oh, that's right. You don't know."> And as Gina explained Hector's circumstances, her tone became considerably less jovial.

Lynnette could hardly believe it. That timid guy had become the most wanted criminal in the country? She wondered if he'd even be the same person when she saw him again.

Soon, the ambulance arrived, and Lynnette had to hang up the satellite phone in order to hitch a ride on it. The clinic in Linkerton wasn't particularly far, and she ended up waiting around for another half hour before Hector rode into the parking lot on his silver motorcycle.

Apart from his black riding jacket, he didn't seem so different. As he pulled off his helmet, he offered her a meek smile, but after a moment, it spoiled into a look of confusion."

"433

~~Holiday Special (Day 3/7, Page 3/6)~~

"Lynn?" said Hector, abruptly very concerned. "What's happened to you?"

She tilted her head at him. "What do you mean?"

"Garovel says... that you... your presence is really different?" He paused, no doubt listening to the invisible reaper again. "He says you're not an aberration, but still... um... Garovel, what the hell are you trying to say?"

"Oh. I guess he's sensing this thing." She held up her half-gauntlet. "It was crafted from an aberration's bones. It's okay. It won't hurt you, and neither will I."

"Garovel's really confused..."

"Well, it is dangerous," said Lynnette. She clenched her fist, and the violet shadow enveloped it. "I basically stole it from the Vanguard. Or rather, I was forced to."

"Y-you... uh... why?"

“The Queen told me to try it on. Test it out while they weren’t looking.” She yanked at the gauntlet with her other arm, and it didn’t budge. “But apparently, once you put it on, it doesn’t want to be removed. Those Vanguard people were going to cut my arm off in order to get it back.”

“Oh...”

“Yeah. Her Highness ordered me to run. So I did.” The purple shadow leapt up from her arm, twisting into the shape of a hammer, then into a shield, then into a sword. “I can see why they wanted it back so badly. This thing is really strong. It’s not like the one that you and I fought in Sescoria.”

“How... so?”

“Well, for one thing, when I fled on my own, I didn’t make a clean get away. I had to fight a servant. And I won. Easily.”

“Ah...”

She gauged his expression, the way his eyes moved from her to an empty space where Garovel presumably resided. “I still can’t see or hear reapers, by the way.”

“O-okay...”

Lynnette tried to give him a smile. “I haven’t suddenly lost my mind and become a murderous psychopath, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No, well... I mean... m-maybe a little worried...”

"434 -- L.

~~Holiday Special (Day 3/7, Page 4/6)~~

“Are you going to give me a ride back to Atreya?” said Lynnette. “Or should I start walking?”

And again, Hector was quiet a moment. He looked at her intently. “Um. C-could you tell me more about that thing on your wrist, first?”

“What do you want to know?”

“How... are you controlling it, exactly?”



She gave a shrug. "It just does what I want it to do. Like an extra limb, I suppose. Except..."

"Except?"

She made the shadow disappear again. "It does also feel... alive. Somehow."

"Hmm. W-what do you mean?"

"I'm not sure yet," she said, frowning. "I'm still getting accustomed to it. But maybe that isn't the answer you were looking for."

He nodded uncertainly, but after a time, he motioned toward the bike. "Let's go back to Atreya. You can, ah... tell me more later... you look pretty tired."

She took a relieved breath.

Chapter Fifty: 'O, strange guardian...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

He'd never seen the Lorentian countryside. Sunny skies and flat greenery as far as the eye could see. Not even mountains in the distance.

The motorcycle's roaring engine made it impossible to have a conversation with Lynnette, but Hector didn't mind so much. It gave him and Garovel a chance to discuss her unique situation. Hector did mind, however, having someone on the motorcycle with him for the first time. When it was just him riding alone, he didn't have to worry so much about screwing up and crashing. He would survive. Having Lynnette here made him all sorts of uncomfortable, especially with how she had to wrap her arms around his stomach to keep herself steady. He'd never done very well with physical contact.

Still, he did his best to ignore it. If he just focused on the road ahead of him, it wasn't so bad.

'I don't like this,' said Garovel.

'I know,' said Hector. 'But it's Lynn. I'm not gonna just leave her out here...'"

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'I know,' said Hector. 'But it's Lynn. I'm not gonna just leave her out here...'"

"435

~~Holiday Special (Day 3/7, Page 5/6)~~

The reaper had been keeping his distance from Lynnette, and even now, he stayed a ways ahead of the motorcycle as it sped down the road. 'I suppose if she's telling the truth, then she'll be a valuable ally to have.'

'What can you tell me about her aura or whatever it's called?'

'It's an odd presence. Geoffrey's the only aberration we've ever seen, so our point of reference is pretty limited, but compared to him, her aura is quite different. I can still sense that she's human. That part of her seems no different from what I saw of her before. I guess that means she really is herself, still.'

'But...?'

'The wrist guard she's wearing has a presence of its own. A very potent one, no less. If Geoffrey's aura was a sword, then that thing's aura is a stick of dynamite. And because I don't know how it works, it just makes me very uneasy.'

Abruptly, Hector felt something against his upper back. His grip on the handlebars tightened as he tried not to freak out and run off the road. 'G-Garovel! What's she doing?!'

The reaper slowed down to see. And he started laughing. 'She's asleep. Looks like she really was tired.'

'That--! But--! I--! She's--! Garovel, make her stop!'

'Just try to relax,' said Garovel, still chuckling. 'I bet it'd be easier for you if she did turn out to be a psychotic monster, huh?'

‘Agh! I should’ve left her behind!’

Garovel just laughed harder.

After a while, they approached the border. Crossing it on the way here hadn’t been the easiest thing. The roads all had checkpoints, and he couldn’t just waltz right through them. So like he’d done the first time, he made a ramp and bridge for himself, allowing the bike to go right over the checkpoint on a wave of metal. There were more border guards this time, but they all just kind of stood there and stared at him as he flew over their heads."

"436

~~Holiday Special (Day 3/7, Page 6/6)~~

The bike jostled as its tires hit the road again, which thankfully stirred Lynnette back awake. And just like that, they were in Atreyan territory. He annihilated the metal bridge as they sped away.

‘Hmm,’ said Garovel, hovering a bit closer to Lynnette now. ‘I’m a little worried what the Vanguard was doing with something like this in the first place.’

‘You think... they have aberrations working with them?’

‘I don’t know enough about aberrations to say for sure, but if all of them are like Geoffrey, then there’s no way the Vanguard would work with them.’

‘How come you don’t know more about aberrations? They seem like, uh... kind of a big deal.’

‘I’m guessing they’re a recent development in the world. When I was a member of the Vanguard, aberrations weren’t a problem we faced. I don’t think they even existed. If they did, then they were hidden extremely well.’

‘Hmm.’

‘I wonder how common they are. Their presence could change everything in the war between the two big powers. Hell, maybe it already has.’

‘You think so?’

‘Well, yeah. Neutrality has always been a big thing. A lot of reapers believe that death is fated and shouldn’t be interfered with or just don’t want to get involved for whatever reason, so they don’t take on servants. That’s never been a problem, because as long as we stay away from big conflicts, we can’t be killed. But if there are these random monsters in the world who can hurt us, then that’s a big deal, like you said. Reapers who’ve never taken on a servant before suddenly have a very compelling reason to.’

‘Ah... like Bohwanox, huh? He only revived Colt after getting wounded by Geoffrey, didn’t he?’

‘Yeah. If that sort of thing happens on a larger scale, it’ll have a huge impact. All those new servants and reapers. Even if most of them try to stay out of the war, some of them are bound to get involved.’”

"437

~~Holiday Special (Day 4/7, Page 1/6)~~

Hector listened to the wind howl past his riding helmet. He’d offered it to Lynnette, but she said she didn’t need it. For anyone else, he would have insisted. ‘I guess you, uh... you don’t agree with those reapers who think death is fated, huh?’

‘Correct,’ said Garovel, ‘though that’s beside the point. Even if I did believe in fate, why should I think that reapers exist outside its influence? If I had you save someone, then why should I not consider you to have been fated to save them?’

‘Uh... I dunno...’

‘Me neither. I don’t understand reapers who think that way. I suppose that’s why I think fate is a useless concept. You can make it conform to anything you want, which is just generally counterproductive to the learning process.’

‘Huh...’

‘You disagree?’

‘No, I... have no opinion, really.’

Garovel let the matter lie.

It was a ways to the bunker yet. Grassy plains gradually transformed into barren, dirty badlands. Eventually, though, they arrived. Hector opened the door in the ground. Lynnette went in on foot, and he wheeled the bike in after her. There wasn't much gas left in the tank, he realized. Hopefully, the bunker would have a supply. For the moment, however, he had a fresh question for Lynnette.

"So, ah... how much can, uh... ah..." He faltered, but Lynnette was patient with him. He had to avoid looking her in the face. "H-how much can you tell me about, um... about aberrations?"

"How much do you know about them?" she asked.

"Not much, I guess... Judging from your, uh... your gauntlet, I'm assuming they all have those... death-taffy things..."

She gave him a bemused grin. "Death-taffy?"

"Y-yeah, they're stretchy like taffy, but... deadlier?"

She laughed faintly, as did Garovel. "Yeah, all aberrations have one of these things. Roman talked about them while we were traveling together. Her Highness had all sorts of questions for him. I mostly just listened.""

"438

~~Holiday Special (Day 4/7, Page 2/6)~~

"Are all aberrations as, um... as violent and crazy as Geoffrey was?"

"Geoffrey? Oh, is that the name of the one we fought?"

"Yeah..."

Lynnette rubbed above her eye patch. "Do you happen to know where he is?"

"Uh..."

"I've been wanting to get revenge for my eye."

He wasn't sure how else to say it, so he just said, "I killed him."

Lynnette blinked. "Oh. What happened?"

But Hector couldn't bring himself to explain. He knew she was one of the few people who would understand. Hell, she probably understood well enough already. But he just didn't want to talk about it. He didn't even want to think about it.

At his strained silence, she seemed to get the idea. "Oh, I didn't answer your question. From what Roman said, yeah, I think all aberrations are extremely violent. I think his exact words were that aberrations are always looking for amusement. They're just always amused by killing people, apparently."

"I see..."

"He said they can't really be controlled, either, because they tend to just do whatever they want. The only reason Abolish is able to manage them at all is because it lets them run wild."

"Sounds... accurate."

"Oh, and they grow stronger by consuming souls. That's why they all enjoy killing so much."

Hector just nodded.

She held her gauntlet up again. "I'm not sure if this can grow stronger in the same way. I'm not sure it matters, either. Even if I knew how to consume someone's soul, it sounds pretty disgusting."

His mouth twisted. "Egh, yeah... and you wouldn't be able to consume a servant's soul, anyway."

"No?"

"Our souls are bound to our reapers, so..."

"Hmm. Would I be able to consume a reaper's soul, then?"

Hector looked at Garovel.

'I don't know! Probably! I don't think I wanna find out!'

Hector offered Lynnette a shrug.

"What else do you want to know?"

“Uh...”

‘Ask her for details about what that wrist guard is capable of.’”

"439

~~Holiday Special (Day 4/7, Page 3/6)~~

Hector's eyes fell upon her gauntlet. "What can that thing do, exactly?"

"Well, it's malleable," she said. The shadow took the shape of a small bird perched on her arm. "It seems like it can conform to any shape I want it to. I'm still learning."

"Does it have like a... maximum range or something?"

"Yes, it does." The shade shot out toward the garage's far wall and reached it, then looped back around but stopped halfway. It strained to reach her but could extend no farther. "What would you say that is? Twenty meters or so?"

"Maybe. But, uh..." He turned to look at Garovel, who'd retreated behind him. "Would you mind not doing that so suddenly, though? I think you scared Garovel."

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" She reeled the shadow back in. "Where is he? I didn't hurt him, did I?"

"N-no, he's fine."

She put her arm back down, keeping it inside her dirty cloak. "The shadow also protects me from harm, but I'm sure you knew that already."

"Y-yeah."

"It has another power that I haven't been able to use yet. Something called Incineration."

He tilted his head. "Incineration?"

"Don't ask me what it means. That's just what I heard the Vanguard servants calling it."



"Hmm..."

She rolled her shoulders and neck. "Maybe I should just tell you the whole story. Ah--but it might be pretty long. Do you have anything to eat around here first? I'm starving."

"Oh, sure. Uh--follow me." He led her to the kitchen. The choices weren't exactly gourmet. Everything here was meant to last for months without requiring refrigeration.

Lynnette grabbed a bunch of different things and sat down at the small table by the door. Atop the pile, she added the contents of her rucksack: a slab of charred meat and some wild berries. "So we flew to Korgum first," she said, unwrapping a packet of beef jerky, "and that was a dead end."

"440

~~Holiday Special (Day 4/7, Page 4/6)~~

Hector didn't join her at the table, choosing instead to stand in the doorway with his arms folded.

"The Vanguard in Korgum wouldn't even have a proper meeting with us, but we honestly couldn't blame them. We were only there for a few days, but in that time, our plane was shot down, and we were attacked by Abolish patrols four separate times. I'm sure the Queen and I would have both died there if not for Roman." She shook her head. "And afterwards, he was suddenly much stronger. Almost like a different person."

Hector and Garovel exchanged glances. "Roman achieved emergence?"

"Yes. He ended up explaining that at length, too. Do you need me to relay what he said?"

"No, that's okay... I, uh... I've had my own experiences with it."

Her brow rose at that, but rather than inquiring further, she chose to continue her story. "The Vanguard there wouldn't help us, because they were clearly dealing with a lot already, but they did point us in the direction of another division, which was in Callum. So we went there next. And without a plane, that trip took a while.

“The group we found was more accommodating than the ones in Korgum, but Her Highness was rather quick to become displeased. Something about her negotiations with them left her quite unhappy. They were kind enough to give us a tour of their facility, which was when I encountered the gauntlet. They were conducting experiments on it, and when the Queen mentioned having fought an aberration before, the person in charge of the study was rather eager to tell us more. Apparently, they were trying to discover the exact mechanism by which its power is made to grow. They thought that artifacts like this might provide insight into emergence in servants.”

‘Ah,’ said Garovel. ‘Even more dangerous than I expected.’

“Did they make any progress on that?” Hector asked.

“No, I don’t believe so. They were very frustrated.”

‘Ha. Good.’”

"441

~~Holiday Special (Day 4/7, Page 5/6)~~

Lynnette took a hearty swig of water. “The real problems started when it was made clear that we were not allowed to leave the facility. It became delay after delay and excuse after excuse. The Queen’s mood only worsened, and eventually, she told me to try the gauntlet on. I didn’t argue. I was just as curious as she was, really. And from there, the situation descended very quickly into chaos. I wasn’t even sure that she and Roman made it out safely until I spoke with Gina.”

“Seems... kinda reckless on the Queen’s part...”

“Perhaps. But then again, I think Her Highness was planning to have me steal it anyway, but when they started talking about taking off my arm to retrieve it, she accelerated her plans for my sake.”

“And then... you were able to beat a servant? Without any trouble, even?”

She nodded. “I’ll demonstrate how, if you want.”

‘That’s a very good idea,’ said Garovel. ‘You should start sparring with her as soon as possible. With Colt gone, a new training partner is invaluable right now.’

“Uh... Garovel wants me to spar with you...”

“Oh yes?”

‘You should help her gauge how strong the gauntlet really is. And ask her for some pointers on how to use a sword. Oh, and demonstrate your powers to her, too. It’s important that she understands what you’re capable of. Also, maybe you should--’

“Garovel, I get it. We’ve got a lot to do...”

‘I’m just offering suggestions.’

He looked at Lynnette again and immediately regretted it, meeting her gaze for a moment and having to blush and look away. “Ah--uh... you really don’t mind? Training with me, I mean.”

“Sure, but before that, could you tell me about what’s been happening in Atreya? What has Abolish been doing in the capital?”

“Ah, yeah... I needed to tell you that, anyway. Because, um. I’m hoping you’ll accompany me when I go to Sescoria next week.”

"442 -- LI.

~~Holiday Special (Day 4/7, Page 6/6)~~

Lynnette stopped chewing to raise an eyebrow at him. “You’re going back there?” she said. “Isn’t that incredibly dangerous?”

“...Yeah.”

“Oh,” she said, stiffening in her seat. “You’re going there to pick a fight.” She paused for a rogue’s grin. “Tell me more.”

Chapter Fifty-One: ‘Of shifting tides...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

David spent the next week juggling a dozen different things. Between his meetings with King William, Duchess Jezebel, all of his brothers, and not to mention the unannounced visits from Nola, it was a struggle to find time for genuine scheming.

But he'd managed one thing, at least. For Jezebel, he'd assisted in setting up a rather large network of informants consisting of the kind of people who would normally be overlooked by David's peers. And he certainly needed their help. He wanted eyes on everyone at all times, which wasn't entirely possible for the Abolishers, as they scared the living shit out of everyone who might otherwise be willing to help keep tabs on them.

Still, word gradually trickled down to him of a plan that Abolish had for the little town of Harold. No one seemed able to give him details, but he knew that it would be enacted very soon. Too soon, in fact. There was no time to learn enough about it, let alone develop a counter-plan.

All throughout the week, he grew increasingly concerned over the matter, which made the time pass ever slower.

And then the day arrived, and everything started moving at once. First, the Abolishers began to leave the castle one by one, and soon, only Desmond Grantier and Andres Geth remained. Next, came the news report.

It was a video of none other than the Darksteel Soldier. David could scarcely believe what he was watching.

This young black man with the most infamous face in the nation was speaking directly into the camera. Very slowly, the words came, each one eerily quiet in its delivery, nearly making David strain to listen."  
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"443

~~Holiday Special (Day 5/7, Page 1/6)~~

<"Within the next twenty-four hours,"> Hector was saying on the television, < "I... the Darksteel Soldier, as you call me... will annihilate... the town of Harold... in its entirety... If you do not wish to die... then I suggest... you leave now...">

It wasn't the kind of voice David would have imagined, but somehow, this struck him as much worse. And the media seemed to share his

opinion. They were playing the video on a loop with horrified commentary. Vain attempts were made to keep people calm, but it spread across channels with public alerts interrupting almost every program.

And yet, horrid as it was, the coincidence did not escape David's notice. The town of Harold. And there was also the matter of Hector's previous media firestorm. David remembered listening to Desmond chew Karkash out for making the news. So what was this young man's investment in Harold? David couldn't understand the boy's motive.

He did not have very long to think on the matter, as he was not watching the footage alone.

Desmond burst out laughing. "YES! He's up to something! What do you think he's gonna do next?!"

Andres stroked his chin, unable to conceal his smirk. "I wonder. He's obviously trying to evacuate the town, which begs the question: how did he find out?"

"Oh! You think he has a spy in the castle?" Desmond's gaze went to the empty space adjacent him. "Aw, don't be like that. It would've been so boring if everything went without a hitch." He paused. "Yeah, yeah, alright. I'll start questioning people."

David glanced at the King before looking back at the Abolishers. He decided to take the risk and ask an intervening question. "Could someone please explain what is happening here?"

Andres and Desmond exchanged looks, and then Andres said, "We've received intelligence that this Darksteel Soldier is an enemy of the Crown. He wants to destroy Atreya, you see."

David put on a worried frown. "Is that so? Why would he want that?"

Desmond shrugged. "Who could say for sure? I'm sure your family has made many enemies over the years."

"444

~~Holiday Special (Day 5/7, Page 2/6)~~

There was no denying that much, David conceded. But even so, their tune had changed much too quickly. He was more than a little reluctant

to believe whatever they told him, and yet, perhaps listening to what they wanted him to believe would grant him a better notion of what the truth was. "Why do you suspect this young man has a spy in our castle?"

They hesitated again.

David was on touchy ground with that question, and he knew it. They didn't realize that he knew they had some type of agenda involving Harold. He wondered how much they would tell him.

"Well," said Andres, "I'm sure you've noticed that all of our comrades are not here at the moment. We don't believe it's a coincidence that this video was leaked today, of all days."

"I was wondering about that," said David. "Where have your friends all gone, exactly?"

"They received a request to return to HQ," said Desmond. "But don't worry. They will be back soon."

"Ah." Passable lies, he supposed. Time to press further, then. "Why did you say he was obviously trying to evacuate Harold?"

Andres' expression twitched. A sudden flash of irritation.

"We have a delicate operation there," said Desmond, still as cool as ever. "He probably wants to sabotage it."

"Oh? What type of operation?"

Desmond was ready with a smile. "Military supplies and so forth. The details would probably bore you, but if you're so interested, then I'll take you there tomorrow and give you a tour of the facility."

David was impressed as he returned a grin of his own. Doubtless, something would prevent that promise from being fulfilled. Perhaps it was time to petition Jezebel for an investigation. The only point where Abolish seemed to consistently encounter any difficulty was where the Darksteel Soldier stood.

--++--++--

Hector and Lynnette entered Sescoria from the east, him on his motorcycle, her in a sleek car of dark green."

"445

~~Holiday Special (Day 5/7, Page 3/6)~~

Lynnette had expressed concern that the vehicle was too flashy, that it would stand out too much, but Garovel insisted that they worry more about speed than looks. A car that could blend in was of little value when enemy reapers could track them through walls.

The plan had changed multiple times over the week due to a confluence of factors, the first of which being his training with Lynnette. In the beginning, he'd been a bit worried about hurting her, but that concern was now long dead. Lynnette completely kicked the shit out of him. So he started using his iron against her. And it made no difference whatsoever.

It was her apparent strength that allowed them to rethink their strategy for today. Suddenly, Hector wasn't going to be faced with a two-on-one fight. If anything, he felt like he was going to be the one providing support. The only advantage he had over her was that he could see reapers and she couldn't.

In addition to accounting for Lynnette's presence, Gina's information revealed that it wasn't just the King who was trapped in the castle. So now, the plan was not just to kidnap him but to get as many people out of there as possible.

And then there was the video. That had been a trying endeavor. The sheer number of takes he had to do in order to get it right was monstrous. It was mostly him agonizing through it for hours on end, with Garovel watching and being in turns amused, bored, and irritated by the lack of progress. In fact, Hector had been prepared to keep going, but Garovel informed him that one of the takes he'd done would work very well. He was doubtful but deferred to the reaper's opinion. And then today arrived, and he heard from Gina that Garovel had been right on the money.

Now it was just a matter of getting to the castle."

"446

~~Holiday Special (Day 5/7, Page 4/6)~~

At a glance, Sescoria seemed just as he remembered it. Tall,



cylindrical buildings were common, as were the accompanying whites and blues. If he didn't know better, he might've thought everything here was normal.

Soon, they came upon the gatehouse. It had been destroyed during Hector's last visit and looked to have just begun reconstruction. It was closed, as they knew it would be, but still had a pair of uniformed officers standing guard.

Lynnette pulled over and exited her vehicle. Hector parked his bike behind her, keeping his motorcycle helmet on as he joined her.

"So?" she asked. "Can Garovel tell where Desmond is?"

That was their first objective. They knew from Gina's intel that Desmond rarely left the King's side. And as Garovel had seen Desmond's aura before, it was possible for the reaper to recognize and locate the man's presence.

'Yep,' said Garovel. 'I can lead you straight to him.'

Hector nodded at her. "Follow me."

Entering through the front gate had seemed like a bad idea when Gina first pitched it to them, but she explained that the reconstruction meant barely anyone was using it.

As he and Lynnette approached the wooden barricade, Hector covered the security cameras with iron. The guards on either side came out of their little watch houses, and he immobilized them both with metal. Each guard had a radio on his hip. Lynnette confiscated them both.

Hector removed his riding helmet, revealing his face to the two guards.

"Oh fuck!" said the one on the right.

"Don't worry," said Lynnette. "We'd like to let you go. It would be in your own best interests if you fled from this place now. Do you understand?"

Barely able to move their heads, the guards exchanged looks with one another. And after a moment, they said, "Yes!" and, "We understand!"

Hector released them, and they immediately ran away. Lynnette handed him a radio. He hooked it onto his belt."

~~Holiday Special (Day 5/7, Page 5/6)~~

The barricade stood a good four meters tall, preventing entry. There was supposed to be a large stone archway above, but it hadn't been rebuilt yet. Lynnette seemed ready to climb over, but Hector motioned for her to hold off, and instead, he raised platforms for the both of them. They reached the top of the gate, and then he raised more platforms on the other side as well, allowing them to simply step over and be lowered back down.

"Aren't you handy," said Lynnette. She'd pulled up the hood of her white cloak again, which she recently had cleaned. She'd made several trips into the city over the week, one of which was for fresh clothes--not just for herself but for Hector, too, as he couldn't shop for himself without causing a panic. She seemed to have grown especially fond of her cloak, though, to the point where she'd even gotten him a black one to wear. She could pull the look off, he thought, but he felt ridiculous in his and chose not to wear it. And besides, it wasn't really motorcycle-friendly attire.

'Over there.' Garovel pointed toward the west side of the castle.

They cut across the huge garden with Hector leading the way. He'd been able to learn the layout thanks to the building plans that Gina found for him. Lynnette already knew the castle and grounds, of course, but he wanted to be prepared.

Inside now, he kept an eye out for more security cameras, as did Garovel, and made sure to obstruct each one. Every guardsman they encountered was similarly subdued, but he couldn't let these ones go just yet. Instead, he found a spare office and began collecting them like life-size figurines. He had to cover their mouths so they couldn't yell out for help, but he was careful not to block any of their nostrils. Garovel promised to remind him that they would need to be released later, but Hector hoped he wouldn't forget such an important thing in the first place."

"448

~~Holiday Special (Day 5/7, Page 6/6)~~

Of course, these people would be able to recognize Lynnette, and at first, she merely tried to keep her face obscured by her hood, but after Hector hauled his fifth guard into the room, she chose to reveal herself.

"You all remember me, yes?"

One of them tried to speak, but he was too muffled by the iron, so Hector uncovered his mouth, along with all the others'. "Lynnette, what the fuck are you doing with him?!"

"He is on our side," she said, her posture abruptly more rigid. At their sounds of disbelief, she added, "I know what you've heard about him, but it is untrue. I am vouching for him."

"Then what is all this? Why are you holding us captive?"

"We couldn't risk you trying to inform Abolish of our presence right away." She looked the guardsmen over another time. "You've all been trapped in this castle with them. You must already know that they are not to be trusted."

"Of course we know. They're fucking lunatics."

"Shut up! You wanna die?! They can hear through walls, you idiot!"

"We are going to fight them," said Lynnette. "Which means they'll be distracted. We want you to use that opportunity to get as many people out of the building as you can."

"You're crazy if you think you can win against them!"

She lifted her gauntlet and loosed a chunk of the violet shade.

"What the hell is that?!"

"We will be fine," she said, "but regardless, whether or not we win is not your concern. Just worry about taking advantage of the distraction we provide for as long as we're able to provide it."

They fell quiet at that, and after a moment, Hector released them all. They still looked at him like he was some kind of demon, but if they had anything else to say about it, then they decided to keep it to themselves.

Lynnette pressed them for an answer. "Can we count on your help?"

~~Holiday Special (Day 6/7, Page 1/6)~~

“Yes,” said the rightmost guardsman.

“Hell no!” said a different one. And he tried to flee, but the purple streak wrapped around him before he could reach the door and dragged him back to Lynnette.

She turned him around to face her. “Allow me to rephrase,” she said. “You will help us.”

The man kicked her in the stomach, and with her violet shield, she didn’t so much as flinch. Instead, her lone eye narrowed, and the guardsman turned pale.

“Lynn...” The word from Hector was quiet, enough so that it took Lynnette a moment to register that Hector had said anything at all. And when she turned to look at him, he said, “Let him go... We can’t force him to risk his life...”

By the expression on her face, she did not agree, but nonetheless, she allowed the man to flee unharmed.

The remaining guards left as well to begin evacuating and recruiting their other comrades to the cause.

‘By now,’ said Garovel, ‘we’ve probably lost the element of surprise, at least partially. Whoever’s monitoring the security cameras will have noticed all the black screens and reported it.’

Hector offered a small shrug. “That’s fine... I mean, we wouldn’t provide much of a distraction if we stayed hidden the whole time.”

Garovel gave an admmissive nod.

Hector followed Lynn back into the hallway. “Where’s Desmond now?” he asked the reaper.

Garovel pointed. ‘About twenty meters or so that way. If they’ve received the report, then his reaper will probably be recognizing our auras right about now.’

Hector led the way, but before they even reached the end of the hall, Prince Nathaniel turned into it, stopping dead in his tracks as soon as

he saw Hector's face.

Lynnette was on the man in a heartbeat, binding him in violet with one hand and drawing her sword with the other.

"Lynn!" said Hector, running after her. "What're you doing?!"

"450

~~Holiday Special (Day 6/7, Page 2/6)~~

"This is the person who tried to kill Her Highness," said Lynnette too calmly. The purple shadow wrapped around Nathaniel's face, suppressing his scream. "He's the one who set all of this madness in motion."

Hector blinked at the unexpected answer. "H-how do you know that?"

"The Queen told me herself." Lynnette pulled the man closer and raised her blade. "I'm struggling to find a reason why I should not simply kill him here and now."

"B-because he's just a normal person," said Hector. "I don't... I mean... are you sure there's no other way to handle this?"

Lynnette glared at the prince as she considered what to do.

Hector looked at Garovel. 'Should I do something? Should I stop her?'

'I don't see much reason to,' said Garovel. 'That is definitely Prince Nathaniel, and we already know that the princes are working with Abolish.'

'But he's... I... I mean, I know he's our enemy, but...'

'She knows more about the matter than we do. I'd say it's her decision.'

Hector just frowned.

Lynnette growled and sheathed her sword. She dragged Nathaniel into the nearest room and shoved him into a closet. Then she turned to Hector. "Would you mind leaving him encased in metal?"

He took a breath and nodded. A moment later, the prince was a statue

from the nose down.

Lynnette shut the closet door on him. "We'll come back for you later, if we can," she said through the white oak. "Then we'll find you more suitable accommodations. In prison."

As they were leaving, Hector had to say, "Uh. Th-thank you... for not killing him."

"I couldn't be a hundred percent sure Her Highness would have wanted me to. He is still her brother, after all."

'Desmond is very close,' Garovel informed him. 'Maybe two hallways over.'

"Desmond's close by," relayed Hector. "Get ready."

"I've been ready."

They returned to the hall, and soon enough, Desmond appeared at the far end. And he just stood there, not ready to come closer yet.

"Great to see you again!" he shouted across the marbled corridor."  
"451

~~Holiday Special (Day 6/7, Page 3/6)~~

Rather than replying, Hector armored himself up. The helm formed around his head just as he'd memorized it. Then came the gauntlets, breastplate, and leggings. It wasn't a full suit of armor, as he was worried that his mobility would be hindered if he added much more to it.

Desmond didn't seem especially concerned by the sudden armor, choosing to wait patiently. "Ah! The girl with the sword! You've changed a lot, haven't you?! Did you go aberration hunting?! I like your new look!"

Lynn ignored him and whispered to Hector, "Do you think he's trying to bait us to attack him? Where is the other servant?"

"I don't know..."

"Pretty clever!" said Desmond. "This little plan of yours! I'm quite

curious as to how you knew to enact it today, though! If you tell me, I'll do something nice for you! Do you like brownies?! I make amazing brownies!"

"What an idiot," said Lynnette.

"C'mon! If you're not going to talk to me, then things are going to get boring real quickly unless you attack!"

'...No,' said Garovel. 'It's a diversion. He wants to buy time so that his comrade can do something. Ignore him. Force him to chase us.'

Hector nodded. "We can't engage him yet," he told Lynn, and then he ran off into the intersecting hall with her and Desmond both following.

He knew the royal bedchamber was close. It was perhaps the most obvious place for the King to be, but then, Desmond probably wouldn't have realized so quickly what their objective was in coming here.

A sizzling hand came flying from behind, but Lynnette was prepared. Her shadow knocked it right back toward Desmond, who had to dive out of its path. The subsequent explosion made the hall jolt, and Hector stumbled but kept going.

The guardsmen must have been doing good work, because there weren't many civilians around. The few that remained, Hector tried to scare into fleeing as he ran past, making metal spikes suddenly jut out of the ground in front of them. That strategy, at least, proved quite successful."

"452 -- LII.

~~Holiday Special (Day 6/7, Page 4/6)~~

Hector barged into the King's chambers, eyes searching frantically around. And luckily enough, there the man was, sitting up on his bed, looking haggard in his regal suit and clutching the shoulder of his missing arm.

When he saw Hector, he merely stood. Maybe it was just because the man looked too exhausted already, but he didn't seem particularly surprised by the young, armored black man. When Lynnette arrived, however, the King's expression changed. "You!" he said, eyes widening.

"Your Highness, we've come to get you out of here!" she said.

"Did Helen send you?!"

"Not quite," said Lynn, "but we're acting with her interests in mind. Please, there's no time!"

"Yes, of course!"

Then came the voice of Andres Geth. "I'm afraid I can't allow that," he said from the hallway, and after a beat, he appeared in the open doorway, along with a new reaper.

Hector wasted no time and launched a javelin straight at the man.

A wall of yellow crystal shot up from the floor and stopped the spear dead. Somehow, the force of the impact left the metal shattered, but the crystal had scarcely more than a crack. "Oh, please," said Andres. "I'd heard that you could make metal, but this is just embarrassing to witness. You call yourself a materialization user?"

Hector scowled inside his helm.

"Allow me to demonstrate how one truly uses materialization."

Chapter Fifty-Two: 'O, colliding fires...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

A shower of yellow crystals flew toward them, and Hector raised a wall of iron, but it barely stopped anything. Chunks of crystal tore through his metal as if it were cardboard. Hector took a softball-sized crystal through the chest, knocking him off his feet.

'He's using soul-strengthening techniques on those crystals,' Garovel informed him privately. 'His element is probably sulfur.'

Hector struggled back up again, watching Lynnette buy him the time to do so. The purple shade could withstand the crystals much more effectively, and when Andres tried to coat her in them, the shadow ripped her free immediately.

'Be careful,' said Garovel. 'He can probably create it in states other than its solid crystal form.'

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"453

~~Holiday Special (Day 6/7, Page 5/6)~~

Lynnette was forcing Andres back into the hall by the time Hector rejoined. However, Andres was apparently baiting her toward him in order to hide the fact that Desmond was approaching her from behind, which was why Hector decided to place himself there first.

For a moment, he and Lynnette stood back-to-back, and he quickly whispered to her what Garovel had just told him about Andres’ ability.

“Got it.”

A giant crystal came flying toward them, and Lynnette cleaved it cleanly in two with her violet-coated sword. The subsequent halves of the crystal crashed into the walls and kept tumbling down the length of the corridor.

Desmond threw a blinking look at the suddenly missing walls around him. In a matter of seconds, his section of the hallway had been converted into one big room, a kind of adjoining chamber. The ceiling began to groan, and Hector thought it might cave in, but at least for the moment, it did not.

Desmond’s reaper, Ezmortig, appeared behind him, probably wanting to provide observational advice like Garovel had been doing.

Hector launched another javelin. Desmond dodged it easily enough while Hector began closing the distance with a freshly constructed blade in hand. And then abruptly, he clapped iron around Desmond’s face. Hector swung for the man’s neck, but even without the use of his

eyes, Desmond still ducked right under the blow and caught Hector's arm with both of his own. The arm snapped, and the man's burly hands found Hector's throat. Hector could hear the sizzling noise, and he knew the explosion was imminent.

The iron spikes came out. They skewered Desmond in five places, loosening his grip and allowing Hector to kick him off before the hand exploded. Desmond went bouncing toward Lynn, who was more than happy to make time for the man. She brought her sword to bear and chopped both of Desmond's legs off.

Yellow crystals crashed into her, and she went flying away from Desmond. Hector leapt up and caught her, mostly with his right arm, as the other was still broken."

"454

~~Holiday Special (Day 6/7, Page 6/6)~~

And due to the odd angle at which he'd caught her, Hector landed with a swirling flourish. He was about to lay her down, expecting her to at least be disoriented, but that didn't seem to be the case. She looked just as clear-eyed as ever and got back on her feet straight away.

And it was a good thing, too, because Andres wasn't letting up. He didn't bother attending to Desmond at all, and instead launched a wave of fist-sized crystals at them. Hector raised a metal wall, and Lynnette added a purple coating to it. The crystals shattered on impact.

Hector already knew that Lynn's shadow was more resilient than Geoffrey's had been, but he was continually surprised by how much. Over the course of their training, he'd made multiple attempts to break through her shadow with a soul-empowered punch, but he had never once succeeded. Even after he'd started using enhanced strength and sent her flying, Lynn had described his punches as feeling like nothing more than a friendly pat on the arm.

Lynnette retracted her shadow while Hector destroyed his wall and prepared another javelin. She went first, diving headlong through Andres' storm of crystals and forcing him back again.

Which was another thing Hector didn't understand: how Andres could launch his crystals the way he did. The man hadn't thrown them. He'd

merely put one hand forward, and the crystals shot forth as soon as they appeared. Hector very much wanted to know how that was possible, but now wasn't the best time to ask Garovel for an explanation.

Lynnette kept pressing and finally caught one of Andres' arms with her blade. The man tried to use it as an opportunity to hit her with a crystal fist, but a javelin flew into the man's chest, completely knocking him off balance. And Lynn sliced his head off.

Desmond had removed the metal from his face by now and was still waiting for his legs to regrow as Andres' head rolled toward him. When he looked up to see Lynnette and Hector bearing down upon them, he grinned and said, "Well, then! Try this one!"

And Desmond's entire body began to darken and sizzle."  
"455

~~Holiday Special (Day 7/7, Page 1/6)~~

Hector and Lynn both screeched to a halt and tried to box Desmond in with metal and shadow together.

It wasn't enough.

The explosion shook the whole building and ripped their hasty container to pieces, even breaking Lynnette's shadow. The shock wave hit Hector like a train. He flew through a wall, then another, and was outside, toppling through grass and dirt until finally skidding to a stop.

His armor was in tatters, and his body was in shreds. Most of the flesh on his face was gone. His torso was no better, exposed ribs jutting out of his chest, jagged and broken. Blood seemed to be everywhere.

His extremities, however, were still attached, apart from a missing foot and half an arm. And he was still conscious. His eardrums were blown out. His eyes were gone. All the nerve endings on the front side of his body were destroyed. But Hector was awake, still aware that everything was regenerating.

And he couldn't speak yet, but he could think. 'Garovel?!'

'I'm safe, Hector. You suppressed it enough for me to get out of the

blast radius in time.'

He would have breathed a sigh of relief if his lungs hadn't been crushed into a meaty paste. 'A-and... what happened to Lynn?'

'I'm searching for her now.'

--++--++--

A purple streak shoved the massive, wooden desk off of her. Lynnette coughed, half-expecting to see blood, but saw none. She wasn't sure if that was because the blood genuinely wasn't there or because she could barely see straight at the moment.

Before trying to move, she shut her eye and did a roll call. All of her limbs still worked, but she was reasonably sure that at least two of her ribs were broken. A pounding headache was there as well, and she raised a hand to her forehead and found a bit of blood there.

"Hoh," she breathed. She shifted off of her back and onto all fours. "I definitely felt that one..." She tried to stand and stumbled.

Looking around, she realized that she wasn't sure where she'd ended up. Whatever room this used to be, it was rubble now."

"456

~~Holiday Special (Day 7/7, Page 2/6)~~

The doorway was blocked by debris, no doubt from the giant hole in the ceiling, which also served as the only source of light for the otherwise dim chamber. At the moment, though, Lynnette wasn't feeling quite up to climbing, so she set the shadow to work trying to clear a path to the door.

"Oh, thank the goddess!" came a man's voice. "You are still alive!"

She looked up to see the King's blond-bearded face through the hole. "Your Highness!" said Lynnette. "Are you alright?!"

"Yes, I am fine. Do you require help getting back up here?"

And she realized that she must have fallen down to the basement level. She gathered herself, standing erect. "No," she said. "Please wait there a moment." She'd never used the shadow like a rope before

and was thus unsure if it could even function as such, but now seemed like a good time to try. She sent a purple hook up and had it latch onto the first floor, and sure enough, she was able to pull herself up without much difficulty.

And as she met the King face-to-face again, she was reminded of her task. "Your Highness, we have to get you out of here." She took his hand, and they started navigating the ruined hallway.

"More of them are coming," said William.

Her brow lowered. "What do you mean?"

"Before your fight, Andres called their other comrades. I am certain they are on their way here."

Her mouth wrenched into a frown. "All the more reason to leave, then."

She had no idea where Hector was. Certainly, she wanted to go search for him, but from her understanding, it would only be a matter of minutes before Desmond and Andres regenerated fully. That left precious little time to get the King out. And even if she was strong enough to defeat them on her own, she knew that she still wouldn't be able to kill them so long as she couldn't see their reapers.

Lynnette escorted the King all the way to the front gate, where the castle's guardsmen were busy ushering civilians to safety."

"457

~~Holiday Special (Day 7/7, Page 3/6)~~

She found her car again and tossed the keys to William. "It has GPS," she said. "Follow it to the last address it recorded. Should be outside Walton. When you get there, look for a door in the ground, and you'll find an underground bunker."

He gave her a confused look. "You are not going to come with me?"

"I'll meet you at the bunker as soon as I can."

"But why--?"

"I'm not leaving here without my friend."

-+-+--+

The regeneration was almost finished. He had enough muscle tissue to stand again, though his walking remained slow and stilted. He could see Garovel overlooking the castle grounds from the sky. 'You see her yet?' Hector asked.

'Ah... Oh, there she is. She's already at the front gate.'

'Good.'

'And that's the King's aura driving away. Looks like she got him to safety.'

'Seriously?'

'Yep.' The reaper laughed. 'This was supposed to be our plan, but she's doing all the important stuff, isn't she?'

Hector shrugged. 'Hey, I don't mind...'

'Uh-oh.'

He stopped. He was starting to hate hearing that from Garovel. 'What's wrong?'

'I sense Karkash approaching.'

'Aw, fuck.' His legs were fully returned now, and he started running. 'You're sure it's him?'

'Afraid so. From the northwest. He must've received word we were here.' Garovel descended back to the ground where Hector could protect him. 'Harold's not that far away, and we've already seen how fast he can fly.'

'I really didn't want to fight him again...'

'His reaper will be able to sense us. He'll chase after us until you force him not to.'

He circled around the castle, trying to reach the front, but Karkash found him first. When Hector saw the man hovering there, he created a lightning rod in the grass for himself, but much to his surprise, Karkash did not immediately attack him.

Instead, Karkash slowly descended toward Hector, and offered a few

words in a thick Vaelish accent. "Where is the King?"

Hector wasn't entirely sure how to answer, but Garovel did so for him.

'He's gone,' the reaper said."

"458

~~Holiday Special (Day 7/7, Page 4/6)~~

Karkash was briefly quiet. His reaper, Hoyohté, was right behind him, and the two of them were probably speaking, but Karkash never removed his eyes from Hector. "You must tell me where he is," the man said.

Hector's expression tilted. 'Is he serious? I don't understand why he's not just attacking me...'

'...Ah!' said Garovel. 'Because he's still not confident that he can beat you! He wants to buy time for the others to arrive and help him!'

'Err--you really think so?'

'Attack him now! We have to get away from here before they show up!'

Hector obliged. And for his opening move, he chose a sneaky thing. He put his hands together, disguising the motion by pretending to crack his knuckles, and behind Karkash, a line of four large catapults took shape. In truth, they were nothing more than seesaws with iron boulders lain at their far ends. Larger boulders took form over the seesaws' raised ends, and when they dropped, the original four boulders were launched.

Hector's trajectory wasn't perfect. The first two boulders missed Karkash, but the last two were on target. They still didn't hit him, though. Rather, they became caught in the man's swirling magnetic field, but that was enough. Their sudden appearance from outside of Karkash's view forced him to take his eyes off Hector for a moment, and in that time, Hector used a sudden platform to propel himself into the air.

When Karkash saw him again, Hector was already barreling toward him. Hastily aimed lightning cut through Hector's chest as a two-handed punch connected with Karkash's collarbone. Karkash torpedoed into the ground while Hector's body fell back down at



normal velocity, spasming a bit from the electricity coursing through him.

When he tumbled into the grass again, Hector started running toward Karkash's body, knowing the deed to be yet unfinished. Fleeing on a motorcycle would be impossible so long as this person remained undefeated, so he annihilated his catapults and made fresh boulders over Karkash's head.

They stopped in mid-air and lightning shot up and bounced between them, crackling with furious energy."

"459 -- LIII.

~~Holiday Special (Day 7/7, Page 5/6)~~

Karkash burst up into the sky, wreathed in electricity as the iron boulders swirled around him with increasing speed.

Hector made more lightning rods as he ran along the ground. He wanted to stay ahead, to create iron spires more quickly than Karkash could seize control of them. Getting in close without anything to shield himself from the lightning was obviously dangerous, and Karkash wasn't likely to fall for another simple diversionary tactic.

For a time, their battle reached a kind of stalemate. Karkash refused to come in close where Hector could actually hit him, and Hector refused to leave the sanctuary of his many, fleeting lightning rods.

It did, however, give him and Garovel an opportunity to strategize.

'Karkash is only a problem because of his mobility,' said Garovel. 'If you can take that away from him, we'll be able to escape much more easily.'

'Is that even possible?'

'We know his power is to control electromagnetic fields, so presumably, he can only fly because he's wearing something metallic under his clothes. Destroy that.'

'How the hell do I do that?!'

'Good question.'

‘Fuck!’

‘I have an idea, though.’ And Garovel explained it to Hector, who listened as best he could while still trying to maintain the stalemate.

Hector understood. It sounded difficult but still doable. Before he could put the plan into action, however, he noticed Lynnette standing atop the castle’s roof. And then he noticed Andres and Desmond, too, appearing together through the hole in the wall that Hector had made upon being thrown outside.

If nothing else, the stalemate was about to be broken.

Chapter Fifty-Three: ‘Under mayhem’s gaze...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector enacted Garovel’s plan. He stopped running and made a soul-empowered dome around himself. Then, he extended the dome out in four directions at once, suddenly creating an above-ground tunnel--one with an intersection, no less. He ran in the tunnel to his right while still adding on to all four directions.

He could already hear Karkash ripping up chunks of metal, searching for him, but the odds were in Hector’s favor. And he meant to increase them even more."

"459 -- LIII.

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"460

Each of the four tunnels forked off in two more directions, and then those forked off again. They began to converge with another, creating a symmetrical maze, of sorts. And Hector just kept on adding to it. The metal tubes were all hollow, so he wasn't concerned about reaching his volume limit anytime soon.

It wasn't easy to keep all the branching paths coordinated in his head, and he was pretty sure he'd mucked it up in a few places, but it didn't need to be perfect. Karkash was going to rip it to pieces, anyway. He just needed a means of getting Karkash's eyes off of him.

And then Karkash did the obvious thing. He pummeled the tunnels with lightning, sending a strong enough current through them that Hector could see sparks flashing across the ceiling.

'He's on your left now,' directed Garovel from underground, 'and still above you. About five meters or so.'

'What's Lynn doing?'

'Waiting, I think. Probably wondering what the hell you're trying to do. The other two are closing in, though. And since their reapers can't sense you at the moment, I expect they'll come for me.'

'Let me know when they get too close.'

'Oh, Lynn is engaging them now. Ten troa says she kills them both without you.'

And despite the circumstances, despite being worried about her, Hector couldn't help smirking at that.

--++--++--

A cloud of purple hit the ground before her and softened her landing. She was glad that worked the way she thought it would. Jumping off a four-story building would have looked really stupid otherwise.

Her ribs throbbed, but she didn't have time to worry about it. A gigantic crystal wall barreled toward her. She gripped her sword with both hands, coloring its blade violet. The shadow extended the sword's reach by a good two meters, and she swung vertically. The wall cleaved in two, but it went deeper than she realized, and she had to bring her sword back down for a second slash to finish cutting through.

Desmond was already there to greet her with a thrown, sizzling hand.

She raised a purple shield just as it exploded. She toppled back but caught herself with a bed of shadow."

"461

The pain was back, stronger now, and she had to clench her jaw. Perhaps another rib had just broken.

Her opponents attacked in unison. The flurry of yellow crystals came first, obscuring her view of Desmond, and she figured that was probably their real purpose. She had no intention of allowing herself to be pinned down again, so instead of blocking the crystals, she chose to avoid them. She thrust her gauntleted fist toward the ground, and the purple flooded forth, sending her up and over Andres' attack. With her ragged cloak flourishing behind her on the way back down, she whipped the shadow around to lash at Desmond, who lost an arm in order to avoid losing his head.

A bed of crystal spikes rose up to meet her as she landed, and she narrowly retrieved the shadow in time to stop herself from falling upon them. The spikes tried to rise up higher, but the shadow slashed them down, allowing her to reach the ground safely again.

And by now, with this being her third fight against the man, she had a good idea of what Desmond would do. Her back was to him at the moment, and she fully expected him to have already thrown another explosive at her, so she spun around in order to swat it right back at him. And sure enough, her prediction proved correct. The purple shadow slapped the sizzling forearm away, and the subsequent explosion knocked Desmond off his feet.

She pursued him, somersaulting with violet over the crystals that tried to bar her path, and as Desmond was struggling back up again, her sword fell upon him, goring him through the chest.

He met her gaze, and Lynnette could see the flesh of his face begin to darken.

She yanked the blade upward and cut straight through the man's neck and skull, splattering the grass with blood and brain. His remaining flesh ceased its darkening.

That was one down, but Andres didn't give her a chance to breathe, and the sky above her dimmed as a gigantic crystal appeared over her head."

"462

The shadow flexed and spun around her, becoming a swirling drill, and as Andres' crystal drew closer, Lynnette leapt up to meet it head-on. She pierced through, and even after losing her initial momentum, the ridges of her drill allowed her to keep climbing. And she arrived at the top, regaining her footing.

A small crystal pegged her in the shoulder, making her wince and stagger back a step. Then a second one, but when she staggered back this time, the crystal beneath her was suddenly destroyed, and she instead fell toward another bed of spikes. She grit her teeth, annoyed, and smashed them with a purple wrecking ball. Yellow shards flew everywhere as she landed.

She threw a glare at Andres, who was already shooting more crystals at her. The shadow deflected them as she ran straight for him.

Abruptly, a massive chunk of iron crashed between her and Andres, forcing her to stop and look toward Hector and Karkash.

Hector's network of metal tubes was no longer grounded. It hovered in mid-air, fraught with blue flashes of electricity. The tubes continued to grow, however, bending and spiraling and reconnecting with one another just as quickly as Karkash was ripping them apart.

She would have liked to ignore them for the moment and focus on killing Andres, but a dozen more car-sized lumps of metal were already flying in her direction.

--+-+--+--

It was a giant mess, now. He'd completely lost track of what went where, but he just kept adding more iron to everything. At the very least, if even he didn't know where he was anymore, then Karkash certainly didn't.

'Up and to your right,' said Garovel, apparently still able to make sense of things.

Hector curved his current tube as the reaper directed, and there Karkash was, facing a different direction. The man seemed reluctant to move around too much, probably to ensure Hector didn't get an easy shot at his reaper, who remained by his side at all times.

Hector launched himself out of the tube, and Karkash didn't see him until the last moment."

"463

Hector caught him with a full bear hug. At this range, the magnetic field around Karkash was too strong for Hector's metal to accumulate properly, and he didn't want any metal that he could've made beforehand to be suddenly turned against him here; so he was weaponless, and rather than pin all of his hopes on landing an instant deathblow, the plan was just as Garovel had told him earlier. He felt for the metal under Karkash's coat, and indeed, found it there.

Karkash thrashed, zigzagging in the air and trying to fling him off, but Hector had a solid grip on him. Hector ripped the metal undershirt out, and they were suddenly plummeting together. Karkash grabbed Hector's arm and finally yanked him off, following up with a flash of lightning that cut through Hector's stomach. Then they both hit the ground.

Hector struggled to stand but wasn't yet able, as he was fairly certain that his spine and hip were both broken. Only a few meters away, he could see Karkash having similar difficulty. They were immobilized for the moment, but both men still had their arms.

The lightning came, and Hector was ready for it with a pair of iron spires. The force of the impact caused the base around each spire to explode, pelting Hector with globs of grass and mud, but the spires themselves remained standing. He didn't bother trying to make them larger, because he knew Karkash could rip them to shreds at any moment, so instead, he went to work on something he'd cooked up over this week past--something Garovel had thought of for him.

Directly above Karkash, Hector materialized a gigantic, vertically-long chunk of iron--a mostly cylindrical tower. And at the top, where Karkash wouldn't be able to see, Hector created a similarly giant, downward-facing spike. And what Karkash wouldn't be able to tell

while he was shredding the bottom half of the cylinder, was that the upper half of the cylinder was hollow and that an enormous spike was already falling toward him at a much higher velocity than the cylinder had been."

"464

By the time Hector completed the trap, his spires were both shredded, and he had to eat another lightning bolt. It sent him toppling backward with a smoldering chunk taken out of his neck and shoulder, very nearly decapitating him. Fleeting sparks leapt across his flesh as he fought the muscle spasms throughout his body, still struggling to stand and keep his eyes on the enemy.

Karkash received the surprise with a scowl. The shirtless man couldn't stop the spike, but he still managed to slightly alter its trajectory. Instead of crushing his entire body, it tore his legs off. The spike's impact made the ground bulge up around it, flipping Karkash into the air.

And Hector had a few moments to breathe. As he recreated his lightning rods, his gaze turned to Andres and Lynnette. Huge pieces of twisted iron littered their battlefield, but that didn't seem to have slowed them down any.

Andres had built a tall, crystal platform to elevate himself out of Lynnette's reach. She was busy trying to destroy its foundation while having to avoid a constant barrage of crystals. So while Andres' eyes were on her, Hector encased him in metal. It was enough of a surprise to make the man have to pause before crystals could tear him free again. It was only an instant, but Lynnette didn't need any more than that. She smashed one of the platform's legs, making it tilt over. Andres tried to rebuild it, but Lynn just smashed another one, and he fell. His crystals couldn't protect him as her violet sword cleaved him in two.

Hector, however, had turned away by then, having to deal with Karkash again. The stalemate had more or less returned, but Hector had his legs back, while Karkash didn't, so he was trying to press closer and making slow progress.

'Behind you!' came Garovel's warning, but it didn't matter.



Hector turned in time to see his own iron boulder hurtling toward him but not in time to annihilate it. It barreled into him, and again, he was sent bouncing across the ground. When he tried to stand up again, he was greeted with more lightning."

"465 -- LIV.

He fell back again, grounded and smoldering. He struggled to raise a fresh spire, but his arms fought him, still buzzing with electricity. He knew the next lightning strike was imminent.

And then Lynnette was there, standing over him. She took the flashing blue bolt in his place.

But the lightning broke through her violet shield.

She shrieked in sudden agony and crumpled to the ground.

"What?!" said Hector, eyes widening. "How did--?! No!" He finally raised another spire, stopping a second bolt from reaching her.

Garovel floated behind him. 'Get up, Hector,' he said. It wasn't encouragement. It was a command. No room for refusal or excuses. 'Get up and get to the bike.'

His body wanted to argue. It wanted more time to regenerate. But it wouldn't get it. He climbed to his broken feet, ignoring his shifting spine, and scooped Lynnette up in his unsteady arms. She was still conscious but looked in too much pain to know or care what was happening.

He didn't want to look at her wound yet. It wouldn't help anything now. He merely stomped onward, creating more spires as he went, and finally left the immobile Karkash behind.

The crowd outside the castle fled at the mere sight of him, which was handy enough as he made his way to the motorcycle. He mounted it and made sure she fit snugly behind him with a body-fitted metal seat.

They roared out of the city.

Chapter Fifty-Four: 'Fierce blade, be well...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

‘Just focus on the road,’ said Garovel. ‘It won’t do her any good if you crash the damn bike.’

Helmetless, clothes in blackened rags, blood all over him, Hector tried to take the reaper’s advice. He knew it was the intelligent thing to do. But he couldn’t tell anything about Lynn’s condition. Over the wind in his ears, he couldn’t even hear her. ‘Just... Garovel, please tell me...’

‘She’s still breathing. I can’t see the wound. It’s obscured with your metal. Don’t get rid of it, though.’

‘Where do I go?’ he asked. ‘Can we really just take her back to the bunker?’

‘For now, yes.’”

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"466

The bunker was still almost an hour away, and right now, that seemed like an eternity.

'I don't understand,' said Hector. 'Why couldn't she stop the lightning? I mean, she could stop those crystals and... weren't they stronger?'

'No,' said Garovel. 'It has to do with the nature of soul-strengthening techniques. Karkash's soul power is clearly much more potent than Andres'. If I'd realized, I would've had you warn her.'

'I still don't follow...'

'Soul-strengthening techniques only increase the physical attributes of something, so even though Karkash's lightning is made more powerful, that still doesn't prevent your metal from conducting it. Andres' crystals, on the other hand, have no such interaction, so they can plow through your metal despite being objectively weaker.'

'Gah...'

'That's what makes these fights so volatile,' said Garovel. 'When soul

power is thrown into the mix, it's difficult to predict how abilities will react to one another.'

He spent most of the ride back in a state of punishing anxiety. He tried not to relive the battle, to not dwell on what he might have been able to do differently, but it was impossible. And gradually, all of his confusion and worry evolved into anger. That familiar feeling, boiling in his chest. His physical enhancements wore off after a while. Garovel held back the pain, so only the exhaustion hit him, but he was still more pissed off than tired.

'You need to call Gina as soon as we get back,' said Garovel. 'A lot has just changed, and we'll need to act very quickly.'

When they arrived, they found the King waiting for them in the garage. The look on his face was of relief until he saw the state Lynnette was in. "Is she okay?"

Hector annihilated the metal around her and said, "Lynn, can you hear me?"

Her eye opened slightly, and she took a long breath. "Yeah..." She tried to get off the bike by herself but tensed up too much.

"It's okay," he said. "I've... got you." With a little more help from Garovel, he lifted her off the motorcycle. He carried her into a back room and rested her on a bed there."

"467

"What happened?" the King said.

"Ah--" And Hector abruptly realized who he was talking to. He'd been lucky enough to not actually have to speak to the Queen very much, but there was no avoiding it here. "We, uh... well... y-you... ergh..." And he must've looked more frustrated than he thought, because the King took a step back. "S-sorry. I'm not gonna... hurt you or... anything."

William looked about as uncertain as Hector felt.

Garovel was busy inspecting the smote cloth and flesh on Lynnette's arm, just above the bone gauntlet.

Her arm, Hector realized, blinking. Not her torso. That was good news,

surely, but he waited for Garovel to speak. The King lingered closer, and Hector had to press him back to ensure the reaper had a good view. "Sorry. Just wait a minute, please."

'There's no cut,' said Garovel. 'Her shadow provided some protection, it would seem, but she still took a nasty shock. Ask her some more questions. What hurts and so forth.'

"Lynn," he started again, drawing her squinting gaze, "can you tell me what hurts?"

"I'm fine," she said breathily. "It's just my arm. And my ribs. Ugh, and my head..." She tried to sit up but quit right away. "On second thought, maybe I'll just lie here for a while."

'Hmm,' said Garovel. 'Might be a bit early to say, but I think she's alright. Ask her where her family is.'

Hector cocked an eyebrow. 'W-why?'

'Because we should find them and make sure they're safe. Quickly, ask her.'

"Uh, Lynn. We need to find your family. Because--" And he blinked again, knowing where this was going. "Abolish probably knows who you are, so. We have to, um--"

"My parents live in Sescoria with my little sister."

He looked at Garovel.

'Maybe Gina can help us with that. Get the address and give her a call.'

He retrieved the address from Lynnette and got up to leave the room.

"Wait," said William. "Please! Explain what is happening!"

'There's no time for that,' said Garovel.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I--I have to go."

"468

"It's okay," said Lynnette. "Go. I'll explain everything to him."

And he left the two of them there. His cellphone was in the rear pocket on his motorcycle. He made the call.

<"Talk to me,"> said Gina.

He started changing clothes in the middle of the garage. "Gina, I need you to get Lynn's family out of Sescoria. Can you do that?"

<"Uh. What?">

"They could be in danger. Please? I don't think I'd be able to."

<"Er. Okay. When?">

"Right now."

<"Are you serious? How am I supposed to do that?">

"Uh. I don't know. It's an emergency, though, so."

<"Ugh.">

"You're really smart. I'm, uh--I'm sure you'll figure something out."

<"You can't just say that and expect me to--">

"I'm sorry, but I really can't talk right now."

<"What? Why not?">

He frowned at Garovel as he mounted the motorcycle again. "My mother will be in danger, too."

<"Agh. Dammit, why do you have to have such a good excuse to ditch me, huh?">

"Sorry."

<"We'll talk later.">

"Right." He gave her the address before hanging up and heading back out again, this time with a fresh pair of pants, riding jacket, and helmet. It would have been nice to catch up with Gina during the journey to Brighton, but he wouldn't be able to hear her over the road noise. If he could've driven a car instead, that might be different, but it was a bit

late to be fretting over such things. At least he would have plenty of time to talk to Garovel. 'How certain are you that they'll go after our families?'

'I'm not certain at all,' the reaper admitted. 'We're just taking precautions. Taking hostages is a common tactic for them to employ. Up to now, we didn't really pose much threat to them, so they wouldn't have wanted to expend very many resources trying to find and eliminate us. But now, considering we just took a metaphorical dump on their dinner table, I'd say all bets are off. No telling what they might do in order to get to us.'

'Hmm.'

'By the way, I have a confession to make.'

'Confession?'

'This past week, whenever you were sleeping, I went to Brighton by myself in order to keep tabs on your mother.'

His hands twitched, and he nearly swerved off the road. 'What?!'"  
"469

'I knew we'd probably need to go get her if we survived the battle, so I went ahead and tracked her down.'

'By yourself?!'

'No offense, but finding her was a lot faster on my own.'

'But! Agh!'

'I thought about having you kidnap her before we attacked the castle, but if we'd ended up dying there, then she would've been kinda screwed. And besides, I wasn't in a hurry for you to meet that awful woman again.'

'That's my mother you're talking about.'

'I know. I don't like her.'

'Garovel...'



‘Hey, I understand that she’s important to you. And even if she wasn’t, we wouldn’t just let her get taken hostage. But that doesn’t mean I have to like her. I still think she’s a terrible mother.’

‘Don’t... don’t talk about her like that.’

‘Why shouldn’t I?’

‘Because she’s my mom, you asshole!’

Garovel fell quiet a moment. ‘Fine.’

A while of silence passed until Hector said, ‘...So how is she?’

‘She’s not living in your old house anymore. She’s still in the process of moving out, but she’s staying in a hotel at the moment.’

He’d seen her on the news, though not recently. All the media attention he’d gotten had of course spilled over to her. Hector could only imagine what she’d had to endure over these past few weeks. Even if time would have somehow changed her opinion of him, he knew that not nearly enough of it had passed. There wasn’t a chance in hell that she wanted to see him again.

‘She changed her name, too. She’s Vanessa Cole, now.’

‘I guess that’s why the reporters have stopped hounding her so much...’ He hesitated with his next question. ‘Did she... lose her job?’

‘I think so. Though, I imagine she quit. Just being related to a criminal isn’t grounds for being fired. Or at least, I’d hope it isn’t.’

‘Maybe, but... I’m not just a “criminal” in the public’s eyes.’

‘True.’

He took a deep breath. ‘Garovel... what do I even say to her?’

‘I don’t think you should lie to her, if that’s what you’re asking.’  
"470 -- LV.

‘No, I mean... I just... ugh...’

‘There might be nothing you can say that will make her listen.’

‘I guess so...’

A beat passed, and the reaper said, ‘Well, we’ve still got a few hours. Let’s come up with something.’

--++--++--

Navigating the ruined hallway, looking for any kind of assistance, Luther began hearing muffled cries. And at first, he thought it was someone trapped beneath rubble, but when he followed the voice, he instead discovered his brother Nathaniel, encased in metal but safe.

The sight brought a smirk to Luther’s face. “Oh, Nathaniel. I see you met the Darksteel Soldier in person.”

Only Nathaniel’s eyes and nose were visible, everything else being covered. He could just barely move his head, though, so he gave a kind of twitching nod.

Luther supposed it only made sense. He hadn’t been certain who was responsible for all of this destruction, but there weren’t many people crazy enough to attack Belgrant Castle. And in broad daylight, no less.

Luther’s expression spoiled and darkened. Instead of attempting anything with his bare hands, he began searching the overturned chamber. The desk by the far wall was largely untouched, and he found a thin blade therein. An antique letter opener was all it was, but it would suffice. He returned to his brother with it in hand.

“A pity that I was the first to find you,” said Luther. And at Nathaniel’s confused look, he added, “A pity that you were also killed by the Darksteel Soldier.”

He jammed the blade through Nathaniel’s eye socket.

Chapter Fifty-Five: ‘Thine inherited wills...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Like most buildings on this side of town, the Edith household was a modest structure. Brown and gray and a bit worn down, it still retained an air of warmth to it, perhaps due to the potted plants in the windows or the handcrafted wind chimes by the front door.

Gina rubbed her face, trying to press the anxiety out of her expression. Her hand absently went to the compact pistol in her purse. She really didn't want to use it, but she wasn't especially confident in her ability to convince an entire family to suddenly drop everything and leave the city with her."

"470 -- LV.

'No, I mean... I just... ugh...'

'There might be nothing you can say that will make her listen.'

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"471

She rang the doorbell. It was a rather long wait, but just when she was about to ring it again, the door opened, and a burly man stood before her.

Her eyes widened.

He was easily twice her size, if not three times, and though he had a large belly on him, his arms were certainly not lacking in muscle, easily filling out his pale blue sweater. A broad, clean-shaven face looked down at her with big, hazel eyes. “May I help you?” he said.

And Gina had to stop and blink, because the man’s voice did not match his face or stature at all. It was actually quite airy and soft, not the least bit intimidating.

The man waited patiently for her to answer, though he did turn his head slightly to show his concern.

“Ah!” she said. “Are you Mr. Edith?”

“Yes, I am.”

"I have news about Lynnette."

And the man gasped, rather lacking in composure. "Is she okay?!"

"I believe so, yes, but--um. Well, it's difficult to explain. Is the rest of your family home? I'd like to tell all of you at once. I know this is very sudden, but it's something of an emergency, you see."

"Yes, please come in!"

She entered, frankly surprised at how smoothly that had gone.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Gina," she said, following him into the den.

The mother and sister were watching television together, both fixated upon the news. Gina might have liked to join them if matters weren't already so pressing. Hector hadn't bothered to explain exactly what happened at the castle, but it was obviously big enough to get him on television again. Twice in one day was a new record for him.

"Honey, this is Gina," said the man. "She's come to tell us about Lynnette. She says it's an emergency."

And immediately, Gina could tell where Lynnette had gotten that penetrating gaze from. The mother's hair was darker, but she had the same sharp cheekbones.

"First of all," Gina started, "allow me to tell you that Lynnette is safe.""  
"472

Mrs. Edith's expression was more rigid than relieved. "Where is she?" she said.

"In an underground bunker. I actually came here to take all of you to her."

They exchanged looks. Mrs. Edith seemed to be their designated speaker. "It's been almost two months since we last heard from her. Where has she been all this time, and why has she not come to tell us these things herself?"

“After the first attack on Belgrant Castle, Lynnette had to flee the country with the Queen and was traveling with her for a while. She didn’t want to risk contacting you for fear of putting you in danger, but that’s changed now. You are in danger. She is unable to come to get you herself, which is why I’m here.”

“How are we in danger?”

“We suspect that her enemies might try to use you to get to her,” said Gina. “Please, I know this is sudden, but I really need you to come with me right now.”

Lynnette’s father seemed ready to believe her, but Mrs. Edith did not budge. “What enemies are you referring to?”

“There are very dangerous people trying to overthrow the Crown,” she explained. “Lynnette is on the Queen’s side, which means the Queen’s enemies are also her enemies.” Her eyes went to the news program, and she pointed to it. “That was Lynnette’s doing. She rescued the King, which drew attention to herself and is why she’s afraid they’ll come after you next.” Hector hadn’t explicitly told her that last part, but after listening to the radio reports on the way here, it sounded pretty accurate.

Mrs. Edith folded her arms. “I want to speak with her,” she said. “Call her now.”

And Gina hesitated. Lynnette did have her own cellphone now; she’d picked one up over the course of the week just in case. But Gina had been trying it on the way over, and Lynnette hadn’t been picking up. “I’m not sure if... ah, but I’ll give it a try.”

She placed the call, and to her surprise, someone answered.

<“Hello?”>

Gina recognized it as the voice of the King. “Your Majesty?”  
"473

<“Who is this?”> said the King.

“Ah--” Gina fumbled a moment, eyes shifting between the family of

three. And she laughed nervously as she said, "I'm Gina. But, aha, you wouldn't actually know who I am, would you? I helped Hector and Lynnette rescue you, but um, I really need to talk to Lynnette right now. I've got her family here, and, um. She is there, isn't she?"

There came a long pause. <"Yes, she is here, but she is currently quite unconscious. She was very tired.">

Gina's expression shriveled up. "Mm. Ah. Okay. Not the greatest timing on that. You're the King, though, so--" She put him on speaker for everyone to hear. "Could you please help me convince these nice people that I really am Lynnette's friend?"

Another long pause. <"...She may have mentioned your name, yes. Gina, was it?">

The family was not looking especially convinced. Even the father seemed rather doubtful now.

Gina tried a smile anyway. "There you see? It's the word of the King. Trustworthy, yeah?"

"That voice could belong to anyone," said Mrs. Edith.

Her smile spoiled.

"You will take me to her," said Mrs. Edith.

"Of course," said Gina. "Let's all hurry, then."

"No, I alone will accompany you. My husband and daughter will wait here for the time being."

"Ah--no, please, you all have to come. You're all in danger."

"Not until I confirm your words with my own eyes," said Mrs. Edith in a voice that brook no argument.

And Gina grimaced. The mother was clearly not going to budge. Time was limited. Options were dwindling. She knew it was a bad idea, but Gina's eyes turned down to her purse, and she went for her pistol. She looked up at the family again, gun in hand, and was about to apologize when she realized that she no longer saw three people before her. There were only two. The mother was missing. And before Gina could even turn, the woman reappeared from around the corner to her left.

With one hand, Mrs. Edith grabbed Gina's gun arm, forcing it up and

away, and with the other hand, she held a sword to Gina's neck.

Gina's eyes widened and a squeaking whimper escaped her lips. "Okay," she said quietly, heart in her throat. "I give up. You win.""

"474

"Who are you really?" Mrs. Edith took Gina's pistol for herself but did not move the blade away. "Why have you come here?"

"No, no," rushed Gina, "I actually was telling you the truth. And the gun--aha--I was just bluffing. It's not even loaded. You can check for yourself. In fact, please do. I wasn't really going to hurt anyone. I've never even fired a gun before, so--"

"Stop talking."

Gina did so.

Mrs. Edith handed the pistol off to her pre-teen daughter instead of her husband, and the girl checked it for her.

"She's telling the truth, Mom. No bullets."

Gina tried to smile, but it didn't come out quite right.

Lynnette's father took a step closer. "Honey, please. The poor girl is terrified. Put your sword away before you get blood all over my carpet again."

The woman sheathed her weapon, though her glare lingered.

"I'm really sorry," said Gina. "It's just--I don't know how much time we have, so I'm assuming it's not very long at all. If I leave any of you here, you'll probably die or be taken hostage."

"Fine," said Lynnette's mother. "I suppose you've demonstrated your conviction well enough. But if you are lying, I will ensure that you regret it."

"Aha... ah..."

-+-+--+



Hector saw the familiar skyline just as evening began to arrive. He stayed away from downtown Brighton, however, circling around it instead. Apparently, his mother had chosen a hotel that was nowhere near their house. He supposed it made the most sense. The media would have probably still found her if she stayed somewhere close by.

He pulled into the parking lot and chose a space near the exit. A deep breath, and he dismounted. He decided it would be best to keep his helmet on until he absolutely had to take it off.

Garovel led him through the front entrance and up to the fifth floor. Hector would have preferred to just make a giant platform and sneak in through a window like he'd done previously, but there were too many people around this time. They soon arrived at his mother's room."

"475

He tried to muster the courage to knock but found himself lacking.

'Perhaps I should check on her first,' said Garovel

Hector gave a small nod, and the reaper phased through the door. He waited for the report.

'...She's lying in bed and watching the news.'

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting.

'Ah, it's about you. "Darksteel Soldier abducts King." As expected. Can't tell what your mother thinks of it. Hard to say if she's even paying attention or not.'

Hector had no response. He stared vacantly at the door in front of him, just waiting, dreading the moment that he knew was coming.

'They're talking about Lynn, too, though they don't seem to have identified her yet. Probably just a matter of time. I wonder if they've given her a nickname, also.'

He looked down the hallway on both sides. A number of people were walking past or standing in doorways chatting. Several of them were giving him odd looks. Still, it was better to have them wondering about the motorcycle helmet than to have them scrambling to call the police. Or the army. At this point, he wasn't sure who would respond.

‘Hector, we can’t drag this out. We don’t know how much time we have.’

Another deep breath. He knocked on the door with the back of his gloved fist.

‘She’s getting up.’

More waiting. Then he heard her voice.

“Who is it?” she said from beyond the door’s peephole. Her voice was not strong at all. He hoped it was just the helmet playing tricks on his ears, but he doubted it.

He still couldn’t quite get a word out, so he lifted the visor of his helmet instead.

A long spell of silence followed until she finally just said, more haggard than angry, “Go away.”

“I can’t,” he said, a bit more vigorously than he expected of himself. “Please. Mom.”

More silence.

Then, to Hector’s surprise, he heard the door unlocking. It opened, and his mother was already shuffling back to her bed by the time Hector entered. He closed the door behind him.”

"476

The room was noticeably dimmer than the hallway. With the heavy curtains drawn over the window, only a small lamp by the bed offered any light. Hector had to remove his helmet and tuck it under his arm.

Then he saw his mother’s face. He almost didn’t recognize her. She was so gaunt. She’d always been a rather slim woman, but now she looked unhealthily so. It hadn’t even been three weeks since he last saw her. He didn’t understand how she could have changed so much.

“You stopped shaving your head,” she said. “Trying to make yourself less recognizable?”

He ran a hand over his hair. Finding words was difficult again. Everything he'd discussed with Garovel on the way here was slipping away. Apologize, maybe? For what? Everything?

She tilted her head at him. "Did you really abduct the King?"

That at least had a straightforward answer. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"He was being held hostage... and tortured. By the same people who ran the Queen out of the country."

"So you rescued him."

Hector couldn't respond to that.

"These people," said his mother, "are they the same ones who killed your father?"

"No. But they are... related."

Her frown deepened.

"I..." His expression hardened. "I already killed the person who murdered Dad."

She returned a flat stare. "Good," she said. "At least you did that right."

He averted his gaze. The "compliment" cut deeper than any wound he'd suffered today.

"So are you going to tell me why you're here, or do I have to guess?"

"I... I need you to come with me. You're not safe here..."

"Ah. So you've put my life in danger now, too."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't waste your breath on meaningless apologies, Hector. I honestly don't care how bad you feel." She stood from the bed and began packing her bag.

Hector waited in silence, occasionally throwing a humiliated glance at the reaper. The whole thing felt somehow worse by having someone witness it, even someone as understanding as Garovel.

Before she finished packing, however, there came a knock at the door."

"477

--donation bonus (day #22, post 1/5)--

Hector looked to his mother again. "Were you expecting someone?" he whispered.

She shook her head.

'I only sense one soul waiting on the other side of the door.' Garovel grabbed Hector's shoulder, sending fresh waves of vigor through his body. 'It's not someone we've met before.'

Hector set his helmet down and moved toward the door. Through the tiny scope, he saw a man in a black cap and coat. Not someone he'd seen before, just as Garovel said. He held up a hand for both his mother and Garovel, a silent request to stay where they were. He cracked the door open and looked through.

"Hello," the man said, "my name is--" His eyes widened as they lingered upon Hector's face. Metal clapped around his mouth, and Hector grabbed him by the collar to pull him into the room.

The door eased shut again, and Hector dragged the man into the bathroom and forced him to sit on the toilet.

"Who are you?" Hector said lowly. He annihilated the iron so the man could answer.

"I'm just a courier! The prince told me to ask the woman in this room to come see him! I don't know why! Oh, goddess! Please don't hurt me!"

"The prince?" Hector's brow lowered. "Which prince?"

"Prince David! Here!" He retrieved a cellphone from his coat. "Call him! You'll see! It's the number at the top of the list!"

"Calm down," said Hector. He tried to make his voice sound gentle, but the man only seemed to go paler. "As long as you don't try anything... I'm not going to hurt you. Please... just relax." He couldn't tell if the man believed him or not. He backed up toward the bathroom's

entrance, keeping the courier in sight, and found the number in the phone. After a couple rings, the prince answered.

<“Is it done?”>

Hector glanced between the courier and the reaper.

‘Don’t just hang up,’ Garovel advised him. ‘Tell him who you are and that you have his man hostage. See what information you can get out of him.’”

"478

--donation bonus (day #22, post 2/5)--

Hector put the phone on speaker and then said, “Prince David... your courier is unharmed... for the moment.”

<“...And to whom am I speaking?”>

“Sir... please tell me... what were you planning to do with my mother?”

There came a very long pause.

--++--++--

David put his fork down, suddenly forgetting about his buttered duck and chanterelle mushrooms. He shot a heavy look across the table.

Duchess Jezebel had already taken notice and stopped eating as well. Instead of asking what was wrong, however, she smiled and kindly told her maidservants to leave the room.

He hated being caught off guard, but it seemed a running theme of late. He disregarded the pit in his stomach and tried to assess the situation intelligently. If nothing else, he decided that ignoring the young man’s question about intent would be unwise. “You probably won’t believe me, but truly, I was attempting to ensure your mother’s safety.”

<“...You’re right. I don’t believe you.”>

The ice in those words gave the prince a chill. He clenched his jaw. “I wish I could prove it to you. You seem like one of the few people who understands the dire circumstances facing Atreya.”

No response.

David tried again. "I won't claim to know what your goals are, but I have met the people against whom you've been fighting. I've seen their atrocities first-hand. I expected they would attempt to reach your loved ones sooner or later, but I see you are a step ahead of me. And them, it would seem. Your diversion was quite impressive. I was very pleased when I heard that you had stolen my brother-in-law away. If you had arrived at the castle earlier, I would have been there as well, and perhaps we would have met in person."

<"...You sure like to talk, don't you?">

"Aha! That I do. I would be most interested to talk about how I might be able to help you. That is why you are bothering to speak with me, yes? Information in exchange for my courier's life?"

<"...Y-yes.">

David cocked an eyebrow at that, but said, "What manner of information do you require?"

"479

--donation bonus (day #22, post 3/5)--

<"...Anything you can tell me... about Abolish's plans... would be helpful. Specifically... how they intend to trigger war with Rendon.">

"Ah. Well, I imagine your recent exploits have torpedoed whatever their previous game was. I will do my best to learn what their next strategy is, but they don't like to discuss such things with me." The prince paused, meeting Jezebel's gaze as he conceived a question of his own. "By the way, how did you know that they were going to be in Harold today? Even I didn't know of that."

Hector remained silent.

David was beginning to see a pattern here. "Fine. I suppose you have no reason to tell me."

<"...Do you know what they were going to do in Harold?">

"I could guess, but no, I don't know for certain. I could try to find out, if

you prefer.”

<“They were going to destroy the entire town.”>

Worse than he’d expected, though not by much. “I wish that wasn’t so easy for me to believe.”

<“They wanted to make it look like Rendon was responsible.”>

“Of course. I see why you had the town evacuate.”

<“...Did it actually work?”>

The prince blinked. “You don’t already know?”

<“I’ve been... busy.”>

“Ah. Indeed, it worked very well. I don’t think they could have fled any faster. And as there’s been no news that Harold was destroyed, I believe it’s safe to assume our Abolish friends were unable to stage their massacre properly.”

More silence. David expected some sound of relief, perhaps, but there was nothing.

Wanting to keep the conversation alive, David concocted a fresh question. “Why are you fighting Abolish, anyway?”

<“...What do you mean?”>

“Well, you’re a criminal, aren’t you? The worst this country has to offer, according to the media and the police.”

<“...You really believe that?”>

The prince smirked. “I don’t. Or rather, I’d prefer not to, but I think hope might be affecting my judgment.”

<“...And I hope I can trust your information.”>

“Of course. You’ll kill my courier if I lie, won’t you?”

<“...No.”>

David’s brow lowered. “No?””

"480 -- LVI.

--donation bonus (day #22, post 4/5)--

<“Your courier hasn’t... he hasn’t done anything wrong. Even if you lie to me, I won’t... I won’t hurt him.”>

“But you said before that my help was in exchange for his life.”

<“No. You said that.”>

The prince chortled. “Then you’re admitting to me that you have nothing to leverage for my information.”

<“...I’m admitting no such thing.”>

“Then how can you be sure I’ll cooperate?”

<“...I said I wouldn’t hurt your courier. I didn’t say anything about you.”>

David opened his mouth but no words came out. He abruptly remembered that he didn’t know how Hector had learned about Harold. Some other source of information was undoubtedly involved, which could serve to check whatever intel David offered. Furthermore, he remembered that Hector hadn’t actually denied being a mass murderer.

<“So please, Prince David... don’t try to trick me.”>

The reports all said that Hector Goffe was only sixteen, but at the moment, David was having a hard time believing that. These didn’t strike him as the words of someone so young. There was a certain caution in Hector’s voice, a carefulness in everything he said. The boy even laid a kind of trap for him. As long as that other source of information was in play, David couldn’t just tell any old lie in order to gain Hector’s trust.

Of course, David had no intention of lying, but still, it seemed clear now that Abolish had underestimated this person. And David did not want to do the same.

“I would promise not to trick you, but I fear it would sound rather like something a trickster would say.”

Chapter Fifty-Six: ‘Gather unto thee...’



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Gina didn't get to drive. She had to sit in the front passenger seat, while Mr. Edith took the wheel and followed her directions. Mrs. Edith sat directly behind her, no doubt ready to pounce on a moment's notice and kill her in any number of horrible ways. Gina just tried not to stare at the woman in the car's side mirror. She would've liked to call Hector again, but Mrs. Edith also confiscated her phone."

"480 -- LVI.

--donation bonus (day #22, post 4/5)--

<"Your courier hasn't... he hasn't done anything wrong. Even if you lie to me, I won't... I won't hurt him.">

"But you said before that my help was in exchange for his life."

<"No. You said that.">

The prince chortled. "Then you're admitting to me that you have nothing to leverage for my information."

<"...I'm admitting no such thing.">

"Then how can you be sure I'll cooperate?"

<"...I said I wouldn't hurt your courier. I didn't say anything about you.">

David opened his mouth but no words came out. He abruptly remembered that he didn't know how Hector had learned about Harold. Some other source of information was undoubtedly involved, which could serve to check whatever intel David offered. Furthermore, he remembered that Hector hadn't actually denied being a mass murderer.

<"So please, Prince David... don't try to trick me.">

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"481

--donation bonus (day #22, post 5/5)--

Mr. Edith was something of a chatterbox and seemed entirely too relaxed for Gina's comfort. In fact, so did Melanie--Lynnette's sister. She'd managed to learn all of their names during the drive. The father's name was Jacob, and the mother's was Isabelle.

And apparently, Isabelle was not an Atreyan native.

"She came here from Intar when she was twelve," said Mr. Edith. "We met only a year later, if you can believe that."

"Oh," said Gina. "So you fell in love quite young, then?"

"Well, not exactly. She terrified me back then!" He laughed. "We didn't start dating until we were much older."

Mrs. Edith pursed her lips. "Jacob, why must you tell her these things?"

Jacob ignored the question. "She's actually very sweet, once you get past all the aggression."

“Aha, I’m sure,” said Gina.

“Isabelle’s mother was a government-trained assassin, you know.”

“Jacob!”

“What? We’re not in Intar. It’s okay to tell people. Isabelle is a bit touchy when it comes to her mother. I’d recommend avoiding the subject if you want to get on her good side.”

Mrs. Edith just sighed.

By the time they reached the bunker, Gina could no longer tell if she or Mrs. Edith was more relieved. She was just starting to show the family around the facility when the King arrived from one of the back rooms.

“Greetings,” said William.

Lynnette’s whole family bent a knee at once. Gina only gave a small bow.

“That is unnecessary,” said the King. “But thank you.”

Gina eyed the gray coat draped over his shoulder. At a glance, it hid the King’s missing arm rather well, but as one’s gaze lingered, it became increasingly apparent that the man was not in the best of health. Pale complexion, bags under his eyes. Hopefully that would begin to change now.

“Your daughter is this way.” The King showed them to the rearmost room where Lynnette was sleeping.

Mr. Edith rushed to her side first. “What happened?”

“I do not know exactly,” said William. “I only know that she was injured after rescuing me. I do believe she will be fine, however.””

"482

“How do you know?” said the young Melanie.

“It was many years ago now,” said William, “but I have some experience in such matters.”

And Gina blinked, because she suddenly recalled reading somewhere that the King had actually been an EMT when he was younger, prior to marrying into the royal family. "Did you tell that to Hector before he left?" she asked.

"I intended to," said William, "but I... hesitated."

"Hesitated? Why?"

The man hung his head a little. "I was still rather confused and... frightened, I am ashamed to say."

"Oh." Gina frowned. "You don't have to be scared of Hector. He's a sweetheart. Besides, you've already dealt with much scarier people than him."

"I know that now," said the King. "Lynnette explained that he is different from Abolish."

Mr. Edith interrupted. "Pardon me, Your Majesty, but when will she be waking up? Do you know?"

"In a few hours, probably, but she should remain in bed a while longer than that. She has at least one broken rib, so she will be in considerable pain unless we can provide her with analgesics."

"I'll see about getting my hands on some," said Gina, and she eyed the King again. "You might need some, too, yeah?"

He gave a tired smile. "That would be appreciated."

"You should rest, Your Majesty," she said. "You look terrible."

"I think I shall." He shuffled off to the next room over.

At length, the family seemed ready to listen to Gina. She tried to bring them up to speed on everything--the Queen's departure, the presence of Abolish, the princes' betrayals, Lynnette and Hector's roles as well as her own.

When they were done asking questions, Gina helped everyone get situated and comfortable. There weren't enough rooms for everyone, but there were plenty of cars. For herself, she took a black SUV. The rear seats folded down, offering plenty of space to sleep, though she wasn't prepared to turn in for the night just yet.

She had to make a few calls. Painkillers were the priority at the

moment, but she figured that a more spacious place might be needed soon."

"483

Eventually, Hector arrived, his mother following in her own car. They both looked completely exhausted, and everyone else was already asleep, so Gina figured introductions would have to wait. Mrs. Edith sat up inside her blue convertible to watch the newcomers, but she probably just wanted to make sure they weren't going to attack anyone, because she lay back down as soon as she saw Gina welcoming them in.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Hector's mom."

"Likewise," Mrs. Goffe said flatly.

Gina smiled with sympathy. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience. And everything else, really. We're a bit pressed for space at the moment, so please just bed up anywhere you like. You'd probably be most comfortable in your own car, but please feel free to use any of the vehicles here."

The woman just nodded and returned to her car.

Gina walked with Hector as he searched for a place to sleep as well. "How's your mother handling things?"

"...Not very well, I think. Garovel will keep an eye on her, but, um... could you also watch out for her? I'm a bit... worried, I guess."

"Eh, I'm not sure I'll be able to help much with that. I need to get back to Sescoria soon."

Hector shook his head. "P-please, um... don't go back there."

"I have to. We need the intel."

"No, we don't," said Hector. "I have, um... a new source. Prince David will be helping us."

She raised her brow. "Wha--? How the hell did you get a prince to help us?"

“Ah--” Hector rubbed his neck. “He just kinda... offered. And look, even if you go back there... you won’t be able to learn anything. Because... Abolish will be more cautious now.”

“Hmm. You have a point, I suppose. I’m sure they’re curious as to how you knew to attack the castle today. They may’ve already found all the bugs I planted.”

“Y-yeah. So...”

She gave a nod. “Okay. I’ll stay and look after everyone. What about you, though? What are you going to do?”

He took a deep breath. “I need to rest while I can...””  
"484

“Do you think you’ll have enough time to rest?” said Gina.

“Maybe... Garovel says that Abolish probably won’t make another move for at least a few days, so...”

“Why does he think that?”

“Oh, because of Lynnette.” Hector smirked faintly. “She fought Desmond and Andres by herself... and she fucked them both up.”

“Heh.”

“We, uh... we couldn’t kill them for good, unfortunately, but... they’ll probably need more time to recover than I will. They both died twice.”

After that, Gina let him go to sleep. He was out within minutes, and after making a couple more calls, she finally turned in as well.

In the morning, she was early to rise, more out of compulsion than because she felt fully rested. She’d never been much for sleeping, really, and so decided to whip up a large breakfast for everyone. Mr. Edith had beaten her to the kitchen, however, apparently having had the same idea. She offered her assistance with the preparations, which he happily accepted.

There wasn’t a large enough table for everyone, nor even enough space in the tiny dining room, so they all gathered in the garage and

ate in a kind of rough circle, some standing, some sitting on the floor or in the back of a truck.

Lynnette, William, and Hector were the last to arrive, each one looking similarly ragged. Gina pitied Hector the most, however, as he became the target of a barrage of questions from Lynnette's mother.

"So if you're not really a mass murderer," Isabelle was saying, "then why does everyone seem to think you are?"

"I... ah... that's... not easy to... agh..."

Gina looked to Hector's mother, expecting her to pitch in with something, but the woman merely listened. Gina had to help him out herself. "He ended up being blamed for something that someone else did."

She actually knew more of the details than Hector probably realized. She'd looked into the events rather extensively and found several contradictory testimonies from people who'd been in the school at the time of the attack. In particular, there was the version given by one of his teachers, Ms. Trent, who claimed to have been saved by Hector."

"485

Ms. Trent's account of what transpired had been too difficult for the media or the police to believe, what with it talking about students becoming possessed with murderous intent. This, combined with the fact that Hector's own father had been among the listed victims, gave Gina a fairly clear picture of what had truly happened. Not to mention, it also explained why Hector seemed to have an especially difficult time talking about it.

She was, however, still left to wonder if Hector really had to kill the possessed students in order to stop them. That was the only thing to give her genuine pause, but even that had not lasted very long. She had one of her minions investigate and subsequently earned herself a peek at the autopsy reports, where she discovered that suffocation had not been the cause of death for any of them. Rather, it had been the work of severe brain damage, despite only one of the bodies indicating any kind of head trauma.

Gina was forced to articulate all of these things to Lynnette's parents

by morning's end. She left out the part about his father, as everyone probably knew that already due to it being a focal point of so many news reports.

Hector tried to assist her in explaining, but he mostly just ended up nodding awkwardly. And afterwards, he shambled off to go sleep again.

"I have a request," said King William, who'd remained largely quiet up to now. "Might it be possible for me to speak to my wife soon?"

"Oh," said Gina, "I suppose I can try giving Master Roman a call. There's a good chance he won't answer, though."

"I understand."

She pulled out her phone and made the call. It rang for a long time, and she was about to give up when it suddenly went through.

<"Gina?">

"Master Roman, is the Queen there with you now?"

<"Yeah, why?">

"I have the King here with me."

<"You what?">

"He's quite eager to speak to his wife, Master Roman. Please quit hogging the phone to yourself."

<"No, seriously, what? How did--?">

There came a sudden rustling, and then Queen Helen's voice said,

<"William?">"

"486

Gina handed the phone off to the King.

"Helen? Ah... yes, I am alright." He glanced across his crowd of onlookers, and after a moment, he flushed red and walked away, speaking more quietly into the receiver.



Gina eyed Lynnette next. She'd been moving a bit stiff all morning, not speaking very much, and just generally looking tired. "How's your pain?" Gina asked.

Lynnette looked at her with a half-drawn eye. "Excruciating," she said. "It's a little difficult to breathe, but His Highness told me that was to be expected."

"I'll make a trip into town and pick up those painkillers for you."

"I'll go with you," said Lynnette.

"No, no," said Gina. "It's better if I go alone. I'm the only one here who we know that nobody is looking for. And besides, you need your rest."

Lynnette frowned but nodded. "Take my phone, then." She offered it, and Gina accepted.

"Be back soon," she said. "Oh, and make sure the King fills Master Roman in on what's happened."

"Okay."

--++--++--

After watching Gina go, Mr. Edith offered to carry Lynnette back to her room, but that was hardly necessary. Even if she'd wanted to go back to bed, she could walk just fine on her own. Annoyingly, she was tired yet not sleepy, so she just stayed in the garage with her family for a while.

Despite the strange circumstances, it was certainly a relief to see them again. More than a few times, she thought she never would. Her mother had been light on the questions so far, probably not wanting to aggravate Lynnette's condition, which was why Hector and Gina had been targeted instead.

"It would seem you've been keeping up with your training during your absence," said Mrs. Edith.

Lynnette gave a weak laugh and regretted it. "You could say that," she said gruffly. "Looks like I'll have to take a break for a little while, though."

"Indeed."

"By the way, Mom, would you mind helping Hector out for me?"

The middle-aged woman folded her arms. "Help him how?"

"We were sparring partners. I'm sure he could benefit from practicing against you."

"487 -- LVII.

Mrs. Edith lowered her brow. "What is your relationship with this boy, exactly?"

"I'm planning to marry him," said Lynnette.

Her mother's eyes widened, as did her father's, her sister's, and even Mrs. Goffe's, who was still within earshot. "You're planning to what?!" said Mrs. Edith.

Lynnette smirked at their faces. "I'm joking. I hardly know him. He doesn't talk very much."

Mr. Edith interjected now, looking almost as stern as his wife. "Young lady, that was not funny."

"Pretty sure it was," she said, earning a titter from her little sister.

Her mother shook her head. "You insufferable--"

"You can't be mad at me. I'm injured." Lynnette clutched her ribs and hunched over a bit.

"Not injured enough, I'm thinking." But Mrs. Edith couldn't suppress her slight grin.

It was Mrs. Goffe's turn to interrupt. "How did you come to meet my son?"

Lynnette stood up straight again, though felt a bit light-headed and decided to lean on the red BMW behind her. "He just showed up at the castle," she said. "Completely out of nowhere. Saved the Queen's life. And mine. Did he not explain to you?"

Mrs. Goffe frowned. "As you said, he doesn't talk very much."

"Well, yes, but I would've thought--"

"We don't talk very much," she corrected.

That left an awkward silence in its wake.

Isabelle was the one to break it, addressing Hector's mother. "You must have had a difficult time with his infamy."

Mrs. Goffe's eyes glazed over. "Yeah," was all she mustered in reply.

"I heard his father was also one of the victims. You must be--"

"Honey, she probably doesn't wish to talk about it."

"I only meant to offer my condolences. I can't imagine what you must be going through right now."

Mrs. Goffe looked over the family with an utterly blank expression. "You're right," she said. "You can't imagine." And she walked away.

Chapter Fifty-Seven: 'Thy royal passing...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Nathaniel received an extravagant funeral service. There were so many flowers that the casket was almost hidden from view. David wasn't sure where they'd all come from."

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--donation bonus (day #23, post 1/5)--

The ceremony was televised, and there were more people crammed into the basilica than were probably needed, really. An orchestra on standby around both the east and west entrances, a choir in the back, cameras all over the first and second floors, and hundreds of distant relatives from all over the country. The Belgrants, the Carthraces, the Masdens, the Volliers, and many others whom David didn't care to think about.

In a way, all of these people made it sadder in David's mind, because he knew that almost no one in the room held any genuine affection for Nathaniel. Even the man's own wife and son had despised him. Apart from perhaps Charles, Meriwether, and, yes, a small part of himself, this huge confluence of people was merely to keep up appearances, to follow through with familial obligations.

"Here under the Goddess' divine light do we pray," said the Master Cleric, a balding man of severely limited stature but with an incongruently large voice that reverberated through the hall. He was a favored speaker at many royal ceremonies, probably due to the sense of gravitas that he could lend a room. "Dear friends and loved ones. Standing before you now, it seems an affront to all my sensibilities that a man so fine as our Prince Nathaniel should be taken from us so long before his time. I would not chide you if your faith in Her will was wavering, if you were beginning to wonder why She would allow such a tragedy to happen."

David recalled these same words at his father's funeral, as well. They'd felt just as shallow then, too.

"But let me be the first to remind you, dear brethren, that our beloved prince is now at peace in Her eternal embrace. Mourn, grieve, and shed tears where you must, but remember that he is with Her now, and nothing has truly been lost, for we will all be able to see him again in time."

David squinted. Nothing quite lightened the mood like a gentle reminder that they were all going to die, as well. He stopped listening and looked over at his brothers."

--donation bonus (day #23, post 2/5)--

Seven were now six, and they all sat in the front pews, interspersed between their wives and children, David being the odd man out in that regard. Of all his siblings, he'd been the only one to escape the pressure to ensure their bloodline live on. Ironically enough, he'd always felt that he might have been inclined to have children if that sense of "duty to his lineage" had never been forced upon him in the first place. Though, if he did ever meet a woman he loved truly, he would probably just run away with her, rather than risk subjecting her to his family.

The Abolishers were in attendance as well, though only five of them, and they concealed themselves beneath blue-and-gold clerical robes. He tried to keep a sense of where they all were, but they kept moving, creeping around and leaving him unsettled as usual. The absent two, he believed, were still resting. Before apparently hibernating, Desmond had met with David one last time, and the man expressed very little disappointment at having lost the King and considerably more relief at no longer having to "babysit the dull bastard."

The other Abolishers were all in a tizzy, now. Belgrant Castle was completely empty of subjects to maim and torture for their amusement, and word had therefore spread around Sescoria about the monstrous people who'd been holding the building hostage. Word hadn't made it into the news, of course, as that was still being monitored and suppressed, but it was progress.

As for this business about Hector Goffe being the one who killed Nathaniel, David didn't believe it, partly because Luther was the one who claimed it so, and partly because David had already asked Hector himself. Granted, murder wasn't a thing that many people would admit to, but David could see no motive for anyone other than Luther.

Though, if David was honest, part of him still wanted Luther to be innocent. Part of him wanted to think the man wasn't that far gone yet. Foolishness, he knew. Luther had already betrayed Helen, nearly to the cost of her life."

--donation bonus (day #23, post 3/5)--

Strangely, Luther's recent deception had served to pacify the Abolishers for the time being. The only reason they were present today was because they believed that Hector had killed Nathaniel, leading them to suspect that Hector wanted the other princes dead as well. So rather than occupying themselves elsewhere with more important matters, they were stuck here, playing guards in case of an attack that wasn't going to happen.

This meant that information about Abolish's presence in the capital had greater opportunity to spread--a chance which David and Duchess Jezebel were taking full advantage of. Even now, while they both sat through this ceremony, their agents were busy helping refugees flee the city and get the word out. For the first time in a long while, David could see genuine hope brewing, hope that Atreya might make it out of this mess without going to war with Rendon or Kahm.

The primary hitch, however, was trying to find out what the Abolishers planned to do next. As volatile as they were, it was difficult to predict how they would respond to being outed. Somehow, he doubted that they'd simply up and leave. Even despite being on relatively good terms with them personally, David had thus far been unable to break any new ground with them.

Desmond and Andres were obviously unavailable. David had no rapport with Conall and Tessa, as they were the busiest of the seven and were usually preoccupied with one thing or another. And since Karkash might as well have been a brick wall for as often as he spoke, that only left Hanjir and Nola.

Hanjir was perhaps the most terrifying of all seven, but not because he was more imposing or intimidating--Karkash had all of them beat there, surely. Rather, it was simply that Hanjir had, by far, the worst mood swings. He was easily the most unpredictable, even starting fights with the others at whim. Moreover, David discovered that Hanjir tended to lie for no apparent reason, which rather devalued him as a potential source of information.

So that left Nola."

"491

--donation bonus (day #23, post 4/5)--

The service drew to a close, and the casket was removed from the building. Only the princes and their immediate families were allowed to follow. David couldn't see the Abolishers from his black limousine, but he was sure they were in pursuit as well.

Nathaniel's final resting place would be beneath the Atreyan Royal Palace, entombed next to their father.

David had been down here a few times before, curious to see what the catacombs were normally like. He'd found them much colder and darker when not in the throes of ritual entombment, which he supposed was only to be expected. At the moment, however, flower petals lined the stone halls, and a hundred lamps bathed the path to Nathaniel's chamber in warm, golden light.

At length, they finally arrived, and David and his brothers proceeded on together, now accompanied only by Nathaniel's flat-faced wife and vacant-eyed son. They watched the casket handlers set it down on the stone slab and slide Nathaniel into the hole in the wall. The chamber itself was only for ornaments and mementos, now laid down by everyone present.

"He will be missed," said Gabriel.

"And avenged," added Meriwether. He'd been the only one of the brothers to cry during the service, and even now, he hadn't fully regained his composure.

They all said their farewells to Nathaniel, and then it was done. Gradually, they all returned to the surface.

David rubbed his face and sighed as he saw sunlight again. It was barely past midday, but all this gloom had taken its toll on him. He would have rather liked to go home and sleep, but there was yet work to be done.

"I still do not understand it," came Meriwether's voice, and David realized the man was addressing him. "This Hector Goffe. By all accounts, he was just a common boy before all of this. How could he harbor such a grudge against us?"

David looked around. The others were dispersing, but Luther was still within earshot, as were a few of the wives, who could be just as problematic if they heard the wrong thing. David decided to remain



neutral as he walked with Meriwether. "It is a mystery, isn't it?"

"492

--donation bonus (day #23, post 5/5)--

"I suppose the boy would not require much motivation," said Meriwether, almost sighing. "What kind of world do we live in, where mere children can cause so much misery?"

"You say that like we've caused none of our own," said David.

"There is a difference. What we do, we do for the good of the nation."

"Of course."

Meriwether shook his head. "There is that tone of yours. Saying one thing while implying another. I wish you would just be straightforward for once."

David merely returned a placid smile.

Meriwether had always been a rather blunt instrument. Sometimes that was helpful. Most times it wasn't. But he was an honest man, on the whole, which David appreciated. It made things simpler, if not necessarily easier.

"Bah," said Meriwether. "You and your games. I have no patience for them."

"I've noticed." David rested a hand on the shorter man's shoulder. "But these are hardly games anymore, I fear. I hope you will take that under advisement and err on the side of caution."

Meriwether eyed the hand. "As usual, I have no idea what you are trying to say."

David's smile tightened. If only matters were as simple as just being able to warn the man about Luther. Certainly, it would have been nice to come right out and say it, but what, then, would happen if Meriwether went on to have a conversation with Luther about David? Quite possibly, Meriwether would be his tactless, confrontational self and alert Luther to the fact that David might not truly be on his side. That, or maybe Meriwether was playing some game of his own that David had yet to see through. Doubtful, sure, but David had misjudged

his brothers before.

But despite all this, perhaps there was yet a way that David could help his brother here, a way which posed no risk to himself. He removed his hand from Meriwether's shoulder. "I wonder what Luther was thinking as he watched Nathaniel being killed."

Meriwether's expression turned to disgust. "What a repulsive thought. Why would you wonder such a thing?"

"493

"I was merely curious as to why Luther even chose to watch in the first place," said David. "He must be a bolder man than I, because I know that if I encountered the Darksteel Soldier, fleeing would be the only thing on my mind."

"What are you talking about?" said Meriwether. "Luther probably did not have the opportunity to flee. He was probably trapped in some way."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you're right."

Meriwether threw him a sideways look but said nothing.

And that was it, the look he'd been hoping for.

David couldn't offer him any information directly, so instead, he'd tried to plant an idea in Meriwether's head--a tiny seed of doubt. It would be up to Meriwether to make that seed grow, of course, but that was the whole point. It had to feel like the man had thought of it himself, otherwise David's name would undoubtedly crop up.

If Meriwether chose to investigate the matter further, he might even find evidence that contradicted Luther's version of events. Of course, it was also possible that Luther had covered his tracks too thoroughly. It was a rather weak gambit, admittedly, but David didn't see much reason not to have it in play.

After that, eight days passed with very little progress on any front.

He spent the majority of his time working on Nola. She wasn't difficult to find. Rather, she came to him. The Abolishers split their manpower, allocating Nola and Karkash to keep tabs on all the princes around the

clock, and she visited David the most, often bringing him presents of the bloody sort.

She was surprisingly tight-lipped about their plans, however.

“Always so curious,” she said in that gleeful tone of hers. “The clever prince. What angle are you working, eh?”

This time was different, though. He’d thought of a new strategy. “I’d tell you what angle I’m working, but... honestly, you see, it’s a bit embarrassing.”

“Oh?” Her eyes narrowed, and she stuck her head closer. “Embarrassing how?”

“No, you’ll surely think me foolish.”

“I won’t, I won’t! So tell me!”

“Well, okay. I was wondering how someone might go about becoming a member of Abolish.”

Nola’s eyes lit up. “No shit?!”

"494

“I understand that one must die first,” said David.

She smirked. “Oh, and how do you know that?”

“I have informants of my own,” was all he told her.

David’s alliance with Hector proved very enlightening. He knew of reapers now as well. He’d already suspected that there was some kind of hidden force behind the Abolisher’s ability to “hear through walls,” as some people had called it. That was one of the first things Hector had told him, in fact, as the young man wanted David to be careful with what he said when he thought no one was listening. It also meant that their correspondence had to be performed largely via text message, though Hector also insisted that David use coded voice mails to confirm that he was the true sender.

Nola laughed. “Are you asking me to kill you?”

David forced himself to grin. "I would kindly request that you wait until I am certain of my conviction."

"Heh." She threw a candid look around David's empty dining chamber. Looking for her reaper, perhaps? After a moment, she said, "It wouldn't work if I killed you right here and now, anyway. You need a willing reaper for that sort of thing, otherwise your soul would decay too quickly, and then you'd just be dead."

"I see. Reapers, yes. I have heard tell of that as well, I think. But truthfully, I was more curious about how one joins Abolish in particular. As in, what sort of oaths one might have to take, and especially how one might be able to prove oneself."

"Oh, that's all boring stuff."

"Is it? I feel that it is paramount for me to earn the trust of your comrades and superiors. Would you know of a way I might accomplish that?"

The mirth in her face lessened somewhat. She was thinking now.

One more push. "I was hoping there might be an opportunity for me in whatever you and your friends have planned next."

"So that's why you've been asking me about it so much."

"Indeed."

She hesitated still. But he could see that she wanted to tell him.

"I apologize for not being more forthcoming earlier," he added. "As I said, I was afraid you would think me foolish.""

"495

"Different sects of Abolish have different requirements," said Nola, "but our sect is pretty simple. All you have to do is kill someone you don't know, while three of us bear witness."

"Hmm. I was hoping for something that would allow me to make a more favorable first impression."

"Heh. Eager prince." She scratched her flat nose for a moment.

"Alright, well. You can't tell anyone what I'm about to say."

"Of course."

"Okay, so... the old plan was to gain the public's favor so that the war with Rendon would last longer and just generally be more 'impassioned.' That was how Ezmortig put it, anyway."

"Ezmortig?"

"Desmond's reaper. But anyway, the old plan's been shot to hell now, and honestly, I'm glad it was. I mean, yeah, it was more ambitious, but it was just so slow. I like the new plan a lot better."

David already didn't like where this was going.

"Basically," said Nola, "we've just decided to attack Rendon ourselves. We'll steal a platoon of Atreyan soldiers and force them to accompany us across the border, where we annihilate the first town we see. Or maybe the first two towns. Or three. I'm sure we'll stop eventually. When we get bored or something."

"...I see. That is much more straightforward."

"I know, right? It's great!"

"When do you intend to do this?"

She grinned. "Tomorrow."

David's eyes widened. Worse news, he could not currently imagine. "So soon?"

"Yeah. We figured we're already operating under time constraints here, what with that sister of yours trying to return with reinforcements. And on top of that, if the metal brat gets much more famous, then his reputation alone will probably draw the Vanguard to Atreya--which would just be a big ol' pain in the cooch. So at this point, all we want to do is set things in motion and get the fuck outta this country."

"What about Desmond and Andres?"

"They've already had over a week to rest. They should be in fighting shape again. Or close enough, anyway."

"Ah, I see..."

"496 -- LVIII.

“So if you’re looking to help,” said Nola, “then maybe you could get us that platoon of soldiers so that we don’t have to steal them.”

David put on a frown. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t be much help with that. I don’t have any sway with the military.”

“Shame.”

David gave a small gasp, partly for the impression it would leave on her and partly because he genuinely did realize something. “No,” he said. “Wait a moment. Perhaps there is a way I can help. Do you know where you will be taking these troops?”

“Oh, um. Where was it? Through that big nature reserve, I think.”

“The one belonging to the Carthraes?”

“Yeah, that sounds right. Why do you need to know?”

“Mm, I’m not sure yet. It might still prove fruitless. Allow me to make a few calls.”

“Sure.”

He stood from the table. “If you’ll excuse me, then.”

“By the way,” said Nola, making David hesitate, “I have a friend who I bet would really like you. She’s a bit of a chubby chaser, and she would be over the moon to date a prince.”

“Oh.” He didn’t dare risk spoiling her good mood now. “That sounds. Delightful. I look forward to meeting her.”

Nola merely returned that manic smile of hers.

He had to force himself to keep only a brisk walk as he fled the room.

Chapter Fifty-Eight: ‘O, warriors of the fore...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It had been a very fast week for Hector. Half of it, he’d spent asleep, and the rest, he’d spent training. He wasn’t sure if Lynn’s mother didn’t

like him very much or if that's just how she was with everyone. He thought Garovel might know, but whenever he asked about it, the reaper just smiled and shrugged.

His training with Mrs. Edith was more of a one-way thing. He couldn't really spar with her like he had with Lynn, so the woman mostly focused on demonstrating how to wield a sword properly, as well as helping him figure out what kind of blade suited him best."

"496 -- LVIII.

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"497

--donation bonus (day #24, post 1/5)--

He'd already learned from his previous sparring sessions with Lynn that the metal he created wasn't as strong as that of a professionally forged sword, but a lot of it also had to do with learning to hone the blade's weight and balance. Granted, it wasn't the biggest concern for him, seeing as he could freely manipulate the size of the blade whenever he wanted, but even so, Garovel encouraged him to come up with a "default" form for his sword. The idea was to memorize the shape so that he didn't even have to concentrate in order to make it.

And indeed, it proved quite effective. He learned to do it well enough to create the full sword in under three seconds. It was only a one-handed blade in its normal state, unlike Lynn's two-hander. He wanted to ensure that his left hand remained free, as he would undoubtedly need it in order to continue creating more iron on the fly. Plus, he wanted his left arm to be where he mounted his shield--something he considered even more important than the sword.

Most of his training, however, was spent alone. He kept trying to add his soul to the metal and thereby strengthen it, which reminded him of his battle with Andres, along with a question that he hadn't been able to ask before.



‘Garovel, how was Andres able to manipulate his crystals the way he did?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The way he could just, like... launch them at us. He didn’t have to throw them or anything.’

‘Oh, right. I doubt you’re able to do that yet. I mean, you can try, but it’s a pretty advanced technique.’

‘How does it work, though?’

‘It’s not an easy explanation. But, um. Let’s see. You’ve probably noticed by now that once you make your iron, you’re not able to manipulate it in any way. Apart from destroying it, that is. Correct?’

‘Ah--yeah?’

‘That’s just how materialization works in general. Once it’s created, it’s a finished product. You’re done with it. It becomes subject to gravity and any other environmental forces, just like normal metal would.’

‘Right, so...?’”

"498

--donation bonus (day #24, post 2/5)--

‘You can’t make your element magically float or fly around with your mind,’ said Garovel. ‘And to my knowledge, that will never change, no matter how much you develop your ability. But that’s not what Andres was doing. He was manipulating his sulfur BEFORE creating it.’

Hector tilted his brow. ‘Uh...?’

‘That’s the trick of it. You change the “state” in which your element is created. What Andres was doing wasn’t technically “launching” the crystals. Rather, the crystals were ALREADY moving when he created them, because he manipulated their “position state,” so to speak, adding an aspect of velocity to them. Which, as I mentioned, is not an easy thing to do.’

‘Hmm...’

‘You’ll also be able to change the physical state that your iron appears in. As it is now, you’re only making iron as it forms naturally in the world, but you’ll eventually be able to create it in liquid or gas form. Especially strong materialization users can even eliminate impurities in their elements. Though, as far as iron is concerned, the impurities are actually what give it its strength, so that might not be terrifically useful for you personally. A lot of elements decay too quickly in non-natural states to serve much purpose outside of a laboratory.’

‘Er, okay...’

‘I should also clarify that we’re not completely certain yet that your element really IS iron.’

‘Wait, really? I thought that was settled a long time ago.’

‘Nope. Even now, we’re still operating under that initial assumption we made.’

‘What else would it be?’

‘Beats me. My knowledge of metals is general, at best. I do believe it is iron, but I’d like to confirm that with an expert when we get the opportunity.’

‘Eesh... and when do you think that’ll be?’

‘Next week, I’d wager.’

‘What? Why would you--?’

‘That was a joke. I don’t have any fucking clue. The way things have been going, we’ll be dead before we get the chance to find out.’

Hector scratched his forehead. ‘You... you do know that jokes are supposed to “lighten” the mood, right?’

‘Let me try again. Why’d the chicken cross the road? It didn’t. It got hit by a car and died.’

‘Ugh...’

"499

--donation bonus (day #24, post 3/5)--  
'I've got loads more jokes,' the reaper said.

'Please, no--'

'Why aren't dinosaurs any good at math? Because they're all dead.'

Hector shook his head. 'Y'know... of the two of us, I thought you were supposed to be the cheerful one...'

'Oh, you want cheerful? I can do cheerful. A rabbit goes into a jewelry store, looking to appraise a gold watch. He asks the vendor, "How many carrots?"'

He couldn't help smirking. 'That... that's terrible...'

'Then why are you smiling?'

'I'm not smiling...'

'You definitely are. What about you? Know any jokes?'

'Ah...'

'Oh, c'mon.'

'Uh... okay... a coal miner walks into a bar, and the bartender says... "We don't serve your kind here." The coal miner says... "You mean you don't serve 'minors'? Never heard that one before." And the bartender says... "No, I mean we don't serve black people."'

'Whoa, Hector, what the hell?! I thought we were sticking to cute jokes with bunnies and crap!'

'Oh, ah, sorry...'

The reaper just laughed.

Throughout the week, Hector found considerable enjoyment from eating together with everyone. Of course, he couldn't hold a conversation with any of them, which was embarrassing, but it was fun just listening. It felt a bit homely, which was something he wasn't sure he'd ever properly felt before. Lynn's family got along particularly well, he thought. Given the circumstances, they seemed strangely normal, but he supposed he wasn't the best judge of that anymore.

Gina had been trying to acquire a new place with a similar level of concealment, but she'd not been having an easy time of it. She was hoping to move everyone by the month's end.

"We've actually met before, Your Majesty," said Gina over breakfast one morning.

"Have we?" said the King, squinting at her.

"It was very brief," she said. "I'm not surprised you don't remember. I was dressed as a maid at the time, and Desmond and Karkash were hassling you."

He blinked at her. "Ah! Yes! Come to think of it, how in the world did you sneak into the castle? It was locked down at the time."

"500

--donation bonus (day #24, post 4/5)--

"Yeah, that took some doing," said Gina. "The castle grounds were undergoing repairs at the time, so I disguised myself as a construction worker in order to gain access. Bit tricky, that. I don't really have the physique for it, so I was a little worried, but it worked out. The repair crew was only allowed into the castle itself for use of the lavatories, which was where the second disguise as a maid came in. Snuck it in with me and changed in the bathroom. Went through the building, planting bugs, then changed back and left, fast as I could."

The King gave her a smile. "I see. So all this time, you have been feeding information to Lynnette and Hector."

"Mostly Hector," said Lynn. "I only returned to Atreya a couple weeks ago."

"By the way, Your Majesty," said Gina, "what can you tell us about Prince David? I'm curious as to why he's helping us. Or seeming to help us, at least."

"That man is an odd one," said William. "I do believe he is trustworthy, but perhaps I am being naïve. I am afraid I have never been very good at reading people."

Mrs. Edith chimed in now, as well. "It's no secret that Prince David has always been different from his brothers. The media loved reporting on

his antics when he was younger. For a while, it seemed like there was a new story on him every month.”

“I remember,” said the King. “I never associated with him very much. I thought he was nothing but a troublemaker back then. I wish now that I had not been so quick to judge him.”

“What’s his relationship with the Queen like?” Gina asked.

“I asked her about that very subject when we spoke the other day,” he said. “I always thought they were quite distant from one another. David was often out of the country, and I never saw them together very much. However, they were apparently much closer as children. And when I told her that I believed David was secretly our ally in all of this, she seemed very happy. She even laughed.”

Mrs. Edith’s brow rose. “I can’t imagine that woman laughing.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Lynn.”

"501

--donation bonus (day #24, post 5/5)--

The King looked at Mrs. Edith. “Have you met Helen before?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I only meant according to her reputation. She’s always struck me as a very serious woman.”

“Mom loves the Queen,” added Melanie. “She’s a super royalist.”

Mrs. Edith glared at the girl, which only made her giggle.

“Is that so?” said William, smiling.

“Oh yeah,” agreed Mr. Edith. “You should’ve seen her after she found out that Lynnette had been accepted into the Queen’s Guard.”

“Jacob, please--”

“She was so happy that it was actually kind of scary. Abnormal-like, y’know? Just freaky.”

Mrs. Edith could only sigh.

"That is very sweet," said William. "I am sure Helen would be pleased."

Lynn and the King had both begun to look a little healthier. They were oddly similar--one who'd lost an eye, and one who'd lost an arm. Both had been through the wringer, and both ended up recounting their tales to everyone. It was difficult for Hector then. Their stories reminded him of all the things he'd lost as well, reminded him that his own pain hadn't really gone away, only been buried.

Perhaps everyone could sense that he didn't want to talk about himself, because they never asked. Maybe they already knew enough from the news. Or maybe they were talking about him behind his back. Strange, to realize he would've preferred that. Garovel probably knew for certain, but Hector avoided asking about it. He didn't really want to know.

Hector's mother, however, looked no better than when she'd arrived. She still had the same gaunt, hollow-eyed stare as before.

Occasionally, Gina would try to engage her. "So what do you do for a living, Mrs. Goffe?"

"I was a stage director," she said.

"Stage director? You mean like for plays and musicals?"

"Yes."

"Wow, that's cool!"

"It was. Before... everything."

Gina frowned. "Of course. I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

"You know, I bet I could help you find new work after this is all over. I'm pretty good at finding things."

"No, thank you."

"502

"Ah--are you sure?" said Gina. "It wouldn't be any trouble."

Hector decided to intervene. "Mom, you should accept her offer."

"I said no." She walked away.

Hector gave Gina an apologetic look and then pursued his mother to the other end of the garage.

She'd climbed into her car to lie down.

"Mom..."

She didn't bother to sit up again. "What?"

"I'm... I'm worried about you."

"You're wasting your time on me."

Hector had no idea what to say to that.

"You should have just left me to die," she said.

"Mom... don't say that..."

"Why not?"

"B-because... how could you think I would ever just...? Agh..."

"It has nothing to do with you. I just don't care."

"Mom..."

"The only person I've ever loved is gone," she said. "What difference would it make if you'd let me die? I'm already dead, anyway."

"Agh, Mom. Stop. You're not--"

"Tell me. Do you even care that your father is dead? That you got him killed?"

Her words might as well have been knives. "How can you--? You don't even know that I--how much I--?" He choked on his own breath, feeling his throat swelling up. He squinted, suddenly having to fight the gathering tears.

She sat up to look at him now. "Wow," she said dully, "so you really do have emotions. I was starting to think you were some kind of monster."

Hector couldn't stop the tears at all now and just tried to hide his eyes with a hand.

'Fuck, I hate this woman,' said Garovel. 'Hector, please stop talking to her.'

But Mrs. Goffe wasn't done. "All this time, you've been off doing whatever you want, getting into more trouble, trying to be a hero. And you're worried about your family now? It's a bit late for that, don't you think? You don't honestly expect me to forgive you, do you?"

He couldn't even respond.

"If you're going to do something, then you might as well do it all the way, Hector. Just leave me be. Worry about your fight with Abolish or whatever it's called. If you get me killed, too, then at least you'll know that it didn't matter."

"503

Hector fled the garage, up the ramp and outside into the harsh sunlight.

Garovel said something to him, and the words even passed through his head clearly, but he simply wasn't paying attention. His mind was cluttered with confusion and fury, wondering if she'd really meant those things, angry that she could even say them, furious that he couldn't respond. And just. Sadness. It hurt, a pain right in his chest. He'd always thought heartache was just a figure of speech.

"Hector?" It was the King's voice.

Hector hurriedly wiped his eyes. "Y-yes?" He couldn't bring himself to turn around and face the man.

"I apologize," said William. "I happened to overhear what your mother said."

He winced. "O-oh..."

"I did not mean to eavesdrop."

"Did... did everyone hear?"



"Only Gina and myself, I believe. She seemed rather concerned as well. Are you alright?"

"I'm--I, uh... I'm, ah--"

'It's okay to say no,' said Garovel. 'Hector, you don't have to pretend like everything is fine.'

Hector just looked at the ground, opting to say nothing.

The King stepped closer. "Perhaps it is not my place to say this, but would you like my opinion?"

"Um... okay?"

"A child does not require a parent's love or approval in order to live happily or honorably."

Hector's brow receded, and he looked up at the King. "Your Majesty, what are you saying?"

"Were you thinking I would try to convince you how valuable family is? How important it is to reconcile with your mother? Because words such as those would not suit me, I fear. I have considerable experience with family discord."

Hector only frowned.

"Of course, if it is within reason to reconcile, then certainly do so. But please, do not believe that there is something wrong with you merely because of what she said. That would be a mistake. One that I have made, myself."

"But... it's not... I mean, what do I do?"

"Whatever you can. But you cannot force someone to love you. Nor do you need to."

"But I'm... I'm all she has. Whether she acknowledges it or not... I can't just..."

"504

"I am not saying you should abandon your mother," said the King. "But

her well-being is not entirely your responsibility, either. She must also want to be well.”

“With respect, um... sir... y-you don’t know very much about us.”

“That is true. I apologize if what I said seemed callous.”

“It’s, ah--it’s fine.”

A heavy silence fell, and Hector realized that the sun was probably beginning to take a toll on the King, so he raised an iron half-dome to shield them both. The man seemed to appreciate it.

“There is something I still do not understand,” said William. “Well, I suppose there are many things, truthfully. But I am curious as to why you are helping us. Is it only because this reaper companion of yours compels you to?”

Hector glanced at Garovel. “No, it’s not just that. I, um... ah... I... want to... agh...”

“Yes?”

He flushed with embarrassment. “I just... we just want to help people.”

The King cocked a blond eyebrow at him. “Begging your pardon, but I find it difficult to believe that your motive could be so simple.”

“Yeah, well...”

“I understand that this Roman Fullister gentleman is helping us because he is an Atreyan loyalist and has business interests here. But unless I am mistaken, you were merely a student in high school a few months ago.”

Hector took a breath and scratched his forehead. “W-well... things kinda, y’know... spiraled out of control.”

“Even so, you have put yourself through quite a lot, and you are telling me that was only because you wanted to--”

Hector’s phone interrupted. He fished it out of his pocket and eyed the caller ID. He hurried back down the ramp while it continued ringing.

The King followed.

“Gina!” shouted Hector, and she turned away from her conversation

with Lynn's family.

Everyone gathered around as the phone stopped ringing. Even Mrs. Goffe wandered a bit closer.

The voice mail triggered, and then came David's confirmation.  
<"Jonathan. Please pick up if you are there.">

Hector did no such thing."  
"505

<"...I guess you are unavailable. Pity. I was hoping you could assist my friends with a very valuable and time-sensitive opportunity. I will send you a text with the details, instead. I hope you receive it soon.">

Everyone waited.

"Time-sensitive?" said Melanie. She did not look very much like her older sister. She seemed to take more after their father than Lynn did.

Gina pulled out her own phone. "I guess that means I should get ready to call Master Roman."

When the text arrived, Hector let Gina be the one to read it aloud.

--++--++--

The chamber didn't look like it belonged to a captain of the Vanguard in the slightest. An entertainment system filled one wall entirely, and Helen could see a shelf full of video games and movies, which seemed to have seen frequent use if their current state of disarray was any indication.

It had taken days to find the Vanguard in Intar. The country was massive, and apparently the group stationed here quite enjoyed its secrecy. Voreese had suggested they just start making a mess of things and wait for the Vanguard to show up, but she was outvoted. Despite how poorly their previous encounter with the Vanguard had gone, Helen still felt that they needed to make a good first impression to have any chance of acquiring assistance.

Indeed, these Intarian servants were a far cry from the ones in Callum. They didn't put on a welcoming façade here. They openly distrusted

Helen and Roman as soon as initial contact was made. And even though it made things more difficult, Helen was more appreciative for it, and she felt slightly more inclined to trust these people.

That being said, she had still been unable to make any progress with negotiations.

The Vanguard's regional captain was a very young boy by the name of Bartholomew Erickson. He didn't look any older than ten years, so she was rather hesitant to speak to him at first, but the boy's reaper, Kohzek, was the one who did most of the talking, anyway. It soon became apparent, however, that Bartholomew was almost as old as Helen."

"506

Kohzek was a difficult negotiator. This was going to be their second meeting with him, and Helen still wasn't sure if the reaper was trying to bargain for a better deal or if he genuinely did not yet believe that Atreya's need was as great as she and Roman claimed it to be.

As Helen took her seat next to Roman, she eyed the two servants across from her--one more than she had been expecting. Bartholomew fidgeted in a chair that was too big for him, but the podgy man next to him was not someone Helen recognized. He had not attended their previous meeting.

As usual, Voreese was the first to ask the obvious question. 'Who's he?'

Kohzek motioned with a ghostly hand. 'This is Harper Norez. And his reaper, Darsihm.'

A sudden silence took the room, making Helen glance around. Both Mehlsanz and Voreese were staring at the newly introduced pair.

'Are you fucking serious?' said Voreese. 'This fucking guy is Harper?'

The fucking guy gave a laugh. "I see my reputation precedes me."

Mehlsanz hovered behind Helen. 'What is someone like you doing here?'

Helen had to interrupt before she got too far behind. "I apologize for

my ignorance, but who is this man?"

'Harper Norez,' explained Voreese, 'is a Lieutenant General. He's considered one of the strongest thirty-four people in all of the Vanguard.'

"Thirty-eight, now," Harper corrected. "We've expanded a little. All these young guns rising in the ranks, gotta make room for 'em somewhere."

Helen took another look at this Harper person.

He was of a darker complexion than most Intarians she'd seen, which perhaps implied that he was also a foreigner. With a round face and a broad nose, messy black hair and a mud brown jacket, he looked rather more like an itinerant worker than some kind of great warrior.

"Darsihm and I are actually here because of you," he said, pointing at Mehlsanz. "You rustled some jimmies when you deserted your division."

Roman tensed in his seat. "You've come to capture Mehlsanz?"

"Oh, no, no," said Harper. "Quite the opposite, in fact. I'm here to ensure that doesn't happen. So relax."

"507

'That's awfully considerate of you,' said Voreese with more than a hint of doubt in her voice.

'Yeah, we're nice like that.' Darsihm leaned back in the air, as if lying on an invisible bed, and crossed his ghostly arms. 'But it'd also be problematic if one of Mehlsanz's old comrades came to kill you. We'd rather the Vanguard not be collectively blamed for the assassination of the Atreyan Queen. But then, that is precisely why Mehlsanz here resurrected her, isn't it? To hide behind her status?'

'I didn't think anyone would actually come to protect me,' said Mehlsanz. 'Especially not a Lt. General.'

"We weren't planning to, either," said Harper. "But then word got out that the Queen was traveling around, visiting different divisions all haphazard-like. If you stumbled onto the wrong people, they might've

done something very stupid.”

“So you’re only here for damage control,” said Roman.

‘We’re only here because Mehlsanz and I share an old friend,’ said Darsihm. ‘Valeess.’

Mehlsanz shifted. ‘Ah... that wonderful fool. It’s been ages. How is he?’

‘Finally took on a new servant. When he heard about the trouble you were in, he wanted to come for you himself, but he doesn’t have that kind of freedom or authority. So he begged me to have Harper come help you, instead.’

“Wait,” said Roman, “so you weren’t even ordered to come here?”

‘Harper is a Lt. General in title only,’ said Darsihm. ‘In truth, he’s more of a freelance officer.’

Helen tilted her head. “I do not understand. How does that work?”

“Basically,” said Harper, “I don’t have the authority to order anyone around, but in exchange, I don’t have to take orders from anyone below the rank of general, either. So Darsihm and I are usually able to go where we like and do as we please.”

“Sounds like my kind of deal,” said Roman. “How’d you swing that?”

Rather than answering, Harper just returned a confident smile.

‘Would you mind saving the chat for later?’ said Kohzek, whom Helen had nearly forgotten about. ‘I have other matters to attend to.’”

"508

--donation bonus (day #25, post 1/5)--

‘Sorry, go ahead,’ said Darsihm. ‘Harper and I were just curious to meet these people. It’s taken a while to track them down.’

Bartholomew had already grown bored and gone to the far end of the room to play one of his games. Kohzek didn’t seem to care, either, which compounded Helen’s confusion. If the boy was truly near her own age, then she would have expected him to display a bit more maturity and interest in their conversation.

Roman's phone chose that moment to go off, which earned a look from Kohzek. "I should take this," said Roman, and he exited the room.

'Now then,' said Kohzek, addressing Helen, 'the matter of your request. Since our last meeting, I have received confirmation that Abolish is indeed present in your country. I do not require proof that they are attempting to instigate conflict. That much can be assumed. However, I remain unconvinced that sending my troops to rout them is the wisest course of action.'

"Why would you think it unwise?" said Helen.

'Because I feel you are asking more of me than you realize. Yes, with our help, you would likely retake your country without much difficulty. The problem lies in holding onto it once it is retaken. I cannot allow my people to remain with you indefinitely, so what is to stop Abolish from merely waiting until we leave and then attacking you again?'

"I have been thinking on that as well," said the Queen. "I was hoping we could establish a more long-term partnership. My country can provide you with financial backing, if you need it, or perhaps some kind of natural resource would interest you more."

'I do not think so,' said Kohzek. 'The most valuable resource to me at the moment is manpower. Intar is a much larger country than Atreya and so requires many more people to protect it. Our enemies might well seize the opportunity to attack while our attention is divided.'

Helen frowned. "Be that as it may, I am sure we could find--"

Roman burst into the room again, phone in hand, drawing everyone's attention. "Gina, tell them what you told me."

"509

--donation bonus (day #25, post 2/5)--

<"Ah--we've received word that Abolish will be taking a group of Atreyan soldiers to attack Rendon tomorrow. If we're going to prevent war, then we're out of time. We need you back in Atreya tonight. Or at the very latest, tomorrow morning.">

Helen shut her eyes and rubbed her forehead. "Why have they accelerated their plans?"

<“They’re afraid the Vanguard will show up and ruin everything for them. Our source says they just want to get the war started and then book it.”>

She didn’t need to ask who the source was. She knew it was David, and she knew she shouldn’t doubt the validity of his information.

‘Well, that sure as hell changes things,’ said Voreese, and she eyed Kohzek again. ‘We’re out of options here. If you don’t help us right now, then it’s war. You understand that?’

Kohzek shook his head. ‘I am sorry, but if I must make an immediate decision, then I cannot assign anyone to help you.’

‘Fucking bullshit!’

Helen had to contain herself. “Then you doom my people to misery and death,” she said, calmer than she wanted to. “It was my understanding that the Vanguard considered protecting innocents from Abolish a moral imperative. If you cannot help--”

Darsihm intervened. ‘Now just hold on a minute there. How many enemy servants are we talking about here?’

‘Seven,’ said Mehlsanz.

‘I see,’ said Darsihm. ‘Do you know all of their names?’

Voreese had them covered. ‘Desmond Grantier, Andres Geth, Nola Pauls, Tessa Shelrick, Conall Learen, and then Hanjir and Karkash, whose last names remain unknown.’

‘Hmm.’ Darsihm exchanged looks with his servant. ‘There are no big name threats, at least. What do you think?’

Harper scratched the top of his head. “Eh, I don’t think I can fight seven at once. Assuming there’s nobody problematic involved, I could probably take three or four, but--”

‘Holy shit,’ said Voreese, ‘are you seriously offering? Because you wouldn’t need to fight by yourself. Roman’s pretty strong, and Queenie’s not too bad, and we’ve got two more combatants waiting for us back home.’

“Oh.” Harper smiled. “Well, okay then.””

"510 -- LIX.



--donation bonus (day #25, post 3/5)--

Chapter Fifty-Nine: 'Thy promised return...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The airplane was rather compact, with only a few seats left empty despite having a mere three passengers. Harper looked out the window and across the tarmac. The gray skies were a common fixture of this province, as were the drizzling rain and thick forest in the distance.

They hadn't wasted any more time trying to convince Kohzek to help them, as apparently it was a rather long flight back to Atreya. Harper had never been there before. He'd barely even heard of it.

'Are you sure about this?' said Darsihm privately.

Harper had to conceal his chortle. 'Would you stop asking me that already? It was your idea to go with them.'

'I know, but are you REALLY sure? It's been a while since you've seen combat.'

'Is that your subtle way of tellin' me I'm fat?'

'Of course not,' said Darsihm. 'We both know I'm not that subtle.'

'Then quit your worrying.'

'Now that you mention it, though, you have gotten a little fat.'

'Thanks.'

Harper wasn't truly surprised by Darsihm's sudden hesitance. There weren't very many reapers who enjoyed flying by plane. As fast as reapers were, they were still outclassed by a typical aircraft, and since they couldn't actually "sit" within the cabin like a living person could, they had to latch onto their servants in order to not be left behind.

It was a common fear that they would accidentally let go at some point during the journey and thus end up separated from their servants by

hundreds or even thousands of kilometers. Of course, they would still be able to communicate with their servants, so meeting up again was an eventuality, but it remained a tremendous inconvenience nonetheless. If it happened over enemy territory, however, then it would be much more than that. Harper recalled various harrowing tales about servants being forced to jump out of a plane in order to go protect their reapers. It was because of such tales that most servant-owned aircraft were not of the leisurely variety, instead opting for an open door through which to jump in the event of such an emergency." "510 -- LIX.

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"511

--donation bonus (day #25, post 4/5)--

Harper doubted that would be an issue today, though. Even in the unlikely event that Darsihm did slip away from him during flight, this plane looked small enough to slow down while still remaining aloft, which would allow the reaper to catch up. Sure, Roman and the Queen would be displeased with the delay, but they didn't strike Harper as the kind of people who would so readily leave an ally behind. And besides, they weren't flying over dangerous territory. Not yet, anyway.

He thought about trying to explain all of this to Darsihm, but the reaper probably knew it already and was just being a worrywart for no reason. That, and it seemed like a hassle.

Harper yawned and scratched his chin, preparing for a nap.

‘So what's your power, anyway?’ said Voreese.

Harper turned to look at her, wrapped around Roman's arm. To Harper's eyes, reapers were simply black clouds, albeit with half-faces on them--glowing yellow outlines of lips and eyes embedded in dark fluff. He no longer gave their appearance much thought, but when he'd

seen Darsi hm for the first time, it had nearly scared him back to death.

‘Roman is an alteration user,’ Voreese went on. ‘He can control particle vibrations. It’s pretty fucking sweet.’

Harper smirked. “I know we’re allies ‘n all, but you shouldn’t be so quick to volunteer that information. Generally-speaking, the less folks know about your servant’s power, the better.”

Voreese gave a hoarse laugh. ‘You think I don’t know that, you fucking chump? I was extending a modicum of trust your way, dumbass.’

“Voreese, don’t be rude to our new friends.”

‘Psh. If a few choice words are all it takes for them to give up on us, then I’ll go ahead and take a stab in the dark here and guess that they weren’t really that invested in helping us in the first place.’

“Voreese.”

‘Fine.’ Her luminous gaze returned to Harper. ‘But please. Don’t act like you know better than I do. I’m older than your whole family put together.’

‘She’s right,’ said Darsi hm publicly. ‘That was very rude of you, Harper.’

“Wha--? Tch.””

"512

--donation bonus (day #25, post 5/5)--

‘Harper apologizes for his impertinence,’ said Darsi hm. ‘You know how these young folks are. Once they reach a certain age, they think they know better than everyone.’

‘Oh, I do know!’ said Voreese. ‘Roman is always trying to tell me what to do. Thinks he’s the boss of everybody, this one.’

“Voreese, please--”

‘See that? All the fucking time.’

‘Wow. Roman, you should really relax.’

Roman and Harper just exchanged pitying head shakes.

‘For Harper, it’s less being bossy and more just general smugness. He’s even started doing it to me lately. It’s out of control.’

Harper wondered if they would ever get back to the point about what his ability was. He decided to take that nap he’d been wanting. Darsi seemed eager enough to speak for him, anyway.

--++--++--

Hector could hardly focus on meditating. The anxiety was ridiculous. After a week of no news, it seemed like everyone was suddenly moving. Tomorrow, he would get into a fight that would involve more servants than he’d ever seen.

‘Are you frightened?’ said Garovel.

Sitting under his iron dome as the sun grew heavy in the sky, Hector looked over the golden brown horizon. ‘I’m... uh... I’m actually not sure.’

‘Really? It’s only natural to feel fear. There’s no shame in admitting it.’

‘Yeah... I mean, I guess I’m scared, but... I dunno... I think I’m more afraid of what might happen to everyone else than of what’ll happen to me.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’m not trying to sound brave or anything...’

‘I know. You just genuinely don’t care about yourself very much.’

‘Well... I do care about myself. K-kinda. I mean, because... if something happens to me, then something might happen to YOU. So...’

Garovel laughed. ‘So you care about yourself via proxy? That doesn’t seem very healthy, you know.’

‘Yeah, well... if something happens to you, then I’m fucked anyway, right?’

‘True, but still.’

'I know. I just. I know.'

'Hmm. Not too scared, huh? But how nervous are you?'

'Aw, fuck, I don't... I--agh...'

'Give me a number. On a scale of one to ten. One is how you feel when you're deep in meditation. Ten is how you feel when you have to talk to a girl.'

"513

'...I think I'll pass,' said Hector.

'Spoil sport.'

Hector continued working on his soul-empowered metal. His objective was to make as large a dome as possible while still having his soul permeate it thoroughly enough that there were no holes for reapers to escape through. He'd been devoting chunks of training time to this effort all week long, and he'd finally begun to see the fruits of his labor.

In order to implant his soul into the metal, he needed a point of contact with it, so he couldn't just make a normal dome over his head. Rather, he'd taken to creating a pillar down the center, like the handle of a gigantic umbrella. Moreover, he discovered that after annihilating only the pillar, the soul power that he had already fed into the dome would linger for a while longer before eventually dissipating. Garovel likened it to blood leaving the body after the heart had been removed, which was perhaps not the happiest metaphor, but Hector understood what he meant.

'Not bad,' said Garovel. 'I think I should tell you more about soul-strengthening techniques now.'

Hector's brow rose.

'At the moment, there's only one technique you need to concern yourself with, because the others are way out of our league. And that technique is "resilience"--increasing the durability of a designated object. That was what Andres was using and why his crystals could plow through everything the way they did.'

'Okay...'

‘The technique is simple enough to pull off. All you have to do is concentrate on your soul within whatever object you’ve pushed it into, and then just “think about” making it physically more durable.’

His head tilted. ‘Wow, uh... I know you said it was simple, but... that’s still simpler than I was expecting.’

‘Yep. Conceptually, it’s very straightforward, just like when you learned to empower attacks in the first place. In execution, though, it’s much more difficult than that was. It’s completely dependent on the synchronization that you and I have, but I think we’re synced enough now that you can at least start attempting to do it.’

‘Er. Alright.’

"514

Hector spent the rest of the evening trying to strengthen his metal. He imagined it becoming more durable like Garovel said, but it was difficult to tell if he was succeeding at all. Garovel seemed to think he was, if only a little.

‘Why don’t you ask Lynn to help you out?’

‘Ah--how?’

‘Have her break through your metal when it’s strengthened and when it’s not. See if she can tell the difference.’

‘O-okay.’ He descended the ramp.

Gina and Mr. Edith were busy making dinner while everyone else was gathered around the television in the corner of the garage. Even his mother was with them, though she sat off to the side.

Conditions were far from ideal. The garage was in turns too warm and too cold, and the bunker only had one-and-a-half bathrooms for eight people. They’d considered moving to Roman’s mansion in Walton, but Gina didn’t think the risk of exposure was worth it. She had a more discreet location lined up, and she planned to have everyone make the transition tomorrow, when Abolish’s attention was sure to be occupied.

“Dinner in ten!” called Mr. Edith from the kitchen, apparently having

spotted Hector's approach. And as usual, the food smelled amazing. Gina had been fetching fresh ingredients from Walton by herself, and she and Lynn's father seemed to work exceptionally well together.

Hector returned an acknowledging nod and made his way over to the others.

Mrs. Edith saw him first. "Ah, are you ready for more sword training?"

"Actually, um--I need, uh... Lynn's purple shadow-thing."

Lynn perked up at her name. "How can I help?" she said, still quite slow to stand.

"I will observe," said Mrs. Edith.

"Me too," added Melanie. "I wanna see what that purple stuff can really do."

The King also seemed interested, and even Mrs. Goffe spared them a look. Everyone had already observed Hector training with his metal, so that much was old news to them, but they had yet to see Lynn do anything with her shadow, aside from wave it around a little to prove that it was actually real."

"515

Hector led everyone outside. He would have preferred they not watch, but he supposed there was no helping it. He raised a hand, telling the small crowd of onlookers to wait there at the top of the ramp. He was a bit surprised to see his mother had also come to see. She was probably just bored, he figured. There wasn't a whole lot to do here after all.

Lynn moved expectedly slow. She didn't seem to be in much pain, but neither was she her normal, sharp-eyed self.

"H-how are you feeling?" he asked her.

She returned a lazy smirk. "Just don't ask me to do a backflip yet."

Whether or not she would participate in tomorrow's battle had been a point of contention. Lynn said she could still fight if necessary, and when they called the Queen to ask about it, Helen deferred to her



husband's medical opinion. The King felt she was not yet in fighting shape and told her to remain here with everyone.

Hector had mixed feelings about the decision, himself. On the one hand, he certainly would've felt better if she was backing him up when the shit went down, and on the other hand, he was glad she would be here to protect everyone else in case something unexpected happened.

He raised a fat iron cylinder out of the ground, as tall as a bus. He left it unstrengthened by his soul and motioned toward it. "Uh--could you cut that in two for me?"

Lynn shrugged. Purple swirled around her, but she didn't draw her sword. Instead, a violet blade formed on its own and slashed the metal cleanly. The two halves of the cylinder toppled apart, and Hector annihilated them.

He created a second one, then touched it with his hand and applied the strengthening technique. He bid her do the same thing again, and she did so, but this time, the shadow stopped about three-quarters of the way through. Lynn blinked at him, then reapplied the blade horizontally, stronger this time, and it cut cleanly through again."

"516

"What'd you do to it?" asked Lynn.

"Oh, I, uh... um. G-Garovel was just, ah... he--"

Lynnette waited patiently.

"Garovel calls it a soul-strengthening, ah, technique."

"You used your soul to make it stronger?" she said.

"Y-yeah."

"Hey!" yelled Melanie. "Do something else!"

Lynn threw her little sister a look. Then the shadow swirled and formed into the shape of a mouth. And it stuck a purple tongue out and blew a raspberry at the girl.

Mr. Edith soon called them back down for dinner. Hector did not stay to eat with everyone, however. He took his plate back outside and continued training while he worked on the meal. The cooks were kind enough to stack the food extra high for him.

Afterwards, Gina came to fetch him again. The sun had set, and it was time to go meet up with Roman at the airfield. Gina was the only one who knew where it was, and the King was quite eager to see his wife again, so they would accompany Hector there before returning here without him. For everyone else, this was goodbye.

He shook hands with all of Lynn's family, beginning with the father, then Melanie, then the mother.

Mrs. Edith's handshake lingered. "Thank you for protecting my daughter," she said, warm enough to make Hector blush in front of everyone. Then she pulled him closer and kissed his forehead.

'Oooh,' said Garovel, snickering. 'I knew she didn't hate you.'

"Uh, it's, um--not at all. I didn't even--ah--"

Melanie chimed in to help him. "Just be cool and say: no problem, ma'am."

He looked over everyone again, still burning up. "...No problem, ma'am."

"I was wrong!" laughed Melanie. "That wasn't cool at all!"

He shook hands with Lynn next, who was probably the last person in the world that he wanted seeing him right now.

"Come back safe," she told him.

His eyes were on the floor, so he couldn't see the softness in her expression, but he managed a nod.

That only left Mrs. Goffe.

He made his way over to her, as she had not come to him with the others."

"517

--donation bonus (day #26, post 1/5)--

Garovel placed himself between Hector and his mother. 'You don't have to say goodbye to her, you know.'

Maybe the reaper was right. Hector certainly didn't expect any warm words from the woman. If anything, he expected her to tell him that she was glad he was leaving, that she hoped she'd never see him again. But he felt ready for it this time, like he needed to hear it now in order to understand his mother's feelings fully. She already knew he could die out there. She'd heard them discussing their plans earlier. Hector wanted to know what she would say to him now, when she understood that this could be the last chance she had to say anything to him at all.

So he ignored Garovel's advice.

His mother just watched him approach from inside the open cabin over her car.

He supposed he would have to be the one to initiate the conversation. "Mom, I'm, ah... I'm..."

"You're going," she said.

"Yeah..."

"Risking your life for the good of the nation. I guess I should be proud."

And again, Hector found himself not knowing what to say.

"What do you want from me then?" she asked. "You want me to wish you good luck?"

"I don't want anything... I just wanted to say goodbye."

"Well, you've said it."

And that was all. That was the extent of what she had for him. He was almost disappointed. But he didn't move away from her yet. He still had a question for her, something he didn't think he would've been able to ask if he didn't feel like it might be his last opportunity to.

"Mom..."

"What?"

"You... you don't love me, do you?"

She stared at him a moment, blinking vacantly. "No. I don't."

He nodded. She'd basically said as much during their last conversation, but even so, after all this time, he was a bit grateful that she just came right out and said it. No more dancing around the issue. Finally, a definitive answer. "Was there ever a time when you did?"

That made her pause again, longer this time as she thought about it. "Not really, no."

"518

--donation bonus (day #26, post 2/5)--

Hector shook his head. At this point, he was honestly just curious. "If that's the case... then why didn't you just put me up for adoption?"

She seemed amused by the question. "I thought about it more than once. But your father was stubborn. He insisted we keep you. Though, if you're thinking it was because he loved you, then--"

"I already know he didn't," he said, suddenly wanting to get there before her. He felt a change taking place in himself, a kind of quiet epiphany, though he wasn't quite sure where it was coming from just yet.

The look she gave him then seemed more disappointed than surprised.

"Dad never wanted to show any weakness. If he didn't want to put me up for adoption... then it was only because he was worried how it would look."

"At least you're not stupid."

'Oh, fuck her!' said Garovel. 'Hector, let's get out of here.'

"One last thing before I go," he said, sterner now. "Mom. Thank you for being honest with me."

"Hmph."

"And... I still love you. I don't know why. You're a terrible mother. But I'm realizing... that I don't give a shit, anymore. I'm going to protect

you, whether you want me to or not.”

She snorted. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

She didn’t have a response for that.

So he left her there. He donned his riding helmet, pulled on his gloves, and mounted his bike. He gave one last wave to Lynn and her family before following Gina and the King out of the bunker.

It had been a while since he rode at night. The stars were out, shimmering in a clear sky, and he greatly appreciated the brisk air. It was almost cathartic.

Garovel was quiet for a while, perhaps still uncertain what to make of that last exchange. Then he finally said, ‘You sure you’re okay?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘Huh.’

A few beats passed.

‘You’re really, really sure?’

He laughed weakly inside his helmet. ‘Garovel, I’m fine. I won’t let what she says get to me anymore.’

‘Huh,’ repeated Garovel.”

"519

--donation bonus (day #26, post 3/5)--

‘Try not to sound so disappointed,’ said Hector.

‘I am, though. I was preparing to cheer you up with a light-hearted story. Or maybe I could’ve gone for a moment of emotional support, and then we would’ve grown closer than ever before.’

‘What a shame.’

‘Tch. It could’ve been great.’

‘Anyway, uh. I’ve been meaning to ask, uh. Do you know anything about this Harper person that Roman mentioned?’

‘The name does ring a bell,’ said Garovel. ‘I remember hearing it in passing when I was with the Vanguard. It belonged to a rookie back then, but if it’s really the same guy, then I imagine he must be pretty strong by now.’

‘How long ago was that? Er, I mean, when did you leave the Vanguard?’

‘Twenty-ish years ago, I think.’

‘You think? I thought you had a really good memory.’

‘Memorization requires that one be paying attention. The passage of time is kind of a blur to me, these days. I stopped keeping track a long time ago.’

‘Hmm. So, uh... why’d you leave the Vanguard, anyway?’

‘Well, my servant had just decided that he was ready to die, so after I released him, I was on my own again. And before him, I’d had many other servants as well, and we were always fighting. And y’know, after a while, that takes a toll on you. I suppose you could say I was tired. Not physically, of course. I just wanted to take a break from it all.’  
‘Really? Even though, um... I mean, I assume Abolish was a problem back then, too, right?’

‘Yes, they were,’ said Garovel. ‘But that’s the thing. The fighting doesn’t end, Hector. Abolish and the Vanguard have been going at it for fucking ages. There’s essentially no hope that the war will end anytime soon.’

‘Geez...’

‘And even being immortal, you can’t just keep fighting forever and ever. It wears you down. You have to take time for yourself sooner or later.’

Hector had no trouble understanding that. He could only imagine what kinds of terrible things Garovel had seen. He didn’t want to ask about

that right now, though, so he asked something else. 'So, um... am I the first servant you've had since leaving?'"

"520

--donation bonus (day #26, post 4/5)--

'Yep,' said Garovel. 'It was a pretty long break, I suppose. Twenty years.'

'And you weren't, uh... afraid of not having a servant to protect you?'

'Ah, well, reapers who don't take on servants are generally left alone. There's something called "the Old Law," which is a kind of unwritten agreement that non-combatant reapers be allowed to reap souls in peace, and even Abolish tends to respect that.' Garovel paused. 'Or at least, they DID. Now that aberrations are running around and doing whatever the fuck they want, I feel like things have probably changed.'

'Hmm...'

'The Old Law is also what Sai-hee bases most of her neutrality on. As I understand it, she considers it her duty to keep the others in check, and she devotes the majority of her resources to trying to "keep the peace," as it were. And for her part, she seems to do rather well. She keeps several territories under her protection, and they make up some of the most peaceful areas in the world.'

'Wow. Why didn't you join her side?'

'Because her side is very "reactionary." They only get involved after the fact, trying to make sure things don't get worse. Which is certainly valuable, of course. I don't mean to denigrate her efforts. That's just not what I wanted to do. I wanted to get directly involved in things and save the people who were in imminent danger--y'know, try to prevent the terrible shit from happening in the first place. Which is what the Vanguard does. That's why it's called "the Vanguard." It's the first to jump in and try to stomp out the threat.'

'Oh.'

'Or at least, that's what the Vanguard is SUPPOSED to do. Looking at the state Atreya is in, you'd be forgiven for doubting the validity of that claim.'

‘Did you... have a falling out with your comrades?’

‘Nah. I mostly kept my opinions to myself. The Vanguard attracts its share of crazies, so I preferred to just leave quietly. But from what Mehlsanz said to me before, it seems like the Vanguard is having problems these days.’

‘Great...’

"521

--donation bonus (day #26, post 5/5)--

Soon, they arrived at the airfield. Hector followed Gina into her chosen garage and parked behind her black SUV. He kept his helmet on, and the King wore a hooded, black cloak--the very same one that Lynn had bought for Hector.

Gina led them through the facility. Only a handful of people were around, but they all made way for Gina and her guests. She took them into the observation room, but surprisingly, no further waiting was necessary, as they could already see an airplane easing to a stop on the landing strip.

‘Is my timing good or what?’ She took them around to the outside and finally met up with the others.

Voreese was the first one Hector saw, and her giant, skeletal grin made him take off his helmet so he could return a smile of his own.

‘There’s the little fucker!’ she said, laughing and swirling around him. ‘How ya doin’, Hector? And Garovell! Happy to see us?’

‘More than you can possibly know,’ said Garovel, sounding equal parts delighted and relieved.

“Definitely,” agreed Hector.

Then everyone else began to appear. Mehlsanz and Darsihm floated up behind Voreese, and then Roman, the Queen, and presumably Harper each descended from the plane in turns.

The King rushed over to his wife first and swept her into his arm. He kissed her then and there.



Helen looked a bit taken by surprise, but she didn't exactly seem upset, either.

The onlookers all shared a chuckle.

Afterwards, Helen touched her husband's face, then moved to his missing shoulder. "Oh, William... what have they done to you?"

"Nothing that seeing you again hasn't made utterly inconsequential."

And they kissed again.

'Damn,' said Voreese. 'Who knew the King was such a smooth operator?'

The married couple didn't seem to hear her. Of course, the King genuinely couldn't.

Roman made his way over to Gina. He looked at her, briefly stone-faced before he couldn't hold his smile back any longer. He gave her a big hug and kissed her forehead.

She giggled. "So I get hazard pay this month, right?"  
"522 -- LX.

Chapter Sixty: 'O, looming tempest...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Hector hadn't realized just how good it would be to see everyone again. He and Garovel had only met Roman and the Queen briefly on that chaotic day in Sescoria, barely even two months ago now, but after everything that happened to him and everything that he knew had happened to them, it was like seeing his oldest friends again. And in a way, he supposed they actually were. They'd been in his thoughts so frequently, and of course, it helped that he'd been able to correspond with them over the phone as well.

Burning with embarrassment, he was still thrilled to shake hands with everyone.

"You look well," said the Queen, her smile much warmer than Hector would have imagined.

"Ah--you--um... ah--"

'You too, Your Majesty,' laughed Garovel. 'Hector is so glad to see you that he can't even put it into words.'

She looked different than he remembered. But then again, the last time he saw her, she'd been having a rather rough day. Here and now, she was nearly restored to that regal form that he'd seen in papers and television, the only difference being her commoner's attire and general lack of cosmetics.

Voreese seemed the most pleased of anyone to be back. 'So I hear you two have really been giving Abolish the middle finger lately. I require juicy details.'

'Seconded,' added Mehlsanz.

Garovel only laughed harder.

Hector found himself confronted with Roman next. "Ah--uh, Mr. Roman, I can't... I can't thank you enough for all your help. I mean, your motorcycles and facilities and, uh..."

"Oh yeah," said Roman, as if he'd forgotten. "No problem. Thanks for looking out for Gina while I was gone."

"Oh, no, she was the one looking out for me," said Hector. "I mean, I would've... I would've been screwed without her help."

Gina smacked him on the shoulder. "Continue."

Hector had to laugh.

Roman seemed different, too, though Hector hadn't really gotten all that good of a look at him during their previous encounter. Roman was wearing his glasses now, and combined with his silky black tie and blood red waistcoat, the man had an air of prominence about him that Hector hadn't noticed before."

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"523

"It's a shame I couldn't meet this other friend of yours," said Roman. "Colt, right?"

Hector bobbed his head to the side. "Heh, uh... You probably wouldn't have liked him very much, anyway."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"Because I don't like him very much," said Hector, still with a smile.

"Ha. That just makes me even more curious."

Roman and Gina both went to have a word with the pilot, who looked rather shaken up and out of place. Hector guessed that the poor man had probably gotten more than he bargained for with this trip, but Roman was reassuring him that there would be handsome

compensation for his trouble.

Harper was next, and he looked rather less formal than Hector had been imagining. "I heard the others mention your name," said Harper. "Hector, right?"

"Ah--yes, sir."

"You look younger than I was expecting."

After having wandered off a little with Voreese and Mehlsanz, Garovel floated closer to Hector again. 'Harper Norez, correct?'

'Indeed. And I'm Darsihm.'

Four glowing skeletons in one place, all with scythes and black shrouds. Hector supposed the number didn't seem like much to anyone else here, but this was the first time he'd seen so many without there being at least one who wanted him dead. It was a nice change of pace.

'I'm Garovel, by the way. Roman said you two were with the Vanguard?'

"That's right," said Harper.

'If you don't mind my asking, what's your rank?' said Garovel.

'Harper is a Lt. General,' said Darsihm.

'What the--?' Garovel looked over at Roman, who was just joining them again. 'Why didn't you tell us earlier that he was a freaking Lt. General?'

"Oh, I assumed you already knew," said Roman. "Voreese and Mehlsanz already did."

Hector eyed Garovel, not wanting to ask his question aloud. 'Uh, is that, er... how high up is that, exactly?'

'The Vanguard is split into three divisions,' said Garovel privately. 'Army, navy, and air. Lieutenant General is an army ranking, and there are only four ranks above it: General, Captain General, Field Marshal, and then the High Commander, which is Sermung's official title.'

'Uh... whoa...'

‘There are equivalent rankings in the air and naval forces which would also be considered “higher up” than Lt. General, but you get the idea,’ said Garovel.

‘Yeah,’ said Hector.

As the salutations concluded, a certain tension began to fill the air. Everyone knew there was still dangerous work ahead of them. And just like that, it was already time for goodbyes again.

Gina gave a last hug to Roman. She had one for Hector, too, which caught him by surprise. “Look out for each other, yeah?”

“Of course,” said Roman, to which Hector added a nod.

Another round of handshakes and reluctant words for the King, and then he and Gina took their leave. Only the servants and reapers now remained, making their way toward the next set of vehicles.

Voreese started them off. ‘So we only know that the enemy will be passing through the Carthrace Nature Reserve. That’s a lot of ground to scout with just the eight of us, but we know that they have to cross the border into Rendon, so I say we keep a line formation.’

‘They won’t be difficult to spot,’ said Mehlsanz. ‘They’re taking a whole platoon of soldiers with them, so scouting shouldn’t be too much of a problem, especially considering we also have the element of surprise.’

‘It’s still four against seven,’ said Garovel. ‘Much of the burden will fall upon Harper. The rest of us should form up around him as soon as possible and support his position.’

“Let’s get underway,” said Harper. “The four of you can discuss details while we’re en route.”

--++--++--

David couldn’t sleep. He knew too much about what would transpire tomorrow for that to be possible. It was the sense of powerlessness that really got to him. Hector hadn’t messaged him back. Admittedly, that was the smartest decision. Strictly speaking, David didn’t need to know how or even if Hector planned to respond to Abolish’s actions. It

would've been a needless operational risk. David still would've appreciated it, though.

Draped in a soft bathrobe, he shuffled into his kitchen, looking for something to calm his nerves."

"525

He cut a big slice of chocolate cake for himself, poured a tall glass of milk, and then made his way into the den. He flicked the fireplace on with a remote control and sat down to enjoy his treat in silence, but scarcely more than two bites in, his doorbell echoed throughout the house.

David eyed the clock on the mantelpiece. It was barely past three in the morning. And as he'd dismissed his butler over a week ago, suspecting Nola would take the poor man's head, David had to answer the door himself. He looked through the peephole first and was surprised to see Meriwether's face there. He opened the door.

"I apologize for the hour of my visit," said Meriwether.

"It's fine. I was unable to sleep, anyway." He invited his brother in and offered him some wine. Meriwether requested something stronger. David poured the man a glass of brandy. "So what brings you here so late?" he asked, returning to his own glass of milk for a sip.

"Um... David, please just tell me... do you know who really killed Nathaniel?"

David gave the man a sidelong stare. His brother did not seem in the finest state at the moment. Bags under his eyes, hair in a mess, clothes unpressed. Granted, it was extremely late at night, but even still.

"I have been looking into his death," Meriwether went on. "I cannot help but feel something is wrong with Luther's story, but I have been unable to find any kind of evidence which contradicts it."

"I see." As David suspected, Luther had been thorough.

"But you always seem to know more than you let on," said Meriwether. "So please--"

The doorbell rang again.

David looked at Meriwether heavily and then stood to go answer it again.

It was Luther this time.

David's hand lingered on the door handle as he raced through the scenarios in his head. It seemed highly coincidental that Luther would visit now, just as Meriwether was making inquiries into him. But even if David assumed that Luther somehow knew about this discussion, what purpose would Luther have in interrupting it? Surely, if Luther wanted Meriwether dead, then there were more timely ways in which to do it."

"526

Moreover, Luther should have no reason to suspect that David knew he had lied about Nathaniel's demise, so perhaps this late night encounter truly was a coincidence. But still, David mistrusted coincidences, as any rational person would, so before he committed himself to anything else, he fished for more information. He opened the door a crack and peeked through.

"Luther?" he said. "What are you doing here so late?"

"Please invite me in."

"Why?"

"I need to speak with you."

"Then speak here and do it quickly. I am tired."

Luther tilted his head with a knowing smile. "I would also like to speak with Meriwether."

So much for coincidence. There was little point in refusing the man entry now. He allowed Luther in and rejoined Meriwether in the den.

Meriwether only looked confused by the new arrival.

"Allow me to forego pleasantries," said Luther, taking a seat. "The Abolishers have left the city. Mr. Conall Learen was kind enough to share their plans with me earlier this evening. They will be gone for



most of the day today. I have therefore decided to take advantage of the opportunity that their absence presents.”

“Take advantage how?” said Meriwether.

“Their names and faces are already known to the police and the military, and come morning, word of their many misdeeds will finally make the national news--at which time, they will also receive credit for a few extra murders.”

David’s expression flickered.

Meriwether blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“A handful of select individuals,” said Luther. “Ones who might have otherwise become obstacles to our objective.”

“What objective?” said Meriwether.

Luther ignored him, instead looking at David. “Abolish will not be upset by this move. They are already enemies of the state and intend to leave Atreya as soon as war with Rendon is triggered.”

Meriwether scowled. “Has there not been enough bloodshed already? You intend to have even more people killed?”

“Oh, Meriwether. You simple fool. I do not intend to have them killed. I already have. You honestly think I would be telling you such sensitive information if it was not already decided?””

"527

It took everything David had to keep the disgust from his face. “Why are you telling us, then?”

“Well, you see,” said Luther, reaching into his coat, “my men were supposed to kill Meriwether earlier tonight.” He pulled out a small handgun.

David and Meriwether both stiffened in their seats.

“Imagine my surprise when I received word that Meriwether was not at home and had come here, instead. Now I am left to wonder if killing him is truly necessary.”

"It surely isn't," David said hastily, ignoring his increased heartbeat. "Meri is on our side. Why would you even think it necessary to kill him in the first place?"

"One must be meticulous," said Luther. For a long moment, his gaze held on Meriwether, whose return expression was not one of fright or worry but of anger and defiance. "I did not think Meriwether would understand, especially when he learned that Gabriel, Charles, and Martin are all dead as well."

Meriwether stood. "WHAT?!"

Luther pointed the gun at him now. "You see? So easy to read, this one."

It was all going wrong. David knew he had to think of something, but nothing came to mind. "Luther, please don't do anything rash. Let us speak reasonably on this matter. Meri, sit down. Meri."

Slowly, Meriwether sat.

"David will soon receive word of their deaths," said Luther, "and as he is now the oldest, emergency power will fall to him." He glanced at David. "I would appreciate it if you did not accept your new responsibility and instead passed it on to me."

"Of course," said David. His mind was racing again. If Luther's only objective was to obtain emergency power, then killing Meriwether would not be strictly needed, as Meriwether was younger. Perhaps one brother's life could yet be saved here. "But please don't harm Meri. If you have any affection for me at all, Luther, then allow me this one favor."

"You are fond of him?" said Luther. "I do not see why. He only seems like a needless complication to me."

"528

--donation bonus (day #27, post 1/5)--

David tried not to grimace. He hadn't seen this coming. And he should have. He had left himself exposed to this assault, despite already knowing that Abolish would not be here to protect him. Which was the strangest bit of irony here--as volatile and dangerous as the Abolishers

were, they had also been serving as guards for the princes up to now. Nola had made sport of terrorizing anyone else David hired to protect him, and he knew that she was not the only one to act as such.

If only he'd realized that Luther also had access to Abolish's plans. It was sloppy to presume otherwise. He'd been so preoccupied with worrying about the attack on Rendon that he'd forgotten about the more immediate threats.

There was no time to be upset with himself, however. The situation required his full attention.

"How about this?" said Luther. "If Meriwether can convince me that he is not a threat, then I will not kill him."

David clenched his jaw, struggling to think and failing. The pressure was getting to him. He didn't know what to do. He wasn't prepared for this at all, and he hated himself for it.

"I have a better idea," said Meriwether. "Put down the gun now, and I will attempt to prevent you from being executed."

Luther seemed amused. At first. But as he stared at his younger brother's unflinching expression, Luther's smile began to wane. "Bluffing will not help you," he said.

"Last chance," was all Meriwether said.

And Luther blinked at him, visibly uncertain.

David was perhaps even more confused, looking to Meriwether for an explanation, but the man was too busy staring Luther down. To David's utter astonishment, Luther did decide to put the gun down on the table in front of him.

Meriwether picked it up and trained it on Luther now, who raised his arms.

David's mouth hung open slightly. "...What just happened here? Meri, what--?"

"I am not entirely sure myself," said Meriwether.

"So you were bluffing," growled Luther.

"No, I was not. You already know that I am a terrible liar. You made the correct choice."

--donation bonus (day #27, post 2/5)--

David still required answers. "Meri, please explain--"

"Not in front of him."

"What now, then?" said Luther.

"We wait."

Not more than thirty seconds later, a group of soldiers in tactical gear kicked down the front door and stormed into the room. The one at the head of the troupe called through a black helmet, "Lord David, sir! Are you alright?!"

"And who are THEY?!" said David. "Someone explain what is happening!"

Meriwether lowered his weapon. "Everything is fine," he told the armed men. "Please take Luther into custody now on suspicion of treason and murder."

The lead soldier hesitated. "I'm sorry, Lord Meriwether, but we do not take orders from you."

"Right." Meriwether looked over at David. "If you would be so kind."

David was incredulous. "Uh--please do as Meri says?"

"Yes, sir!"

David watched a pair of soldiers emerge from the crowd and haul Luther away. He was still waiting for his explanation as Meriwether addressed the apparent guard captain.

"Is she on her way?"

"Yes, sir."

And from that small exchange, David began to understand, though the details still eluded him. "These are Duchess Jezebel's men?"

"Yes," said Meriwether. "I knew she had someone observing your

residence. Luther could not have had more than a handful of men waiting outside, so I knew it would only be a matter of time until the duchess' watchers called in enough reinforcements to completely overwhelm them."

David stared at him. "Tell me honestly. Are you really Meriwether? Are you now going to pull your face off and reveal that you are actually someone else?"

The man snorted a laugh. "I have only been working with the duchess for a few days. She told me to keep my involvement a secret from you. I have been thinking about telling you anyway. That was one of the reasons I came here tonight, in fact."

David sighed. "I thought I had earned her trust." He supposed it was good that he hadn't, though.

Jezebel soon arrived, also in a robe over her pajamas. Her face spoke of weary relief when she saw them. "I am glad to see you are both unhurt."

David frowned at her. "Could you not have at least warned me about this plan to trap Luther?"

"530 -- LXI.

--donation bonus (day #27, post 3/5)--

"I must agree," said Meriwether. "This whole situation could have gone terribly awry. I should have liked to be let in on the plan as well."

"You darling boys," she said, smiling sympathetically. "This was no plan of mine."

"What?" said David.

She returned a frown of her own now. "Gabriel, Charles, and Martin are dead. And so too would Meriwether be if he had not come here when he did. Honestly, I thought this was somehow your mad plan."

The brothers exchanged looks.

"I was only having David watched as a precautionary measure," she said. "Ostensibly, I did it for your protection, but frankly, I wanted to be sure you were not pulling one over on me."

David narrowed his eyes. "You also planted bugs in here, didn't you?"

"My apologies," she said with a nod.

"No need for that," said David. "Your distrust has apparently saved my brother's life, if not also my own."

She tilted her head a little. "It would seem that we have all deceived each other so thoroughly that not one of us has any idea what we are accomplishing anymore."

David rubbed his forehead. "This. This is why politics terrifies me..."

Chapter Sixty-One: 'To yield no ground...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"Everyone! Hello! My name is Desmond, and my friends and I will be kidnapping you today!"

A crowd of about fifty soldiers looked at him as he stood on the dais on one end of the base's conference hall. Their faces were a wild mixture of anger and fear and horror. Clearly, they still required a bit of homogenizing.

"Now I know what you're thinking. 'Kidnapping?! That doesn't sound very fun!' But you are mistaken. We're going to have a grand, old time. Trust me! I have experience with this sort of thing!"

The reapers floated among the soldiers, watching and listening, sizing them all up, while the other six servants hovered around the perimeter of the crowd--the shepherds who had gathered the flock.

"You may notice that we've taken all your knives and ammunition and given you unloaded guns. This is because we don't need you fine fellows to do anything other than march around and look pretty.""  
"530 -- LXI.

--donation bonus (day #27, post 3/5)--

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"531

--donation bonus (day #27, post 4/5)--

Desmond reached into the bag at his feet and pulled out a special treat for everyone. "As you can see, I have in my hand here, your commanding officer's head."

A ripple of murmurs passed over his audience.

Desmond held up his other hand. "Please hold all questions until after the presentation is over." He cleared his throat. "I didn't catch his name, so we'll just call him Teddy. Teddy was very brave. Teddy didn't want to do as my friends and I asked." Desmond dropped the head on the floor. "Don't be like Teddy. Don't be brave. We're looking for cowards here today. Cowards listen to us. And more importantly, cowards get to live. But if, for whatever reason, you are still feeling that courageous impulse, then absolutely feel free to tell any of my esteemed comrades, and they will happily solve that little problem for you. I'm sure you all recognize our faces already and are therefore aware that we can snap your frail bodies like the tiny, insignificant twigs that they are."

'Nice speech,' said Ezmortig privately. 'Move it along before our friends start getting restless.'

"Right. Everyone, please make your way to one of the designated vehicles on your left."

Six armored cars sat near the wall in a disjointed line, and the soldiers all began to filter toward them. It wouldn't be enough for all the troops, but that was what the small jet in the adjacent hangar was for.

Desmond very nearly felt a tinge of pity for the soldiers who ended up on that plane, because Hanjir was the one piloting it. The reason they hadn't stolen a giant plane for everyone to board together was



because Hanjir was the only pilot of the seven, and nobody else wanted to fly with that maniac at the controls. There'd been talk of stealing a new pilot to go along with it, but Hanjir made a fuss, ranting about how they shouldn't trust some random person with such an important part of the mission. It seemed obvious enough to Desmond that Hanjir just didn't want to share the sky with anyone, but the man's words had convinced the reapers."

"532

--donation bonus (day #27, post 5/5)--

Under cover of darkness, they set out. Of the six cars, one was left unoccupied by a servant, as Karkash chose to simply fly under his own power and observe the convoy from above.

Desmond relaxed in the backseat, a soldier on either side of him. His body still felt a bit stiff, muscles sore, bones heavy. He rubbed his eyes and gave a loud yawn. "I'm going to take a nap now," he announced to his fellow passengers. "You may be tempted to try to kill me or run away while my guard seems to be down. Go ahead and give it a try, if you want, but I will become rather cranky. At which point, I won't care if only one of you tried something. I'll kill all four of you, anyway." At their uncomfortable silence, he added, "Can I get a 'yes, sir'?"

"...Yes, sir."

"Delightful. Wake me up when we get there. Or if something catches fire. Or if that plane crashes. I will need to go laugh in Hanjir's face in the event of that last one."

"...Yes, sir."

Desmond grinned and shut his eyes. "I could get used to this. Have you given any thought to becoming professional yes men? Because I might like to hire you."

--++--++--

The Carthrace Nature Reserve was an enormous stretch of forested mountains and valleys, occasionally broken by small lakes or hidden caverns. There were only two roads that ran through this area, both having been built long before the land had come under protection, and as such, they were no more than dirt trails, used only by hikers and

forest rangers these days.

Hector supposed the place would have been more beautiful during the daytime, when it wasn't all just pitch blackness against the lone headlight of his motorcycle.

The servants took up positions at the far western edge of the reserve, while the reapers all flew up high in the sky to enhance their view of the horizon. They'd all expected a long wait, and they certainly got one.

Hector partnered with Roman to watch the southern path, the Atreya-Rendon border at their backs, no more than three kilometers away."

"533

The two men were perched atop a cliff, sitting on a metal bench with a domed cover against the wind. The night air was brisk on Hector's face, but his riding jacket was fairly warm. Roman didn't look bothered by the temperature, but of course, the man could also generate heat with his alteration power, so perhaps he was cheating.

Voreese and Garovel were both off scouting, so Hector and Roman took turns meditating while one kept watch over the road below, but after a few hours, Roman seemed to grow bored of it and struck up a conversation instead.

"So I guess your power has grown quite a bit since I last saw you."

"Ah... y-yeah, I suppose," said Hector. "What about you? Lynn said you achieved emergence."

"Lynn? Oh, you mean Lynnette? You call her Lynn, huh?"

"I, uh... well, that's what she said her name was, so..."

"Mm. Yeah, I'm a lot stronger now, too. I can do all sorts of fun stuff. Like flying."

Hector turned his head curiously. "Really?"

"Little difficult, though. Haven't quite mastered it. I can fly even faster than reapers can, but I haven't worked out how to prevent my body from getting pummeled by g-forces." Roman rolled his neck. "Broke my

spine a few times.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Heh. What’s the worst injury you’ve had so far?”

“Oh, um. Hmm.” He scratched his head and took a deep breath. “I think that time I got blown up in Sescoria is still the worst. Y’know, when... uh... back when you saved me and Garovel?”

“Oh yeah. Okay, then what’s the worst you’ve had that didn’t kill you?”

“Hmm... I’m not sure, uh... There was one time in Klein where the cops pumped about a hundred bullets into me. There was the time my whole mouth got shot off--oh, but the time I had my, uh... my chest cavity ripped open... with like, surgical clamps... that was pretty bad. Though, I guess I was technically dead when it happened...”

“Impressive. Worst for me was probably the plane crash. Had to shield Lynnette or she would’ve been toast, so I didn’t have time to protect myself from this huge metal beam--came straight for me, basically cut me in two.””

"534

--donation bonus (day #28, post 1/5)--

“Ouch,” said Hector.

“Yeah. Was feeling that one for a couple weeks.”

The conversation hit an abrupt pothole as Hector realized that it was up to him to respond but that he didn’t have anything to say. He quietly agonized for a fresh topic, but Roman soon filled the void for him.

“So how did you originally die?”

Hector’s mouth was left open at that question. Mid-breath, it just made him stop.

Thankfully, Roman didn’t seem to notice yet. “Me, it’s kind of a funny story. Guess you could say I was a bit of a punk, back then. Always trying to get my hands on something valuable, something I could sell. Always trying to work people, get them to think that I was someone I wasn’t so that I could, y’know, take their stuff.” Roman paused for a

nostalgic smirk. "Maybe I'm still a bit of a punk, honestly. It's so much fun when you trick the right person."

Hector just offered a nervous smile, still dreading the moment when he would have to answer. It felt like he was somehow back in school, back before meeting Garovel, during one of those awful times when he was just waiting for the teacher to call on him and tell him that he had to give his presentation to the class.

"Basically, though," Roman was saying, "I ripped off the wrong guy, and he had me killed. All because of some stupid diamonds that he didn't even need anyway. Guy was absolutely loaded. I mean, don't get me wrong--I am a greedy son of a bitch, too, but come on. I outwitted him, was all. Murder was taking things a bit far. So I didn't see it coming until it was too late, and that's when Voreese found me. Then she helped me dismantle the bastard's entire life and leave him rotting in prison with nothing."

"Ah... w-wow..."

"Was pretty satisfying, I have to say."

Hector was just hoping Roman would forget the previous topic as he said, "Uh, w-was that also when you met Gina, or...?"

"535

--donation bonus (day #28, post 2/5)--

"No," said Roman. "I didn't meet Gina until about a year later."

"H-how long have you two been... um...?"

"How long have we been, what?"

"Been, um...? Er, what is your relationship, exactly? I-if that's not too personal, I mean."

"She's my second-in-command. My right-hand woman. My babysitter."

"One of those things doesn't--"

"She's the glue that keeps my boat in the air."

"That's definitely not a thing people say..."

"She's the golden goose that makes sure I don't count my chickens before they hatch."

"...I don't even know what that's supposed to mean."

"She's the giraffe to my peanut butter--"

"If you don't want to tell me, you can just say so."

"I don't want to tell you."

"Ah..."

Roman gave a sideways nod. "Honestly, though, I'm not entirely sure, myself. Gina is a curious one. I've met a lot of people who make their living off of keeping secrets, but Gina is more difficult to read than most of them."

"You think so? She seemed pretty, um... straightforward... uh, to me."

"Yes, well. She would. And I did tell her to help you, as well."

"Hmm..."

"When I first met her, she was borderline agoraphobic."

"Agora...?"

"She was extremely reluctant to go outside. I don't think she'd left her apartment in months."

"Oh... and you helped her get over that?"

"You could say that."

Hector just looked at him, waiting for elaboration.

"I kind of burnt down her apartment," said Roman.

"Aha..."

"Accidentally."

"Right."

"The details aren't important."

“Uh-huh...”

“Long story short, I helped her get back on her feet. Was only meant to be a temporary situation, but she ended up sticking around.”

“And you don’t know anything else about her?”

“I never said that.”

“But you said... all that stuff about her being difficult to read.”

“Yep.”

“Then...?”

“If you want to know more about her, then ask her yourself. Not my place to tell.”

Hector gave a small nod.

“You never answered my question,” said Roman. “How did you originally die? Told you mine.”

Hector nearly cringed. He was better prepared to answer now, but he certainly would’ve preferred Roman to have forgotten.”

"536

--donation bonus (day #28, post 3/5)--

For most servants, it was probably a benign enough thing to answer-- simple and chat-worthy, even morbidly amusing, like Roman’s had been. The man likely had little reason to suspect that it was so personal a question.

He considered lying. It would be easy enough. A car accident, maybe. But the thought of lying about it was somehow even more humiliating to him. So he decided to take a cue from Roman. “I... don’t want to tell you.”

Hector knew that it might appear rude for a seemingly harmless question or that it might just spark even greater curiosity from Roman, but he was prepared. He’d had plenty of practice remaining silent.

However, Roman did not pry any further. “Fair enough,” was all he

said.

Hector took a long, quiet breath as there came another lull in the conversation, this one more enduring. He could already see the first hints of daylight on the horizon. Clouds gathering in the distance suggested rain to come, no doubt very common weather for this forest.

He squinted, looking up diagonally. He could just barely make out the floating white skull in the sky. It was moving, scouting, and Hector couldn't tell if it was Garovel or Voreese. 'How much longer, do you think?'

'Not sure,' said Garovel from wherever he was. 'The waiting is pretty terrible, though, isn't it?'

'Y-yeah...'

'Something not too many folks realize. Big fights usually involve a fuckload of waiting. You'd think that'd change in these modern times, but nope.'

'Ugh...'

'How's Roman? Does he seem nervous?'

'Er, not really...'

'Hmm. Ask him how long he's been a servant.'

Hector regathered himself and asked, "How, um... how long have you been a servant?"

"Six years or so."

'He says six years,' said Hector.

'Odd.'

"What about you?" said Roman.

"Oh, uh." He recalled what Garovel had told him previously about keeping his faster growth a secret, but he wasn't sure what an appropriate lie would be. "About seven months, I think..." It hadn't even been four yet, but he remembered telling Gina five a couple months ago.

Roman cocked an eyebrow at him. "So young."

--donation bonus (day #28, post 4/5)--

Hector returned a shrug. "Six years seems kinda old."

"I suppose it is. I've mostly stayed out of conflicts, so I'm sure my power hasn't grown very quickly compared to yours. Voreese and I were more concerned with financial matters."

"Why would she care about money?" Hector asked. "Why would any reaper?"

Roman gave a laugh. "You probably wouldn't think it, but she's actually quite ambitious. Wants to build a servant empire of her own."

Hector blinked at that.

"Not getting involved in big fights for the first few years was part of her plan, see? According to her, that's how the servant emperors in the past have pulled it off. Keep a low profile for many years, let your physical power build slowly, and in the meantime, focus on acquiring funds and a reliable network of contacts. Then you make your debut and try to draw in some bigger fish, hopefully get them to join your team. And from there, it's all about momentum."

"I see..." Hector looked across the endless canopy of trees another time.

"That's what she says, anyway. The simplified version."

"Hmm. In that case... six years seems really young, too."

"Yeah. That's the trouble with long-term plans. The world keeps turning while you're busy getting ready. You remember Gerald, right? That old prick whose garage I took you to? That's why he abandoned us, you know. He's more concerned about the future than the present."

"Mm."

"Networking is a real bitch. My advice? If you find genuinely trustworthy people, hold onto them as best you can. If you don't have enough space for them in your life, then get a bigger house. Don't let them go."



Hector was quiet a moment as he let those words sink in. They seemed wise, though maybe a bit simplistic. He was reminded of a certain family of three. Perhaps that was Roman's intention. "You... you really want to become an emperor? Like Sermung and all them?"

"Maybe."

"It hardly even seems possible--uh, no offense. I mean, like, personally, uh... I couldn't imagine myself doing something like that.""  
"538 -- LXII.

--donation bonus (day #28, post 5/5)--

"You don't think so?" said Roman with a sheepish grin. "Maybe we could be partners, you and I. Build an empire together."

Hector's brow depressed. "Uh..."

Roman laughed. "Not up to you. I know."

"Ah... w-why does Voreese want to make an empire?"

"Delusions of grandeur."

"...What?"

Roman's expression softened. "She wants to make the world a better place. And not just in a good-deed-for-the-day kind of way. She wants me to obtain so much strength and influence that I can at least try to fix some of the really fucked up things in the world. Like slavery and widespread famine and institutionalized poverty--y'know, the things that no one's been able to fix in centuries."

"Y-you, uh... um... wow."

"And that's not even counting Abolish." Roman laughed again. "She fucking hates Abolish."

"Garovel's not a fan, either."

"Ha. Anyway, yeah, she's got all sorts of lofty ambitions. But I suppose that's what I like about her." He paused to look at Hector. "Don't tell her I said that, by the way."

After a bit more chatter, they both returned to their meditations. Not long into it, however, Roman's hand gripped Hector's shoulder, taking the young man away from the metal house that he had been imagining.

All amusement had gone from Roman's face. "They've chosen our road," he said. "Voreese is on her way to inform the others. Tell Garovel."

Chapter Sixty-Two: 'The Battle at Rathmore...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector nodded. 'Garovel, get back here. Abolish is close.'

'Voreese can sense them?'

'Yeah.'

'Aw, fuck. I sense them now, too.'

Roman was stretching his arms. "How you feeling, Hector? You ready?"

"Hell yes."

When Garovel arrived, the first thing he said was directed at Roman. 'What's the enemy's ETA?'

There was a silent pause as Roman asked his reaper. "Voreese says fifteen minutes, at most."

'It'll take Harper and the Queen at least twenty to reach us. Let's fall back. There's a large rock formation west of here called Rathmore's Gate. Does Voreese know it?'

Another pause. "Yeah."

'Then let's go.'

They ran down the cliff's rear slope to reach their vehicles."  
"538 -- LXII.

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"539

Garovel led the way. Hector's motorcycle wasn't suited to the dirt road, nor was he accustomed to riding on such terrain, but he managed well enough. The path diverged, and Garovel chose the narrower one. The branches grew uncomfortably close, even brushing Hector's helmet as he passed, and in his rearview mirror, he could see Roman's black BMW scraping its way through.

The forest abruptly gave way, replaced by a wide area with enormous pillars of natural stone. It was a kind of rocky hill, accented in green by swathes of moss, and the pillars themselves were an odd sight. Only two, there were, rising out of the uneven ground like a misshapen tuning fork. The northern pillar was almost twice the height of the southern one, but they were both still larger than an average building. Each one cast a long shadow in the amber dawnlight.

Hector parked his bike and dismounted as Roman pulled up next to him. He took off his helmet, feeling the dewy air against his face again.

"Can you still sense them?" he asked.

'Yeah,' said Garovel. 'But I can sense our friends now, too. Shouldn't be much longer.'

And indeed, it was not. After a couple minutes, the other three reapers arrived from the opposite path, along with the Queen and Harper. Everyone gathered around.

'I sense Karkash at the head of the group,' said Garovel. 'They'll be here in under a minute.'

Then came the sound of a distant airplane, and everyone's attention was drawn to the sky. From where they all stood, they had a clear view of the small aircraft.

'Shit,' said Garovel.

'It's too far away,' said Mehlsanz. 'We can't sense who's on board or even how many there are, but I highly doubt it's a bunch of civilians who just happen to be flying by.'

Voreese swirled over to Roman and grabbed his shoulder. 'Leave it to us,' she said.

'You can't just shoot it down,' said Garovel. 'There might be innocent soldiers inside.'

'We can't let it cross the border and attack a town, either,' said Voreese. 'Don't worry. We'll use a delicate touch.'

"540

"Be back as soon as I can," said Roman, letting Voreese latch onto his back. And as he crouched down, everyone took a step back. It wasn't quite far enough, however. He shot up into the sky, leaving a shock wave in his wake that cracked the ground and nearly knocked Hector on his ass.

'Holy shit!' thought Hector, looking up with wide eyes to see Roman and Voreese dwindling from sight.

Then Garovel pointed suddenly. 'Karkash.'

And Hector saw the Vaelish man as well, diverting up and after Roman, obviously wanting to intercept him.

Harper raised an outstretched arm with a closed fist. He didn't need more than a moment in order to take aim, and then a beam of solid, white light flashed into existence all at once, cutting the sky in two.

Karkash instantly lost an arm, a leg, and half of his torso. He ceased flying up and spiraled off into the forest below.

'Nice shot,' said Darsihm, bobbing his head at his servant.

It was an alteration type, Hector knew. The ability to manipulate light waves. Garovel had learned of the man's power after his long strategy meeting with the other reapers and had then been kind enough to impart that knowledge to Hector, as well. But even though he'd known about it beforehand, seeing it firsthand was something else. And just like that, the Lt. General had already crippled Karkash, at least temporarily.

Hector could hear the enemy drawing close now. They didn't seem especially concerned with keeping quiet, whooping and hollering over the already raucous sound of their vehicles pushing down the narrow path.

Then the noise died down, the cars' engines shut off, and Hector could hear people exiting the vehicles.

'I sense a lot of souls over there,' said Darsihm, 'but only ten are making their way closer. Half of them are floating, so it would appear we have five opponents.'

'Until Karkash gets back,' added Garovel.

'Keep the formation,' Mehlsanz reminded them. 'Don't let them separate you.'

From there, a heavy period of silence seized the area. The Abolishers did not show themselves in order to exchange words."

"541

The first attack came in the form of an enormous yellow crystal, crashing through the trees like they were nothing. When Harper

pierced it with a white beam, however, the boulder exploded into chunks, clearing out a small section of the forest.

Andres and Desmond were immediately visible, which meant the other three were probably about to flank them.

‘On your left,’ warned Garovel.

‘Right, too!’ said Mehlsanz.

Hector raised metal walls on both sides, but as he was too far away to strengthen them with his soul, the three opponents broke through almost instantly. On Hector’s side, there were two women. They could only be Tessa Shelrick and Nola Pauls, though he didn’t know their faces. On Helen’s side, there was Conall.

Desmond had already lobbed an arm at the party, but a white beam detonated it before it reached them. Harper had one more beam, and he spent it on Tessa, cleaving her in two before she even reached Hector.

Nola, however, still made it to him. He raised another wall and rolled out of her path, but she smashed through it anyway and caught him by the ankle. Metal spikes shot out of his entire leg, piercing her. She didn’t seem to care very much and just pressed his foot against the ground.

His foot sunk into the rock. Melted into it. It was suddenly stuck there, and confusion was about to get the better of him until Garovel’s voice reached him.

‘Don’t panic. Protect yourself.’

Nola reached for his head next, but a full suit of spikes leapt out of his body, skewering her more completely than before, even raising her off her feet.

“You little fuck!” she yelled, spitting blood.

He struggled for leverage on his sunken foot and retracted his spikes. She fell toward him, and he punched her square in the face at full strength.

--+-+--+--

Roman arched his path toward the aircraft with bursting shock waves,

each one affecting his body, breaking dozens of bones and putting pressure on every one of his muscles."

"542

Exhilarating as it was to fly under his own power, it still demanded quite a bit of Roman's concentration to sustain. He was essentially just using strong, controlled vibrations to fling himself through the air, and it all felt rather haphazard, like any simple misstep might send him whirling out of control. Moreover, if he hadn't focused his soul into his head and strengthened his resilience there, the constant force against his skull would have left him completely disoriented. Voreese wouldn't have let him fall unconscious, of course, but that hardly would have made much difference if he couldn't even see or think straight.

As he drew closer, the jet's true speed became clearer, and Roman slowed down to match it, gradually positioning himself beneath the blue-gray underbelly.

'Fifteen souls on board,' Voreese informed him. 'Can't tell if there's a reaper with them, but if there is, then they know we're here.'

'Right,' said Roman. 'How do you want me to do this?'

'Hmm.'

'You don't even have a plan, do you?'

'I'm thinking.'

The plane banked right, hard and sudden.

'Think faster, please.'

'Shut the fuck up. Go around to the nose and get us a view of the pilot first.'

Roman accelerated and did as she requested. Through the window, they could see Hanjir, a burly man with wild hair. He was looking right back at them, and a reaper sat perched on his shoulder.

'Guess that answers that,' said Voreese privately.

'Yeah, but now what?' said Roman. 'Garovel was right. If I just shoot it



down, the soldiers in there will probably die.'

'I'm sure there are parachutes on board,' said Voreese.

'Are you seriously telling me to attack it now?'

'Bah. I guess not. Let's just wait for it to land and then fight this asshole there. I hate to waste time, but--'

The pilot stood up from the controls.

'The fuck does he think he's doing?' said Voreese. And then, publicly, 'Hey! The fuck do you think you're doing?'

The other reaper chimed in now. 'You morons are dead! Get 'em, Hanjir!'

"543

Hanjir wrapped one arm around the pilot's seat.

'Are you kidding me?' said Voreese.

Hanjir's hand reared back.

'He's not kidding me. Get ready to dodge.'

When Hanjir threw his hand forward, a path of destruction flew out of it, annihilating the windshield.

Roman avoided the attack easily enough, and he and Voreese merely watched as the cockpit depressurized, very nearly sucking Hanjir out into the sky.

'What a fucking lunatic!' said Voreese. 'He's a destruction type! He can't even fly, and he does THAT?!' Then to the other reaper, Voreese yelled, 'YOUR SERVANT IS STUPID AS FUCK!'

'Voreese, that's not helping--'

'No, YOU'RE stupid as fuck, you bitch!'

Another wave of destruction came for Roman, and he dodged it even more easily than the first one. 'Okay, maybe it's helping.'

‘DUMB SHIT!’ said Voreese. ‘HOW’D HE EVEN LEARN TO FLY A PLANE?!’

Roman hadn’t realized how obnoxiously loud she could make her supposedly soundless voice. He knew she could be annoying, but this--he was just flat out impressed.

‘Shut up and die, already!’ the other reaper was saying.

‘LAND THE PLANE SO WE CAN HAVE A REAL FIGHT!’

And Roman understood what she was doing. With a hole in the plane, the depressurization put all of the normal people aboard in danger, and neither could Roman attack without potentially blowing it up or otherwise causing it to crash. But if they could get the pilot to make an emergency landing, then matters would be dramatically simplified.

‘You idiots wouldn’t stand a chance against Hanjir on the ground!’

‘YEAH, RIGHT! ROMAN WILL MAKE THAT GUY EAT HIS OWN DICK!’

‘Hanjir, land the plane so we can kill these fucks!’

‘Wow,’ said Roman, watching as Hanjir strapped himself back into the pilot’s seat. ‘I almost can’t believe that worked.’

‘It’s Abolish,’ said Voreese privately. ‘Odds are about fifty-fifty that any given member is one of the stupidest motherfuckers on the planet.’

‘Maybe. It also helps that you’re the most irritating person who ever lived.’

‘Aww, Roman, you sweet talker. You’ll make me blush.’

Roman followed the plane’s descent toward the ground."

"544

They’d crossed the border into Rendon a while ago, and Roman could see the edge of the forest, giving way to flat grasslands that extended all the way into the horizon. He stuck close to the plane as it landed, prepared to help in case the unideal terrain caused something to go horribly awry, but to the pilot’s credit, nothing did.

Roman touched down as well, choosing to simply stand still while his body fixed itself. There was nothing that took a great amount of time to regenerate--just some snapped bones, torn muscles, and likely a bit of internal hemorrhaging. All things he could more or less shrug off. He would certainly feel it later, though.

Hanjir didn't even bother to turn off the engines. He pulled the door open and jumped out into the grass, wasting no time in throwing another wave of destruction.

It wasn't exactly slow, but it certainly wasn't fast enough to hit Roman. He propelled himself out of the way, bounding across the ground in leaping strides. Hanjir tried to cut him off, but Roman just zagged away from the next attack, getting Hanjir to pursue him. He needed the Abolisher to move away from the plane so that he could capitalize on the open environment as much as possible.

Roman circled around Hanjir and engulfed the man in an invisible cage of crushing pressure. More precisely, it was a spherical, inward-facing shock wave, the very same thing he had once used to temporarily suppress an explosion from Desmond.

Hanjir gave it little consideration, however, and merely punched through. He attacked again, forcing Roman left.

Roman readied his fire. The trick of it was to set his own flesh ablaze. By invigorating particles at a concentrated point, natural heat would increase, dry out his skin, and subsequently ignite it. He found it easiest to make a tiny flame and help it spread, rather than trying to set his whole hand alight at once. And after the flames grew large enough, he could project them out with a shock wave, effectively shooting fire at the enemy."

"545

The flames flew toward Hanjir, who made no effort to avoid them. Instead, the man simply destroyed them before they could reach him.

That was generally the trouble when dealing with destruction types. As much as their power was renowned for its offensive potential, it was perhaps even more effective defensively. Distorting space the way they did could stop virtually any attack, the only exceptions being

things that were very powerfully enhanced by the opponent's soul--but even then, if the destruction user's soul power was remotely as strong, then it would still make no difference.

So Roman knew that he would not be able to defeat Hanjir in terms of raw strength. But he didn't need to. Given the opportunity, Hanjir would stop every attack, so Roman simply wouldn't give him the opportunity. He returned to the air and began a continuous volley of simple shock waves in order to keep Hanjir busy for a few moments.

He recalled Voreese's lessons. She'd lectured him at length about all the different types a long time ago, but it was these past two months in particular when she'd made sure to drill all the knowledge into his head again. According to her, destruction types were all one-trick ponies, lacking the kind of unpredictability that most other abilities benefited from. Moreover, they were completely outclassed by almost any opponent who possessed superior mobility. To cover this weakness, they would often carry light firearms or otherwise rely on technology for added mobility--both solutions which could backfire against the wrong opponent. This was why they were better suited to large battles where they could provide heavy-hitting support for their allies, instead of individual scrambles where they had to carry their own weight.

This fight wasn't going to be a problem.

When Roman landed again, he slammed both feet into the ground.

The earth leapt out from under Hanjir and flung him into the air. His path of destruction ran uselessly into the dirt, leaving a pentagonal trail as Roman closed in to take full advantage, already preparing more flames with the hand he hadn't used before."

"546

--donation bonus (day #29, post 1/5)--

Fire engulfed Hanjir, along with a shock wave that knocked him and his still-connected reaper higher into the air. Roman flew up after them, giving the opponent no chance to regain his balance, and juggling him even higher with each successive blast of soul-empowered vibrations. The flames continued burning all the while, fighting with Hanjir's rapid regeneration, but ultimately doing more damage to the reaper, who then chose to abandon Hanjir and fly away. And once Roman had achieved great enough height, he let the Abolisher drop again.

Hanjir was in freefall for only a few seconds, but that was plenty of time to reach terminal velocity. As he grew close to the ground, he shot it with his power, which made a crater and was perhaps the only thing the man could think to do in the last moments of panic. His body splattered on impact, bones shattering, organs liquefying.

Roman was already busy chasing the reaper down.

‘No!’ The soul-empowered fire had taken its toll, leaving the black crow smoldering, ethereal feathers in tatters. ‘You fuckers! How dare you!’ The reaper tried to flee underground.

Roman did not allow it. He caught the bird with a pressurized, soul-empowered cage. And crushed it.

The reaper’s body evaporated and vanished entirely.

‘Fucking idiot,’ said Voreese. ‘Good riddance.’

He flew back to Hanjir’s crater to set the dead body ablaze and crush the head with a focused shock wave. “That’s one down,” he said as he landed again.

‘Check on the soldiers real quick,’ said Voreese.

He made his way over to the plane. Only a few of the men had left the cabin, the rest watching from window seats. The first soldier he approached shied away from him, but the second stood his ground.

“Are you guys okay?” Roman asked.

For a moment, the uniformed man merely returned a hard look. He was black and quite young. “You... saved us?”

Roman decided not to smile, figuring it might come across as more insane than comforting, especially after all these men had been through. “Yeah.”

"547 -- LXIII.

--donation bonus (day #29, post 2/5)--

“Who are you?” said the soldier.

“Not important.” Roman adjusted his spectacles, which had also benefited from his soul-enhancements. “Listen, I’ve gotta go now. I’ll try to return soon with new transportation for you guys, but if I’m not back within half a day, then you should just start walking, because I’m probably dead.”

“Wait a minute. What do we do if the Rendon military shows up?”

‘That’s very likely to happen,’ said Voreese. ‘They probably have jets already en route. These guys should just explain that they were taken hostage and surrender peacefully.’

Roman relayed the information.

“Are you serious?” said the soldier.

“Quite.” And Roman ran off, getting some distance before launching himself into the sky again.

Chapter Sixty-Three: ‘Of advancing borders...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

News of the princes’ deaths broke, followed by reports of superpowered assassins and terrorists, and followed again by the revelation of Luther’s incarceration.

David was still confused, still unsure what to make of everything. The game had literally changed overnight--perhaps even for the better. It was an unsavory thought, given three of his brothers had been killed, weighing heavily on his heart, but at the same time, they had been traitors and, yes, obstacles to Atreya’s recovery. And already, the power of the Crown was beginning to fall upon his head.

Only, it wasn’t so easy as that.

He didn’t yet know whether he had real power or not. Abolish could still return at anytime and force him to do whatever insane thing they desired, so as much as he wanted to address the nation and give an honest speech about the tumult behind everything, he knew it would have to wait.

So David took his time to “grieve.” He needed it, anyway.

Hunched over in his chair with his head in his hands, David just tried to

think. What was the most pressing concern? The biggest problem? Figuring that out took him a while.

The potential outbreak of war. That was the biggest. And this news of royal death could have a profound impact on it. Atreya's relationship with Rendon was tenuous at best, what with all the talk of increased tension every day, thanks to Abolish's propaganda."

"547 -- LXIII.

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So David took his time to "grieve." He needed it, anyway.

Hunched over in his chair with his head in his hands, David just tried to think. What was the most pressing concern? The biggest problem? Figuring that out took him a while.

The potential outbreak of war. That was the biggest. And this news of royal death could have a profound impact on it. Atreya's relationship with Rendon was tenuous at best, what with all the talk of increased tension every day, thanks to Abolish's propaganda."

"548

--donation bonus (day #29, post 3/5)--

It was rather depressing to contemplate, but enough people had already repeated Abolish's lie and thereby transformed it into truth.

David tried to focus on what could be done. He had a whole room full of advisers in front of him, but he'd drifted from their conversation a while ago.

"Your Majesty, are you listening?" someone was saying.

David opened his eyes but did not look up.

"Perhaps we should reconvene later," said someone else, "after you are rested."

"No," said David, and not in the light tone that they had perhaps come to expect of him. He'd never spent very much time at all with most of these people, and here they were, giving him contradictory counsel,



likely just trying to cover all their bases. He wasn't yet sure how many of them he wanted to dismiss, but the number was growing. "Continue. I will listen and ignore as I please, but you will not stop talking. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"We have to consider how Rendon might react to this news," said someone else, a middle-aged woman and duchess of the House Vollier. "They could well see this as a moment of vulnerability and mount an assault. We should strike first."

David tried not to roll his eyes. She almost had a point. Rendon was as unpredictable as Abolish right now. It was why he had not gone to them for help, not tried to inform them of a rebel faction that might attack them today. He didn't need to give Rendon a reason to move in and occupy Atreyan land in order to eliminate said rebel faction. Not only would that escalate matters, but it would also give Rendon an immense advantage in the event of full-scale war. So David could understand the woman's concern there, but he was most certainly not going to attack a foreign nation purely out of fear.

"Don't be absurd!" said someone else, an elderly fellow and baron of the House Belgrant. "We should be working with Rendon to prevent war from even occurring! They will be looking to see where our soon-to-be king stands on the matter, which is why His Majesty should waste no time in assuring them that he will sue for peace!"

"549

--donation bonus (day #29, post 4/5)--

Ah, the Belgrants. The idyllic, unremarkable house that skyrocketed to power because of a freak political storm. Four years hadn't done much to stave off their reputation for being simple and uninformed.

David would have liked to agree with the man, of course, but even assuming the Rendon Parliament to be of benevolent intentions, there was still the very possible threat of Abolish having its claws in Rendon as well. Hector had mentioned such a suspicion in one of his texts-- words passed along from Helen.

David wished he knew where his sister was right now. He wondered how she would handle this situation, because to him, it seemed like

there was nothing he could reasonably do except wait until he heard from either Hector or Abolish.

The advisers were arguing again. These were the people Helen had for counsel? No wonder she'd nearly been assassinated.

"I don't care!" said the baron from earlier. "I am right! And all of you are wrong! Which is why I sent word to Rendon an hour ago!"

The entire room turned to look at the man, then at David.

At least David knew which person he wanted to dismiss first.

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Harper had to keep a close eye on the Queen. Her power was the least developed, which put her in the most danger. Moreover, she'd had something of an unlucky draw in terms of servant abilities. Calcium transfiguration, she'd gotten; and while it was far from useless, transfiguration was notoriously difficult to master, generally requiring the most study and practice. It was little wonder why most transfiguration users only figured out one or two different ways to use their power and just stuck with that.

Protecting her in the middle of the fight should have been easy for him. Objectively, he was clearly stronger than all of the Abolishers present. But one of the opponents still posed a problem--Conall Learen, a man of imposing stature, easily the tallest of the group. By now, it was apparent that Conall's power was materialization, and his element was a highly reflective metal--aluminum, Darsihm posited."

"550

--donation bonus (day #29, post 5/5)--

While Conall couldn't completely stop Harper's soul-enhanced beams of light, he could still provide rather solid protection from them--protection which he extended to the other Abolishers. And that was the real problem.

Darsihm passed the obvious instructions on to Mehlsanz and Garovel. 'Take that one out,' he said, motioning to Conall, 'and Harper will be able to annihilate the others.'

Harper pooled his concentration and threw his hand into the air. From

it, an immense beacon of light poured out, illuminating the ruined forest in front of him and casting giant, moving white lasers across the dirt, gouging out trenches as they all convened toward the aluminum shelter around Andres and Desmond. The beams left smoldering trails in the aluminum but still bounced off into the forest, cutting through trees and igniting them. Not the most desirable outcome, but Harper just needed to keep Andres and Desmond pinned down for a few moments.

Hector coated the Queen's arms in metal as she closed in on Conall. Conall raised an aluminum wall for himself, and even with its soul-enhancements, the full might of the Queen's punches left enormous dents in the shimmering metal. And all the while, an iron meteor formed high above Conall and begun its descent.

And as the meteor neared the ground, the Queen retreated out of its way. However, it stopped in mid-air before ever reaching Conall.

And that's when Karkash reappeared, tearing the iron meteor into electrified chunks, swirling them around the battlefield while Hector rushed to annihilate them all again.

The tide of battle shifted.

Hector was suddenly very busy diverting lightning strikes with iron spires, which allowed Conall to help Desmond and Andres draw closer to Harper. Nola was back up as well, and soon, so would Tessa be, and her power was still unknown.

Harper had to keep them all at bay while the others worked on eliminating at least one before the enemy regrouped fully. He tried to shoot Karkash out of the sky again, but the Vaelish man saw it coming this time and surged through the air at the last moment, avoiding the beam completely."

"551

And though it missed, the attack on Karkash bought Hector a bit of time. A dozen iron pillars shot up around the trio, providing brief refuge from lightning while Karkash went to work removing them.

A mound of yellow crystal flew toward Harper, and he had to spare a laser to destroy it before being flattened. An aluminum coating tried to

slow the movement of his arms, but Harper tore through without losing a beat and sent a two-handed blast of light toward Conall's shelter. The laser hit aluminum, reflecting off but still toppling the metal anyway.

Conall was left briefly vulnerable, and Harper wanted to take advantage, but then Andres and Desmond were both there in his face while Nola came up from behind.

Judging from the way she'd melted Hector's foot into the ground earlier, Nola's power was certainly integration type, though Darsiham didn't yet have more details for him. Hector had yanked himself free a while ago and discovered the foot to have become stone--having not just displaced the ground it had sunken into but actually merging with it.

On its own, Nola's power would not be immensely threatening to Harper, but here and now, supported by her comrades, if she managed to touch him and disable just one of his limbs, however briefly, it would spell trouble indeed. Thankfully, though, the Queen intercepted her, leaving Harper to only worry about Desmond, Andres, and Conall.

It was time to change tactics. His enemies knew they couldn't touch him from a distance, so now they were trying to surround him and attack at close range.

That was absolutely fine with Harper. They would find that his soul power was more than up to the challenge.

Yellow crystals gathered around him, trying to hold him down while Desmond closed in with a flaming fist.

Harper merely waited and let them think he was trapped. Then he reached out through the crystals, shattering them like they weren't even there, and grabbed Desmond by the arm and neck. White light brimmed around the edges of Harper's palm and exploded forth, taking Desmond's head off in an instant."

"552

As he tossed Desmond's corpse aside, Harper was already turning to receive Andres, but the other man was suddenly reluctant, perhaps

deterred by the sight of his comrade's quick death.

Harper prepared a beam of light with one hand and stalked closer to Andres. Predictably, Conall's aluminum rose to Andres' defense, so Harper leapt forward and instead of shooting it with light, he bashed through with a soul-strengthened punch.

Andres fled behind more crystal and aluminum walls, and Harper might have given chase if not for the need to keep formation. If the enemies lured him too far away from the Queen, then they'd be able to sacrifice one or two of their pawns to keep him busy while they ganged up on her. He could not let that happen.

He spared a beam of light for Nola, catching her right through the torso and allowing the Queen to send her flying again.

'On your left,' warned Darsihm.

Harper saw Tessa there, fully regenerated and bearing down on him. And she'd pulled her hand back behind her, concealing it from view. Harper knew better than to gamble on an unknown power, so he played it safe and merely readied himself. And when Tessa threw her hand forward, Harper saw the air visibly distort along a straight path toward him.

He dove out of the way, rolling onto one knee, and then leveled a beam at her. Aluminum was already there, reflecting it, and then Tessa's path of destruction broke through from the other side, gunning for him again.

Harper's strength went to his legs and he fired himself away from the ground, up and over the path.

'Crystal above you,' said Darsihm.

Barely even seeing it himself, Harper busted through and sent yellow shards raining down below, along with two more beams of light, one from each hand.

--++--++--

Hector was getting really sick of having to fight Karkash. And unlike previous times, he had to keep Karkash focused on himself. If he tried to do something clever, it'd probably just result in Karkash going off to fight Harper or the Queen instead--and they both had enough to deal with already."

Expectedly, they'd once again arrived at a stalemate. Hector wanted to attack Conall, but Karkash's magnetism wouldn't allow it; Karkash wanted to attack Harper, but Hector's lightning rods wouldn't allow it.

Then Karkash stopped attacking and just hovered there in the sky, looking down at Hector's network of safety towers.

'What's he doing?' said Hector.

'Not sure,' said Garovel. 'Changing tactics, maybe? Be careful.'

Karkash thrust a hand down. Lightning flashed forth and expectedly crashed down on the spire nearest Hector, throwing up dust and cracking the stone beneath it. Already, Hector could tell that this was more power than Karkash had previously bothered expending. The man was focusing on a single lightning rod, and Hector wasn't quite sure why. Karkash's other hand moved as well, but a second line of lightning did not project from it.

'It's a diversion,' said Garovel privately. 'He's trying to steal a tower behind you while your attention is focused here. It's the one on the right at about forty-five degrees.'

Hector knew the exact tower the reaper was talking about. He annihilated it without even turning around.

'You got it,' Garovel confirmed. 'Karkash doesn't look too pleased, though.'

Hector concentrated on reinforcing the still-assailed spire, adding smaller ones around it to absorb some of the run off electricity. It wasn't actually attached to the ground--none of them were, as that would have required Hector to materialize metal underground. Rather, Hector just made the foundations much broader than the peaks so as to allow greater stability.

Karkash used both hands now, converging two streams of electricity into one giant one, and the sudden additional force made the air tremble. The surge became blindingly bright. Hector couldn't even open his eyes, but he could still feel the air crackling against his skin, wild sparks that would tear into him the moment he made a mistake.

And Karkash wasn't letting up. If anything, he seemed to be putting even more into it with each passing second.

'He's just trying to overload the towers now,' said Garovel. 'Don't let him.'

'Easier said than done!' said Hector."  
"554 -- LXIV.

The sparks only increased, heating up the air to the point that Hector could feel his flesh searing. He tried to raise more spires, to make them taller and more robust, but the lightning was ripping into them as soon as they formed now, stunting their growth, making Hector's iron accumulate irregularly, if at all.

'You need more,' said Garovel, somehow very calm. 'C'mon, Hector. Do it.'

'Shit!' Hector's muscles all tensed as the surges drew ever closer. He started coating himself in metal just so that the electricity would come for him and not Garovel.

But abruptly, the lightning ceased.

Hector's eyes were too damaged to see what was happening. They would only need a few seconds to regenerate and restore his vision, but Garovel could still see just fine and so informed him immediately.

'Roman's back.'

Chapter Sixty-Four: 'The crack of Thunder, the pulse of Fire...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Roman tore through the air like a missile, and Karkash was clearly prepared to receive him, no doubt having been warned by his reaper.

Roman didn't need an introduction. Garovel had of course provided the details of Hector's past encounters with this man, and ever since Roman heard that Karkash could also fly, he'd been expecting to end

up in single combat with him.

They were both alteration users, and they were both highly mobile. The only thing left unclear was the degree to which Karkash could control his lightning. If Hector was able to divert it with the natural conductance of iron, then Karkash's control couldn't be too strong, but from Garovel's account, Karkash could also hone his lightning well enough to even cut through flesh like a blade. This, combined with the knowledge that the man had recently achieved emergence as well, made Roman think this fight would not go as smoothly as the one against Hanjir.

Honestly, though, a part of him had been looking forward to this. He'd never been one much for battle, but recently, he'd found himself growing restless with his power."

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"555

--donation bonus (day #30, post 1/5)--

Childishness, Roman knew--an immature impulse to test out his still relatively new strength. But still. There it was. And if he had no choice but to fight this time, then perhaps there was no harm in learning to enjoy it a little. And besides, the extra motivation had helped him practice.

'Don't stop moving and don't stop attacking,' said Voreese.

'I know,' said Roman. His arm fought against the pounding wind force as he sent a shock wave ahead of himself--his own flight speed added to it like a bullet fired from the nose of a plane.

Karkash responded in kind. Lightning cut into the shock wave before it reached him. The clash made the air erupt. Frantic waves of sparks shot out in all directions.

Roman banked right hard, and he saw Karkash following suit. Another

shock wave, another surge of lightning, another furious explosion. And again. And still another time. They followed each other higher up, exchanging attacks as Roman gradually forced his way closer, swirling around each explosion, ignoring his own battered body because Karkash's couldn't be in much better shape.

When he was finally within range, Roman threw his fist out and surrounded Karkash with a pressurized cage. It certainly wasn't enough to stop the man, but it slowed him for a moment, and Roman took the opportunity to move in even closer, a shock wave already flying ahead of him.

Karkash deflected it with another burst of lightning, but he was too close to the explosion this time and got caught up in the blast. He flew off course, toppling through the air.

Roman gave chase, preparing a bath of fire with a trembling hand. The flames poured forth on another shock wave.

But instead of struggling to steady himself, Karkash seemed to embrace his downward tumble, and it became a broad, swooping maneuver. He moved down and away from the fire, which burned up harmlessly after going too far. And then Karkash was flying up toward Roman again, smoothly sliding past the next stream of fire and retaliating with fresh lightning."

"556

--donation bonus (day #30, post 2/5)--

Roman was already covering himself with a fiery shock wave as he swerved right. Fire and lightning clashed. The explosion rocked the air and threw sparking embers across the sky, obscuring Roman's view of Karkash.

Karkash veered around the explosion. Roman expected more lightning to accompany the man and so immediately launched another shock wave at him, but perhaps Karkash had anticipated as much, because there was no such lightning to be found. Instead, Karkash flew up and over, avoiding the shock wave before raining blue bolts from above.

A branch of lightning caught Roman's left arm, making him grit his teeth and muscle through the seizure. In an instant, he swiped the air with his right arm and returned an enormous shock wave. Karkash

must not have expected such a quick response, because it barreled into his torso.

Both men lost aerial control and started falling. Roman's body seized up as the electricity coursed through it, and Karkash's chest had caved in on itself.

They recovered nearly in unison, and abruptly found themselves staring each other down.

A tense quiet arrived as they got a good, long look at one another, both reluctant to make the first move again. Roman might have guessed from the man's name that Karkash was different from the other Abolishers present, but the attire made that point rather clearly. The long, slender coat with a black sash was certainly not Atreyan fashion, nor was it something Roman had seen any of the other Abolishers wearing--though admittedly, he'd only seen three, and perhaps Desmond's butler disguise didn't quite count.

'Still okay back there?' said Roman, eyes still locked on Karkash as he floated.

'Yeah, don't worry,' said Voreese.

Hoyohté, the crow on Karkash's shoulder, took the lull in combat as an opportunity to speak. 'Who are you people? Why must you stand in our way?'

'Why do you have to fuck with our country?' said Voreese.

'We are honor-bound,' said Hoyohté. 'We are all servants of the Void--even you, though you may refuse to acknowledge it.'

'OH!' yelled Voreese, reaching for that obnoxious tone again. 'WELL, OKAY, THEN! IF THE VOID WANTS EVERYONE DEAD, THEN THAT'S FINE!'

"557

--donation bonus (day #30, post 3/5)--

'I do not expect you to understand,' said Hoyohté.

'NO, SERIOUSLY!' said Voreese. 'TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE FUCKING VOID! I'M IMAGINING IT AS A GIANT, INVISIBLE

ASSHOLE IN THE SKY! IS THAT ACCURATE?!

'I suppose I should expect no less from heretics, but will you even refuse to identify yourselves out of warriors' respect?'

'IS IT PUCKERED OR GAPING?!'

Hoyohté said nothing more as Karkash started moving again.

Roman knew that negotiations would have just been a waste of time, and Karkash didn't look especially fazed by Voreese's words, but even so, Roman had to wonder if it was wise, attempting to anger a man who could throw bolts of fucking lightning.

--++--++--

Helen had thus far only managed to develop one real use for her calcium transfiguration power, as the learning curve for it had proved too steep for anything more. Epidermal calcification was all she had, a means of hardening her skin.

It was a simple enough idea but not at all easy in execution. Despite calcium itself being fairly tough on its own, Helen could not simply replace the surface layer of her skin with the stuff, as it would naturally react with the other elements below and reduce her flesh to a bubbling, melting mass of decidedly useless goo. So to prevent that from happening, she needed to make calcium carbonate--a mineral also requiring carbon and oxygen. Both of those elements were readily available in the human body and indeed, the skin itself, but learning to bond them together with her transfigured calcium had been a grueling exercise in patience and concentration. It took a rather precise application of mental pressure, and she'd only recently been able to get it down.

Combined with the fact that, in all of her thirty-three years, she'd never been in a fight until a little over two months ago, Helen was admittedly feeling disadvantaged in this whole ordeal.

Still, she had refused to stand by and let these three gentlemen do all the work. Enhanced strength and regeneration were useful enough on their own, and if nothing else, she could at least help to divide the enemy's attention."

"558

--donation bonus (day #30, post 4/5)--

Perhaps it was tactically unwise, going into battle herself like this, but to her mind, it was worth the risk. In the worst case scenario, Abolish would kill her here and then leave the country for fear of the Vanguard, at which point, Atreya would primarily be left in the hands of David, William, Gina, and Lynnette. And she trusted those hands.

So here she was, gambling for the optimal outcome. Though, from what Mehlsanz and Voreese had said, it was pretty safe to bet on Harper Norez.

An immense flash lit up the battlefield, making Helen squint and shield her eyes. Then just as suddenly, the light vanished, taking more with it than expected. It took Helen's eyes a moment to adjust and another moment to understand what she was seeing.

An apparent hole in space stood where Harper was--a black dome in the middle of the forest. Presumably, Harper was still there somewhere, having stopped the movement of light within, or bent it perhaps. It would surely buy the man a few seconds of confusion, but not likely more than that, because as Helen understood it, reapers could still see souls regardless of light, and, Helen suspected, so could servants--provided their soul-synchronization was strong enough.

Conall posed the greatest threat to Harper, so it was rather obvious that Harper would attack him in the darkness--which was perhaps why Harper didn't. Instead, when the veil of darkness lifted, it was Tessa he was in the midst of attacking.

As for herself, the Queen worked alongside Hector to keep Conall occupied.

An enormous iron slab gathered high above Conall's aluminum shelter. It crashed down with full force, not breaking the no doubt soul-strengthened aluminum but still sending impressive cracks through it.

Helen took that as her cue to begin whaling on it. Each punch broadened the cracks and made the aluminum tremble. And she broke through, but a second barrier was already waiting for her. And it had spikes.

This one was truly just a wall, though, not a dome. Hector raised an iron platform on the other side and flung Conall up and over."

--donation bonus (day #30, post 5/5)--

Conall spun in the air, seeing Helen and Hector below, as well as the iron sword flying toward his gut. The man encased himself in aluminum. The blade shattered on impact and knocked Conall farther away, into a group of still-standing trees.

They pursued. The Queen held her hand out toward Hector as they ran, and he created a sword for her.

The strained light of the forest darkened even further as metal appeared above her head. For a moment, it was difficult to tell whose it was, but she didn't have to guess.

"That's not mine!" said Hector.

'Split up,' said Mehlsanz.

Helen ran right, and Hector ran left. The aluminum crashed down between the trees. Conall probably would have liked to follow the attack up, but the man no doubt realized by now that Harper would tear his comrades apart without him. And that was the game here. They didn't have to defeat Conall--only distract him.

Helen spotted Conall again and chucked the sword with all her strength. It flew straight and true. Conall was forced to shield himself again, allowing Hector a few moments to circle around. A horizontal pillar shot out of Hector's gauntlet with a pointed tip.

Conall launched himself up with an aluminum pillar, clearing the treetops for a fresh view of Harper, where he took the opportunity to make fresh shelter for his comrades. Another iron sword shattered against his aluminum coating and knocked him away again. As he fell, he retaliated once more.

A flurry of aluminum spikes flew toward Helen. She took refuge behind a burly tree trunk, which did manage to stop the spikes but only just. The wood was left skewered in multiple places, sharp tips poking out through splintered holes.

Then Karkash reappeared, swooping low over the treetops. Roman was not far behind, though he was missing an arm now.

Hector raised an iron spire to catch the imminent lightning, but it didn't work. The lightning eagerly went for the aluminum spikes instead, making Helen's tree explode.

The impact knocked her off her feet, countless scraps of wood tearing into her."

"560

--donation bonus (day #31, post 1/5)--

Helen made a fist and punched the dirt in order to give herself the leverage to climb back to her feet. Her regeneration was already pushing the chunks of broken wood out of her flesh, and she could feel her shattered bones reforming.

As her ear drums restored themselves, she heard more explosions, quite close. They sounded like Desmond's, being preceded by that distinct and low sizzle. She could feel drops of rain as well, few and faint, perhaps just now starting to fall.

'Hurry,' said Mehlsanz. The reaper was not without her wounds, either. Thin plumes of white-and-black smoke rose out of the ghost's backside and upper right arm.

Helen rushed back toward the battle.

And from that point, it was utter mayhem.

Every combatant was present again. All hope of keeping formation was lost in a mad scramble. Lightning hacked Hector's arm off. Flames engulfed Andres. A shower of yellow crystals riddled the Queen with holes before an iron wall rose to her defense. A beam of light claimed one of Karkash's legs. A forest fire devoured trees in the background, and no one was in any position to stop it from spreading, but perhaps the rain would render that unnecessary.

'I can hardly tell what is happening!' said Helen. She bounded out of the way of another swarm of crystals.

'We're slowly losing ground,' said Mehlsanz privately. 'And it's about to get worse. I sense six new souls approaching quickly from the direction of Rendon, and given the situation, they're probably Abolish, too.'

An iron spire shot up next to Helen, and then lightning crashed against it. She squinted against the blinding flash while struggling to maintain her concentration. 'Should we retreat?!'

'Maybe,' said Mehlsanz, 'but we probably wouldn't get away--on your right!'

The top of the tree next to her erupted, making the whole thing groan and topple over. Helen leapt out of the way. 'There must be something we can do.' She went to work on her arms, focusing and flexing in order to reestablish the calcium carbonate. Her peachy skin turned pale white as it hardened, cracking here and there."

"561

--donation bonus (day #31, post 2/5)--

'It's not over yet,' said Mehlsanz. 'I suspect Harper is holding back.'

'Why would he possibly be--?' She had to break the question off as she was abruptly confronted with Andres, who seemed just as surprised by the encounter. She struck before he could and punched him hard enough to make her calcified skin crumble.

Andres went toppling through the air and took a tree down with him.

'Just be ready to run,' said Mehlsanz. 'If I'm right, then things are going to escalate very quickly.'

--++--++--

Harper scowled as another aluminum wall rose to Tessa's defense.

Even with Roman and Karkash thrown back into the mix, the battle saw little in the way of progress--which was unfortunately still in Abolish's favor. They probably just wanted to buy time for their comrades to arrive from Rendon, at which point they would merely try to overwhelm Harper. Such was Darsihm's assessment, anyway.

Conall and Tessa were the core problem, Harper knew. Conall's mirrors needed to be broken down at close range, but that was where Tessa's destruction power excelled. If Harper rushed in to smash through, she would be there with her unstoppable attack. And all the while, the other Abolishers were attacking more or less as they pleased, probably trying to catch him off guard.



He just needed an opening, a foothold, and he was sure that he would be able to make up all of his lost ground.

Then Roman fell out of the sky, crashing down at a low angle and skidding across dirt and stone right in front of Harper. Roman's body was in tatters, bones sticking out of his flesh, limbs hardly seeming to function. But his right arm still worked. And that was enough.

Undeterred by the reflectivity of aluminum, Roman's shock wave smashed through Conall's barrier, leaving Tessa suddenly exposed.

Harper immediately capitalized, and a beam of light tore the woman asunder.

Now was the moment, he felt. The close range threat was gone for now. He still wasn't sure where Tessa's reaper was, so he just moved against Conall next."

"562 -- LXV.

--donation bonus (day #31, post 3/5)--

Karkash was busy trying to kill Roman while Hector stood in the way again, and the Queen was still trying to occupy Conall's attention. That only left Desmond and Andres for Harper to deal with on his way to Conall.

Wait. No, it didn't. That other woman was still missing.

'This is--no, behind you!' said Darsihm.

Nola Pauls was there, crouched and reaching for him. A beam of light would have taken her head off if not for the aluminum faceguard. Instead, she was merely flung back, but not before she succeeded in melting Harper's right leg into the rock below.

He was suddenly immobile, stuck fast above the knee while his left leg could achieve no leverage to pull himself free. He struggled as aluminum walls shot up around him, encasing him completely. From the sound of it, Andres was adding an outer layer of sulfur crystals, too.

His mind raced. Even with all his years in the service, here and now, he still had to fight the urge to panic. If he didn't break out right now,

Abolish would certainly overwhelm the others. And then they would gang up on him.

There was no other choice now. He'd fallen for the enemy's feint. And hell, even breaking free of this cage wouldn't be enough. More Abolishers were en route, and there was no telling what fresh problems they could present.

Harper's jaw muscles tensed in the darkness. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He could already feel the first stage of the transformation taking place. 'Warn the others,' he told Darsihm.

The reaper didn't require an explanation. 'You know I can't do that without also alerting the enemy.'

'If we accidentally kill one of them--'

'We've committed our allies to memory. Trust in our instincts, Harper. It's all we can do now.'

Chapter Sixty-Five: 'Come, ye devils, and perish...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Rain fell in sheets now, slickening the earth, evaporating against each flashing bolt. Hector saw the tower go up around Harper and would've liked to help, but he was rather occupied at the moment with a storm of lightning."

"562 -- LXV.

--donation bonus (day #31, post 3/5)--

Karkash was busy trying to kill Roman while Hector stood in the way again, and the Queen was still trying to occupy Conall's attention. That only left Desmond and Andres for Harper to deal with on his way to Conall.

Wait. No, it didn't. That other woman was still missing.

'This is--no, behind you!' said Darsihm.

Nola Pauls was there, crouched and reaching for him. A beam of light

would have taken her head off if not for the aluminum faceguard. Instead, she was merely flung back, but not before she succeeded in melting Harper's right leg into the rock below.

He was suddenly immobile, stuck fast above the knee while his left leg could achieve no leverage to pull himself free. He struggled as aluminum walls shot up around him, encasing him completely. From the sound of it, Andres was adding an outer layer of sulfur crystals, too.

His mind raced. Even with all his years in the service, here and now, he still had to fight the urge to panic. If he didn't break out right now, Abolish would certainly overwhelm the others. And then they would gang up on him.

There was no other choice now. He'd fallen for the enemy's feint. And hell, even breaking free of this cage wouldn't be enough. More Abolishers were en route, and there was no telling what fresh problems they could present.

Harper's jaw muscles tensed in the darkness. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He could already feel the first stage of the transformation taking place. 'Warn the others,' he told Darsihm.

The reaper didn't require an explanation. 'You know I can't do that without also alerting the enemy.'

'If we accidentally kill one of them--'

'We've committed our allies to memory. Trust in our instincts, Harper. It's all we can do now.'

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"563

--donation bonus (day #31, post 4/5)--  
'Mm?' said Garovel privately. 'What's Harper--?'

Light erupted out of the tower around Harper, a beacon straight up, cleaving the sky in two and dispersing the rain clouds around it.

'Oh fuck!' said Garovel.

Then the tower exploded, and a huge wave of force washed over the area. Hector felt it pass through him, but it didn't knock him over like it did for the Abolishers. He wasn't sure why until he saw Roman's fist in the air, though Roman himself was still incapable of standing.

'Grab Roman and run,' said Garovel.

Hector didn't need to be told twice. 'What the hell is happening?!' he said as he hoisted Roman over his shoulder. The man said something, but Hector couldn't hear him. 'Is it emergence?'

'No. Harper's entering one of the hyper states--something called "pan-rozum." I highly doubt he's old enough to fully control something like that.'

'You mean he's gonna attack us, too?!'

'I'd rather not find out. We're all dead, if he does.'

Harper's movements were decidedly inhuman. Hector's eyes couldn't even follow him. It looked like the man was teleporting, the only evidence to the contrary being the straight trails of fleeting white light that Harper left in his wake. One moment, he stood at the center of the crumbled tower, and the next, he was in front of Andres, arm through the Abolisher's chest. And the moment after that, Andres was dead, decapitated in a cloud of blood, along with the reaper behind him.

Everyone scattered.

Harper went for Conall, encountering brief resistance from the aluminum. Very brief. The trail of light bounced off the mirror wall and then went up and over, getting behind Conall faster than he could even turn around. Harper split the man down the center with a glowing arm. Conall's reaper was already fleeing, but it made no difference. A white laser turned the skeleton to vapor.

Hector could hardly believe his eyes. They were nothing to Harper. And they all knew it. Karkash was already gone, flown off as soon as

he realized what they were up against."

"564

--donation bonus (day #31, post 5/5)--

Hector searched for his motorcycle as he ran, expecting to find a smoldering pile of scrap, but there it was, untouched and right where he'd left it.

"Hey, put me down," said Roman as they reached the bike. Hector did so, and Roman proved capable of standing again.

"Get on, and I'll--" The sentence died in Hector's throat as he turned.

Harper was right there in front of him.

Hector leaned backward, eyes widening. The look on Harper's face was especially unsettling, because it was one that he'd seen before. It was just like Stoker's. Half-asleep, seemingly unaware or even conscious. The only difference was that Stoker had been twitchy, whereas Harper still moved rather smoothly as he poked his head closer, perhaps curiously.

'Don't attack him, Hector!' said Garovel. 'Just let him look at you.'

'O-okay,' said Hector, trying not to sound terrified. After everything he'd faced in the past, he'd nearly forgotten what it was like to feel genuine fear. Without a doubt, this was a much more effective reminder than necessary.

Harper's head turned, and then in a blink, he was gone again, leaving an equivalently tall streak of light behind as he went after Nola next.

Her reaper went down first, and Nola hardly had enough time to look confused before a luminous pillar burned through her skull.

Seeing how quickly the man could dispatch people, Hector didn't understand why Harper had just let him and Roman go. But he decided that now wasn't the time to question it. He mounted his bike with Roman behind him. He found the dirt road, as well as the Queen in her black sedan, already ahead of him.

She soon stopped, however, as they arrived at a group of armored vehicles. It was the soldiers that Abolish had kidnapped.

The border guards had proved rather stubborn, trying to stop them from crossing into Atreya. Vladimir had briefly considered merely waiting for Desmond and his comrades to cross into Rendon first, but that would have required far too much patience. And besides, he hadn't gotten to kill anyone in ages, and those guards had really annoying faces. It was definitely the correct decision, he felt."

"565

The news of Atreya's royal turmoil had unfortunately sent sympathetic ripples through the Members of Parliament. Thankfully, they were slow to make up their minds about what to do next, so all the pressure that Vladimir and his two friends had been building up over these past couple months had not yet gone to waste. That was why this attack today was so important and why he wanted to make sure that it went without a hitch.

Vladimir hadn't been expecting a fight at the end of this trip, so when his reaper told him the good news, he'd been pleasantly surprised. Even from this distance, the reaper could tell that something was amiss by the way the souls moved, seemingly clashing with one another, some even in mid-air. There were also many souls present which were apparently not involved in the conflict, but those were probably just the hostages that Desmond and his comrades had brought along.

"Can you tell how many opponents there are?" Vladimir said in his native Bolenese.

'Not sure,' said his reaper, 'but unless Desmond has already lost multiple fighters, there can't be more than three or four enemies.'

Vladimir's small car rumbled down the muddy road, following close behind the two ahead of him. "I hate getting wet. They'd better give us a decent fight, at least."

'That's stupid. I hope they die in seconds.'

He laughed. "That would just be embarrassing."

A white pillar shot up into the sky at a distance, glowing bright and

cutting through the rain clouds.

‘Oh hell! Stop the car! Turn around right now!’

“What? Why?”

‘Do it!’

Vladimir didn’t have much choice in the matter as the cars in front of him stopped as well. Even for their compact vehicles, there wasn’t much space on the road, so the other servants got out and started flipping the cars around with their bare hands. Begrudgingly, Vladimir began to do the same.

‘Hurry up, you slow ass! Desmond’s people are dropping like flies!’

“Oh, come on,” he said. “They can’t be that str--”

‘Oh god! Here it comes!’”

"566

Vladimir turned in time to see one of the cars get speared by a surge of light and explode. The accompanying servant flew back into a roadside tree, and their reaper didn’t get very far before being impaled by a bar of white light.

There was hardly time to react, hardly even a chance to glimpse the attacker. His own reaper was simply vaporized in an instant. Vladimir was not given the opportunity to lose his mind. Light engulfed his vision as he died.

--++--++--

Hector watched the Queen take charge, directing the soldiers who seemed utterly shocked by her presence.

“You must all retreat from here now!” she told them. “That is an order!”

“Yes, ma’am!” said multiple voices, apparently quite keen to leave as they scrambled back into their vehicles.

Helen looked to Roman next. “Mr. Fullister, take the reapers away from here as quickly as possible. As long as the reapers are far enough

away, Harper will not be able to sense them, yes?"

"Right, good thinking." The man's body was mostly restored by now. Voreese was already attached to his back, so he moved to gather the other two reapers up.

'Here,' said Garovel, giving Hector one last boost of strength and regeneration. Mehlsanz did the same for the Queen.

Then Roman was off with his three passengers, bursting through the sky again, up and over the trees.

"Hector, you and I will ride with the soldiers and help them escape." She motioned to the adjacent vehicles as the engines roared to life. The ones at the other end of the column were already started back down the road.

Everything was happening so fast. He didn't have much time to process it all, but he at least understood that these soldiers were in the most danger. He mounted his motorcycle again, and the Queen decided to jump into one of the cars with a group of soldiers. He brought up the rear as the last cars began moving.

Hector built giant walls behind the group, knowing they probably wouldn't delay Harper more than a second, if that."

"567

'Garovel, talk to me,' said Hector. 'What am I up against here?'

'Harper and Darsihm have merged their souls, and now they're in a kind of battle trance, hardly even conscious. The only reason they didn't kill us earlier was because they must've memorized our souls as belonging to their allies. It's amazing that they even have enough control to do that much.'

An idea struck him. 'So Harper won't attack me because of my soul?'

'Yeah. But he can't possibly have memorized the soldiers' souls, because he's never met any of them. He'll definitely attack them, and they stand even less of a chance than you do.'

He brought his bike to a sudden halt. 'Then, maybe...' An iron wall rose up in front of him, cutting him off from the armored vehicles ahead. He



touched the metal with one hand and made sure to block the entire road, from one giant cluster of trees to the other. And he kept growing the metal higher, curving back over his head while simultaneously empowering it with his soul.

It was a giant cage in the making, one that he couldn't be sure would work. His soul was the important part. Maybe Harper wouldn't attack the cage if it also carried Hector's soul. It seemed like a long shot, but trying to fight Harper didn't even seem like an option.

Hector built the cage as fast as he could. It had to be gigantic, or Harper would probably just jump over it. He arched it back and raised iron pillars to support the high roof. He added a floor as well, not wanting Harper to dig his way out. And the cage became quite long, encasing a massive section of the road like a tunnel.

If Harper pursued the soldiers, he would have to enter Hector's cage. This was the only path Harper could take. Unless he could fly now, too. Or just chose to navigate the forest, anyway.

That'd suck.

No other ideas sprung to mind, though, so Hector focused on his task. The cage was nearing completion, only the far wall of it left open while he stood in darkness on his end.

And then Harper appeared."  
"568

In a blink, Harper Norez was already standing there next to Hector. The Lt. General illuminated the entire tunnel as he faced the wall that Hector was touching.

Hector shut the far end of the tunnel, completing the trap. He stared at Harper, waiting to see what the man would do.

But Harper did nothing, only turned his head back and forth slowly until eventually settling on Hector.

'Wow,' said Hector. 'It really worked...?'

'What did?' said Garovel.

'I think I've... I've got Harper trapped...'

There was a pause. 'You what?'

'I made a cage and added my soul to it... and he's not attacking it, I guess because he thinks it's me?'

'That wouldn't--uh... How the...? You--?! How the fuck did you get him inside a cage?!'

'Well, uh... I mean, I knew he'd probably come this way... It's the shortest and clearest path to the soldiers, so...'

'Hector...! Just--! Holy shit!'

He gave a nervous laugh, still wary of Harper's half-conscious stare.

'It's not because he thinks your metal is actually you, though,' said Garovel. 'It's more like you've blinded him. He can't sense the souls on the other side of your walls, so he just doesn't know where to go anymore.'

'Ah... yeah, that's what I meant to say.'

'You had no idea. You got lucky.'

'...You can't prove that.'

Garovel laughed. 'Whatever the case, good work! Now try to move him back up the path, as far away from the soldiers as you can.'

'Garovel.. I don't like the way Harper is looking at me...'

'He's in a state of self-hypnosis. He's only driven forward by a desire to attack things, but he can't sense anyone other than you right now.'

'...So he's going to attack me.'

'Almost definitely.'

'Great.'

'I'm betting it's just a matter of time until his bloodlust overcomes the "knowledge" that you're his ally. That's why you need to move him away from the others. He is probably going to break out of your cage sooner or later.'

‘I’m fucked, aren’t I?’

‘SO fucked.’”

"569

Hector shook his head as he started backing up on his motorcycle.

‘Y’know, Garovel... sometimes, you can be a little TOO honest.’

‘Hey, it’s not like you need to win,’ the reaper said. ‘Just try not to die too quickly.’

‘Super helpful, thanks.’ He kept one hand on the iron wall as he moved along, returning down the path he’d come from. The metal floor proved rather slippery against the soles of his shoes and the bike’s tires, but he had to move slowly anyway in order to ensure that Harper followed him, lumbering and eerily silent.

‘You could try talking to him,’ said Garovel. ‘Probably won’t do any good, but it’s worth a shot.’

‘Egh...’ Hector soon reached the end of the tunnel and so had to add on to it. He created an empty room on the other side of the wall, and then annihilated said wall. And repeated the process each time. ‘How far away do I have take him?’

‘Not much farther, I’d imagine. I can barely even sense your soul at this range. Roman will be heading back to help you soon.’

He could see Harper’s pace increasing. “Mr. Harper, sir... heh... y-you don’t wanna attack me, right? Garovel’s just... worried for no reason, yeah? You’ve totally got this battle-trance-thing under control... I’m sure we won’t have to--”

Faster still.

Hector armored up.

It was a lot to keep track of. Growing the tunnel. Maintaining the soul-empowerment. And now armoring himself, too. He had to simplify the metal attire, and much of it was reduced to mere coatings, leaving only space for his joints to bend freely.

As Harper drew too close, Hector raised a wall between them.

Darkness enveloped the young man as Harper's light was cut off.

But only for a moment.

Harper broke through, glowing white, and smashed Hector in the chest. The impact shattered the iron breastplate and sent Hector flying off his bike and through the wall behind him. He bounced through the mud, toppling over himself again and again, still not stopping until he slid up next to a familiar rock formation, the one Garovel had called Rathmore's Gate."

"570

It might've been a surprise to see the rocks still standing after all the combat that had taken place around them, but Hector didn't spare it any thought as he climbed to his feet again. His sunken-in chest was regenerating, crushed lungs in the midst of reforming.

Harper flashed closer but stopped not long after exiting the cage. His head turned to the side, glazed eyes looking away from Hector.

That was bad.

A spiked ball materialized in Hector's hand, and he tried to shout and get Harper's attention, but his lungs couldn't hold breath just yet. So he just threw it with full force.

Harper vanished just before the ball reached him. In a blink, he reappeared next to Hector, already with a hand around the young man's throat, fingers digging through the iron coating and into Hector's flesh.

The spikes came out, skewering Harper's hand and forearm. Hector was briefly free, until Harper's other arm connected with the side of his helm. Again, the armor shattered, and Hector went flying, toppling across hard stone with a broken neck.

He struggled to stand back up this time, his body not wanting to listen to him. Vital nerves below his brain stem needed time to repair. He could barely move, but he could at least see Harper. He knew that a single beam of light through his skull could've already ended this fight. And yet it hadn't.

Hector felt his lungs working again. "You're still holding back," he said.

The words didn't seem to register. Harper just looked away again.

"No! Focus on me!"

If Harper leapt away now, there would be no catching him. There would be no saving anyone. More innocent lives destroyed. More failure.

Hector understood these things. And he refused to let them happen.

Defeating Harper, that was impossible. But delaying him? Surely, that could be done. If this stupid body would just move. Always breaking when he needed it most. If he couldn't move, he couldn't materialize anything. Except, perhaps, coating himself. In spikes.

That would have to do."

"571

The first pillar shot out of Hector's armor like a rocket--a massive knife through the air, a good fifty meters. He couldn't direct it. The thing just shot up and out, far enough to reach Harper but still well over the man's head. So he added sharpened branches to it, as well--blades upon blades upon still more blades, a great tree of iron daggers. It had nothing in the way of support, however, and immediately began to fall, which if nothing else, certainly demanded Harper's attention.

And it was not alone, this knife. Nine more followed it up, all leaping from Hector's body in different directions, splayed out and wild, each one so thick that it crushed or impaled its own cluster of trees.

Hector annihilated them each at the base only and let the boat-sized columns of metal fall around him. He propped himself up with another pillar as his neck finished regenerating. Looking over his work, he wasn't sure if this was emergence's doing, just because it happened so quickly this time, but he didn't have long to think about it.

Harper's zigzagging frames of light bounded from pillar to pillar, and then in an instant, Harper was there in front of him, an arm plunged through Hector's chest.

Still not quite going for the kill, it seemed. That suited Hector just fine. Every functional muscle in his body flexed as he strove to repeat

himself. A new mass of spikes flew out, each one furnished with thorns and gnarled hooks.

They forced Harper back and gave Hector a moment to breathe.

He spotted a broken slab of aluminum on the ground, shimmering in the mud and drizzle. He dove for it and clapped a pair of iron straps around the thing. He slid his arm through the straps and raised it in front of himself. A mirror shield. Makeshift and crumbling, but better than nothing. And just in time, too.

A white laser flashed across the clearing.

It bounced off the shield, but the force of the impact still blew him back. His mirror held together, however, and Hector regained some unsteady footing on slippery rock."

"572

'Garovel, tell me the soldiers are safe.'

'They're not. You need to buy another two minutes or so.'

'Two minutes?! Do you know how long that is in the middle of a fi--?!'

The attack came from the side, catching Hector under the rib cage. Light burst out of Harper's fist, cutting through metal and flesh like butter. He sailed into the rock formation, which stood strong against the impact, not even cracking.

The right side of his chest was gone, but he didn't let that slow him down. More spikes, broad as he could make them.

Harper tore through them with a spray of light.

He raised the mirror shield. It protected him but shattered. He dove away, knowing another attack was imminent, hoping for another chunk of aluminum and not finding it.

Abruptly, Harper shuddered. The man doubled over onto his hands and knees.

Hector had to spare a moment of surprise before deciding to keep attacking anyway, but by the time he launched another spike from his

gauntlet, Harper had vanished again, the trail of light leading behind Hector this time.

He didn't get the chance to turn around before feeling the next impact. The beam of light cleaved horizontally through his chest, finishing Harper's earlier work. Hector's legs and stomach flew one way, and his upper body flew another. Still perfectly conscious, he splattered to the ground in a bloody heap, arms mangled but still functioning.

He made to attack another time, undeterred by the loss of over half of his body, but when he saw Harper hunched over and trembling again, Hector hesitated. He suddenly wasn't sure that attacking was the smartest move. On the one hand, he of course needed to provide a distraction, but on the other hand, if he provoked Harper too much, then the fight might just end instantly, and then everything would be for naught. So he stayed his hand this time and observed.

He squinted. 'Harper's not looking so good...'

'Not surprising,' said Garovel. 'The hyper state takes a very heavy toll-- heavy enough to kill him and Darsihm both if they can't control it well enough.'

"573 -- LXVI.

'Uh, shit... is, um--is there anything I can do to help them?'

'No,' said Garovel. 'They've taken their lives into their own hands now. It's up to them.'

Uncertain, Hector went to work on a soul-empowered dome. He doubted it would do much good at this point, but attacking directly seemed like a much worse idea now. At least this way Harper would be "blinded" again.

Darkness fell over the two of them as the iron roof spanned out, blocking out the sky and the rain. Able to taste both blood and mud in his mouth, Hector watched Harper begin to glow again, becoming the only source of light once more. Dozens of pillars supported the dome as it completed itself. Even Rathmore's Gate was covered.

Harper returned to his feet. He looked straight at Hector, and the expression on the man's face seemed to indicate that he had regained

consciousness.

However, Hector didn't get the opportunity to ask.

The explosion of light made everything go white.

Chapter Sixty-Six: 'Once the Light has arrived...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Roman saw the solid bar of white shoot up into the sky and had to shield his eyes. It remained there for a long moment, and even after it was gone, the image of it was still burned into his vision for a few seconds.

As he drew near, he saw the aftermath of the fight from the air. The forest had been leveled all around Rathmore's Gate, the odd chunk of metal or stone mixed in. Unable to see either Hector or Harper, he returned to the now wildly uneven ground for a closer look, knocking an upturned rock over with his rough landing.

'Damn,' he said. 'I know the place wasn't in such great shape when we left it, but now it just looks like a bomb went off.'

'See anyone?' said Voreese.

'Looking.'

Harper appeared in a flash, standing right in front of Roman. But he didn't attack. Instead, the light dimmed all around him, and he collapsed face-first into the mud.

Roman stared at him a moment. "Huh.""

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Roman stared at him a moment. “Huh.””

Darsihm melted out of Harper's back, a formless mass at first, then slowly becoming an ethereal crow again.

"You conscious?" said Roman. A beat passed. "You alive?"

Neither answered.

"Hmm. I suppose if you were dead, there wouldn't be anything left of you." He picked the reaper up with a soul-empowered hand and then hoisted Harper over his shoulder.

That only left Hector. And with all the rubble around, the kid could be just about anywhere.

'Hey, is Hector even alive?' he asked.

There was a pause, and then Voreese said, 'Garovel can't recreate him from scratch, so he must be there somewhere.'

'Dammit, why's that kid gotta be so resilient? I don't wanna search through all this shit.'

'What about Harper?'

'Yeah. Already found him. Pretty sure he's just unconscious. Darsihm, too.' He flipped over a bisected tree trunk. 'Aha, hey. Think I see Hector.' He moved closer and pulled a pair of legs out of the ground. 'Aw, shit. It's just his legs. Hmm. Guess he'll be wanting these pants, though.'

'Y'know, you could try calling out to him.'

'Good idea.' Pants and belt draped over one arm, he started shouting. "Hector! Where are you, pal?! If your lungs still work, then say something!"

Rather than a voice, a sudden spire shot up on the other side of the rock formation. When Roman made his way over, he found Hector's upper body in the midst of regeneration. Crumbled chunks of his helm remained around his head, and he had one-and-a-half of his arms, but his chest had yet to fully reform. Roman could see Hector blinking at him.

“Well, now,” said Roman. “This brings back memories. You managed to stay conscious this time, though.”

--+-+--+--

It took a while to reach the nearest rallying point. Karkash didn't even know where it was. Because he didn't need to. Hoyochté had all the fallback locations and contingency plans memorized. This one was a long-abandoned gas station, and it stood some fifty kilometers north of the Carthrace Nature Reserve.

Karkash was the first to arrive, of course. He took a seat on the roof, which groaned under his weight but held together.”  
"575

Hoyochté floated behind him, her hulking orca's body casting no shadow. 'I knew this assignment would be terrible,' she said in Vaelish. 'What other result could there be when working with such fools?'

"I don't understand how the Morgunovs ever accomplish anything at all," said Karkash, also in Vaelish. "It could only be the Void's will that has allowed them to last this long."

'I know what you mean, but I think it's something of a testament to Morgunov's abilities that he can organize and lead people like that.'

"Is he not as mad as people say?"

'Mad, certainly. A fool? No. I've only met him once, but I've seen his work. He's just as much a genius as he is insane.'

"Would you say he is smarter than Dozer?"

'Of course not. Dozer is the true vessel of the Void's will and power. There is no competing with him.'

"Unless your name happens to be Sermung, apparently."

'Let's not turn this into an argument.'

Karkash rubbed his neck as he stretched it. "You know my faith in Dozer is strong. I wasn't trying to argue anything. But regimes do

change. Sooner or later. And there's only so much we can do about it."

'Not this again. You don't have the power to be speaking words such as those. As servants go, you're still a child. I'd hope today has taught you that much, at least.'

"I understand the limits of my strength. It's the limits of others that I question."

'Enough.'

They waited for a long while. Honestly, Karkash didn't expect anyone else to have survived the fight. Waiting in this place seemed like a waste of time, but unsurprisingly, Hoyóhté was adamant that they follow protocol. He occupied himself with meditation, and eventually, the reaper stirred him out of it.

'I sense Ezmortig,' she said.

He opened his eyes and looked out over the lowlands. A vast reach of grass stretched toward the horizon, and in the distance, he could just make out the shape of another reaper headed toward them.

"Surprising.""

"576

When Ezmortig was close enough, he started to recreate Desmond. The brain was the first thing to appear, growing out from a speck on the ground and from there, it only took a few minutes for the man's body to regenerate fully.

Desmond took a deep breath, stretching his jaw muscles with one hand as he looked around at Karkash and the two reapers. He was nude, of course, but he didn't seem to mind very much. He gave a loud sniff and cracked his neck. "So I guess things didn't go very well for us, did they?"

'I'm fairly certain that everyone else is dead,' said Ezmortig. 'Hanjir and Jupard might've gotten away, but I suspect Roman killed them.'

"Who's Roman?" said Desmond.

'The flying man that Karkash was fighting. We fought him, too, back when we tried to kill the Queen the first time. He told us his name at

Belgrant Castle, though you probably don't remember. His reaper's name is Voreese.'

Desmond squinted. "That was the same guy? I don't remember him flying around before."

'Seems his power has grown since then,' said Ezmortig.

'You should have killed him the first time, then,' said Hoyohté. 'If that man had not been present today, the fight might have gone very differently.'

"Pfft, whatever. I seem to recall you not killing the metal kid on two separate occasions. Three, now. Oh, and let's not forget about your little stunt with Stoker and Nize. If you'd just let them go--or better yet, let me handle it--then maybe you wouldn't have ended up on television and put the entire fucking plan in jeopardy for no reason."

'In our sect, we make an example of treasonous cowards,' said Hoyohté. 'I do not expect you to understand.'

Ezmortig interjected. 'Calm down. It's no use complaining at this point. Anyway, the real problem was the man with the light powers. Even if Karkash had been free to attack more, I highly doubt it would have made a difference. No offense.'

Karkash merely gave a small shrug and folded his arms.

"Eh, fuck it," said Desmond, shaking his head. "So what's the plan now?"

"577

'We should return to headquarters,' said Ezmortig.

'Are you sure?' said Hoyohté. 'We can still fall back to our allies in Kahm, no?'

Ezmortig shook his huge head. 'This operation is lost. We'd need to bring someone in who could kill that light bastard, but this mission just doesn't have that kind of priority. Atreya isn't important enough right now.'

'I was told that this operation was critical for establishing Abolish's

dominance over the continent.'

'Ah. Well. Our captain tends to exaggerate when she gets excited.'

Hoyohté swam up behind Karkash, and her voice bristled with irritation as she said, 'We would not have come here if we had known that this was just some trivial fancy for your sect.'

'Yeah,' was all Ezmortig said.

Desmond snickered, drawing Karkash's glare.

'You waste our time,' said Hoyohté. 'I do not find that amusing.'

'Oh, please. Your people knew this assignment was probably horseshit when they only sent two servants to assist. Simple risk-reward scheme. They wanted to send someone so that if things went well, they could claim to have helped, but they obviously didn't want to devote any real resources to it. And all the while, both sides could dress it up as the spirit of cooperation, which is always good for morale.'

'Hmph.'

'But you knew that already,' said Ezmortig. 'C'mon. There's no need to play dumb with me. I know you're smarter than you would have me believe. The way you ferreted out those traitors of yours, led them right into a trap--and by pretending to be overeager and stupid, no less. You're really quite calculating, aren't you? No doubt, you were hoping this assignment would help you gain traction with your superiors, too.'

"You talk too much," said Karkash.

Desmond laughed. "He does talk too much. There's no stopping him once he gets going. But still, I've learned that he's worth listening to. I'm sure you'll understand that we're pretty good friends to have, if you give us a chance."

Karkash eyed them flatly. "You both talk too much."

"578

'Look,' said Ezmortig, 'I understand. You're upset. You think this has all been for naught. And maybe it has been. But how about we make it

up to you?’

There was a long pause, and then Hoyohté said, ‘I’m listening.’

‘Before you return to Vaeland, come with us to Calthos.’

“Whoa, hey,” said Desmond. “Ez, please. We don’t need to--”

‘Shut up, Desmond. I’m negotiating.’

Hoyohté looked between them. ‘Why Calthos? Your headquarters is in Kavia, no?’

‘It is. We’d only stop in Calthos briefly. You see, a while back, Desmond came into some money. Which is in Calthos.’

‘Money?’ said Hoyohté.

Desmond frowned.

‘Compensation for your time,’ said Ezmortig. ‘I’m sure a smart woman like yourself could think of all kinds of uses for it.’

‘And you would simply give us this money freely,’ she said, more than a little doubtful.

‘Well, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping for anything in return, but it’s completely up to you. Think of it as an extension of trust, an offer of good faith in hopes of fostering future partnership.’

‘Ah... I see. You’re one of the ambitious ones.’

‘Aren’t we all?’

‘Ha. Rather a bold investment, don’t you think? You hardly know us.’

‘Simple risk-reward scheme,’ he said again. ‘And it’s not that bold, really. We have a LOT of money.’

‘Will your captain not be upset that you are spending funds without her approval?’

‘Let me worry about that.’

‘Ah. She doesn’t know you have it, does she?’

Ezmortig chose not to answer.

‘If it is as much money as you say, then your captain would have taken it from you and used it elsewhere. You certainly would not be given such access to it as you claim to have.’

‘Maybe she just trusts me.’

‘If that were true, you would not be here. As you said, Atreya is not important right now. Is that what this is all about, then? You feel you are being undervalued in your sect? Looking for a way to move up in the world, perhaps?’

“Now who talks too much?” said Desmond.

"579 -- LXVII.

‘Our circumstances are not your problem,’ said Ezmortig. ‘Rather, they’re to your benefit. So what do you say? Will you come to Calthos with us?’

Karkash wasn’t certain what to make of this offer. He didn’t like Desmond very much, but Ezmortig at least seemed competent. He looked at Hoyohté as she deliberated. She didn’t ask his opinion, and he knew she would probably just ignore him if he gave it.

‘Very well,’ she eventually said. ‘We will go with you.’

‘Wonderful. Like-minded friends are a rare sort, you know. I’m sure our partnership will become the stuff of legends.’

‘Do not get ahead of yourself.’

‘Of course.’

Desmond scratched his bare ass as he turned around, facing the eastern horizon. “It’ll take a while to reach Calthos. Unless Sunshine over there can fly and carry me at the same time.”

Karkash glanced at Hoyohté. ‘Should I?’ he asked.

She gave him a small nod.

He pointed at the back of Desmond’s head. Lightning exploded through it.



Desmond's body fell over, headless now as well as naked.

Ezmortig eyed the corpse and sighed. 'You could have warned him, at least.'

"More fun this way," said Karkash.

Hoyohté chuckled. 'And they say we have no sense of humor.'

Chapter Sixty-Seven: 'Blessings be upon thee...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Once Roman found him, Hector wasn't conscious for very much longer. He was completely gone even before they'd made it back to the others.

So he slept. Deep and familiar, warm and embracing. And he awoke, as he had many times before, to the sound of Garovel's voice.

'Get up, Hector.'

His eyes took their time focusing. He saw blue sheets in front of him, and he slowly realized that he was lying on his side. He turned over and rubbed his face.

'I know you still need more time to rest,' said Garovel. 'I'll let you sleep all you want later.'

He sat up and found a well of pain waiting for him. "Guh!"

'Yeah. Sorry about that. You can handle it, though, right?'

"Fffghhh--!" Every part of him burned. He buried his face in his pillow and growled out a few muffled curses. It helped. He hadn't felt this much pain in a while."

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"580

‘C’mon, Hector. Just walk it off.’

Hector grit his teeth. “Fucking...! Agh...!”

‘Pain is just an illusion, Hector. Like friendship or personal happiness.’

That wrenched a laugh out of him. “Garovel, you suck...”

‘Yeah, yeah.’

He looked around, and it took him a moment to understand what he saw. It was a bedchamber, but it certainly wasn’t any place he’d stayed before. A large, clean desk and lamp sat adjacent a cedar shelf filled with scores of books, and a tall window with silvery curtains offered natural light into the room. His bare feet touched a silken rug, and he noticed that the room had two different doors as well, each on a different wall. “Where the hell...?”

‘We’re in the royal palace. In Sescoria, that is. We’ve been here for three days already.’

He held a hand to his forehead. “Oh, man... what’d I miss?”

‘I’ll tell you while you get ready. The bathroom is the door on your right, by the way.’

“Get ready for what?” he said, sluggishly making his way to the

bathroom.

‘Dinner with the Queen.’

He stopped, and his eyes widened. “Oh shit...”

Garovel snickered. 'Hector. Something actually NICE is happening. And we're not dead! We survived. Try to appreciate that much, at least.'

"Ah... yeah. Is everyone...? I mean, uh, how is everyone?"

'They're safe. You stopped Harper from hurting anyone else. I decided to wake you up, because Harper and Darsihm are awake now, too. I thought you'd like to have dinner with everyone, especially since Roman and Gina are leaving in the morning.'

"Oh. Uh... th-thanks." He went through the door and found a change of clothes next to the spotless sink. He saw himself in the mirror and blinked, abruptly remembering that first day after Garovel originally revived him. It felt so different this time, yet so familiar. His face still had that same gloomy look as before, but he didn't mind it so terribly now. His hair had grown out a little, though, and that, he did mind. It'd always looked like the rough side of a blackened sponge to him."

"581

Hector sifted through the drawers beneath the sink, hoping for a razor to shave his head with, but he only found an assortment of soaps, shampoos, and extra towels. He considered trying to shave his head with materialized metal but soon decided against it.

"So, um... what's gonna happen now? I mean, uh, is Atreya safe from Abolish?"

'For the time being, it is,' said Garovel. 'The Queen's been busy trying to make sure things stay that way. Well, she's just been busy in general, really.'

Hector turned on the shower and pulled his shirt off. "What about the war with Rendon?"

The reaper phased through the wall and gave him his privacy. 'It's been averted.'

'Just like that?' said Hector, stretching while he waited for the water to warm up. It didn't take nearly as long as he thought it would.

'I suppose it sounds simpler than it was. Less than a day after finally returning here to Sescoria, the Queen went to Rendon--against pretty

much everyone's advice, mind you. But she knew what she was doing. Peace negotiations are now underway. And the Atreyan soldiers whom Rendon had taken into custody, she brought them home safely, too.'

He lowered his brow and chuckled. 'How'd she pull that off?'

'I didn't go with her to Rendon, obviously, but I'm sure it was the spectacle of it all that made it possible. First thing she did when she got back? Appeared before the press, right out there on the front steps of the royal palace. She hadn't even made it inside the building yet. She ensured they'd be here waiting for her as soon as she arrived. And of course, this was gigantic news, so the whole country knew about it in a matter of hours. Then she and the King jumped on a plane and went straight to Rendon. They took Lynn and Roman along in case things went south, but it seems to have gone smoothly. I suppose Rendon didn't really want to go to war, and with all of the insanely good press that the Queen's gotten, she was able to offer their parliament an easy way out of a terrible situation.'"

"582

'Wow,' said Hector. 'Pretty bold move... But I guess the Queen wouldn't need to be too worried about getting captured by a bunch of normal Rendon soldiers.'

'Yeah.'

'So... I guess... everything worked out?'

'You say that like you had nothing to do with it.'

'I mean, I'm just... kind of... shocked.' And on top of everything, his shower soap smelled amazing.

'I know what you mean. We've scored a pretty huge win on this one. It's almost worrying, how well things have turned out.'

'You mean like something really bad is about to happen?'

'Aw, Hector, don't say that. You'll jinx it.'

'Wouldn't it be more of a jinx not to mention it at all? And besides, you're not even superstitious.'

‘Mm. Both good points.’

He finished up his shower and got changed. The white shirt had a flaring black collar and silver buttons, and its long sleeves fit his arms perfectly. The pants suited him similarly well, and he wondered if someone had taken his measurements while he slept. As he slipped into a fresh pair of thickly-soled shoes, there came a knock at the door. He opened it to find Harper Norez there.

“Evening, Hector.” The man looked rather haggard, slumped over with heavy eyes. Darsihm clung to his back, a kind of ethereal lump that didn’t look anything like a skeleton at the moment.

“Hello, Mr. Harper. Ah... you don’t look so well.”

The man smirked. “I can’t be feeling much worse than you, I imagine. I heard about what we did to you. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no, no,” said Hector. “Don’t worry about it. I mean--uh. You saved everyone. If you hadn’t done that, then, uh... Abolish would’ve killed us all.”

“Well, yeah. I’m still sorry you ended up in that position, though. If we’d had more control, things wouldn’t have gotten so bad.”

“Really, Mr. Harper, it’s fine.”

‘Yeah,’ added Garovel. ‘Hector’s accustomed to getting the shit kicked out of him.’

That made Harper laugh. “I see.”

“Is, um... is Darsihm okay?”

“Oh yeah. He’s going to be out of it for a couple weeks still, but he’ll be fine.””

"583

Hector was about to leave with Harper, but Garovel stopped him.

‘Hold up,’ the reaper said. ‘There’s a hat for you by the bed. Put it on.’

It was an officer’s cap, he saw. “Uh... why?”

‘Not many people know you’re here, but if you’ll recall, a LOT of people know your face. We don’t want to incite a panic while you’re strolling around the palace. There’s a fake mustache in the drawer, too.’

Hector opened the drawer and sure enough, it was there, bushy and gray and ridiculous-looking. “You... you’re joking.”

‘Of course I’m joking. But seriously, wear it. When people see it, they’ll think, “Aha, that’s silly!” and not, “Oh fuck, it’s the Darksteel Soldier!” Which is what we’re going for.’

“Can’t I just make a mask for myself?”

‘That would probably scare people, too.’

“Agh... what about my motorcycle helmet?”

‘I had Roman hide it from you.’

“You asshole...”

‘Oh, c’mon. You know you’ve always wanted a sweet stache like that one.’

He looked to Harper for help, but the man only offered a sympathetic shrug. Hector finally caved. He donned the hat and then the mustache, peeling away the layer of plastic on the back to stick it on his upper lip. It was too big for his face, nearly covering his entire mouth and even poking him in the cheeks.

Garovel busted out laughing and didn’t stop, which made Harper crack up as well.

“I hate everything,” said Hector. And he shook his head, but the reaper’s laughter was getting to him, too.

They made their way out into the hall. Apparently, Harper didn’t know where to go, so Garovel led the way. The palace was certainly busy, people bustling to and fro everywhere Hector looked. And of course, the building itself was enough to make him gawk. Every corridor was at least five times taller than him, and the walls were all a pristine white, frequently adorned with enormous paintings. Columns of blue marble rounded off every corner, and it seemed like there were never any sharp edges anywhere, apart from perhaps the massive chandeliers that hung down over every intersection."



Garovel gave them something of a tour as they walked, explaining where each new corridor led to and even pointing out various people among the crowds as being international representatives.

'Oh, and I should probably mention,' the reaper said, slowing a little but not stopping, 'the night before we returned, three of the Queen's brothers were murdered.'

Hector's eyes widened, and he looked at Harper, who seemed equally surprised. He looked at Garovel again. "Um, Prince David, ah...?"

'He's alive. Him, Meriwether, and Luther are fine, but apparently Luther was the one responsible for the killings, so he's been imprisoned. The Queen's already held a joint funeral service, despite the fact that those same brothers were also traitors who tried to assassinate her. I'm sure it's a rather confusing and difficult situation for her, so maybe don't ask about her family over dinner, yeah? If she wants to talk about it, just let her bring it up on her own.'

"Understood," said Harper. "Thanks for the warning."

'Sure.'

They arrived at an enormous banquet hall, but they didn't stop there. Garovel led them toward the far corner and into an offshoot chamber which was much smaller and mostly filled with one large table. Roman and Gina were already here, as were David and Meriwether, and also Vanessa Goffe, who sat at the other end of the table. Voreese was present as well, and she was the first to greet them.

'Finally, someone else who can actually see me,' she said. 'Was getting tired of talking to that clod.'

Roman threw them a look from across the room but was apparently too invested in his conversation with Gina to do anything more.

Hector just gave her a smile and left Harper and Garovel to keep her company. He made his way over to his mother.

When she saw him coming, she stiffened. She looked in slightly better health than before, but that may've only been due to the makeup she

was wearing now.

He pulled out the chair next to her but didn't sit down just yet. "Mom... uh... how are you? Have they been treating you well here?"

"585

His mother chose not to answer the question and instead asked one of her own. "What the hell are you wearing?"

"Ah..." He pulled off the mustache. "Just a prank someone played on me."

"You shouldn't let people make a fool of you."

"It's not like that," said Hector.

"Hmph."

He sat down and glanced across the table at the others. He still found it difficult to make eye contact with his mother, but he tried his best. "I'm sorry I haven't been around the past few days. I've been unconscious, so... yeah."

She didn't have anything to say to that.

'She knows what happened to you,' said Garovel, and Hector flinched a little, only now realizing the reaper had followed. 'Believe it or not, she visited you several times. Not sure if it was because she was concerned about you or what. She didn't say much.'

Vanessa took a long breath, perhaps irritated, perhaps just bored. "So what are you going to do now, anyway?"

"Uh... I'm not sure yet."

"We can't stay here in the palace forever. And I assume we're not returning to Brighton, either."

His brow receded. It struck him as odd that she was already accepting of the idea that she would continue living with him. He thought it would surely be an ordeal, convincing her to stay where he could protect her. "I'll figure something out soon," he said. "Seems like things've finally calmed down a bit, so... ah..."

She just nodded and fell silent again.

He gave up trying to get a read on her. After a few moments, Prince David and Prince Meriwether took the opening and approached. Hector stood to greet them.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you in person," said David. He and his brother both looked rather tired as they took turns shaking hands with Hector.

"Uh, I'm, ah..."

David tilted his head. "I'm Prince David. We spoke on the phone? And corresponded via text? You do remember, yes?"

"Y-yeah, of course. I'm just, um--I... it's very nice to meet you. Oh, and I'm sorry about, uh... about threatening you before..."

"586

David laughed. "I should think we're more than past that by now. Is everything okay? You seem nervous."

"Ah, s-sorry, uh..."

Thankfully, the Queen's arrival saved him further embarrassment. Compared to his previous encounters with her, however, she looked decidedly different, thanks in no small part to her midnight blue gown with elaborate swirls of white, silver, and gold. He almost didn't recognize her, the change was so stark, but after a moment, he vaguely remembered seeing her in dresses on television. Before all this, he'd never paid much attention to what the royals were up to. If he'd ever expected to meet any of them, that might have been different. The King and Lynn both followed her into the room, and all three of their faces lit up when they saw him.

"Hector!" said the Queen. "I was not expecting to see you here! What a pleasant surprise. I have been wanting to speak with you."

As all eyes turned to him, he had to resist the urge to run out of the room. Instead, he merely flushed crimson.

Garovel floated up next to Hector and addressed Helen as he said,

‘Really? If you wanted to ask him something, you could have just asked me.’

‘Nah,’ said a smirking Mehlsanz, who had of course accompanied her servant into the room as well. ‘This is the kind of thing that should be discussed in person.’

As soon as the Queen sat down at the table, the food began to arrive. Hector pulled down on the brim of his hat and turned away from the door, not wanting to risk scaring any of the staff members. Perhaps the Queen understood this, because as soon as the last dish was set, she ushered the attendants out of the room and told them not to disturb her meal. She returned to a very quiet table, however, and had to throw a curious look across it.

Clad in a guardsman’s attire, Roman broke the silence for everyone. “I think we’re all wondering what you wanted to talk to Hector about.”

“Ah,” said Helen. “If you must know, I wanted to discuss the matter of Hector’s heroism in the preservation of Atreya and its citizens. Specifically, I wanted to ask what manner of reward he would like.” Everyone looked at Hector again, then back at the Queen.

Helen smiled warmly. “What do you think, Hector? I was thinking something along the lines of, perhaps, a castle.””  
"587 -- LXVIII.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: ‘Of measured worth...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector’s mouth hung open as he looked at the Queen. He wasn’t sure he heard her right. He couldn’t have.

‘Whoa, whoa,’ said Voreese. ‘You’re giving away castles? Can we have one, too?’

“Voreese, no,” said Roman. “Hector’s one thing, but we definitely don’t need or want anything from the Queen.”

“Are you certain?” said Helen. “I have no qualms about granting you lordship over lands of your own.”

Roman bowed his head forward a little. "That's very generous, but it'd be problematic for me if people found out that I was working with the government. In the circles I frequent, that kind of information is liable to ruin a man's reputation."

"I see," she said. "Am I to expect lobbying requests for favors from you, then?"

Roman leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "It's not like I have leverage over you or anything. I'd just appreciate if you and I could maintain a certain amicability moving forward. Having a friend in your position would be nice for me, and likewise, having a friend in my position would be nice for you."

The Queen gave a nod.

'Fuck that, I want a castle!' said Voreese.

Roman rolled his eyes. "Voreese, shut up."

'No, you idiot! If she's just giving shit away, then I want Warrenhold!'

Now Roman just seemed confused. "Why? And what is that, even?"

'Ugh! Because--!' She cut herself off and looked at Mehlsanz and Garovel. 'Wait, am I the only one who knows?'

The other two reapers exchanged shrugs.

"Warrenhold?" said the Queen. "Are you referring to the Gray Warren?"

'Yeah! The fortress in Gray Rock! No one's lived there in ages, right? So it currently belongs to the Crown, right?'

"Yes, that is correct."

'Great! Then we'll take it!'

"No, we won't, Voreese! I can't accept land from the Queen! It'll ruin everything! Why do you even care so much?!"

Voreese grumbled and looked around the table. Her hollow eyes fell upon Hector. 'Hector. Sweetie. And Garovel. You handsome devil. Choose Warrenhold. So we can visit you. It'll be delightful.'

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"588

‘Perhaps you could explain what is so special about this Warrenhold place before we decide,’ said Garovel.

Voreese looked over her audience. ‘Well, it’s old as shit! In a good way! Lots of history, very defensible, and tons of space underground.’ She leveled a stare at Garovel. ‘Trust me on this one. You’ll thank me.’

A silent pause followed, and Hector was left to wonder what the non-servants at the table must be thinking of this conversation, watching the Queen and Roman talk to their imaginary friends. However, Hector noticed that most of them weren’t even watching, really, instead taken to enjoying the feast laid before them. He realized he hadn’t even started eating yet, despite being utterly famished, so he decided to dig in as well.

‘Okay,’ said Garovel. ‘We’ll take Warrenhold. If Her Majesty is actually offering it to us, that is.’

The Queen tilted her head. “Are you certain? Perhaps you should visit it before deciding. Unless my memory is mistaken, the Gray Warren was forced to endure an earthquake some years ago. You may not come to find it in the most desirable state.”

‘Eh, we’ll make do,’ said Garovel. ‘No need to draw things out. We’ll take up less of your time this way.’

Helen eyed the two reapers a moment, perhaps skeptical, but then said, “Very well. You will have the papers by the week’s end.” She turned to Hector. “Do you find that agreeable?”

“Oh, um, sure... but, uh...” He faltered again under everyone’s gaze.

“Yes?” said the Queen, as they all waited for him.

“S-sorry, it’s just... maybe I’m missing something, but, uh...” His fists clenched under the table as he forced the rest of the words out.

“Wouldn’t it be a problem for, uh, Your Highness, if you give such an incredible gift to... well, me? I mean, I’m pretty hated by... ah, everyone...”

“Once the public knows the truth, that will not be a problem,” said Helen. “I intend to address the matter of your innocence in front of the press very soon. In fact, I was hoping you might accompany me when I do.””

"589

‘Pfft, are you kidding?’ said Garovel. ‘You want Hector to appear on television? I thought you wanted to reward him, not torture him.’

“He has done it before, has he not?” said Helen. “He threatened the town of Harold to facilitate its evacuation, no?”

‘That was a recording, and it still required about fifty takes.’

“Ah--Garovel’s right,” said Hector. “I really don’t--please don’t ask me to--I just--agh...”

“Very well,” said the Queen. “I understand. Regardless, it will require time. I can order the police and the military to stop hunting you easily enough, but I would ask that you take a well-deserved respite while we attempt to win the public over.”

‘Mm, dunno about that,’ said Garovel. ‘Hector’s pretty gung-ho when it comes to protecting innocent people.’



Hector gave the reaper a look. 'You say that like you're any different.'

'He can be so stubborn,' Garovel went on. 'I don't think an inconvenience of reputation would be enough to stop him from going out and looking for trouble.'

Her Highness smiled warmly and nodded. "Yes, well, protecting people would not be a problem, but it would be helpful if you could avoid taking the blame for crimes you did not commit."

'There go my plans for the weekend,' said Garovel.

'How do you intend to tell the public, exactly?' asked Voreese.

'Carefully,' said Mehlsanz. 'Most of the blame will fall upon Luther as the orchestrator of everything. Unfortunately, we can't really name Abolish as the instigator unless we want to give them more reason to return and silence us.'

"They may try to do that, anyway," said Harper, who'd thus far only listened quietly as he ate.

'We're aware,' said Mehlsanz. 'We were hoping you would stay here in Atreya for a while longer.'

"That's fine with me," said Harper. "I don't have any pressing business elsewhere at the moment, but you should know, I could be called away at any time. Out there in the world, if something big enough happens, my superiors might well contact me. And that's not going to be the kind of thing that I can just ignore.""

"590

"I understand and thank you for all your help," said the Queen. "If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to ask."

Harper laughed. "Oh, do I get a castle, too?"

"If you desire one, yes."

"Ha, that's okay. My whole reason for being here is to protect you, so I'd rather stay wherever you do, if you don't mind."

"Of course. You are more than welcome here."

King William took the opportunity to break into the conversation.  
“Where are you from, Mr. Norez?”

“Oh, nowhere,” said Harper. “Or everywhere, depending on how you look at it. I don’t really identify with any particular place anymore. I travel too much for that. This is my first time in Atreya, though. I’m liking it so far.”

“Now that the genocidal maniacs are gone, you mean,” said Roman.

“That is definitely a step up, yes,” said Harper. He looked at the King again. “Ah, but my apologies, Your Highness. I suppose that’s not a very satisfying answer to your question, is it? I can at least say that I was born in Jesbol, though I don’t have many memories from there. My parents escaped when the Jungle Wars began spreading.”

“The Jungle Wars?” said William. “That was some sixty years ago, and yet you do not look a day over thirty.”

“I moisturize.”

The Queen laughed faintly and turned to her husband. “Reapers may choose to prevent their servants from aging, dear.”

“There’s that, too,” said Harper. “But I’m pretty sure it’s the moisturizing. I mean, just look at my skin.”

--++--++--

It was raining, but that was no rare thing, nor was it even that heavy. Already at the age of twelve, Marcos Elroy was accustomed to much more than this meager drizzle. There wasn’t even any flooding; he could still see the grass beneath the playground, or more accurately, beneath the platform on which the playground stood, on which the entire city stood.

Sometimes, the rain was so strong, it was like living on the sea. Or at least, he thought it was. He’d never been to the sea.”

"591

Playing basketball in his bulky blue raincoat wasn’t the easiest thing, but he knew that his mother would get mad at him again if she found

out he took it off, and he didn't want her to forbid him from coming out here to play. After all, his school had an indoor court and so did the youth club near the estate. But he didn't have any friends in those places.

The past few times, he'd felt stupid for being the only one wearing a raincoat, so this time, he'd brought enough for everyone. Now the court bustled with a group of flailing, child-shaped blueberries.

For some reason, they tried to return the coats to him after the game was over, and Marcos had to refuse them. He thought it was obvious that they were gifts, so he didn't understand why his friends seemed so reluctant. He ended up just running away before they could put up any more of a fuss. Besides, he didn't want to carry them all the way back home. Carrying them all the way here had been a big enough pain, already.

The journey back required a good bit of legwork, and Marcos had always been taught not to run when the ground was so wet, so he resorted to a brisk walk as soon as he was out of sight.

It was sometimes easy to forget that Aguary stood on a platform. It had asphalt roads and concrete walkways and grassy parks. The only real reminders were the perforated drains that riddled the ground and the madega trees, which all had their own holes to stand in. They were already massive things to look at with their sprawling canopies of wispy teal leaves, but to then realize that below the platform, the madegas all had another five meters of trunk, made them seem all the more impressive. But of course, they were older than Aguary itself, so perhaps that was only to be expected.

When Marcos arrived at the gatehouse, the pair of guards made him pull back his hood before smiling and welcoming him home. Nico and Jorem were their names, and they didn't look very friendly, but that was probably the whole idea. They were always nice to him, at least."

"592

Marcos proceeded up to the Main House, stopping briefly under the overhang to wipe his feet and shake some of the water off his coat. He pushed through the tall doors, hung his coat up, and pulled his boots off. Dinner was soon to arrive, he knew, but until then, he had time to kill.

He found Cisco in the center hall--or rather, Cisco found him, slipping up behind him and pinning both his arms behind his back, holding him in place. "Hey, brat. Can you get out of this yet?"

"Stop!"

"Come on. Get out of it."

Marcos thrashed fruitlessly. "I can't!"

"Yes, you can. I showed you how."

"I can't! Just let me go!"

"No."

"If you don't let me go, I'll yell!"

Cisco released him with a shove, and Marcos nearly fell over. "You're pathetic."

"And you're an ass!"

"Whatever. Go cry to Ma if you want." Cisco walked away.

Marcos scowled and rubbed his sore shoulders. He had four siblings, and he definitely hated Cisco the most. Cisco was the second-oldest, having four years on him, but Gema was never around anymore, so Cisco still got to play the role of eldest.

He decided to head up to his corner room on the third floor, but he encountered his father on the stairwell first. Marcos had never known a sterner face than that of his father. The man's jawline and cheek bones were harsh enough to cut with. The stone gray irises and bushy black eyebrows were both traits that he had passed on to all of his children, even the girls.

This man, Zeff Elroy, was a Rainlord of Sair, and by extension, so too were all of his kin. Admittedly, Marcos didn't know what all that entailed, but he knew that it meant his father was important to the government in some way and that it was an honor to bear his name.

When Zeff's cool gaze fell upon his son, he offered the boy an acknowledging nod. "Marcos."

"Pa." He wished he could deliver such a simple greeting with as much

gravitas. One day, maybe."  
"593

"Did you have fun with your friends?" his father asked.

"Yes, ensir," said Marcos.

"Good. Go get cleaned up before dinner."

"Yes, ensir."

"Wait. Have you wished your sister a happy birthday?"

Marcos averted his gaze. "Ah..."

"That comes first, then."

He tried not to groan. "Do I have to?"

"Yes."

"But she hates me."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because she said so to my face."

"And did you perhaps do something to provoke her before she said that?"

"No, ensir," he lied.

Zeff knelt down to look his son in the eye. "Your sister does not hate you. She is merely different from you and the others. You should show your support for her, especially when she is having a difficult time. Understood?"

"Yes, ensir."

"Remember this, Marcos: an effective means of measuring a man's character is by observing how he treats his loved ones. See to it that you may not be measured as such and found lacking."

Someone should've told that to Cisco, Marcos thought. He held his

tongue, however, and simply nodded. He watched his father walk away and then proceeded up the stairs.

Emy's room was on the third floor as well, across the hall from his own. Marcos knocked on the door.

"What is it?" came her voice.

"Uh, I was just wondering how you're doing."

There was a pause as footsteps stomped toward the door. She cracked the door open and looked through. "What?" As of today, she was still only two years older than him, but she looked like more than that. It was so unfair that girls got to mature more quickly than boys.

"Listen, I'm sorry about the frog. And the mouse."

"Mice," she corrected.

"Mice."

"And the roaches," she went on. "And the snake."

"Yeah, those too. Sorry."

She just eyed him doubtfully.

"And, uh--happy birthday?" Not a question, but he offered it like one.

"Thanks," she said flatly.

"But you know, the snake wasn't dangerous. You didn't have to freak out as much as--"

She slammed the door in his face.

He shrugged and moved on to his room."

"594 -- LXIX.

There'd been a stint in the past where part of the estate had been destroyed, which resulted in him having to bunk with Cisco temporarily. Needless to say, Marcos now fully appreciated his good fortune in having a room all to himself.

He washed his hands, dried his hair with a towel, and then made his way back downstairs.

Dinner was tenser than usual. For as long as Marcos could remember, their lord father had made a point of ensuring that the family always sat down and ate together, going so far as to ground any child who was late for the meal without good reason. It was a sacred time, often reserved for parental inquiries, but today was different. Emy's fourteenth birthday meant something special, something that everyone knew she was not looking forward to.

"You should just relax," said Cisco. "It's not even going to hurt."

Emy kept her eyes down at her plate as she said, "I don't expect you to understand."

Annoyance flashed across Cisco's face. "You're the one who doesn't understand. This is a good thing, you idiot."

"Francisco," said their mother, "do not speak to your sister that way. And Emiliana, do not scorn your brother's attempt to comfort you."

"Yes, enma'am," they both said.

Rare as it was, Marcos found himself in agreement with Cisco on this one. If he were in Emy's position, he would've been excited to finally be receiving a reaper. Even if it did mean dying.

Chapter Sixty-Nine: 'Thy bonds in blood...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

With the helium tank in hand, Zeff entered the center courtyard where the rest of his family was waiting for him. They all stood together on the small bridge over the pool as rain continued to fall, filling in the silence with a kind of pattering static. His wife held Emiliana's hand, who just looked pale as Zeff drew close. The other children stood nearby, but there was no one else around, as he had dismissed all of the family's attendants for the remainder of the evening. Excepting, of course, the four reapers who were also present."

"594 -- LXIX.

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"595

For Zeff, the reapers took on the appearance of overlarge bats--as big as hyenas and with similar faces but also bearing wings and glowing white eyes. They had a curious habit of hanging upside down just as normal bats might, only these ones didn't need to hang from anything, so they simply floated there in midair.

Among the four reapers here, there was one each for Zeff, his wife Mariana, and Francisco. The last would be the one to resurrect Emiliana.

As Zeff reached out to her, pressing the transparent gas mask toward her face, Emiliana suddenly began to tremble. "Mama, Papa, please!" she said. "I can't--! Please! Please don't make me do this!" She was already on the verge of tears and trying to pull away, but her mother held her firm.

A part of him wanted to chastise the girl. She didn't know how good she had it. Drowning was the original tradition, but having experienced it personally, Zeff decided to spare his own children that agony. He remembered his passing all too vividly. Panicked and terrible. In this very pool. Helium gas was nothing like that. Just as Francisco's had been, Emiliana's death would be peaceful and painless, like drifting off to sleep.

He wanted to tell her these things--things she already knew, had been told--but as he looked at her face, at the terrified expression of his baby girl, he found his heart slowly leaving him. He lowered the mask.

Everyone looked at him, the same silent question being asked. It was his own reaper who posed it.

'Zeff, what are you doing?' said Axiolis.

"We will wait a bit longer," said Zeff. He patted Emiliana on the head.

His wife did not look pleased. "Zeff," was all she said, and Zeff knew she would have said more if the children weren't present. Fortunately for her, Axiolis was more than happy to fill in.

'You shouldn't delay without good reason,' the reaper said. 'You're not

doing the girl any favors by postponing things.'

Zeff chose to ignore him and instead eyed the reaper meant for Emiliana. "I apologize for the inconvenience."

"596

'No hurry,' said the other reaper. 'I'm plenty patient.' This one's name was Chergoa.

Zeff gave a grateful nod.

Marcos stepped up next to his sister. "Hey, if Emy doesn't want her reaper, then I'll take it."

Zeff exhaled an amused breath. "No, Marcos. Emiliana will still be receiving her reaper. Just not tonight."

The relief on Emiliana's face seemed to lessen at that, but she nodded all the same. "Thank you, Papa..."

"Francisco, see that everyone gets ready for bed," said Mariana.

"Yes, enma'am."

After returning indoors, they parted ways with their children. The long corridor with ribbed arches in the ceiling gave them plenty of time to speak as they walked toward the Main House's master bedroom, all four of the reapers following.

"You do know that it is not because she is merely scared, don't you?" said Mariana.

"Yes," said Zeff.

"She's not like her sisters. Gema and Ramira are both tomboys, but Emiliana is about as girly as girls come."

Zeff threw his wife an odd look--curious and amused by the way she put it.

"She wants to marry young and live quietly as a mother," Mariana went on. "She wants a different kind of life for herself--one without all the commotion that the name Elroy brings with it."

He took a deep breath. "I know."

"Then why are you humoring her? It would be better to just get it over with and disillusion her now."

"Because I am wondering if that is necessary."

They arrived at their room, and Zeff entered first while Mariana stopped in the doorway. "What are you saying?"

Zeff looked to Chergoa. "I know this is not what you bargained for, but would you allow Emiliana to live quietly if she were your servant?"

Chergoa unfurled her black wings. 'Uh. I suppose I could do that. But what do you think, Axiolis? You're the one who recruited me into this Vanguard business.'

All eyes turned to Axiolis, and for a while, the reaper just stared at Zeff. 'Frankly, I'm not pleased by the idea. Nor will the General be.'

"597

"The General is not Emiliana's father," said Zeff. "And neither are you."

'Yes,' said Axiolis, 'but I think the argument here is that you would be taking a reaper away from the Vanguard for personal reasons.'

"Chergoa has not joined the Vanguard yet," said Zeff.

'That may not matter.'

'Is it necessary for her to have a reaper at all?' asked Chergoa. 'If she is only going to live quietly, then why even bother with all this?'

'Because she is an Elroy,' said Axiolis in Zeff's stead. 'Even if she changes her name and moves far away from here, trouble might still find her one day.'

'Ah. So I would be her backup plan, then.'

"I would ask you to prepare her," said Zeff. "If she is forced to fight, I want her capable of protecting herself."

'I can do that,' said Chergoa.

‘And what does the Lady Elroy think of this?’ asked Axiolis. ‘Do you agree with your husband?’

“I think the heart of a teenager is fickle and uncertain,” said Mariana. “She may desire a quiet life now, but what will she want in five years? Or ten?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want us to decide for her.”

“We decided for Francisco,” she said.

His expression darkened. “We also decided for Gema.”

Mariana’s face tightened, eyes narrowing a moment before looking away. “Gema made her own choices.”

“Only after we took away the one she wanted.”

The woman shook her head and sat down on their bed. “When did you become so indulgent?” she said, still not looking at him. “I thought I married a Rainlord.”

‘Rain isn’t always cold,’ said Axiolis, and Zeff was a bit surprised to find the reaper defending him.

So was Mariana, apparently. “I thought you were on my side.”

‘As a Vanguardian, I am. But as this man’s reaper, and as someone who considers your family my own, I do find your husband’s words convincing.’

Mariana sighed. “All this, because you can’t bear to see your daughter a bit frightened.”

Zeff merely folded his arms.”

"598

“Oh, very well,” Mariana conceded. “If that is your decision, then I will stand by you.”

“Thank you,” said Zeff.

‘So when would you like to perform the ceremony, then?’ asked

Chergoa.

"Tomorrow night," said Zeff. "That should allow more than enough time to explain the change in plans to her."

'Okay. I'll just haunt your neighborhood in the meantime.'

-+-+--+

David descended the long steps into the underbelly of the sterile white prison. As far as dungeons went, it didn't quite have the same medieval menace to it that he'd had in mind, but he supposed the eerie calm and cleanliness offered a different kind of discomfort.

Two guardsmen escorted him in silence, and he soon arrived in front of the designated cell with a transparent wall and a speaker box in the center. David hit the button on the right side to let his voice carry through. "Hello, Luther."

Luther sat up and tilted his head. "David. I was beginning to think you had forgotten about me down here."

"Oh, you will be getting plenty of attention soon enough."

"Ah. Am I to be executed, then? Given a farce trial, perhaps?"

"A trial, yes, but not for your execution. I'm told the prosecution will be seeking life imprisonment."

"Life imprisonment. Ha. That is an execution, too. Instead of a needle or a chair or an axe, it is simply a box and patience. In a way, it is much crueller--killing someone with time. Boring a person to death, taken literally."

"Shall I tell the prosecution you feel that way?"

Luther scowled and turned away.

"I thought not," said David.

"Why are you here?" said Luther. "To gloat?"

"Well..." David grinned. "Yes. That is exactly why I am here."

"Ugh." Luther shook his head in disgust. "I suppose this is what I get for acting so impulsively. I thought I saw a golden opportunity to eliminate all rivals. I should have known better."

“Indeed. It almost makes one wonder how you could be so foolhardy.”

Luther stared at him for a long moment. “Oh, you liar. You did come down here for another reason.”

“Did I?”

"599

“You came to observe my mood,” said Luther.

David smirked. “I am interested in your mood, am I? Dear brother, perhaps I should find you a larger cell. Your ego must be taking up so much room in this one.”

“Heh, I would not refuse the offer.” He stood and approached the clear wall, inspecting David’s face more closely. “But no, you are most certainly here to see how miserable I am. Because if I am not miserable, then you would begin to wonder why that is.”

“I would wonder that, yes. Are you miserable, then? Is there anything I can do to make you more so?”

“Knowing you, I am sure there is.” Luther pulled away and walked toward the other end of his cell. “What of our esteemed sister? She has not graced me with her presence.”

“I’m certain she will visit you eventually, but she has been rather busy of late. Cleaning up your mess, you understand.” There was a pause, and David almost expected Luther to crack some misogynistic joke about cleaning, but instead, the man merely asked a different question.

“And what about Meriwether?”

“What about him?” said David.

“He has yet to visit me, but if what you say is true about my stay of execution, then it would seem he has at least kept his promise to me.”

Briefly, David wasn’t sure what promise he was talking about, but then he remembered how Meri had managed to invoke Luther’s surrender. “Meri is a man of his word,” was all David said.

"I suppose I can no longer call him a fool."

"Not without being the bigger fool, no." As David expected, Luther was still unaware that their previous encounter had been a series of wild accidents. David was more than content with not correcting him.

Luther sat back down. "So what is your verdict, then? Am I hiding something?"

David was almost certain that he was. But instead of answering, he asked, "Are you not curious about your wife or your children?"

Luther paused. "Are they dead?"

"No, of course not."

"Damn."

"600

David squinted. "You hate them that much? Why?"

"Ask me that again after you have been married for seventeen years."

David could almost understand the man's hatred for his wife; that woman was a relentless ladder-climber, and to Luther, she probably embodied everything he despised about nobility. But still. "Your wife is one thing, but you even resent your own children?"

"I resent all insufferable nuisances."

David felt his irritation flare up, becoming true anger for a moment, and he couldn't keep himself from glowering.

"Oh, does that bother you?" said Luther. "Hmm. That is right, isn't it? You were always the affectionate uncle."

David breathed and wiped his expression clean again. "At least I can take solace in the fact that you are no longer part of their lives."

"On that, we can agree."

"There is hope for us yet."

That made Luther laugh outright, longer and more loudly than David

had perhaps ever heard from him. Admittedly, that wasn't saying much, but it was surprising just the same. When Luther's voice settled again, a small period of silence elapsed. And Luther looked suddenly hollow, as if that laugh had gouged a hole into him. "I genuinely wanted to trust you, you know. You were the only one I liked."

David had nothing for him. Four dead brothers. Countless innocent lives lost at the hands of Abolish. For this man here, David could hold no pity.

"Why did you have to side with Helen?" said Luther. "When I think of what you and I could have built, I feel like weeping for this country."

David couldn't even bring himself to humor the man. "You are mad."

And there it was again, that look in Luther's eyes. The cold, flat stare. After a moment, however, it was gone once more. "Enough," he said. "Let us continue our game. Am I hiding something, or am I not?"

"Of course you are," said David.

"Correct. Would you like to know what it is?"

"Sure."

"Wonderful. Then I will give you a hint. If you give me something first, of course."

"Well, I have two candy bars on me. I am willing to part with half of one, but only if you promise to tell the truth."

"601 -- LXX.

"That is not quite what I had in mind," said Luther.

"Well, okay. I'll give you a whole bar--but only if you really promise to tell the truth."

"I wonder if you will still be so funny once you figure it out."

"I hope so," said David. "I like to think that an unbreaking sense of humor is the pinnacle of human integrity. Or at least useful for annoying one's opponents."



"I want a television," said Luther.

David almost said no immediately. The most dangerous thing about Luther was his political mind, so granting him access to a news source would be a mistake. But after debating it in his head a little more, David decided that he could work around that problem. With a deliberate bit of reluctance, he said, "I can do that."

Luther eyed him a moment, probably skeptical of how easy that was. "Television first. And a written agreement of exchange."

"Of course. I will speak to your lawyer and have everything sorted."

Chapter Seventy: 'O, abiding blade...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Following Her Highness around all day long was more exhausting than she thought it would be. It also didn't help that she still wasn't feeling her best, what with her ribcage throbbing whenever she took too large a breath. She tried not to let it show, though, and as far as she could tell, she succeeded.

The promotion to being the Queen's personal bodyguard had taken Lynnette by surprise. Moreover, Her Highness wanted her to continue wearing the white cloak as a symbol of the position, as the media had already latched onto it when she and Hector kidnapped King William--an act now known to the public as one of liberation. They'd taken to calling her the White Sword. Lynnette wasn't really sure what to make of it, but seeing as the Queen had already spun it to their advantage, there wasn't much left to do but just accept it. She wondered if it had felt this weird for Hector when people started calling him the Darksteel Soldier. She'd have to ask him whenever he woke up again."

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"602

Over the course of the week, the Queen held a large press conference

every single day, inviting a different batch of reporters each time. Lynnette attended all of them, as Her Highness wanted her to be a constant presence in the background. A few times, the media directed questions at Lynnette, but she decided to remain quiet and let Her Highness do all the talking.

The topic of Hector Goffe proved to be one of the most difficult. The Queen explained, repeatedly, that he was no longer a fugitive, that she considered him a national hero. Instead of trying to explain how the people Hector was accused of killing had been dead already, the Queen chose a simplified version of the truth: that their deaths were not his doing. Furthermore, she went on to flat out lie, saying that the people who falsely accused Hector were trying to prevent him from aiding her. And as the conferences continued and more detailed questions were asked, the Queen's tale grew rather elaborate. By the end, Lynnette wasn't sure she understood it all anymore, but apparently, Hector had been working under the Queen the whole time. The public never knew, of course, because it was a state secret, a matter of internal security.

"I gave him a mission," Helen was saying, "to discover who the architect of the plot against me was. He was unfortunately a bit too successful. They attempted to frame, imprison, and subsequently silence him. But obviously, they underestimated young Mr. Goffe. In spite of his age, he is not only strong--as you all well know--but also, intelligent and courageous, which is of course why I hired him in the first place. And after all that he has done for his countrymen, all that he has sacrificed, I want his true nature to now be made clear to all. I hope every single one of you--"

This would go on for a while. If nothing else, Lynnette had to appreciate the woman's ability to weave a tale.

Some journalists ate the story up. A horrid villain secretly being a noble hero certainly made for an exciting headline. Others were rather understandably more skeptical."

"603

Lynnette noticed that the Queen never mentioned anything about Hector's whereabouts or the fact that she was giving him the Gray Warren. Whenever someone asked where he was now, she would plainly refuse to answer, saying instead that he was well and would no

doubt return to keeping people safe very soon. Hector would probably appreciate that, Lynnette thought.

The omissions didn't stop there, however. There were several things that the Queen never told the press. She said nothing of her own powers as a servant, attributing all her success in the past conflict to her subordinates. She never even brought up the existence of reapers in the first place--nor that of aberrations, Abolish, or the Vanguard. No doubt, the Queen felt these things would not only complicate the public narrative but also prove dangerous.

As for the origins of the Darksteel Soldier's superhuman abilities, that was actually not much of an issue for the press. Everyone already knew that powerful individuals existed in the world, so the Queen could get away with saying that Hector was simply born with his gifts. Even before Hector and Abolish had started making waves in Atreya, everyone had heard the ominous stories from abroad about terrible wars among the international superpowers, about their soldiers of insurmountable strength. It was always a kind of muted, distant tale, one that people told each other with an awful sense of hopeful doubt and weary helplessness. It was an unassailable constant, one that people simply learned to live with. Because there was no other choice. The world was big and frightening. There was no changing that.

Lynnette knew that she couldn't claim to be much different, herself. And after everything that had happened over these past few months, it seemed obvious to her that Atreya was still in immense danger. The immediate threat might have been gone, but the country was still in a state of flux, and the bigger perils out there now seemed even more imposing.

And behind closed doors, Lynnette could tell that Her Highness thought so, too."

"604

Since returning, Helen had not met with her council even once. Prince David had convinced her very quickly to dismantle it and rebuild from the ground up. Instead of doing it herself, however, she delegated the responsibility to him. David didn't seem particularly thrilled with the job but accepted it gracefully, and after he was gone, Lynnette saw the Queen putting the reapers to the very same task. They, of course, would be able to spy on everyone and report back to Her Highness

with any candidates they deemed suitable for the positions.

It struck Lynnette as a bit odd--and a little devious--that the Queen did not inform Prince David of what the reapers were doing, but she supposed it never hurt to be cautious. Or maybe the Queen just wanted two independent lists to compare against each other. Whatever the case, it wasn't Lynnette's job to worry about such things. It was, however, her job to observe everyone closely, and Prince David had become someone who met with the Queen more frequently than anyone else.

And to Lynnette's eye, this was a good thing. Despite recent circumstances, terrible as they'd been, the good prince seemed to have a clear head about it all, and oftentimes, he brought a smile to Helen's face.

"And how is my beautiful sister on this fine evening?" said Prince David.

"I am well," she said from her desk. "And what about my intrepid brother? How are you?"

"I have certainly been worse, thank you for asking. Ah, and I see your bodyguard is still looking as stalwart and intimidating as ever."

Lynnette wasn't sure what made him say that. Maybe it was the eye patch. Maybe she should find a new one. A white one, like her cloak. Or maybe that'd only make it worse. She wondered where in the world she might find fashion tips regarding eye patches. Curiously, that didn't seem to be a big thing in magazines or on television.

"What brings you here?" said the Queen. "Have you finished your list, already?"

"Ha, not quite yet. I'm not a wizard, you know. These things take time."

"605

"So you have a more pressing concern?" the Queen asked.

"Yes," said David, "or at least, similarly pressing. I am worried about the AFA. I have been observing its movements for a while, and I believe I can say with some confidence now that it should be

destroyed. It's filled with people who were loyal to Gabriel. Even with him gone it's still too dangerous to let those people retain their positions."

"Mm." Helen sipped from a fine blue tea cup. "You are worried they will now prove more loyal to Luther than to me, is that it?"

"There is that, yes, but more broadly speaking, I think the AFA is frankly too much of a wild card at this point. Even if those people don't choose to follow Luther, they could quite easily splinter off and form new rogue factions of their own."

"I see your point, but at the same time, we cannot simply dissolve the Agency of Foreign Affairs. It does serve a rather important role, when not plotting against me. We will certainly have need of it moving forward."

"True. Perhaps we should refurbish it, then."

"That is what I am thinking. But that would also require strong new management."

"Indeed. Not just someone who can bring potential traitors to heel, but also someone who can make use of them. Not an easy command, dearest sister."

"I might ask you to take the job, but..."

David gave a weary laugh. "Don't you think I have enough to do?"

"Do you have someone else in mind?"

"Your aunt. I believe she would serve admirably, and if not, then she could probably point you toward someone just as capable. Perhaps more than one person, even."

Helen frowned. "That woman. Yes, I suppose she would do very well there."

"Try to sound more enthusiastic when you offer it to her. Whatever you think of her, she did save Meri's life, and possibly my own."

"Yes, yes. And she is fiercely loyal to William. I will offer her the position soon."

"Thank you."

Their conversation went on for a while longer, and then David ventured off again."

"606

Not long after that, the Queen looked up from her reading. "Lynnette."

"Yes, ma'am?" she said, sitting up in her chair by the door.

"What do you think of my brother?"

Lynnette hesitated. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Come closer," said the Queen, motioning to the chair on the other side of her desk. "Sit here."

Lynnette did so.

"Now tell me. You have been observing everyone around me over these past few days, yes?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So what is your opinion of David?"

"...He seems like a good man. And intelligent."

"Is that all?"

She eyed the Queen, a bit reluctant to say any more, but after a moment, she decided to ask, "Do you not trust him?"

The Queen smirked. "I trust him very much. Why do you ask?"

"The assignment you gave him. You didn't tell him that you're having reapers do the same thing."

"Aha. Yes. And why do you think I did that?"

"Because you are secretly testing his loyalty."

"Correct."

"I don't understand why, though. If you trust him so much, then...?"

"Trust is not a switch that you flip on or off," said the Queen. "Trust is a currency, and everyone must earn it, myself included. The good thing about trust is that it gets easier to earn as you acquire more of it. The bad thing about trust is that once you lose it, it is very difficult to get back."

"Are you saying Prince David did something to lose your trust?"

"No. I believe David has a kind heart, but he hides it well. And that is precisely the problem. He is a very secretive man."

"Really?" said Lynnette. "I was under the impression that the two of you were quite close."

"When I was a child, that was the case, but the age gap between us was an obstacle. When I was eight years old, David was already seventeen and leaving for school abroad. And then, even after he finished school, he stayed away. In retrospect, I think I can understand his decision to do so. By the time I saw him again--really saw him again--it was eleven years later, and he was a stranger to me."

"607

"Did he change that much?" Lynnette asked.

"We both did," the Queen said. "I was about to marry William. My life was already upside down. And when I saw David, he was nothing like I remembered. He had grown... well, he had grown fat. There is no dancing around it. He ballooned up like an inflated pool toy."

Lynnette tried not to laugh. "Your Highness!"

"It was surprising," she went on. "But to my mind, that was not the real concern. He was so much less cheerful than I remembered, less happy. Thankfully, he is a bit better about that presently, but I do not think he ever quite found that old mirth again. I still wonder what might have happened to effect such a change in him. He has never told me. Or anyone, as far as I am aware."

"So you can't bring yourself to trust him completely as long as he is keeping things from you."

"Partly, yes, but I also find that it is best never to trust someone completely unless it is the only practical option remaining."



"I see."

A lull in the conversation arrived, and Lynnette thought it would die there, but the Queen posed another question before Lynnette could leave the chair.

"Why do you think I decided to give you this job?"

Lynnette found herself hesitating another time. The Queen had not deigned to speak to her this much in quite a while. "To be honest, Your Highness, I'm not sure."

"Do you dislike it?"

"No. But you could have returned me to the Queen's Guard instead of inventing an entirely new position for me."

"That might have been easier, yes. But frankly, you are too frightening for your old job."

Lynnette blinked. "Frightening?"

"Have you truly not noticed? Your mere presence unsettles most people, including your former comrades. Truthfully, you even unsettle me a little."

"Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--"

"I know. Do not worry. Rather, I should be the one to apologize. I have been taking advantage of that part of you. Having the White Sword on my arm helps me to appear strong in the public eye, you see."

"608

"My sword isn't even white," said Lynnette.

The Queen chortled. "Would you like me to force them to change the name via royal decree?"

"That would be amusing, but I suppose not."

The Queen took a moment before asking her next question. "What is your opinion of Hector?"

“My opinion? Your Highness, what do you mean?”

“I am merely curious what you think of him. You have spent more time in his company than I have.”

“Well, I think we are lucky to have him on our side.”

“A banal answer.”

“I’m not sure what sort of answer you’re looking for...”

“Tell me something I do not already know about him.”

“Um... I doubt I know any more than you do.”

“As I recall, you spent an entire week alone with him in an underground bunker. Are you saying you learned nothing else about him in that time?”

“When we weren’t training together, he mostly kept to himself. He’s not exactly the most talkative person.”

Helen exhaled a breath. “And neither are you, it would seem.”

Lynnette just returned a flat expression.

A beat of silence passed as the Queen observed her. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

Lynnette pursed her lips together on one side. She was no longer uncertain where Her Highness was going with this conversation. Momentarily, she wondered if stabbing the Queen would still be considered treason as long as she knew the woman couldn’t die from it.

“Lynnette, please stop looking at me like that. It is a harmless question.”

“You are usually more subtle than this, Your Highness.”

“I would rather not have to play word games with you as well.”

She sighed. “...I do not have a boyfriend.”

“Ah. Girlfriend?”

“No, ma’am.”

"I see."

She could practically see the gears turning in the Queen's head.  
"Hector is a bit young for me, don't you think?"

"Oh, are we talking about Hector again?"

"Your Highness, please."

The Queen laughed. "He is sixteen, yes? And as I recall, you are nineteen? Hmm, I suppose you have a point. Three years makes a big difference at your age."

"609

"I'm glad you agree, ma'am. And I'll thank you to never bring it up again."

The woman smiled wryly a moment, then looked to her side and laughed.

"Did Mehlsanz say something?" said Lynnette.

"Yes, she said--"

"Tell her I said to shut up."

The Queen laughed again. "She heard you."

"Why the sudden interest in my love life, anyway?"

"Mostly to tease you, I suppose."

"Gee."

"Also, I am trying to have a bit of forethought. I told the media that Hector works for me, but of course, he does not. Nothing binds him and Garovel to Atreya other than good intentions. They have no investments here."

Lynnette's brow depressed. "So that's why you gave him a castle? It wasn't to reward him?"

"It was both. There are two things required in order to form a truly

enduring alliance with someone. The first is an amiable relationship, and the second is a shared investment. Without either one, any alliance can be easily compromised when difficult times inevitably come calling, and unfortunately, those are the times when you will need that alliance the most.”

“Your Highness... honestly, that is a bit disgusting. With respect, you do know that there is such a thing as too much scheming, don’t you?”

“Lynnette, if I were truly ‘scheming’ to pair the two of you up, you would not be aware of it.”

“...I’m not sure that makes me feel any better, Your Highness.”

“No? My apologies, then.”

“And you say I’m the frightening one...”

There wasn’t much time left for conversation, and soon, the Queen was off again to another meeting, this time at the Ministry of the Interior on the other side of Sescoria. The majority of the talks concerned reparations for the extensive physical damage that the country had seen of late, especially that of Belgrant Castle. Admittedly, Lynnette couldn’t follow a lot of what was being said and eventually just stopped listening--that is, until the Queen started to raise her voice and then went on to fire several people in front of the entire assembly.”

"610

During the ride back to the palace, when they were alone again, Lynnette asked, “Are you sure that was wise, Your Highness? Didn’t you just make a lot of new enemies?”

“They were already my enemies,” said Helen. “They were embezzling disaster relief funds. I would have preferred to imprison them, but I currently have no physical proof of their misconduct--only Garovel’s word.”

“Why not wait until you could gather proof, then?”

“They threatened to go after me in the media, unless I granted them more funding today.”

“Wow. You’d think they’d know better than to mess with you by now.”

"These are times of political upheaval. Corruption and betrayals are to be expected. They probably believe that if they do not gain an advantage now, I will eventually destroy them."

"They are probably right."

"I have a special place in my heart for those who steal from disaster relief. I think I will sic David and Meriwether on them. With any luck, they will be in prison before they can find jobs elsewhere. If not, perhaps I will ask Hector for a favor."

"Heh."

"Speaking of Hector, I believe he is leaving for the Gray Warren tonight. Shall we go bid him farewell?"

"I thought he was still sleeping," said Lynnette.

"He is, but Garovel will awaken him for us."

Lynnette was still hesitant from earlier. "Please, tell me you're not... trying to... mgh..."

"Ha. I can go by myself, if you would prefer. We may not see him for quite a while, however."

Lynnette just grumbled under her breath.

"I hope I have not accidentally jaded you to the idea. You should not let me influence your feelings in either direction. I was only teasing you before. Truly."

"I'll try to keep that in mind, ma'am."

When they arrived at the palace again, it was still a while yet until Hector was slated to leave, and the Queen of course had more business to attend to. Lynnette couldn't help being slightly distracted through it all, and by the time they went to visit Hector, she was annoyed by the anxiety she'd let build up in her chest."

"611

They found Hector in his guest room, already awake for them.

“Ah--hello, Your Majesty. And Lynn.”

“We wanted to say farewell before you left,” said the Queen.

“Oh, I see.”

And a long silence followed, wherein Lynnette could only assume that one of the reapers was speaking. Then the Queen went over to talk to Hector’s mother.

Lynnette shook hands with Hector. She wore gloves now, just like he did, only hers were a bit bulkier as they were meant to conceal the bone gauntlet on her left hand. “Looks like this is goodbye for now,” she said.

“Yeah... I’m, uh. I’m kinda sad to be going. I’ll miss everyone.”

“Heh. My family will probably want to come visit you sooner or later.”

“Ah--y-you think so? That’d be awesome! Oh, but, uh--you should hold off on that. This... Warrenhold place sounds, uh... kinda sketchy, so...”

“Right.”

“I need to make sure it’s safe to have guests and... yeah...”

“Well, you have my cell number.”

“Y-yeah. Same to you. Call me if there’s, like... uh... if you guys want my help, I mean.”

“Of course.”

Lynnette looked toward the Queen, but the woman was apparently busy talking to one of the reapers now. She turned back to Hector, who could not meet her gaze, as usual. She felt an awkward tension welling up and decided to rebel against it with the first thing she could think of. “So they’re calling me the White Sword now, apparently.”

“O-oh, that’s... huh. But your sword isn’t even white...”

“That’s what I said.”

“Ah--it sounds cool, though. Makes more sense than mine, at least. I mean, uh... I don’t think ‘darksteel’ is even a real thing.”

"Mm. You think they just chose that because you're black?"

"I hadn't really thought about it, but... now that you mention it... Hmm. Kinda sounds a little racist now..."

She laughed at that. "Sorry."

"I guess 'darksteel' is better than 'blackmetal.' That just sounds like a... funky type of music or something."

"Yeah."

"Coulda been a lot worse, really," said Hector. "Coulda called me, like, the Negro Vigilante."

"Oh, geez, no."

"Or the Darkey Knight."

Her eye widened, and she snorted a sudden laugh. "Wha--?! That's terrible!"

"Ah--too much? S-sorry..."

She just kept laughing."

"612 -- LXXI.

--1st Anniversary Special (day 1/7, page 2/4)--

Hector smiled and looked at Lynnette as her voice died down. "You... y-you, uh... you have a... ah..."

She tilted her head at him, waiting.

"Ah--your... uh... um..." Unfortunately, this time, he reached critical mass and turned away from her again, unable to pull any more words out.

"What were you trying to say?" she asked.

"I-I don't know. Just, uh. N-nevermind."

Her expression tightened. "C'mon, tell me. What were you going to say?"

“Nothing. Really. Just. N-nothing.”

She was now convinced that it definitely wasn't nothing. He'd been talking just fine a second ago, so what the hell changed? “Seriously, just tell me.”

He fell completely silent.

At this point, she was becoming annoyed. She raised her hand and let a bit of purple creep out the back of her glove. “Hector, don't make me wring it out of you.”

Hector's eyes widened. He met Lynnette's gaze evenly. And then he ran out of the room.

She blinked after him, open-mouthed and dumbstruck. He'd actually fled? For a moment, she genuinely considered giving chase.

Hector's mother and the Queen both took notice and came over. “What happened?” the Queen asked.

“I don't know!” said Lynnette. “Or--wait, was that a reaper emergency or something?”

“No. I was talking to Garovel when Hector suddenly left.”

“Then what the--?! Ugh! I can't believe he really just did that!”

Mrs. Goffe had a question as well. “What in the world did you say to him?”

“More like, what did he say?” Lynnette shook her head and eyed Mrs. Goffe. “Please tell your son that the next time I see him, I really am going to wring the answer out of him.”

Chapter Seventy-One: ‘Thine unassailable walls...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

‘Wow, Hector. And here I thought you were getting better at talking to people.’

‘Shut up, Garovel!’



‘Seriously, what the fuck was that about?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Remarkably, I remain unconvinced of that.’

‘Shut up!’

‘Well, stop running already.’

‘Is she behind me?!’

‘Lynn? No.’

Hector slowed to a walk, looking over his shoulder as he arrived at the palace’s east entrance. When he saw people were staring at him, he pulled down on the brim of his hat and tried to settle his heartbeat.”

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--1st Anniversary Special (day 1/7, page 2/4)--

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"613

--1st Anniversary Special (day 1/7, page 3/4)--

'Really?' said Garovel. 'You're not going to tell me what that was?'

'...Where's my bike?' said Hector.

The reaper was gracious enough to point him in the right direction.

'C'mon, Hector. You know you can tell me anything.'

'I... I know I can. But that doesn't mean I want to.'

'Oh, it's like THAT, is it? Well, damn. What'd she do? Touch your arm unexpectedly? Accidentally breathe within three meters of your face?'

'Hey, Garovel, I've got an idea. How about you go fuck yourself?'

'So hostile. You know you're just making me more curious now, right?'

'Ugh...'

He found his way to the parking garage and decided to wait there for his mother to catch up. It took a while, but when she arrived, she had a small escort of two with her. There was an elderly woman in a faded rainbow dress and a rather tall black man in a white-and-blue guardsman's uniform.

His mother stopped in front of him and stared. "I'm not even going to ask what that was about back there. Lynnette is upset with you, though. She asked me to tell you that."

"Ah... oh..." He figured it best to just take his mother at her word and move on. "W-who are these two?"

The old woman stepped forward to introduce herself first. "Amelia Carthrace," she said, offering Hector a wrinkly handshake, which he

eventually took. "At the Queen's behest, I am here to help you manage your affairs from now on. Pleased to make your acquaintance, young man."

The guardsman took his turn next. "I am Jamal Easton. A call went out looking for people to work for the Darksteel Soldier. Seems I was the only one who answered."

Hector looked between the two of them. "Um... I don't, ah..."

"Hector, just go with it," his mother said. "I'm sure we could use the help right now. From the sounds of it, the Queen has gifted you quite the white elephant."

He glanced at Garovel, who just shrugged. "O-okay. Do you guys know the way to this Warrenhold place?"

"614

--1st Anniversary Special (day 1/7, page 4/4)--"Yes, sir," said Jamal. By the look of him, he was in his late twenties and quite solidly built. Rather than a sword like Lynnette, however, the man wore a holstered gun on his hip. "I would be happy to lead the way for you."

It struck Hector as more than a little odd to be called sir by this person. Still, he nodded gratefully. "Th-thank you. Please do."

The three of them piled into the adjacent SUV and pulled out of the palace's garage while Hector followed on his motorcycle. Ms. Carthrace asked him if he would not prefer to simply ride with them so that they could discuss various things along the way, but Hector politely refused. There would be plenty of time for discussion after they arrived.

Slashes of pink and orange painted the evening sky as he rode out into the city. It would be a rather long trip to Gray Rock, he knew, which of course meant that Garovel would have plenty of time to keep bothering him. Even so, Hector recalled a particular something that he wanted to ask the reaper about.

'So, um... I've got a question...'

'Oh, imagine that.'

‘What did you call it? The thing that Harper did?’

‘Pan-rozum.’

‘Yeah. Could you explain that more, maybe?’

‘I could, maybe. If you tell me what made you run away from Lynnette, that is.’

Hector thought about it. ‘...I don’t wanna know that badly.’

‘Oh, come on! I have to tell you about pan-rozum!’

‘Oh well... I guess I’ll just be unprepared in the future. No big deal.’

‘Y’know, you can be a real dick sometimes.’

‘Ah... sorry.’

‘Tch.’ Garovel paused, perhaps gathering his thoughts. ‘Pan-rozum is a hyper state. It is achieved when the reaper and servant merge their souls together via a very high synchronization.’

‘Ah... so it’s not something that you and I can do.’

‘Of course not. It’s not even something that Harper should really be doing, and he has to be at least twenty-five years old as a servant by now.’”

"615

--1st Anniversary Special (day 2/7, page 1/4)--

‘So what does pan-rozum actually do?’ said Hector. ‘Just make the servant faster and stronger?’

‘No. That was a byproduct of Harper’s ability being what it is. Pan-rozum allows the user to assimilate attributes of different ability types. For a brief period of time, that is.’

‘Eh... I’m still not sure what you mean...’

‘Well, for instance, Harper was able to meld the properties of his alteration ability with that of both the transfiguration and the integration types. He took the bodily attribute of transfiguration, as well as the

conversion attribute of integration.'

'Uh...'

'In other words, pan-rozum allows a servant to break down the barriers between the different types of abilities and merge them together. That's how Harper's ability could change from just manipulating light to... actually BEING light.'

'Wait, what? You're saying Harper converted his body into... light particles or something?'

'Basically, yes. And not just that, either. Thanks to the integration attribute, he was also able to restore his body back to its original state afterwards, and that's not easy. In fact, nothing about that is. The whole thing is a ridiculous accomplishment. I'm still a bit awestruck, I guess. The amount of training that the two of them must have done... If Harper's really only a servant of his twenties, then that is absolute madness.'

'Couldn't he have joined the Vanguard later, like after being a servant for a while?'

'Possibly. It's uncommon for servants to wait so long to pick a side, but yeah. He does seem to have a special arrangement with his rank, too, so maybe you're right.'

'Hmm.'

'Honestly, with pan-rozum activated, Harper's ability is one of the strongest I've ever witnessed.'

Hector blinked at the long stretch of road ahead of him. 'Really? Three thousand years, and Harper's one of the strongest EVER?'

'That I've personally seen,' Garovel reiterated. 'But yes. I'm not sure you understand the caliber of warrior you've just met and fought alongside. He may be the fastest human being who has ever lived. The speed of light is pretty much the top of the mountain on that one.'"  
"616

--1st Anniversary Special (day 2/7, page 2/4)--

'It kinda seemed like Harper was just teleporting around,' said Hector.

‘Well, yeah. As far as human perception is concerned, there would be no difference.’

‘That power is pretty crazy... I mean, how could anyone ever defeat something like that?’

‘I don’t know. You did pretty well against it, though.’

‘Yeah, because he was holding back. If he’d wanted to kill me instantly, he could’ve at any time.’

‘True. At least for now, Harper’s pan-rozum is far from perfect. I think Darsihm is still unconscious from the exertion.’

‘Why’d it affect Darsihm so much more than Harper?’

‘The reaper is the focal point of pan-rozum’s merge. It tends to demand more from the reaper, mostly because it’s just such a complex amalgamation of powers. It’s up to the reaper to make all the chosen attributes fit properly into place so that the newly realized power works as desired. The servant’s job, on the other hand, is more to just accept the power without exploding and killing them both. Which, y’know, is also kinda important.’

‘Eesh...’

‘Also, I should probably mention that pan-rozum isn’t necessarily for everyone.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning, depending on what a servant’s ability is, pan-rozum might not even be that useful. Harper’s ability just happens to work ridiculously well with it, so don’t go thinking it’s always as powerful as that.’

‘Mm.’

‘But there are other hyper states which might suit different people better. For instance, there’s pan-forma, which--’

‘Eh--uh--sorry to interrupt, but, uh, why don’t you save that for another time? I barely even understand what you just said about this pan-rozum shit, so... m-maybe just hold off on lecturing me on all this other stuff that isn’t, uh... I mean, it’s not immediately relevant, right? So...’

'Well, fine. I didn't wanna explain it to you, anyway.'

'Yes, you did.'

'Yes, I did.'

'You love explaining things.'

'Hell yeah, I do.'

Hector laughed.

'And why shouldn't I love it, huh? You get to learn things. I get to sound smart. Nobody gets murdered. Everybody wins, really--I mean, when you think about it, it's pretty awesome.'

"617

--1st Anniversary Special (day 2/7, page 3/4)--

'Were you, like, a professor or something way back when you were alive?' said Hector.

'Not quite.'

'What was it like, living back then?'

'It was shit.'

'Aww, why?'

'Medicine was shit. Technology was shit. Society was shit. Everything was shit wrapped in more shit with an extra shit sandwich in case you were still hungry for more shit.'

'...So wait. Was it shit?'

'Eh, it was okay.'

He chuckled inside his riding helmet. 'I can't tell if you're joking. You've never really told me anything about your past.'

Garovel paused. 'Yeah. Well. Maybe I'll tell you some other time.'

'Why not now? It's gonna take a while to reach Gray Rock.'

'My time spent alive did not make for a pleasant story.'



‘Oh... so it really was shit, then.’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’

‘Why was it so bad?’ said Hector. He waited, and when Garovel didn’t answer, he added, ‘No specifics, then. Just tell me the general stuff.’

‘Like what?’ said Garovel.

‘I don’t know. Like, where were you born? What civilization are you from?’

Garovel was slow enough to respond that Hector was about to ask something else when the reaper finally said, ‘Across the ocean. I’m not sure what the land there is called now, but I think these days, you call my old people the Lyzakks.’

The name actually rang a bell. Hector remembered learning about the Lyzakks in school. He couldn’t recall very much, for the lack of attention he’d paid, but he did know that the ancient civilization was mostly remembered for its brutality. And there was something else-- something about how they’d crossed the ocean and invaded the continent or some such thing.

He wanted to ask Garovel about it, but he hesitated. He wasn’t sure how keen the reaper would be to talk about them, but he figured that Garovel would just come right out and say so if he really didn’t wish to. ‘Uh... didn’t the Lyzakks launch an invasion a long time ago?’

‘I was dead way before that, but yeah. I’m a little surprised you know of it.’

‘Er, so am I.’”

"618

--1st Anniversary Special (day 2/7, page 4/4)--

‘Funny you should bring that up,’ said Garovel. ‘That happens to be one of my favorite pieces of history.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Well, see, the Lyzakks came to Eloa some 2800 years ago, and as

soon as they landed, they stormed across the continent and seized control of everything they saw. Then they reached the center of Eloa and came upon the Armans--the so-called "people of the rain." The Armans stopped the Lyzakks cold, didn't let them take another step west.'

'I guess you're not a fan of the Lyzakks, huh?'

'They were assholes who enslaved millions of people and forced them to fight in their armies for them. The fact that the Armans stopped them was a wildly unprecedented event of the time. Up to that point, the Armans had been a peaceful people, and on top of that, they were insanely outnumbered.'

'So how'd they win?'

'Well, they didn't win. They only forced a draw. But yes, it was remarkable nonetheless. They accomplished it by being incredibly clever. See, they had plenty of warning about the Lyzakks burning across the continent, but rather than flee or prepare tribute for an immediate surrender, the Armans decided to just booby-trap the FUCK out of everything in their land.'

'Oh, geez...'

'It. Was. Amazing.'

Hector shook his head but couldn't help smirking.

'And horrible,' Garovel added. 'Absolutely brutal and terrible. But also completely ingenious. See, most of the Armans lived in the lands where it always rains. Not just frequently or consistently in small amounts. It pours and floods all the damn time. And they turned that into their most potent and infamous trap. They built these dams everywhere and then hid their work, so when the enemy arrived, they would see areas that were clear and dry, seemingly suitable for safe passage or for setting up camp. Then the trap would spring, and they would lose hundreds or even thousands of men to a flash flood.'

'Wow... uh... That's pretty fucked up.'

'Yeah. It was. But the Armans successfully defended themselves from a vastly superior force--and not just once or twice, but dozens of times.'"

--1st Anniversary Special (day 3/7, page 1/4)--  
'Did they eventually make peace?' Hector asked.

'Oh yeah. And what was even better was that, by the time the Lyzakks finally lost their war-boner with the Armans, the Armans had already developed into quite the fearsome people. In the beginning, it'd started with just making traps, but as things drew out, they buckled down and got to work learning how to fight, lead, sabotage, and all that good stuff.'

Hector couldn't help laughing. 'So I'm guessing this isn't exactly an unbiased version of events you're giving me...'

'Well, I do feel bad for all the slaves the Lyzakks took, because a lot of them died in the fighting; but when I think about the Armans and everything they did to defend their families and their lands, I really get pulled over to their side. Broadly speaking, that is.'

'Right.' And Hector thought Garovel was done talking about the subject, but after a beat, he realized how wrong he was.

'But anyway, like I was saying, when the Lyzakks decided that they didn't wanna fuck with the Armans anymore, they tried to just leave them alone and pick fights with some other people. But it was too late for that. Everyone else on Eloa had rallied around the Armans already, so wherever the Lyzakks went, the Armans would come over and fuck their day up. It was really great. The Lyzakks had no choice but to just calm the hell down. And after peace was made, the Armans and all their constituents consolidated their power into one huge group, and that's how the Mohssian Empire came about, controlling the whole western half of Eloa for two millennia. Which includes modern day Atreya, by the way.'

'Yeah, I know where Atreya is, thanks. I did manage to make it through third grade, at least.'

'Just saying,' laughed Garovel. 'Anyhow, the Lyzakks gradually turned into the Valgan Empire, and they of course controlled the eastern half of Eloa, but not for quite as long. Regardless, the Mohssians and the Valgans became the primary cultural divide on this continent. I think Sair is the only modern day country that has both of those old bloodlines in large quantities.'"

--1st Anniversary Special (day 3/7, page 2/4)--

'Why only Sair?' said Hector.

'Oh, I don't know. I doubt there's a simple answer to that question. It was where the Armans and Lyzakks first clashed, so maybe that has something to do with it.'

'Hmm.'

'After the two big empires fell, though--that's when things got complicated.'

'Oh, right. Because up until then, everything had been so simple.'

The reaper laughed again. 'Comparatively, yes. The Mohssians gave rise to all these small countries like Atreya and Rendon. It's why, even to this day, you can travel all over western Eloa and never need a translator.'

'We all speak Mohssian, yeah. They don't all speak Valgan in the east, though, do they?'

'Nope. A lot of them do, but they've got a handful of younger languages, too. I believe our friend Karkash spoke one of them.'

'Ah... him.'

'He didn't talk much, but I'm fairly sure that was a Vaelish accent I heard. That, and he looked the part. I think Stoker may've as well, but his clothes were pretty ragged when we found him, and his accent wasn't nearly as strong.'

'I guess that means Abolish is operating in Vaeland?'

'Could be. Easy to believe, too. Vaeland was one of the most dangerous places in the world a few years ago.'

'Gah...' There came a lull in the conversation, and knowing that they still had a good hour or two before they reached Gray Rock, Hector was a bit afraid that Garovel was about to bombard him with still more history lessons, so he tried to steer the conversation elsewhere. 'Uh...

do you know anything else about this Warrenhold place? I forgot to ask before.'

'Not really. I only talked to Voreese about it a little. She mentioned it being even older than Atreya itself, but that's it. She said she would come visit us there a day or two after we arrive.'

'Hmm. Was it just me, or did she seem kind of suspicious when she was telling us to choose the place?'

'Heh. Maybe.'

'You were suspicious, too, actually... You accepted her request pretty easily.'

"621

--1st Anniversary Special (day 3/7, page 3/4)--

'She made me curious,' said Garovel. 'I think you're right, though. I'm guessing there's something in Warrenhold that she doesn't want to talk about in front of Mehlsanz and the Queen--or possibly Harper, because he's Vanguard.'

'What would she want to hide from them?'

'Don't know. I have a few guesses, but I'm hoping for a nice surprise.'

'You couldn't just ask her while no one else was around?'

'I was busy helping the Queen out. And besides, I like surprises, remember?'

'Ugh.'

'Eh, I trust Voreese's judgment. She wouldn't try to surprise us with some pile of horseshit. Probably.'

'If you say so.'

After that, Garovel went back to talking about history, but Hector found it hard to continue listening. As soon as he realized that he was beginning to drift off to sleep, he politely asked Garovel to stop so he could concentrate on the road. The reaper begrudgingly obliged.

When they finally started drawing close to Gray Rock, Hector followed the SUV ahead of him down a side road for a while until they eventually pulled over. Jamal got out and showed Hector the forking path in front of them, the problem being that one of the roads was closed off. Jamal pulled the orange barricades aside as he explained.

"We're nearly there," he said. "A rock slide left the road ahead blocked, but that shouldn't be a problem for you, right?"

"Uh... I-I guess so."

Amelia laughed as she came up behind them. "It seems we are already going to get a demonstration of our young lord's strength."

Hector gaped at her. "L-lord?"

"Of course," she said, blinking. "Were you not told of your accompanying title?"

"Eh... I don't think so..."

"You are the acting Lord of Warrenhold. Or the acting Lord of the Gray Warren, I suppose. Whichever name you prefer. Personally, I like the prior."

"Oh... uh. I guess that... would make sense."

It didn't take much longer to reach the obstacle that Jamal was talking about. There'd been several more roads connecting along the way, and it seemed that this one was the only path forward. It cut through a small hill, wherein a wall of gray boulders now stood in evening darkness."

"622

--1st Anniversary Special (day 3/7, page 4/4)--

Flashlight in hand, Hector eyed the blockage and scratched his head. The rocks at the top were bigger than he was, bigger than his motorcycle, even. "Why wasn't this ever cleared away?" he asked.

Madame Carthrace was the one to answer. "From what I have read, there simply was not enough interest in doing so. Warrenhold isn't famous enough to be very attractive to tourists, and no one has lived there for nearly forty years. Only historians have ever broached the

subject of reopening it, but they have never been able to secure funding.”

“I hear it’s an eyesore,” his mother added.

“Yes, I have heard that as well,” said Amelia. “The surface is supposedly a ruin, but the vast majority of the castle is underground. No one has visited since the earthquake, however, so we may come to find that in ruins, also.”

“Great,” said Mrs. Goffe. “Is it haunted, too? Because that would just be icing on the cake.”

Amelia bobbed her head. “There are certain rumors about it.”

“Wonderful.”

“I would not worry about it very much,” said Madame Carthrace. “Any old house that has fallen into disrepair will be seen as an ill omen by some people. Superstitious nonsense, it is.”

‘I like this lady,’ said Garovel.

Hector sensed irony in there somewhere but decided to ignore it. He stretched his arms as he eyed the boulders again, considering how he should approach the problem. Garovel grabbed his shoulder and sent the rush of vigor through his body. Hector wasn’t sure he would need it, though, and simply pressed his hands against the cracked pavement.

Iron grew at the base of the rock wall, weaving through the tiny cracks in its haphazard foundation. He added onto it from the bottom, creating a platform that lifted the whole wall. The weight of the rocks resisted him, demanding much more concentration than any simple platform he’d ever created. He forced it up, and suddenly, one of the giant rocks at the top jostled free and fell toward him.

Hector caught it with both hands, further cracking the pavement beneath his feet. He threw the boulder to the other side of the road, away from everyone. But his aim wasn’t so great. The rock hit a large tree, bounced off, and crushed his motorcycle.

He stared at his work. ‘...Did that really just happen?’

‘It sure did. Good job.’”

"623 -- LXXII.

--1st Anniversary Special (day 4/7, page 1/4)--

'Dammit, I really liked that one,' said Hector.

'Well, maybe it still runs.'

The tree fell on top of the boulder, hammering the motorcycle into the ground. A busted wheel bounded over to Hector and fell at his feet.

'As a unicycle,' said Garovel.

Hector was a bit more careful after that. The blockage went rather deep. He had to raise up ten separate platforms, annihilating holes through them and turning each one into the next section of a large iron tunnel, but eventually, he reached the other side. He wasn't wholly satisfied with this as a permanent solution, though. It would do for now, but he was resolved to come back later and see about removing all the rocks so that he could annihilate the tunnel. That, and he'd have to clean up the pieces of his bike, anyway.

He rode with everyone else the rest of the way, but it only took a few minutes. They passed under a tall gatehouse that had lost its pointed apex, which now lay stuck in the ground by the side of the road.

And finally, they arrived at a clearing and were granted a view of the castle. The central structure seemed largely intact, but it only rose two floors above ground. There were six pallid towers around it, but they had all crumbled to a single story, save one lone champion at the back which still boasted a good four or five floors.

They reached what seemed to be the main courtyard. Everyone exited the vehicle together, and Hector found wild grass and weeds grown to knee-height. Jamal began pulling gear out the back of the SUV-- floodlights, most notably.

"Where shall we begin?" said Amelia.

Hector took a deep breath and exchanged looks with Garovel.

Chapter Seventy-Two: 'Gentle rain, learn well...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)



Her father had not put the ceremony off a second time. Emiliana was a servant now, and the whole world seemed different somehow. She'd retreated back to her room, happy to finally be away from everyone. Except for this reaper, unfortunately. From the end of her banana-colored bed, she looked at Chergoa with uncertainty."

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"624

--1st Anniversary Special (day 4/7, page 2/4)--

To Emiliana’s eyes, the reaper was a glowing blue wisp, a kind of floating ball of cerulean flame. With eyes. And a mouth.

She didn’t like it at all.

But apparently, they were supposed to become friends now.

Chergoa hovered around the room. ‘You really like the color yellow, don’t you?

It was true. Emiliana’s room was distinctly brighter than anywhere else in the house for that reason. She especially liked sunflowers. The one standing in a vase at the foot of her bed was easily the most precious ornament in her room. She used to have a second one, as her lord father had given her two for her seventh birthday, but Marcos ruined that like he did everything else.

She wasn’t interested in telling any of that to Chergoa, however. “Why did Mama and Papa choose you?” she asked instead.

‘A good first question. They chose me because I am an old friend of your father’s reaper, Axiolis.’

“Is that all?”

‘Understand that they did not pick me lightly. They are entrusting their beloved daughter to me, and that is no small thing. Despite my friendship with Axiolis, your parents still corresponded with me for over a year before they became convinced that I would be a suitable partner for you. Us reapers are already rather difficult to come by, but when family is concerned, it is best to be extra picky. Wouldn’t you agree?’

“I guess so...”

From there, Chergoa explained at length about how the regeneration would work, how the enhanced strength would work, and how their souls were now bound together. Emiliana, more or less, knew all of this already, but she just listened quietly until the reaper was done talking.

“Mama said you wouldn’t make me join the Vanguard.”

‘That’s right. Your father asked me to let you live whatever life you wanted for yourself.’

“And you agreed to that?”

‘I did.’

Emiliana breathed. “Thank you...”

‘I will still be making you train, however. That is not up for debate.’

Emiliana wasn’t exactly thrilled, but she supposed she couldn’t complain.”

"625

--1st Anniversary Special (day 4/7, page 3/4)--

‘I hear you are already dreaming about marriage,’ said Chergoa. ‘Is that true?’

Emiliana just averted her gaze, unsure how to answer that.

‘Fourteen is a bit young to be focusing on that, don’t you think?’

She would have liked to tell the reaper that it wasn’t any of her business, but unfortunately, it very much was. Emiliana understood

that their lives were bound together now, and throwing a fit about it wouldn't do any good. Her mother had certainly made sure to hammer that much into her.

Still, she found it difficult to say anything. Of course fourteen was young. She was under no illusions that she was older than she really was. But that didn't change the way she felt.

'Hmm,' the reaper hummed, suddenly with the echo that indicated privacy. 'Could it be that you already have someone in mind?'

Her eyes widened, and for a moment, she forgot to breathe.

'Ah. Is that really how it is? You can tell me. I promise not to tell anyone else without your permission.'

Emiliana blushed and looked at the ivory carpet. "Yes..."

'Who is it?'

She exhaled a heavy breath. "Don't make me say..."

'Do you know if they have feelings for you, too?'

"I... I believe he does..."

'Hmm. Is there a significant age difference?'

"Ah... well... he is two years older than me."

The reaper paused. 'It's not Cisco, is it?'

"What?! No! Cisco is my brother!"

'Just checking.'

"That's disgusting!"

'Is it one of Cisco's friends?'

Emiliana abruptly lost her fervor.

'Oh boy. And Cisco doesn't know, I take it?'

"If Cisco found out, I'm afraid he would kill him..."

'His reaper wouldn't let him do that. Might let him break a few of the boy's bones, though.'

Emiliana just frowned.

‘Don’t worry. I’m not going to tell them. If this boy really is such a big part of your life, though, then I would like to see him.’

“Okay...”

‘Does he have a reaper as well?’

“No. But he does know about them... I think Cisco showed off to him once, maybe.””

"626

--1st Anniversary Special (day 4/7, page 4/4)--

Chergoa set her to meditating not long after that. It wasn't Emiliana's first time doing so; her mother occasionally made her do it in the past as practice. The woman seemed to think it good exercise for young people. Emiliana wasn't the only one of the Elroy children to have considered it a waste of time, but it was different now. This was the real thing.

After a while, the meditation put her in the mood to sleep, which was good because there wasn't much left of the evening, anyway. She went to bed, a little nervous about what the next day would bring, but she drifted off soon enough.

In the morning, she readied herself for school and was displeased to find her bras had become uncomfortably snug again. This was the third time in as many months, and dammit if it wasn't unsettling. The rest of her body wasn't growing nearly so quickly. For once, she was grateful for living in a place where it rained all the time, because at least it gave her an excuse to wear bulky clothing.

Then again, she'd heard that boys liked large breasts, so maybe this was good? She hoped that was true, because right now, these damn things just made her feel like a freak. And worse, a lot of the other girls at school seemed to resent her, too, as if she had any control over it. Or maybe they disliked her for other reasons. She couldn't tell anymore. After all, she wasn't the only one going through changes. When did everything get so confusing?

Honestly, if it weren't for her two best friends, she didn't know what she

would have done. They were so much more adult than she was-- maybe not so much physically, but definitely mentally. They'd always been able to take things in stride and make light of stuff that would have bothered her. Unfortunately, though, she didn't think she should talk to them about her latest problem. Becoming undead probably wasn't something they were equipped to advise her about, and if they became scared of her... No, it definitely wasn't worth the risk."

"627

--1st Anniversary Special (day 5/7, page 1/4)--

Emiliana attended the same secondary school as Cisco, who had recently gotten his license and was now able to drive them. Back on her first day here, she'd quickly discovered that her brother had a reputation as a bully, which made her a bit reluctant to be seen with him. On the other hand, she found that it also made people she didn't like leave her alone. And after a while, she realized that she didn't really think Cisco could be a bully, either. It was probably just some misunderstanding. That would be more like the brother she knew. He wasn't really mean--just a bit brusque and harsh, most of all towards Marcos, but of course, the little brat deserved it as far as she was concerned.

Chergoa followed her to school as well. Maybe this was just for their first day together, though, because Cisco's reaper wasn't following him around.

Emiliana got through the beginning of the day normally enough, thankful for the routine of it all. Chergoa often wandered off to have a look around and perhaps see what Cisco was up to. It wasn't until they broke for lunch that the next moment that Emiliana had been dreading arrived. Being two years younger, she didn't share any classes with the boy of her affections, but she did share the same lunch period.

His name was Alex Belos, and he was sitting on the other side of the refectory. Emiliana remained with her two friends, but she stopped listening to what they were saying as Chergoa wandered closer to look at him. Thankfully, at least, Cisco had a different lunch period and wasn't sitting right next to him.

'Hmm,' said Chergoa privately. 'I thought he'd just be some pretty boy, but he definitely isn't.'

Emiliana squinted. 'What are you saying?'

'Nothing. Just that I figured a girl your age would go for someone more... handsome.'

'What?! He is very handsome!'

'Eh.'

She wanted to yell, but that would have made a scene, so she settled for a curt breath as her expression of disgust. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'

"628

--1st Anniversary Special (day 5/7, page 2/4)--

'I guess he's alright,' said Chergoa, 'if you're into horsefaces and big foreheads. Handsome in the non-traditional sense, maybe.'

'Shut up! You're an idiot, oh my god!'

'So defensive. You really do like him, huh?'

Emiliana growled under her breath until she realized that wasn't very ladylike. The odd looks from her friends may have had something to do with it as well. She made the excuse that she'd just been trying to clear her throat, which they seemed to buy, more or less.

'What's so great about him, anyway?' asked Chergoa.

She'd been expecting this question for a while. 'He's sweet, thoughtful, gentle, kind, handsome, and smart.'

Chergoa laughed. 'You sure came prepared, didn't you? How do you know that he really is all of those things, though?'

'Because he has been friends with my brother for five years, and I have known him just as long.'

'That doesn't really answer the question.'

'Ugh. You want specific examples?'

'I suppose not. His true nature should be apparent enough if I observe

him when he thinks no one is watching.'

'That's... that's horrible. You shouldn't invade his privacy.'

'Shouldn't. But I'm still going to.'

'I'm telling you not to!'

'Good thing I'm the boss in this relationship, then.'

'Agh!'

'He's not even your boyfriend yet, is he?'

'N-no... but...'

'But what?'

'I'm supposed to meet him after school today.'

'Ooh. Why?'

'He said he wants to give me a birthday present.'

'Your birthday was two days ago.'

'Yes, well, we didn't have school two days ago.'

'Sounds fishy. Maybe I should tell Cisco and have him meet you there.'

Her eyes widened. 'Don't!'

'Only teasing.'

'Agh...'

'It's not like Alex could do anything to you, anyway. For his own sake, I hope he doesn't try anything.'

'He wouldn't do something like that.'

'You sound convinced.'

Emiliana returned to listening to her friends. Or tried to. They were talking about the upcoming biology exam, which she wasn't especially interested in. Not because it was boring, but rather because she wasn't worried about it. Biology was one of her best subjects. As usual, they asked her to help them study for it, and she just kind of nonchalantly



agreed."  
"629

--1st Anniversary Special (day 5/7, page 3/4)--

For the remainder of the school day, Emiliana could hardly focus. She'd been anxious all weekend, wondering what exactly Alex was going to say to her or what his present would be; and now that it was so close to time, it was almost too much for her. Combined with all this talk of dreaming about marriage and her parents letting her live how she wanted, Emiliana's imagination started leaping away from her, wondering what she would do if Alex asked her to marry him. Of course he wouldn't. Not today, surely. But eventually? Was that possible? What would their lives be like? She could be a mother and--

'So how much do you know about your heritage?' asked Chergoa.

The question came out of nowhere and yanked Emiliana back down to Eleg. It took her a moment to realize that the reaper was probably just bored with her geography teacher's lecture and trying to make conversation. 'Why do you ask?'

'Of all the houses and bloodlines in this country, only ten of them are "Rainlords."'

'There are more in Intar.'

'That's true, but the Rainlords of Sair are considered the purest descendants of the old Arman people. I'm just wondering what that means to you.'

Emiliana hesitated. 'Honestly? It doesn't mean much to me at all.'

'Oh?'

'I know I'm probably the only one in my family to think so, but... Elroy is just a name. My ancestry doesn't matter to me.'

'Hmm.'

'What do you think?' Emiliana asked. 'You're ancient and wise, aren't you?'

'Well, I don't think a bloodline makes someone "destined for greatness"

or what have you, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that your ancestry is irrelevant, either.'

'Why? I genuinely don't understand what the fuss is about.'

'It has less to do with you individually and more to do with how people see you.'

'Well, that's their business, not mine.'

'And of course, there's also the fact that your family name has given you an overwhelming advantage in life. I hope you're not so spoiled that you don't even understand how privileged you are.'

'I know that.'

"630

'That's what everyone says,' said Chergoa.

Emiliana stiffened her brow. 'What do you want me to say?'

'Something convincing. The Rainlords and Sandlords of Sair are the oldest living bloodlines on Eloa. Your father is granted a seat on the Council of Lords in addition to being a Captain of the Vanguard. If that doesn't mean much to you, then I would wager that you do not, in fact, understand how privileged you are.'

Emiliana rolled her eyes and returned to observing the teacher's presentation. The man was busy talking about the Gulf of Emerson, theorized to be the result of a megathrust earthquake that cut through the continent some ten thousand years ago.

It was one of the rare moments in this class that wasn't just about memorizing the names of cities and countries. She didn't see much point in a geography course when she could look places up on her phone whenever she wanted--or even pull up a map of the entire planet in a matter of seconds. Maybe that was just the "annoying teenager" part of her brain, but this class really did seem like something that only an old person would consider important.

Probably not a thought she should share with Chergoa, she figured.

Finally, her last class let out, and she grabbed her lemon umbrella and

made her way around to the far end of the gym. She walked fast. Cisco was supposed to drive her home, so if this took too long, he would start wondering where she was.

She spotted Alex waiting for her beneath an overhang. With a knot in her chest, she approached him.

He smiled at her. "Hi."

She returned one of her own. "Hi."

"Thank you for coming."

"Of course."

At the sudden awkward silence, she couldn't help growing a bit impatient. "Is everything alright?" she asked.

"Sorry," he said, "I'm waiting for one more person."

Her smile waned. She was about to ask who he meant when someone rounded the corner and she saw that it was Cisco."

"631

Emiliana's breath caught, and she turned to Chergoa.

'Hey, don't look at me,' the reaper said privately. 'I didn't tell him. Your boyfriend here obviously did.'

"So what's all this about?" said Cisco. His reaper still wasn't with him. Dennex was always rather dutiful about going out and reaping souls while Cisco was occupied with school.

Everyone's attention was on Alex now, and he shrunk a little, seemingly under Cisco's gaze the most. "I wanted to ask you... well, I wanted to ask her if she would go on a date with me--"

"Excuse me?" said Cisco, while Emiliana's eyes lit up.

--but I want her brother's blessing as well," said Alex. He rummaged through his pocket and pulled out a silver locket, holding it up for them both to see. "A token of my sincerity. So you know that I'm not--"

Cisco grabbed the boy's wrist. Alex flinched.

"Cisco, don't!" said Emiliana.

Cisco eyed the locket. He opened it with his other hand but didn't take it from Alex. There was no picture inside. Not yet, at least. He cocked an eyebrow at his sister. "You like this guy?"

She nodded furiously and with gritted teeth, said, "Don't hurt him!"

Cisco released him and then stared at the both of them with those steely eyes of his. That face owed so much to their father, more so than any of the other Elroy children. His hair, on the other hand, had been taken from both parents. It had their mother's waves and their father's jet blackness. If Cisco ever bothered to run a brush through it, his hair might have been quite appealing, but apparently, he preferred looking like an unkempt beast.

"No," said Cisco.

"What?" said Emiliana.

He stared at her. "No. He's not even brave enough to date you without seeking my permission first. I bet the only reason he asked us both to come is because he was worried I would beat his ass and wanted you here to stop me."

"That's not true!" she said. "Right?"

Alex's face scrunched up, and he just kind of shrugged.  
"632 -- LXXIII.

Admittedly, that did dampen her enthusiasm a bit, but she was determined now. "Well, I don't need him to be brave," she said to her brother. "I only need him to be kind and sweet and thoughtful--which he is."

"Yeah!" said Alex. "I'm super nice!"

"Listen," said Cisco. "Alex, you're my friend, and I like you, but you are not a good match for my sister, and I'd rather you stay away from her."

Alex immediately nodded. "Well, okay, if that's how you feel--"

“Shut up, Alex,” said Emiliana. “You don’t need my brother’s permission to date me.”

“That’s true,” said Cisco, making them both blink at him. “But he asked for my blessing. I’m only telling him that I’m not going to give it.”

“So, wait,” said Alex. “If we start dating anyway, then... you’re not going to murder me in my sleep?”

Cisco took his time answering. “Of course not. Don’t be silly.” His words didn’t match the threat on his face and in his voice. “I would never hurt you. You’re my friend.”

“I’m glad that’s settled.” Emiliana took the locket from Alex and enveloped one of his arms with both of hers.

“Eh... y-yeah...”

“Where should we go for our first date, then?” she asked.

“Uh... I was thinking a movie, maybe...?”

“Great! When should we go? How about tonight?”

“Er--if you want, I guess we could--”

“By the way,” interrupted Cisco, “now that she’s fourteen, Emy has a reaper, who will probably be spying on you whenever you think no one is looking. Have fun with that.”

“Cisco!”

‘Hey!’ said Chergoa. ‘It’s no fun if he knows I’m watching! You’re only supposed to ruin your sister’s good time, not mine!’

Alex just gave a nervous laugh.

Chapter Seventy-Three: ‘O, guarded promise...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Luther was relegated to one corner of his cell while the maintenance man worked. Soon, he would have his television, just as David had promised.

David was also present, seated on the other side of the glass and observing the installation. The person seated next to him--Luther recognized her immediately. He'd never actually learned her real name, but the white cloak and sword on her hip told Luther all he needed to know."

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"633

“I am surprised our sister lent you her pet just for this,” said Luther.

“I’m sure she was merely concerned for your safety,” said David. “If you escaped out there into the world, who knows what might happen to you?”

“Ah, so if I were to escape, you are saying that this young lady here would not immediately hunt me down and cut me in two?”

David glanced at her a moment, then smiled at Luther. “I doubt she would need to kill you in order to subdue you. But then again, I have been wrong before. Feel free to give it a try.”

“Hmph. Can she not speak for herself, this one?”

"I am sure she is a lovely conversationalist, but I did not request her company for her verbal skills."

"Perhaps she simply knows better than to talk to us snakes," said Luther. "Smart girl."

The look she gave him was distant, as if she were hardly even paying attention, like Luther wasn't even worth her time. In a way, it was more frightening than if she'd been glaring at him. And more irritating.

The maintenance man finished up and exited the cell. Luther stood to inspect his work. Rather a small screen, he felt, and placed a bit too high up for his liking, but it had all the channels he wanted, which was the most important thing. He looked around. "No remote?"

"You can change it by hand," said David.

"Agh. This must qualify as cruel and unusual punishment, surely."

"You have your television. I have held up my end of the bargain. Hold up yours."

Luther put on a frown. In truth, he was a bit relieved. He'd expected David to come up with some kind of clever catch, but this was just petty nonsense. And he was perfectly fine with that. "Very well. A hint is all I promised--and for this meager display, that is certainly all I will give."

"Out with it, then. If your hint bears fruit, then perhaps this meager display will change."

"634

With all his spare time lately, Luther had been thinking carefully about what type of hint he should give his brother. He could simply lie, of course, but that would no doubt kill any further attempts to barter. Worse, it might even make David refuse to speak with him again, and given that Luther would probably be stuck down here for quite some time, David's traitorous company was one of the few things he actually looked forward to. Not that he could ever let David know this. It would only give the man an advantage.

So he had to tell David something, at least. And he knew what. "The



hint, then. The extra precautions I took before the night of my undoing, as it were. I will only tell you that it has to do with money.”

“Ah.” David rubbed his beard. “I suppose that is a satisfactory clue.”

“Unless you give me something else, you will get nothing more from me,” said Luther.

“Okay,” said David. He stood and reached into his vest pocket. He pulled out a small remote. He hit one of the buttons.

The screen on Luther’s television turned to gray static.

Luther folded his arms. “Have you forgotten? You signed a written agreement, and one of the stipulations--”

--“Was to ensure that you be given certain numbered channels, yes. I read it quite thoroughly; I assure you. But if you look closely, you will see that I did give you those channels. For instance, channel six--” David flipped over to the specified channel, wherein the picture returned. “See? You requested this one in particular, and here it is.”

Luther stared at images of an animated sheep walking on two legs through a very boxy-looking city.

“Normally, channel six is merely a boring network with daily soap operas and nightly news programs,” said David. “Fortunately, I knew you would not be interested in any of that, so instead, I had a special receiver installed in your television, and now your channel six is twenty-four hours of cartoons.””

”635

“You--” tried Luther, but David wasn’t done.

“And here, channel eight--oh. Non-stop infomercials. Always something interesting there. Then you have your channel for music videos, your channel for food, your channel for wildlife. And of course, I made sure to include several religious networks as well--I know how pious you are, so I’m sure you will enjoy those. Ah, and my favorite: the crackling fireplace. I am not even sure what you would call this channel, but I find it very soothing.”

Luther just shut his eyes and rubbed his forehead. What a bastard,

David was.

Mariana wasn't very fond of unexpected visitors. Perhaps she'd just spent too many years in places where such visits only ever meant that someone had come to kill her. Marriage and children had not softened her in that regard. If anything, they had made it worse. Or better, depending on one's viewpoint. All of her children knew how to hold, fire, and clean a few different types of firearms--even Ramira, who was nine years old.

So when the guards out front radioed in with the message that some woman was requesting to see her and Zeff, it was no coincidence that the first thing Mariana did was slide the speaker box over and reveal a hidden recess in the wall. A handgun lay there, and she grabbed it. It wasn't loaded, of course, but that was why she always carried a spare magazine around with her.

'Would you relax?' said Shenado.

There was a very simple answer to that question, but Mariana decided not to be rude. To her eyes, Shenado and Axiolis were both darkly orange foxes. Each had multiple tails that flickered with ethereal fire, just like their burning eyes.

The speaker box still worked fine in its new position, and Zeff asked the guards, "Does this woman have a name?"

A pause, and then, <"She says it's Salazar. Says you know her.">

Zeff blinked at his wife.

'It's been fifteen years,' said Axiolis. 'What's she doing here?'

Mariana pressed the button and told the guards, "Let her in.""  
"636

Juliana Salazar had always been unpredictable for as long as Mariana had known her, so it made a certain amount of sense that the woman would just show up unannounced like this. She was loud, obnoxious, and way too easy-going.

She was also a general of the Vanguard's ground forces, as well as Mariana's previous commanding officer.

As Mariana recalled, the first thing that anyone noticed when they looked at Salazar was her hair, and fifteen years later, she saw that had not changed as Salazar strode into the welcoming chamber with a rainbow falling around her face. On anyone else, Mariana imagined it would have looked ridiculous, but on Salazar, somehow, it seemed all too fitting.

Salazar's reaper followed in behind her. Armengél was this one's name, and even through the filter of perception that was every reaper's appearance, he still managed to look dour. His flaming eyes rounded down, as if sullen about something, but Mariana knew that was just the way he usually was.

The rainbow woman smiled that giant smile of hers as she saw Mariana. "There you are! Oh, and Zeff! How are you?!" She didn't wait for any responses and just moved in for a big hug.

Mariana still had her gun but was able to endure the hug without using it. "We are very well. What brings you here?"

"Why, you, of course," said Salazar. "No offense, but Aguairey isn't exactly my ideal vacation spot. We wanted to talk to you."

'About what?' said Shenado.

"Oh, lots of things. Got any snacks? I could go for some snacks."

Mariana exchanged glances with her husband before waving to the butler by the door. The man scurried off, and they moved their conversation into the next room where they could all sit down on the cushioned furniture with silver embroidery.

'Nice house,' said Armengél. 'You steal it?'

"No," said Mariana. "It's been in Zeff's family for generations."

Salazar clicked her tongue. "Oh, that's right. We never did visit you after the wedding. Always meant to."

"I imagine you were very busy," said Mariana.

"Aren't we all?" said Salazar."

‘It’s always nice to see a friendly face and have a pleasant chat,’ said Axiolis, ‘but I get the impression that’s not really why you’re here now.’

‘It does seem odd that the two of you are traveling alone,’ said Zeff.

‘Why?’ said Salazar. ‘Is it dangerous here?’

‘Even with your level of strength, someone as important as you should have some kind of security detail,’ said Zeff.

That left the General quiet, but after a moment, Armengél responded for her. ‘There aren’t that many people we trust right now.’

‘Why?’ said Mariana.

‘Let’s table that question for a bit,’ said Salazar. ‘There are some other things we should discuss first.’

‘Do go on, then,’ said Shenado.

The butler chose that moment to arrive with the aforementioned snacks, which further delayed the discussion between the three servants as Salazar politely complained that there wasn’t anything alcoholic. The reapers, however, continued talking while Mariana and Zeff just listened.

‘In terms of raw manpower, the Vanguard is stronger now than it has ever been,’ said Armengél. ‘Twenty years ago, we hardly had five thousand active servants, but now we have ten times that. In the past year alone, we’ve gained over three thousand new recruits--many of them, reapers who have never taken on a servant before and therefore require considerable direction.’

‘Startling numbers,’ said Axiolis. ‘Abolish must not be pleased. This business with aberrations has only ended up reinforcing our cause.’

‘Poetic justice for not upholding the Old Law,’ said Shenado. ‘If they keep allowing their pets to break neutrality agreements, Sai-hee might even start helping us out.’

‘You’re being too optimistic,’ said Salazar now that the butler had ventured off again. ‘It’s nice to imagine that the enemy’s plan has blown up in their face, but that’s not exactly the case here, unfortunately.’

‘Explain,’ said Shenado.

“As Armengél said, the Vanguard is larger than ever,” said Salazar. “Too large, in other words. Bloated. And still growing. All these new recruits--who’s to say some of them aren’t Abolish spies?”

‘That is why they are vetted,’ said Axiolis.

‘Which, at best, is a difficult process,’ argued Armengél.”  
"638

“Many of the reapers joining us have been in isolation for ages,” said Salazar. “They’ve never chosen a side, because they’ve never needed to. Most of them originally died long before it was common practice for governments to record any meaningful details about the lives that their citizens lived. And as floating, imaginary beings, it’s easy to live beneath everyone’s radar, so a lot of the time, the only thing we have to go on is word-of-mouth: what reapers tell us about each other. And that’s not much.”

‘It’s a simple matter for Abolish to sneak agents in as one of these “unknown” reapers,’ said Armengél.

“The Vanguard may be larger than ever, but it is definitely not stronger,” said Salazar. “It’s disorganized, and corruption has taken full advantage of that.”

Zeff’s gaze hardened. “Corruption? That is a bold accusation, General Salazar.”

“No, it isn’t,” Salazar said flatly. “The Vanguard has always had its share of eccentrics and troublemakers. I’m sure you’ve met plenty of them. They’re valuable assets, but they thrive in chaos. And they make it worse.”

Mariana found herself in agreement there, at least.

Armengél hovered behind his partner, nodding deeply. ‘Ideally, we would slow down the recruiting process in order to give ourselves time to adjust, but saying that now is like telling a dog to chew its food more.’

At the ensuing discomforted silence, Salazar’s expression lightened

again. She grabbed a rice cake from the tray beside her and took a bite. "Have any of you heard of the Vahgrakaanas?" she asked.

The word was familiar, but Mariana couldn't place it. She didn't need to, though.

'It's a group of five rogue servants, all of moderate fame,' said Shenado. 'And the name. Vahgrakaanas. It means 'vagrant lords' in Old Mohssian.'

"That's right," said Salazar. "They're still small and comparatively weak, but they're capitalizing on the times and gathering clout right now. A lot of people suspect that they're trying to become a fourth major player, equal to the Vanguard, Abolish, and Sai-hee."

'Five deserters, is what I've heard,' said Axiolis. 'From both the Vanguard and Abolish, supposedly. Not sure I believe that, though.'

"It's true," said Salazar. "But they won't be five for much longer. Because I will be the sixth.""

"639

"What are you saying?" said Zeff. "You intend to abandon the Vanguard?"

'Yes,' affirmed Armengél.

"Come with us," said Salazar.

Mariana could hardly believe what she was hearing. "What? You must be joking."

Salazar looked over everyone again, settling on Mariana. She had a rare gaze, this woman, thanks to her heterochromatic irises. Deeply brown on the left and brightly hazel on the right. "We've been thinking, lately, about who we trust the most," she said. "Shenado and Mariana here came to mind. Maybe things've changed after all this time, but I remember you two being some of the most uncompromising individuals I have ever known. And yes, that made you a pain in my ass on more than one occasion, but it also helped me trust you when things went bad--as they often did."

Armengél nodded. 'We don't know your husband quite so well, but the

Elroys are renowned for their sense of duty, and if you were willing to marry him, then it's a fair bet that he is trustworthy.'

'How can you spout such traitorous nonsense?' said Axiolis. 'You're genuinely asking us to leave with you? Just like that?'

"We know it is sudden," said Salazar. "And we know you have a family to think about. Bring them with you. We will keep them safe. We won't force them to fight for us, either."

Shenado seemed more shaken than anyone. 'Why are you leaving? Only because you fear a bit of corruption in our ranks? You're a general! You say the problem facing us is organizational, but aren't you in a position to change that?'

"We've tried," said Salazar. "It's too late."

'That's not good enough!' said Shenado. 'What about Sermung?! Have you even lost faith in him?!'

"Sermung is the most powerful person in the world," the General said. "I still have faith in him. And in three of the top eight. Sanko, Lamont, Jackson. But everyone else? I don't know. And that's not enough anymore, because I no longer have faith in what they've built. I can't tell if the Vanguard is crumbling, but I know that it is at least changing. And not for the better.'"

"640

'You really think the situation is that bad?' said Axiolis.

"When was the last time either of you went on a mission?" the General asked. "Three months? Longer? You're isolated out here, because you have children. But once they're grown, the Vanguard will return you both to active duty, and you'll be lucky to see them once or twice a year."

Mariana was unfazed by her words. "That is what it means to serve."

'You were right when you said that we were uncompromising,' said Shenado. 'That has not changed. In fact, after everything you've just said, we should take you captive and turn you over to our own general.'



That remark left a stinging silence in its wake. For a time, no one moved.

Salazar smiled through the ill atmosphere. "Well, before you do anything you'll regret, allow me to remind you that we are guests in your home. And as you mentioned earlier, we came here alone--which we didn't have to do. We could have brought several followers with us, but we chose not to out of courtesy, respect, and peaceable intentions for you and your family. I would expect the honorable Elroys to not trample on our goodwill." She held up her rice cake. "Not quite a 'shared meal,' but I believe it still captures the spirit of hospitality."

Mariana saw her husband nod.

"That's what I like about you Rainlords," said Salazar. "Observers of the old customs. You take your promises seriously."

"Yes, we do," said Zeff. "Which should tell you that we will not be breaking the ones we have made to the Vanguard, either."

"I figured as much," said Salazar. "But I want you to know that there is no time limit on this invitation. If you change your mind one day, seek me out."

Shenado shook her head. 'I can't believe you're deserting. And why join the Vahgrakaanas, anyway?'

'For the freedom,' said Armengél. 'Even if we managed to get accepted into Sai-hee's exclusive little club, we still wouldn't be able to do what we want.'

"641

Mariana's brow lowered. "And what is it that you want to do?"

"Only to survive and continue protecting people," said Salazar.

'By working with Ex-Abolish,' said Shenado.

"Well, I didn't say it was ideal."

Mariana glowered. The more she thought about it, the less she was surprised by Salazar's decision. There was a reason this person was Mariana's previous commanding officer. When she married Zeff, the

couple had been confronted with a choice, because a Vanguardian family was not allowed to have split allegiances. It was either Zeff's commanding officer or Mariana's. And it was not a difficult decision for her. Rather, it was one of the things that had motivated her to finally tie the knot with Zeff.

The memory of that old mission was abruptly vivid in Mariana's mind, a mission that had shaped over a decade of conflict to follow.

The president of Vaeland had only just won his election by a small margin, and his first act was to outlaw the practice of slavery. Noble, perhaps, but foolish, because he did not have the strength to support it.

And so the Vanguard came to his aid. Salazar was the first to arrive in the capital with thirty servants under her command, Mariana among them. The goal was only to hold out until their reinforcements could break through the Abolish-controlled southern isles and link up with them.

From all reports, progress was good. Jackson's men were estimated to arrive in less than ten hours. Salazar's troops had not even seen any fighting yet.

Then a name reached them.

Gohvis. Bearing down on them from the north.

And that was enough to make Salazar retreat without putting up any resistance. She allowed him to take the capital with ease, allowed Abolish to take root in the heart of the country. To the ruin of all its people.

Mariana wasn't a fool. She knew they wouldn't have been able to stop that monster. But they only needed to delay him until Jackson arrived. Yes, it would have been difficult. Yes, many of them would have died. But that was the Vanguard's purpose. Sacrifice was what it meant to serve."

"642 -- LXXIV.

Salazar may have been strong. She may have been clever. She may have even saved Mariana's life along with those of all her comrades.

But when it came down to it, she and Armengél were cowards, and this meeting here today only confirmed that for Mariana all the more.

A part of Mariana wanted to dredge up the past right now and confront the woman about it directly, but she resisted, knowing no good would come of it. She'd already heard Salazar's excuses, anyway.

"How's that daughter of yours?" the General asked, which pulled Mariana back to the conversation at hand. "Gema, wasn't it?"

"She is fine," she said.

"That's good. How old is she now?"

"Eighteen."

Perhaps the woman had been expecting a more elaborate response, because the conversation died there and didn't recover. She looked at the Elroys as the uncomfortable silence returned, perhaps letting it draw out to be sure that they didn't have anything else to say to her. "Ah... it seems we're no longer welcome here, Armengél."

He nodded. 'Well, at least they're not trying to kill us.'

Chapter Seventy-Four: 'O, forsaken sanctuary...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Seven hours after his arrival in Warrenhold, Hector had still not fully explored the castle, and it certainly wasn't for lack of trying.

It was just him and Garovel now. It had taken a while just to find a staircase that led underground, and even then, he'd had to clear away the rubble first. The tall stone doors would hardly even budge, and Hector ended up accidentally busting them down, only to see still more debris in the way. He decided that it was too dangerous for anyone else to venture down with him, so he asked Jamal to escort his mother and Madame Carthrace to a hotel. It was already well into the night anyway, and they all seemed pretty tired. Jamal left him with a variety of supplies, for which Hector was quite thankful.

The castle had its own generator. Somewhere. Until he found it and figured out how to get it working, there would be no electricity. Which meant no light, of course, save only what he brought with him."

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"643

Hector's flashlight didn't last very long, and he was forced to carry a floodlight around in one hand like a kind of supercharged lantern. He made an iron harness for the large battery pack that Jamal had left him and strapped it to his back as if it were an oxygen tank.

In the beginning of his expedition, he was predominantly concerned with clearing rubble out of the hallways, which usually meant refilling the holes in the ceiling or the walls and then patching the whole section of corridor over with a layer of iron. It also helped him keep track of where he'd already been, because the place was a damn maze, and Garovel couldn't do much to help him explore it when there was no light anywhere. He found himself sorely missing Harper Norez's company.

The castle itself was not of uniform construction. The first few areas he found were all made of a mixture of wood and concrete, but then he started seeing whole rooms and hallways of tawny sandstone or dark red brick or deeply blue marble. He found one chamber with lavish rainbow tile, though it probably would've looked nicer without the fissures running through its walls. A few other times, rooms were simply small caves with natural rock walls and nothing more.

He tried to explore each floor completely before descending again, but some rooms were so thoroughly destroyed that he couldn't tell if there were any other doors hidden behind all the debris. More things he'd have to worry about later, he figured.

Five floors below the surface, he came out onto a sudden balcony, and for a moment, he thought he'd found a larger cave, but after shining his light around, he realized it was actually just one giant chamber.

'A banquet hall?' suggested Garovel.

Hector took a deep breath of stale air and raised a metal platform up

from below the balcony. He climbed on and lowered himself down. He ran his light across the room again, counting eight more doors to choose from--two on each wall. He just sighed."

"644

By now, Hector was getting the distinct impression that he still wasn't even close to the end of this self-guided tour. He supposed that could be a good thing, but on the other hand, even if he only counted everything he'd seen so far, Warrenhold already seemed way too big for four people. And hell, he wasn't sure if Jamal and Amelia were going to live here. The thought of having all this space for only him and his mother was even more daunting. Were all castles this gigantic?

'At least there doesn't seem to be a vermin problem,' said Garovel.

"So far."

'I don't think I've even seen any cobwebs anywhere. Curious.'

"Watch the next room we find be a fucking den of spiders."

'Are you arachnophobic?'

"No. Er... at least, I don't think I am..."

'Oh, that's right. You're not afraid of anything, are you?'

"Uh--I don't know about that. When I saw Harper use pan-rozum, I almost shat myself..."

Garovel laughed. 'Oh yeah? I didn't realize. I suppose I can see why, though.'

He looked around again. "Agh. I wish I at least knew how many floors there are in this place." He'd asked Madame Carthrace for a map or floor plan of the building, but she explained that she'd been unable to procure such a thing despite searching for the past several days.

'Just think of it as an adventure.'

"I feel like I'm gonna get lost down here forever..."

'Don't worry. I can probably guide you back.'

“...Probably?”

‘If not, you can become the Darksteel Mole Man.’

“Fantastic.”

Eyeing all eight doors another time, Hector eventually just shrugged and chose the closest one. It led to another hallway. A very long hallway. There had to be at least another ten rooms to investigate, but he decided to keep going instead. At length, the corridor ended very abruptly, as if the rest of it were missing, replaced by a hole leading to pitch blackness. Hector stepped closer to the edge and shined his light through the hole.

This time, it really was a cave."

"645

Enormous stalactites hung down from above, fervently living up to the name of Gray Rock. He couldn't tell how large the cave was from this angle, but it certainly wasn't small, and it seemed to extend around the castle.

‘There,’ said Garovel. ‘See that rock ledge?’

He did. It wasn't very far, just slightly below him. He made a bridging staircase for himself and descended. His light illuminated an extremely steep drop off as he walked, and when he reached the ledge, he looked back toward the castle, finally seeing it from the outside. Or part of it, anyway.

It almost seemed like the tower was upside down. Wide at the top, it became incrementally thinner in rivets toward the bottom, where it found support from a mound of natural rock. But even now, Hector still couldn't quite see the bottom because of the rocks in the way. Additionally, the hole that he'd exited from was even larger than he'd thought, and it now granted him a view into several different rooms and hallways. A whole chunk of the tower was missing, he realized.

‘That's a little suspicious-looking,’ said Garovel.

“Is it?”

'The center of that hole is about even with the ledge you're standing on now.'

"Hmm."

'I'm wondering if it was really caused by an earthquake. It's fairly symmetrical, too. Makes me think it could've been made by an explosive.'

"You think someone attacked this place?"

'That's often why castles are built, so maybe this is just an old wound that was never repaired. But y'know, I just think the whole earthquake story is strange. I imagine that someone skilled enough to build a place like this would know better than to choose a location that has an earthquake problem.'

"It's really old, though. Maybe the builders just didn't have that kind of... uh... surveying technology? Or something?"

'Maybe. Let's go see what's on the other side of this tower.'

Hector considered his options. The rocks below looked rather perilous, so he figured that materializing a staircase on top of them would be annoying. Instead, he made a single giant platform and jumped to it. The force of his landing caused it to fall forward, but that was as planned."

"646

Hector fell with the platform, and when he neared the bottom, he leapt off again, creating a sudden slide to catch himself. He eased down through the smooth iron tube and landed comfortably on both feet.

Garovel floated over. 'Showing off for me?'

He laughed as he annihilated his work. "Never hurts to practice. Though, to be honest, I was kind of expecting to faceplant on that one..."

'I'm glad you're not one to let a little thing like the threat of grievous bodily harm stop you.'

He held up his floodlight to be sure he hadn't broken it and was glad to



find it in working order. "By the way, uh... I'm pretty sure I achieved emergence when I was fighting Harper."

'Oh? That's excellent.'

"Not sure what all I can do now."

'Looks like we'll have plenty of space and opportunity to figure that out.' The reaper floated slowly forward, rounding the base of the tower as Hector followed.

Abruptly, they were confronted with a broad view of what seemed like the entire castle, though the floodlight could only illuminate so much at once. Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, Hector gradually counted eight towers in total, all hanging down from the ceiling in a ring formation directly above him. Cavern rocks rose up from the floor to cradle each structure, save one, which looked to be half-destroyed with a good chunk of its remnants now hanging freely in mid-air. At the top, Hector could see a series of bridging walkways connecting everything and angled support beams for them extending out from each adjacent tower.

"Holy shit..."

'Yeah... I'm starting to see why Voreese wanted this place.'

"People think this is an eyesore? It looks incredible..."

'Hmm.'

The towers varied in size somewhat, but even the ruined one must've still had about ten stories. The largest, though, stood directly in front of him. It didn't grow thinner like the others as it reached the base of the cave, and its stone looked a bit different as well, darker and more intricately carved. By itself, it must have had over a hundred windows just on this side alone, as well as a couple of protrusions into the rock halfway up its massive body."

"647

Hector wondered if the banquet hall from earlier was in that largest tower somewhere, but the more he looked over everything, the more he became convinced that each tower probably had enough space for it.

'All in all, Warrenhold still looks like it's in pretty decent condition from the outside,' said Garovel. 'Apart from that one tower over there, that is.'

"We've been down here for hours already, but there's still so much left to explore..."

'Well, you did spend most of that time clearing hallways.' The reaper paused. 'Hey, do you hear something?'

He listened. Indeed, there was a faint rushing sound, constant like distant static. "Yeah. What is that?"

'I could be mistaken, but it sounds like a waterfall.'

Hector cocked an eyebrow. "What? Underground?"

'It would've been very practical to build Warrenhold near a source of water, and an underground river could very well mean an underground waterfall.'

"That'd be... pretty sweet, actually. Where do you think it is, then?"

'Not sure. Could be on the other side of one of these towers, maybe, behind a wall somewhere. Or it could just be farther down in the cave. Seems like we've found the heart of the castle, but we're still not at the bottom of the cave yet.'

"Geez..."

'Regardless, we should look for that waterfall first. It could lead us to a generator.'

"Oh, you think it's hydroelectric?"

'It's possible. Obviously, the castle is older than hydroelectric power--hell, it's older than the discovery of electricity itself--but if the last resident lived here only forty years ago, then yeah, it could have a generator like that. There's no guarantee it still works, though.'

"Of course..."

At the reaper's request, Hector backtracked a little, just a short ways from the ring of turrets, and found another steep drop off. This one, however, had a decrepit stone wall--an ancient guardrail, seemingly. Hector shined his light over the edge and illuminated a distant bed of

dark turquoise.

‘Oh,’ said Garovel. ‘There’s a friggin’ lake right here.’

Hector could see gray objects in the water, poking out above the surface. “Are those... buildings?””

"648

Garovel went over the cliff for a closer look.

“Hey!” said Hector. “Don’t go off on your own!”

‘Relax. I’d be able to sense if there was anything alive down here. Just stay up there and give me light.’

Hector wanted to protest more, but he figured he should probably just trust that Garovel knew what he was doing. He wasn’t particularly happy about it, though.

‘It’s strange,’ the reaper said. ‘Usually, if I concentrate, I can sense even small animals within a hundred meters or so, but I haven’t been able to sense any life at all. No insects or mice in the castle, no fish or anything in this water here, no worms in the dirt, even.’

‘That can’t be right,’ thought Hector. ‘There’s gotta be bugs down here somewhere, right? Maybe your soul radar or whatever is getting screwed up for some reason. You should get back over here.’

‘My sense is fine. I can still sense you perfectly well. You are literally the only living thing in Warrenhold, right now.’

He looked around again. ‘That’s... a little creepy.’

‘These buildings in the water are houses,’ said Garovel. ‘Very old and empty. This used to be a tiny village.’

‘I wonder how it flooded...’

‘Bah. It’s too dark. I can’t see where the lake ends or begins, but it does seem to be flowing east. Wherever that waterfall is, I don’t think it’ll be easy to reach.’

‘What now?’

‘Eh, we’ll explore the water later. You should get back above ground soon and check your messages. I’m sure your cell reception in here is terrible, and the others will be wanting to hear from you.’

‘Alright.’

Garovel was returning now, flying backwards as he looked over the dotted lake. ‘It seems our new home has seen some rough times.’

“No kidding.”

‘It won’t be easy to repair.’

‘That’s, um... yeah. I’m not sure how we’re supposed to afford it. I didn’t even see furniture in any of the rooms, either, so we’ll need money for that, too.’

‘Yeah, and the Queen only gave you three million troas to work with.’”  
"649 -- LXXV.

--donation bonus week #1 (day 1/5, post 1/5)--

It took a second for that number to register. “Wait, what?”

‘You didn’t think she’d give us this monstrosity without any funds to get started, did you? This place is probably the biggest money pit I’ve ever seen.’

“But... wha...” He squinted with one eye. “Fucking three million?! You’re telling me I’m a millionaire now?!”

‘Technically.’

“Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?!”

‘I wanted to see the state of things first. And now that I have, I don’t think you should get too excited about your newfound riches. If the rest of Warrenhold is in as terrible a state as everything we’ve seen so far, then three million troas will hardly put a dent in our expenses.’

“But... three million...”

Garovel chortled as they started back toward the ring of towers. ‘Our

goal should be to restore Warrenhold in such a way that it will eventually begin to pay for itself.'

"How the hell do we do that?"

'There are all sorts of ways to make money, Hector, especially when you already have some at your disposal. But first, we still need a clearer picture of everything that Warrenhold has to offer. Hopefully, Voreese will give us some juicy details when she visits. The castle is certainly impressive to look at, but I'm not sure that explains why she seemed so set on it.'

"Hmm. Maybe there's a secret treasure room."

'That'd be nice.'

"So secret that we'll never find it."

'Sounds about right.'

Chapter Seventy-Five: 'Son of Water, observe carefully...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Ever since school let out for the day, Marcos couldn't quite shake the feeling that he was being watched. It was discomforting, to say the least, like his eyes could see someone recognizable there in the pedestrian crowds, but his brain simply refused to tell him who it was.

He tried to be smart about it and just stuck with his friends. When their basketball game concluded, he asked them if they wanted to come over to his house and play some other games. They agreed but still ended up finding excuses to abandon him along the way. He knew they were just uncomfortable in these fancier neighborhoods, but still. He really wished they would've stuck with him a bit longer."

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"650

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 2/5)--

On his own now, Marcos attempted to stay near the crowds, which was rather easy, thankfully. Aguary had ample foot traffic despite the constant rains. Temperatures were usually mild enough that walking wasn't terribly unpleasant so long as one had a raincoat or umbrella.

The last leg of his journey proved problematic, however. The Elroy Estate didn't sit on a main road, which meant he would have to abandon the comfort of the crowd in order to actually make it home. But it wasn't that far. He just needed to make it past the madega tree at the end of the next street, round the corner, and then it would be a straight shot the rest of the way.

He gathered his courage and went for it, quick as he dared on the slick concrete. He glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone emerged from the crowd to pursue him. He stopped dead when he instead saw his jackass brother there.

Marcos was at once incensed and relieved. "Cisco! Were you following me?!"

"Maybe."

"Why?!" Marcos had to stifle his next words, realizing they would only have been an admission of fear. He didn't need Cisco making fun of him.

Cisco took his sweet time answering, letting his eyes drift elsewhere, probably talking to his reaper privately like Marcos wasn't even there.

Marcos hated when he did that.

"No reason," said Cisco. "I was just wondering why you're always

disappearing.”

“I disappear to get away from you!”

“Good to know.” Cisco closed the distance between them and put an arm around his brother. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Marcos squirmed out of his grasp. “What’re you doing? Don’t touch me.”

“Just move your ass, brat. No one likes a sluggard.”

“A what?”

“It means a slow and lazy person.”

“Then why didn’t you just say that?”

Cisco pushed him forward. “Walk.”

Marcos walked. He didn’t understand what was going through his brother’s head, and he didn’t much care to, either.

They finally reached the gate, and Nico and Jorem welcomed the brothers home. Marcos thanked them for the courtesy, while Cisco only nodded.”

"651

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 3/5)--

Marcos parted ways with Cisco at the first opportunity. He made his way upstairs, looking for the refuge of his room, but Ramira appeared in his path with a question.

“What did you do?” She was a tiny thing, this girl, skinny even for a nine-year-old. Her overalls and wild black hair made her look almost as boyish as he did.

“What are you talking about?” he said.

“You did something bad and got in trouble.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Liar. I heard Mama telling Cisco to keep an eye on you this morning.



Why would she do that if she didn't think you did something wrong, huh?"

"I don't know. But I didn't do anything wrong."

"Yeah, right. I bet you put a frog in Emy's bed again."

It was actually going to be slugs next for Emy, but Marcos hadn't gotten around to it yet. He'd never been brave enough to try anything on Cisco, but he was thinking it was about time to rectify that. Maybe replace his shampoo with vinegar. Or write him a fake love letter from a secret admirer. And include instructions on where to meet. And then the admirer would turn out to be a bull terrier with a pink bow on its head.

He might've been putting a bit more thought into that second one.

"Tell me," said Ramira. By the eager look in her eyes, she was about to pester him to let her help with his next prank.

"I really didn't do anything."

"Hmph. That's boring."

He tried to move past, and she stepped in front of him.

"Are you going to do anything?" she asked.

"No."

"Really? Because Emy has a boyfriend now, so..."

That caught his attention. "She does?"

"Yeah!"

A beat passed as Marcos stared at his little sister. "Alright, what can you tell me about him?"

"It's Alex Belos. Cisco's friend. His favorite color is green. He has a pet turtle named Frank. He walks to school, because he doesn't like the bus. He hates broccoli, and he's scared of dogs. And Cisco."

"How the heck do you know all this?"

She gave a confident grin. "Because I'm a spy. Duh."

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 4/5)--

"A spy. Right. I forgot. Sorry." He knew that trying to tell her otherwise would only upset her. "Well, I want you to keep spying, then. If we're going to do this thing, then we'll be needing as much intelligence as we can gather."

"Okay!"

He lowered his voice and said, "But keep it a secret. You never know if one of the reapers might be listening."

"I'm a spy. Not an amateur."

"I know. Just don't get caught."

"Duh." She scampered off.

He watched her go. She was going to be a very scary person one day, he thought.

It wasn't much longer to dinnertime, so Marcos just watched television for a bit. Regardless of what Cisco said, Marcos hoped the day would never come when he no longer enjoyed cartoons.

At dinner, there seemed to be a tension in the air that even he noticed. Marcos mostly just kept his head down and peeked around the table from below his bushy eyebrows while he worked on his stew. His father was eventually the one to break the ice.

"I have a small announcement," said Pa, immediately drawing everyone's attention. "My presence has been requested in Rheinhal, so I'll be leaving in the morning."

The children digested his words.

"Are you being given an assignment?" said Cisco.

"Possibly. I don't know. I do know that it will only be for a day or two. I expect all of you to behave in my absence and listen to your mother."

"Yes, ensir," said all four children, nearly in unison.

There wasn't much left to be said after that. A few inquiries into their schooldays, a request to meet this Alex Belos fellow, and nothing else. Marcos was far from an expert on what his mother was thinking, but she didn't look particularly pleased, and her dour mood seemed to permeate the entire dining room. Gradually, the evening drew to a close.

Marcos lay in bed in his odd, brick-patterned pajamas, and he found himself unable to sleep. Something was nagging at him, and all he had now was time to think about it."

"653

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 5/5)--

This business about Ma telling Cisco to follow him around was certainly odd. And if that was really the case, then why hadn't Cisco just told him so? To be a jerk? It seemed like a lot of needless trouble to go through. Cisco must've been tailing him for hours...

Hmm. Had Cisco really been following him that long? Because it would've been impossible unless Cisco had skipped the end of school, which wasn't something Cisco was likely to do. Cisco made no secret of his view that school was an important obligation as an Elroy. Perhaps orders from Ma trumped that, though. But then, there still remained the question of why she would ask Cisco to do something like that when she knew he would be so against it.

At length, Marcos sat up. He rubbed his face. He got out of bed and made his way downstairs, looking for a glass of milk from the kitchen. As he poured, he could hear muffled voices from the next room over. His parents were still awake, it seemed, and curiosity got the better of him, so he wandered closer. Their voices sounded heavy and serious--even more so than usual for his parents.

"...I don't like this, Zeff."

"Neither do I, but what would you have me do? Ignore Lawrence's orders? For what reason, exactly?"

"It just feels very sudden, and after everything Salazar said, I think we should be very cautious. I have little respect for the woman, but I have never considered her to be stupid."

"Well, thankfully, I married a woman who excels at caution."

"Zeff--"

There was a long pause.

"Rallying?" said Pa. "You're starting to sound a bit paranoid. We've no reason to suspect General Lawrence of any wrongdoing."

"No, she's right," said Ma. "It's best to be overprepared."

"Fine, but--"

Another pause, but this time, Marcos heard footsteps moving toward him. He panicked and tried to run, but the door was already opening, and then he heard his father's voice.

"Marcos. What are you still doing up?"

"654

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 1/5)--

Marcos flinched. His father never really yelled, but the man could take a certain tone that made Marcos suitably frightened. He held up his glass of milk. "I'm sorry," he tried. "I couldn't sleep, so..."

"Well, hurry back to bed."

Marcos looked up at his father and frowned. "Pa. Um... are we in danger?"

The man gave a sigh of irritation. "You were eavesdropping."

Marcos looked at the floor.

"It's nothing that you need to worry about," his father said, a modicum more softly. "That's a job for your mother and I."

"But..."

He patted his son on the head. "Marcos. You know the world is dangerous. I can't promise you that nothing bad will ever happen. Your mother would kill me if I lied to you like that." He knelt down to look his son in the eye. "But you are an Elroy. A Rainlord. And what do the

Rainlords say? What have we always said?"

"The rain fears not the torch."

"Yes. And what does that mean?"

Marcos remembered asking that same question. He remembered his father's answer equally well and now chose to repeat it. "It means we don't run from danger. We destroy it."

"That's right. All of us. Even while I'm away, your mother will be here, and you know she won't let anything happen to you. Neither will your brother. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, ensir."

"Good. Now with that said, we are not in any danger that we know of. I would tell you if we were. Do you believe me?"

He wasn't really sure he did, but he still said, "Yes, ensir."

"There's a good boy. Back to bed now. Off you go."

He nodded and downed the rest of his milk before returning to his room. He didn't feel all that comforted, really, but he still fell asleep after a fashion. When he awoke, he was able to see the Lord Elroy off before school. As he watched the man drive away, Marcos frowned and wondered who would be there to prevent anything from happening to his father."

"655 -- LXXVI.

--donation bonus week #1 (day 1/5, post 2/5)--

Chapter Seventy-Six: 'Thy buried history...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector was glad for Amelia Carthrace's presence. The woman could organize just about anything, seemingly, and she had a handle on his funds. She was almost like an elderly version of Gina, he thought, and he could see why the Queen had asked her to help him out. The only thing he didn't understand was why Madame Carthrace had actually agreed to.

By mid-morning, Warrenhold already had two separate crews onsite. The first was the preliminary reconstruction team, which Amelia tasked with making immediate and primitive repairs to the aboveground buildings. Their primary goal was to have enough rooms with four walls for everyone by the day's end.

The second crew was a team of surveyors, and Hector accompanied them underground. At first, they wanted to split up and go in all different directions to help speed their work along, but Hector wouldn't allow it. He wasn't going to let anyone wander around down here alone until he was more confident in the castle's structural integrity. He knew that these people were professionals, but even so, he doubted that many of them had experience with places quite like this. If a hallway suddenly collapsed on someone, Hector wanted to be right there to shield them in an instant. The surveyors were a bit annoyed at his insistence, but the longer they spent underground, the less that seemed to bother them.

They didn't experience any cave-ins or otherwise have any brushes with death, but that didn't seem to matter. Gradually, the surveyors all took to clustering around Hector, and they became rather fidgety and irritable. They busied themselves with their work, taking measurements, charting the rooms out, inspecting walls and columns for signs of weakness; but not a single one of these people appeared very comfortable in this place now.

"...Are you guys alright?" Hector asked.

The lead surveyor had introduced herself as Sharon Calloway earlier. She took a deep breath and adjusted her hard hat, then her spectacles. "We're fine. Don't worry."

"There's something about this place," said someone else. "I can't put my finger on it, but..."

"It's unsettling," said another."

"655 -- LXXVI.

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--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 3/5)--

Hector eyed them all again. They each seemed in perfectly good health, still. Just a bit uneasy, perhaps. "Uh... w-would you like to take a break for lunch?"

"Yeah," voted someone.

"Seconded."

"Sounds good to me."

Miss Calloway frowned. "It's early still. We should go on a bit longer--at least until we make it to the bottom of this first tower."

The others didn't argue with her, but Hector could see the reluctance in their faces.

Miss Calloway led the party deeper. They passed a familiar banquet hall, opting to keep going straight down, and then they came upon a peculiar thing. The walls, the floors, and the ceilings were all made of darker stone here, so Hector didn't notice straight away, but the surveyors did.

"What's with this area?" one of them said. "Are my eyes lying to me, or is this place in absolutely pristine condition?"

Miss Calloway ran her hand horizontally across a darkly gray wall. "No, you're right. This stonework is impeccable. Look closely. See the decorative etchings?"

"Beautiful. It's preserved remarkably well."

"How can only this section of the tower be so perfect when the rest is scarcely better than a ruin?"

"Perhaps someone restored this part in secret," said Miss Calloway. "Whatever the case, it's very good news. Unlike everything else we've seen so far, this area is quite inhabitable." She looked at Hector. "You may wish to set up a base of operations here and try to expand the restoration outward."



Indeed, it seemed like a good idea. They walked through the rest of the tower in a state of awe. Hector counted seven perfect bedrooms, two ancient washrooms, a kind of large den with a hearth right in the center, a storage closet, and one long staircase that spiraled between the four adjoined floors. The bottom floor led outside into the immense cavern, allowing the surveyors a good look at the ring of eight great towers.

They marveled at the sight only briefly before deciding that it was time to take that break now. Hector was a little disappointed by their reactions, quite frankly."

"657

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 4/5)--

As they were heading back up, Miss Calloway looked at Hector. "I was hoping to get more done. I apologize for the inconvenience, Mr. Goffe."

"Oh, d-don't worry about it. I'm, uh... er... I mean, there's no rush."

"We've charted out most of the first tower," she said. "You'll be pleased to know that the overall condition isn't quite as bad as it looks. Each area where we've encountered a fracture appears to have been the result of isolated incidents rather than that of a single, greater event."

"Er, you mean... all these collapsed hallways aren't even related?"

"Well, they could be linked in that the same person or group of people created them while moving through the castle, but it seems very unlikely that they were caused by something like an earthquake."

"Oh..."

"And then of course, you have the area with the darker stone, which is in such good shape that I find it slightly baffling. Moreover, I'm not sure what type of stone that was, either. You have a very curious house here, Mr. Goffe."

"Ah... yeah..."

By the time they reached the surface again, Jamal had already gone to fetch food for everyone at Amelia's request. The surveyors mainly just seemed happy to be out in the daylight again.

Hector checked on the reconstruction team. Already, they were making progress. They'd picked the lone tower on the far side of the property to start work on, no doubt because it was the least destroyed out of all of them. When he'd first arrived late last night, this had been the tallest and most impressive tower he saw with its four, arguably five, floors; but now that he'd seen the giants that lay underground, this thing looked like a dwarf.

Hector saw his mother and Amelia sitting together and chatting on a large chunk of overturned stone. He considered venturing over to speak with them, but Garovel got his attention first.

'Ah. I sense Voreese approaching. Brace yourself, Hector.'

That made him smile as he looked up and around. The clear blue skies made it easy to see, and after a moment, he spotted her."

"658

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 5/5)--

From quite high up, Voreese swooped down. She stopped a ways above everyone and looked over the restoration efforts. 'Wow, I didn't think you guys'd be so quick to get started.'

Garovel motioned toward Amelia. 'You can blame the Lady Carthrace there for our productivity.'

Voreese descended the rest of the way until she was about level with Garovel. 'Have you encountered any problems? Any anxiety attacks? Oh, and hello, by the way. Good to see you both.'

'Likewise. And what do you mean? Anxiety attacks?'

'If I'd known there were gonna be so many people here, I would've told you earlier,' she said. 'Warrenhold has a very unique quality to it. The three of us can't sense it, but normal people can. Apparently, it's like a pressure in the back of their minds, and they have no idea what causes it, which makes people very anxious and uncomfortable.'

'We noticed something like that,' said Garovel. 'We were just underground with the surveyors, and they seemed pretty eager to get out of there.'

'There's no actual danger,' Voreese explained. 'The real cause of the

feeling is kind of silly.'

'Oh, you know what the cause is?'

"Course I do. It's the stone. All eight towers down there were uniquely constructed. These ones up here weren't, though. They were added later by other people.'

'Ah,' said Garovel. 'Warrenhold was built by a servant, you mean?'

'Yeah, an extremely powerful integration user. Some of the things she could do with her power--I don't even know. I've never seen anyone else able to do what she could. I mean, I understand the mechanics of her work, but I don't know how the fuck she pulled that shit off. Even in terms of servants, she was like a fucking wizard.'

'You knew her well?' said Garovel.

'Fuck yeah, I did. She was my servant for a very long time.'

Hector blinked. He was tempted to join the conversation now, but since he was the only person present who could actually hear these two talking, he figured it would be best to just listen quietly so as not to spook any of the nice people around."

"659

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 1/5)--

'What was her name?' said Garovel.

'Stasya Orlov,' said Voreese. 'I doubt you've heard of her. She never became famous.'

'Why not? If she was as strong as you say--'

'Because people are bastards. We're talking about the early days of the Mohssian Empire here. Not a great time period to have lady parts, you may recall.'

'Ah...'

'She was a genius, that woman. Built incredible things. And history gave her zero credit. Even this place. Officially, Warrenhold is said to have been built by some fucking douchebag.'

'That's depressing. And sadly, also a very common occurrence for historical women. But if what you're saying is true, then the new Lord of Warrenhold would surely be in a position to give Stasya her due reverence.'

Voreese's skeletal grin broadened, and she looked at Hector. 'Oh yeah?'

Hector just kind of shrugged and nodded, deferring to Garovel.

'We can build her a memorial, if you like,' he told her. 'Or just put her name up everywhere.'

'Either of those would earn my eternal affection.'

A construction worker stepped up next to Hector and said, "Hey, wait. You never explained why the stone makes people freak out."

Hector did a double-take. That wasn't a construction worker. That was Roman dressed as one. "What the--?! When did you get here?!"

"A while ago. Told the other guys that I was a volunteer. They didn't seem to mind the extra pair of hands."

Hector had so many sudden questions that he wasn't sure where to begin. "W-why are you dressed like that?"

Roman smiled. "A little anonymity among friends never hurts."

That wasn't much of an answer. Hector glared at Garovel. 'Why didn't you sense him?'

'Oh, I did. I wanted to see how long it would take you to notice.'

'Garovel!'

'Good to see you, Roman. Welcome to Warrenhold.'

"Thanks. I was curious. Voreese? You gonna explain?"

'The stone doesn't make people freak out,' she said. 'It just causes anxiety.'

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Why, though?"

'It's really just a side effect. Stasya wanted the castle to repel pests.'

She had a real thing about bugs.'

A beat passed.

"Are you kidding?" said Roman."

"660

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 2/5)--

'Nope,' said Voreese. 'Stasya crafted the stone herself. And if you've been down there, then you know that it sure-as-fuck works. Not only does it repel bugs, it repels all wildlife. It even makes humans not want to be there.'

'That doesn't sound like a very comfortable place to live,' said Garovel.

'Well, it doesn't affect us, because the stones use a very faint "taste of death" to repel living creatures. Obviously, we've all had more than just a taste, so our souls are already acclimated to it and don't notice anything strange.'

'Still,' said Garovel. 'We have normal people with us, as well. We can't expect them to live in a place that makes them perpetually uncomfortable no matter what they do.'

'No, no, it's okay,' said Voreese. 'The feeling isn't all that strong, really. As long as you explain where it comes from--that there's no actual danger and that it's just a silly pest control mechanism--then normal residents will get over it. The human brain is sophisticated enough to overcome the feeling with sufficient exposure and understanding.'

'Hmm.'

'If you DON'T explain it to people, though, then it can really start to fuck with them, especially if they happen to have an anxiety disorder or just strange brain chemistry. It's just the not knowing that really gets to people. So, anyone who's going to be spending time here, particularly underground, should be made aware of this. It's very important to their mental health.'

"Ah--okay," said Hector.

'No one's down there right now, right?'

‘No,’ said Garovel. ‘Hector wouldn’t let anyone go in without him.’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘Oh, and also: no pets. Explaining the problem is obviously not going to work with a fucking horse or what have you. They’ll just run away at the first opportunity, and if you try to keep them here, they’ll go batshit crazy.’

“O-oh. Okay...”

‘If you’re disappointed, then just think of Garovel as your pet,’ said Voreese.

“That’s what I do,” said Roman. “To me, Voreese is that tiny dog that everyone knows. The one that never stops barking.””  
"661

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 3/5)--

Voreese looked up suddenly. ‘Roman, I think I’m receiving a message from the afterlife. Someone’s traveled for eons upon eons through null space and infinity, doing the impossible, all so they could tell you something...’

“Is that right?” said Roman dryly.

‘They’re saying... that you should... fuck off.’

“Nice.”

‘Now they’re thanking me and telling me how worthwhile their journey was. And now they’re gone.’

“You put way too much thought into that,” said Roman.

‘...Said no one ever in regard to anything you’ve ever done.’

“I don’t overthink things. I’m okay with that.”

‘Oh, yeah. Nevermind that it got you fucking killed before.’

Roman shrugged. “Well, that’s why I have you now.”

A ripple of awkward looks washed over everyone.

“What?” said Roman.

‘That was nearly a compliment,’ said Garovel.

‘Yeah. Don’t compliment me, you fuck.’

“You’re a lovely person, Voreese.”

‘Agh! Quit it!’

“Uh--er... um...”

They all turned to watch Hector struggle through his next sentence.

“Ah, eh... I was just wondering... were there, um... any other reasons why we, uh... er, why you wanted us to choose Warrenhold? Because, er--ah...”

Garovel helped him out. ‘Good question. This place isn’t exactly in the best condition, and it’s going to be extremely expensive to restore. If we’d picked a different castle, then we would’ve had an easier time, I’m sure.’

‘Ha. Well, there are a lot of reasons, but allow me to paint you a picture first. You remember the Redwater Uprising, yeah?’

‘Of course.’ Garovel looked at the two curious servants. ‘An extremely bloody rebellion that went on for more than half a century. It was one of the major contributing factors to the Mohssian Empire’s collapse.’

Hector just nodded gratefully.

‘Yeah, what he said,’ said Voreese. ‘Stasya was long gone by then, but during those fifty years, this fucking castle weathered six different sieges. SIX. Okay? And we’re not talking tiny little fortnight sieges here. We’re talking two or three years each. It was ridiculous. There were three separate kings that took refuge here AT THE SAME FUCKING TIME, because it was basically the only safe place left for them.’

“Holy shit,” said Roman.”

"662

‘Everyone wanted their heads on a pike,’ Voreese went on, ‘and each king had shitloads of competing claimants to his throne, most of whom thought they could win public favor by finally killing these three bastards. So it was safe to say that shit had sufficiently hit the fan for them by that point.’

“And Warrenhold kept them safe?” said Roman.

‘Yeah. One of the kings died of old age; another starved to death; and the last one was only killed because his guards finally decided to just let the enemy in. Unfortunately, that last one also meant that the sixth siege had succeeded, so Warrenhold’s impregnable reputation was spoiled. Which was bullshit, but what’re ya gonna do about it, right?’

Garovel bobbed his skull. ‘So in other words, you’re saying this will be a very safe place to live, once we fix it up.’

‘It already is a safe place,’ said Voreese. ‘On the surface here, yeah, everything is shit and will get fucked up real quick, but underground? There are certain areas of the castle--maybe you saw them--that Stasya made extra special.’

‘Oh, you mean the places with darker stone?’

‘Yeah. Stasya called that stuff “nightrack,” and it’s the reason why Warrenhold is still standing. She spent years JUST crafting nightrack, and she still couldn’t make enough of it for the whole castle. Even with her power, the manufacturing process took forever. She made enough for the Tower of Night, and then decided that it just wasn’t worth the time investment to make enough for seven more towers. Instead, she gave them each a small inner sanctum of it.’

‘I assume this nightrack has special properties?’ Not quite a question, but Garovel asked it like one.

‘Yep. It’s durable as fuck, first of all. Our two servants here? Wouldn’t be able to scratch it. It would take someone like Harper to break through. And then, guess what? Even if you do destroy it, it fucking fixes itself.’

“It regenerates?” said Roman. “You mean, like servants do?”

‘Yup.’

“How the hell...?”



‘Fuck if I know! I told you she was a fucking wizard!’”

"663

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 5/5)--

“Geez,” said Roman.

‘Oh, and on top of all that, the nightrock still repels pests like all of Stasya’s “normal” stone does. So, yeah. It’s good shit, okay? You’re gonna like living here.’

‘Okay,’ said Garovel. ‘I believe you. Were there any other reasons why you wanted us to take Warrenhold?’

And Voreese fell quiet a moment. She looked across her audience again. ‘Well, I guess you’re gonna find it sooner or later.’

‘Find what?’

‘I’ll show you. I was gonna give you a tour, anyway.’ She floated off toward the underground entrance.

Hector gathered up the surveying team again. He did what Voreese told him earlier and tried to explain that the mysterious anxiety was merely a byproduct of pest control.

It took a while.

They weren’t particularly receptive to the idea that mere stone could magically influence people. Hector had to remind them that they were talking to someone who could make metal appear from nowhere. Then he had to reassure them that he wasn’t going to hurt them. Roman tried to help him out but just ended up confusing things more, because no one knew who he was or why they should listen to him.

Eventually, though, they made it underground again. Voreese led the expedition to the network of bridges that connected all eight towers near their peaks. With more light bearers around, Hector realized that in addition to all the crisscrossing paths, there wasn’t just one solid ring of bridges--there were actually three, stacked on top of each other with adjoining staircases intermittently. Much of the uppermost ring was embedded in natural rock, but occasionally, there was an opening that allowed for an incredible view of the greater cavern area.

Hector was a bit concerned that the bridges were unsafe to use, but Voreese assured him that they had lines of nightrock supporting them beneath the otherwise normal stone and were therefore quite sturdy even after all this time.

She rattled off all sorts of information as they made their way toward the Tower of Night. Apparently, the castle had been too large for pretty much everyone who ever owned it after Stasya. Hector was not surprised."

"664

--donation bonus week (day 4/5, post 1/5)--

Six of the eight towers had names, Voreese explained. There was the Entry Tower, the Bell Tower, the Book Tower, the Star Tower, the Tower of Day, and the Tower of Night. The remaining two had never received names--or at least not ones that Voreese was aware of--because they had never really been used for anything other than storage. Given Warrenhold's size and its ill reputation, excessive visitors had never been much of a problem.

The Entry Tower was not the largest, but it was still the tallest by an extra third, as it was the only tower to reach all the way up to the surface. And according to Voreese, it was also one of the things that made Warrenhold so easily defensible. Any invading force had only two options: storm the bottlenecking Entry Tower or dig through forty-six meters of nearly solid rock.

The Star Tower, on the other hand, was unquestionably the shortest and smallest of the eight. It was the one that was half-destroyed and hanging from the ceiling. Voreese seemed surprised at the sight of it and unfortunately couldn't explain how or when that had happened. Hector shined a light through the hole that was now its belly and could see the mass of nightrock therein, a black box partially suspended in mid-air.

'You don't happen to know where the generator is located, do you?' said Garovel.

She shook her head. 'Sorry. The last time I was down here, that kinda thing hadn't been invented yet.'

'I figured.'

The Tower of Night was surely the most impressive of the eight, Hector felt. Larger than all the others and composed entirely of nightrack, it was still completely intact. Even its doors were nightrack, uniquely made so that they would slide horizontally instead of needing to be pushed or pulled open. Voreese said that Stasya did this because the doors were too heavy for normal people and that the locking mechanism for them had also been quite far ahead of its time.

Voreese guided them down, all the way to what seemed like the bottom of the tower, only to reveal a hidden door in the floor that led deeper still."

"665

--donation bonus week (day 4/5, post 2/5)--

'Tell them to wait here,' said Voreese, motioning to the surveyors.

Hector hesitated, glancing between her and the others.

'Why?' said Garovel.

'You won't want too many people to know about what I'm going to show you.'

Garovel nodded, and Hector did as she requested. Miss Calloway didn't try to argue with him. Her team was content with just investigating the rest of the tower. They still looked a bit spooked, but curiosity appeared to be getting the better of them now as Hector heard them quietly marveling amongst themselves at the remarkable condition, noting in particular that the floor wasn't even very dusty.

'Roman, guard the door,' said Voreese. 'Make sure they don't follow us. I'll tell you all about it later.'

He frowned but nodded.

Hector proceeded downward with the two reapers. After a staircase, he arrived in a rather large chamber. He shined his light around and found it empty, save a thick lever adjacent the staircase. It was stuck into a bulky gear embedded in the floor.

Voreese pointed at the lever. 'Pull that toward you. You'll need some strength for it.'

Garovel grabbed his shoulder.

Hector inhaled deeply as the vigor coursed through him. He took hold of the lever with both hands and pulled. Even with the enhancements, it resisted him, but he slowly won out. The lever moved, and the gear turned, and Hector heard the scraping rumble of heavy stone sliding open--the same sound that the doors of nightrock made, only this one was much deeper. The sound ceased as soon as he stopped pulling the lever.

'Keep going,' said Voreese. 'Yank the lever free and then put it in the other end of the gear. I know it's annoying, but this is the oldest part of an already ancient castle. You'll have to forgive the primitive design.'

He did as she asked, making two more rounds with the lever and gear.

'That should be enough. You don't need to open it all the way.'

"Open what?" said Hector. He was looking around the room and not seeing anything."

"666 mwahaha

--donation bonus week (day 4/5, post 3/5)--

'Look down,' said Garovel.

And then he saw it. Part of the floor had slid away, revealing an impressive rectangular slit in the nightrock. At this angle, he couldn't see anything within, only pitch blackness. He stepped closer for a better look.

'Don't fall in,' said Voreese. 'If you do, it'll be two and a half hours before you hit the bottom.'

Hector stared at her. "W-what? What the hell is this?"

'This, dear Hector, is the reason why Stasya built Warrenhold here. As old as this castle is, this pit right here is even older.'

He shined his light through. He could see gray walls in an almost perfect cylinder extending straight downward. And that was it. He couldn't see the bottom. It just kept going. The hole itself was wide enough for perhaps three people to stand adjacent with their arms

spread.

‘Where does it let out?’ asked Garovel.

‘Right near Capaporo. You know it?’

‘Yeah. Are you sure it still exists, though? I haven’t been there in, oh, three hundred years, maybe.’

‘I don’t know. It’s been seventy years for me.’

‘Hmm.’

“E-excuse me, but... I don’t understand anything that’s happening...”

‘We wouldn’t expect you to,’ said Garovel.

“Uh... well, what is this hole?”

‘It’s a portal to Hell,’ said Garovel.

Hector just blinked dully.

‘I don’t think he believes you,’ said Voreese.

‘Tch. He probably remembers that I don’t believe in Hell.’

‘Should’ve lied better, then.’ A beat passed as she stared at Hector. ‘It leads to Heaven.’

‘...I don’t think he’s buying it.’

“Agh. Please, just tell me the truth.”

Voreese looked at Garovel, who shrugged. ‘Alright,’ she said. ‘It leads to a second human civilization that diverged from the surface of Eleg so long ago that nobody up here even knows about it.’

Again, Hector just stared.

‘We call it the Undercrust,’ said Garovel. ‘It’s a layer of rock in Eleg’s mantle with caves that make the one here in Warrenhold look like nothing. There were about five hundred million people living down there, last I heard.’

“Wait. Are... are you actually being serious?”

"667

--donation bonus week (day 4/5, post 4/5)--

Voreese nodded. 'We know it sounds like bullshit to you. You've been taught your whole life that the whole world has basically been explored to its fullest. But it hasn't.'

"H-hold on a second," said Hector. "You're saying... I don't... What?"

'It would help if you asked a clear question,' said Garovel.

"Well, but... I mean, isn't it, like, super hot down there? Molten lava and stuff?"

'Sure is,' said Voreese. 'They've developed a variety of methods for dealing with that. Heatproofing, heat funneling, supercooling--I'm a little curious to see what else they've come up with since I've been gone. It helps that Sermung and Sai-hee both live down there a lot of the time. From what I hear, those two are like walking safe zones. And the same is supposedly true of a lot of their strongest supporters.'

'Some of the residents are also flat out immune to the temperatures,' added Garovel. 'You should close the hole back up now, by the way.'

Their nonchalance was more than a little befuddling. Hector wasn't sure whether to believe them or not. He returned to the lever and started cranking it back the other way. The slit in the floor slowly scraped shut again. "You guys, ah... I really don't see how there could be a whole different civilization living that far underground. I mean, if that's true, then wouldn't we have discovered them by now?"

'It's too difficult to get there from here,' said Voreese. 'That pit right there is almost four hundred kilometers deep. But that kind of vertical distance is difficult to imagine. The tallest mountain in Atreya, for instance, is only about three kilometers high. The tallest mountain in the world is barely ten.'

Hector's brow rose. "Huh..."

'And those mountains are sloped, making them a little easier to climb and descend. This pit goes straight down, more or less. Servants can reach the bottom simply enough by falling to their death and then reviving, but how the fuck is a normal person supposed to make the trip? And supposing they did somehow survive the journey, they'd still

have to make it all the way back up again, which is even more difficult.”

"668

--donation bonus week (day 4/5, post 5/5)--

‘And that’s not even factoring in how a surface-dweller is supposed to deal with the other dangers in the Undercrust,’ said Garovel. ‘The heat alone is problematic enough, but there’s plenty of other shit to worry about, too.’

‘It’s just not feasible,’ said Voreese. ‘It’d be like trying to cross the ocean before boats were invented. Normal people--in either civilization--simply don’t have the technology to use these holes yet. Maybe one day, they will, but until then, it’s essentially a reaper and servant privilege.’

‘And EVEN THEN, not every servant can make the trip, either.’

‘Right, yeah.’

‘Just because the servant can get down the hole doesn’t mean they can get back up. You’d probably be okay, though, since you can just make an infinite platform for yourself.’

He scratched his cheek. “How would I survive the temperatures?”

‘Oh, no, you’d be toast as you are now,’ said Garovel. ‘You’d have to grow a lot more powerful first.’

“Ah...”

‘Believe us now?’ said Voreese.

Hector tilted his head and scrunched his face up a little. “Eh... I just... I don’t know. Don’t they have, like, uh... seismological, er... radar? Or something?”

‘They do,’ said Garovel. ‘But that doesn’t provide the most precise of measurements. Besides, a city-sized hole in the planet would only look like a tiny speck against the gigantic mass surrounding it, and specks can be explained away as any number of other things. I don’t think a seismologist’s first guess would be, “Hey, I bet that’s a city full of people!”’

Hector opened his mouth to give further voice to his doubts but found that he'd run out of counterarguments. He still didn't want to believe them, though. It just seemed too ridiculous.

Garovel laughed. 'Do you remember when you asked me how the Vanguard managed to prevent Abolish from drilling into the planet's core?'

He did remember, and it made him blink a few times as he recalled Garovel's answer, or rather the lack thereof. "You said you didn't feel like telling me... You said it'd make a nice surprise one day..."

'Welp. Surprise!'"

"669 -- LXXVII.

--donation bonus week #1 (day 5/5, post 1/5)--

Chapter Seventy-Seven: 'Lord of the Rain, go calmly...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The rain finally ceased as Zeff neared the decadent mountain town of Rheinhal. It was one of the oldest settlements in Sair, but it hardly showed. A building older than ten years was a rare sight here, and the lush greenery combined with the first sunlight he'd seen in weeks gave the city a lively glow. It was something of a tourist trap, this place. Hotels, casinos, amusement parks, shopping malls, movie theaters, and more than a few out-of-season ski resorts sat under the immense shadow of the Wares Mountains.

They were the more impressive sight to behold, Zeff felt, living well up to their status as the fourth largest range in the world. Harsh silver-gray cliffs occasionally poked out from the otherwise high-reaching forests, only to be capped by snow at their peaks. They were the great dividing line, these mountains, between much of the continent and particularly between western and eastern Sair. The Wetlands and the Drylands. The Rainlords and the Sandlords. Ancient enemies turned modern rivals and kindred spirits.

Zeff's thoughts went to Asad and his family. It had been too long already, he knew. He remembered Asad proposing his son for an arranged marriage with Emiliana, an honorable offer which Zeff found



fiercely tempting. Join houses with his old friend? Become the first bridge between the Rain and Sand in history? And he knew that merely by asking, Asad ran the risk of upsetting the other Sandlords. It was not an offer made lightly, so it had been very difficult to tell the man no. That was more than six months ago now, and Asad had still not spoken to him since. Zeff would have to try harder to make reparations upon his next visit to Kuros.

He made his way toward the foot of the mountains, where stood the oldest reminder of Rheinhal's ancestral heritage, Rhein's Keep. Previously, the name Rheinhal belonged solely to the castle itself, but as the city flourished around it and came to be arguably even more famous for its wealth, the castle was renamed Rhein's Keep to avoid confusion."

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"670

--donation bonus week (day 5/5, post 2/5)--

Rhein's Keep stood on a larger hill all to itself, allowing most of the city to see its four massive turrets with round crenellations and flying the blue-and-gold flags of Sair. And of course, as the central Vanguardian stronghold in the nation, the castle remained in immaculate condition despite its age. Pristine, arching windows. Fresh crimson paint for its outer wall. A groomed yard with a madega tree standing in a clear pool. Madegas were certainly not native to this region, which meant it had to have been transplanted here--and recently, too, as Zeff didn't remember seeing it when he visited a year ago.

Axiolis flew close behind him as he made for the castle's northwestern tower. They'd discussed the ambiguous nature of this visit prior to and during the drive. General Lawrence's unexplained order to arrive within twelve hours despite Zeff and Mariana having both been on leave had left everyone a bit unsettled, to say the least, especially after Salazar's departure. Zeff wondered if that was why he'd been called in. Perhaps they wanted information on her; or worse, perhaps they thought he meant to join her and wished to test his loyalty. If so, then he figured that it was going to be a very long and unpleasant couple of days. But as ever, he was prepared.

Familiar faces were everywhere, comrades and friends. The opportunity to see everyone like this had become rather rare for him, and he was glad to see most of them go out of their way to welcome

him with a smile and an occasional handshake. He asked what news they had, and among their varied answers was one consistent concern: mounting problems in Calthos. By all accounts, Abolish had gained a foothold there and begun a public defamation campaign against the Sandlords.

Zeff scowled. That had to be one of Abolish's more annoying tactics, surely. The Sandlords were not all Vanguard, just as not all Rainlords were, but they did have strong ties to it. Perhaps that trip to Kuros would happen sooner than he thought."

"671

--donation bonus week (day 5/5, post 3/5)--

Zeff entered Lawrence's office easily enough, passing two silent sentries outside the General's door. He supposed it was a good sign that they didn't stop and search him, at least, but then, it wasn't like General Lawrence needed anyone to protect him from Zeff. In the Vanguard, ranking tended to also denote a person's strength, and Lawrence was certainly not an exception to this.

The office itself was more functional than impressive. Zeff had never known his general to suffer any fools or excesses, and this room very much reflected that, he felt. A simple round chamber with a single window, lamp, filing cabinet, desk, computer, and two chairs. No decorations for either the wood-planked walls or the old cobble floor.

Lawrence stood as Zeff entered. The man's reaper, Dergoz, clung to his arm instead of floating freely. And since Dergoz appeared as a bat, the sight of him looked slightly awkward and terrible at the same time, almost as if the reaper were attempting to bite into the General and drink his blood. With both eyes closed, though, the reaper was probably just sleeping.

"Captain Zeff," said Lawrence. "Thank you for coming." He looked to be in his fifties, but Zeff knew the man's history to be much older than that, spanning upwards of seventy years with the Vanguard.

"Good to see you, ensir."

"Please, have a seat."

Zeff sat, as did Lawrence.

'Is Dergoz alright?' asked Axiolis.

"He is just tired," said Lawrence.

Zeff tilted his head. "Have you recently seen combat, General?"

"It doesn't matter now. I'm sure you're more curious as to why you're here."

Zeff nodded.

"I apologize for not telling you. We were afraid you would not come if you knew."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because it has to do with your daughter. She has become a fugitive from the Vanguard."

Zeff reared back in his chair. A fugitive? Gema might have been reckless, sure, but he couldn't imagine her pulling anything that foolish. Moreover, he was sure that he'd found a very reasonable reaper to help guide her."

"672

--donation bonus week (day 5/5, post 4/5)--

As Zeff eyed the General, he took a long breath before asking, "What did Gema do?"

"She killed someone she shouldn't have."

Zeff shut his eyes a moment. "Who, exactly?"

"An Intarian diplomat," said Lawrence. "She has upset a lot of people, Zeff. I was hoping you could tell me where she is."

"Ah..." Zeff shook his head. He was in for an embarrassing conversation, it seemed. "I'm sorry, but I have no idea. My relationship with Gema is... strained. I've not spoken to her in over two years."

"Please, take a moment to think. This is very important. Anything you can tell us about her whereabouts could be helpful. A hiding place she

had as a child, perhaps.”

After a beat, he frowned. “I’m sorry, ensir. I honestly have no clue.”

Lawrence eyed Axiolis.

‘Sorry. I don’t have any idea, either.’

Lawrence threw a quick glance at Dergoz on his arm. “There must be something you two can tell me. You’ve both known her since she was born.”

Zeff wasn’t sure how else he could phrase it, so he just said, “I’m sorry, ensir.”

The General’s expression hardened. “You are putting me in a very difficult position, Captain.”

“I wish we could be more help to you, General, but--”

‘Enough,’ said Dergoz suddenly.

Zeff hadn’t realized the reaper had even been listening.

‘I didn’t think Rainlords were in the habit of lying,’ said Dergoz, not sounding particularly sleepy.

Zeff raised an irate eyebrow. “I am not lying.”

“Dergoz, let me--”

‘Silence.’

Axiolis hovered closer to Zeff. ‘Something is wrong here,’ he said privately.

Zeff was beginning to get that impression, too.

‘It is vital that we find Gema Elroy,’ said Dergoz. ‘You are her father. If you do not know where she is, then who does?’

“I don’t know. She has not been home in over two years.”

‘Yes, I heard you the first time.’

‘You seem rather desperate to find her,’ said Axiolis. ‘If she has broken the law, then let Zeff and I be the ones to retrieve her.’

'No, I do not think that would be wise,' said Dergoz."  
"673

--donation bonus week (day 5/5, post 5/5)--

'Then I don't know how else we can help you,' said Axiolis.

'Neither do I,' said Dergoz. 'Not so long as you refuse to cooperate.'

'We are cooperating as much as we can. We can't tell you what we don't know. Why are you so quick to assume we are lying? When have we ever given you cause to think we would?'

A thick silence consumed the office as the reapers stared at one another.

'Allow me to simplify your understanding of the situation,' said Dergoz. 'If you do not tell us where we can find your daughter, then we are going to ask your wife. And then we are going to ask your children.'

Zeff's irritated expression slowly melted away, turning first into blank realization, then gradually into a hard glower.

Dergoz was not finished talking, however. 'You are a good man, Zeff. We do not wish to hurt you or your family. But that is the severity of the matter at hand. Gema Elroy must be found at all costs.'

'Why?' said Axiolis. 'What could possibly be so important about Gema that you would threaten to harm our family? Innocent children!'

'Your children are not innocent. They are Elroys, and all Elroys are Vanguard.'

'Pah! You think having Lawrence as your servant gives you the right to change our laws?! Zeff's children are not Vanguard until they come of age! You are threatening the very people we are supposed to protect, you utter fool!'

"Ax, stop," Zeff said lowly, and the reaper seemed to understand.

Dergoz allowed Axiolis to settle down before resuming. 'Your disapproval is noted. Are you going to tell us where Gema is now? Or do you wish to let the situation run its course?'

Zepp tried to think. He didn't have the information they wanted, so obviously, giving it to them wasn't an option. If he lied, perhaps that would buy time, but how much? And what would he even use that time for?

'Ah, but before you answer,' Dergoz went on, 'I should also mention that we have been shadowing your family in Aguary for the past twenty-three hours.'

"674

Zepp gripped both arms of his chair with white-knuckled hands. "You brought me here to isolate me from them."

'Provided you simply cooperate, then--'

"If you think my wife is going to let you take our children into custody for any reason, then you are sorely mistaken."

'She is no longer in Aguary, either,' said Dergoz. 'As soon as we confirmed that you had left the city, your wife received orders to report to Lagemoor. And we all know how dutiful Mariana is.'

'At least tell us why it is so important that you find Gema,' said Axiolis.

'Why? I am sure you already know.'

'But we don't!'

'More lies.'

Zepp was at a loss, growing equal parts desperate and furious, but he kept his voice steady and quiet. "General Lawrence, ensir, how can you condone this action?"

The older man couldn't meet the Rainlord's gaze.

'I don't believe them,' Ax said privately. 'If Mariana left for Lagemoor while you were away, she would have called and told you.'

Zepp squinted. 'You think she ignored the order?'

'Yes. She and Shenado were already suspicious, so it would make sense.'

Dergoz was becoming annoyed. 'Are you trying to buy time? To what end? I hope you are not thinking of fighting Lawrence. You must know that you stand no chance against him. Especially not here.'

The reaper was probably right, but given that none of Zeff's comrades had acted suspiciously when he talked to them earlier, it was a fair bet that they didn't know about the actions being taken against his family. Once upon a time, Rheinhal had been a stronghold of his ancestors, before House Rhein met its end. That this place was now being used against him only made the circumstances sting all the more. But it also reminded him of something.

"If you seize my family, the other Rainlords will not sit idly by," said Zeff.

'They will if they know what is good for them,' said Dergoz.

'Are you mad?' said Axiolis. 'You would risk war with the Rainlords just to find Gema?'

Dergoz chose not to answer.

'We have to run,' Ax said privately."

"675

Zeff wished he had a better idea, but they were already short on time. And by the strained look on Lawrence's face, the man had probably hoped Zeff would volunteer Gema's whereabouts and thereby avoid a confrontation. Zeff certainly didn't want to fight, either, but he wasn't seeing much choice.

If nothing else, he was sure that Mariana would keep their children safe. That woman was prepared for everything. How he wished that he had stayed in Aguary with her. At least then, they could have faced this together. "Perhaps I should call my wife," said Zeff. "We can hear what she thinks of the situation." He reached for the cellphone in his inner coat pocket.

'I would not advise that,' said Dergoz. 'Lawrence will be forced to stop you.'

"Why? Is she not in Lagemoor like you said?"



Again, Dergoz did not respond.

"Fine. We will tell you what you wish to know. But not here. There are too many people around who could overhear."

Dergoz wasn't buying it. 'I think we will risk it. Tell us where Gema is now.'

Zeff sighed and nodded. He relaxed his grip on his chair and shifted his feet.

The ability to materialize more than a single element was a tremendously rare thing, to be sure. There was no learning it. A person could either do it, or they couldn't. It was hardly a coincidence, however, that Zeff ended up with the ability to materialize hydrogen and oxygen together. His was a historic power, one that cropped up every few generations among Rainlords. The Redwater Twins famously both had it at once.

Zeff flexed both arms where they lay, making minimal movement, and immediately, a white cloud materialized all around him, filling the room in a blink. He leapt from his chair and bolted for the exit, all the while pressing his soul into the cloud. Axiolis latched onto him as he ran.

In front of the door, a sudden wall appeared, brilliantly white and massive. Solid radium, it was. Lawrence's deadly ability. Its pearly surface began to blacken with air exposure, creating an outer layer of radium nitride."

"676

It would take more than that to stop Zeff. He launched a tide of water with enough force to shove the radium wall straight through the door, the subsequent radium-water reaction hissing violently and producing streams of hydrogen gas. A single spark could set the gas off at any moment, but that was the last thing Zeff was worried about as he pressed through.

'Do not let Zeff Elroy leave the premises!' shouted Dergoz for all to hear.

The two sentries from earlier were there in the cloud. Even without a clear view, Zeff was able to materialize ice inside their mouths, and in

the next instant, frozen spears burst out of their skulls and killed them both. He mumbled an apology to their on-looking reapers. Any servant without a certain level of passive soul-defense might as well have been dead already for all the threat they posed Zeff. He estimated that there were fifteen servants currently within Rhein's Keep whom he could not kill with this strategy, the most problematic of course being Lawrence.

Zeff made it all the way out to the courtyard before encountering his next resistance.

'All guards!' Dergoz was shouting. 'Take Captain Zeff into custody immediately!'

It seemed to be creating more confusion than anything, and Zeff intended to capitalize. He ran for the main gate.

A radium dome fell over him, which would have encased him in darkness if not for the element's faint blue glow. But after a moment, it wasn't so faint. The thing that made the General's power so dangerous was unquestionably the way the man could strengthen the element's radioactivity by empowering it with his soul. It made the radium decay more quickly, but that was a meager price to pay for the waves of debilitating pressure that it sent through the opponent's body. Already, Zeff could feel the weakening effects, bathing him and Axiolis in so much radiation that his regeneration was having a hard time keeping pace.

Zeff armored himself in ice, empowering it with his own soul as well. It only offered partial protection from the radiation, but he didn't intend to stick around. A string of geysers shot up around him and flipped his radioactive prison into the air. Blood oozing from the eyes and nose, Zeff kept running."

"677

Scores of servants were afoot, and he had each one's attention now. Only moments ago, they'd been in the midst of training or en route to another part of the castle or simply standing guard atop the walls. The latter were the first ones to mobilize, but by then, Zeff had already summoned a tidal wave to clear a path to the gate.

And clear a path, it did. Broad enough to envelope the whole courtyard and taller than the highest tower, only a handful of servants managed

to get out of the way. The raging waters consumed everyone else and smashed them against the castle's unflinching walls. And before that was even done, Zeff loosed another wave behind him, just to give Lawrence something to do.

'Can you escape underground?' said Zeff.

'I sense a soul net below us,' said Ax, 'but it only goes as far as the castle walls.'

And the reaper didn't have to explain any further. The most efficient means of escape was to have Axiolis phase through the ground. At full speed, the reaper would be protected by a hundred meters of rock within seconds; and within a minute, he'd be completely out of Lawrence's range, at which point, Zeff would be able to spear himself through the skull and be revived at Axiolis' leisure.

This was the plan. He just had to get Axiolis to the other side of the wall first.

Zeff launched himself into the air with a sudden ice platform. He would have been able to clear the wall then and there if not for the gigantic radium dome that materialized to stop him. There would be no shoving this one out of his way. It covered the entirety of Rhein's Keep, supplanting midday sunlight with a dim blue gleam.

But Zeff had expected as much. Anything less would have been downright lazy on the General's part.

Still mid-flight, Zeff made a fist and half-extended his middle and index fingers. On its own, the hand gesture had no great meaning, but to Zeff, it was a code of muscle memory, a thing that had helped him develop, memorize, and train a particularly difficult usage of his power."

"678

Just beyond the knuckles of his two fingers, a self-sustaining jet of water materialized--thin and precise and inheriting an overwhelming amount of forward velocity. It was a pressurized water drill, strong enough to cut through solid metal under its own power, and when he strengthened it with his soul, even Lawrence's radium would give way. So when Zeff collided with the dome, he pressed the jet into it like a

needle into a pincushion.

With nothing to hold onto, Zeff let himself drop back to the ground, but he kept the water jet exactly where it was, and on the way down, made two more and pressed them into the wall as well. He'd created three points of structural weakness, which wasn't much, but it was a start. He knew that if he used only one jet to cut a large enough hole for himself, Lawrence could just fill the thing back in before Zeff even finished cutting. Multiple jets were more efficient and would prove difficult for Lawrence to get rid of, since they would cut through anything they touched. The only difficulty was keeping it all straight in his head. They were tiny burning dots in space, held in place by his mind alone, and he needed more of them, but he first needed to buy more time for himself.

Radium tried to clap around his body, but the ice armor that was already there resisted, and Zeff broke free with a storm of crystalline spikes. He ran alongside the blue wall, throwing another tidal wave with his left hand while readying a fourth jet with his right.

A cliff of radium rose to Lawrence's defense, and the water broke upon it, protecting not just the General but also the other servants rallying behind him. The chemical reaction sent huge, sizzling streams of hydrogen gas into the air. And then, without warning, the gas detonated.

An enormous fireball lit up the whole castle. There was no way to tell what ignited it; many different servant abilities could have been the trigger.

Zeff shielded himself with water."

"679

The force of the blast pushed him back against the dome, but he was far enough away that it didn't even break his concentration. Not everyone was so fortunate. When the air cleared, the castle's barracks were half-gone.

'God, I hope there aren't any normal people here,' said Axiolis.

Zeff took the opportunity to plant more drills. He got out four more within close proximity to one another before a trio of servants attacked

him in unison.

‘Don’t kill Axiolis!’ ordered Dergoz. ‘We need them alive!’

Zeff knew each attacker. Oscar Murray, Adam Leroy, Davin Echer. All decent, loyal men in his mind, and unfortunately, they were all too strong for Zeff to kill instantly.

But that didn’t mean they were strong enough to stop him.

Oscar sent a path of destruction at him while Adam and Davin tried to flank him with an arm of freezing gas and a flashy silver sword, respectively.

An ice platform flung Zeff up and over their attacks, and he formed another hand sign--middle and index fingers fully extended, this time with both hands. Literal hand guns, they were, both in shape and in function. Bullets of empowered ice shot out in rapid clusters. His three opponents scattered, but Zeff still mowed down Oscar and Adam. Davin only survived because of sudden silver armor, which had still taken a beating.

‘Look out!’ said Axiolis.

A long stretch of radium reached all the way from across the courtyard, and Zeff used a block of ice to knock himself out of the way. But it wasn’t enough. The radium branched out after him and gored him through the stomach. It continued branching downward, trying to find its leverage against the ground in order to keep Zeff suspended in mid-air.

Again, Zeff had to multitask. A water jet to cut himself free. A shower of frozen bullets to keep Lawrence busy. Zeff hit the ground with a thud and yanked the rest of the radium out of his chest, thankful he couldn’t feel the awful burns it had left in his flesh."

"680

It was time for another tidal wave, he decided. Water raged across the courtyard, dousing scattered fires, tossing rubble and battered servants around.

It bought him the extra bit of time he needed. After one more water jet pressed into the dome, he was at last able to punch through with an

icy gauntlet. The castle wall lay on the other side, and he immediately launched himself over. As soon as he landed on the outer steps, he started running. 'Go!' he told Axiolis.

Thankfully, at least, Lawrence's enhanced radiation didn't affect reapers as strongly as living things, so when Axiolis broke away from Zeff, the reaper was only suffering from a bit of ghostly smoldering. He vanished into the ground.

Zeff saw the radium dome disintegrate and knew that Lawrence would be on him any moment. He lowered his own soul defenses in order to be able to kill himself. The ice formed in his mouth, about to pierce his brain.

Instead, a bladed disc sliced through his mouth, severing the top half of his head from the rest of his body. And he saw Lawrence standing there on the wall with a clenched fist.

Still conscious, Zeff could only watch as the radium clapped around his head. Axiolis had escaped. He had not.

--++--++--

Lawrence carried Zeff's radium-coated head under one arm as he reentered Rhein's Keep. Upturned earth, shattered stone, and regenerating bodies abounded. He immediately had Lieutenant Adam Leroy freeze Zeff's head for him--or rather, for Dergoz.

'You let Axiolis get away,' Dergoz said privately.

'Zeff was stronger than I anticipated,' said Lawrence.

'You are lying. You held back.'

'Of course I did. You wanted them alive.'

'That is not what I mean, and you know it.'

General Xavier Lawrence refrained from further argument. He knew there was nothing to be gained from it. And besides, the reaper wasn't exactly wrong. He couldn't disobey Dergoz overtly, but occasionally, small victories were still possible. For all of Dergoz's threats, Lawrence knew that the reaper didn't want to release a servant with his level of power. It would mean starting over from scratch, letting nearly eighty years go to waste."

"681 -- LXXVIII.

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 1/5)--

Dergoz growled. 'Axiolis will contact the other Rainlords and rally them against us. We must acquire the Elroys as soon as possible and interrogate them. If they give up Gema's location, then we can simply surrender Zeff's brain to the Rainlords and avoid unnecessary conflict.'

Lawrence didn't think it would be so easy but decided to keep his opinion to himself.

'I know you are displeased with me and with what I am forcing you to do,' said Dergoz. 'But if we don't find her in time, they will kill us all. Do you understand that? Not just you and me. Our whole division will be destroyed. Everyone who works under us. Extinguished.'

'Then perhaps you are being loyal to the wrong person. If we tried to help the girl--'

'It's much too late for that. When Sermung falls, there will be no one to protect those loyal to him.'

'And if he doesn't fall?'

'Then the Vanguard is doomed, anyway.'

And therein lay the source of their disagreement. Lawrence wasn't in the mood for another futile debate, however, and started back for his office. He didn't want to give the order to take the Elroys into custody, but unfortunately, it wasn't up to him. And knowing that it would take Axiolis at least two hours to reach Aguary--if that was indeed where the reaper was headed--then Mariana and her children would have no warning when the ten servants shadowing them took action.

Lawrence's mood only worsened as he walked.

Chapter Seventy-Eight: 'The undefeated woman...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Mariana sat in the front den, meditating. She'd decided to keep Marcos and Ramira home for the day without explanation. They'd not been

terribly upset about it. Emiliana, on the other hand, had been rather insistent about attending school, and since Mariana didn't have an exact reason why her daughter should stay home, she ended up relenting and letting the girl go. And when the Lady Elroy went to tell Francisco to accompany his sister, she found the boy already prepared to leave.

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"682

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 2/5)--

'It is a little exciting,' said Shenado, making Mariana open one eye to look at her. 'I don't think we have ever ignored orders like this before. I wonder if we are going to get in trouble.'

'Probably.' She shut her eye again and took a deep breath. 'Whatever the punishment, I will take it.'

'Maybe they didn't realize that Zeff was out of town.'

'They certainly know now that I have told them.'

'Oddly sloppy on their part.'

'Perhaps they don't know you and I very well. Even after all these years in Lawrence's division, I still feel like the oddball out, sometimes.'

'There aren't very many women in his division. I wonder if that has anything to do with it. Fifteen years, and they've assigned you a whole ten missions. Compare that to Zeff, who has had twenty-eight.'

She gave a slight nod. 'It is a bit annoying.'

‘Maybe they think you are the “homemaker” type.’

‘I doubt I give anyone that impression. It is probably more to do with my ability. On paper, my simple destruction type isn’t as impressive as Zeff’s power.’

‘If they only knew.’

She smirked faintly.

‘I expect they’ll have Cisco go on his first mission soon,’ said Shenado.

‘They should. He has been ready for months.’

‘You aren’t worried?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘You don’t act like it. You didn’t act like it with Gema, either.’

‘You would rather I made a fuss?’

‘It would be interesting to see.’

‘I knew what I was signing up for when I joined the Vanguard. And I knew what having children with Zeff would mean. Our role is only to protect them until they can protect themselves.’

Shenado let Mariana return to meditating. After a little while, however, a call came in on the speaker box. The butler moved to answer it for her, but Mariana waved him off.

<“There are two men here to see you,”> said Nico’s voice. <“Say their names are Jonathan Flint and Charlie Day.”>

Mariana squinted, vaguely recognizing the names. She looked to Shenado.

‘I remember them,’ the reaper said. ‘Ask why they are here.’”

"683

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 3/5)--

“What is their business here?” said Mariana.

After a spell, Nico said, <“They say your presence is requested in Lagemoor. They’ve come to escort you there.”>

She exchanged glances with Shenado again. “Inform them that I do not intend to go to Lagemoor so long as my husband is not here to look after our children. As I told the man on the phone, I will depart for Lagemoor as soon as Zeff returns.”

There came another long pause. <“...I’m afraid they are insisting, enma’am. Ah! Wait! You can’t enter through there--oh! Whoa. Uh... I’m sorry, Mrs. Elroy, but I don’t think I can stop them...”>

“It’s fine, Nico. You and Jorem, take the rest of the day off.”

<“Oh, ah. Yes, en--”>

Mariana ended the call and waved the butler over.

‘I don’t like this,’ said Shenado.

Mariana was ahead of her. “Claudio, gather everyone into the panic room immediately and arm yourselves. Inform them that this is not a drill and do not come out until I say so.”

Claudio was a middle-aged gentleman of enduring loyalty, having served the Elroys since Zeff was in his twenties. “Right away, my lady.” He walked briskly off.

‘Jonathan and Charlie should have reapers, but I don’t sense them. They must be keeping their distance.’

Mariana moved to the large sofa and removed the soft cushions. A long metal box lay beneath them. It had no lid or point of entry. She ran her hand along the top, breaking it open with her power and revealing one of several such stashes she had hidden around the house. In this one, there were six grenades, ten knives, two handguns, one semi-automatic rifle, three boxes of ammunition, two small black remotes each with twin red buttons, and a single landmine.

She pulled out her cellphone next and called Cisco, arming herself to the teeth while she waited for him to pick up.

‘They’re at the front door.’

She expected to hear an explosion or someone breaking in. Instead, she heard the doorbell.

Shenado cocked a furry eyebrow at her. 'Little odd.'

Her son wasn't answering his phone, Mariana realized. She tried Zeff."  
"684

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 4/5)--

'They're just waiting,' said Shenado. 'It seems they aren't itching for a fight, at least. Perhaps you should answer the door. Cautiously, of course.'

Mariana glared at her phone as it continued ringing. Zeff wasn't answering, either. She made her way to the entrance slowly. She stopped to arm and plant her landmine in a very particular place--in a narrow doorway beneath a Jesbolese rug of just the right weight. It was beautifully woven with blue-gold swirls and dark frills, but she'd bought it for this exact purpose. On its own, the rug wouldn't trigger the mine, but if someone stepped on any part of it, it would go off.

'Don't step on it by accident,' her reaper said privately.

A gun in one hand, Mariana proceeded to the door and cracked it open. The gun was really just a quicker supplement, of course. Her free hand was the much more dangerous weapon, in many ways.

"Lady Elroy, please pardon our intrusion, but we needed to speak with you as soon as possible. I'm Charlie. This is my colleague, Jonathan. May we come in?"

"You may not." From what she could see, both men appeared to be in their mid-to-late twenties. Charlie was the blond one, Jonathan the bespectacled one. They wore very casual clothing, nothing that would make them stand out in a crowd, surely.

'We've met before,' said Shenado. 'Nine years ago. You were both new recruits.'

"Yes," said Jonathan. "We've been assigned to protect you. We didn't mean to startle you, but we really don't have time to dawdle here. We need you to come with us to Lagemoor immediately."

"I am not leaving my children here."

"Oh, of course," said Jonathan. "We're to bring them, as well."

"We've received a credible threat against your family," said Charlie. "We are only here to escort you and your children to a more secure location."

Mariana was far from convinced. "Why did you not simply tell me this over the phone?"

"Time is short," said Jonathan. "Allow us to explain on the way. Please just trust us for now."

"No."

Both men frowned."

"685

--donation bonus week (day 1/5, post 5/5)--

'With respect, we don't know anything about you, so why should we trust you?' said Shenado.

"Please, we're here to help," said Charlie. "Call General Lawrence, if you must. He will confirm."

"I have been trying to call my husband," said Mariana. "Why is he not answering?"

"Captain Zeff was captured," said Charlie.

Mariana's expression flickered. "By whom?"

"A rogue faction within the Vanguard. They want your family, because you have information regarding the whereabouts of your daughter, Gema."

'Why do they want Gema?'

"I'm sorry, but I don't know any more than that," said Charlie.

Shenado paused. 'Where are your reapers?'

"Scouting the area for threats," said Jonathan.

Mariana eyed the two men again, still not opening the door any farther.

Her instincts told her not to trust them, but she knew her instincts to be a bit jaded. Everything they said sounded plausible, at least. And if there really was another threat out there, then ignoring these men might mean putting her children in even more danger. She clenched her jaw at the tense silence, uncertain what to do, and glanced at Shenado for help.

‘Shut the door,’ the reaper told her privately. ‘Tell them you don’t want their help, and then let’s see how they react.’

Mariana closed it and backed away from the door’s treated gray wood. “Thank you for the warning! But I will be protecting my family without your help!”

“No, please, listen to us!” came Jonathan’s muffled voice. “We’re only concerned for your safety!”

“I appreciate that! You can tell General Lawrence I refused your assistance!”

They pleaded a few more times, but Mariana said nothing further. She kept backing up, consciously stepping closer to her covered landmine, and tried Cisco again while she waited. Still no answer.

When the pleas stopped, Mariana hunkered down and listened intently.

‘They’re moving away from the door,’ Shenado informed her. ‘They appear to be leaving... Hmm. We’ll wait a bit more before going after them.’ Abruptly, however, the reaper’s head twitched to the side. ‘I sense three more souls entering the property from the rear. I don’t recognize them.’”

"686

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 1/5)--

They’d only sent three servants to retrieve her? If it came to a fight on her own land, three random Vanguardian lackeys did not concern her very much. As she cut through the Main House toward the courtyard, she couldn’t help feeling a little underwhelmed.

‘Oh, I sense two more,’ Shenado added. ‘One each for the east and west wings. I don’t recognize them, either.’

Mariana was now sufficiently whelmed. She slowed her pace to look at her cellphone. There was certainly no chance of help arriving before the fighting broke out, but she wasn't above asking. The first Rainlord in her contact list was Joana Cortes--formerly Joana Elroy. A bit obnoxious, perhaps, but still a good woman, in addition to being Zeff's sister.

'Charlie and Jonathan are returning now, too. Front entrance like before.'

Okay. Seven opponents was quite enough for her. Thankfully, Joana picked up after the second ring.

<"Mary! Hey!">

"Joana, shut up and listen. My house is under attack. There are seven servants here. Charlie Day and Jonathan Flint are two of them. I am not joking. I need assistance right now. Do you understand?"

There was no reply.

"Hello? Joana?" The call had dropped, she realized. She growled and tried the number again, but it wasn't even ringing this time. There was no telling how much Joana had heard. Mariana was kicking herself for not making the call sooner. If she'd known that she really was under assault and not just being extra paranoid, she definitely would have.

'No good?' said Shenado.

"It's being jammed."

'They've probably already cut the landline, then. Ah--no time to check. They are getting very close now. Dead ahead.'

Mariana pocketed her phone, exchanging it for one of the small remotes she'd taken from her weapons cache. Its two red buttons were unlit. She pressed the left one, then right one, then both together, then right, then left, then left again. The arming sequence. Both buttons lit up now.

She stopped at the door to the rainy courtyard and looked through. She pressed the right button and was pleased to see four automated turrets pop out of the stony half-pillars around the center pool. As she'd hoped, whatever was jamming her phone didn't have the right frequency for this."

"687

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 2/5)--

Mariana left the courtyard behind and headed for the eastern wing. 'Is everyone in the panic room?'

'Yes. I can sense Ramira, Marcos, and all the staff there.'

Good news, at least. Her one and only objective right now was to protect that room at all costs. It sat in the center of the Main House, and though it was designed to take a beating, defending it from four different directions at once was going to be difficult by herself. Her first priority was to get all the turrets set up. As an extra safety measure, she needed to be within five meters to activate them. She hadn't wanted them to trigger unless she could see everyone currently standing in their line of fire. A bit inconvenient, perhaps, but she did want her children to live here after all.

As she neared the eastern garden hall, she heard a muffled crash from the front of the house.

'Jonathan and Charlie have broken in.'

A booming thud followed, making the floor and walls tremble around her.

'...Well, Jonathan is dead.'

She'd hoped the landmine would claim them both, but she supposed that was expecting too much. She reached the unwallled garden hall and activated the turrets there. They descended from the light fixtures in the ceiling. She could hear the turrets back in the courtyard opening fire as she ran for the western hall next, intending to intercept Charlie along the way. Her turret remote was exchanged for a handgun.

'He's about to be straight ahead of you. Attack now.'

Mariana clenched her fist and summoned the path of destruction. It tore a triangular hole into the door, large enough for her to jump through, and ripped its way across the chamber, blowing a hefty table to pieces. Charlie was indeed there, but he managed to roll out of the way at the last moment.

She was already firing at him, catching him in the shoulder and in the neck. He pointed with one finger. Mariana jerked left behind the sofa,



but the flesh in her gun arm began to boil, and the sleeve of her overshirt burst into flames."

"688

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 3/5)--

Mariana decided that burning alive wasn't enough to stop her from popping out of cover and ripping the air apart with her ability again.

Charlie lost an arm fleeing back the way he came. Mariana tossed a grenade after him and then dropped to the floor, trying to pat the flames out as she rolled.

'You didn't get him,' Shenado told her in private. 'He's by the northern stairwell. I'm not sure what his power is yet, but it seems like an alteration type.'

Pushing him back would have to do. If he really did have alteration, then he would probably try to keep his distance from her, and she simply didn't have the time to deal with that right now. The western hall needed its turrets first. Half-scorched, she picked herself up and ran as hard as she could.

'Too late. Go to your right.'

That led to the kitchen. Mariana immediately saw the enemy servant entering from the western hall, and she destroyed half the room with her attack. The bulky man tried to cancel it out with his own path of destruction, but it certainly didn't go in his favor. Her path plowed through his and claimed an arm and a chunk of his ribcage. While he staggered from the impact, she launched another wave. He tried to dodge this one, but having anticipated as much, Mariana's closed fist opened into a hook-shape. Her path curved mid-flight and obliterated the rest of the man's body, save only his head. She didn't hesitate to grab him by his long black bangs and carry him off with her.

Rather than returning to the courtyard again, she elected to go straight to the panic room.

'There are only three left,' said Shenado. 'Two coming in from the courtyard, plus Charlie from the front.'

Three was a much more manageable number, of course, but Mariana

knew better than to relax too soon. If these three had survived her booby-traps, then they were probably the strongest of the seven. And there was still the matter of the others coming back to life if she let this fight drag out too long."

"689

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 4/5)--

The panic room was embedded in the floor beneath the dining hall. Shenado warned her that the two unknown servants were also about to enter the same chamber through the southern door, so when Mariana arrived, she flung their comrade's severed head at them. And they probably weren't expecting that, because it stole their attention long enough for her to launch a large wave of destruction.

They dove in opposite directions, the two men. A thin one and a short one. That was about the extent of her distinction between them as she whipped out her semi-automatic rifle and showered the short man with gunfire.

She'd apparently chosen poorly, however, as the man covered himself in a shiny gray metal, making her bullets bounce off and ricochet around the room. The thin man threw his own path of destruction--but not at her. It went for the floor, beneath the long banquet table in the middle of the room, and Mariana's eyes widened, instantly launching her own wave to intercept.

The distorted spaces collided. Hers won out, but a chunk of the floor was gone. She couldn't tell how deeply the man's path had cut through. The panic room's walls were strong, but they couldn't have withstood that attack.

She didn't have time to worry, however. The short man was charging her now, which was a strangely foolish thing to do--unless he was only trying to distract her.

'Charlie on your right,' Shenado warned.

Mariana ran left for the thin man, as he was the priority now and needed to at least be kept busy so that he didn't attack the panic room again. She didn't see Charlie miss with his attack. His almost invisible power collided with a rosewood cabinet, instead, and gouged a smoking hole into it, hardly a centimeter wide.

She launched another wave at the thin man, who fled around the banquet table while the short man tried to get in her way. His metal arm swung at her. She slid past it, gathered her power into her fist, and punched the man's shoulder clean off."

"690

--donation bonus week (day 2/5, post 5/5)--

The metal man flew back, leaving his arm behind--which she discovered was not merely coated in metal but actually made of it, extending partway into the muscle tissue.

Her three opponents rallied together on the other side of the room, stepping carefully so as not to be too close to one another and thereby render her job easier. For a hesitant moment, they merely looked at her, and she stared them all down from beneath her harsh eyebrows.

"This doesn't have to get any uglier," Charlie tried. "We are not going to hurt your children. If you would just come with us--"

The wave made them scatter as it annihilated the table down the center and punched an isosceles hole into the wall. The ceiling shifted from the impact, and Mariana tossed a grenade after Charlie while pressuring the thin man. She threw a distant punch at thin air, feigning another wave attack. The thin man took the bait and dove right, and Mariana used her other hand to throw a follow-up punch, this time using her power. Her rifle was ripped to pieces as that was the hand she'd held it in, but it was a worthwhile sacrifice, because the path blasted forth and obliterated the thin man completely.

The short man barreled into her, trying to knock her off balance, but Mariana managed to grab him and bring him along for her tumble across the floor. She rolled over him and pinned him down. A burning hole pierced her back and set her on fire again. She ignored it and took the opportunity to remove the metal man's head from his neck. He still had plenty of blood on the inside.

She yanked her flaming overshirt off and threw it aside. Her long hair had caught fire as well, but that didn't matter so much. When she stood back up, Charlie was no longer in the room. She queried Shenado with a look.

'He is retreating,' the reaper said.

Surprising, but wise. She didn't have time to question it, though."

"691

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 1/5)--

She'd only managed to decapitate two of the seven, the first of which had already regenerated down to his shoulders. She fixed that real quick, then proceeded to the speaker box by the southern doorway.

"Can you hear me?" she said. "Is everyone alright?"

<"Lady Elroy..."> It was Claudio's voice, slow and grave. <"Marcos is very badly wounded...">

Her breath caught. Marcos? She didn't understand. "Open the door," was all she could think to say.

The floor groaned and split beneath the decimated banquet table. It separated straight down the center, gradually revealing the thick silver door.

She saw the gaping hole in its nearest corner.

The door pushed open from below, and Claudio's head appeared. His expression was grim. She followed him down the ladder.

And there her son lay, bunched up in the corner next to a chunk of debris and one of the maids. His neck was twisted grotesquely. Blood gushed from his head wound. His eyes were still open, but only just, and they moved to her, holding on her, recognizing his mother.

The boy could only let out a whimper.

Mariana went to him. She could still hardly breathe, and her hands trembled as she touched his shoulder. Her horrified eyes looked at the maid by his side. The young lady had first-aid training, Mariana knew, but this was certainly beyond her.

'Mariana,' Shenado said. 'I know it's terrible, but we have to go. If we stay here, they'll just keep coming.'

Mariana gnashed her teeth. She wanted to argue, wanted to scream,

wanted to go back up there and hunt down all their reapers and kill them for good. But Shenado was right, damn her.

She stood. She went to the panel by the ladder. The number pad blurred together as she looked at it. She hadn't cried since she was a girl. She remembered wondering if she even could cry anymore, but that was certainly not in question now. She couldn't stop the tears or the snot or the ragged breaths and just tried to wipe her face so that she could see what she was doing."

"692 -- LXXIX.

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 2/5)--

Mariana punched the numbers in and then waved at everyone to back up toward the walls, completely unable to tell them with words.

The floor pulled away below them, revealing an even deeper hole. This one led beneath the platform--the massive structure holding up the entirety of Agquarey. Lights flicked on around the hole, illuminating the dark waters below. As well as a large motorboat.

Mariana wiped her face another time and then returned to Marcos. She was afraid to ask Shenado the obvious question, but before she decided to move him, she needed to know for certain. 'Is he going to die?'

'...Yes. I'm sorry.'

It was dizzying, almost. She'd seen people die before. Of course she had. Seen friends fall in battle. Been forced to kill them after they'd lost their reapers. She was no stranger to death. But this was something else entirely. This was her son. Her baby boy. He was only twelve, for god's sake.

Shenado had to nudge her along. 'Mariana....'

She bent down and took Marcos into her arms. At his pained groans, she whispered, "Shh... It's okay. You're going to be okay."

And she was not lying. She was not going to let him die. The look she gave Shenado seemed enough for the reaper to understand the truth of this promise as well.

## Chapter Seventy-Nine: 'He who burns fiercest...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

As he leaned against the wall, Cisco browsed the news on his phone. It was early in the day still, not even past lunch yet, and he hadn't attended either of his morning classes so far. Nor did he plan to attend any of the others.

Dennex floated next to him, restless as ever. 'Why do these school days last so long?' he said privately.

'Good question.'

To Cisco's eyes, reapers were hulking, skeletal wolves wreathed in black fire in place of flesh or fur. Their flames flickered and waved constantly but made no sound whatsoever, and their big eyes burned yellow with white at the center. Needless to say, Dennex looked woefully out of place in the middle of a school hallway."

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--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 2/5)--

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"693

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 3/5)--

'I would rather be reaping souls right now,' said Dennex.

'I know you would, but it's just for today.'

'Is it?'

Cisco looked up from his phone. 'Probably. I guess it just depends on how Ma and Shenado feel tomorrow.'

The reaper sighed.

‘You really enjoy reaping souls, don’t you?’

‘It is very important work. And sadly, it is increasingly overlooked as time goes on. Reapers get too caught up in their dealings with their servants and neglect the suffering of the deceased.’

‘If that’s how you feel, then why did you agree to join the Vanguard with me? Sai-hee’s group is the one that deals the most with reaping, right?’

‘That is exactly why. Sai-hee’s group doesn’t need anyone to remind them of its importance. The Vanguard does. And this way, I also get to fight Abolish a lot more.’

‘Ah. Does Abolish bother to reap souls at all, you think?’

‘I know some of them do. It’s part of their shared belief system. Giving souls to their “Void” consciousness.’

‘Right.’

‘But I also know that some only gather souls in order to feed them to their aberrations. Those are the ones I would most like to kill.’

‘Preying on the helpless.’

‘I can think of nothing more disgusting.’

Cisco could only nod in agreement. He knew the Vanguard had an entire division devoted to hunting down aberrations, and Dennex had told him on their first day together that he intended to join it when Cisco grew strong enough. Once he’d been a servant for four years, he would be able to request a transfer out of the division of his parents, but he would probably need more time than that, he figured. The aberration hunters were renowned for their strength.

He returned to his phone, just waiting for the bell to ring so that he could follow his sister to her next class. She hadn’t been too pleased with his decision to shadow her all day, but he didn’t really care about her opinion. Ma wanted him to look after her, and that was exactly what he was going to do."

"694



--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 4/5)--

Cisco had the hallway all to himself while he waited, so whenever someone exited one of the nearby classrooms, he could easily see who it was. Fellow students, mostly. Bathroom breaks and so forth.

At length, he grew bored of the news and began browsing other things on his phone, but when he noticed someone else walking down the hall, he had to look up from his articles and image galleries about various breeds of puppies.

It was a grown man that he saw turning the corner and then stopping when he noticed Cisco standing there. Cisco didn't recognize him, but the man held his gaze longer than seemed normal for a total stranger. Then the man left back the way he came.

He glanced at Dennex. 'Did you see that?'

'I did.'

'Who was he?'

'No idea,' said Dennex. 'Why don't you come stand over here?' He nodded toward the other side of the classroom door, where a fire alarm was embedded in the wall.

Cisco understood and did as the reaper asked.

A few minutes later, the stranger returned, this time with a teacher.

Mrs. Rio walked straight up to him. "Why are you not in class, Mr. Elroy?"

Cisco ignored the question and squinted at the person behind her. He could see a guest's badge hanging around the man's neck, so he probably wasn't a member of the school's faculty. "Mrs. Rio, who is that?"

"Don't try to change the subject. Why are you not in class?"

He eyed her flatly and shrugged. "Because I'm a bad student."

'Really?' said Dennex. 'That's how you're going to play this?'

But the reaper didn't know very much about Cisco's school life, or about Mrs. Rio here. Normally, young teachers were pretty nice to their students, but this woman was a rather well-known hardass in spite of

that. Cisco had been stuck with her during his first year, which he hadn't minded so much, until after he'd started gaining a reputation as a bully. Her dislike for him became quite apparent, then."

"695

--donation bonus week (day 3/5, post 5/5)--

The difficult thing about being labeled a bully in one's first year was that it became extra difficult to shake. The person he'd "beat up" had, in truth, been trying to bully him. He was never really sure why. Maybe the kid had a problem with Rainlords; maybe he thought Cisco would be easy prey, because he was so scrawny back then; or maybe he just didn't like Cisco's face--he'd heard as much before. It seemed to intuitively annoy certain types of people, like they thought he was silently judging them. Though, in all fairness, sometimes he was.

Moreover, since the real bully had also been a first-year, none of the teachers knew he was a bully, which made it all the easier to lay the blame on Cisco. And after that, Cisco often attracted the kinds of people who thought being a bully was cool. Just as often, rather than making friends, he would tell them to go screw themselves.

That hadn't done him many favors, either. Alex Belos was one of only three friends he'd ever made at this school.

But it was fine. Cisco didn't care that much. He had more important things on his mind, anyway. Maybe if Gema had stayed and finished school here, things would have been different for him, but Cisco doubted it. She never gave him the time of day, really. Always too self-absorbed to worry about anyone else. He never understood why Marcos seemed to idolize her--maybe just because the brat didn't actually know her.

"Return to your class," said Mrs. Rio. She held out her hand. "And hand over your phone while you're at it."

That wasn't going to happen. "No."

"Excuse me?" She reached for his phone to take it herself.

Cisco didn't let her. "If you're going to give me detention, then just do it and leave me alone. I'm only here today in order to look after my sister. Not to attend classes."

"Perhaps you would rather I fetch the principal and see what he thinks?"

"Mrs. Rio, you can fetch the Mayor of Agquarey for all I care. I'm not moving."

"696

--donation bonus week (day 4/5, post 1/5)--

The teacher's eyes narrowed, and Cisco thought she might actually yell at him, but after a moment, she relented. "Very well. Two weeks' detention it is, then."

"Fine." Cisco already knew his parents wouldn't be upset with him.

Mrs. Rio turned to leave, and when the strange man held up a hand in protest, she just shrugged and kept walking. After she was gone, the man looked at Cisco again.

"Who are you?" said Cisco, no longer leaning against the wall.

The man hesitated, then glanced at Dennex, which was enough to confirm Cisco's suspicion that this person was indeed a servant. "My name is Louis Ferrage. I've been ordered by General Lawrence to escort you and your sister to Deynos for your own safety."

'Why?' said Dennex. 'What is the danger?'

"I'm sorry, but that is all I was told."

"Well, I can't just leave with you," said Cisco, raising his phone. "I'll call my mother, and if she says it's okay, then--" His phone was suddenly coated in a silvery-white metal.

"I'm sorry," Louis said with a raised hand, "but I can't allow you to do that." And two more men arrived around the same corner, along with their three accompanying reapers. "Please come quietly."

Cisco eyed the three pairs. 'Are there any more of them?'

'I don't sense anyone else in the hallways around us,' Dennex said privately. 'Seems Louis here was sent to retrieve Emiliana, while those two in the back probably went to your class, thinking you'd be there.'

One of the other men stepped forward now. "My name is Randall Pierce. I know this is sudden, but I assure you, we mean you no harm."

'And if we refuse?' asked Dennex. 'Are you going to attack us in the middle of a public school? Innocent people might get hurt. Children.'

"That is why you should not refuse," said Randall.

'This is ridiculous,' said Dennex. 'You call yourselves Vanguard? I want to talk to your superiors. Get them on the phone right now, and then we can sort all this out properly. This is probably just some misunderstanding, actually. I bet if we--'

As the reaper blabbered on, Cisco realized that was his cue. He pocketed his useless phone, took a deep breath, and then hit the fire alarm. Blaring noise filled the hall."

"697

Surprisingly, the trio of servants didn't look terribly upset by the alarm. People began filing out of the classroom, and the Vanguardians just let them go, standing still and silent as they waited for the uninvolved to pass. Cisco looked for Emiliana among the other students, but even after the classroom had emptied, he still hadn't seen her. He saw Dennex smirk.

'The girl jumped out the window!' said one of the other reapers.

Louis ran for the door.

Cisco felt Dennex empower him with vigor, and he grabbed Louis' head with one hand. Cisco shoved the man back, and Louis fell on his ass, a smoldering handprint burned into his face.

"You've yet to do us any harm, so I will grant you this one warning," said Cisco, his hand trembling as the smoking flesh of his palm regenerated. "Try to touch my sister again, and I will kill each and every one of you."

'Chergoa heard enough to know that they should flee,' said Dennex privately. 'It seems Axiolis chose a wise partner for your sister.'

"You don't want to do this," Randall said darkly. "We know who you

are, Mr. Elroy. You've only been a servant for two years. I've been one for four. My friends here, three and five. Do the smart thing and surrender."

Cisco pulled off his coat and started rolling up the sleeves of his gray undershirt. "You know who I am, do you? If that were true, then you would be running away like the cowards you are. I am Francisco Elroy, fools. I am a Rainlord of Sair. The blood of the Armans runs through my veins."

"You are a schoolboy with a famous name," said Randall. "Is that name of yours worth dying for, I wonder?"

"Of course it is. But I wouldn't expect someone who tries to abduct young women to understand the first thing about honor or integrity."

"We understand duty, Mr. Elroy. It seems you're still too young to know the difference." Randall looked to Dennex. "Talk some sense into your servant."

"698

Instead of answering Randall, Dennex chose to speak only to Cisco. 'Kill Louis first, or he'll use his metal to protect the others. These men were chosen to fight you, so you probably won't have a natural advantage over any of their powers.'

Their intentions were clear enough now, and as he was already outnumbered, Cisco decided it wouldn't be wise to keep waiting for them to attack him all at once. He would make the first move.

The primary reason why Cisco needed the area clear of all bystanders was because of his own ability. Dennex had instilled in him very early on that it was never to be used around normal people. Even low levels of exposure could prove fatally toxic. When it came to servants, however, Cisco would of course require a bit more potency.

Held behind his back, Cisco's arms melted as his flesh converted to fluorine, finding hydrogen atoms in his skin to bond with. Hydrogen fluoride was a colorless gas--invisible--which made it seem like his arms were quietly dissolving into nothing. The hydrogen-fluorine reaction was not normally so silent, but he had enough control to keep it muted.

Dennex was gracious enough to blabber on a bit more while Cisco worked. 'You're right, of course,' he said publicly. 'We probably stand no chance against you. You will have to forgive my friend, Cisco. He is rather hot-tempered. Brash. You understand. But he will listen, assuming you guarantee--'

On contact with tissue, the hydrogen fluoride decomposed into hydrofluoric acid. Cisco hadn't infused it with his soul so as not to alert the other reapers to its presence, but it had an extremely pure acidic concentration, which was plenty strong enough for Cisco's purposes. The three servants doubled over in agony. The gas destroyed their corneas, and the acid boiled their skin, filling the corridor with pungent fumes.

Cisco dove headfirst into the gas without concern. It was his own fluorine, after all. He could control how--or even if--it reacted with his body. The only worry was that someone else could instigate a violent chemical reaction with it, but that would be a rare thing, and the Vanguard wouldn't likely send someone who would needlessly increase the risk of collateral damage. And besides, the three men were rather preoccupied at the moment."

"699

With full strength, Cisco landed a punch that crushed Louis' skull and sent him bouncing down the hallway. But Cisco was not done. Louis' unnamed reaper had been right beside him, trying to empower him for the fight, so Cisco leapt up and snatched the skeletal beast out of the air with his other hand. The other two reapers scattered, their servants now strengthened.

Still obviously disoriented, Randall rounded on Cisco and swung wildly at the air, sending a wave of destruction after him.

Cisco slid right on by, wrapped his arm around Randall's head, and twisted it off like a giant bottle cap. He landed on both feet again, his battered arms in the midst of regenerating. In each, he had a different prize--a reaper hostage and Randall's head. He leveled a stare at the final servant, waiting to see if the man intended to flee now.

Alas, that did not seem to be the case. "Is this the 'honor' you were talking about?" the man asked, fully regenerated. "Taking advantage of

your opponent's demonstration of courtesy to catch them off guard. We told you we meant you no harm."

Cisco nodded slightly. "Yes, well, I did warn you. And I'm being kind, too. This reaper in my left hand? I haven't killed him yet. Your friend Louis will be fine. Randall, too."

"A sucker punch. Not that it matters, I suppose. I'm still stronger than you are."

"Confident," said Cisco. "Then tell me your name before we proceed."

"I am Dunstan Rofal, Lance Corporal of the Seventh Watcher's Unit under General Lawrence."

'A watchman,' said Dennex. He clung to the back of Cisco's neck. 'You lot are better at scouting than at fighting.'

"We are multitalented," said Dunstan. His black eyebrows had sharp arches to them, and his harsh cheekbones could have been weapons unto themselves. He didn't look all that much older than Cisco. Early twenties, at most. "I may not have your esteemed heritage, but you do not have my training."

"You've obviously never met my mother." Cisco set Randall's head aside."

"700

Dunstan charged him head on. Cisco sacrificed his right forearm to bathe the man in acid. Dunstan reached right through it and grabbed Cisco by the neck. Dunstan's flesh was missing, but it wasn't boiling. The acid had just splashed right off, as if by some invisible barrier.

Knowing that he could lose his head in an instant, Cisco had to respond quickly. He yanked himself back with a somersault, up and around Dunstan's arm in order to leverage his whole body weight against his opponent and drag them both to the ground together. They tumbled, and Cisco ended up atop Dunstan's arm. He tore it off and rolled away, giving himself some space to reevaluate the situation.

Dunstan was just as quick to return to his feet as Cisco, and the bloody gash on his shoulder closed itself before fresh bone and tissue began to grow out again. Curiously, the match had become one arm versus two and a half--soon to be three once Cisco's wrist and hand regenerated.

'He's transfiguration, too,' Dennex observed privately. 'He's using one of the noble gases, I'd wager. There are few elements that wouldn't react with hydrofluoric acid or the air at room temperature.'

Dunstan took the opportunity to attack again, but Dennex didn't stop explaining. Cisco struggled to dodge and keep listening.

'It seems acid won't work on him so long as he's paying attention. You'll have to overpower him or catch him off guard.'

Dunstan caught Cisco's chest with two fingers' worth of superheated gas, twin jets of searing pressure. Cisco swung for the man's face, but Dunstan ducked under and then thrust his hand upward, burning through Cisco's neck and head as if he were cutting through cardboard. Cisco barely pulled away in time to avoid having his skull split in two. Instead, he'd only earned a giant gash from sternum to ear, flesh and bone hanging loosely from his face as blood gushed forth.

Cisco tried to back off, but his opponent didn't seem interested in letting up. 'You might want to flee now,' he told Dennex.

'I'm not going anywhere without my servant. Chergoa and Emiliana can warn everyone else.' The reaper sounded much too relaxed for Cisco's liking."



With Dunstan neutralizing Cisco's fluorine, the fight descended into a contest of grapples, slickened and more dangerous from all the blood they were both losing.

Cisco swung Dunstan's severed arm like a sword. Dunstan slipped under it, and then wrapped himself around Cisco's arm, trying to position Cisco for a piercing blow to the temple. Instead, Cisco took the opportunity to force them both into a spin with himself at the center. He swirled Dunstan around, and when the man's grip loosened, Cisco flung him straight at the wall.

Incredibly, Dunstan flipped in mid-air and caught himself on the wall. And for a moment, he actually stayed there, both feet planted vertically against the cracked plaster while his hands gripped the burning holes they'd made for themselves.

Still half-dizzy from spinning, Cisco could do little more than gawk at what he'd just witnessed.

Dunstan launched himself from the wall like a missile, destroying it and barreling into Cisco. They tumbled together, Dunstan shoving Cisco's face into the blood-streaked floor, and Cisco could feel the freezing temperature encroaching upon the back of his head.

"Well fought, Mr. Elroy," were the last words he heard before losing consciousness.

--++--++--

Dunstan tried to wipe the blood from his face as his flesh finished regrowing. Transfiguration was certainly not the cleanest of abilities. He'd already taken Dennex hostage, merely holding the reaper with his soul-empowered right hand. In his left, he held Cisco's frozen head.

Randall Pierce and Louis Ferrage had still not yet regenerated, and their accompanying reapers, as well as Dunstan's, had already flown off after Emiliana Elroy. Cisco had delayed them, but with any luck, they would have the girl in custody within a few hours.

'What is your element?' asked Dennex, not sounding particularly upset with his newfound captivity.

Dunstan eyed him. Normally, reapers were pitch dark wraiths with tattered, flowing bodies and glowing red eyes, but at the moment, all he saw was a kind of amorphous shroud staring up at him from around his hand. "I'm a little surprised you didn't try to flee," said Dunstan.

"702 -- LXXX.

'You weren't trying to kill us,' said Dennex. 'And you seem like an honorable gentleman.'

"Even so. In your position, I'm sure a lot of reapers would have abandoned their servant."

'A lot of reapers are stupid.'

"Does the young Mr. Elroy mean that much to you?"

'He does, but that's not the only reason. I don't intend to end up trapped indefinitely without a servant, and I'm curious to find out who sent you and why.'

"You're a strange reaper."

'Honesty makes me strange?'

Dunstan looked around the corridor again. Their battle had been fairly short, but the aftermath might have suggested otherwise. And with toxic chemicals in the air, he would have to see to it that the area was quarantined before any of the normal people were allowed back into the building. Furthermore, the school's staff might not feel like listening to him, given that he was covered in blood.

On second thought, the Elroy girl might just get away. Orders or no orders, Dunstan wasn't about to let innocent bystanders get hurt because of him. Randall probably wouldn't agree, but then again, Randall was an idiot who'd gotten himself killed.

'Is it argon?' said Dennex. 'Come on, tell me what your element is. It is argon, isn't it?'

Dunstan stretched his neck. He probably shouldn't tell the reaper, he figured, in case he ended up having to fight Cisco again, but he decided to, anyway. Something about the reaper's candor made him feel like returning the favor. "It's krypton, if you must know."

‘Ah. I was close.’

Dunstan started looking around for a bag to place Cisco’s head in. Diplomacy would only be made more difficult if people saw him carrying it around like some lunatic.

Chapter Eighty: ‘O, monstrous child...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Emiliana had never run so fast in her life. She wasn’t at all accustomed to her new physical prowess. Chergoa told her not to slow down for anything, but it was difficult with so many people around--and in the rain, too? She tried to stick to grassy areas as much as possible because the pavement seemed too slick."

"702 -- LXXX.

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"703

--donation bonus week (day 4/5, post 2/5)--

It didn't end. She just kept running. Her schoolbag slapped against her back, and her folded umbrella pattered uselessly against her so that it wouldn't catch the air and slow her down. Through alleys, over fences, under madega trees, across streets and yards and parks and empty lots. She didn't know where she was going. She only knew that she had to get away. Strange men had come to abduct her, and Cisco had protected her from them.

She tried to reach her mother, but the call wasn't going through. Her father wasn't answering. She was panicking. Everything was wrong. She didn't understand how Chergoa was able to keep so calm, but she certainly appreciated it.

'Can you call any of the other Rainlords?' the reaper was asking.

'Uhh--' Emiliana tried to sift through the numbers in her phone while she splashed through a series of ponds. She would've really liked to have even one of her parents' Vanguardian friends listed, but she'd never gotten to know any of them well enough to exchange personal information. The other Rainlords, she barely knew--but no, wait. She'd met lots of their children. A couple of them were even her cousins. If she called them, maybe they could tell their parents? Did she have any of their numbers?

She had three, she realized. Selena Cortes, Ester Zabat, and Alicia Redwater. She went for Alicia's number first, as it was the only one Emiliana remembered calling at all in the last three months. And as she waited for it to ring, she tried to think about where she was in relation to the Redwater family. The main branch lived on the other side of Aguary, as she recalled. House Cortes was the same, and the Zabats lived all the way in Luzo, so Alicia was probably her best bet after all.

Mercifully, Alicia picked up. <"Hi, Emy. What's up?">

A beat passed, and she just blanked. How was she supposed to explain this without sounding utterly ridiculous?  
<"...Hello?">

'Talk!' Chergoa yelled at her. 'Say things!'"  
"704

Emiliana snapped back, and the words just poured out her. "Alicia! I'm here! I'm in a lot of trouble! These men came to my school to abduct me, and I don't know what's happening, and Cisco stayed behind to fight them! And I--I don't--"

<"Whoa, whoa, slow down,"> Alicia said. <"Men came to your school?">

“Yes! I tried to call my parents, but neither of them are answering, so I called you! Please help me! I’m really scared!”

<“O-oh! Okay, hold on a second! I’m at school, right now, but just--stay on the line.”> There came a brief rustling noise. <“Hey! Let me borrow your phone! Yes, I need two phones! This is important! Shut up, and just--! No, just give it here!”> A feminine screech broke out, followed by a beat of silence. Then, a bit haggard, Alicia said, <“You still there?”>

Emiliana had slowed down a little. “Er--”

‘Don’t stop running,’ said Chergoa. ‘I still sense the three reapers from the school following us.’

She picked up her pace again, continually marveled by how she hadn’t grown winded or tired at all. “Yes, I’m here!” she said to Alicia.

<“Good! I’m calling my grandma now! She’ll help you for sure!”>

“Uh--your grandma?”

<“Yeah! Don’t even worry about it! Oh, and can you tell me where you are?”>

Chergoa was floating near enough to overhear the question. ‘Tell her you’re heading north toward the Great Madega.’

Emiliana relayed the information.

<“Okay, got it. Ah, hold on a second.”> Then, slightly muffled again, <“Fuck off! I’ll give your phone back in a minute! Go ahead! I don’t care who you tell! Stay back! I swear, I will bite y--Oh! Grandma! Yeah, it’s Alicia! Listen, I just got a call from Emy Elroy, and--”>

As she listened to the girl’s secondhand explanation, Emiliana threw repeated glances at Chergoa.

‘How well do you know this Alicia girl, exactly?’ the reaper asked.

‘Uh. Not that well. She’s a little younger than me, and I thought she was a nice girl, but she sounds kind of--er, “louder” than I remember...’

‘Ah.’

‘Not that I’m complaining...’

<“Alright, Grandma is headed your way,”> Alicia reported. <“You should be okay now.”>

“Thank you!”

<“How many bad guys are there? Do you know?”>

“Three, I think. But my brother delayed them. It might just be the reapers following me now.”

<“Alright, just keep heading to the tree. Grandma will find you in no time. I’ll stay on the phone with you until--AGH, FINE! TAKE YOUR FUCKING PHONE BACK! BITCH!”>

Chergoa raised a wispy eyebrow. ‘What is Alicia’s last name, by the way?’

‘Redwater.’

‘Wow, you called one of the Redwaters?’

‘Yeah, why?’

‘Oh, right. You’re not much of a history buff, are you?’

‘Uh--’ Emiliana didn’t get a chance to ask what she was talking about, because Alicia interrupted.

<“Sorry about that. I’m still here.”>

“Ah, g-good. Thank you.”

<“So do you have any idea who these men are?”>

“Well, they said they were Vanguard, but... uh--”

<“What? Vanguard?”>

“I don’t really understand it, either.” She explained what she and Chergoa heard Dennex rambling about through the wall. Chergoa had considered it entirely intentional on Dennex’s part as a means of telling them to flee without alerting their enemies. Emiliana hadn’t been quite so convinced of this at first, but she’d since warmed up to the idea after being chased by reapers for the past ten minutes straight.

She could see the Great Madega Tree now. Taller than most of the buildings around it by a third, it was one of the most famous places in Aguary--or in all of Sair, even. The Great Madega was one of the largest trees in the world, rivaled only by the monstrous Jaskadan Forest across the sea. And the people of Aguary did not squander this natural wonder. Rather, they turned it into a leisure center, of sorts. A narrow walkway spiraled around its huge gray-brown trunk, and a climate-controlled observatory sat within the grip of its sprawling crown of foot-sized blue-green leaves. Additionally, a plethora of high-end shops sat around its base for the many tourists it attracted."

"706

The crowds thickened as Emiliana neared the tree, creating a kind of moving ceiling of umbrellas for her as she pushed her way through. And because she didn't really know how strong she'd become, she was extra careful not to accidentally shove anyone and instead chose to just press forward with her body only. It made the going a bit slower, but the last thing she wanted to do was hurt some poor bystander.

"I'm at the tree," she said into the phone.

<"Go up,"> said Alicia. <"It'll make it easier for Grandma to find you.">

Chergoa nodded, and Emiliana proceeded up the metal walkway. It seemed solidly constructed, but there was only enough space for two people across--a line going up and a line going down.

When she reached the observatory, she found herself waiting a while, nervous and uncertain. Whoever was following her was sure taking their sweet time. Alicia was trying to keep her calm with small talk, but Emiliana was only half-listening. By now, she probably could have called the police and had them come get her. Though, if those men were really Vanguard, then obviously, the police wouldn't have been able to do much.

In some spots, the observatory offered a wide view of Aguary, but in others, tall hotels and office buildings stood in the way. She wasn't looking at the city, however. She was paying much closer attention to everyone else who entered the observatory after her.

She spotted an elderly woman with a cane among the entrants, but the



woman spared her a glance and nothing more. Having never met Alicia's grandmother before, Emiliana had no idea what to look for, but she kept her eye on the elderly woman, anyway, not seeing any other likely candidates. The old gal seemed more interested in the television monitors mounted in the center of the broad chamber, and after a second look, Emiliana saw why.

'Reported chemical incident at local high school,' the news line read. The reporter was talking about how the authorities were still unclear whether it was an accident or not."

"707

Only two students were so far unaccounted for, apparently. After a minute, Emiliana saw her own name there alongside her brother's. And not long after, she was staring at helicopter footage of her own house and listening to the reporter talk about how the rest of her immediate family was also missing. The news line soon changed to, 'Assault on Rainlord family?'

It did nothing to ease her mind. She didn't want to hang up on Alicia, but she had to try calling her parents again.

A vain attempt. Her father still wasn't answering, and the call still wasn't reaching her mother. Her hands trembled as she made to try Cisco next.

Her vision began to blur, in and out of focus. She squinted at her phone as her fingers started to burn--and then, so did her face. She couldn't hold back her pained groans, and she dropped her phone as she watched her fingers contorting strangely against her will.

'Ch-Chergoa!' she thought, hardly able to think straight. 'What--?! What's--?!'

'Emiliana! Oh sh--! It's okay! No, this is fine. Just try to calm down.'

It felt like thick needles were digging into her face. Or out of it, rather. Her forehead, both cheeks, and her left eye all burned like fire. 'What is this?! What's happening?!'

'It's okay. I'll tell you exactly what's happening, but first I need you to try and relax. Just close your eyes and listen to my voice. You're okay.'

Do you understand? You're fine.'

She did as the reaper said, or tried to. She could still feel her own racing heart and stunted breaths. And her whole body shook, small tremors running through her, up and down and back and forth all at once.

But after a spell, the feeling slowly melted away, leaving only a few lingering shivers.

'Alright,' said Chergoa. 'Now when you open your eyes, you're going to see some changes. You're a little different now. But I don't want you to panic, okay? I need you to trust me. I'll explain everything. I promise.'" "708 -- LXXXI.

Hesitant, Emiliana opened her eyes. The first thing she noticed was that the vision in her left eye was dimmer. Cloudier and darker, and the eye itself just felt stiffer, like it took more effort to move.

And then she saw her hands. Specifically, the tips of her fingers. They'd all become dark as coal and hard like rocks. And more than that, some of them had grown outward, gnarled and pointed like misshapen claws. Two on her right hand, three on her left.

She remembered her face next, how it had burned as well. Wide-eyed, she searched around for a mirror but didn't see one. But she could see the changes just barely in the corners of her vision. Small protrusions from her flesh. Stubby horns, they felt like. Dark and hideous.

She was about ready to lose her mind. 'What the hell happened to me?!

'Your ability has manifested,' said Chergoa. 'You're a mutation type.'

Chapter Eighty-One: 'What it means to serve...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Emiliana moved toward the glass wall, just wanting to get away from the other people before they noticed they were standing next to some

kind of freak. She stared at her hands in horror. 'I'm going to be like this for the rest of my life?'

'Yes and no,' said Chergoa, still trying to sound gentle. 'You can't exactly undo what's happened, but you can make further changes to yourself and potentially counteract any negative effects they've caused.'

Emiliana touched her face another time. Her rocky fingertips had lost all sensation, but with her palm, she could feel four little horns on her head--one on each cheek and then two on her forehead. Her reflection in the window was faint, but she could see enough to know that she already hated what she'd become.

'Mutation is the least understood type,' said Chergoa. 'I know that might not inspire much confidence, but luckily for you, I've studied it quite a bit, so I know more about it than most reapers probably do.'

Emiliana wanted to scream at her. It was disgusting. How could her parents let her become a servant if they knew something like this could happen?"

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"709

Her parents.

Emiliana remembered.

Where were they? She wanted to yell at them. And cry at them. Most of all, she wanted to stop worrying about them. About herself. About everything. She pressed her hands against the window and dropped to her knees. Her claws left scratches in the glass, and she could not have cared less.

She settled wearily into a heap on the floor, letting her roiling thoughts slowly diminish. And perhaps it was the agonized wonder for her

parents only a moment prior that was responsible for the sudden and inexplicably clear reminder of her mother's words.

Sacrifice is what it means to serve.

The woman had said it enough times that Emiliana nearly came to hate the phrase, but dammit if she hadn't also come to understand its meaning. Her mother wasn't just talking about being in the Vanguard. She was talking about being a servant. The power and responsibility it granted, the unwanted attention. Sacrifice was inevitable, and oftentimes, unknowable. The only thing to be done was to attempt to prepare for the worst.

And annoyingly, Emiliana abruptly remembered her mother doing exactly that. The Lady Elroy had indeed explained about the mutation type, along with the other five categories of abilities. She'd warned her of the possibility, told her to keep a clear head if the time ever came, even told her that might not be possible due to the way abilities tended to manifest via stress--and that, nonetheless, it was still necessary.

"Because you are an Elroy," her mother had said. "One day, someone will attempt to hurt you for no other reason than that."

It wasn't fair, Emiliana felt. The only thing she wanted to do right now was blame her parents. And she couldn't bring herself to.

Chergoa was still trying to soothe her, Emiliana realized. 'I know this seems horrible right now, but you're okay. Trust me.'

Emiliana didn't even have the energy to glare at her.

"Are you unwell, child?"

Emiliana turned and saw the elderly woman from earlier standing there.

She was a tiny thing, even shorter than Emiliana and certainly more shriveled. When she saw Emiliana's mutated face, however, she didn't flee or yell. Instead, she merely raised an eyebrow at the girl."

"710

Emiliana stood to her feet. She went straight for the first question she could think of. "Are you Alicia's grandmother?"

"I am indeed," the woman said. "I apologize for not telling you right away. I was hoping to catch your pursuers when they revealed themselves, but it seems they intend to remain hidden."

'Ah, I sense them fleeing now,' said Chergoa.

'That would explain it,' said a new reaper, phasing up through the floor behind Madame Redwater. 'I suppose Octavia and I have become a bit too famous to employ such discretion.'

"How dull." Octavia offered Emiliana a pert smile. "They never tell you that once you grow powerful enough, people tend to stop trying to fight you. I have not had a real fight in four years.""

'Six, actually,' her reaper said.

"Really? Huh." The old gal shrugged. "Glad it only seemed like four."

'It's a pleasure to meet you both,' said Chergoa. 'I've heard of Octavia Redwater, of course, but not her reaper. What is your name? Mine is Chergoa, and this is Emiliana Elroy.'

'I am Wendissofigelroc,' he said.

"Just call him Wendy," said Octavia.

'Please don't. I hate that name.'

Octavia shook her head. "He never learns. No one is ever going to call him Wednesdaywafflerocks."

'Wendissofigelroc.'

"Whatever, Wendy."

'Ugh. Wendy is a girl's name. At least tell them to call me Wen.'

"When what?" And the smirk grew slowly into Octavia's face.

Wendy only returned a flat stare.

"Get it? When what? That was a joke."

Wendy just sighed and floated away.

"Anywho..." Madame Redwater turned to Emiliana again. "You are safe

now. Let us go find the rest of your family, shall we?"

Emiliana wanted to hug her, but she only managed a weak nod.

--++--++--

Mariana had to keep to an exact path. If the rain hadn't been strong enough that day, certain areas below the platform wouldn't be flooded enough for the boat to pass over.

It was a long while before they reached the edge. Beneath Aguary, the persistent darkness was only occasionally offset by pillars of light and their accompanying waterfalls, both of which were provided by the few drains that weren't connected to the city's greater sewage system."

"711

By the time they saw the gray sky again, Marcos had died. And the clock was ticking. Mariana had about eighteen hours to find the boy a reaper before his soul decayed too greatly and became unusable.

'Think this through calmly,' said Shenado.

Mariana didn't want to be told that. She was perfectly calm. She'd already cleared her head and saw the situation exactly for what it was.

But Shenado was insistent with her attempts at comfort. 'We can find a reaper for him. If we explain that it is an emergency, the other Rainlords will be able to recommend someone for him.'

There were multiple problems with that, Mariana knew, chief among them being the fact that she wasn't at all sure who among the Rainlords should be trusted. What little faith she had in her allies had already been shaken today. 'We rule out any family that has ties to the Vanguard,' she said.

Shenado frowned. 'I understand your caution, but that eliminates almost everyone in Intar. And half of us in Sair.'

'I'm not willing to risk contact with anyone in Intar, anyway. The Vanguard monitors all long-distance communications there.'

'True. They could be monitoring Sair, too. They don't have permission, but given what we've seen today, that probably wouldn't stop them.'

And they wouldn't need to monitor the whole country, either. Just the Rainlords.'

Mariana pulled out her phone. Now that they were out from under the platform, she finally had a signal again, but that wasn't why she'd held onto it all this time. She only wanted to see if she had any missed calls. And she did, all of which were from Emiliana. The temptation to call her back immediately was strong, even knowing that someone else could be listening.

Thankfully, it wouldn't be necessary. Mariana tossed the phone overboard and kept going, leaving Aguary behind. She knew the exact coordinates of her destination even without Shenado reminding her, and after a while, she saw it there, bobbing up and down in the water. It was a boathouse and safe house all in one, tied to a tall pillar in the water."

"712

In this area, the waters often receded enough to reveal the bare ground, and the boathouse was designed with that in mind, bearing a foundation that could stand or float equally well in exchange for sacrificing most of its aquatic mobility. It also wasn't terribly large. Even the few people she'd brought with her wouldn't be able to stay here comfortably, but it would have to do for now. She pulled up beside it and had everyone else board it first, then carried Marcos' body over with her.

The remote location was ideal for the current circumstances. Due to all the souls in Aguary, Shenado hadn't been able to identify any of the reapers who'd been pursuing them; but now that they were far enough away from the city, any reaper stupid enough to have kept following would be immediately sensed and memorized by Shenado. Unfortunately, none of the enemy reapers had been that stupid.

'Whoever they were, they've given up chasing us,' the reaper said. 'Seems their reapers value their anonymity. I'd say that confirms that it's a watcher's unit, then. And that Charlie Day fellow--strange for an alteration type to be used as a watchman, but it might make sense if he had power over radio waves. Would also explain the heat he could produce and perhaps even the jamming of your cellphone.'

Right now, the only thing Mariana needed from this place was the



encrypted satellite phone. It required a bit of setup, but she had it working within a few minutes.

‘Who are you calling first?’ Shenado asked.

‘Emiliana.’ She didn’t need Shenado to tell her the girl’s number. She tapped it in from memory. It took a little while to connect and start ringing.

Emiliana picked up immediately. <“Mama?”>

Mariana exhaled a long breath. “Yes, it’s me.”

<“Oh, thank god!”>

“Are you alright? Are you safe?”

<“I am. I’m with Octavia Redwater. I called her granddaughter for help, and then she came to get me herself.”>

“Good! Smart girl. I’m proud of you. Is Francisco with you?”

She paused. <“No... He stayed behind to fight, I think. I don’t know what happened to him. I’m sorry...”>

"713

Mariana’s expression softened. “Don’t apologize, mijara. You didn’t do anything wrong. Is Octavia there right now?”

<“Y-yes...”>

“Let me speak with her.”

<“Mama... I...”>

“What?”

<“Ah...”> Her voice was shaking. <“My power manifested. I’m a mutation user...”>

Mariana stopped to digest that information as she looked around the cabin. The sloped windows all around her offered a full view of rolling hills among the flooded lowlands. Aguarey stood high to the south, appearing to almost float above the waves.

"You will have great need of that power, Emiliana," said Mariana. "I know you may not want it now, but one day, it will save you and those you care about. Remember that, mijara."

Emiliana didn't respond.

Mariana had to press her onward. "We'll talk more when I see you again. Put Octavia on the phone, please."

<"...Yes, enma'am.">

There came a brief rustling, and then, <"Lady Elroy, hello."> The old woman's airy voice was familiar and welcome. <"I am glad to know you are alive.">

"Not as glad as I am to know you have my daughter," said Mariana. House Redwater was one of the few she was inclined to trust. Of all the Rainlord families in both Sair and Intar, the Redwaters were probably the proudest and definitely the most famous. They were troublemakers, historically, not given to taking orders from anyone other than themselves.

<"Is your husband with you?">

"No. I don't know where he is. I fear the worst."

<"I see. I have already sent word out to look for him. I will let you know as soon as I hear anything.">

"Unfortunately, I have a problem which takes precedence even over finding Zeff."

<"Not having a very good day, are you?">

Mariana nodded tiredly to herself. "My son Marcos is dead."

<"Ah... I am so sorry.">

"I require a suitable reaper for him. I was wondering if you might know of one."

Octavia was slow to answer. <"That will be difficult. I have a network of contacts, as I'm sure you do as well, but any reaper without a servant is also without a means of getting in contact with them.">

“I am aware,” said Mariana. “I was hoping you would have someone already nearby.”

<“I’m sorry. Several candidates come to mind, but I don’t know where to find them. You know how reapers are, especially without a servant tying them down.”>

“I thought as much. It was worth asking.” Searching for any single reaper could take months or even years, she knew. It was not uncommon for them to disappear, particularly after releasing a long-held servant. For many, replacing their servant meant replacing their very best friend. It wasn’t a thing they liked to rush into. Or, depending on their circumstances, some reapers might go into hiding while they built up a new servant’s power.

<“I’ll make some calls to the other families and see if any of them have someone lined up for your son. With any luck--”>

“You would only be wasting your time,” said Mariana. “Unless you give me your word that you have met the reaper personally and would entrust them with your own child’s life, then I will certainly not be entrusting them with mine.”

There came a long pause. <“I see. And you are planning to...?”>

“Yes.”

More quietly, Octavia asked, <“What can I do for you?”>

“I would like to see Emiliana. Did you take her to Red Lake Castle?”

<“I did. Can you make it here safely?”>

“Yes, that shouldn’t be a problem. I will be there shortly.”

<“Very well.”>

“Thank you for all your help, Octavia.”

<“Ah, before you go--do you know why your family has been targeted? Your daughter mentioned that the assailants were Vanguard.”>

“No, I don’t know. I will see you soon.” She hung up.

Shenado floated in front of her.

And Mariana could see her son's soul in the reaper's grasp. It was a faint, bluish thing to her eyes, a somehow pyramidal liquid, impossibly holding its shape with slow, trembling effort. She remembered the first time she'd started seeing souls, after years of being a servant already. It was unequivocally strange, suddenly being able to see what Shenado saw. The only apparent difference seemed to be that Shenado could see them even before a person had died, while Mariana could not--with the exception of aberrations, which were suddenly quite easy to pick out of a crowd."

"715

Shenado looked like she had something to say, but she remained quiet.

Mariana made a few more calls. She tried Zeff and Francisco without success, and then she rang Joana Cortes again to inform the woman of what had happened. House Cortes was a burgeoning Rainlord line, an offshoot of House Elroy started by Joana herself. She'd chosen to take her commoner husband's name--a decision which had upset Zeff to no end--but Joana had at least made it clear that she still intended to carry on their bloodline with children of her own.

It was a particularly delicate issue for Zeff, because for many years, aside from him and his sister, there had been no other Elroys left. Zeff had inherited his family's fortune when he was only fifteen. And not due to peaceable circumstances.

At the moment, though, Mariana didn't have the time or patience to listen to Joana's questions or ramblings. As soon as Joana confirmed that she did not have a reaper for Marcos, Mariana hung up and called three other Rainlord families. House Garza, House Merlo, and House Delaguna. They were the only other ones without ties to the Vanguard, but as Mariana had expected, none of them had any reapers available, either. The tradition of turning one's own children into servants was a custom exclusive to the Vanguardian Rainlords, so it was unsurprising that they were not keeping any spare reapers around. Supposedly, House Blackburn had cut ties with the Vanguard a few years ago, but Mariana didn't know that family well enough. This matter was too important to entrust to strangers.

With no other calls to make, it was time to leave. Mariana knew that Zeff and Axiolis might turn up here looking for her, so she scribbled a quick note and left it at the helm. Then she gathered everyone back into the boat again, topped off its gas tank, and set out for Red Lake Castle. It was an easy place to reach, as the castle sat on the farthest northwestern edge of Aquarey's platform and doubled as a gigantic support column."

"716

Red Lake Castle was a hulking, crimson structure with a tower on its northwestern corner that rose much higher than any of its others. The castle also had a port all its own, hidden away beneath the platform, allowing Mariana to take her boat right into its welcoming underbelly. She found Emiliana waiting for her inside, along with Chergoa and Octavia.

Emiliana looked relieved to see her mother. Until she saw Marcos' body.

"He is going to be fine," said Mariana. The four small horns on her daughter's face did not escape her notice, but reacting to them now would serve no purpose, she felt. Instead, she turned to Octavia. "I would like to speak with my daughters in private. Do you have a room we can use?"

"Of course. Follow me." The old woman led Mariana's group to a nearby elevator.

Ramira hadn't said a word this whole time. Mariana shifted Marcos over to her right arm and held her left hand out for the girl. Ramira took it and walked with her.

The journey was painfully quiet.

Shenado took the opportunity to ask a private question. 'So when are you going to ask me to release your soul?'

Mariana only glanced at her.

'I know you're considering it,' the reaper said.

'I am more than considering it.'

‘Oh, so you didn’t think you needed to ask, then. You’re just assuming I have no problem with letting you go and taking on your son as my servant, is that it?’

‘I do not see many options, Shenado.’

‘Yes, but are you sure this is the best one?’

Mariana gave the reaper a hard look. ‘You are telling me to let my son die.’

‘I am telling you not to abandon the rest of your children. The whole reason you chose to stay in Aguary today was because you refused to leave them alone while Zeff was away. And now? We still don’t know what has become of him. They may have already lost their father. Are you going to deprive them of their mother, as well? They need you now more than ever.’”

"717

Mariana had to turn away as she listened. There was truth in Shenado’s words. She knew there was. And it gave her pause. The choice in her head wasn’t quite so clear anymore.

‘I know it is difficult,’ Shenado went on, ‘but think about this carefully. Yes, Marcos is only twelve. But Ramira is only nine. Emiliana is confused and distraught and looking to you for guidance. We don’t even know where Francisco is. Hopefully, only captured. And then there’s Gema. Obviously, she’s gotten herself involved in something big and terrible. Wherever she is, I’m sure she could use your help, too.’

That argument almost convinced her. Almost. She steeled her expression. ‘I am not going to let Marcos die. And I am not abandoning them. I am leaving them in your care.’

It was Shenado’s turn to hesitate.

‘They won’t need me to guide them when they have you,’ said Mariana. ‘They’re practically your children as much as mine. It won’t just be Marcos. Not really. You’ll take care of them all. I know you will.’

‘I can’t protect them from physical threats.’

‘Yes, you can. Not with your body, but with your mind. By being smart. And by teaching them to be just as much so. We’ve already started. They know how the world is. Now, they will see it firsthand. And you will be there for them.’

‘Mariana...’

‘Please, Shenado. I’ve made up my mind.’

‘...And what if I refuse?’

‘Then I will never forgive you for as long as I live. And you might as well find a new servant, anyway, because I will never listen to any requests you make of me ever again.’

‘...I thought you would threaten to kill me.’

‘I would have been bluffing, and you would have known it. But make no mistake, if there ever came a day when the rest of my children were finally out of danger, I would certainly kill you for letting Marcos die today.’

Shenado sighed publicly, drawing looks from Emiliana and Octavia as they proceeded down a long hallway together. ‘Fine,’ the reaper said privately. ‘I’ll release you. You were always mean to me, anyway.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I bet Marcos will be nicer.’”

"718

Octavia showed them into a vast, windowless chamber with a high ceiling. Beds sat on either side of the room, each one neatly made. Octavia had her housekeepers show Mariana’s own staff to different rooms on the same floor. Ramira and Emiliana didn’t leave their mother’s side, but Emiliana was eyeing one of the beds as if it might be holding all the secrets of the universe. Mariana certainly understood the impulse. The fatigue was weighing on her, and her clothes were still smote and ragged from earlier.

She’d been struggling to think of what to tell her girls. Before she could even get started, however, Wendy phased through the ceiling and

floated down toward everyone.

‘Our other guests have begun to arrive,’ the reaper said.

“What other guests?” said Mariana.

“I called an emergency meeting,” said Octavia. “We will be needing a plan of action, of course.”

Three more reapers descended from the ceiling after Wendy. Mariana recognized all of them. Lonogren, Jostomere, and Mevox. Each one belonged to a different Rainlord family--House Merlo, House Zabat, and House Delaguna, respectively. Their servants were all the heads of their houses.

‘So what’s all this then?’ said Mevox. He stood out a little from the other reapers in that his fox fur had a faint luster to it.

“If you would please wait upstairs with your partners,” said Octavia, “Mariana and I will be with you in a mome--”

‘Nah,’ said Mevox. ‘I wanna know what’s goin’ on right now.’

‘We know the Elroys were attacked,’ said Lonogren. ‘We would like to hear the full details from Mariana and Shenado. I am sure we can all agree that this is a matter of great urgency.’

“We should at least wait until everyone has gathered,” said Octavia.

‘Hell with that,’ said Mevox. ‘No need to wait for their slow asses. Talk to us, Mariana. We’re here to help.’

Octavia looked at the Lady Elroy with sympathy. “We’ve an impatient lot here, it seems.”

Mariana took a haggard breath. She only wanted to talk to her daughters, but she supposed there was still plenty of time for that. Regardless, Shenado was gracious enough to speak up for her.”  
"719

‘The Vanguard sent seven servants to our house,’ said Shenado. ‘They claimed they only wanted to “escort” us safely to Lagemoor, but when we refused to go with them, they attacked us. One of Mariana’s



sons was fatally wounded in the battle. Another is missing. As is Zeff.'

Mevox drifted closer to Mariana and her children, poking his head forward curiously. 'Why were they tryin' to escort you to Lagemoor?'

'We're not sure,' said Shenado. 'They mentioned something about wanting to find Gema, Mariana's oldest daughter, but that might have been just another lie. Not that it matters much, because we don't know where Gema is. Even if we were of a mind to turn her over to them, we wouldn't be able to.'

"Are you of a mind to do that?" said Octavia.

"No," said Mariana.

'Damn right,' said Mevox. He turned to Jostomere, who'd thus far remained silent. 'What're you thinkin'? Your family works for the Vanguard, too. I suspect you've got a more difficult decision to make than the rest of us here do.'

'That is true.' Jostomere's burning eyes fell upon Marcos' body. 'But this is plainly unacceptable. And if it can happen to the Elroys, it can happen to the Zabats. You can expect our full support.'

'Ours as well,' said Lonogren. 'Which already puts us at five of ten.'

'Six, actually,' said Shenado. 'House Cortes is guaranteed to help. Joana is Zeff's sister.'

'Ah, that's right,' said Lonogren, nodding.

'We can ask the Intarians for help, too,' said Wendy. 'They might turn us down, but there are thirty more families there. At least a few will agree to help, I'm sure.'

'Worth asking,' said Mevox. 'Where was Zeff's last known location?'

"Rheinhal," said Mariana. "He was ordered there by General Lawrence."

Octavia's brow twitched. "Xavier Lawrence, you mean?"

Mariana nodded.

Octavia pursed her lips. "The Blue Bear, huh? I didn't realize he was the one they had stationed in Sair."

‘Do you know him personally?’ asked Shenado.

“Not well,” said Octavia. “We crossed paths ages ago. Very polite, as I recall. A real gentleman. His reaper, less so. I haven’t heard his name in years. Thought he might have been killed.”

"720

‘If it’s only a single general and his underlings we have to worry about, then I’m not too concerned,’ said Mevox. ‘Problem is, you Vanguardians like to send reinforcements.’

‘Indeed,’ said Jostomere.

Soon, more Rainlords began to arrive, and Octavia decided to move the conversation upstairs. Mariana still hadn’t set Marcos down or left her daughters alone, wanting the girls to hear everything that was discussed.

Mariana knew that Zeff was well-loved among the other Rainlords, but even so, she was still a bit surprised by everyone’s readiness to support her. Only House Blackburn and House Stroud did not have representatives here today, but among the other eight family heads, none even humored the notion of handing Mariana and her children over to the Vanguard. At first, Mariana thought they were just holding back while in her presence, but more and more, she became convinced that was not the case.

“I can’t believe they had the gall to attack you in your own home,” a lumbering man was saying. He was the largest person in the room by a head and had the bulk of two men put together. Salvador Delaguna was his name, and just like his reaper, he was prone to ‘listening to his passions’ as Octavia had once put it. “We should go to Rheinhal this very moment and demand they return Zeff to us.”

‘Sounds good to me,’ said Mevox.

Abel Sebolt shook his head. “We all care for Zeff, but let’s not be rash,” he said. The Lord of House Sebolt reminded Mariana of Zeff in many ways. They had the same kind of naturally cold expression, though Abel was slimmer. “We are still immensely outnumbered, you realize.”

“So were our ancestors,” said Joana Cortes.

“Hear hear!” said Salvador.

As they talked, Mariana noticed a maid enter the room and rush to Octavia’s side, whispering in her ear. After a moment, Octavia nodded and whispered something back. The maid exited, and Octavia stood to address everyone.

“I’ve just received word from Asad Najir. Apparently, Axiolis is with him.”

That caught everyone’s attention.

“Zeff?” said Mariana."

"721

“Let us see,” said Octavia. She reached toward the middle of the broad table and lifted the receiver on the conference phone there. She put it on speaker for all to hear. “Lord Najir, are you there?”

<“I am,”> came the Sandlord’s voice.

“Is this line encrypted?” Mariana asked.

<“It is. And before you ask, no, Zeff is not here with me. Only Axiolis escaped.”>

Mariana’s heart sank a little. But at least now she knew he wasn’t dead.

Salvador puffed up with visible irritation. “Why would Axiolis go to you and not us?”

<“Ah, is that you I hear, oaf?”>

“It is! Answer my question, desert rat!”

<“Axiolis feared that going to you would be too predictable. So he came to me, knowing the enemy would not think to intercept him on the way here.”>

“Hmph.”

<“Don’t feel bad, oaf. I’m sure Axiolis would have gone to you right

away if he needed any big rocks turned into small rocks.”>

“Ha! Will you be delivering Axiolis to us in person, then? Please tell me you will be.”

<“Axiolis says he will stay here and attempt to recruit more of the Sandlords with me.”>

Mariana’s brow rose. “You have already decided to help us?”

<“Of course.”> The man said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Mariana knew Zeff and Asad were close, but considering they hadn’t spoken to each other in months, she would have expected some hesitation, at least. Certainly, the other Sandlords would not be so easily convinced. “I must thank you, Asad.”

<“You are welcome. How is the situation in Agquarey? I have seen the news.”>

Mariana brought him up to speed in detail. The attack on her house, her subsequent escape, Cisco being unaccounted for, and Marcos. The boy’s lifeless body was already becoming stiff. Mercifully, the stench of death was not as bad as she knew it could be.

<“Terrible. I am so sorry. Do you have a reaper for him?”>

“...I do not,” she said. “Do you happen to have one there with you now? If you send them to Agquarey right away, they could make it here in time.” Axiolis, of course, was not an option, as he could not release Zeff without making contact again.

<“...I am sorry, Mariana. There are no such reapers here.”>  
"722

‘Alright, then, who here has a reaper for her son?’ Mevox looked across the room at everyone present. Cortes, Garza, Delaguna, Merlo, Redwater, Sebolt, Zabat, and Elroy.

None answered him.

‘Oh, come on. There are eight families here--nine, including Asad’s.

You tellin' me none of us can help her?'

'We all know reapers who could fill the role,' said Shenado. 'The problem is contacting them in time. Do you have a solution to that, Mevox?'

Mevox looked over everyone again and frowned. His head dropped a little. 'Well, then... is there a servant here willing to give up their life for the boy?'

"Stop," said Mariana. "I appreciate the sentiment, but you all have families of your own to protect. If anyone is to give their life for my son, it will be me." She heard the intake of breath from Emiliana. "Instead, after I am gone, I ask that you watch over my children until my husband is free."

"We are not out of time yet," said Salvador, though not with his usual vigor. "A reaper might still be found..."

Mariana leveled a stare at the huge man, which was enough to make him shift uncomfortably in his chair. "Yes, well... if such a miracle does not occur, then please consider that to have been my final request."

The table fell briefly silent.

Joana placed a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, Mary... of course we will take care of them."

"As if they were our own," said the Lord Sebolt.

The others all nodded in agreement. Lady Rayen of House Merlo, Lady Socorro of House Garza, Lord Santos of House Zabat, and Salvador and Octavia as well. Their reapers acknowledged the promise, too.

There wasn't much left to be said after that, but the conversation lasted a while, anyway. They came to a rough consensus that an immediate assault on Rheinhal was not the right course of action and that a non-violent resolution to this conflict was still possible, though unlikely. First, they would send formal word to General Lawrence demanding Zeff's release, and while they waited for the man's response, they would muster all available forces and begin calling in favors from allies abroad."

"723

The Rainlords dispersed, but no one left the castle just yet. Everyone promised to call around for any available reapers. Mariana almost told them not to bother, but the desperation of her circumstances had begun to weigh on her, finally. And in the past couple hours, her trust for everyone in that room had grown immeasurably.

In truth, even after all these years, even after giving birth to five new Rainlords, she'd never quite felt like a Rainlord herself. She'd only married into the title, not been born with it.

But today, she felt it. That companionship. Ancient and bloody and fierce and warm. And so very welcome.

The rest of the day drew out slowly. Mariana waited as long as she could, spent as much time with her daughters as she could, and hoped silently that someone would walk through that door with a reaper for Marcos. But no one did.

The girls had been quiet, perhaps afraid to ask their questions, perhaps just knowing that their mother would talk to them in her own time. Mariana thought at length about what she should say to them, what her last words should be.

It wasn't easy.

"You will be safe here. I wouldn't leave you if I thought otherwise. Red Lake is one of the most secure castles in all of Sair." Mariana paused, her expression spoiling slightly. "But I don't know what the future holds. Something could happen. Even if I remained here with you, something could happen. Do you remember what I taught you? The most important lesson?"

"Always be prepared," Ramira piped up.

Mariana smiled tiredly. "Yes."

"Think, plan, and act ahead of time," added Emiliana.

"That's right. You are smart girls. I have confidence in you both. Look out for one another. Listen to one another. And protect each other. Do you understand? The time for childishness is past. It is unfair, but both of you must grow up quickly now. That means you will have to give up on many of the things you desire. Possibly forever. You will come to

accept this, or you will get someone killed. Perhaps someone you love very dearly. Perhaps yourself. Perhaps both."

The looks on their faces were stern, and Mariana knew they understood. Or hoped they did, at least."

"724

"And don't you dare blame Marcos for my death," Mariana went on. "And don't let him blame himself. None of this is his fault."

Emiliana frowned. "It's not yours, either, Mama..."

Mariana blinked at her. She exhaled a curt breath and took Emiliana's face in both hands in order to kiss her on the forehead, just above the horns. Then she knelt down and hugged Ramira more tightly than she'd ever hugged her before.

"Mama--that hurts..."

Mariana released her. "I'm sorry, mijara."

"It's okay."

Time was running short, she knew. Mariana composed herself and considered what else she needed to say. She eyed the two reapers present. "Listen to Shenado and Chergoa," she told her girls. "They are both wiser than I could ever be. They will guide you well."

"What if they don't agree with each other?" said Emiliana.

"Then listen to Shenado."

'Hey,' Chergoa pouted.

Shenado smirked. 'Seniority rules.'

'Ugh, you sound like my brother.'

Everyone but Ramira looked at her.

Chergoa cocked an eyebrow. 'What?'

"You said that as though your brother was still alive," said Mariana.

‘He is. At least, the last time I checked, he was.’ She squinted. ‘It’s been a while, though. I suppose he could’ve gotten himself killed. Sounds like something he’d do.’

‘That is very rare,’ said Shenado. ‘You truly have a living sibling? Why did you never mention him before?’

Chergoa shrugged. ‘Didn’t think to. I have no clue where he is. Haven’t seen him in... a while, like I said. I did tell Axiolis about him, though.’

“Your brother is a reaper, too?” Emiliana asked.

‘Yeah, of course.’

‘What is his name?’ said Shenado.

‘Garovel. You know him?’

‘No.’

‘I figured.’

The reapers’ chatter lasted a bit longer, only continuing to lose poignancy and relevance as it dragged on. It seemed apparent to Mariana that they were just trying to delay the inevitable now. Oddly childish of them, she thought--but not altogether unexpected. In her experience, most reapers tended to hold onto that quality in some small way. She always figured it was just something they did to help keep themselves sane."

"725 -- LXXXII.

At length, Mariana finally had to urge the reapers along. “Shenado...”

‘I know,’ the reaper said, turning heavily toward her. ‘We are out of time.’

Mariana breathed deeply and took a seat next to the hearth. She gazed into the fire therein. She’d lit it herself. She hadn’t sat next to an open flame like this in years. The crackling warmth summoned images of her childhood, of her humble parents, of their quaint home, of a plump mass of fur called Polly with those floppy ears and big, soft eyes. ‘Thank you for everything you’ve done for me,’ Mariana thought. ‘I never did say that enough.’



‘You never needed to,’ said Shenado, wrapped in the echo of privacy. ‘Do you have any last words?’

Mariana considered turning to her girls right then and telling them that she loved them. But she didn’t want to. She’d never liked saying it, which was perhaps a shame, because saying it now would only make things harder for herself. And for the girls, too, probably. And it didn’t really matter, anyway. Because they already knew. They had to. So she decided to hold her tongue. Instead, she thought, ‘For Zeff, if you ever see him again, tell him... I’ve decided that it wasn’t a mistake.’

‘What wasn’t a mistake?’

‘He will understand.’

Shenado nodded solemnly. She moved closer.

Mariana watched the fox’s claws reach toward her face. And as she felt her life leave her, she heard Shenado’s tremulous parting words.

‘Goodbye, my sweet girl...’

And the echo faded.

Chapter Eighty-Two: ‘Precious might, accrue now...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It was a nice change, being able to return from a night’s patrol without having earned himself dozens of blood stains and bullet holes. He’d been starting to run out of wearable clothes again.

“Welcome back, sir.”

“Oh, ah... th-thank you...” Hector stopped in the doorway to pull his dark coat off. He was surprised to find Jamal still awake at this hour. “You, um... you really don’t have to call me sir, Mr. Easton.”

The tall guardsman looked at him evenly. “Begging your pardon, sir, but I disagree.”

Hector frowned and tilted his head at him. “Why?”  
"725 -- LXXXII.

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It was a nice change, being able to return from a night's patrol without having earned himself dozens of blood stains and bullet holes. He'd been starting to run out of wearable clothes again.

"Welcome back, sir."

"Oh, ah... th-thank you..." Hector stopped in the doorway to pull his dark coat off. He was surprised to find Jamal still awake at this hour. "You, um... you really don't have to call me sir, Mr. Easton."

The tall guardsman looked at him evenly. "Begging your pardon, sir, but I disagree."

Hector frowned and tilted his head at him. "Why?"

"726

"It's for the people around us, sir," Jamal said. "It demonstrates to them that I think you are someone deserving of my respect. And that affects how they see you. For the better, I should hope."

"Uh... o-okay... but no one else is even awake, right now."

Jamal paused. "Well, it may also be force of habit, sir."

Hector smiled meekly and proceeded into the kitchen to grab something to eat. As usual, he was both exhausted and hungry. He still hadn't replaced his motorcycle yet, so he'd been doing his crime fighting on foot. He'd been trying to develop a more efficient means of getting around using only his materialization. Garovel had a few suggestions for him, but they required considerable practical experience. Hector had taken more than a few bone-breaking tumbles over the last few days.

Gray Rock was a nice city, he thought. The crime here didn't seem quite as bad as other places, perhaps because the police force was so vigilant. He'd encountered them several times, and while they hadn't been especially pleased by his presence, he was just happy they weren't shooting at him. Now that the nationwide manhunt for him had been called off by order of the Queen, Hector hoped to eventually form a working relationship with the Gray Rock Police Department. After two weeks here, he still wasn't quite sure if that was feasible or not.

As for Warrenhold itself, Madame Carthrace's troupe of construction

workers had already managed to rebuild three of the six aboveground towers. Hector had also offered some assistance on that front, able to save them some time with the heavy lifting. The workers had quickly grown to appreciate Hector's metal power, as he could use it to create a kind of short-range transport line for huge stacks of materials. He would lay down a long, solid strip of metal, have the materials placed at one end, and then push them along with a continuously materializing wall. And not coincidentally, this was similar to the method by which he'd been attempting to transport himself around the city."

"727

The underground reconstruction, however, had barely started. The surveyors had only just completed their work, but at least now, Hector had a rough map of the grounds and quick sketches of all the floor plans. He'd learned that the eight underground towers all boasted twenty-four floors, with the exception of two--those being the Star Tower, which only had its top nine and a half floors, and the Entry Tower, which required thirty-two in order to reach the surface.

Expectedly, the Tower of Night was shown to be the largest with an average of twelve rooms per floor compared to the others' averages between seven and ten. In total, the castle had seventy-one lavatories, twenty-five hearths, six gathering halls, four kitchens, four adjacent bathhouses, one multilevel library, eight rainbow shrines, and then about six hundred empty rooms of undesignated function. This was not counting any of the buildings above ground or in the lake below Warrenhold.

The numbers left Hector a bit overwhelmed, to say the least. This wasn't a house. It was a town. He couldn't imagine ever needing this much space for anything. When he asked Voreese why Stasya had made it so gigantic, the reaper said that it was because she'd hoped Warrenhold would one day become a center of commerce between the surface world and the Undercrust.

'And she specifically wanted it to be a fortress so that it could protect itself from all manner of exploitation by external forces,' Voreese had said. 'When she was building it, Stasya considered Warrenhold to be an investment in humanity itself. She wanted this place to change the world.'

Hector could see why Voreese seemed to remember the woman so fondly.

And yet, he only had to look at Warrenhold now in order to understand what had become of Stasya's dream. It was a sobering realization, that. Hector would have liked to know the full story of how Stasya had died, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. He didn't see how it could be anything other than sad. Voreese never brought it up, either, but that might have only been because she hadn't stuck around very long. She and Roman had their own matters to attend to, of course."

"728

Between the repairs to Warrenhold and the patrols around the city, Hector had plenty to do. It was a rare moment when Garovel allowed him to just relax and eat a quiet meal like this. And even more than the food, Hector was looking forward to sleeping. The bed in his temporary room was waiting for him, he knew.

But as he sat across from his guardsman, Hector recalled a question that he'd been meaning to ask ever since they left Sescoria two weeks ago. He wasn't sure when he might get another opportunity to pose it. "Mr. Easton... why did you volunteer to work for me?"

"There were many reasons, sir."

"...Well, I'm listening."

A woman's voice interrupted. "Oh, are we sharing our stories now?" The Lady Carthrace entered through the door behind Hector. Her silken pajamas bore wild streaks of bright red, and for a second, Hector thought she was covered in blood and was duly relieved to realize it was only the woman's vivid taste in clothes. She made her way to the counter for a glass of water. "Do go on, Mr. Easton. I would like to hear this as well."

Jamal leaned back in his chair. "Only if you promise to go next, milady."

She smiled. "Little old me? How could I be of any interest?"

"I'm curious why a member of the richest family in Atreya would accept a job babysitting a teenager." He glanced at Hector. "No offense, sir."

Hector laughed faintly with a raised eyebrow. "None taken... I guess."

Amelia joined them at the table and sipped from her glass. She nodded and then motioned for Jamal to proceed.

Jamal looked at Hector again. "Milord is from Brighton, yes?"

It still took Hector a moment to realize who milord referred to. "Er, I... yes?"

"That is where I am from as well," said Jamal.

"Oh..."

"As it happens, I have a very good friend who still lives there. We haven't seen each other since we were about your age, but she and I have stayed in touch all these years. And grown quite close, I suppose. I still consider her to be my best friend."

Hector exchanged uncertain looks with Garovel."

"729

"But sometimes," Jamal continued, "I'd worry about her. She's a very... self-conscious person. And... lonely. She has an unfortunate tendency to attract certain types of men. Ones who try to take advantage of her. I knew all of this, but even still, I never imagined she would encounter that type of man..."

Hector scratched his cheek. "Uh... I'm sorry. I'm not sure I follow--"

Jamal held up a hand. "When she told me she'd nearly been the victim of a serial killer, I thought she was joking. But she wasn't. And then she told me about the person who'd saved her." The man's smile was a faint thing, and it almost seemed like it didn't belong on his face. "She actually said that, at first, she thought it was me. And in fairness, she hadn't seen me in years, and she doesn't know very many black people. And being mistaken for a hero--certainly not the worst kind of racial profiling I've ever experienced. But when she got a good look at you, she realized that you were too young to be me. And apparently, you also had a knife in your chest which didn't seem to be bothering you very much."

'Holy shit,' said Garovel. 'He's talking about the woman you saved on

your very first night as a servant, isn't he?"

Hector blinked at Jamal, unsure of what to say.

"And not long after that, the media started talking about a vigilante with remarkable power. The coincidence did not escape my friend's notice. It was a traumatizing experience for her, but I think knowing that someone like you was out there helped her cope. She isn't the same person that she used to be."

"W-what... um. Oh... well, I'm glad she's doing okay..."

"You remember her?"

"Y-yeah. But... uh, I never learned her name."

"Jessica Paulson," said Jamal.

"Ah..."

"She's a big fan of yours, by the way. She was really upset when they started calling you a murderer and a criminal."

"Oh..."

Garovel was laughing his ass off. 'A fan! Oh, I would pay good money to watch you have a conversation with a fan. You should invite her to Warrenhold. Oh! Maybe Jamal is about to ask you that! Say yes, Hector. As your reaper, I command it.'

"730

"Anyway, the point is, Jessica is the reason I believed you would be a trustworthy person, despite your... turbulent relationship with the law. However, in the interest of full disclosure, sir, that was not what prompted me to give up my old job and come work for you. The truth of the matter is that I simply did not like being a member of the Queen's Guard."

Amelia pitched in now. "Why not? It was a fairly prestigious position, no?"

"It was. But most of the other guards were pompous, insufferable bastards. Excuse my language."

"Really? Did you, ah... er, what about Lynn? Did you think she was like that, too?"

"Oh, that's right. You fought alongside her, didn't you?"

"Er, yeah."

"She never bothered me. She seemed a bit full of herself for someone so young, but at least she took her job seriously. Most of the Queen's Guard would slack off and then lord their status over anyone who wasn't famous or rich. It wasn't until after the assassination attempt that they finally started getting their act together and behaving like real soldiers should."

"Were you in the castle during the Abolish occupation?" Amelia asked. She threw a look at Hector. "That was the name, yes? Abolish?"

Hector nodded.

Jamal's expression hardened. "Yes, I was there."

"Weren't you frightened?" said Amelia.

"I was."

They waited, but the man seemed to have nothing else to say on the matter.

Perhaps sensing the growing awkwardness in the air, Amelia decided to move on. "Well, my reasons for joining our young lord are somewhat similar, though not quite so harrowing, I admit. I suppose it is only to be expected that all three of us here be veritable black sheep, in our own ways. I also came here to escape a number of intolerable individuals."

"Who do you mean?" said Jamal.

"My many nephews and nieces. It is a rather long story and one I am sure would bore you, but the short of it is that--though you were correct in your assessment of my family's wealth--for a variety of very old reasons, I inherited the Carthrace name but none of its fortune."

"731



“None of it?” said Jamal. “You upset your parents that much?”

“Oh yes,” Amelia laughed. “You know that rebellious phase that young people go through? It was not a phase for me. My parents and I saw the world in vastly different ways. And they passed that on to my brother and sister, who then passed it on to all of their children. In their eyes, I was always the corrupting aunt. They thought me a nuisance, at best. An opponent, at worst.”

“Er... an opponent?” said Hector.

“In their power games. The Carthraces and the Lumenbels have a long-enduring rivalry with one another. And now, with so many of those Lumenbel boys dead, I am sure my nephews are seeing it as a great opportunity to further our family name. Unfortunately for them, the Queen has no obvious successor with whom they may attempt to arrange another marriage. In theory, if both Helen and William were to die tomorrow, rule would pass to the already-married firstborn son of her oldest brother. There is also the very likely possibility that the Queen has preemptively appointed someone else in secret--someone who will only be revealed should such a crisis ever arise. As you might imagine, the political seas in Sescoria are rather stormy, right now. I am most glad to be here with you fine gentlemen, instead.”

Garovel floated over Amelia. ‘Hmm. Ask her what the origin of this dispute between the two families is.’

With effort, Hector managed to.

“Oh, I could not tell you. That was before even my time. But it has sustained itself over all these years due to continually renewed feelings of ill will. In recent memory, there was the matter of Prince David upsetting my niece Delilah so much that she plainly refused to marry him no matter how my brother attempted to coerce her. Which was no small feat, mind you. My brother could have given lessons to mules on stubbornness. Even on his deathbed. The doctors said he had three days left, at most. He didn’t let go of this mortal coil for another month.””

"732

Hector’s brow receded. “Wow... uh... w-what did Prince David do to

upset your niece so much?"

Amelia gestured with an open hand in front of her. "That, I don't know. She has never provided details. Popular theory was that he blackmailed her in some way."

Hector wondered if Prince David was capable of such a thing. It seemed rather extreme, but then again, blackmail wasn't nearly as bad as what he already knew certain other royals to be capable of.

"Regardless, it was a shame," said Amelia. "That marriage was an attempt to settle our past differences and bring the two families together. Instead, it made matters worse. A few years later, they tried again with a new couple. Sarah and Luther." She frowned. "Their union appeared to be more successful... but recent events would suggest otherwise."

It was a strange thing to think about, Hector felt--that all of the horrible things Atreya endured over these past few months might have never happened if Prince Luther had married differently. He wasn't sure he believed that. It seemed too simple. But then, he certainly didn't believe it was fate, either. And he didn't see much room for a middle ground on that point. Events were either fated to occur, or they weren't--and trying to game the system and say that events were fated but still part of multiple "possible fates" was definitely bullshit, he thought. Something to consult Garovel about later, he decided. Though, he already had a pretty good idea of what the reaper would say.

Jamal had more questions for the Lady Carthrace. "So is that your only reason for accepting this position? To get away from your family?"

"Is that not reason enough?" she said.

"It seems to me that someone of your status would be able to find opportunities to flee almost anywhere," said Jamal. "Why choose Lord Goffe?"

Hector doubted he would ever get used to that.

"I had Helen's word that Hector was a trustworthy young man," said Amelia. "And if she trusts him, well... If earning my trust were like learning how to swim, then earning her trust would be like learning how to breathe underwater.""

Their conversation went on for a little while longer as they discussed the next stage of their plans for Warrenhold's restoration. The matter of the hydroelectric generator was nearly resolved, thankfully. Hector had finally found its location a few days ago, buried beneath one of the unnamed towers. The survey team hadn't been able to find it, because it sat on the far end of a flooded hallway in a room as big as a house.

Simply enough, Hector had been able to fill the room with iron and thereby push out all the water. It had proved slightly annoying, since Hector didn't know how to swim--a thing for which Garovel surprisingly did not make fun of him--but he managed. A replacement generator was already scheduled to arrive as early as next week. It was easily their most expensive purchase yet, but they decided trying to fix the one already here would likely prove problematic in the long-term, given how many years it had gone without any maintenance whatsoever.

As for the flooding issue, it turned out to be the fault of a large crack in the generator room's wall. Hector patched it up with metal easily enough, and afterwards, he was able to follow the hydroelectric generator's actual water intake stream and discover the location of something else that had been eluding the surveyors: the waterfall.

When standing in the middle of all eight of Warrenhold's great towers, anyone could hear the waterfall's faint white noise, but the cavernous echoes made it impossible to use the sound as any kind of guide. Until then, they hadn't been able to find the path that lead to it, and Hector discovered that was because the path went through the bathhouses, which were even more problematic than the generator room. The bathhouses weren't merely flooded; they were flooded with searing hot water. Apparently, Warrenhold had its own natural hot spring.

That was Hector's current project. He and Garovel had been trying to render the bathhouses usable once more--or at the very least enterable. So after getting some much needed sleep, Hector went back to it. So far, he'd managed to remove much of the excess water, but the heat was still unbearable."

Hector looked around the bathhouse another time. Aside from his pair of flashlights, he'd brought some candles with him this time. Given how damp the place was, he didn't think a bunch of light bulbs would've been a good idea. And unfortunately, as Garovel had explained to him, the floodlights he'd been using before were not named such because they were supposed to be used in flooded areas but rather just because of how they flooded an area with light.

Of course, electrocuting himself wasn't a big concern--especially considering all the times he'd been struck by lightning--but he figured it best to exercise caution in case anyone else happened to wander in while he was working.

This particular bathhouse was almost all one giant chamber. Half of it had been carved out of natural rock, and a tall divider cut right down the middle, perhaps meant to separate the male side from the female side. The big tub in the center could have probably held fifty people comfortably, and its hard perimeters of rectangular rocks gave way on the side nearest the entrance for long, flat steps that eased gradually into the water.

'Welp, I finally found the problem,' said Garovel. He'd been wandering blindly through the pitch darkness of solid rock in search of the source of the hot spring's heat.

'What is it?'

'A shitload of magma.'

Hector's eyes widened. 'How much is a shitload?'

'More than a crapload, less than a fuckton.'

'...So helpful.'

'It's pretty far down here. Won't be easy for you to reach.'

'Hmm...'

'I see two options. You can dig down here and divert some of the magma. And probably burn yourself to death at least once or twice. Or, you can try to add more layers to the hot springs in order to absorb more of the heat before it reaches the water--possibly employing some type of heat-resistant material.'

'Ugh...'

‘What?’

‘It’s just... I mean, obviously, there’s not supposed to be that much magma down there, or else the temperature up here wouldn’t be so fucking high...’

‘Indeed. It’s probably the result of that earthquake the Queen mentioned, just like all the other flooding we’ve seen.’”

"735

‘But it’s not like the quake created the magma,’ said Hector. ‘It just bridged two pools together, right? Or streams... or whatever.’

‘Yep. Which means there’s almost certainly even more magma down here somewhere. And depending on how much there actually is, the shift in heat pressure from that earthquake might one day lead to brand new volcanic activity. Which wouldn’t be very good for us.’

‘No kidding.’

‘So you’re thinking that just adding layers to the tubs wouldn’t fix the real problem.’

‘Pretty much, yeah...’

‘How do you intend to dig down here, then? Brute force? Even with enhanced strength, that’ll take you a while.’

‘Well... I don’t see any other options...’

‘Alright, then let me have a look around for the best point of entry.’

‘Okay.’

Hector exited the bathhouse, having to go all the way through the Tower of Day’s ground floor and out into the greater cavern area before finally finding a lungful of genuinely cooler air.

He decided to practice with his metal while he waited. He hadn’t been training with his metal as much as he would’ve liked. Or at least, he hadn’t been experimenting with it as much. He’d of course been getting plenty of practical experience in his almost daily patrols around Gray Rock, and while that was certainly helpful for honing his existing

skills, it didn't help much with developing new ones. He knew that he needed to set aside some time soon and really see what else he was capable of now. For the moment, however, these brief periods of downtime would have to suffice.

He extended his arm out fully and concentrated. There was only one thing he wanted, and he envisioned it in his head.

The metal ball materialized in an instant, just in front of his open palm. But rather than falling straight to the ground, it popped outward first, as if it had been gently tossed. He annihilated it before it touched the ground.

It wasn't much velocity, of course, but it was a start. And he was sure he could do more, still, if he could only get a better feel for it in his mind. It was just such a newly applied concept that he was having difficulty wrapping his head around it."

"736

Hector experimented with a few different methods of imagining the moving metal into existence. First, he just tried to envision it as 'already in motion' before creation, like Garovel had mentioned. That idea seemed to be the key, making the added velocity possible in the first place. Then, to see if he could increase the speed, he tried imagining the metal as if it were the tip of a spike, growing out of a base that just wasn't there. He knew that he could create spikes very quickly, so he'd hoped that would have an impact, but if it did, it was negligible.

Now, he was just trying to imagine everything with more precision in his mind. Clarity had always been a big factor in the past, so he figured this was probably no different. He'd been trying to research movement as a whole. He'd never gotten around to taking a physics course in high school, but he wasn't sure it would have mattered anyway, not without this desire which now possessed him.

It was also of enormous benefit to carefully observe objects in motion. A thrown ball, a dropped ball, a launched ball, their differences mattered, just as the ball itself mattered. Momentum, inertia, weight, surface area--for a subject that seemed so basic and intuitive in nature, he found the mechanics actually quite complicated and engrossing.

Strangely, it didn't feel like homework, even though he knew that it basically was. Instead, it just felt valuable and necessary--like growth. Plus, it was exciting to think about all the different ways he might be able to apply movement to his metal.

'I think I found a good spot,' said Garovel, bringing Hector back to the task at hand. 'There's a small room below the Tower of Day. Seems to be the closest.'

Hector soon found the room he was talking about. It was a storage closet, he guessed, assuming they had things like that in ancient times. He couldn't imagine why they wouldn't.

Garovel empowered him with strength and pointed at the room's bottom right corner."

"737

Hector rubbed his hands together, making fresh iron gloves for himself and then connecting them both to the handle of an oversized pickaxe. Wielding it like a sword, he pressed his soul into it for extra oomph, and then slammed it against the wall with all his might.

A huge chunk of stone broke away from the wall and shattered into a hundred pieces. And so did the tool. And so did both of his arms.

'Hmm. I'm not an expert, but I don't think you're doing it right.'

Hector watched his elbows snap back into place and his torn flesh close itself up again. "Might've used a little too much force there..."

'Might've. Or maybe next time, you can try to swing it so hard that you break your LEGS. Wouldn't that be cool?'

He rotated his arms, stretching and flexing. He annihilated the remains of the pickaxe and created it again from scratch. He set to work again, this time with a finer touch.

'Now might be a good time to bring up the topic of passive soul defenses.'

Hector didn't stop swinging. "Passive what now?"

‘As your soul power grows, you’ll be able to naturally increase the resilience of your own body. So things like just now, they won’t happen anymore--or at least, they won’t happen quite so easily.’

“Oh. So a stronger soul makes my body tougher?”

‘Yeah. In two separate respects. First, there’s “resilience,” which is basically the same as how you strengthen your metal. You just apply it to your body instead, and as you get stronger, it begins to happen on its own, constantly applying that extra strength to your body--albeit not as powerfully as when you apply it yourself.’

“Huh...”

‘Passive resilience becomes a really big deal, eventually. Powerful enough servants can even deflect bullets with their bare skin.’

He stopped picking to throw a look at Garovel. “A-are you serious?”

‘Oh yes. Not that bullets would even give them a hard time in the first place, but you get the idea, right?’

“Eh, y-yeah...”

"738

‘It tends to cause a huge disparity in power,’ said Garovel. ‘It makes it so that certain servants can’t even be wounded by anyone who isn’t close enough to their level in strength. They can just mow down hordes of lesser servants without a care in the world, pretty much.’

“Fuck...”

‘Yeah. Few things are as terrifying to see bearing down upon you on a battlefield.’

Hector returned to his crude tunneling. Its downward slope was perhaps a bit too steep, he thought, and he started trying to curve it more.

‘Anyway, soul resilience is only the first means of passive defense. The second is “field density,” which is similar but a little less intuitive.’

“Field density...? I can’t even imagine what that would refer to.”



‘Mm. It’s also called soul pressure, which might be easier to conceptualize. It’s a defense against abilities being used within your own personal space. For instance, a materialization user might try to use the orifices of the human head to create the base of a spike that then shoots straight into the brain and kills their opponent instantly. But with strong field dens--’

“Oh!” Hector stopped picking again and blinked. “I didn’t even think of trying something like that...”

‘It’s a very advanced technique, not easy at all, especially on a moving target--but that’s neither here nor there. I’m saying that one’s field density offers a kind of constant defense against that sort of thing. It’s a lot like how you couldn’t coat Karkash in metal due to his magnetism. Same concept, only applied more broadly.’

“Hmm. How does that work?”

‘By preventing the USE of the abilities in the first place. Materialization won’t accumulate properly. Destruction won’t tunnel properly. Integration won’t fuse. And alteration users, they’re fucked, too. Only transfiguration and mutation are immune, because those powers are strictly limited to the user’s body, where one’s own field density is strongest, so it doesn’t matter how oppressive their opponent’s soul pressure is.’

Hector scratched his head. “You weren’t kidding about it being less intuitive than the other thing...”

‘Soul resilience.’

“Yeah, the other thing.”

Garovel exhaled a nonexistent breath."

"739

“So, uh... you’re saying this field density thing protects the body, but it can also double as a kind of weapon? I mean, suppressing the opponent’s power seems pretty potent...”

‘Yep. That’s generally how the terminology is handled. “Field density” is defensive; “soul pressure” is offensive. But they both refer to the

same thing.'

"I'm... not gonna remember that."

'You will, eventually. In the meantime, I'll remember for you.'

"Right, thanks." He was nearly waist-deep in the hole now, and the heat only seemed to be growing stronger. "But, um... was there a reason why you brought this stuff up now? I'm still too weak to use it, aren't I?"

'For passive defense, yes, you're still too young. But you could try actively applying the resilience to your body. Might help you cope with the heat a little better.'

"Really? How much better?"

'Oh, not much at all. You might be able to get a few centimeters closer to the magma before the heat convection melts your face off.'

"Well, that's nice..."

'It's to be expected. Our souls have only had six months to synchronize.'

That made him stand upright. "Six months..." He pressed a hand to his forehead, partly to wipe the sweat away, partly just thinking back. "It's only been six months?"

'Six and a half, to be precise.'

"That's still ridiculous..."

'Hopefully, the next six won't be quite so hectic. You've got a pretty good handle on your power now, and you're a much better fighter. We've even made a few good allies. Oh, and let's not forget our new base of operations. Seems like it's already time to start thinking about the next step.'

"The next step? What do you mean? You have something in mind?"

'As a matter of fact, I do. We should begin fostering a network of reliable contacts.'

"Oh... y'know, Roman mentioned something like that, too."

'Did he? When?'

"It was just before that big fight. The one at, uh..."

'Rathmore's Gate?'

"Yeah. He said, ah... networking is really difficult."

'He's not wrong.'

"His previous allies kinda fucked him over, didn't they?"

'Seemed like it.'

"740 -- LXXXIII.

"But, uh... Roman said if we ever find someone we can really trust, we should take good care of them. He said something like... if I don't have room for them in my life, then I should get a bigger house."

'Heh, is that so?'

"And... I think he was talking about Colt. Like he was implying that I shouldn't have let Colt leave."

'Ah. Hmm.'

"Er... maybe I was just reading too much into it, though..."

'Well, once we finish sprucing this place up, perhaps we should give Colt a call. Check up on him, at least. But I won't force you to offer him a room. I know you two have your differences. And he IS a murderer.'

"Yeah..." Hector stopped digging again to look at Garovel. "I don't know if I'll ever forgive him for that..."

'...But?'

He sighed. "But I don't know. And besides, he probably wouldn't even want to live here."

'Ah, it just occurred to me that we don't know how Warrenhold affects children. Voreese said the unsettling feeling could be explained away, but obviously, that's not going to work with babies.'

"You think this place has an age restriction? Seems like Voreese

would have mentioned that.”

‘Maybe. No harm in asking her next time.’

Hector was up to his shoulders in rock now. He took a hard breath and rested his pickaxe on his shoulder. “Geez... how much farther down is it?”

‘Only a few more meters.’

“Meters?! How many?!”

Garovel shrugged. ‘Nine or ten? Or... fifteen? Could be twenty, I suppose.’

“Fuck, man...”

‘Hey, you try measuring while you float through complete darkness without any sense of motion around you.’

He rolled his shoulders. “This sucks. I thought hot springs were supposed to be relaxing...”

Chapter Eighty-Three: ‘Relations from afar...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It was nearing the end of Lynnette’s shift. For the first couple weeks, it had been just her on round-the-clock guard duty, sleeping only rarely. After Harper was back on his feet, however, the man was gracious enough to begin trading off with her, since there was no one else in Sescoria who could really protect Queen Helen.”  
"740 -- LXXXIII.

“But, uh... Roman said if we ever find someone we can really trust, we should take good care of them. He said something like... if I don’t have room for them in my life, then I should get a bigger house.”

‘Heh, is that so?’

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“Er... maybe I was just reading too much into it, though...”

‘Well, once we finish sprucing this place up, perhaps we should give Colt a call. Check up on him, at least. But I won’t force you to offer him a room. I know you two have your differences. And he IS a murderer.’

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‘Ah, it just occurred to me that we don’t know how Warrenhold affects children. Voreese said the unsettling feeling could be explained away, but obviously, that’s not going to work with babies.’

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Hector was up to his shoulders in rock now. He took a hard breath and rested his pickaxe on his shoulder. “Geez... how much farther down is it?”

‘Only a few more meters.’

“Meters?! How many?!”

Garovel shrugged. ‘Nine or ten? Or... fifteen? Could be twenty, I suppose.’

“Fuck, man...”

‘Hey, you try measuring while you float through complete darkness without any sense of motion around you.’

He rolled his shoulders. “This sucks. I thought hot springs were supposed to be relaxing...”

Chapter Eighty-Three: ‘Relations from afar...’

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

It was nearing the end of Lynnette's shift. For the first couple weeks, it had been just her on round-the-clock guard duty, sleeping only rarely. After Harper was back on his feet, however, the man was gracious enough to begin trading off with her, since there was no one else in Sescoria who could really protect Queen Helen."

"741

As ever, Lynnette observed Her Highness's meetings in silence. Deliberations with the Minister of Defense took up most of the evening, as the man was--perhaps understandably--concerned about the troubling developments and conflicting reports in Sair. Lynnette imagined that the sudden talk of a possible civil war was unsettling to just about everyone on Eloa, so the fact that two entire countries, Lorent and Callum, both stood between Atreya and Sair was probably of little comfort to the minister.

The Queen, however, seemed as calm and collected as ever, and even though it took a while, she convinced the man that she would not overlook the matter, despite the Agency of Foreign Affairs still being in a questionable state after she had all but dismantled it.

Soon enough, Harper arrived to take her place.

Lynnette stood for a quick handshake. "Sleep well?" she asked him.

"Sure di--" The man broke himself off, glancing to his side and then back to Lynnette. "Darsihm says there's something strange about you, Miss Edith."

Lynnette eyed the Queen, who spared them a look before returning to her mountain of reading and paperwork. Lynnette stepped into the quiet hall so as not to disturb her, then addressed Harper again. "...Darsihm? Ah, is that your reaper friend?"

"Yeah. He's been unconscious 'til now, so he's never seen you before."

"Oh, I see." She pulled off her glove to reveal her bone half-gauntlet. "Then, I'm sure he is sensing this. It apparently spooked Garovel and

the others as well, but none of them could tell me anything about it that I don't already know. I was meaning to ask you about it when your reaper woke up."

"Oh! Shoulda shown it to me earlier. I know just as much about it as Darsihm does. Where'd you get it from, by the way?"

"A division of the Vanguard in Callum," said Lynnette. "They were doing experiments on it. I didn't intend to steal it from them, but... it just sort of... worked out that way."

A grin split Harper's flat face. "Might not wanna be so forthcoming with that information the next time someone asks. Lotta my colleagues are a touch stingy, you know, and they generally frown upon thievery-- particularly of a thing like that.""

"742

Lynnette pursed her lips at the man. "Well, I'm glad you're not upset."

"Oh, you can blame that on Darsihm. I used to be a real stick in the mud--not very lenient or understanding of other folks' plights. But as I get older, I find his laidback disposition to be a more agreeable means of continuing through this dimly lit passage we here call existence."

Lynnette just kind of looked at him.

Harper returned a chuckle. "Pardon my sophistry."

"I suppose what I want to know most is whether or not I should expect any kind of drawbacks to wearing this gauntlet. So far, it's been surprisingly easy to control."

"Aha. Wondering what the catch is, huh? As far as I know, there isn't one." A beat passed, and then Harper added, "Well, apart from not being able to take it off."

"So there really is no way to remove it?"

"Not without taking your arm with it. Oh, and I guess that leads to another downside, doesn't it? Certain folks will try to kill you for it. Because it's so rare and powerful, you see."

"Right... Do you know why it can't be removed normally?"

"That's an easy one: because it's not just bound to your arm. It's also bound to your soul. It gives your soul physical weight relative to your own body. Like superglue. Except not really. In fact, forget I made that analogy. I suck at analogies. Dunno why I even tried."

"Uh...?"

"Oh, and another downside I forgot about. Er--sort of. You might consider it a good thing, I guess."

She waited with a disjointed expression.

"You can't have kids," said Harper. "Your living shadow will prevent your eggs from being fertilized."

Lynnette's eye widened.

"It's weirdly sexist, too, because when it's bound to a man, the shadow doesn't prevent the guy's sperm from fertilizing an egg. I guess it's a matter of protection versus penetration? Or maybe it just has to do with bodily proximity. Very odd either way, if you ask me."

She still didn't have a response for him."

"743

"On the plus side," said Harper, "it means you don't need to worry about using contraceptives. That's neat, right?"

Lynnette just squinted at him. She was wondering if he was about to admit to joking, but apparently, he was being serious.

"Then again, if you really want to give birth, you could amputate your arm. Or try a surrogate. Personally, though, I'd just recommend adopting. Not enough people adopt, you know. The world already has plenty of kids in need of a good parent, but hardly anyone considers adopting unless they can't have kids of their own. It's a real shame." Another beat passed as he watched Lynnette's face. "Before you ask, yes, I've adopted many children."

She wasn't going to ask that.

"They're all grown up now. It's why I like to travel so much. They live all



over the world. I've been thinking of doing it again, but now that I'm with the Vanguard, raising a child would be more complicated. Could also be more exciting, though." He smiled and let his eyes wander upward a little. "Could take 'em with me wherever I went and keep 'em safe while I show 'em the world. Fantastic, that'd be."

Lynnette hadn't realized Mr. Norez could speak at such length so easily. She was starting to think he'd just keep talking unless she stopped him.

"Anyhow, you're still young. Probably haven't given any real thought to such things, have you?"

She would have liked to say he was wrong, but he wasn't. Lynnette had never been the type to fantasize about being a mother or a wife. If it happened, it happened. She didn't see much reason to dwell on it any more than that. But now, apparently, her options had already dwindled without her knowledge.

An unsettling realization.

She resolved to think about it later. There was still an important question she needed to ask this person. "Can you tell me how to use Incineration?"

Harper briefly turned to the empty space next to him. "Are you talking about your glove's hidden ability?"

She cocked an eyebrow. "Hidden? I only heard it mentioned in Callum. I don't know anything else about it."

"744

"Ah... well, unfortunately, neither do we. I've heard that these items have secondary powers, just like aberrations themselves do, but I've only met a handful of people who are actually using them like yourself. And what's more, I think only two or three of the ones I've met had managed to draw the power out. I didn't think to ask for an explanation as to how they did it. Sorry."

"Mm."

"Having said that, though, I could point you toward some folks who can tell you more. There're a few in Callum, but I'm guessing you'd rather

not speak to those.”

“Preferably not.”

“Then, I know a fellow named Haqq Najir who’s been studying aberrations since they first started appearing. Crazy smart, that guy. And not a member of the Vanguard, either, so he definitely won’t rat you out for stealing.”

“How do I contact him?”

“I could call him right now, if you like. Knowing him, he’s probably still awake at this hour. Thing is, I’m sure he’ll want to meet you. He’s very... enthusiastic about his research. He’ll probably drop whatever he’s doing and--”

The sight of Prince David caught their attention. He did not seem to be in possession of his usual humor, hardly even acknowledging their presence before proceeding into the Queen’s chambers.

Lynnette eyed Harper. “Perhaps now isn’t the best time.”

“Perhaps not.” Harper placed a hand on the door but didn’t follow David just yet. “I’ll call Haqq in the morning, then. Go get some sleep. You look tired.”

She rubbed below her one eye and squinted. “Will do. And tell me what they’re getting up to in there, yeah?”

“Sure thing.”

--++--++--

Until now, Helen hadn’t had the time for this meeting, nor had she been particularly looking forward to it. She hadn’t seen Luther in person since fleeing Sescoria, but after her conversation tonight with David, Luther had jumped to the top of her priorities.

Luther smiled upon seeing her, David, and Harper approaching. “Ah, there she is. Finally, the prodigal sister deigns to grace me with her presence.””

"745

As she looked at him, she could hardly believe this was the same man. The face belonged to him, but the expression seemed nothing of the sort. He was pleased. And she had a pretty good idea why.

David, Meriwether, and even Mehlsanz had told her about this-- Luther's madness. But even so, she'd felt as though they must've been exaggerating the point somewhat. Even after everything that had happened, it was still a difficult thing to take someone's word for.

"And what, may I ask, is the purpose of your visit?" said Luther. "At this time of night, it must be urgent."

Helen pressed the button on the speaker box to allow her voice through. "It seems that the Minister of Finance and the Lord High Treasurer have both inexplicably left the country tonight."

"Oh?" said Luther. "How curious."

"What do you know of this matter?" Helen was not in the mood to mince words, but she doubted that would make much difference to Luther right now.

Luther took a seat on his milky white bed. His prisoner's uniform was also white, but the thick vertical stripes of orange ensured plenty of visibility. "What makes you think I know anything?"

"I have multiple reports stating that you frequented the Royal Treasury over the past eighteen months," the Queen said.

"It is an interesting place."

"You also claimed that your contingency plan involved money."

Luther looked at David with false shock. "You told her? Brother, how could you?"

David merely observed their conversation in silence.

"Luther, what have you done?" she tried. "Tell me."

"Is it not more fun for you to guess?" he said. "You will find out sooner or later, regardless. In fact, sooner, from the sound of it."

Helen eyed his cell. "You want something in exchange, then."

"I understand why you would think that, but the truth is, you have nothing I desire. Apart from my freedom, I suppose, but I suspect that

is not on offer.” His eyes briefly went to David again. “And after the stunt with my television, I have no wish to make any more deals.””

"746

Helen squinted. “I do not understand your purpose in doing any of this.”

“Then perhaps that is the question you should be asking me,” said Luther. “The crown has made you very demanding, sister. It is unbecoming. A lady should try to be more understanding of others’ feelings.”

“Explain, then. Why did you betray me?”

“Because this country needed me to,” said Luther. “There are over 150 sovereign nations in the world, and yet only ten of them have monarchs. And of those ten--”

--only four possess virtually unchecked power as I do,” finished Helen. “I am aware.”

“Do you see no problem with that, sister?”

It was an argument she’d been hearing since childhood, an argument she’d once believed in herself. “So, rather than speak to me of your concerns, you decided that it was better to force a regime change by having me assassinated and plunging Atreya into a war with its neighbors. I fail to see how you could believe these actions would benefit the country.”

“Necessary change is often the most painful.”

“I suppose you would have Atreya be coddled by the illusion of a republic or democracy, instead?”

Luther only tilted his head at her.

“Do you honestly believe such governments can last in earnest? They can be founded on such idealism, perhaps, but it is inevitable that they will give rise to new royalty and be ruled by it. The only difference is that the kings of democracy can hide themselves behind a veil of elected figureheads.”

The man was quiet a moment as he blinked slowly at her. He looked at David another time. "Did you know she was this cynical?"

"Yes, I did. You would have known as well, if you had ever bothered to get to know her the way a brother should."

"It seems we are guilty of that on both counts," said Helen. "If I had known Luther's heart even just one year ago, we would not have these problems now. And our family might still be together."

Luther exhaled a short laugh and shook his head at her. "You genuinely believe that a monarchy is the best method of governance?"

"747

"In this instance, 'best' is a term of gross oversimplification," said Helen. "Monarchy is a high-risk, high-reward system. Under the right leadership, it can be more efficient, moral, and just than any other; under the wrong, it can destroy its people. That is why the most important decision a monarch will ever make is choosing his or her successor."

"I suppose the person with all of the power would believe that," said Luther.

"I did not come here to have an adolescent debate with you," said Helen.

"No, you came here, because you had no choice."

"Tell me what you have done to the nation's finances, Luther."

"Or what? You will have me tortured? How mundane."

The Queen rolled her eyes and sighed. "I outlawed torture three years ago."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"You might hold my word in low regard, but it does not matter. You will have plenty of time to see the truth for yourself."

"Torture or not, I see no reason to tell you anything."

"Hmm. You have a point."

Luther cocked an eyebrow at her.

Helen turned to the others. "Please leave us," she said.

David and Harper both hesitated at that request. Darsihm and Mehlsanz were also present, but their ghostly expressions remained unfazed.

"I am in no danger," Helen assured them. "You can wait for me upstairs, if you prefer."

Harper glanced at Darsihm, who shrugged and floated off, after which Harper soon followed. David frowned but did as she asked. Only Mehlsanz remained behind, floating silently by the Queen's side.

And perhaps he sensed an unfavorable change in the atmosphere, because Luther backed away from the glass of his prison cell.

Helen iced her expression. She'd hoped she wouldn't need to resort to this tactic, but it seemed there was no helping it. "One of the reasons I have taken so long to come visit you is because I wanted to do my homework first. It may not make up for years of inattentiveness, but on the other hand, I feel it grants me a bit of perspective."

"748

"What are you talking about?" said Luther.

"David told me that your categorical hatred of royalty is due to our father, but that is not the whole story, is it?"

Luther lowered his face a little but didn't remove his gaze from the Queen.

"This was not the first time you have attempted to destroy a government," said Helen. "Nineteen years ago in a tiny country called Snider--that was your doing, was it not?"

Her brother chose not to answer.

"The King of Snider had a reputation for brutality, but nonetheless, Father was on good terms with him. You spent only a single summer

there, supposedly enjoying a leisurely time as any prince would. And yet, no more than six months after your visit, the King of Snider was overthrown in a bloody conflict. One might call that a coincidence and be satisfied, but for two entire years after that rebellion, there were several other families attempting to seize power--and all of their efforts were in vain. In fact, each claimant to the throne died rather gruesomely or mysteriously. Or both. Until, finally, democracy took hold."

Luther was expressionless. "You believe me responsible for all of that? Perhaps I should be flattered."

"Mm. It was quite difficult to find out the details of that summer visit of yours. You were careful, even then, but you were young. I have spoken with several of your attendants from that time, and they all mentioned your habit of disappearing. For me, however, the truly convincing piece of evidence was the girl."

Luther turned away and paced toward the wall.

"I have her name written down." She reached inside her flowing coat and pulled out a notepad. She flipped through the pages. "Lila Vance. She was only six when the King of Snider had her parents executed for blasphemy. She was only seven when you met her, no? Despite lacking the means, she was able to move out of Snider after your visit but before the rebellion. She has lived quite comfortably in Kahm ever since, under the name Lila Demitri. She is but a simple flower vendor, and attributes her wealth to her rich uncle.""

"749

Luther spun around to confront his sister again. "Enough of this. What is your point? Are you trying to make me believe that you will hurt Lila if I do not cooperate? Do not make me laugh, Helen."

"She has a husband and two daughters now," the Queen continued, "but I am sure you knew that already."

Luther looked at her coolly. "I know you are bluffing, sister. You would never do such a thing."

Helen expected this. Now she had a choice to make about how best to convince him that she was not bluffing. The temptation, of course, was

to stare him down and tell him he was wrong to doubt her with as much severity as she could muster, but she did not believe that would work on this person. This was a man who held no respect for her whatsoever. No, the best tactic here was surely just the opposite. She had to be nonchalant, as if taking the life of an innocent person was of no consequence to her, as if Luther's suspicion made no difference at all. And that meant she could show no hesitation.

"My only dilemma now is that I have four candidates to choose from," said Helen. "I assume you care for the husband the least, so I shall begin with him and work my way toward Lila. I am sure you will understand my conviction by the time I reach her. Or would you prefer that she die second as a small measure of mercy for her children?"

"You would never harm a child."

Helen kept her expression utterly flat. "There are over forty million people in Atreya. Roughly one quarter of them are children. How many of those would die if I were unwilling to take the lives of two foreign girls? I wonder."

Luther clenched his jaw and squinted at her.

"Perhaps I should start with the daughters, then, and spare the husband. That way might prove more expedient."

"You wouldn't--"

Helen returned the notepad to its place inside her coat. "I will bring them here to visit you so that you can see with your own eyes that I am not playing a trick with corpses. You will exchange words with them, confirm their identities for yourself, and then watch them die."

"750

"Fine," said Luther, "you win. I will tell you what I have done."

Helen's gaze flickered. She hadn't expected him to give in so quickly. He didn't look especially unsettled by Helen's threats, either.

"There is nothing you can do," he said. "That is why I am telling you. Because it is already too late."



Helen merely waited.

"You see, I have discreetly removed all of the money from the Royal Treasury and replaced it with borrowed funds. Atreya now holds nothing but debt." He didn't smile. If anything, he only looked even more callous than before. "You think you have won your kingdom back, sister? Far from it. Atreya belongs to over a dozen other countries."

She said nothing, still, only letting her eyes drift vacantly to the side a little. If he was lying, then she would confirm it easily enough; but Luther would know that, of course, which meant that, for now, it was a safe assumption that he was telling the truth.

"They will come to you soon in search of their money," he said. "Some may be understanding of your circumstances, but I do not think Intar, Horsht, Korgum, or Dozer will be very agreeable. You owe them quite a sum, and any one of them might become upset when they learn that you have done business with the others."

Intar, Horsht, Korgum, and Dozer. Intar was difficult to deal with on a good day, but the other three were easily the most volatile nations on the continent. As soon as he uttered their names, there was no hope of Helen concealing her exasperation. She shut her eyes and turned away from Luther to press a hand to her forehead.

She needed to think. She'd expected the problem to be bad, but this? Could anything even be done? If the Royal Treasury really only contained borrowed money now, then everything would be made more difficult.

Whatever the case, she had to start asking questions. She required information, and Luther was perhaps the only person who could give it. "You are talking about nearly two hundred billion troas. How could you have possibly removed that much money from the Royal Treasury without anyone noticing?"

"751

"Have you not realized by now?" said Luther. "Someone did notice. In fact, not only did they notice, they helped me. But not because they wanted to, of course."

Helen put it together. This was why the Minister of Finance and the Lord High Treasurer had fled. Luther bribed or coerced them. Either way, it didn't make much difference now. She moved on to a more important question. "What did you do with the money you removed?"

"That was the real challenge. I had no great need of the money, myself. If anything, it was a burden and a risk to keep around. I considered throwing it all into a volcano, but that would have required quite a bit of manpower, and frankly, I doubted that any reasonable person would perform such a task for me without succumbing to temptation. In the end, I gave some of it away to the less fortunate. I would have liked to give more, but too much would have surely drawn attention from the media, so the rest went to Abolish for their services. It would seem I did not get my money's worth on that front, but then again, I knew I was overpaying from the beginning."

Abolish. She would have liked to go a while longer without hearing that name again. If they had the money, there was no telling where it was now. She didn't even know if any of them had survived the Battle at Rathmore. Harper hadn't been able to tell her how many he killed.

She intended to press Luther for details, but she didn't expect to learn anything else of use, and indeed, that proved to be the case. She decided to leave before Luther wasted any more of her time.

Mehlsanz followed her up the prison stairs. "What are you going to do now?"

'...I am open to suggestions.'

'Wow. It's that bad, huh?'

'If you have any ancient wisdom for me, now would be the time.'

'I'm not sure I have any ancient wisdom that's worth two hundred billion troas.'

'I thought as much.'

"752 -- LXXXIV.

'Perhaps we should find someone who can materialize gold or silver,' said Mehlsanz.

Helen stopped climbing the steps to look at her reaper. 'Do you know of such a person?'

'No, but I'm sure they exist.'

She started up the steps again. 'Yes, well, when you find someone like that, let me know.'

'Knowing our luck, they probably work for Abolish.'

Chapter Eighty-Four: 'With thy shroud, endure...'

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As she stared into the mirror, Emiliana tried not to hate what she saw. She hadn't been confident in her looks even before growing horns in the middle of her face and losing some of the vision in her left eye.

Chergoa and Shenado kept telling her that this mutation ability wasn't as bad as it seemed. Emiliana did not believe them, frankly. And she wanted to say as much to their faces, too. She wanted to argue and complain and even throw a tantrum like a child. But she never could quite bring herself to. Each time the anger welled up, heating her face and chest with irritation, something in the back of her mind always got in the way. It felt like a pit, dark and endless, and it swallowed her every feeling, good or bad.

She knew what the pit was. There was only one thing it could be. A wound, without a doubt. Still so fresh that hardly anything else even seemed to matter by comparison.

Before leaving the bathroom, she put her mask back on. Essentially, it was just a simple, jet black plate, convexly curved so that it didn't require an indentation for her nose and bearing two long, flat slits for her eyes. Along with her dark gray hoodie, she'd taken to wearing it wherever she went, sometimes even when sleeping--not that she'd slept much, of late.

The mask certainly attracted its fair share of attention from the attendants around Red Lake Castle, but it was still better than the kind of attention that her horns attracted. It made being seen by strangers bearable again. Already, she'd begun to wonder if she would end up wearing it for the rest of her life."

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attendants around Red Lake Castle, but it was still better than the kind of attention that her horns attracted. It made being seen by strangers bearable again. Already, she'd begun to wonder if she would end up wearing it for the rest of her life."

"753

These past two weeks, she'd really just wanted to be left alone, and for the most part, she'd been granted that. It was just too much. Everything. She wasn't ready to think of herself as the responsible one, as the one who had to try to fill the unfillable chasms left by Mama and Papa and Cisco and even Gema. It was all wrong. All of it.

And then there was this training. It was the only thing she knew how to do, the only thing that seemed even remotely worth thinking about. And yet, her ability still terrified her. She hadn't dared try to invoke it again, even though she knew that was the end goal here.

Training meant more than just meditating, however. It also required laborious study of anatomy and physiology. She'd always enjoyed biology, but she'd never studied it with this much rigor or sense of obligation.

Mutation was so strange. Unlike transfiguration and materialization, it didn't rely on any particular elements. Rather, it stemmed from the formation and manipulation of biological molecules--proteins, in particular. Hers had manifested with keratin, according to Chergoa, which was apparently a common starting point for mutation users.

'Some people call mutation "the anything power," because in theory, you can use it to modify your body in any way you can imagine,' the reaper had told her. 'Now, that's not QUITE true, but the sentiment is fairly accurate. For instance, with proper control, you could grow entirely new limbs--even wings, if you wanted. You could breathe fire. You could sharpen your senses, your reflexes, even make yourself more intelligent, potentially. Though, don't try that last one, unless you're extremely confident in your capabilities. Messing with your own brain is probably the most dangerous thing you can possibly do.'

Emiliana was in no rush to mess with anything.

'Oh, and when you think you're ready, you should start practicing on your non-dominant hand. I know it sounds kinda terrible, but at least

that way, if you make a mistake, the damage won't be too bad."

"754

Emiliana didn't love the idea of having to sacrifice a hand just to practice, but she supposed the reaper had a point. Her hands couldn't be made much worse than they already were, anyway. She'd tried to hide them with gloves, but when her claws didn't get stuck on the cloth, they just ripped right through it. Instead, she'd gotten into the habit of hiding them in her pockets.

Aside from training, there wasn't much else to do. Emiliana wasn't allowed to leave the castle, nor did she wish to. Her thoughts often went to Alex. She'd only gone on one date with him before everything happened. Now, she could hardly imagine what he must be thinking. She hadn't even spoken to him since then, but he'd surely heard the news about her family. Perhaps he thought she was dead. No, it was probably too soon for him to believe that.

"Hey, Emy," came a distant voice from below. "What are you doing up there?" It belonged to Alicia Redwater, Octavia's granddaughter.

Emiliana looked down from her high perch among the West Hall's shadowy rafters. Lately, it had been difficult to find places where she could be alone. Red Lake Castle had felt huge and empty at first, but now, people were everywhere, most of them members of the gigantic Redwater family. Even Octavia and Wendy seemed to have trouble keeping track of them all. The vast majority of them, however, were non-servants like Alicia here.

"...How did you find me?" Emiliana asked.

"Your little brother," said Alicia. "He's worried about you."

That stung. He was worried about her? She'd heard Marcos thrashing around in his bed at night, heard him whimpering and crying in his sleep. The brat had his own problems. He wasn't supposed to be worrying about hers.

"I just wanted a quiet place to meditate," said Emiliana.

Alicia squinted and turned her ear up toward her. "I can barely hear you. Would you mind coming down? How did you even get up there?"

Emiliana shifted her leg over the beam. ‘Chergoa,’ she called. ‘I’m done.’”

"755

‘Alright.’ The reaper appeared after a few moments and grabbed Emiliana’s shoulder.

With the vigor burning through her, she swung down and around the beam and then flung herself toward the ridged pillar she’d used to climb up. Her claws scratched against the old red-and-gray stone as she alternately slid and dropped her way to the floor. The maneuver earned her a few gawkers among the many passersby, but most acted like it was nothing special. No doubt, they’d seen much crazier things in their time.

“Wow,” said Alicia. “That was impressive.” She was the one looking down at Emiliana now, though not for lack of sincerity. At thirteen, she was a year younger, but her height suggested otherwise. It seemed strange that she could be related to such a tiny woman as Octavia.

Emiliana adjusted her dark mask and buried her claws in her pockets.

“I think you scuffed up the pillar, though,” Alicia added with a smirk.

She saw the faint claw marks. “Ah... I’m sorry. I used your madega last time and accidentally tore out a few chunks of the bark. Your gardener was upset.”

Alicia laughed. “It doesn’t matter. If anyone gets mad at you, just send them to me.”

They started walking together, with Chergoa following quietly.

“Anyway, it’s not just your brother, you know,” Alicia said. “Your sister is worried about you, too. And so am I.”

“...I appreciate your concern, but I am fine.”

“Have you eaten anything today?”

“...What day is today?”

“Friday.”

"Then, no."

"Agh, aren't you in training? How do you expect to keep up your strength if you skip meals?"

Emiliana didn't answer that and just followed Alicia to the refectory. The lunch crowd had diminished somewhat, but there were still way too many people around for Emiliana's liking. Alicia offered to sit and eat with her, but Emiliana grabbed a sandwich wrap and an iced tea to go. She wasn't interested in removing her mask in order to eat in front of all these people.

Alicia kept following her, anyway."  
"756

'C'mon,' Chergoa urged. 'Alicia's trying to look out for you. The least you can do is try to carry a conversation with her.'

The reaper was right, Emiliana knew. She attempted a question of her own. "Are all of these people really your family?"

"Ah--well, some of them just work for us, but basically, yeah. Grandma only had one child--my papa--but her sister had nine. So I have a lot of cousins. Or rather, 'second cousins once removed,' technically." She paused. "I looked it up after the last time they visited."

"Wow..."

"Yeah. And then, as if that weren't enough, Grandma and her brother had cousins with the name Redwater who also had children and grandchildren, so there are even more branches of my family out there. It's super confusing. I honestly couldn't tell you exactly how I'm related to ninety percent of the people here."

"How many members of your family have reapers?"

Alicia bit her lip. "Oh, I should know this, um...I know it's only a small fraction of our total number. I wanna say... twenty? I don't think it's more than thirty people."

"That's still a lot."



“Yeah. I think only the Sebolts have more than we do.”

“Right.” Emiliana considered bringing up the more pressing subject of negotiations with the Vanguard, but she doubted that would do much to lighten the mood. And besides, she was sure that she already knew more about it than Alicia did. Chergoa had been keeping her apprised of developments--not that there had been very many. General Lawrence had not returned Zeff to Aguary, and the Rainlords had yet to take aggressive action. Lawrence had, however, made it known that Cisco and Dennex were in his custody at Rheinhal. Apparently, he’d offered them as trade for either one of Axiolis or Shenado.

The allied Rainlords responded by sending him an umbrella.

When they reached the large guest room, Ramira immediately ran up to Emiliana and hugged her.

“What’s the matter?”

“Stupid!” Ramira said. “You were gone way too long!” It didn’t seem like much of a reason, but she sounded genuinely upset about it.

Emiliana couldn’t recall the girl ever hugging her before.”

"757

Ramira didn’t let go of Emiliana, instead just looking up at her and squinting. “Quit leaving me alone! I don’t know any of these stupid people!” She tossed a glance at Alicia. “No offense.”

Alicia just shrugged.

“I thought you liked being alone,” said Emiliana.

“Yeah, well, I don’t!”

“Then why are you always wandering off and eavesdropping on people?”

“Because that’s what spies do! It’s my job! That doesn’t mean I want you to disappear for nine hours!”

“Hey, I wasn’t gone that long.”

“Whatever!”

Alicia interjected. “You’ve been eavesdropping on people?”

Ramira looked at her blankly. “...No.”

“Right,” said Emiliana. “Did you learn anything juicy during this eavesdropping that you didn’t do?”

The little girl frowned. “Not really. With all these people around, you’d think there would be more going on, but no. It seems like everyone gets along really well. It kind of creeps me out... No offense.”

Alicia just shrugged again.

“I think it’s because everyone knows that there are invisible reapers all over the place who could be watching their every move and listening to all of their suspicious conversations,” said Ramira. “I think I might have to start going through their mail next.”

“That would be a federal crime,” Emiliana told her.

Ramira’s face scrunched up. “Federal? What does that mean?”

“It means both the Rainlords AND the Sandlords would be upset with you. And you’d go to prison for a really long time.”

Ramira squinted. “Nuh-uh. They wouldn’t put me in prison. I’m only nine.”

“Hey, I don’t make the rules.”

“You’re lying! You shouldn’t lie to me! I’m young and impressionable!”

Chergoa burst into a laugh. ‘She makes a good point. Don’t confuse your sister like that. Could cause her problems later. And when she finds out the truth, she’ll probably make you regret it. If I were her, you’d be waking up with glue in your hair the next day.’

The reaper made a compelling argument. “Okay, you wouldn’t go to prison. But you would get in a lot of trouble, so don’t open other people’s mail. Understood?”

“Fiiine...”

"758

Emiliana took another look around the room. "Where is Marcos?"

"He said he was tired of meditating and went to explore the castle," said Ramira.

Chergoa's wispy eyes closed, and it took her a while before she could say, 'He's three floors below us. Shenado's with him.'

Emiliana nodded. She took a seat on the end of her bed and removed her mask in order to eat. Ramira and Alicia sat with her and continued chatting, mostly about Ramira's espionage. Alicia seemed rather keen to hear about what certain cousins of hers were up to. Emiliana could see a shady partnership being born. She shared her silent amusement with Chergoa.

As the day drew on, however, Emiliana found herself growing more and more restless. And she began to understand why. Her mother's words were there in the back of her mind, urging her quietly onward. Grow up quickly. Be prepared. Protect what is important. Who is important.

Mask on, she looked across the room at her little sister one more time before heading off to the solitude of the lavatory. She asked Chergoa to come with her.

She locked the door behind her. There was plenty of room to work with in here. Three pristine silver sinks. A pair of toilets, each one with its own offshoot room for extra privacy. A large ceramic tub with a separate shower. Ample floor space with a shaggy rug.

She took a seat on the broad edge of the tub and stared at her left hand, flexing her fingers in anticipation. She breathed deeply, clutched her wrist with the other hand, and concentrated on what she wanted. Flat subtraction was impossible, of course, otherwise that would have been her goal.

Her fingertips burned as she watched the claws grow longer, thicker, sharper. Just as she'd imagined them in her mind. She hadn't thought it would be so easy. She had to stop before they became blades unto themselves.

She inspected her work. They weren't so gnarled anymore. Rather, they had hooking curves to them, and their lengths were almost

uniform, boasting a good five centimeters or so. Compared to her right hand, the difference was unmistakable."

"759

‘Nice work,’ said Chergoa. ‘That’s a good start. You should see if you can do something new now. Try manipulating a part of your skin--the knuckles, maybe. An application of keratin could make it more resilient.’

Emiliana made to respond, but when she looked up from her work, her eyes widened behind her mask as something else demanded her attention.

A pitch dark figure was suddenly there before her, taller than any person she had ever seen. But this wasn’t a person, seemingly. Rather, it looked more like a monster, covered in black scales and even bearing a tail in spite of its bipedalism. Its lithe torso seemed vaguely human, as did its folded arms and huge hands with long, gangly fingers, but its head was still a matter of debate. It appeared to have no mouth, somehow--or at the very least, no lips. A small protrusion in the scales suggested that the nasal passage was where it should be, but the eyes--those were piercingly reptilian, glowing faintly crimson, and most unsettling of all, staring right at her.

Emiliana was without a voice.

The creature was certainly alive and breathing, but it said nothing. If it even could. For a long moment, it only watched her, until it slowly turned its head and looked around in silence.

‘You okay?’ Chergoa asked privately. She’d been hovering next to Emiliana the whole time but didn’t seem especially perturbed by the monster’s presence.

Finally, Emiliana found the proper question. ‘What the HELL is that thing?!’

Chergoa hesitated. ‘What thing?’

‘That giant monster! Right in front of us!’

‘Uh...?’

‘How can you not see it?! It’s right there!’

‘I don’t see anything,’ said Chergoa. ‘I don’t sense anything, either.’

‘What? Then...?’

The monster didn’t move. It only lingered there mutely, until at length, it faded away into empty space, dispersed like a whiff of smoke, leaving Emiliana to wonder if it had even been there to begin with.

‘It’s gone now... You really didn’t see anything?’

‘I really didn’t. You really saw a monster?’

She put a hand to her head. ‘I... I thought I did... What’s happening to me? Am I hallucinating?’

‘Hmm.’”

"760 -- LXXXV.

Chapter Eighty-Five: ‘Thine ancestral blood...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Marcos moved through the gallery with slow wonder. Elaborate artwork filled the chamber, huge paintings framed in brass and steel. Each one depicted some historical event, only a couple of which he recognized, but Shenado was more than happy to answer his questions. To his eyes, the reaper was an eagle with a white tail and splotched brown-gray body. She would have looked like a normal animal, if not for the smoldering black eyes.

He stopped in front of a particularly violent image. In it, two men in shimmering red armor clashed against a roomful of opponents. Spears of ice filled the scene, skewering ten men in golden armor and coloring the walls with their blood.

‘Whoa,’ said Marcos. ‘What’s this one?’

‘Read the title at the bottom,’ said Shenado.

‘Umm... ‘The Redwater Twins Declare Independence.’ Oh!’”

‘Do you see the man in the back? The one wearing a crown?’

He searched among the carnage. “Yeah.”

‘He was the first and last ‘Rain King,’ sent by the Mohssian Emperor of the time to rule over all the Rainlords. He was seen as nothing more than a pawn, but nonetheless, he made many unreasonable demands, which led to what we see here.’

“What kind of unreasonable demands?”

‘Taxes, for one. Poverty was already a difficult issue when he arrived, and he only made it worse. And there was also the not-so-small matter of trying to take multiple wives, which wasn’t a tradition that the Rainlords appreciated, especially because many of the women he pursued were Rainlords themselves. The final straw was an eight-year-old by the name of Nereida Redwater. Girls often married extremely young in those days, but even then, eight was outrageous. Nor did it help matters that the so-called Rain King was already in his forties.’

“Eww.”

‘Nereida’s father was Lluc Redwater.’

“Oh, I definitely know who he is.”

‘I should hope so. He and his brother were probably the most famous Rainlords who have ever lived.’

Marcos looked at the painting another time. Lluc and Marcelo Redwater were the two men at the heart of it, the conductors of this immortalized bloodbath."

"760 -- LXXXV.

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"761

'In this painting, Lluc is the one on the left,' said Shenado. 'He always wore his hair longer than Marcelo so that people could tell them apart.'

"Did you know them?" Marcos asked.

'Personally? No. I've heard Axiolis talk about them at length, but I didn't get involved with you Rainlords until after your parents met.'

"Oh, right..." That subject hollowed out his expression as it brought him back to the present. However, he was resolved not to dwell on it, and instead attempted to spin it around to the past again. "It's weird to think that Papa has their power now."

'Legendary people are still people.'

'Indeed, they certainly had their flaws,' came another reaper's voice. It belonged to Wendy, entering the room behind Octavia Redwater. 'Lluc and Marcelo were identical in more ways than one. They were like wild horses, those two. You never knew what they were going to do next. And neither did they, I am convinced.'

"Are you enjoying the gallery?" Octavia asked. She never seemed to need her cane at all, making Marcos wonder if she just carried the thing around for show. "I have not been down here in ages."

'It's lovely,' said Shenado, 'even if some of the images are a bit unsettling. I was surprised to find no one else here.'

"Ah, well, family members generally aren't interested in this place. The youngins hear about it all their lives, I suppose. Nereida wanted this room to be an intimate shrine to our family's legacy, but I'm afraid it has become more of a tourist attraction than anything. And of course, we're closed to the public at the moment. So you see. Empty."

Marcos was more interested in what Wendy had been saying. "You knew the Twins?"

'I did,' he said. 'In terms of personality, they could not have been more UNLIKE your father, I should think.'



“Really?”

‘Yes. They were impulsive, loud, obnoxious, and foolish.’

“Don’t listen to him,” said Octavia. “I didn’t know them, obviously, but I know Wendy, and he has always been a party pooper.”

‘Lluc was your great great grandfather, wasn’t he?’ asked Shenado.

“That, he was.”

"762

Marcos hesitated. “Were the Twins not heroes?”

Wendy paused to mull the question over. ‘They were good in a fight, I suppose. And their hearts were generally in the right place. And they were natural leaders. In those regards, at least, I’d say they weren’t entirely dissimilar to Zeff. But I certainly don’t think they were deserving of the fame and affection that history has afforded them.’

‘Few people are,’ said Shenado. ‘And many deserving people end up all but forgotten.’

‘True. But I will always reserve the right to complain about it.’

‘Ha. Fair point.’

Octavia made her way toward the next painting over. She nudged Marcos with her elbow as she passed. “Wendy can be a real downer sometimes, but he’s not wrong. See this one here? I commissioned it a few years ago.”

An enormous canvas depicted a castle engulfed in flames. As he looked closer, he realized that the silhouette within was the same as that of Red Lake. And above it, a rift in the deeply gray clouds allowed sunlight to shine through. The title at the bottom read, ‘The Day of Clear Sky.’

Marcos tilted his head. “What is this?”

Madame Redwater placed both hands on the top of her cane as she looked up at the sprawling work. “Everyone remembers the Uprising. Of course they do. It ultimately brought down the empire. But people

often forget that the Uprising itself was a grisly failure. All of the Rainlords suffered terribly, but my family had the worst of it. Only a handful survived this attack you see before you.”

Wide-eyed, Marcos only listened.

“The Redwaters were the first to truly stand against the empire,” Octavia went on. “The Twins’ early victories inspired people across the continent and sparked dozens of other rebellions, which tend to get lumped in as all being part of the Uprising, too, but they weren’t. Not really. You see, because we went first, we received the full weight of the empire’s military strength. So this painting--it’s a bit of an eyesore once you know what you’re looking at, but this gallery would be incomplete without it, I feel.””

"763

‘Even this painting is a bit misleading, if you ask me,’ said Wendy. ‘The Twins could have avoided this. They had ample warning that the enemy was coming to their doorstep, but their pride wouldn’t let them retreat like they should have. They could have lived to fight another day, but this painting implies otherwise by glorifying their deaths.’

“It doesn’t glorify anything,” said Octavia, furrowing her brow. “You know that’s not why I had it painted.”

Wendy just ruffled his feathers at her.

“It’s a reminder that theirs was a cautionary tale,” said Octavia. “It’s so we don’t forget the consequences of our actions. My family has always been too reckless for my liking.”

‘I don’t know how much good it’s done,’ said Wendy.

For a moment, Octavia just glared at him. Then she wiped her face clean and looked at Marcos again. “Anyway. What do you think? Are you disappointed to hear that they weren’t quite the heroes that everyone claims they were?”

Marcos blinked. “Disappointed? Not really. Even if it’s not as nice or... as comforting, I’d still rather know the real story. Otherwise, it just feels like I’m being lied to.”

She broke into a wide grin and laughed faintly. “I don’t know if your

father ever told you this, but when he was younger, he and his sister lived here at Red Lake for a few years.”

He thought back. “Oh... yeah, I think he mentioned that.”

“Did he? I’m surprised. Regardless, the point I was trying to make was that when he first came here, he and I had much the same conversation as this one. And he said almost exactly the same thing as you did just now.”

Wendy intervened with a nod. ‘I remember it perfectly. His exact words were, ‘I would rather find more pain in the truth than any solace in a lie.’”

Octavia chortled. “That’s right. He was pretty intense for a fifteen-year-old.”

‘Of course he was,’ said Wendy. ‘He’d just been through an ordeal of his own, remember?’

“I do,” she said, and her smile waned.

Marcos had an inkling of what they were talking about. “What ordeal?””  
"764

It was Octavia’s turn to hesitate. “Did Zeff ever tell you what happened to the rest of his family?”

It was as Marcos thought. He gave a weak nod. “He didn’t mention it much, but... they were all killed, weren’t they?”

“Yes. He and Joana were the only ones to survive. Afterwards, they lived here at Red Lake until they turned eighteen. I didn’t want them to rejoin the Vanguard, but they wouldn’t listen to me.” Her expression weakened, eyes glazing over with distant memory. “I was very upset by that decision. I should have been more understanding. Instead, they pushed me away, and I just... let them.” She closed her eyes and rubbed her brow with one hand.

Marcos frowned. The old woman had been so cheerful from the first moment he’d met her. He’d wondered if nothing ever fazed her or if she simply didn’t care. Seeing her like this evoked a strange mixture of worry and gratitude. He was slow to ask his next question. “He never

really went into much detail about how they died, so... can you tell me what happened?"

Octavia looked at him heavily, then at Shenado.

'Axiolis told me about it, but I'd like to hear your version of events, if you don't mind.'

Octavia gave a slow nod. "Very well." She took so long to gather her thoughts that it seemed like she might have changed her mind. "...Zeff and Joana had no other siblings. Their parents and grandparents were all members of the Vanguard, as were many of their cousins. Zeff was on his way to joining the Vanguard as well. He'd been with Axiolis for over a year, already."

She paused again, biting her lip as she chose her next words. "The attack happened very suddenly. The Elroys were having a large family gathering out on a lake up north. About thirty miles from here. Almost all of them were present, including Zeff and Joana. The few who didn't attend were later found dead elsewhere. I didn't know anything had happened until Zeff showed up on my doorstep with Joana in his arms. She was unconscious but still alive. She didn't have a reaper yet, so Zeff had carried her all the way here on foot."

"765

Octavia seemed to have trouble continuing her story. She glanced at her reaper another time, and Wendy helped her out.

'Axiolis and Zeff were both able to identify the attackers as members of Abolish,' he said. 'Zeff recognized them from photographs, while Axiolis had actually fought against them with his previous servant. We sent a team to the lake in order to look for any other survivors, but there weren't any. Octavia and I visited as well in order to make sense of what had happened. It was very unsettling to us that Abolish could make it this far into our territory undetected while still having enough power to wipe out over two dozen servants--some of whom were quite powerful. We didn't find any answers, but it has always bothered me.

'After that, all of the Rainlords gathered to mount a counterattack, along with the Vanguard's assistance. We knew who the enemy was, where they were located, and had solid intel on most of their members. On paper, at least, they DID have enough power at their disposal to

have conducted such an attack, and we had several reports that they'd been in frequent conflict with the Vanguardian units to which the Elroys belonged. So, despite the strange circumstances, there was no doubt that they were the ones responsible, and at that point, we were all brimming with righteous fury. We fully intended to obliterate them from the face of Eleg.

'However, when we reached their base of operations, there was almost nothing left. Instead of a large military complex, we found a smoldering crater. A chasm. So deep that we could barely see the bottom. And all around it, were the heads and mutilated corpses of everyone we knew to be responsible for the attack--as well as a few we DIDN'T. Some were very surprising, being well-known and high-ranking members of Abolish who might have given us real trouble in a direct conflict. As you might imagine, we weren't sure what to make of it. And thirty years later, we still aren't.'

"766

'That is about the same as what Axiolis told me,' said Shenado. 'I've always thought that story was a little strange.'

'You are not the only one,' said Wendy. 'Octavia and I wondered if the Vanguard was somehow behind the attack on the Elroys, but we never found any evidence proving so. And of course, Zeff and Axiolis saw the attack happen and were convinced it was Abolish, so I don't think they ever doubted the Vanguard like we did. Or perhaps that was their reason for rejoining: because they thought it would help them find answers.'

‘If they ever had such suspicions, then they never told me about them,’ said Shenado. ‘I think they genuinely believe it was Abolish’s doing. And to be frank, I trust their judgment more than I trust yours.’

Wendy ruffled his feathers again. ‘I do not blame you, I suppose. But you must admit, recent events have cast a new light on that old one.’

Shenado made no response.

“If the Vanguard betrayed my family thirty years ago, then why would they wait so long to try and finish us off?” said Marcos.

Everyone blinked at him collectively.

“What?” he said.

‘Nothing,’ said Wendy. ‘That was a very level-headed question and well-posed. We have been wondering the same thing, but just because we don’t currently have an answer doesn’t mean there isn’t one.’

Shenado came to land on Marcos’ shoulder. ‘It hardly makes much difference at this point. We’re in a fight now whether we like it or not. How goes the gathering of the allies, by the way?’

“Fairly well so far,” said Octavia. “Our conflict has gained quite a lot of attention. The fearmongers are saying a war in Sair would destabilize the entire continent, so there are a number of parties interested in preventing it.”

‘And a few in exacerbating it,’ added Wendy.

“Of course.”

“Do you think it will really come to war?” asked Marcos.

“If Lawrence continues to ignore our demands, then yes. Soon enough, we’ll have ample strength to lay siege to Rhein’s Keep.””  
"767

‘The Vanguard will have a real problem on its hands if that happens,’ said Wendy, ‘because it won’t just be us. There will be dissenters to deal with as well. We’ve sent word to all of the Vanguardian leaders, explaining our circumstances, and we’ve received word back from

Field Marshal Sanko stating that, if the situation continues to escalate, she will come to Sair personally and order General Lawrence to stand down.'

Shenado perked up a little. 'Sanko, huh? That's excellent news, but I don't think Lawrence will listen to her. She may outrank him, but his boss is Lamont. Is she the only one you've heard from?'

Octavia nodded. "The others have all been irritatingly quiet. We're not even sure if our message reached Sermung."

'I'm not surprised,' said Shenado. 'His whereabouts are often kept secret. Even if he did receive your message, he probably won't answer you.'

"So we've been told."

'Truthfully, I wouldn't have expected any of them to answer,' said Shenado. 'Sanko is really willing to go against her own comrades for our sake? That is a very bold decision on her part, especially considering she doesn't have any ties to the Elroys that I know of.'

'Believe it or not, some people in positions of power still give half-a-damn about the rules,' said Wendy.

Octavia breathed a curt laugh. "When I was younger, I was quite keen to meet all of the strongest women in the world--or at least, all of the ones who wouldn't kill me for looking at them the wrong way. So naturally, Wendy and I have met her before. A few times, in truth. Not very friendly, that woman. I don't think she likes us much. But I've never gotten the impression that she cares about anything more than she cares about justice and the rule of law."

'I've heard others say as much about her as well,' said Shenado. 'But you'll have to forgive me if I'm a bit more skeptical than usual.'

'Of course. We're in no rush to trust anyone from the Vanguard, either.'

"768 -- LXXXVI.

Chapter Eighty-Six: 'Turn toward the needful...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The police presence here wasn't as strong as the rest of Gray Rock, and Hector had ended up visiting this area frequently during his patrols. Just in the past three days, he'd thwarted two attempts at robbery, one at rape, and another at murder. At the moment, however, he wasn't here on patrol. Garovel had a different task for him now that the sun had risen.

The unmarked building on the featureless street corner had taken a while to find. He barely noticed the small sign by the front door. 'Free breakfast,' it said in thin letters.

He proceeded inside and found it just as rundown as the exterior, though the smell was slightly more welcoming. The very first chamber was a large refectory with a crowd of disheveled persons afoot. Hector had tried to match attire in order to blend in, but now that he got a good look at what they were wearing, he was starting to think he'd gone a bit overboard. Sure, none of them seemed to be wearing fresh clothes, but they weren't in rags like him. After silently consulting Garovel about it, he decided to pull off the most shredded pieces and trash them before he attracted too much attention. He kept his hat and ridiculous mustache, however.

There was a line for hot food at the counter, but Hector just took a seat at one of the empty tables. 'So now what do I do?' he asked.

'Just observe and listen,' said Garovel. 'The first step is establishing a presence. It'd be a little off-putting if you just walk up to them and start asking about their lives.'

Hector saw a few people eyeing him oddly. 'You really think this is going to work?'

'No idea. Could be a total waste of time.'

He shot the reaper a look. 'Garovel, what the hell? Are you serious?'

Garovel snickered and shrugged. 'Relax. Just think of it as getting more acquainted with your local community.'

'This "local community" is on the other side of the city.'

'Semantics.'

"768 -- LXXXVI.



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"769

Alone at his table, Hector just tried to make himself comfortable. Despite all the people, the place remained fairly quiet, and no one seemed interested in approaching him. Garovel wandered around, eavesdropping on their hushed conversations.

‘Let’s see. These guys are talking about the food. Seems they’re enjoying it. Over here, they’re talking about the weather. Cold front coming in, apparently. Next, we’ve got a conversation about Madison Reach. This guy thinks she’s super hot.’

‘I don’t even know who that is,’ said Hector.

‘Doesn’t matter. Boring topic. Ah, these people are talking about you. Vigilante in Gray Rock. They’re scared. That’s too bad. What else we got? Hmm... Oh, here we go. This guy’s talking about himself. His buddy just called him Frank. Sounds like Frank used to be a carpenter. Strange. You’d think that would be a pretty stable line of work. Maybe he got injured.’

Hector continued listening for a while longer. After an hour, he wasn’t sure they’d made much progress. Most of these people were only here to eat breakfast after all, and that didn’t exactly require them to volunteer their life stories to one another. He and Garovel departed for Warrenhold soon afterward.

It was a ways back, and after armoring up, Hector took the opportunity to practice with a couple different methods of transport. The first was a kind of self-propelled, one-seater train. Essentially, he just materialized an iron track with a chair on it and then pushed the chair along by adding metal from the backend. From there, he could lay more track as he went while simultaneously annihilating the metal behind him.

He thoroughly enjoyed traveling with this method, if only because it allowed him to sit down and basically float toward his destination like a magician; but in practice, he found it rather unwieldy to navigate around pedestrians and cars. He tried doing it over the tops of buildings instead, but that meant constantly materializing bridges,

which were not only more complicated but also required support structures, and he couldn't very well create a metal column in the middle of a busy intersection. And apart from all of that, as a general means of travel, it was just slow. He hoped to improve on all of these things as his proficiency increased, but it seemed like that might take a while."

"770

The second method of transport that Hector tried was a bit more haphazard. It consisted of launching himself into the air with iron platforms and then trying to break his fall instead of his body. He was often unsuccessful. On the plus side, super jumping over buildings was fun as hell, as was improvising ramps and slides and arching platforms to catch himself. It was just that the priorities, of course, were always to avoid endangering bystanders or destroying property, which ended up translating into an abundance of faceplants and pratfalls for Hector.

As he waited for his spine to realign and his arm to start bending the right way again, he let out a heavy groan and annihilated the twisty ramp he'd created for himself on the way down. Perhaps he'd made it a little too twisty. 'Garovel... I'd really like a new motorcycle now...'

The reaper snorted a laugh.

'Do I really have to wait until I get a license?' said Hector.

'It's for the best. Just bear with it for now. We'll find you a new bike soon.'

Hector grumbled and started walking. He'd made the ramp spit him out on the edge of a grassy park, and there were more than a few onlookers for his graceless landing. At least these people didn't look too scared of him. One kid even gave a big wave and shouted, "Yo, Darksteel!"

Hector smiled inside his helm and returned a more hesitant wave of his own.

Garovel was still up high and didn't notice, probably looking elsewhere in case of fresh trouble that might have needed their attention. 'On the bright side, this is really good practice. Maybe you can't tell, but I've seen you improving each day. In fact, I think you should keep traveling

like this even after you get a new bike and just have the motorcycle in reserve for long trips.'

'Ugh...'

'Trust me. The less reliant you are on technology, the better.'

He knew Garovel had a point. And training wasn't supposed to be easy, anyway.

Eventually, they made it back home, and Hector was ready to help out the reconstruction crew again, but when he made his way through the dilapidated front gate and up the main path, he spotted a cluster of unfamiliar vehicles.

They were all news vans, he realized. 'Oh... fuck!'"  
"771

'Wow, look at 'em all,' said Garovel. 'I guess it was only a matter of time until people found out that Warrenhold has a new owner.'

'Shit shit shit shit.'

'Relax, they haven't spotted you yet. And hey, at least they're not too scared to ask you for an interview.'

'Agh...'

'Y'know, you could just go up and talk to them.'

'Fuck no!'

'C'mon, it's only a few cameras and potentially millions of people watching your every move.'

'Fuck you!'

'Alright, alright,' laughed Garovel. 'Then just treat the cameras the same way you treat guns.'

'That... that's a good idea.'

'Of course it is. My ideas are always good.'

Hector shifted his grip on the rucksack over his shoulder. He'd brought it with him today in order to hold a change of clothes along with the hat and mustache he'd been wearing earlier. He took a deep breath and started toward the central building's front entrance.

As soon as they noticed him approaching, the reporters crowded around and stuck microphones up to his helm, asking so many simultaneous questions that he couldn't hear any single one clearly.

When he clapped iron around their cameras, everyone went abruptly quiet. To their credit, however, that wasn't enough to deter them for very long.

"Mr. Goffe, why have you come to Gray Rock?"

"He's a lord now, you idiot. Lord Goffe, what do you have to say to the people who still believe you are a criminal?"

"Can you give us your personal accounting of the events of the Calman High Massacre?"

"Imbecile! Don't ask him that!"

"Lord Goffe, what is the nature of your relationship with the royal family?"

'Y'know, you could just tell them to get off your land,' said Garovel.

Hector considered that, even opened his mouth to do so, but unsurprisingly, he struggled to say anything at all. After a few more moments of listening to their bickering noise, he decided to just push through and go inside. He annihilated the metal around their cameras right before he closed the tall door behind him and barricaded it with a wall of iron. He could still hear their muffled shouts from the other side."

"772

'That wasn't so bad,' said Garovel.

Hector destroyed his helm and rubbed his face.

The repairs to this old antechamber had come along nicely. It was mainly just simple wood and stone, but Hector didn't think anything

fancier would have suited him. He was mildly surprised to find no one immediately around.

‘Hmm,’ said Garovel, his skull twitching to the side. ‘It seems those weren’t our only guests. Prince Meriwether is here.’

‘What? What’s he doing here? And why would he show up unannounced?’

‘And there’s someone else... someone I can’t quite... Oh, wait, no. That’s Lynn.’

Hector froze up.

‘Her weird aura is like a fog. I can’t pinpoint her location. I just know that she’s around here somewhere. She’s probably with the prince, though. I doubt she’d be wandering around on her--’ Garovel stared at him. ‘Hector? You okay there, buddy?’

‘Lynn’s really here? Why would she--? Agh... You’re sure?’

‘Mmhmm.’

He could feel himself already beginning to panic. He started pacing between the room’s pair of wide staircases. ‘What do I do? Oh no, oh fuck...’

‘Alright, Hector, what’s going on? Is this gonna be a constant thing with you and Lynn?’

‘Uh... mgh...’

‘Oh, c’mon. Don’t start this hesitation-business with me again. We’re past that, aren’t we? Just tell me.’

‘Ah... ergh...’

‘Do you want me to guess? We could turn it into a game. Quack if your problem with her involves a duck-billed platypus in some way.’

‘Garovel, what the--?’

‘Ponies! She told you she hates ponies, and now you don’t think you can be friends with her anymore! I’m right, aren’t I?! Man, I’m good at this!’

‘You’re an asshole...’

‘Hector. Obviously, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong. And since you’re about to go talk to her, now might be a good time to ask me for advice. Unless you’d rather handle it on your own, that is.’

‘Y-you... I... ugh. Y-you can’t tell anyone. Ever.’

‘Okay.’

‘I mean it, Garovel. You can’t. If you do... I’ll... fucking... I don’t know-- just don’t!’

‘Alright, geez. What, do you have a crush on her or something?’

Hector’s brain decided to stop letting him form words. His face flushed red, and he had to avert his eyes.

For a moment, the reaper just stared at him awkwardly. ‘Oh.’ Another beat passed. ‘Seriously?’”

"773

Rather than answering, Hector merely leaned on the nearest wall for support.

‘Huh,’ said Garovel. ‘Um. Okay. I’m guessing you don’t intend to tell her how you feel.’

‘Of course not. Are you kidding me?’

‘That’s fine, then. If you don’t plan on confessing, then there’s really nothing to be freaking out about, is there?’

Hector squinted and scratched his forehead.

‘Just remain calm and collected. She’s not going to figure it out unless you tell her, and it’s not like I’m going to tell her, either. Your secret is perfectly safe. Just remember, you’ve dealt with many high-pressure situations before. You can handle a normal conversation with Lynn.’

‘Uh... you’re not gonna try to convince me to confess? That’s what everyone says to do, isn’t it? Don’t drag things out, ‘cuz it just gets... er... more painful over time or some shit like that?’

‘Well. Ideally, you would do that as soon as possible and see what happens, but--and you can correct me if I’m wrong about this--but I suspect that a physical relationship with someone would be a very big deal for you. It’s a big deal for most people, obviously; I’m just saying it’d be even more so for you.’

‘Er...’

‘Because you’re just such a special snowflake, Hector.’

‘Fuck you...’

The reaper laughed again. ‘You understand what I’m saying, though, right? You’re very young, and so is she. And given your social difficulties, I wouldn’t want you to rush into anything. You can if you want to, though. Just let me know, and I’ll advise you as best I can in that regard.’

‘Y-you’re talking like I don’t even have to worry about being rejected...’

‘Oh, rejection would make things so much simpler. Hector, if she rejected you, yes, it would suck, but then you could move on and stop worrying about your feelings for her, because you’d know that nothing could ever come of them.’

‘Eh... I don’t think it’d be that easy for me, Garovel...’

‘I think you’d be surprised. Rejection is very straightforward. No one likes it, but it’s way less complicated than acceptance.’”

"774

‘...I didn’t realize you were such an expert on romance,’ said Hector. ‘Do you even... I mean... do reapers even... er...?’

‘No. We lose all sexual desires when we lose our bodies. And personally, I’m glad, because that shit sucked. Thank you, biology.’

‘So in other words... you don’t really know what you’re talking about.’

‘Hey, I had my share of relationships while I was alive.’

‘Yeah, back when clubbing someone over the head and dragging them into a cave was considered a first date.’



‘First of all, that’s historically inaccurate. The Lyzakks were not cavemen. And secondly, what you’re describing is basically rape, which I have never approved of, thank you very much.’

‘Well, that’s good to know.’

‘Would you just listen to my advice? I’m old and wise, dammit.’

‘I don’t think an old and wise person would need to say that.’

‘Hmm. Maybe I can convince you with an impression, then. HEY, EVERYONE, I’M THE DARKSTEEL SOLDIER. I’M SUPER SHY AND MODEST, BUT LOOK AT ALL THE SHIT I’M STILL MANAGING TO GIVE MY REAPER. AREN’T I AWESOME? How was that? Pretty accurate, right?’

And maybe it was the way Garovel had phrased it, or maybe it was just the big dumb voice the reaper had used, but Hector broke down into a fit of laughter. It hit him so suddenly and so strongly that he had to lean against the wall again in order to stop himself from doubling over onto the floor. He tried to keep his voice down, but that only seemed to make it even funnier.

Garovel couldn’t help absorbing a few chuckles via proxy. ‘Wow, that really got you, didn’t it? I’ve never seen you laugh this hard before.’

Slowly, Hector composed himself. He thought he was okay, but as he looked at Garovel again, he found the laughter creeping back into his lungs.

“What’s so funny?” came Lynn’s voice.

Hector turned and saw her standing there in the eastern doorway. His body tried to freeze up on him again, but a lingering cluster of amused rumbles prevented it. “It’s--ah-ha... i-it’s nothing. G-Garovel was just... aha--being Garovel...”

"775

Lynn just leaned against the doorframe and folded her arms. She had a new eye patch, Hector realized. This one was white like her cloak, and it made the bronzy flesh tones of her face stand out all the more. And with her deeply black hair, her Intarian heritage had never been

more apparent.

Hector was losing his humor now as he very successfully tried not to stare at her.

‘Ask her what brings her here,’ Garovel told him.

“Uh... w-what brings you to Warrenhold?”

“Her Highness gave me a mission and told me to ask you for your assistance.”

“Oh.” He cleared his throat. “What kind of mission?”

“I’m escorting Prince Meriwether to Sair. He and I both have business there. His is more urgent than mine, though.”

‘Sair?’ said Garovel. ‘Hmm.’

“What do you... er, why do you need my help?”

“You’d be my backup,” she said. “Sair is a little unstable right now, so Her Highness said I should take someone else along if possible. But Roman is out of the country, and if I took Harper, then there wouldn’t be anyone in Sescoria capable of guarding the Queen. That leaves you. So here I am.”

“Ah... you could have just called.”

“And give you the chance to run away from me again? I don’t think so.”

Hector winced. He’d hoped she’d forgotten about that.

“Why did you run away? It’s been bothering me.”

‘Garovel, help...’

‘Tell her you had a poop-related emergency.’

Hector’s eyes widened, and he rubbed his forehead in order to hide his expression. ‘Are you fucking kidding?! That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!’

‘Is it stupid? Or is it genius?’

‘It’s stupid!’

‘Well, phrase it more diplomatically, then. Don’t say you almost shat yourself. Say you had an upset stomach.’

‘You--!’

‘Quickly now. She’s waiting for an answer.’

He grit his teeth. “I... uh... I had... ah...”

She stepped a little closer. “You...?”

“I... I had an upset stomach, so... I kinda... uh... needed to leave.” He chanced a look, but he couldn’t tell if she was buying it or not.”

"776

“Are you lying to me?” said Lynn with a narrowing eye.

He was all in now. “N-no...”

“Because at the time, it seemed like you were trying to avoid my question.”

“Er... I was just... embarrassed. I still am, actually, so... p-please stop asking me about it...”

‘Ooh, that’s good. Nice touch.’

“Fine,” she said. “Then what was the answer to my question before? You were about to say something before suddenly telling me it was nothing and then leaving.”

“Uh...”

‘You don’t remember,’ said Garovel.

“I don’t remember,” said Hector.

Lynn looked annoyed with him. But after a moment, she relented.

“Well, whatever. I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Hector would have breathed a huge sigh of relief if she hadn’t still been watching.

“So do you want to come to Sair with us?” she asked. “It’s not a royal

order, if that's what you were thinking. I'm sure I can protect the prince on my own just fine."

Hector hesitated again and glanced at Garovel for another assist.

'Ask for more information first. I'd like to know what the Prince's urgent business is before we commit to an impromptu trip out of the country.'

That seemed incredibly obvious now, and Hector wasn't sure why he'd needed Garovel to explain it to him. "Can you tell me about, um... more about why you're going to Sair? It's kind of sudden, isn't it?"

"We're going to meet the Sandlords. Prince Meriwether's wife happens to be one of them. She recently returned to Sair on her own at her family's request, and now Her Highness is sending the Prince as an ambassador to assess the situation there. And to negotiate something, I think. I didn't follow everything she told him. She talked to him for a long time."

"Huh. I, uh--I see. And you said... you have your own business in Sair, too?"

"Yeah, I'm going to meet a man named Haqq Najir. He's a Sandlord, too, and a friend of Harper's." Lynn held up her left hand, the one wearing the bone gauntlet beneath her dark gray gloves. "I talked to him over the phone the other day, and he said he would tell me how to unlock the full potential of this thing if I pay him a visit."  
"777 -- LXXXVII.

"Full potential?" said Hector. "Oh, so... you're going there to get stronger?"

"That's the hope."

'What do you think, Hector?' said Garovel. 'Want to go with them?'

Hector turned away from Lynn and rubbed his neck as he eyed the opposite doorway. 'I really DON'T, actually.'

'Why not?'

'Because it means I'd... I'd have to be around... her.'

‘But I thought you really liked her.’

‘Yeah! That’s why I don’t wanna be near her!’

‘I’m not sure you understand what “like” means, Hector.’

‘Ergh, I need an excuse to stay here...’

‘Sure, Hector. It’s no big deal. The woman you care about is venturing into a volatile country where she’ll probably face all kinds of danger. There are bound to be many innocent people there in need of help, as well. And this Haqq Najir fellow probably has all sorts of useful information. Not to mention that you’d be helping your country and that the Queen requested it. But y’know, just forget all that. It’s obviously more important that we stay here so that you can... help some construction workers do their jobs slightly faster.’

‘I... I stopped a murder the other day...’

‘And that was very good, Hector. Gold star for you.’

He looked at Garovel, then back at Lynn. ‘...Dammit.’

Chapter Eighty-Seven: ‘Thy bitter heart, bear down...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Despite how spacious it was, Vanessa Goffe’s private chamber was almost full. Boxes from the old home in Brighton had arrived a few days ago. Most of them, she didn’t know what to do with. Part of her just wanted to burn everything and forget about it, but her less impulsive side fought against that notion.

There was still no electricity. According to Madame Carthrace, the new generator would arrive in a few days, but Vanessa wasn’t terribly bothered about it. She’d always liked candlelight well enough. It reminded her of her childhood. The quieter moments of it, at least.

Without a working television to occupy her attention, Vanessa had taken to reading. It didn’t really matter what the book was, nor did it matter if she retained any of it. Just the distraction of fresh words in her mind was enough. This current one about war during the last century was a morbid bore through the majority of its pages, but the part about the Jungle Wars managed to hold her interest. She recalled Mr. Norez mentioning them at their dinner with the Queen."

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"778

Forty years, those conflicts had lasted, each one progressively bloodier and more expansive than the last, and all stemming from the same dispute over the Corvana Jungle. Apparently, the land had been thought worthless by all seven of the countries through which it extended, until someone discovered a network of diamond mines therein. Of those seven countries, only Jesbol, Melmoore, and Corrico still existed today. The successive wars ruined all of the others.

Vanessa rested the book on the nightstand by her bed and rubbed her eyes.

She didn't often leave this dark room. Some days, she didn't even get out of bed. Sleep was perhaps the only thing she actually looked forward to anymore. It was the easiest way to avoid thinking about Samuel.

More than once, she'd considered ending her own life. Maybe burn herself along with all of those boxes. Poetic, but probably a terrible way to go. In the end, she realized that, regardless of the method, she simply didn't have the conviction. And she didn't know why, either. She didn't feel afraid of dying, necessarily, and if there was any point left in

living, she couldn't tell what it was; but even still, she didn't want to go through with it. Maybe it was just the natural human impulse. Or maybe it was the knowledge that Samuel wouldn't have approved.

Suicide would have been difficult, anyway. For whatever reason, Amelia Carthrace seemed to think it necessary to keep Vanessa apprised of the reconstruction's progress on a daily basis, and Jamal Easton checked in even more frequently. The man never said so, but Vanessa was fairly certain that Hector had ordered him to make sure that she was eating. She had lost quite a bit of weight recently--not that it was any of that stupid boy's business.

Hector rarely came to her himself. She couldn't tell if he was just that busy or if it'd finally sunk in that she didn't want to see him. Regardless of the cause, today proved to be an exception.

The knock at her door stirred her out of her flat-eyed daze.

"...Mom? Can I come in?"

There wasn't much point in refusing, she felt. "Yes."

Hector entered. He looked around her room, taking in the mess and probably judging her for it. "I'm going to Sair for a little while," he told her. "I'll be back soon."

"779

Vanessa eyed her son for a long moment, debating whether or not she wanted to respond. She decided against it.

Hector didn't seem to appreciate her silence. His annoyed stare was something she had become well-acquainted with during their few recent encounters. "I came to see if there was anything you needed before I leave," he said.

The lack of hesitation in his voice did not escape Vanessa's notice. He was telling her that he was going to leave the country. Telling her. Not asking for permission. Not even hoping for approval, by the sound of it.

He was changing. She could see it with each new visit he paid her. The young Lord Goffe. It seemed like he was genuinely starting to believe himself worthy of the title.



How ridiculous everything had become.

"I don't need anything from you," she said blankly.

That wasn't enough to get him to leave, however. "...How have you been doing? Mr. Easton said you haven't left this room in almost a week."

Her eyes glazed over. "It's comfortable."

"Mom, I... I worry about you."

Her eyes narrowed at him. Her impulse was to ask why, but she already knew what he would say. The same thing as before--because she was his mother and because he loved her.

And she did not wish to hear that again.

It made no sense whatsoever. How could he love her? After everything that had happened, everything she'd said to him, how the hell could that be possible?

She'd always found it strange. Mothers were supposed to feel something different for their children, weren't they? Maternal instinct? Where was hers? She'd never felt it. From the moment she first realized she was pregnant, she'd kept expecting something to change, some switch to be flipped inside of her. She thought, surely, she would be able to feel it when she held him in her arms for the first time. It was the only thing that let her endure those nine horrific months. But no. All she'd felt was relief that it was finally over. And afterward, she thought it might come when he took his first steps. Or when he could feed himself. Or dress himself. Or go to school on his own.

But nothing. Not really. He was just some child. No different from anyone else's. The only distinction was that she had a societal obligation to this one. So she pretended. She played the role as best as she was able."

"780

She had never loved him, not truly. And yet now, he was the only family she had left. Worse, he was the only person to whom she had any meaningful connection. Friends? She'd never excelled at making those in the first place, but the few she'd possessed had abandoned

her the second they learned her son was a fugitive.

It was all his fault. He'd ripped her out of the world and placed her here. She'd already decided that she would never forgive him for that. She knew she would carry that grudge all the way to her grave.

However.

There was still... something. A conflict. She'd realized it after Hector returned from his fight with Abolish.

If he died, she would be entirely alone.

Even if he was to blame for everything, even if she didn't want to be around him, Hector really was all she had now. Vanessa genuinely didn't know what she would do if Hector died, too. Pitiful as it was, she didn't think she had it in her to go back out into the world again and build a new life for herself from scratch.

A small part of her wanted to admit this to him right now. The notion flared up in her mind, and for a terrible moment, as Hector again stood there waiting for her response, Vanessa wasn't sure what was going to come out of her mouth.

But she struggled in silence for long enough that Hector apparently took it to mean that she wanted him to leave. "Alright," was all he said as he turned for the door.

"Hector," she blurted.

He stopped and looked back at her.

She hesitated, unsure of what she was about to say. "...Is your trip going to be dangerous?"

The question seemed to confuse him. "Um... probably, yeah."

"Then... be careful."

Hector stared at her like she'd just confessed to murder.

She immediately regretted what she said and looked away, filling her vision with the empty wall next to her.

"...I will. Th--uh... th-thanks, Mom..."

She shut her eyes and rubbed her forehead as she listened to him

leave.

--++--++--

The helipad atop Rhein's Keep hadn't been used in a while. It was mostly reserved to non-servant VIPs, which they hadn't had many of, as of late. Today was different, however.

Lawrence's blue tie lashed against the wind as he waited by the staircase. He checked his watch. It wasn't like Parson Miles to be late."  
"781

--donation bonus week (day 1/7, page 1/3)--

Dergoz sat on Lawrence's shoulder, fidgeting impatiently. 'Why did it have to be Parson?' he said privately.

'Could be worse,' said Lawrence. 'Could have been Jackson. Or Sanko.'

'We might end up seeing the latter anyway, if this conflict doesn't get resolved soon.'

'Something to look forward to.'

'You do realize that she will kill us both if she learns of our involvement, right?'

'Of course. I was being facetious.'

'Hilarious.'

'Perhaps Parson will protect us.'

'Now I know you're joking.'

There came the sound of a distant tearing, that of a jet through the sky, and Lawrence searched the eastern horizon. Sure enough, he saw the speck there on its rapid approach. Rather than a jet, however, it was just one lone man.

Parson didn't need to slow down at all. He just stopped in an instant and was standing right there on the helipad. And after a beat, a surging gale caught up to him, so strong that it might have knocked

Lawrence off his feet if he hadn't braced himself.

Part of the man was missing. His white-and-gray airman's uniform flapped against the wind where his legs and arms should have been. After a couple blinks, however, the limbs returned to him--but not by way of regrowth. Rather, the flesh swirled back into existence, as if springing from the wind itself.

As the air settled down again, Lawrence approached to greet him.

Captain General Parson Miles grinned as soon as he saw Lawrence, but before they could exchange words, he held up a hand. His ragged overcoat was still flapping wildly, and Parson reached into it to retrieve something. He pulled out a localized vortex, at the center of which were two undisturbed, double-scoop ice cream cones. His reaper melted out from his back. Overra was her name.

"Pretty good, right?" said Parson. "Now, I know what you're thinking, and the answer is yes, the second one IS for you. You're welcome." He offered an ice cream to Lawrence.

Dergoz sighed publicly, but Lawrence just shrugged and accepted Parson's generosity.

'C'mon,' said Overra, 'you gotta admit, it's pretty impressive. He picked 'em up in Kuros, and they're not even melting.'

'What?!' shouted Dergoz. 'You stopped in Kuros along the way?! Why?!'

"Uh, to get ice cream. Duh. We were already running late, so I figured a quick pit stop wouldn't matter."

'Tell me you are joking!' said Dergoz. 'If you stopped in Kuros, then the Sandlords almost certainly know that you are in Sair now!'"

"782

--donation bonus week (day 1/7, page 2/3)--

Parson was busy licking his ice cream. It had chocolate sprinkles.

"Yeah, so?"

'So?! So we're about to go to war with them, you jackass!'

"I thought it was the Rainlords we were having problems with," said Parson.

Dergoz had to take a moment to calm himself. 'There is a very real possibility that they could forge an alliance with each other. Which means you've just revealed your location to the enemy. For an ice cream.'

"Oh." He still hadn't stopped eating. "Well, I'm sure it'll be fine. And besides, the Sandlords make really good ice cream. Surprisingly good, in fact. You'd think they'd stink at it, right? Being all about heat and sand and everything."

'Agh! Why did you even come here?!'

"Just following orders."

"From Sermung?" asked Lawrence, figuring it was time to intervene.

'Lamont, actually, but same difference,' said Overra.

Lawrence eyed them both up and down. At a glance, Parson was an unassuming young man with golden brown hair and terrible posture. He was one of the oldest servants in the world, but Overra had never let him physically age. Or perhaps he'd asked her not to age him. Either way, it was the kind of thing that tended to make a bad first impression with the other old servants. Lawrence, however, was long past such trivialities with this man. "Why are you alone? I expected you to be in company."

"Oh, yeah. My awesome tiltwing was shot down in Calthos. Thing was brand new, you believe that? Nearly lost one of my airmen, too, so I decided to make the rest of the trip on my own. Also, I wanted ice cream."

'Apologies,' added Overra. To Lawrence's eyes, she was quite a strange thing. She was a tornado, compacted in scale but constantly and silently whirling, while also bearing a mouth and eyes that consisted of nothing more than dark splotches. 'We would have been on time, otherwise.'

"Yeah. You know she hates that sort of thing."

"It's no trouble," said Lawrence, tasting his own ice cream now. Parson hadn't been wrong about its quality.

They started down the stairs together.

"So where's Zeff's head?" said Parson.

Lawrence was expecting that question. Parson had always had a tendency of somersaulting over the pleasantries and bringing up the most sensitive topic as if he were merely asking about the weather.

And it was sensitive, Lawrence knew. Especially for Parson, because Zeff had worked directly under him before Lawrence took over his position here in Sair."

"783 -- LXXXVIII.

--donation bonus week (day 1/7, page 3/3)--

Without a doubt, Parson's connection to this place and to Zeff was the biggest reason why Dergoz was displeased by his presence. Lawrence couldn't decide if he was pleased that Zeff couldn't be revived and interrogated.

"We're keeping his head in cold storage," said Lawrence. "We've been hoping to ship him out of the country, but the Rainlords are watching us too closely. They've been searching every vehicle that leaves this building."

"Ah. And if you tried to take it yourself, they'd seize the castle, instead."

"Assuming they don't gang up on me."

"Right. I suppose I could take it while you hold down the fort."

'We probably shouldn't remove our one real bargaining chip from the table,' said Overra. 'If worse comes to worst, we may need it.'

"True. What about the Elroy kid? You have both him and his reaper, right?"

"Yes. They have already been interrogated, but if you would like to do it yourself, I will arrange a room for you."

"Maybe. Haven't decided yet."

'What of Gema Elroy?' said Dergoz. 'Any developments?'

‘No. Apparently, she just disappeared. Even the watchers haven’t been able to track her down. The only thing that seems clear is that she must have someone helping her.’

‘They could be hiding her in Aguary,’ said Dergoz.

‘Doubtful. We’re fairly certain that she’s still in Intar somewhere. But it’s always possible that she slipped past our net.’

“Invading Aguary without rock solid intel would be a gigantic mistake,” said Parson.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Tell me,’ said Overra, ‘have any of the Rainlords sided with us?’

Lawrence shook his head. “None in Sair, no. The Blackburns are the only one who haven’t declared for either side.”

‘The Blackburns, huh? Now, that is interesting. I think Parson and I will go talk to them.’

‘Are you kidding?’ said Dergoz. ‘They might take you prisoner!’

Parson shrugged. “Eh, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Dergoz kept his sigh private. ‘How in the world did this man become a captain general?’

Chapter Eighty-Eight: ‘The land that breeds austerity...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector had never been on a plane before, much less an international one--or royal one. He didn’t think that the Lumenbel family’s private jet was providing him with a very typical first experience. Something about the giant seats and minibar tipped him off.

Their entourage was extremely small. It really was just him, Garovel, Meriwether, Lynn, and a pair of pilots on board. He supposed any extra bodyguards for the Prince would have just meant more people for Hector and Lynn to protect, but he had at least been expecting a couple more ambassadors to come along."

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"784

--donation bonus week (day 2/7, page 1/3)--

Hector had a corner booth all to himself. He could see Prince Meriwether sleeping in the center of the plane. The man must have been tired, because it was barely past midday. They’d set out almost as soon as Hector agreed to go with them.

‘Hey, when’s your birthday?’

Hector blinked at the sudden inquiry. ‘Uh... why?’

‘Just curious,’ said Garovel. ‘It’s gotta be soon, right? Or did I already miss it?’

‘No, ah... it’s next month, actually.’

‘Aha. What day?’

‘The twenty-fifth.’

‘You’ll turn seventeen, right?’

‘Y-yeah...?’

‘I guess it’s a good time to bring up the topic of aging.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, do you want me to stop your body from aging physically?’

His eyes widened. ‘Uh...’

‘I can keep you eternally youthful, is what I’m saying.’

‘I... uh... hell, I don’t know.’

‘Personally, I think you should at least wait until your late twenties before having me press the pause button, but I figured I should ask in case you really like being a teenager.’

A beat passed, and Hector eyed Garovel. ‘Why the FUCK would I like being a teenager?’

The reaper snorted a laugh. ‘Well. I don’t know. You’d get to feel young. And. Spritely?’

‘Ugh. Screw that. Now that I think about it, uh... I think I’d rather age normally until I’m, like, fifty or something.’

‘Really? Well, we’ll see how you feel in a few years.’

‘Hmm.’

‘That’s actually a pretty common sentiment, though. You’d think more servants would want to be eternally young, but as it turns out, most sixty-year-olds don’t want strangers treating them like they’re twenty-year-olds.’

‘Choosing to be eternally young seems kind of... douche-y.’

Garovel laughed again. ‘Maybe it is.’

‘How the hell do you prevent aging, anyway?’

‘Magical reaper juice.’

‘...Ew.’

‘Nah, it’s just a kind of smaller-scale extension of the ability to regenerate your body. I actually don’t know the exact reason why it works, because no one knows what causes aging in the first place. There are lots of interesting theories about it, though!’

‘Please, no--’

‘There’s one theory that aging is caused by reproductive hormones that promote growth early in life but end up driving the body into decline later on, because they’re still trying to maintain reproduction despite it no longer being possible. There’s another theory that it’s selected genetically, like a literal “biological clock” embedded into your DNA. Then there’s the one regarding the progressive shortening of telomeres--’

‘Alright, alright, I get it. Shit is complicated.’

‘It is. By the way, Lynn is staring at you.’”

"785

--donation bonus week (day 2/7, page 2/3)--

Hector had been trying not to look at her since takeoff. He glanced at Lynn from across the cabin, and sure enough, her one eye was indeed locked on him.

‘Maybe you should go talk to her.’

‘Maybe I shouldn’t.’

‘Oh, look, she’s coming over to talk to you instead.’

‘Fuck!’

She sat down across the table from him, resting her sheathed blade by her side. "So how have things been going in Gray Rock? I never asked."

"Er... uh..."

'Relax. Tell her things are going fine.'

"Th-they're going fine."

"What's your new castle like? I didn't really get to see much of it."

"Oh, uh... m-most of it is underground."

She cocked an eyebrow at that. "Underground? Oh, I guess that's why they call it Warrenhold, huh?"

"Yeah. It's a lot bigger than I, um... er, there's a lot more space than I was expecting."

"Sounds cool. Hope I get to see it later."

"Uh... hah..." He scratched his chin as his eyes searched for something to latch onto. 'Garovel, what do I say?'

'Tell her you think she has a rockin' body.'

'Garovel!'

'Sorry. Ask her how things are in the capital.'

"H-how are things in Sescoria?"

"Non-violent, at least. The Queen's been busy navigating a political minefield, instead."

"It must have been hard on her. Losing, uh... I mean, the way she lost so many of her brothers at once." Hector eyed the unconscious prince again.

"They've all been working hard," said Lynn. "While we're going to Sair, Prince David is headed to Intar."

"By himself?"

"Intar isn't as dangerous as Sair is right now, but he does have some normal bodyguards with him." She paused. "All of this is a state secret,

by the way, even the nature of our visit to Sair now. I'm not sure if I made that clear earlier. So don't go telling people about it when we get back."

Hector managed a weak laugh. "The last thing you need to worry about is me talking to people..."

That seemed to amuse her. "I noticed you had some reporters nosing around."

"Er, yeah... Did I mention how good your timing was?"

"Heh, maybe not that good. They bothered us on the way in. Why were they there, anyway?"

"I... I think they wanted an interview."

"Ah. You've sure gotten popular."

"Egh..."

"Better than them being afraid of you, I guess. Progress."

"That's what Garovel said."

She leaned back in her seat. "Maybe their fear is starting to shift over to me."

"786

--donation bonus week (day 2/7, page 3/3)--

Hector looked up at her for a change. "Why would they be afraid of you?"

She motioned with her left hand. "Apparently, this thing makes people uneasy."

"Oh... but, uh... I'm pretty sure people consider you a hero. Er, h-heroine...? I mean, the White Sword doesn't really sound like a name that they'd give to a villain..."

"Ha. That's a good point, I guess. It's just that I've started noticing a lot of people acting uncomfortably around me lately. Though, you're the only one who's actually run away from me."

“But, er--that wasn’t because I was scared of you.”

‘Not in that sense, at least,’ said Garovel.

Lynnette just smirked and nodded.

Through the window, Hector could see barren lands stretching below him. Far into the western horizon was a sprawling mountain range, much larger than any he’d seen in Atreya.

From the air, the city of Kuros seemed to sparkle and burn under the strength of the sun. Almost every building was pure white, and the only place Hector saw any greenery was directly adjacent a shimmering oasis at the heart of town. The buildings grew taller there as well, often needle-like in design, making the area look like an enormous bed of spikes.

Soon enough, the plane touched down, and Lynn took point, exiting the aircraft first while Hector followed after Meriwether.

The heat was overwhelming, at first. Perhaps he was just accustomed to Atreya’s temperate climate, but this place felt like an oven to him. It was a strange sensation, breathing air that was already warmer than his lungs.

A group of four were there to greet them on the tarmac, all garbed so heavily in white and gold that Hector couldn’t even guess their genders. Three of them carried large parasols, seemingly for the benefit of the one in the middle.

Hector immediately noticed a reaper floating behind one of the parasol-wielders. And they certainly noticed him and Garovel, too--as well as Lynn after another moment.

Meriwether approached them and spoke first. “Hello, Nasira.”

“Welcome, my dear husband,” said the apparent woman in the center. She kept her face bowed and her hands hidden in her robe’s huge sleeves, but with how much taller she was than Meriwether, she was nearly meeting his gaze anyway.

Hector didn’t think they looked terrifically pleased to see one another.

Their two parties became one as Nasira brought everyone to a silver limousine."

--donation bonus week (day 3/7, page 1/3)--

"How have you been?" Meriwether asked his wife.

"Very well, thank you," she said. Her Valgan accent was faint enough that Hector hadn't noticed it at first. He only recognized it from its prevalence in television and movies. "How is your sister?"

"She has been quite busy proving herself more capable than my brothers and I ever dared imagine."

"I am sorry I could not stay longer in Atreya. My father was very insistent that I return home."

"You told me before. There is no need to explain again. How are the children?"

"They have missed you. Rashad, especially."

"I see."

It hadn't even occurred to Hector that Meriwether's wife had brought their children to Sair as well.

After that, the ride in the limousine became distinctly uncomfortable. The married couple exchanged no further words, leaving a heavy silence in their wake. Hector's eyes drifted to the sight of increasingly taller buildings through the window. Many of the streets were covered with huge tarps, offering plenty of shade to the legions of palely-dressed pedestrians afoot.

Since no one else in the car was speaking, Garovel apparently took that as his cue to speak with the other reaper present. 'It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Garovel, and this is Hector. Might you tell us your names?'

The other reaper seemed hesitant but said, 'Emerix. And this is Badat of Hahl Saqqaf.' He motioned to the person on Nasira's left.

'Ah, I see.'

With only the dark eyes to go on, Hector still couldn't tell if Badat was a

boy or a girl. Badat sounded like a masculine name to him, but given how unfamiliar he was with this culture, he decided not to assume anything. 'Hall Sock-off?' he asked Garovel.

"Hahl" is a Valgan word referring to a noble family,' Garovel explained privately. 'Like the word "House" in Mohssian. He's saying that Badat here is a Sandlord from the Saqqaf family.'

Hector had to consciously avoid nodding. Another heavy intermission passed, and Hector thought Garovel might revise his previous introduction to add that Hector was also the new Lord of Warrenhold, but apparently, the reaper didn't find it necessary. And Hector was glad for it, frankly. He didn't want to try to seem more important than he really was.

After a while, Garovel tried again. 'I don't suppose you feel like giving me a brief rundown of what's causing the recent instability in Sair, do you?'"

"788

--donation bonus week (day 3/7, page 2/3)--

'What difference does it make to you?' said Emerix. 'You are only here to guard your prince, are you not?'

'That, we are. I'm mainly just curious. No need to answer if you don't want to.'

Emerix mulled it over a bit, then said, 'The Vanguard attacked a Rainlord family.'

It was Garovel's turn to hesitate. 'What? Are you serious?'

'I am, indeed.'

And to Hector's surprise, Garovel had nothing else to say. He expected him to inquire further, but the reaper merely remained silent instead.

As they finally drew close to their destination, Hector couldn't help gawking a little through the window.

The Golden Fort. Even Hector had heard of this place. It wasn't difficult to see why it was one of the most famous fortresses in the entire



world. He'd heard that it was constructed from pure gold, but seeing it now, that couldn't possibly be true. It seemed obvious that the building's yellow hue came from its gigantic sandstone walls. Swirls of golden paint ran all along them, becoming particularly ornate around the main gateway, and tall white turrets rounded off every corner, hanging golden banners from their topmost windows like fluttering tongues against the constant wind.

In the main courtyard, however, there truly did stand an immense statue of solid gold. It depicted a kind of strange plant--an octet of arching leaves, each one large enough to shield a grown man from the punishing sun.

Hector exited the vehicle last and then followed everyone else inside. From what Prince Meriwether had told him before leaving, their primary goal was to meet with Nasira's father. He now wondered how plausible that would be. The castle was brimming with people, and Hector kept seeing even more reapers among the crowd as they proceeded on.

'How many servants do they have here?' asked Hector.

'Don't know,' Garovel said privately, 'but we've only been here a few minutes, and I've already counted nine.'

'Geez... And they're all crazy strong, I bet...'

'Not necessarily. Most reapers and servants don't go looking for trouble like you and I do, so they don't grow as quickly as you have over these past seven months.'

'Hmm...'

'And even the ones who DO look for it like we do probably still don't find as fucking MUCH of it as we always seem to.'

'Y-you think so?'

'Yeah. Because if they did, they'd probably get fucking killed.'

'...Was that supposed to be comforting?'

"789

‘Maybe a little comforting, yeah,’ said Garovel. ‘But please don’t pick a fight with anyone here. There are most definitely servants here who really ARE way more powerful than you.’

‘R-right.’

‘I’m almost certain that Nasira’s father is one of them. And if he is, then he’s probably near Harper’s level of strength. At least.’

‘Aw, fuck... why did we come here, again?’

Meriwether’s entourage was shown to a large guest chamber, where Nasira asked the three of them to wait. She, Badat, and Emerix disappeared afterward. The Prince took a seat by the empty fireplace and turned on the adjacent television. He started flipping through the channels, only about half of which seemed to be in Mohssian.

Hector and Lynn both remained standing, which drew Meriwether’s curious look. “I appreciate your diligence, but you are both a little too on edge, I think. I understand that you might find Sandlords somewhat intimidating, but they are not going to harm us. I assure you.”

“You seem certain, Your Highness.”

“I lived in this very castle for several years when I was younger,” said Meriwether. “I consider the people here as true and dear to me as my own family.”

That sounded like a loaded statement, considering everything Hector knew about Atreyan royalty.

‘Hmm. Ask him if he’s always known that they had reapers.’

“Uh, Prince Meriwether, sir, ah...”

“Yes?”

“Have you always known that, um... that the Sandlords have reapers on their side?”

“Not as such, no. I have always known that the people here possess special powers, of course, but I never imagined that... deathly phantoms might be the source of said powers.”

Lynn looked at Hector. “Have you already seen them around?”

He nodded. “G-Garovel has already counted nine. Er--not including

himself. And, uh--we're pretty sure there are more than that."

Lynn did not seem pleased by that news.

Meriwether, on the other hand, didn't seem particularly fazed by it. "Relax yourselves," he said. "You do not need to follow me everywhere around the castle. This place is quite safe. As long as you do not leave the grounds without me, we will be fine. You have your own business to attend to, do you not?"

"I do, but--"

Meriwether stood up again and pulled a bulky ring off of his left index finger. It featured a silvery bell with a sapphire at its heart. He offered it to Lynn. "If anyone questions why you are here, show them this.""

"790

--donation bonus week (day 4/7, page 1/3)--

Lynn's eye widened. "I can't take this, Your Highness! It's worth more than everything I own!"

"Well, be sure to return it to me later, then."

Lynn was incredulous.

Meriwether pressed onward. "Lord Haqq said he would meet you in this castle, yes?"

She managed a nod.

"Knowing him, he will probably be in the basement studying one thing or another."

"He told me where he would be."

"Ah. Good, then." The Prince turned to Hector next, making the young man tense up. "If you can, please have your reaper speak to the others around here and find out as much about the current circumstances in Sair as you can. Then report back to me. I may have need of such information."

"Ah--" Hector glanced at Garovel, and when the reaper nodded, he

said, "Y-yes, Your Highness."

"Thank you," said Meriwether. "I will remain here while I wait for Lord Abbas to see me. I suspect it will be a while. I will call Ms. Edith here if anything urgent should arise."

The Prince all but pushed them out of the room after that. Hector and Lynn exchanged looks before rejoining the crowd of people in the curved hallway. They made for the basement first, which wasn't the easiest thing to find, but Garovel was able to petition a couple of passing reapers for directions.

Hector wanted to ask Lynn more about this Haqq person, but with all the people around, he couldn't bring himself to. Instead, he settled for another private conversation with Garovel while they walked.

'Who owns this fortress?' Hector asked. 'Do you know?'

'It belongs to the Saqqaf family. My understanding is that they are the most influential of the Sandlords.'

'But Haqq Najir isn't one of them.'

'No, he would of course belong to the Najir family.'

'Okay...'

'It would be nice if we could make allies with these people.'

'Even though they're fighting the Vanguard?'

'That's not what Emerix said. He said the Rainlords are fighting the Vanguard. He didn't say the Sandlords had joined them.'

'Oh...'

'But yes, it does give me pause. I don't think the Vanguard would attack anyone without good reason. At least, I hope they wouldn't.'

'What'll happen if the Sandlords do join in?'

'Hard to say. I don't think the Rainlords can stand up to the Vanguard on their own.'

'Hmm.'"

"791 -- LXXXIX.

--donation bonus week (day 4/7, page 2/3)--

‘Either way, it’s not really our concern,’ said Garovel. ‘We’re here to protect the Prince and gather information, not get involved in someone else’s war.’

Hector threw another glance around the hallway. ‘But I thought it was our job to stick our noses where they don’t belong.’

‘Ha. Well, in this case, we don’t even know which side to help. Just because we happened to meet the Sandlords or the Rainlords first doesn’t mean they’re more deserving of assistance than the Vanguard is.’

‘...I guess things were a lot simpler when everyone was fighting Abolish.’

‘Indeed.’

Beneath the fortress, the halls became narrower, perhaps because they didn’t need to hold so many people. Hector saw guards in front of every door. Only a few of them had reapers by their side, but he noticed cameras around every corner instead.

Lynnette stopped in front of the door marked Research & Development 4. “I think this is the place,” she said.

One of the men standing guard held up a hand to bar their path. He said something in Valgan, and even though Hector didn’t know the words, he was pretty sure the man was telling them that they weren’t allowed in.

“We’ve come to meet with Lord Haqq Najir,” said Lynn. “Could you please inform him that Lynnette Edith is here to see him? He should be expecting me.”

The guards waited so long to respond that Hector wasn’t sure they’d understood her, but at length, the one on the right nodded and entered on his own. After a minute, he returned with a man in a lab coat.

“Are you Lord Haqq?” Lynn queried.

“I am.”

## Chapter Eighty-Nine: 'Answers ye seek...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

The Lord Haqq Najir had perhaps the strangest eyes Hector had ever seen. They were yellow. And the man's round glasses only served to magnify them. "Show me this gauntlet of yours," he said.

Lynn pulled her glove off to reveal the bone wrist guard. She held it out for him to examine.

"Excellent. Come with me." He ushered them past the guard and into the laboratory. The walls were filled with machinery while the center of the room hosted six full tables with more men in white coats laboring over them.

A particular sight caught Hector's attention as they passed it. A full suit of armor, it was, embedded into the eastern wall and looking like the most complicated piece of technology in the room."

"791 -- LXXXIX.

--donation bonus week (day 4/7, page 2/3)--

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"792

--donation bonus week (day 4/7, page 3/3)--

Hector had a certain appreciation for armor, and he would have liked to stop and examine it, but now didn't seem to be the appropriate time. However, he was not the only one who noticed it.

'What is that thing?' asked Garovel. 'Some kind of battle armor?'

"Ah," said Haqq. "Abbas may not look like it, but when it comes to inventing, he is nearly my equal. That over there is a joint project of ours. You should count yourselves lucky if you never learn what it is capable of."

Hector and Garovel exchanged looks.

Haqq led them into a rear room, much larger and longer than the previous one thanks to the firing range at the back. Ringed targets stood on the far end, and another man in a lab coat was busy fiddling with a bulky firearm.

A new reaper floated up behind Haqq and said something to him in Valgan.

"Yes," said Haqq. "This is Lynnette Edith and..."

'Hector and Garovel. A pleasure to meet you both.'

'Likewise,' said the other reaper. 'I am Sazandara. I hope Haqq has not been frightening you too much.'

'On the contrary, I am quite interested in his work,' said Garovel.

That earned a smile from Haqq before he returned his attention to Lynn. "Now, I shall perform some preliminary tests to gauge how strong your gauntlet is currently." He tossed a glance at Hector and Garovel. "This may take a while, so you'll probably want to go do something else."

It was Hector and Lynn's turn to exchange looks now.

"I, uh... I think I'll stick around, if it's all the same to you..."

Haqq had already moved on. "Please stand by the door and extend your shadow as far as you are able."

The man had not been exaggerating, however. It did take a while. He measured the maximum length of Lynn's violet shade, tested how



much pressure it could withstand before she felt even the slightest discomfort, gave her instructions on complex shapes to mold it into, timed her speed around the room when using only the shadow to transport herself, and then began asking her questions pertaining to her mental state.

"Have you noticed any increased aggression since you started wearing it?" Haqq asked.

"No... why? Should I have?"

"Oh, no, these are just precautionary questions," said Haqq. "You understand, yes?"

Lynnette only gave an uncertain nod."

"793

--donation bonus week (day 5/7, page 1/3)--

"To be frank," said Haqq, "we do not want you inheriting any of the psychological tendencies that belonged to the previous owner of those bones. There is no evidence to support the idea that this is even a possibility, but I believe the worry is still quite reasonable, don't you?"

"I guess..."

"So, no strange or unexplained mood swings since you began wearing it?"

"No."

"Good. That is very good." He scribbled something into his notes.

Behind him, the man with the gun from earlier fired off a rocket that soared across the chamber and obliterated a target dummy with an explosion so large that it shook the whole room. Flames and gnarled metal spikes leapt across the firing range, taking down several additional targets and even bounding back and cracking the safety glass directly behind Haqq.

Everyone turned to the stranger, who seemed quite pleased with himself until he noticed their stares.

"It works," the man said in his thick accent.

Haqq just glared at him.

“I will go make adjustments.”

“You do that,” said Haqq. He returned to his notes once the other man was gone.

‘Our apologies,’ Sazandara said to Hector and Garovel. ‘The young ones are always so enthusiastic about their work.’

Lynn took the opening to interject with her own question. “So how do I use Incineration?”

Haqq looked up. “Ah, yes. I did promise to tell you. You may not like the explanation, however.”

She merely folded her arms as she waited.

“In order to invoke the secondary ability, you must be in the correct emotional state. Which, simply put, is happiness. You must be enjoying yourself.”

It took Lynn a moment of blinking to respond. “What? I have to be happy?”

“Correct. There are two things required to invoke it. The first is enjoyment, and the second is intent to use it. Rather simple, really. The problem, of course, is that whenever you want to use the power, you will naturally be in the middle of a fight, which is a difficult environment in which to find enjoyment.”

Lynn still didn’t seem like she understood, and Hector couldn’t blame her. “Wait a minute,” she said. “I have to be... so... what?”

“It is the same as how aberrations themselves harness it,” Haqq explained. “They all have a very strong bloodlust. It is part of their nature, which as it turns out, plays a key role in their power.””

"794

“I’m not sure I can do that,” said Lynn. “I’ve always been trained to keep a cool head during a fight. Be as close to emotionless as possible.”

"That is understandable," said Haqq, "but you see, it is also your problem, not mine."

Lynn's mouth flattened.

"Regardless," Haqq continued, "after your power grows again, I would appreciate it if you paid me another visit so I can take new measurements."

"I don't think I'll be doing that," said Lynn. "It sounds like your problem, not mine."

They exchanged irate looks.

And for some reason, no one else seemed to be asking the obvious question, so Hector had to force himself to interject. "Uh... Mr. Haqq, uh... you said, Lynn's power can actually grow? H-how?"

"By absorbing human souls, of course. The same as with aberrations themselves."

Hector saw Lynn's expression sour.

"I suppose that I should also mention that your secondary ability is your only means of absorbing souls," said Haqq. "Incineration, you said it was?"

Lynn nodded. "What does Incineration actually do?"

"It ignites anything your shadow touches. And the ensuing flames cannot be extinguished by any physical means. Only yourself or some overwhelming soul pressure will be able to put them out. And to absorb a soul, you would only need to set a person on fire."

'Would it work on servants?' asked Garovel.

"No, it cannot absorb a servant's soul. But the flames will certainly cause them difficulty. And of course, it can still absorb a reaper's soul. When you set about testing it, I suggest you be extremely careful. If you hurt any innocent people in our territory, accident or not, we will hunt you down and take that gauntlet from you by whatever means necessary."

Lynn looked rather displeased by all of this information, and Hector didn't feel much differently. He did not envy her position. If the only way to grow his power was to consume human souls, he wasn't sure

what he would do. Even if someone was a bad person, did they deserve to have their soul eaten?

“What happens to the souls I absorb?” Lynn asked.

Haqq tilted his head slowly. He looked like he wanted to ask what she meant, but after a moment, his expression settled, and he seemed to get her meaning. “There is no scientific evidence to support the idea that the souls you absorb retain any kind of consciousness.”

"795

--belated donation bonus (day 5/7, page 2/3)--

“So you don’t really know,” said Lynn.

“If it is such a moral quandary for you, then you can simply avoid absorbing souls,” said Haqq. But at Lynn’s persistent look, he added, “Yes, we do not know, because there is currently no way to know. There exist no scientific instruments which can aid us in studying souls.”

‘None that WE know of at least,’ corrected Sazandara. ‘Haqq is very intelligent, and you should listen to him, but he is also more of a hardware man than anything. We haven’t devoted much time to studying souls other than to observe the enhanced physical properties they may provide for our technology.’

Lynn, of course, heard nothing of what the reaper said, and Haqq didn’t seem too keen to reiterate it to her, so Hector had to struggle through it. Sazandara helped him out by repeating a few of the things she said.

In the meantime, Garovel took the opportunity to address Haqq again. ‘I was wondering if you might do me a small favor.’

“What sort of favor?”

‘My servant is a materialization user. Would it be possible for you to confirm his element for us? We believe it to be iron, but we’re not one hundred percent certain.’

Haqq eyed Hector with an overwhelming degree of disinterest. Then he held out his hand. “Make a flat disc for me, just small enough to fit in my palm here.”

With hesitance, Hector did so. The metal accumulated in the man's hand and formed a perfectly smooth and round disc.

Haqq cocked an eyebrow at the metal. Perhaps he'd been expecting something shoddier-looking. Or perhaps he thought Hector wouldn't even be able to do it in the first place. Haqq lifted the disc to his ear and rapped a knuckle against it, listening to the ring. After a moment, he tossed the disc back to Hector. "You were right. It is iron."

Hector annihilated the disc instead of catching it.

'I was hoping for something a bit more rigorous and definitive,' said Garovel, eyeing Sazandara. 'Not that I don't trust your servant's ear.'

Haqq gave an irritated sigh.

'Haqq would be delighted to assist you,' said Sazandara. 'He will perform an emission spectrometric analysis for you. Isn't that right, Haqq?'

The man had nothing to say.

Sazandara's skeletal grin widened. 'It shouldn't take him very long. He's very skilled. Come back tomorrow.'

'Much appreciated,' said Garovel."  
"796 -- XC.

Hector gave Haqq another metal disc for examination, and the man just pocketed it and returned to asking Lynn questions, this time concerning her family's medical history. Her very apparent Intarian heritage had not escaped Haqq's notice, and she had to explain that she was indeed born in Atreya.

Hector's attention was divided when yet another reaper appeared, this time descending from the ceiling.

'Haqq, it's almost time for the assembly meeting. Asad wants you to join him.'

Haqq rolled his eyes. "He still thinks he can convince Abbas?"

‘He does. And so do I.’

“Well, of course you do.”

The reaper’s skeletal face twisted impossibly with annoyance. After a moment, he eyed Haqq’s guests. ‘Hello. I do not believe I have seen any of you here before.’

“Agh, don’t bother them, too,” said Haqq.

Garovel jumped at the chance for another introduction. ‘We’re from Atreya. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Garovel, and this is my servant, Hector Goffe, along with our comrade, Lynnette Edith.’

‘Atreya? Interesting. I am not exactly from around here, either. My name is Axiolis.’

Chapter Ninety: ‘The bridge between the Two...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

‘Oh?’ said Garovel. ‘Where are you from, then?’

Axiolis seemed about to answer when he stopped himself, hollow eyes narrowing. ‘You said... your name is Garovel?’

‘I did, yes.’

The reaper’s odd reaction had even gained Haqq’s attention. ‘Then,’ said Axiolis, ‘are you Chergoa’s brother?’

Hector blinked and turned to stare at Garovel, who took his sweet time answering.

‘...Yes, I am. How do you know Chergoa?’

‘She is an old friend,’ said Axiolis. ‘I happened to cross paths with her a few times before really getting to know her. The first was some three hundred years ago in Ardora. She was trying to have her servant dig a new well for a village that was struggling through a drought. It made a favorable impression on me.’

‘Yeah, she has a good heart,’ said Garovel. ‘Usually.’

‘When she first told me that she had a living sibling, I thought she was

joking.'

'I don't blame you,' said Garovel. 'Is Chergoa here in Kuros, then? I don't sense her nearby.'

Axiolis' expression somehow darkened. 'Oh... you do not know, then. I thought that perhaps she got word to you herself.'

'Please explain.'

'My servant is a Rainlord,' said Axiolis, sterner now. 'His name is Zeff Elroy. He was captured by the Vanguard, which is why I am here seeking aid from the Sandlords. Chergoa's current servant is Zeff's daughter, Emiliana Elroy.'"  
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daughter, Emiliana Elroy.”  
"797

Hector wasn't sure he'd followed all of that, but the strained look on Garovel's face told him more or less everything he needed to know.

‘In other words,’ said Garovel, ‘Chergoa is right in the middle of this war of yours.’

‘I am afraid so.’

Garovel kept his next word between him and Hector. ‘Fuck.’

Hector had to unburden himself of his questions. ‘You have a fucking sister?! I mean--?! How is that even--?! Why didn't you ever--?!’

‘I'll tell you later,’ was all Garovel offered him. And then publicly, he said, ‘I would very much like to know more about the Rainlords' current circumstances.’

‘Then I shall very much like to tell you,’ said Axiolis. However, he was distracted when he noticed Haqq quietly stepping for the door. ‘Haqq, don't think I've forgotten about you. You need to join your brother upstairs.’

‘I would love to, but I am quite busy here,” said Haqq. “Your new friends here have tasked me with a critical analysis of great urgency.”

‘Leave him be,’ said Sazandara. ‘He will not be much use to Asad, anyway. I will go with you.’

‘Very well,’ said Axiolis. He turned to Garovel. ‘I would like you and your servant to attend as well.’

‘Of course,’ said Garovel. ‘I was hoping you'd invite us.’

The reapers led the way, and Hector tried to explain where they were going and why to Lynn as she just followed with that resigned look on her face that he'd seen several times before. By now, she must have gotten accustomed to being left in the dark about half of the things going on around her.

During the trek back upstairs, Axiolis continued with his story.

'We still do not know why they decided to attack us,' he said. 'Zeff and I have been with the Vanguard for over twenty-five years. I am still having a bit of difficulty realizing that I no longer work for them. Part of me is hoping that this is all just some kind of gigantic misunderstanding.'

'I would have expected you to sound angrier,' said Garovel.

'Oh, I am. But I am also... very confused. I cannot imagine what could have motivated them to betray us the way they did. Zeff and I are-- were--believers. In the Vanguard. In everything it stood for and tried to accomplish. We devoted ourselves to it. We devoted our FAMILY to it. Can you understand that, I wonder? Have you ever believed in your cause so fiercely that you would devote not just your life to it but also the lives of your loved ones?'

'I'm afraid I haven't,' said Garovel."

"798

'Then you are wiser than I, it would seem.' Axiolis fell quiet a moment as they reached the elevator once more. 'My servant's wife is dead now because of what the Vanguard did to us. His wife. Practically my daughter. When I think about that... I become much less confused.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Garovel.

'When Zeff and I were interrogated, their questions seemed to be most concerned with the oldest of Zeff's daughters, Gema. It appears as though the Vanguard is quite desperate to find her.'

'Did they tell you why?'

'Supposedly, she killed an Intarian diplomat, but I do not think that would evoke the level of aggression they have shown toward the rest of the Elroys. I sense a greater plot behind all of this. At a guess, I would say that Gema has become involved in some kind of power struggle. I only wish we knew where she was.'

'Tell me more about these Elroys,' said Garovel.

'Very well.'

The Golden Fort's assembly hall was a domed chamber of formidable size, naturally lit during the daytime by two high-placed rows of elliptical windows. Gold-and-white banners hung from the ceiling as yet another reminder of Hahl Saqqaf's presiding ownership.

Asad had been waiting all afternoon for another chance to speak. Abbas and the others had heard his arguments four times previously, and still no decision had been made. The routine had begun to wear thin.

As he sat listening to a lesser lord from Egas drone on about rural livestock, he just tried to resist the urge to rub his forehead and sigh. Thankfully, at least, his red cowl allowed him to hide his expression. He was the only one of the eight Sandlord heads garbed in crimson today, as he was the only one intending to speak before the assembly. It made him stick out in the line of seated white robes, but he was accustomed to such things by now. His golden yellow eyes and black full body tattoos had never made it very easy for him to conceal himself, even among his brethren here.

'Not much longer now,' said Qorvass in Valgan. 'Just be patient.'

To Asad's eyes, each one of the eight reapers present was a large insect--a scorpionfly, more precisely. Their long wings, however, consisted of burning flames, and their bulbous eyes held a dark glow."

"799

Asad appreciated Qorvass's attempt at encouragement. He wasn't sure what he would do if he couldn't convince the other heads to help. The Rainlords would attack Rheinhal any day now. Hell, they could be launching their assault this very moment. Octavia Redwater hadn't been keen to share that particular information with him, and Asad didn't fault her for it, not when he couldn't even guarantee that the Sandlords would help her.

It was reaching the point where he was beginning to consider doing something that he knew to be very stupid. If Abbas and the others refused to help, then perhaps he would just go in on his own. Of course, if he took the full strength of Hahl Najir with him, it would undoubtedly come back on the others and put his own family in

danger, but if he acted independently, that wouldn't be an issue. It also meant he would be much more likely to get killed. Hence, the stupid part.

He'd already talked to Qorvass about it, and while the reaper was certainly not thrilled by the idea, he hadn't entirely dismissed it, either. They hadn't seen Zeff in months, due to an argument that Asad couldn't even rightly recall now, but the mere thought of the man's family being betrayed by their own comrades, of Mariana dying for it, of Zeff being held captive, and of their children suddenly without parents-- it was all more than enough to anger Asad past the point of conventional wisdom.

After the Egasi lord concluded, Abbas began assuring the man of what would be done to address his agricultural concerns. Asad noticed the new group of onlookers enter from the far end of the room. Three reapers, and two young foreigners. Sazandara was among them, but Haqq was not. He should not have been surprised, he realized. His brother was many things, but a concerned citizen of the world was not one of them.

When the time finally arrived for him to speak, Asad stood and circumnavigated the long desk in order to reach the room's center platform.

All of the Hahls were represented here today, which was a rare thing, and Asad knew the reason for it was due to the perfect split between their allegiances. Hahls Najir, Shihab, Duxan, and Saqqaf were all independent, while Hahls Haayen, Kattan, Mateen, and Dagher all worked for the Vanguard."

"800

It was no coincidence that all seven of his esteemed peers were male. Kurosi law plainly forbid women from holding positions of political power. It was often conflated as a law of all Sandlords, but it really was a regional matter. Asad had lived in Kuros for nearly twenty years now, and at this point, his youth spent growing up in Moaban seemed almost like someone else's life, but he still clearly remembered his mother being the unquestionable head of Hahl Najir when she was alive. It was difficult to imagine her bending to anyone else's will, regardless of what the law might have told her.

Asad pulled down his red hood, revealing his bald head to the audience. His tattoos extended there as well, four black lines inked into the naturally dark tan of his bare pate. Such were all of his tattoos-- nothing but ornate lines across his whole body, all bearing intermittent protrusions that looked vaguely like tiny thorns or knots. They'd become something of a cosmetic nuisance as he'd grown older, thinning and stretching over time, but he was entirely unashamed of showing them off.

"My fellow lords," Asad began in Valgan, "you know what I am here to say. I am unsure of how else I can convince you. It is painfully obvious that our country, our comrades, and our people have all found themselves in the sudden grip of danger and war. I firmly believe that inaction during this time is a mistake, and I urge you to support our western brothers before it is too late."

An audible snort rose from the far left side of the desk, pulling Asad's eyes to Lord Hamza of Hahl Dagher. A thin man, his ivory robes nearly swallowed him whole, offering only a small view of the man's sharp nose and gray eyes. "'Western brothers'?" he said. "You overstate our relationship with the wet monkeys."

"We share the name of our land with them," said Asad. "We share our people and the responsibility that accompanies them. And financially, they are our brethren as much as any lord here."

"Sharing a war against the Vanguard is not the same thing as sharing food and money for our subjects," said Lord Abbas of Hahl Saqqaf. He was the oldest person in the room, though it hardly showed. The few gray streaks in his dark beard were quite faint, and his sky blue gaze didn't match his weathered features, making him look somehow younger."

"801

Asad frowned and prepared his rebuttal, but he must have been taking too long, because Qorvass stepped in to help as Axiolis floated up behind them both.

'The Rainlords are our allies,' said Qorvass. 'It is as simple as that. We may have had our difficulties with them in the past, but that was generations ago. We have moved beyond it. And now, we are confronted with a test. We should do for the Rainlords what we would

want the Rainlords to do for us.'

"And if we assist them now," Asad added, "it will solidify the bond between us more strongly than ever before. And it is a bond that all of us here--all of our fathers and grandfathers, even--have been nurturing for centuries. Consider what that would mean for our children! Consider what an unshakeable foundation of camaraderie it would establish!"

Abbas' reaper drifted forward. Worwal was his name, and Asad was not looking forward to what he was about to say. The reaper had proved to be their most difficult obstacle in each of their previous meetings. 'The vengeance seekers would have us believe they are instead aspiring to greatness.' Worwal's tone was not one of condescension or mockery. It was only flat and cold observance.

Asad couldn't entirely refute the statement, either. So he didn't try. "It is true that I want vengeance for the Elroy family. My friendship with Zeff is no secret." He paused, considerate of his next words. He was abruptly reminded of what his fight with Zeff had been about. "What is a secret, however, is my proposal to join my family with his."

That sent a ripple through his audience. Asad could already see the disapproving looks on their faces.

'What are you doing?' Qorvass said privately.

Asad ignored the question. "Yes, it is true. I made such an offer to him several months ago. My son Midhat with his daughter Emiliana. But perhaps you will be relieved to hear that he refused me." He paused again to observe their expressions. "I am telling you this now because it has been my hope for many years that our two peoples be united as one." He eyed Worwal. "So you see, while I do want vengeance, it is not instead of any aspiration. I want both."

"'United as one'?!" said Hamza. "Now you are just speaking nonsense!"

"802 -- XCI.

Asad gave a slow nod. "You may be right, Lord Hamza. Perhaps it is nonsense. I will not claim to know whether or not such unity is truly possible. But that is a discussion for another time. Here and now, I am

only trying to inform you of my intentions. My sincerest hopes.”

Hamza didn't have anything to say to that.

But Abbas did. “Asad. That is all very nice. On the whole, I agree with your sentiments. A better relationship with the Rainlords would go a long way. But we cannot forget that we have problems of our own and that our first obligation is to our subjects. The current state of Calthos is particularly troubling to me.”

“I understand that,” said Asad. “But we could still provide the Rainlords with some support, if not our full strength. I will volunteer myself, of course.”

‘It is simply unwise,’ said Worwal. ‘We would be jeopardizing our relationship with the Vanguard while Abolish is practically knocking on our door.’

A chorus of concurring grumbles arose from the men and reapers.

He was losing them, Asad knew. Worwal's point was a good one. But as Asad was about to voice his counterargument, the golden phone on Abbas' desk rang.

Everyone turned to watch him answer it. The man listened, thanked the person on the other end, and hung up again. He stood and placed both hands on his desk. “Word has just arrived from Rheinhal. The Rainlords have begun their assault.”

Chapter Ninety-One: ‘When the Lake is quiet...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Red Lake Castle retained less than a third of its occupants from the previous day. Emiliana had known that a lot of people would be leaving all at once, but even still, the sudden change was a little unsettling, especially when she considered that many might not return.

These last few days, she'd been trying to stop being so reclusive, trying to get to know more of the people who were laying down their lives to protect her family, but now, it seemed like too little too late. There were so many servants whom she'd barely even met, and only a handful of them had stayed behind. Aunt Joana was still here, thankfully, as were a few of the Redwater servants and the apparently

well-known Dimas Sebolt, tasked by Lord Abel Sebolt with protecting the Elroy children while the strongest Rainlords were away."  
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"803

Emiliana was surprised to see that so many of the non-servants had accompanied Octavia and the others to the battlefield.

'They'll leave the fighting to the servants, of course,' Chergoa explained. 'Instead, they'll provide operational support. Things like keeping civilians away from the battle, maintaining supplies, organizing teams and strategies--that sort of thing. Normal people can be particularly helpful when they observe the battle from a distance and feed information to the combatants via radio. Signal jammers are often deployed as a disruptive countermeasure, and then it usually becomes a contest of which side can neutralize the others' jammers first. And that's because in a fight between two forces of roughly equal size and strength, the more organized one almost always wins.'

Emiliana couldn't help wondering something as she listened. 'How many battles have you been in?'

'Enough to make me stop counting.'

That made her think of another question. 'Why did you decide to be my reaper?'

Chergoa paused. 'Well, you and I were supposed to join the Vanguard. That was my reason for wanting a new servant. It was less about you specifically. I did observe you for a little while, though. You seemed nice enough.'

'That is it? We're bound together for the rest of my life, and that is all

the thought you put into it?’

‘What can I say? I’m not very picky. So long as you’re not a violent psychopath, I’m not bothered about it.’

‘Wow... then, why did you decide to join the Vanguard?’

‘Ah. It was Axiolis who convinced me. He’d been trying to convert me for ages. Finally wore me down.’

‘You must be regretting it now.’

‘Pfft, no. Maybe it’s hard for you to believe, but I’m glad I’m here with you.’

Beneath her dark mask, Emiliana’s expression distorted. ‘Why?’

‘Well, if you didn’t have me, you could’ve ended up stuck with some dumbass who gives horrible advice. And then what would you do?’

‘Are you... making a joke?’

‘Yes, Emiliana. Yes, I am. Good catch.’

‘I was hoping for an actual answer...’

‘It WAS an actual answer,’ said Chergoa. ‘And it was also a joke. Multitasking, you see.’

‘I don’t understand...’

Chergoa gave a faint laugh. ‘Holy shit, girl. I’m saying that I’m glad I can be here with you while you weather this storm of bullshit. Don’t think for a moment that I regret taking you on as my servant.’”

"804

Emiliana wasn’t sure she believed Chergoa. The reaper didn’t seem like she was lying, but all the same, it was difficult to tell what went on in the mind of someone thousands of years old.

She tried to go about her day as normal, but it was impossible. Knowing that the siege of Rheinhal was beginning today left her in a constant state of worry. There would be no meditating, she realized, so

she spent her time just trying to stay close to Marcos and Ramira. She wasn't letting them out of her sight. Not today.

Collectively, the Elroy children ended up mostly hanging around Diego Redwater or Dimas Sebolt, as Marcos had taken a liking to them both due to their relative fame among the Rainlords.

In a very short time, Emiliana had come to know more about the distribution of power among her brethren than she ever had before. According to Shenado, the title of the strongest living Rainlord was a matter of dispute with four possible candidates: Octavia Redwater, Rayen Merlo, Melchor Blackburn, and Xuan Sebolt. Strangely--at least to Emiliana--Melchor and Xuan did not serve as the heads of their families, instead yielding the responsibility to their younger cousins.

Including those four, Shenado proceeded to rattle off the names of the strongest twenty servants, and while Emiliana didn't remember most of them, she'd taken particular note of her father being ranked as eighth. Dimas Sebolt, Diego Redwater, and Joana Cortes had been ranked as tenth, eleventh, and fourteenth, respectively. Emiliana wondered where Shenado would have ranked her mother, but she didn't have the heart to ask.

With everyone gathered in the Red Den, Emiliana chose to stand in the corner with Chergoa, looking through the panoramic windows that made up the chamber's eastern wall. They offered a clear view of the endless rain and flood waters, while the windows on the other side of the room displayed the vast cityscape of Aguary.

"Is it true that you once took on thirty Abolishers all by yourself?" Marcos was asking.

"...Yes," was all Dimas said. He was a statue of a man, tall and solidly built and always wearing a dark suit with a black tie. Whenever Emiliana saw him, he never spoke unless spoken to, which translated to him only speaking when Marcos and Ramira pestered him with questions.

"And you beat them all?" said Ramira.

"...Yes."

“Was it scary, fighting so many servants at once?” asked Marcos.

“...A little.”

“Why did you have to fight them?” asked Ramira.

Dimas turned to his reaper, the blue wisp floating over his shoulder.

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Iziol. ‘If I tell the story, Ramira won’t hear it.’

Dimas’ face remained entirely unreadable as he turned back to his young audience. “...They were attacking a village. I stopped them.”

‘Wow,’ said Iziol. ‘I think they were hoping for a bit more detail.’

“...It was snowing.”

They waited in vain for him to continue.

“What a conversationalist,” said Diego Redwater. He lay on the couch across from Dimas with his hands behind his head.

Dimas had no retort.

Diego was a man of his early thirties, if appearance was to be trusted, sporting a simple blue t-shirt and gray shorts. He was one of the very few Rainlords with red hair, which he kept in short curls. His reaper hovered over him. Yangéra was her name, but Emiliana hadn’t heard her say a single word so far. Not that the reaper needed to. Diego was vocal enough for the both of them. “C’mon, Marcos. Why don’t you ask me about some of my great deeds? I’ve got all sorts of stories.”

Marcos smirked and looked back at Dimas. “Do you think you could beat up Diego?”

“...Certainly.”

Diego sat up. “Whoa, whoa, whoa...”

Their conversation gained a bit of vigor after that, but Emiliana had already lost interest and stopped listening. Instead, she just let her mind wander as she stared out across the waves in the dreary blue horizon.

Her thoughts drifted to the monster she saw before. Or hallucination. Or whatever that thing was. She’d asked both Chergoa and Shenado

about it, but neither one could tell her anything. She was still trying to decide if she should ask someone else, trying to decide if she really wanted to know the answer.

The more troubling possibility had certainly crossed her mind. She might genuinely be going crazy. The mutation ability could do that, couldn't it? She could have accidentally mutated a part of her brain when her power manifested. The horns on her face--two of them were right there on her forehead. It seemed entirely possible that they might have grown not just out from her skull but also into it. And if that was the case, then the horns could have done... something to her brain. Changed it. Broken it."

"806

It was horrifying to think about. And confusing. She didn't feel different. Not really. But then again, there was that emptiness, that pit in the back of her mind. But that was just... loss. Wasn't it? Psychological. Not physical, surely.

She was beginning to dread finding out.

Perhaps it didn't matter, though. She hadn't seen the monster again. Perhaps she never would. Perhaps it was just a one time thing. A freak event of some kind.

Wishful thinking, she decided. She wasn't sure optimism suited her, anyway.

'Hey,' Chergoa said privately, pulling Emiliana out of her daze. The reaper's glowing eyes pointed her toward the others.

Everyone had stopped talking, Emiliana realized. At the heavy silence, she stepped closer.

Dimas and Diego both stood.

"Is something wrong?" Emiliana adjusted the edges of her hoodie to make sure she could hear them, but Shenado was the one who responded.

'We have an unexpected guest at the front gate. He seems to be alone, apart from his reaper. I sense Joana moving toward them.'

Chergoa drifted up behind her servant. ‘You recognize them?’

‘It’s Melchor Blackburn,’ said Shenado.

Emiliana understood the sudden tension in the room now. The Blackburns had been the only one of the ten who hadn’t joined in the campaign against the Vanguard. And that name. Melchor. It hadn’t been very long since she first heard it.

Without warning, Iziol brushed up against Dimas and then bolted from the room, phasing straight through the glass wall.

‘Where’s he going?’ said Chergoa.

“...Only being cautious,” was all Dimas said.

Emiliana watched Iziol shrink into the horizon.

‘Joana is bringing Melchor here,’ informed Shenado.

They waited. The two men took up positions facing the Red Den’s northern door, Dimas in front of Marcos and Ramira while Diego covered Emiliana.

At length, the door opened, and Joana entered first, followed by a long-faced man whom Emiliana didn’t recognize and a host of Redwaters whom she did.

Joana started them off. “Lord Melchor says he has received word of an imminent assault on Red Lake. So he has come to help us guard the children.”

“How generous of you,” said Diego. “Who told you they were here?”

“No one,” said Melchor with his reaper right behind him. He had a hard voice, the kind that carried easily through the air and bit at one’s ears.

“We merely guessed that you would be keeping them here.””

"807

“Lucky guess,” said Diego.

“Not really,” said Melchor. Like Dimas, Melchor also wore a suit, though his wasn’t quite so dark, and he’d left the jacket unbuttoned to

let his tie dangle freely. "I've known your grandmother for many years, Diego. She considers this castle to be the safest place in Sair. And if it were fully occupied, herself included, I might agree. But since that is not the case, I am certain that Red Lake is too vulnerable a place for the Elroy children at the moment."

Having taken up a position between the two bodyguards, Joana responded for the group. "I suppose it just depends on who is coming to attack us."

Melchor paused to look over his audience, letting his emerald eyes do most of the work while his head hardly moved.

The man's reaper spoke up for him in a flat, dry voice. 'We're sensing a bit of hostility.'

"It's nothing personal," said Diego. "The Elroys have had a touch of bad luck with unexpected visitors, lately. You'll have to excuse us if we're not entirely thrilled to see you right now."

'Of course,' the reaper said. 'However, Melchor and I did come here by ourselves. If we wanted a fight, we would have brought backup.'

"We appreciate that," said Diego. "And yet, here you now stand, in the middle of our castle with your eyes on the children. Perhaps you're under the mistaken impression that you're strong enough to kidnap them and fight your way out on your own."

"Rather than that," said Melchor, "we were hoping you would all return with us to Luzo. House Blackburn will protect the children while the siege is underway."

"A generous offer," said Joana, "but I think we will remain here at Red Lake."

'Please reconsider,' said Melchor's reaper. 'We have reason to believe that Captain General Parson Miles will be here within the hour with a siege party of his own.'

That left an unsettled quiet in its wake.

'You do not have the strength here to repel him. But with the full might of the Blackburns behind you, he will be no threat.'

"Why would Parson be coming here when Rheinhal is under attack?" asked Joana.

'I cannot rightly say. Perhaps it is a testament to how badly the Vanguard wants to capture the Elroys, or perhaps they have reinforcements already en route. We have sent word to Octavia as well, so I'm sure she will be prepared for whatever happens.'"

"808

Shenado was the one to speak up next. 'If you have proof of your claim, then present it now. Otherwise, fuck off back to your marshes.'

Everyone looked at her.

Emiliana was more than a little surprised by the reaper's aggressive language. She'd barely heard anyone use the f-word before, and Shenado had just dropped it in front of Marcos like it was no big deal.

'Have we done something to offend you?' asked Melchor's reaper.

'Yes,' said Shenado. 'If you wanted to look after the children, you should have discussed it with Octavia, Rayen, and Xuan beforehand. Instead, you decided to come here while they are busy defending the Rainlords' honor--something your family elected not to participate in.'

'There was no time. We only received word of Parson's assault twenty minutes ago. We would have called, but we feared it being intercepted.'

Emiliana watched Shenado's burning eyes narrow.

'I understand that you may be suspicious of us,' the other reaper went on, 'but please, try to see reason. Don't allow Mariana's death to cloud your judgment. The children's lives--'

The flames of Shenado's cerulean body flared up. 'I have already asked you to provide proof. Seeing as you have not done so, when will you be fucking off? I hope it is soon.'

"We are only trying to help," said Melchor.

'If that's true, then you can wait outside the castle,' said Shenado. 'And when Parson arrives, you will be close enough to assist us.'

'You're being unreasonable--'



'I do not believe I am.' Shenado looked to one of the Redwaters behind Melchor. 'Send word to Octavia of this supposed assault. Let's see what she and the others think about it.'

The servant nodded and made for the door.

Melchor's reaper vanished into his body. The man's eyes became silvery marbles, dark with a metallic luster, and in an instant, the floor and walls were all covered with metal. "We did not come here to fight," said Melchor, apparently still quite conscious. His voice, however, was suddenly different, because it wasn't just his. Emiliana could hear his reaper speaking in unison. Two voices, one aloud and one in her head. "Please reconsider."

The metal beneath her feet was whiter than that of the man's eyes, she noticed, and after a moment, she realized that it was frozen.

'Mercury,' Chergoa assessed privately, calm as ever. 'Get to Ramira. It'll be hazardous to her if it melts.'

"809

Emiliana moved to do what Chergoa said, but Marcos was closer and reached Ramira first. With a bit of help from Shenado, the boy lifted his little sister off her feet. Ramira didn't seem to appreciate being carried, but Emiliana was too distracted by the adults in the room to keep watching.

"Why are you doing this?" Diego asked, all sense of leisure gone from his voice now. He'd taken a wider stance, half-crouched with his arms hanging loosely in front of him.

"Duty," said Melchor and his reaper. "We will not harm the children. We simply need them to come with us."

"But why?" said Joana.

"Old mistakes," was all Melchor offered.

"That's not good enough," said Diego. "This is your last chance, Melchor. Either explain yourself or leave peacefully."

The Lord Blackburn did not move.

The ensuing silence was perhaps the heaviest thing Emiliana had ever experienced. Everyone remained perfectly still, even Marcos and Ramira. Emiliana counted seven Redwaters standing behind Melchor. Not a single one of them looked pleased to be there. Emiliana flexed her one clawed hand unconsciously.

‘Get ready to run,’ came Chergoa’s echoing voice.

‘There’s nowhere TO run.’ So long as the chamber remained covered in Melchor’s soul-empowered mercury, even the reapers wouldn’t be able to leave, Emiliana knew.

‘That’s why you need to be ready when there is,’ said Chergoa. ‘And don’t resist. If Diego and the others lose, just surrender.’

‘I can fight.’

‘You can’t fight THAT.’

Melchor’s mercurial eyes had not changed, but his skin flashed intermittently between pale normalcy and waves of shining metal. Flesh one moment, metal the next, and then back to flesh again. If the man meant the display as some kind of warning, it didn’t seem to be working.

And then, everyone moved at once.

Diego’s reaper Yangéra vanished into his body as well, which caused Melchor to lunge for him. But Melchor’s movement wasn’t anything human. Instead, the man’s whole body turned to liquid mercury and surged forward as if expelled from a fire hose. His suit still stuck vaguely to him, giving an uncertain sense of where his body might be in the middle of that lustrous glob.

Diego didn’t need to protect himself, however. Dimas did that for him, putting both hands forward and shoving Melchor’s liquid mass entirely off course from across the room.

Emiliana had heard about Dimas’ fearsome alteration ability: gravitation."

"810 -- XCII.

Melchor was not long delayed. The Redwaters all pounced on him at once, their mixture of powers accumulating into a confused frenzy of attacks. Their varied crystals and metals and gases all combined and ignited, engulfing the man's liquid body in flames while simultaneously bombarding him from every conceivable direction.

And Melchor ignored them. He pressed through their combination attack as if it were nothing more than smoke. He went for Diego again.

Diego was ready for him, though. Emiliana knew his power as well: nitrogen transfiguration. A surge of mercury came for his head, but Diego ducked right under it and gripped Melchor's amorphous body with both arms, going for a ride as Melchor kept leaping across the room like a wild bull. Emiliana could see him attempting to slow Melchor down with a bath of liquid nitrogen as he flailed, struggling to hang on.

Dimas took the opportunity to rear back from across the room and punch a hole into the south wall. Emiliana saw the air visibly distort as the impact shattered Melchor's frozen mercury. "Go!" the man yelled.

Emiliana turned to run, only to find Joana already pulling her and Marcos along. But it made no difference. Before they could reach the hole in the wall, the mercury filled back in, leaving them still trapped in the room with everyone else.

The group of Redwaters moved to attack again, but two broad pillars of mercury converged on them, one down from the ceiling and the other up from the floor, meeting each other like the teeth of a giant's jaw. Emiliana could hear their bones crunch and see their blood go flying as the frozen mercury claimed five servants at once.

Chapter Ninety-Two: 'The weight of the rain...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Dimas Sebolt glanced at the dead. He'd never seen Melchor's power firsthand like this, but he'd heard Xuan speak about it at length. It was only supposed to be mercury transfiguration, but the man's mastery of pan-rozum completely changed the equation. In Dimas' mind, Diego's earlier confidence had been entirely unfounded. Being outnumbered meant virtually nothing to someone like Melchor Blackburn.

Fool that he was, however, Diego could still prove invaluable in this fight, Dimas knew. Diego himself had control of pan-forma, a kind of simpler hyper-state exclusive to transfiguration and materialization users only. It was much less versatile than pan-rozum, not breaking down the barriers between ability classes and instead affording three blanket enhancements to durability, regeneration, and connectivity." "810 -- XCII.

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"811

Mercurial spikes erupted from Melchor's body, skewering Diego through the eye socket and finally throwing him off. Bloody and full of holes, Diego managed to catch himself on the bookshelf in the middle of the room, sliding across the top and freezing it with the residual liquid nitrogen still present in his arms. By the time his feet touched the floor again, his wounds had already healed, even the one that had undoubtedly pierced his brain.

Diego didn't have to dive back into the fight. Melchor came for him first, which Dimas found quite telling as to which opponent the Lord Blackburn was most concerned about. Surely, if Diego managed to freeze enough of Melchor's body at once, it would be problematic for the man, but even with Diego's soul-empowered liquid nitrogen, the freezing process would require more than just a few seconds. Melchor's passive soul defense was not something to be overlooked. Diego wasn't going to get that much time unless Dimas and Joana provided it for him.

Dimas pointed a single index finger at Melchor. Much as he would have liked to, he couldn't simply crush the man with overwhelming gravitational pressure. Melchor's passive soul resilience and field density were both too powerful for such a tactic. However, Dimas could still reverse the gravity around Melchor in order to disorient him. So he

did.

In an instant, Melchor was flung toward the ceiling, splattering against it briefly before recovering and crawling around like some kind of hideous liquid spider.

Joana took the opportunity to launch a flurry of thick chromium spears, all barbed and razor sharp. They pelted Melchor, some bouncing off, some sticking in, and his body shuddered and morphed before it could expel the chromium back out again.

Dimas didn't let up either. With one hand, he kept intensifying the gravity around Melchor in order to slow him down, and with the other, he fired off a series of gravity bullets--invisible pockets of supercondensed pressure that carried enough speed to pierce steel at fifty meters.

Mercury splashed violently with each impact, but Melchor weathered that assault, too, though not quite so effortlessly as before. His liquid body contorted and swirled as he moved out of the way.

Diego, in the meantime, had been prepping three of his fingers. No doubt, he feared using any more than that in the presence of his allies. Dimas knew what he was crafting. He'd seen him do it before. Soul-strengthened nitroglycerin, it would be."

"812

It was probably the most difficult compound that Diego could construct within a reasonable timeframe. All in all, it only required hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, but the structure of the hydrogen and oxygen molecules was no simple thing to achieve, needing to be organized into three hydroxyl groups and then merged with white fuming nitric acid. Certainly, it wasn't Dimas' area of expertise, but he at least had to give Diego credit for being able to pull something like that off in the middle of combat.

And of course, even after construction, nitroglycerin was wildly unstable. Mishandling was liable to get himself killed, so it was a testament to his confidence that he would do it now, when a mistake would mean harming Yangéra as well.

Dimas just tried to focus on pinning Melchor down while Diego worked.

It was nearly impossible. The two remaining Redwaters tried to assist again, but a ceiling of spikes finally claimed them. And it would have claimed Dimas and Joana, too, if he hadn't slowed its descent with a gravitational wall.

As Melchor reared back for another attack, Diego lobbed his three severed fingers at him. One missed, but the other two were on target, making contact with the tattered suit that still clung to Melchor's vague form.

All three explosions went off at once. They were even stronger than Dimas anticipated. The chamber didn't just tremble; it spasmed, violent enough that Dimas nearly lost track of everyone despite the gravitational shield he'd placed over himself and the children. A wall of chromium stood before them as well, thanks to a crouched and cringing Joana, and Dimas could see Emiliana covering Marcos and Ramira with her own body.

The shock wave had smashed Diego against the rear wall, but the man was already picking himself up and healing so rapidly that, in a moment, he'd only have earned himself a bit of mussed hair and a few blood stains on his t-shirt.

An impressive hole now lay in the upper corner of the room, ushering smoke to the outside. The lamp that had been providing light was in pieces as well, leaving only the rainy gray sky for illumination. Diego ignited his fingertips in order to supplement that.

Dimas could see Melchor's form through the smoke and dust, still alive and churning. He made a fist and punched through the south wall again, knowing that the best possible use of this downtime was to ensure that the Elroys escape."

"813

The mercury crumbled against the gravitic impact, but before Dimas could tell the children to flee, it filled right back in.

Melchor's dual-voice rose through the chamber. "No one leaves," he said. "Not without our guidance."

Dimas and Diego both inched closer, not wanting to give the man enough time to recover but also not wanting to walk into a trap. Dimas

could see a few thick puddles of mercury that had been severed from the rest of Melchor's body.

"The three of you will become great pillars of the Rainlords one day," said Melchor. "We do not wish to kill you here and now."

"You don't say?" said Diego, also bearing a second voice with Yangéra. "Then let's all just relax and talk this out over a nice game of hopscotch."

Melchor did not seem amused by the suggestion. He was the first to begin moving again.

Dimas and Joana tried to slow him down as Diego moved to freeze the severed puddles of mercury. It would be a long process of whittling away at Melchor's body, but Dimas didn't see another way of defeating the man when they didn't have the power to simply overwhelm him. Dimas could try smothering him with hypergravity, but that would be dangerous for everyone else, and the idea was to protect the reapers and children, not turn them all into meaty spaghetti.

More spikes came for him, this time too many to simply dodge. So he didn't. Dimas inhaled deeply as he focused for the increase that he wanted. The gravitational bubble appeared around him and stopped the spikes dead, cracking and shattering them before they could reach him. Their broken pieces flew away from him and dug into the walls, letting a bit more light peer through fresh holes before Melchor covered them back up again.

It had grown dark, the only physical light source being that of Diego's ignited fingers, but Dimas didn't strictly require it. He could see the vague outline of souls. While they were still attached to people, souls were a kind of faint fog spread thinly through the body and only really noticeable in the darkness. A dim glow, essentially.

And then, in a fleeting moment when he wasn't being attacked, he noticed something horrific.

There were too many souls. There was a second Melchor in the room."  
"814

Melchor's liquid mass had split, and now both parts were moving



independently of one another. The chaos and low visibility of the fight had been concealing it from Dimas.

Perhaps the split had only just occurred, because Shenado chose that moment to warn them. 'There are three of him now! Be very careful!'

Three?

A surge of mercury blindsided him, throwing him off his feet while still clinging on to him, quickly consuming his whole body, no doubt wanting to crush him and prevent regeneration.

Every single one of his muscles flexed at once, and the gravity stopped him in mid-air. An invisible bubble exploded outward and tore the mercury off of him as he floated there.

Indeed, he could see all three hulking blobs looming in the darkness now. The one that had attacked him was already moving toward Joana and the children.

Dimas fired off a round of gravity bullets as he propelled himself closer. Joana pierced the liquid beast with a giant chromium spear, adding spiked branches to it and shredding mercury with each new growth. The clone writhed and squirmed away from her, only to immediately circle back around and try for her again. Dimas gathered enough force into his fist and barreled through the clone, expelling increased gravity upon the moment of impact.

Globs of mercury splattered everywhere but didn't settle. Instead, they scuttled away like ants, retreating back into a pool nearer the other two clones. Dimas reversed gravity beneath them, wanting to keep every droplet suspended in the air and isolated from one another, but it didn't matter. They didn't need the floor. They could move under their own power, no doubt due to Melchor's additional mastery of materialization's velocity states.

A muffled explosion shook the chamber, pulling everyone's attention back to Diego. While they'd been busy with a single clone, Diego had been dealing with two. And it was not going well, Dimas saw. He rushed to assist the man, but the mercury was already smothering him, and after another moment, Dimas heard the crunch. That wouldn't be enough to truly stop Diego, of course, but Melchor also ripped Yangéra free of the man's body, using the mercury as a physical filter through which to separate the two. And even while Melchor endured a storm of gravity bullets and chromium spikes, the liquid coffin tightened another time, ensuring that Diego remained dead."

Dimas expected to see Melchor kill Yangéra as well, but the man did no such thing, instead choosing to hold her out in front of him as a shield. Dimas and Joana both had to stop attacking.

"It is over," said Melchor. "Diego was your only hope of escaping this room, and now that I have Yangéra, you cannot even attack me freely. Please cease this pointless struggling and surrender."

Dimas couldn't see Joana's face in the darkness, so he looked to her reaper and then to Shenado. Indeed, this battle was undoubtedly lost now. Close-quarters combat didn't suit him, and without Iziol present, Dimas had an observational disadvantage. There was nothing for it.

'We've lost,' thought Dimas. 'Self-destructing now.'

'Understood,' came Iziol's voice. By now, he must have been a quarter of the way to Rheinhal.

And as Dimas prepared both hands with gravitic orbs, he took a deep breath so that he could raise his voice for all to hear. "...I will return for you all very soon."

By now, Melchor had no doubt realized what he was doing, and Dimas could see the soul-empowered mercury rushing to stop him.

Dimas placed his head in his hands and let the force smash his skull to pieces.

Chapter Ninety-Three: 'The code of the shield...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector sat quietly in the unlit guest chamber. Lynn and Prince Meriwether were both asleep. Hector had volunteered to stay up and keep watch since he didn't require sleep as much as Lynn did. She agreed, as long as he woke her up early so that he could get some rest in the morning.

It had been an eventful evening. He'd watched the entirety of Lord

Asad's discussion with the other Sandlords. Garovel had been kind enough to translate what they were saying into Mohssian for him. By the end, it was quite clear that Lord Asad had been unable to convince them of anything.

After that, Axiolis introduced them to Asad and Qorvass, who were both much more courteous than Asad's brother, but once the pleasantries concluded, the conversation still proved itself considerably more troubling than the one with Haqq.

"We are going to Rheinhal," Asad had said quite fluently in Mohssian. "Abbas and the others have chosen not to help, but I cannot remain idle."

'You are welcome to come with us,' said Qorvass. 'Any friend of the Elroys is a friend of ours.'  
"815 -- XCIII.

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It had been an eventful evening. He'd watched the entirety of Lord Asad's discussion with the other Sandlords. Garovel had been kind enough to translate what they were saying into Mohssian for him. By the end, it was quite clear that Lord Asad had been unable to convince them of anything.

After that, Axiolis introduced them to Asad and Qorvass, who were both much more courteous than Asad's brother, but once the pleasantries concluded, the conversation still proved itself considerably more troubling than the one with Haqq.

"We are going to Rheinhal," Asad had said quite fluently in Mohssian. "Abbas and the others have chosen not to help, but I cannot remain idle."

'You are welcome to come with us,' said Qorvass. 'Any friend of the Elroys is a friend of ours.'

"816

That was the part that had stuck with Hector. These people were ready to trust him despite knowing nothing about him other than that he was Garovel's servant. Apparently, that was the only thing that mattered. It was easy to forget, sometimes, that Garovel wasn't just his friend but also his greatest connection to the world. And it was more than just how Garovel was keeping him alive physically; Hector hadn't forgotten that it had also been Garovel's connection with Mehlsanz that had allowed him to work with Lynn and the Queen so easily. And now, again.

He supposed it was only natural that Garovel would have ties to a shitload of people, but even still, he certainly hadn't been expecting a sister.

'I would've told you about Chergoa eventually,' Garovel said privately. 'We just hadn't gotten around to that conversation yet.'

'Uh-huh...'

'Look, I haven't seen her in... uh... I'm actually not sure how long it's been. Four hundred years, maybe.'

'Four hundred?!'

'Possibly five. Time is such a blur.'

'What the hell? Why so long? Did you have a falling out or something?'

'If by "falling out" you mean I was being kind of a dick to her, then yes. That is exactly what happened.'

'Ah... w-what'd you do wrong?'

'Well. Um. When you spend as much time with someone as I've spent with Chergoa, it becomes pretty easy to get on each other's nerves. And we're siblings, so that just made it worse. Even when we agreed on something, we'd still find a way to argue about it.'

'...This sounds an awful lot like an excuse, Garovel.'

'Oh, no, I fucked up. I'm getting to that part. Don't worry. I'm just giving you a bit of context.'

Hector smiled faintly in the darkness. 'Okay...'

'You have to understand, Chergoa and I have known each other for thousands of years. Just think about that for a moment. We have one of the oldest relationships in the world. Even among reapers, few have known each other THAT long. So to try to sum up our relationship in a concise way is just... it's basically impossible.'

'The two of you have seen some shit.'

'...Yes, Hector. Eloquently put, thank you.'

'Sure thing.'

‘The point is, Chergoa and I have often taken long breaks from one another. We’ve spent entire lifetimes apart and thought little of it when we saw each other again.’”

"817

Hector could hardly imagine it, seeing someone again after seventy years and feeling as if that was normal.

‘There’s also the fact that it’s very difficult to stay in touch with other reapers, just in general,’ Garovel went on. ‘We tend to wander, especially when we don’t have servants keeping us in one place. When you don’t make plans to meet up again, it becomes very difficult to do so. And since Chergoa and I parted on less than amiable terms, we never made those plans. And from there, we just lost track of each other.’

‘So... it’s not that you’ve been avoiding each other for four hundred years. You just haven’t crossed paths.’

‘Yeah. I’m sure she’s forgiven me by now. Or at least stopped caring.’

‘...You still haven’t told me what you did wrong.’

Garovel paused a moment. ‘She and her servant at the time had just opened an orphanage in this really isolated place. I felt that she should move everyone to a city where the kids could be better taken care of--or in other words, where someone else could look after them. She did not agree. She believed--quite correctly, as I would later find out--that the nearby towns were too dangerous; and moreover, she wanted to raise the children personally. I thought that was a job best left to normal people.’

‘Hmm. That doesn’t sound too bad, though. I mean... er, I can kinda see your point.’

‘Yeah, but the problem was, I had an overabundance of moral certainty about it. I specifically remember saying to her, “You’re wasting your time. Rather than taking care of these kids, you should be trying to make sure that this war doesn’t make orphans of any others.”’

Hector’s brow receded a little. ‘Geez...’

'I know, right?'

'That doesn't seem like something you'd ever say. Usually, you're more... uh... kind of, er... I'm not sure "cynical" is the right word...'

'Practical?'

'Yeah. You're practical. And that seemed like a pretty naive thing to say.'

'Wow. Getting called naive by a teenager. That stings.'

'Am I wrong?'

'No, you're right. It was stupid to think that Chergoa's servant could impact the war in such a way as to prevent any more children from being affected by it. But at the time, I really wanted to believe that.'

'Why?'

Garovel hesitated again. 'Well, that's another story. But I suppose it's one I should tell you.'

Hector waited.

'I had just recently released my servant of the previous sixty years. And not because my servant wanted me to.'

He blinked. 'What do you mean?'"

"818

Garovel floated away from him and stopped in the middle of the room. 'It's still a bit early for this conversation, but oh well.' He turned around to face his servant again. 'Hector, I want you to listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you. You may not like what you hear, but I hope you will never forget it, because it is one of the most important things I am ever going to say. And I will try to explain why that is.'

Hector shifted in his chair. 'Uh--okay. I-I'm listening...'

'There's something that happens to people when they acquire power,' the reaper said. 'It's not that it corrupts them, necessarily, but it can definitely change them. Whether it's political power or physical power,

the result is essentially the same. Power of any kind grants you influence and control over others. And as you gain more power, more influence in the world, you become increasingly susceptible to that change. So for servants, that change is almost inevitable, because your power is constantly growing.'

'Are you saying... your servant abused their power?'

'In a word, yes. He started extorting innocent people. Said he could put their money to better use than they could. I think he saw it as a kind of "greater good" tax, like he viewed himself as some sort of governing figure when he'd really just become a thug.'

'Wow... and you couldn't just tell him to stop? Didn't he understand that he had to listen to you? I mean... we're called "servants" for a reason, right?'

'Yeah, about that... Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but you'd probably realize it on your own eventually. And I trust you, I guess. See, when servants grow powerful enough, they can prevent their reapers from releasing their souls.'

Hector tilted his head. 'What? How?'

'It's pretty simple, actually. The reaper has to make contact with the servant's body in order to release the soul. So the servant can just keep the reaper in a soul-empowered prison and never allow themselves to be touched.'

'Oh...'

'It's an extreme solution. If you can't make contact with your reaper, then you lose access to your regenerative power, enhanced strength, and hyper states. And obviously, if you get killed, then your reaper probably won't feel like resurrecting you again.'

'No kidding...'

'Also, you'd have to worry about maintaining the prison. The soul power will drain from it over time, unless you have absurdly high synchronization with your reaper.'

"819



‘Are you... uh... I mean, did your servant do that to you?’

‘Yeah,’ said Garovel. ‘He kept me prisoner for two years.’

‘Geez...’

‘Looking back on it now, two years wasn’t very long at all. Only two out of thousands already lived. But it was one of the worst things I’ve ever experienced. Being trapped makes all the difference in the world, especially when you don’t know if you’ll ever make it out again.’

‘Agh, man... But, uh.... how DID you get out? Did the guy screw up?’

‘Partially. I tricked him. Another problem with imprisoning your reaper is that, guess what? They can still talk to you. In fact, unless you’re keeping other people around their prison, you are the ONLY person they can talk to. So naturally, I began by just constantly talking shit to him. Trying to drive him to the breaking point so he’d do something stupid, right? That didn’t work so well. Whenever I annoyed him enough, he’d just wound me to the point where I’d fall unconscious for a few days. Should’ve known that was a bad plan. He was a thug. Any problem he could solve with violence, he would. So instead, I very slowly convinced him to do one of the dumbest things I could think of. Reverse psychology. Being purposely vague. That sort of thing.’

‘What’d you have him do?’

‘I waltzed him into the territory of a famous member of Abolish. He thought there’d be treasure. There wasn’t.’

Hector had to stifle a laugh. ‘Wow, Garovel. I guess he deserved it, but holy shit...’

‘That Abolisher went on to become even more famous afterwards. His name was Suresh, and he was considered Dozer’s equal for a while.’

‘Whoa...’

‘Suresh is dead now, but his successor is still alive. Gohvis. Ever heard the name?’

‘No...’

‘The Monster of the East? The Black Scourge? Those are both him, too.’

Hector thought back. ‘Actually... yeah, I’ve heard of the Black Scourge. When I was little. I thought it was like... a plague or something.’

‘Nope. It’s a guy.’

‘Fuck...’

‘Yeah. He’s arguably even more famous than Dozer, his boss. Or so I hear. I’ve never met either of them personally, in case that wasn’t obvious. Maybe everyone is wrong about them, and they’re secretly super nice dudes.’

‘Right... Hmm. Dozer has a country named after him, but why is

Gohvis so famous?’

‘Regicide. Genocide. And punching a hole into a volcano that then erupted and wiped out an entire Vanguardian stronghold.’

‘...What.’”

"820

‘That’s just what I’ve heard,’ said Garovel. ‘Gohvis is famous for lots of things, but I don’t know how much is true, if any. Still, I think it’s pretty safe to say that he’s someone we never want to meet.’

‘But... punching a hole into a--I mean, like, with his FIST?’

‘I guess so. Dunno.’

‘That’s ridiculous. I feel like I would’ve heard about someone doing something like that.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m pretty sure it happened before television was invented. Might be newspapers about it, though. That’d be an interesting headline. But I’m not surprised you haven’t heard about it. I don’t think it’s the type of thing they’d teach in school.’

‘If they had, I probably would’ve paid more attention. That’s awesome.’

Garovel’s skeletal brow twisted somewhat. ‘...You did hear the part about genocide and him being a member of Abolish, right?’

‘Oh, yeah... Fuck, man, why couldn’t he be a good guy?’

Garovel laughed.

‘Are there any cool stories about good guys doing insane shit like that?’

Still chuckling, the reaper said, ‘I think we’re getting a little off topic.’

‘Are we? I forgot what we were talking about.’

‘Wow, Hector.’

‘Hey, it’s late. I’m tired.’

‘We were talking about my sister.’

‘Right... uh...’

‘Chergoa.’

‘I knew that.’

Garovel shook his head. ‘Anyway, like I was saying before, I treated Chergoa and her servant poorly. My most recent servant had betrayed me, so I was... upset. And unreasonable. We parted ways without making plans to meet up again, and now, apparently, I’ve found her in Sair all these years later. And I would quite like to see her again.’

‘So you think we should go to Rheinhal with Lord Asad.’

‘Yeah. If I don’t see Chergoa now, it could be fucking ages before I get another opportunity to. But with that said, I won’t force you to go. Because it DOES sound incredibly dangerous.’

Hector scratched his forehead. ‘When does it not?’

‘I’m serious, Hector. These warriors aren’t like the ones we fought in Atreya. The Sandlords and the Rainlords are the real deal, and the Vanguard won’t be taking them lightly. We’ll almost assuredly encounter people both AT and ABOVE Harper’s level. So don’t just go with the flow on this one, alright? Understand what you’d be getting yourself into.’

The prospect gave him pause. More people like Harper? And stronger? Hector’s face scrunched up a little as he thought about that. He was starting to miss Warrenhold right about now.”

"821

But regardless of how he felt about it, Hector was certain that they couldn’t just leave after hearing about Chergoa. ‘It’s your sister, Garovel. We have to help her.’

‘You sure? I definitely won’t hold it against you if you’d rather stay out of it. Our involvement might not make much difference, anyway.’

‘Well... uh... I don’t know. Shit. Making the real decisions is your job. As long as we’re working to protect people, I mean--I’m not... I... agh,

y-you know what I mean, right?’

‘Ha. Yeah, I do.’ Garovel looked toward the guest room’s other two occupants. ‘What about them? They said they’d understand if you chose to leave with Asad, but still.’

Lynn and Meriwether had their own beds, of course. The Prince’s snoring sounded like it belonged to a man twice his size.

‘Uh... well, it doesn’t seem like they need me. This castle seems pretty safe...’

Garovel paused. ‘You’re really just doing this to get away from Lynn, aren’t you?’

Hector decided not to grace that with a response.

It wasn’t long until morning arrived. Lynn awoke first, popping up from her pillow as if someone had ordered her to attention. She sat there a moment, scanning the room. She nearly looked like a different person without her braided ponytail or her white hood. She’d slept in her eye patch, though.

“Anything happen?” she asked.

Hector just shook his head.

She nodded and carried her luggage to the bathroom in order to shower and change. She took her time, but she was still done before the Prince was up. She started working on her ponytail while they waited for Meriwether to get ready.

“Thanks for taking the night shift,” said Lynn. She was looking at Hector via the reflection in the large mirror that she was using for her hair. “You should get some rest now.”

Hector stood. “Actually, uh... Asad leaves this afternoon, so, uh, I should probably go see Haqq first.”

Her hands stopped, and she stared at him. “You said you would sleep in the morning. That’s why I let you take the night shift.”

He knew that and couldn’t help smiling just a bit. “Yeah...”

She turned to look at him directly. “If you’re really leaving to go fight, then you should’ve slept.”

“Well... I told you I don’t need sleep in order to fight.”

“Hmph.” She went back to her ponytail.

“S-sorry...”

“It’s fine. I guess I just wish that I could go, too.”

"822

“W-why?” asked Hector. “You enjoy fighting that much?”

“I wouldn’t say I enjoy it. But I could use the experience.” She stopped braiding briefly in order to wave her gauntlet in front of her face. “Even with this, I’m not nearly as strong as I need to be.”

“Ah... I know the feeling.”

Lynn smirked. “You do, huh? Is that why you’re always inserting yourself into other people’s problems?”

“Uh... hah, yeah, I guess so.”

Silence seized hold of the chamber after that. Hector couldn’t help becoming increasingly uncomfortable as they waited. Lynn was just sitting there. Right there. Being herself.

This was clearly a problem.

Hector stood and went for his single bag of luggage. “So, ah... I should probably go meet Haqq now...”

At that, Lynn also stood. “Okay.”

“I don’t know if, uh... if I’ll have time to see you both again before I leave, so...”

“I understand.” She moved closer now, making Hector tense up. “Be careful out there, alright?”

“I-I will. Thanks.”

Lynn frowned at him and went in for a hug.

Hector’s eyes bulged, and he recoiled away from her.

Lynn froze up, then put her arms down and stood there woodenly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--I just thought--uh. I'm sorry."

"Ah, oh, n-no, it was--um, eh... I'm the one who--mm... ergh--"

'Ugh, this is painful to watch,' said Garovel.

"S-sorry," Hector said again. He took an awkward step toward her, insanely thinking he would be able to reinitiate the hug, only to immediately realize his folly and step back again.

Lynn offered him a handshake instead.

Hector reached for it, but the journey proved too perilous, and he retracted his hand. "I'm... ah... s-sorry... er, again. I don't know what's... egh..."

'Holy shit, Hector.'

The young woman looked at her hand, perhaps wondering if there was something wrong with it.

'Just relax,' said Garovel. 'You've shaken hands with her before, remember?'

But it was too late. The moment had passed.

"Well, um," Lynn retied, "be careful out there... I mean, I already said that, but..."

"Y-yeah... Er. Y-you, too..."

And he probably should have waited around so that he could say goodbye to Prince Meriwether as well, but Hector couldn't bear the atmosphere in the room now and chose to simply flee instead.

He was grateful for the bustling corridor's sea of people. It allowed him to feel like he was disappearing into the shuffling mass of bodies as he made for the basement level once more.

Garovel followed silently for a while, until he apparently realized that Hector wasn't going to start the conversation. 'That was more gruesome than watching Harper cut someone in half.'

Hector sighed to himself. 'I panicked...'

'No shit.'"

"823

'Agh... I fucking suck.'

'Aw, don't feel too bad,' said Garovel. 'You'll do better next time.'

'The worst part is... now, she probably thinks that I'm grossed out by her or something...'

'Eh, you don't know that. Maybe she just thinks you're a spastic weirdo.'

'...Great. Thanks for that.'

'No problem.'

Hector just wallowed in his self-loathing as he joined the group of people waiting for the elevators.

'Why do you have a crush on her, anyway? Do you even know the reason?'

'Uh...'

'I'll take that as a no.'

'No, well, I mean... I know why.'

'Then tell me.'

'Ergh... because... I mean, because she's fucking awesome.'

'She is?'

'Yes! She's like--she's like everything I'm not. Really smart and strong and focused.'

'You're all of those things, too, Hector.'

'No, I'm not--'

'I think you literally just named your three best characteristics. When you don't know the answer, you generally ask intelligent questions;



you've proven yourself in battle multiple times, as far as I'm concerned; and you meditate like a fucking Jesbolese monk. Smart, strong, focused.'

'I... that's not--'

'So essentially, you're telling me that you like her because she reminds you of yourself.'

'What the--?! No! I just--! I just don't know how to--!'

'Whatever, narcissist.'

'Fucking--! You... agh...'

'Maybe you just have an eye patch fetish.'

'...Is that a real thing?'

'Oh, I'm sure it is. I have immeasurable faith in humanity's capacity for perversion.'

At length, they finally arrived at the R&D lab again. The guards let them through without a fuss this time.

Haqq and Sazandara were both right there near the doorway. The reaper noticed them first. 'Hello again,' she said.

'Good morning,' said Garovel. 'Did you get a chance to perform the analysis?'

"Yes, I did!" said Haqq. "The results were absolutely fascinating! It seems your servant is able to materialize an ultra-rare quad-element compound of titanium, iridium, carbon, and plutonium! I'm not sure why I couldn't tell right away yesterday!"

Confused, Hector just kind of blinked dully. He didn't know what to say, but judging by the reaper's flat expression, Garovel apparently did.

'You're lying.'

"Of course I am lying. Just as I told you before, it is only iron. The embodiment of mediocrity and tedium. Why did you make me waste my time analyzing it? I was hoping that you had brought me something that was at least vaguely interesting, but no. Your servant is about as special as a sunny day in Kuros." He eyed Hector. "And probably just as useful.""

--BELATED donation bonus (day 5/7, page 3/3)--

Hector shrunk away from Haqq's gaze and flushed with a touch of humiliation. He knew that there were probably servants out there with abilities that were naturally more powerful, but he didn't think iron was that bad. Perhaps he'd been mistaken, though. Haqq was the expert, after all. He looked to Garovel, who was visibly irritated.

'We weren't trying to impress you. We just wanted confirmation. That being said, I'd appreciate it if you didn't insult my friend for no apparent reason. And by the way, iron is far from useless.'

Haqq gave a throaty laugh. "I suppose in relative terms, yes, you might be able to find some semblance of value in it. But when you find yourselves faced with real monsters, iron will not be enough to save your unremarkable lives."

'Wow,' said Garovel, louder now. 'I fucking hate ability-snobs like you. Power doesn't make the person, you moron. You'd do well to remember that, lest you have someone teach it to you the hard way.'

Haqq seemed to dismiss the notion.

'Garovel is correct,' interjected Sazandara. 'Haqq, you should apologize for insulting them.'

Haqq's expression soured, and he pulled his shoulders in. "No. They wasted my time. And so did you, for that matter. You know I have more important things to be doing."

'Apologize. Now.'

"Or what?" said Haqq. "You will release me? Because I insulted a couple of strangers? Be serious."

'They are no longer strangers. They are allies now.'

Haqq exhaled another laugh. "Allies? Why? Because they've decided to help Asad on his fool's errand? Please. I could not care less about their circumstances if you paid me to ignore them."

Garovel had heard enough, it seemed. 'Let's go, Hector. We got what

we came for.'

'Please wait,' said Sazandara. She tapped Haqq on the head, and the man immediately dropped to the floor, unconscious. She floated closer to Hector and Garovel. 'I am deeply sorry that Haqq is such an insufferable twat. Frankly, I wanted Asad as my servant, but I got stuck with this social cataclysm of a person, instead.'

After a moment, Garovel relinquished a nod. 'It's fine. I understand. The apology is appreciated, though. Thank you.'

'Allow me to make it up to you.'

Garovel paused. 'What do you mean?'

'Follow me.' She floated away from Haqq's body and guided them into a deeper room where the walls were completely filled with lockboxes, as if they'd suddenly walked into a bank vault."

"825

Sazandara approached the room's apparent attendant, a youthful man at a desk full of notebooks and binders. The reaper said something to him in Valgan.

Nodding, the attendant pulled on a pair of gloves and fished a key out of a drawer. He moved to the rear wall, opened one of the larger boxes, and with visible effort, pulled out an impressive slab of metal with a gentle curve to it. Sazandara said something else to him, but this time, the attendant hesitated, looking from her to Hector and back again.

Before Hector even thought to ask, Garovel began translating for him.

'She's telling him to give it to you. He's asking if she's sure. Says Haqq will be upset.' Garovel broke for a chuckle. "'That's the point," she says.'

The attendant soon conceded and moved to hand the object over.

'Careful not to let it touch your skin just yet,' said Sazandara.

Hector did as she instructed, abruptly glad that he hadn't taken his own gloves off.

At first, even while holding it, he still wasn't sure what the thing was, but as soon as he turned it up vertically in his hands, he realized.

It was a shield. A heater shield, to be precise--a flat top with a rounded, pointed bottom. Smaller than a kite shield but larger than a buckler. Hector recognized it from his research into old world armor.

He was suddenly reminded of his afterschool armor-building project with Lance Alexander. It was only a few months ago, but it seemed like a different life. What was Lance doing now, he wondered? He recalled finding a small measure of relief when he saw the list of victims of the Calman High Massacre and realized that Lance's name was not on it.

Blinking, Hector pulled himself back to the present as Sazandara started talking again.

'This is a self-repairing shield,' she explained. 'It is extremely durable for a number of different reasons. These four vertical lines you see here--these are bars of tungsten carbide. Haqq synthesized them personally. The rest of the metal is a mixture of steel and titanium alloys. Also, the metal has been permanently soul-strengthened by Abbas Saqqaf, so I think you'll find that it can take quite a bit of punishment before ever needing to repair itself.'

'Permanently soul-strengthened?' said Garovel. 'Lord Abbas can do that?'

'Of course. But never mind that. I still haven't told you the best part.'

'Oh?'

"826

'As long as your servant's bare skin is making contact with this shield, his passive soul defenses will be dramatically increased,' said Sazandara. 'Unless, of course, his soul defenses are already superior to that of the shield. In which case, no increase is granted.'

Garovel hovered nearer. 'Hmm. I didn't realize that was even possible.'

'I would have been surprised if you did. Haqq made the breakthrough himself. It is still not a widely known development.'

‘I see. Are you sure you’re willing to part with it? This seems like an incredibly valuable object.’

‘This is merely a test piece, hence the antiquated simplicity of its design. Haqq wanted to see if he could integrate the materials properly. It took him several months to craft enough for just this shield alone. And admittedly, as irritating as Haqq can sometimes be, I was rather impressed. I don’t know how familiar you are with integration abilities, but being able to craft THIS much of any self-repairing material is quite a feat.’

Hector and Garovel exchanged glances.

‘In other words, yes, it is immensely valuable,’ she went on, ‘but I do still wish for you to have it--partly as an apology and partly to teach Haqq a lesson.’

Garovel shrugged. ‘Well, I won’t refuse such a useful gift. Thank you for your generosity.’

‘You are quite welcome,’ she said. Then she turned to Hector and added, ‘Lord Darksteel.’

Hector’s brow rose at that.

Sazandara’s bony smile widened. ‘After we met yesterday, I asked Haqq’s nephew to look into you. I didn’t realize it would be such an easy assignment for him.’

‘And here I was just getting accustomed to no one recognizing Hector’s face,’ said Garovel.

‘I must say, your actions in your home country have been quite bold. Are you not concerned that the Vanguard will come to recruit you?’

‘Recruit us?’

‘Indeed. Certain factions have recently been quite... aggressive in their attempts to gain more members. I imagine your servant’s fame will make him rather appealing to such people.’

‘Hmm. That’s odd. Not long ago, our Queen went on a veritable quest to find Vanguardian allies, and yet she was barely able to procure the aid of a single servant.’

‘Yes, but that was when your country contained the stench of Abolish.

Now that this is no longer the case...’

‘I see your point.’

‘Perhaps there is more riding on your alliance with Asad than you realized.’

‘Perhaps you’re right.’”

"827

Hector turned the shield over in his hands again, wanting a good look at the front. It was lustrously gray, apart from the four bars of tungsten carbide that Sazandara mentioned before. Those were a bit darker, but Hector wouldn’t have been able to tell that they weren’t simply paint if the reaper hadn’t told him. They fit so seamlessly into the shield that he couldn’t see even the slightest physical crease between them and the rest of the lighter-colored metal.

‘Before you use it, a couple of warnings,’ said Sazandara. ‘As soon as your skin touches it, the enhanced soul defenses will take effect. When you’re wearing gloves like you are now, no enhancements are granted to your body.’

“O-okay.”

‘Additionally, you will notice that touching the shield directly causes immense physical pain. That is a side effect of your body being made stronger than it is prepared to be. Garovel will therefore need to numb the pain for you whenever you intend to wield it barehanded.’

“Ah... and then I’ll feel the pain later.”

‘Naturally.’

Hector nodded. ‘Figures,’ he remarked to Garovel.

‘The shield will also take a toll on you, Garovel.’

‘Me? Why?’

‘The defensive increases are made possible by interfering with the soul-synchronization between the two of you. The shield functions as a catalyst, and through it, your souls are stretched beyond their limits in

an effort to equalize themselves with the shield. And because the reaper is very much the “battery” of the relationship, this experience will gradually drain you.’

‘I see.’

‘How long has Hector been your servant?’

‘About three years.’

Hector’s expression flickered. He had to consciously keep himself from staring at Garovel. It hadn’t even been eight months.

‘Quite young,’ said Sazandara. ‘In that case, I would advise Hector not to wield it barehanded for more than thirty minutes per day.’

‘Understood,’ said Garovel. And then privately, he amended her number to, ‘Six minutes per day. Remember that, if you can.’

Hector wasn’t sure he understood the point of lying to their allies like this. Even if Sazandara somehow ended up betraying them, wouldn’t it be better if she thought they were weaker? Something to ask Garovel about later, he decided.

‘Is there anything else we should know?’ Garovel asked.

‘No, that is everything.’

‘Alright. Thank you for explaining. We appreciate your hospitality. Once things settle down, I’d like to invite you back to Warrenhold with us. I’m sure even Haqq would be able to enjoy himself there.’

‘Ah. I will keep that in mind.’”

"828 -- XCIV.

Chapter Ninety-Four: ‘Kindred souls, be swift...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It wasn’t long until Hector found himself aboard another airplane. He’d only arrived in Kuros a day ago--on his first ever plane ride no less--and yet now he was already leaving.

This second plane ride had a very different atmosphere, however. It did not provide quite the same level of comfort that the Prince's private jet did. Rather, this one felt more like he'd somehow become involved in a smuggling operation. Lord Asad had chosen to use a cargo plane for their trip, and one of the doors was kept open at all times, making the whole affair rather windy and loud.

He supposed it only made sense, though. Asad hadn't gained the approval of the other Sandlords for this venture, so a certain amount of discretion was to be expected. Moreover, the storage space allowed them to conceal military supplies among the normal cargo. The sight felt a bit surreal to Hector--piles of boxes belonging to the United Mail Service of Sair next to huge crates full of food rations and rocket-propelled grenades.

Apart from the pilots, only two other people had accompanied Hector and Asad. Both were female, though Hector hadn't been able to tell until they pulled back the hoods of their black-and-gold robes. And they both had those distinct yellow eyes, too. The older woman was Imas Najir, Asad and Haqq's sister. The younger woman was Jada Najir, Asad's daughter. With all of the air rushing around the cabin, it was too noisy for anyone to speak without shouting, and the ladies seemed content with letting their reapers do the talking for them. Hector had no problem doing the same.

Garovel spoke at length, explaining his and Hector's presence. Axiolis assisted. The other reapers welcomed the help but didn't seem too concerned otherwise.

Hector could see the landscape changing dramatically through the windows. Barren desert and wastelands gave way to harsh, craggy rock formations, and soon enough, enormous mountains came into view, standing between them and Rheinhal. Some of the peaks were so tall that the plane had to navigate around them due to its low altitude flight.

Hector also noticed that meditating was more difficult. Garovel explained that it was a mild effect of hypoxia and could therefore be neutralized if needed, but the reaper told him that the extra burden could prove beneficial as practice."

"828 -- XCIV.



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"829

He tried to meditate for a while, but intermittent bouts of turbulence kept shaking him out of it until he decided to just give up.

'Fun fact for you,' said Garovel, still privately. 'Under normal atmospheric conditions, turbulence is usually exclusive to higher altitudes, but since we're near a mountain range, the air currents are all wonky even at this height.'

'How interesting...'

'It IS interesting, you sarcastic fuck.'

Hector breathed a small laugh and looked down to avoid drawing attention to himself. The shield was right there in his lap. It seemed too valuable to not keep a solid grip on at all times, especially with that hole in the plane sitting right there. He really didn't want his luck with shields to be the same as his luck with motorcycles.

After a while, Hector remembered a question he'd been meaning to ask. 'By the way, uh... why did you lie to Sazandara about my age? Wouldn't it be better if people think I'm weaker than I actually am?'

'She DOES think you're weaker than you actually are.'

'W-what?'

'I told her three years. Truthfully, factoring in all the times you've achieved emergence and your constant practice and meditation, your iron ability is more like six or seven years old.'

Hector squinted with one eye. 'Wha? No way. That can't be right...'

'In terms of sheer volume and power, yes. It is. Trust me.'

'But... that means I'm, like, uh... er... e-eight times stronger than normal...?'

'Thereabouts, yeah.'

He thought back, trying to count. 'But I've, um... I mean, I've only achieved emergence, like... four times, I think.'

Garovel snorted. "Only four," he says. That's kind of a fuckload, y'know.'

'Is it?'

'Yes!'

'Hmm... but still, I mean... EIGHT times as strong?'

'I know it sounds ridiculous. That's exactly why I had to lie about it to Sazandara. If I tell people you're less than eight months old, and then they later see what you're capable of, that could bite us in the ass. If you're a bit stronger than average, no big deal. If you're eight times stronger, BIG DEAL. Big smelly, hairy deal. That kind of information is not to be shared lightly, Hector. Understand? That's how we end up with people like Gohvis knocking on our door, people who'll see us as a problem that should be nipped in the bud.'

'I understood that much. I just, uh... hmm.'

'You just, what?'

"830

'I just feel like... eight times is still too much. I mean, that one guy I fought... uh... the guy with the yellow crystals.'

'Sulfur.'

'Yeah. He was obviously older than me as a servant, but... he probably wasn't THAT much older, right? I mean, considering how you said he was weaker than Karkash, who probably wasn't that old, either.'

'Yeah. What's your point?'

'Well, that guy could add velocity to his sulfur pretty well. And even now, I can barely do that with my iron. So, I mean... logic would dictate that I'm still not as strong as that guy was, right?'

'Mm. That's a reasonable assumption to make, but alas still incorrect.'

Adding velocity to your element is a skill that also requires practice. It's something you have to actually understand "how" to do. Even if you'd achieved emergence a dozen times already, you wouldn't be able to add velocity to your element until you learned the particulars of it.'

'Oh...'

'In terms of raw power, though, I think you've already surpassed that sulfur guy. He only had the edge on you because his soul synch was higher. You'll get the velocity thing down soon enough.'

'Hmm.' Hector gave a sideways nod. It was true that he'd been thinking that he could still do more with the velocity than he'd so far managed. 'Then... are there any other "skills" like that?'

'Temperature manipulation. That's a pretty high-level skill for materialization users, though. Weirdly enough, it's easier for transfiguration users to do, perhaps because they don't have to also be mindful of spatial coordination like you do.'

'Spatial coordination?'

'Depth perception. Where you want to create your element. That sort of thing. Transfiguration users also just have tighter control over their elements, even being able to manipulate how intensely they react to other elements. So I suppose it's not too surprising.'

'Hmm.'

--++--++--

Rheinhal was not as Asad remembered it. Even from the air, he could see the difference. Barricades had gone up all over the city, forming concentric circles around Rhein's Keep. Vehicles were a rare sight as well. No doubt, the Rainlords had evacuated most, if not all, civilians by now.

Encouragingly, Asad did not see much in terms of property damage. He spotted a couple small craters near the castle, but nothing else. Yet the siege was still young, of course."

"831

As they neared the airport, Asad moved to the front of the plane in

order to radio the Rainlords on the ground and ensure a safe landing. A car was waiting for them on the tarmac, as was a group of reaperless workers who began unloading supplies as soon as Asad and the others were clear.

It was a quiet car ride, even between the reapers. Perhaps everyone was nervous, wondering what difference four more servants would make. After a spell, Asad's daughter decided to break the silence.

"Where did you get that shield?" she asked. At twenty-two years, Jada was the oldest of Asad's three children.

It seemed to take Hector a moment to realize that she was talking to him. "Oh, uh... from your... uncle, I think?"

Asad had thought he recognized it.

'Less from Haqq and more from Sazandara,' said Garovel.

That made more sense. Asad's hand went to the ring in his pocket, rolling it absently between his fingers and wondering if he would need it. Haqq had given it to him just before leaving Kuros. Callous though he was, Haqq had always found other ways to demonstrate his concern for his big brother.

Soon, after passing a couple checkpoints, they arrived at a large hotel, around which stood a plethora of new reapers and servants. They all eyed Asad and his small entourage, but only one deigned to approach.

It was a very small person, Asad realized, fully grown certainly but no taller than a child. "Welcome to Rheinhal," the little man said.

Asad couldn't help hesitating, still unsure to whom he was speaking. "Thank you."

"The Lion of the Desert, is it? I do not believe I have ever had the pleasure." He certainly had a firm handshake, regardless of his stature. "I am Xuan Sebolt."

"Ah! A pleasure, indeed! Though, at this rate, I fear they will start calling me the Black Sheep of the Desert, instead. I am sorry I could not procure any more aid from my kin."

"You have nothing to apologize for," said Xuan. "This is not their fight. Were we in their position, we probably would have done the same."

Asad only frowned at that.

“Come inside, won’t you? I believe everyone has been expecting you.”

They followed.

The hotel lobby broadened into a casino floor, though all of the slot machines had been turned off. Lavish red-gold carpeting filled each walkway, lined with segmented lights.”

"832

‘The Seadevil is a dwarf,’ said Qorvass privately. ‘Was not expecting that.’

Asad had to agree. He supposed the size of a servant made no real difference in the measurement of their worth, but it was still quite strange to discover that one of the most feared Rainlords of Sair could seem so unintimidating. And it wasn’t just Xuan’s height that was responsible for that false impression, Asad realized. His easy smile and big, sea green eyes had contributed something to it as well. And then there was the way he bobbed from side to side as he walked, as if stepping in tune with a song only he could hear.

Xuan led them to the back with his unintroduced reaper following closely behind. They ventured through a series of doors and offices until they arrived at a boardroom.

Asad recognized most of the faces present. Octavia Redwater, Rayen Merlo, Santos Zabat, Evangelina Stroud, as well as a handful of their family members. A map of Rheinhal lay across the center table.

“Glad you could make it,” said Octavia, already standing there by the door. The tiny old woman wasn’t much taller than Xuan. “Ah, and who is this that you have brought with you?”

“My sister Imas and my daughter Jada,” he said, gesturing. “And their reapers, Orjand and Atalim.”

Axiolis assumed the responsibility of answering for the remaining two. ‘This is Garovel and his servant, the young Lord Hector Goffe of Warrenhold. They have come all the way from Atreya, and as it happens, Garovel here is Chergoa’s brother.’

That sent a ripple through the chamber. Asad saw Octavia exchange looks with Xuan before responding.

"I see," she said. "Then I suppose you are hoping to meet with her."

Garovel spoke for himself now. "Yes, I am. I was not made aware of Chergoa's ties to the Rainlords until just yesterday. Axiolis explained that she is a fairly new addition to your ranks."

"Your timing is unfortunate," said Octavia. "We'll have to speak quickly. Chergoa and her servant are currently being held hostage."

"What?!" said Axiolis. "Since when?!"

"Dimas Sebolt arrived here last night and informed us of an attack on Red Lake in which the Elroys were abducted. By Melchor Blackburn, no less."

"Melchor? Why would he do such a thing?"

"We don't know yet," said Octavia.

The Lady Rayen Merlo decided to chime in now. "We are sending the Sebolts and Delagunas to recover the children. Abel and Salvador are attending to the matter at this very moment and intend to leave Rheinhal before sundown."

"833

"In that case, I hope they will not mind Hector and I tagging along," said Garovel.

"I'm sure they won't," said Xuan. "I'll take you to them after this. They won't be leaving without me, so just stay close."

"Appreciated, thank you."

Asad had questions for Rayen and Octavia. "You are sending all of the Sebolts and Delagunas? That is nearly a third of your forces, no?"

"It is," said Rayen. "They will need no less than that in order to breach Marshrock."

"Even then, we may have trouble," said Xuan. He eyed Asad another

time. "Your assistance would be most welcome."

Asad pursed his lips. "I came here in order to help free Zeff."

'Be that as it may, I think you should accompany Xuan,' said Axiolis. 'I know Zeff would tell you to prioritize his children over himself. And besides, this way, the Vanguard won't become aware of Hahl Najir's involvement. You'd be assisting us without doing anything that might cause reprisal against you and your family.'

'Axiolis is right,' said Qorvass.

"What about the fight here in Rheinhal?" said Asad. "If you send so many of your fighters to Marshrock, will you still be able to take the Keep?"

"Breaching Rhein's Keep may not even be necessary," said Octavia. "Thus far, we have only been testing their defenses, and while they have proven quite solid, it won't make much difference as long as we continue to hold the city."

"Our opponent has a time limit," said Rayen. "Sanko is coming. When she arrives, she will settle the matter for us. All we need do is prevent the enemy from escaping."

'You make it sound so easy,' said Qorvass.

"Simple, perhaps," said Rayen. "Not easy. Our forces are going to be spread thin. But if Asad wants to put his skills to the best use, he should go to Marshrock."

After a beat, Asad gave a reluctant nod. "Very well."

Garovel posed another question now. 'What more can you tell us about the children's captors?'

"Xuan can fill you in on such details," said Rayen. "However, do be aware that Melchor Blackburn is not a man to be trifled with. Do not attempt to fight him unless you have him absurdly outnumbered or Xuan is with you."

Xuan laughed. "Stop, you'll make me blush. I'm nothing special." Then he wiped his mirth away and turned to Garovel. "She's right, though. Don't try to fight him without me unless you want your servant to be turned into a fleshy pudding.'"

"834 -- XCV.



## Chapter Ninety-Five: 'Where the streams darken...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

They'd been split up. Emiliana had a room all to herself. It was a comfortable prison, bearing a large bed and a television, but there weren't even any windows. Melchor had taken her mask from her, apparently thinking it important to see her horned-face. He'd taken Chergoa, too, but Emiliana could still communicate with her.

'Ugh,' came Chergoa's disembodied voice. 'I hate being stuck in a box.'

'What's the point of separating us?' Emiliana asked. 'I can still talk to you.'

'Because if you managed to escape, it'd save them the trouble of hunting you down. They could just kill me and not have to worry about you telling anyone anything.'

Emiliana appreciated the reaper's candidness, but sometimes it could be a bit much. She sat down on the edge of her bed and put her head in her hands, closing her eyes and trying to think. 'What about Marcos and Ramira? Why separate me from them?'

'A solitary escape attempt is easier to stop than a coordinated one. But guarding multiple prisons also requires more guards. From that, we can infer the Blackburns are not short on people.'

Emiliana didn't think it made much difference how many guards they had as long as Melchor was around. She would not soon be forgetting what she saw the man do at Red Lake. And if that wasn't disheartening enough, she'd gotten quite a good look at Marshrock from the outside. The name was not queerly chosen. The castle had literally been carved into a gigantic rock, and murky wetlands did indeed surround it and the entire town of Luzo. Marshrock was a dark monolith on an otherwise flat and muddy landscape, sticking up toward the gray sky like a mountainous child that had somehow strayed from its herd.

'I'm still wondering why in the world they're doing this,' said Emiliana.

‘No kidding. Their behavior is strange. Considering our circumstances, the Blackburns seem to be pretty cautious, and yet they decided to bring us to Marshrock, which is undoubtedly the first place the other Rainlords will think to look for us.’

‘Well, it is their stronghold.’

‘But it wouldn’t have been that difficult to hide us. I’m sure Melchor could have smuggled us out of the country, if he wanted.’

The reaper had a point.

‘It almost seems like they want the other Rainlords to come here,’ said Chergoa.”

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"835

‘Why would they want that?’ said Emiliana.

‘I don’t know. It’s particularly strange when you consider how Melchor tried to get us to go with him peacefully at first. Really not sure what to make of these people.’

‘Hmm. Maybe they really are trying to protect us in some way.’

‘I highly doubt that.’

She laid back on her bed and sighed. 'So what should I do now?'

'You're a prisoner. Not much to do other than wait. Try meditating, if you can manage it.'

'Right...'

'And entertain me. I'm super bored.'

'I don't understand how you can be so calm about everything...'

'I could pretend to be freaking out, if you want.'

'...Please don't.'

'I could tell you a nice story to help you relax.'

At that suggestion, Emiliana begrudged a half-smile. 'What kind of story?'

'What kind do you want? I know lots of stories.'

'Surprise me, then.'

'Alright. So I knew this girl once who was a total kleptomaniac. Stole stuff all the time. It was crazy. Anyway, she really liked it when I told her jokes, but I'd often have trouble explaining puns to her, because she always took things literally.'

A beat passed. 'Oh my god...'

'Good story, right?'

'I think I'll start meditating now.'

'So cruel.'

It was a fairly difficult transition to make, but Emiliana managed it after a while. She focused on clearing her head, mostly. Chergoa had previously explained that meditation was typically used in order to imagine the progression of one's power, what one desired to achieve with it in the short term, but since Emiliana still wasn't at all certain what that was, she was content with keeping it very general in her mind. At this point, all she knew was what she didn't want to become.

That monster kept creeping back into her mind. Trying not to think about it only made the task impossible, and at length, she decided that

she should just stop meditating.

When she opened her eyes, however, the black-scaled monster was standing before her.

She froze up. Without her mask, she couldn't help feeling even more vulnerable this time.

It looked around the room, still deathly silent, and Emiliana decided to move away from the bed.

The monster's red eyes followed her.

Slowly, she positioned herself closer to the vanity mirror, wanting to see if the monster had a reflection.

It didn't.

She wasn't sure whether to be relieved or not. It was fairly compelling evidence that the beast wasn't genuinely there, which made it less dangerous, but that still didn't tell her what the damn thing was or why she was seeing it."

"836

The monster opened its mouth, which was a small revelation unto itself. The creature didn't have protruding lips of any kind, and until now, the place where its mouth resided had looked unsettlingly empty. But this wasn't an improvement. Emiliana spotted a tongue and at least two rows of sharp teeth. And by the way its mouth kept moving, the monster looked like it was trying to speak, but no words came out. No sounds, even. Just more uncomfortable silence.

Emiliana had to blink a few times. She hadn't even thought to try talking to it. After a few moments, she mustered up the courage to ask, "What are you?"

No answer.

And before she could pose another question, the monster faded away again, leaving no remnant of its presence. Emiliana checked the mirror one more time just to be sure it hadn't suddenly appeared there in the manner of some freaky horror movie.

Alone again, she wasn't sure if she should tell Chergoa about what had just happened. The reaper hadn't been able to tell her anything useful the first time, and it wasn't like anything had changed since then. Emiliana wrestled with the decision for a while until eventually choosing to keep the repeated encounter to herself. On top of everything, she didn't need to give Chergoa more evidence that her servant was going crazy.

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Melchor needed his sleep. Even for him, it had been an exhausting night. Any time he and Orric had to use pan-rozum meant a bout of punishing fatigue was soon to follow. The recovery period had shortened immensely over the years, but it would still be many years more before they could use it without any recoil whatsoever.

When he awoke, he cleaned himself up and changed into a fresh suit. He let Orric continue sleeping. To his eyes, the reaper was a quaint jaybird, boasting deeply blue feathers with a few splotches of black and gray. The eyes glowed with black light, though at the moment, they were closed and so not luminous.

Melchor was still tired himself, but he knew that it was still a long ways yet before he could truly relax again. He left his empty bedroom behind and made for the Black Hall, where cousin Ismael was most likely to be at this hour. Relatives and attendants filled the barrel-vaulted corridors along the way, but they all made way for him whenever they saw him coming."

"837

The Black Hall was the largest room in the castle, and its walls were a testament to ancient Arman architecture with their elaborate stonework and inlaid columns. Its ceiling, however, consisted entirely of natural rock. Its slanted, craggy surface hadn't changed since the Armans first brought the rock to this wet place and carved a home out of it.

When Ismael noticed Melchor, he ordered everyone else to leave. Once upon a time, such an order from Ismael would have been shouted with confidence and perhaps even laughter, but here and now, Ismael only whispered his desire to his attendants, who then quietly ushered the crowd of people from the chamber.

Once they were alone, Ismael let the silence linger a while before finally speaking. "I am sorry for what I had you do," he said.

"The Lord of Marshrock should not apologize for his decisions," said Melchor.

Ismael's eyes went to the floor. "Forgive my weakness, then."

A tinge of irritation crossed Melchor's face, but he held his tongue this time.

"I know that my selfishness is to blame for our circumstances."

'Our selfishness,' the man's reaper said. This one was named Rholtam, and he had been with House Blackburn longer than anyone else. 'The responsibility is ours to share, my friend.'

Ismael did not respond. He and his wife Nere had both retained the youth of their mid-thirties, but it had grown difficult to tell. He didn't look old so much as just tired.

It pained Melchor to see him like this, but it had been many years since he'd seen much else in him. They were distant cousins by blood, but Melchor had come to feel like his older brother.

Rholtam gave a soundless ruffling of his feathers and looked at Melchor. 'Will Orric be ready for battle by tomorrow morning?'

"Yes. Is that when we expect our visitors to arrive?"

'Indeed. We have enough aerial defenses along the way. Our opponents will have to do some night marching up through the marshes if they wish to avoid needless losses. In the meantime, we have already started evacuating the town.'

"Where are you sending the refugees?"

'To Intar. We've organized shelters for those who need them. I'm sure they'll feel much safer across the border.'

Melchor nodded.

Ismael still hadn't reestablished eye contact with him.

"What of Ibai?" asked Melchor.

'He is under guard,' said Rholtam. 'He made quite a fuss.'

"I don't doubt it."

"838

The anterior door opened, and through it came Nere Blackburn. The manic and haggard look on her face was not so different from that of her husband. She scurried straight toward Melchor and wrapped her skinny arms around him. "I am so glad you are safe," she said into his chest. "I told Rholtam that we should not have sent you alone."

Melchor returned the embrace, though his wasn't quite the vice grip that hers was. He gave an acknowledging look to her reaper, who was hovering up behind her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't greet you as soon as you returned," she said. "Ibai wouldn't--he... he was..."

"Being difficult?" said Melchor. And when the woman only nodded in response, Melchor exhaled a tired laugh and kissed the top of her head. "It's alright. I'm fine." As much as Ismael was a brother to him, Nere was a sister. Between the two of them, Melchor wasn't sure whom he worried more about these days.

Nere released her hold on him and went to go sit next to her husband. Her strained eyes moved to Ismael's face, and she shakily found his hand with her own.

Melchor saw Ismael squeeze her hand, but it was still not enough to stir the man back to sociability.

Rholtam picked up the slack for him. 'Have you had a chance to assess the castle's defenses?'

"Not yet," said Melchor. "It is next on my to-do list."

'Good. If possible, I would like Orric to look them over as well. I'm sure he can--'

"I do not see an end to this," said Ismael.

Everyone looked at him.

Ismael raised his head, gradually moving his gaze from each observer



to the next. "I thought it could work. I thought we could keep our family together, but now... what hope is there? Truly? What hope? Tomorrow, they will come, and everything will unravel. Everything I've... everything... everything..." He rubbed his face with his free hand.

'You're wrong,' said Rholtam. 'There is hope still. But there can be no peace for us while that man still lives.'

No one needed him to specify which man he was talking about.

Rholtam wasn't done. 'We all know this, yes? Even if we weather this siege and somehow reconcile with the others, it will not prevent future conflicts arising in this same manner. The problem will remain.'

"839

Nere was looking even more frantic than usual now. "What are you saying?"

Rholtam didn't answer. No one really needed him to. It was a discussion they'd had before.

"I fear Rholtam is right," said Ismael. "He must die."

"No!" said Nere. "We can't! And even if we could--!"

"I know what you would say," said Ismael, "but we have been down that road this entire time. Going along with him. And here is where we find ourselves. Again, we teeter on the verge of both treason and ruin because of his vile game."

Nere still did not seem to agree, but if she had further arguments, she was not able to put them into words.

Ismael looked to Melchor again. "You are the only one who can do it. Any resources you require, you need only ask."

Melchor inhaled deeply and folded his arms. "To be honest, I'm not certain I could manage it. Even under ideal circumstances, it would be a struggle."

"It does not matter how you accomplish it, only that you do." Ismael sat upright and seemed to find more strength in his voice as he spoke.

"You must do it. Whatever happens, I want you to promise me that you

will. Even if you are the only one of us who survives the coming battle, I want you to hunt him down and end his life. Even if all it will achieve is vengeance. That will be enough. Swear to me, Melchor. I need your word."

Melchor looked at his cousin evenly. He hadn't seen the man look so sure of himself in ages. The bags under the man's eyes were still there, but that old clarity seemed to shine through regardless. Melchor's chest swelled with a sudden purchase of honor, of pride in the man he now saw before him. "As the Lord of Marshrock commands," said Melchor. "I swear, here and now before you all, that I will kill Parson Miles even if I must use my dying breath to do so."

--++--++--

These confines were exasperating. And just plain unfair, really. He was a grown man, after all. More than grown. Hell, at this point, he and his parents looked the same age.

Ibai Blackburn groaned aloud. He was already so bored. There wasn't even anything good on television. News, news, and more news. What few cartoons he could find, he'd already seen. His favorite shows didn't air new episodes until the weekend, and for all he knew, the castle might be in ruins by then."

"840

--BELATED donation bonus (day 6/7, page 1/3)--

He didn't understand why his parents wouldn't just let him fight. They were wonderful and loving people, but they could be so frustrating sometimes. A big battle was on its way to their doorstep, and yet all of a sudden, he wasn't allowed to participate? The absurdity of it boggled the mind.

He jumped up from his couch and paced across the room. There weren't even any windows to look through, and the walls were all soul-strengthened in order to make sure he stayed put, as well as to conceal his presence from any curious reapers. Sure, it was spacious, having its own den and kitchen and bathroom; and sure, it was filled with all sorts of toys and other things that were obviously meant to keep him distracted, but he just wasn't in the mood for--

Hold on. Was that a merry-go-round tucked away in the corner? It was

a bit small, but he hadn't been on one of those since he was a kid. Oh, man, he'd have to give his mother a big hug later. That magnificent woman thought of everything.

After a while of unadulterated joy, a ringing noise arrived. Next to the sealed door, Ismael's face appeared on the monitor embedded in the wall. <"Ibai?">

He bounded off his mechanical wonder and rushed over. "Hello, Papa! Can I come out yet?"

<"I'm afraid not, mijoro. I just wanted to check in on you. You will need to stay in there for a while yet.">

"Agh!"

<"I know. But it is for your own safety.">

"Yes, yes, same old drill. But I want to fight!"

<"I know you do.">

He groaned again and walked away from the monitor, only to immediately walk back to it. "Okay, fine, no fighting. But still, Papa, there truly is no need to keep me locked up in here. You could send me abroad! Away from all the danger! I would adore a vacation! And I would be perfectly safe!"

<"You know why I can't do that.">

"I won't hurt anyone. I promise. And I won't cause trouble or attract too much attention, either. I know how important it is to remain hidden."

<"I wish I could believe you.">

"But you can! Papa, please! I understand! Believe me! Don't leave me in here!"

And he saw his father hesitate. A flicker of uncertainty achieved at last. But that was all it was.

<"I am sorry. I will let you out soon."> And the monitor went dark.

He was alone again. He clicked his lips apart and gave a loud sigh. And then, faintly, he smiled to himself. "Almost convinced you that time, Papa."

His hand brushed his chin and felt the fresh stubble there. Bah. Facial hair was such a bother. He moved to the bathroom and looked into the mirror. He extended two fingers, and from them, a brown shadow appeared. It formed a small blade, and he began shaving."

"841 -- XCVI.

Chapter Ninety-Six: 'Thy strong hearts, be welcomed...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector had never seen so many servants and reapers. By Garovel's count, there were about fifty pairings accompanying them to Luzo. The majority of them belonged to House Sebolt, apparently. The Sebolts distinguished themselves with bright blue bandanas worn over the left shoulder. The fabric had a distinctive white lightning bolt woven into it. The Delagunas, meanwhile, boasted white bandanas with dark blue squiggles. Hector wasn't too sure what those were supposed to look like.

Come to think of it, there must have been many more at the encampment in Rheinhal, but they'd been so spread out that he never got the chance to see them all together.

He was glad that they weren't flying this time, even if it was slower. Airplanes were neat and all, but he'd gotten his fill of them in the last couple days. Instead, the departing Rainlords were taking a huge convoy of automobiles all the way to Luzo. He rode in a limousine with the Najirs. Jada took the opportunity to pop her head up through the sunroof for a view of it all, and Hector had to join her.

It was a remarkable sight, seeing so many vehicles traveling together down one long road across the countryside. A lot of the reapers were flying up high around them, scouting no doubt, and there were a handful of servants who could fly as well. Hector spotted Dimas Sebolt among them, soaring through the sky with his gray raincoat billowing around him like a cape. At first, that raincoat seemed a bit superfluous, but Hector could see the dark clouds that they were all driving toward on the horizon. It wasn't long before the rain began to fall, and he and Jada had to tuck their heads back inside the limousine.

He knew there would be rain, of course, but as the convoy drew

onward, he still couldn't help marveling at it. It just didn't end. In fact, it only continued to grow heavier. Rolling green hills gave way to huge rivers and lakes. Occasionally, there would be almost no visible land, and it would briefly feel like the bridge they were on was taking them across an ocean.

And those were the most spectacular things, he felt. The bridges. He'd never seen so many in so short a time. In some parts, they were more common than normal roads. And some of them were fantastically elaborate in design."

"841 -- XCVI.

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"842

A few of the bridges that they used had small settlements attached to them--quaint houses clustered around pit stops or refueling stations, even the occasional odd-looking tree. And in the areas where there was currently no flooding, Hector could often see wharfs or boathouses in the muddy grass, tied to the bridges via long chains and cables.

Bridge maintenance must have been a pretty popular and steady job around here, he figured.

Soon, night arrived. Knowing that they wouldn't be near Luzo until almost morning, the Najirs decided to rest up while they could. Hector was of a mind to do the same, but he had a bit of trouble falling asleep in spite of how exhausted he felt.

He had ample company in Garovel and Qorvass, though. Jada and Imas' reapers were off elsewhere, perhaps scouting or talking to people in other cars, and Axiolis had decided to remain in Rheinhal, as that was where his servant was.

'Do you mind telling us what Asad's ability is?' asked Garovel. 'It seems we'll be fighting together after all. Hector's is iron materialization, in case Sazandara didn't tell you.'

‘Ah. Asad’s is also materialization. In fact, he is probably the most powerful materializer among the Sandlords.’

Hector eyed the tattooed man’s sleeping face. He’d figured Asad was crazy strong, but still.

‘I’m glad he’s on our side, then,’ said Garovel. ‘What is his element?’

‘Not an element,’ said Qorvass. ‘A compound. Silicon and oxygen together.’

‘Oh! Quite the rare servant you have.’

‘Heh. Indeed.’

‘If I’m not mistaken, that’s an inherited power, isn’t it? Unique to the Sandlords?’

‘It is. And you might say that it’s also why we’re even here in the first place.’

‘How so?’

‘Zeff Elroy inherited the unique compound of the Rainlords. Hydrogen and oxygen together. I highly doubt Asad and Zeff would have become friends if either of them had different powers. When they were younger, they were both treated rather specially, which is an experience not many people can relate to.’

“W-what does that mean?” Hector asked. “Treated specially?”

‘They were the “darlings” of their respective peoples,’ said Qorvass. ‘You see, their abilities aren’t just strong. They have immense cultural importance. They are seen as confirmations of their bloodlines.’

‘A couple thousand years ago, their powers would have granted them the right to rule over all their brethren,’ said Garovel, ‘and the public would have viewed them as divine beings.’”

"843

‘Yes,’ said Qorvass. ‘It’s no longer so extreme as that, but an underlying reverence for their abilities is still very much alive. Even now that Asad and Zeff are older, they often have unfair expectations

placed upon them.'

"Unfair?" said Hector.

'To simultaneously lead their people and yet also abide by the wishes of their elders,' said Qorvass. 'But that is just one example. Other times, people simply expect them to be more powerful or influential than they are. In some ways, Asad's power is more of a burden than an advantage. Not that I'm complaining.'

Hector began to wonder what abilities their other new comrades might possess, but he couldn't find an opening in the conversation to ask Qorvass about them. Garovel probably had it under control, though. Both of the reapers seemed interested in exchanging information, so Hector figured it was only a matter of time before the subject came up. However, after a while, Garovel addressed Hector privately.

'Hey, why aren't you asleep yet?'

'Uh...'

Garovel tapped him on the head. 'Here.'

And he was out. He plunged into a warm darkness, devoid of thought and worry. When he awoke, his body briefly argued with him before Garovel pulled that away, too.

They'd already arrived in Luzo, he discovered. Dark clouds filled the sky, but according to Garovel, it was past dawn. Apparently, a select group of Rainlords had gone ahead and forged a safe path to the city for the rest of them. That must have been a dangerous job. He wondered who'd done it.

Luzo's covered walkways offered protection from the pouring rain, though not from the booming crash of thunder in the sky. The lightning was so close that the resultant sonic boom left windows rattling in its wake. For a second, Hector thought he was about to encounter Karkash again, but that wasn't the case. The thunderstorm was natural. This region of Sair was known to experience them rather frequently, Garovel explained.

Hector followed the Najirs to another meeting, this time in a tall office building overlooking a river. It seemed there were no civilians around to object to the property seizure.

The Rainlords were waiting for them inside. Hector had already met



the seven servants here back at Rheinhal, though only briefly. The Lords Abel, Xuan, Dimas, and Lady Amaya all belonged to House Sebolt, while House Delaguna was represented by Lord Salvador, Lord Alejo, and Lady Elba.

That was about all Hector could remember. He would definitely need to rely on Garovel in order to tell all their reapers apart."

"844

The Lord Abel Sebolt looked over the gathering of servants around his empty table. "Is everyone here, then? Good, let's begin." He gestured with one hand, opening his palm, and suddenly the table was no longer empty. A metal rock stood upon it, and it took Hector a moment to realize that it must have been a miniature replica of Marshrock. Abel added a few ant-sized people next to it for scale.

Even as he continued listening to Abel speak, he had to admire the precision of the replica. It had tiny windows and balconies and even courtyards and motionless flags. He had no clue how accurate of a representation it actually was, but as a fellow materialization user, he was duly impressed.

"Given the circumstances that brought about this conflict, we must assume that the enemy is fully prepared to receive us," said Lord Abel. "With our current strength considered, a direct assault on Marshrock has an unknowable outcome, but it would most likely result in the greatest number of casualties for both sides. Therefore, we will be taking a slower approach.

"Our first objective is to construct a soul net. We will organize into three teams headed by myself, Salvador, and Asad. Xuan will remain in a neutral position so that he may rush to the aid of any team that becomes targeted by Melchor. In the meantime, Dimas, I want you to harass the enemy aboveground in order to keep them occupied."

"Yes, Father."

"Do not commit to a prolonged attack or attempt to infiltrate the castle," said Abel. "If you see an opening in their defenses, the opponent is most likely trying to lure you into a trap. Make that clear to anyone you choose to take with you."

"Understood," said Dimas.

"Radio coms will be distributed to everyone for observational support. You will also receive physical maps and itineraries in case the enemy employs signal jammers. As for the net, I expect we will be able to complete construction within two-to-three days. Afterwards, we will begin putting true pressure on the castle and seek to infiltrate. Questions?"

Qorvass spoke up. 'Do you have a list of all known enemy combatants with their corresponding abilities and estimated threat level?'

"My wife will be handling that topic next," said Abel. "Are there any questions concerning our immediate strategy?" He waited, but there were none. He took a step back from the table and motioned to Amaya."

"845

The Lady Sebolt placed a briefcase on the table. "The Blackburns have kept to themselves in recent years, so it is possible that they have combatants we do not know about. However, it is a fairly safe assumption that our most powerful opponent will be Melchor, or Darktide, as he is sometimes called. I'm sure you have all heard of him, but here are pictures for anyone who does not know what he looks like." She pulled out a stack of photographs and handed them around. "If nothing else, please ensure that all of your subordinates know this man's face. His power is mercury transfiguration, but even if you believe that you have an elemental advantage over him, DO NOT attempt to engage him unless Xuan is with you."

Garovel chose to interject. 'Pardon my ignorance, but how old is this Melchor?'

'It's been 104 years since he was resurrected,' said Xuan's reaper. This one's name was Duvoss, as Hector recalled.

'Holy fuck,' said Garovel privately, coinciding with Hector's bulging eyes. Then publicly, the reaper asked, 'What about you, Xuan? If you don't mind saying, that is.'

Xuan made as if to answer, but then paused and deferred to his reaper.

Duvoss shook his skeletal head. 'Xuan is 106.'

Xuan frowned and scratched his cheek. "Damn. Are you sure about that?"

'Quite.'

"Shit, I'm old." He only had a few age lines on his face that Hector could see.

Garovel had still another question for him. 'In a straight fight, are you confident you could defeat him?'

"Not at all. It could go either way."

Lord Abel exhaled audibly. "Xuan, please don't be quite so candid with our troops."

"Yeah, yeah. Morale and all that jazz. I know my role."

Abel's flat stare did not imply an abundance of faith in the man.

Lady Amaya picked up where she had left off. "In addition to Darktide, the Blackburns have several other combatants of which everyone should be aware. Ismael and Nere are of course quite powerful, as they are the heads of House Blackburn, but according to our information, they have no children of their own." She started handing out folders with personal profiles. "Instead, House Blackburn's impressive numbers are attributed to its many branches. On the battlefield, other Blackburns to watch out for include Fidel, Silvia, Pilar, Tomas, Horatio, and Sabas. Any of them could rip through our forces if we fail to keep them in check.""

"846

Asad handed one of the folders off to Hector, who began sifting through it. There were many more names than the ones that Lady Amaya had just listed. Most had mug shots to go along with them, and about half had full bios, including breakdowns of their abilities as well as what they were known to be capable of with said abilities.

Hector stared at the pages like they were goddamn treasure maps. He wasn't accustomed to knowing this much about the enemy prior to

battle, but he certainly welcomed the change. He held a page up for himself and another for Garovel as he pored through the intel. He wished he'd been allowed to look at these files yesterday.

'Do you have pictures of the Elroy children?' asked Garovel.

"Yes, of course." Amaya retrieved a much smaller stack of photos from her briefcase and handed them off to Hector. "Bear in mind, these were all taken about a year ago. Also, I will need them back before you leave."

Hector understood. The Elroys seemed to be in rather high demand around here. No doubt, Lady Amaya didn't want their images spread around. And indeed, Hector could see why. They all seemed to share the same black hair and harsh bone structure, not to mention the same hard gaze. He wondered if Rainlords considered it improper to smile when having their pictures taken.

Amaya pointed at three of the five faces. "These are the ones we're looking for. However, this girl here--" She picked out the apparent middle child. "--Emiliana Elroy, she is Chergoa's servant, and she now has four small horns on her face and claws on her left hand. She may be wearing a black mask if you see her."

'Ah,' said Garovel. 'Mutation user?'

"Yes."

Hector lingered on Emiliana's picture. The servant of Garovel's sister. How strange. It was as if he were looking at a long lost relative or something. He tilted his head and reevaluated the other four faces.

All through his childhood, his only family had been his mom and dad. No aunts or uncles or grandparents. Maybe this was what it felt like to have cousins. Sort of. Still kinda weird, seeing as they were all white people.

In any case, he tried to burn their faces into his mind. He knew Garovel would remember for him, but this struck him as important enough to warrant the extra effort."

"847 -- XCVII.

The meeting didn't last much longer after that. Hector returned the Elroys' pictures but was able to hold onto the enemy intel. Lord Dimas was the first out the door, immediately followed by his mother.

Qorvass had another question for Abel. 'Are you sure it was wise to task your own son with harassing the enemy? It's probably the most dangerous job you could have given him, no?'

Lord Abel nodded. "Dimas may be my son, but he is already stronger than I am. I have complete confidence in him."

## Chapter Ninety-Seven: 'The Siege of Marshrock...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

At this distance, Marshrock was a hulking lump on the dark horizon. Dimas could hardly make it out, excepting only when lightning flashed and lit up the entirety of Luzo.

He adjusted the hood of his long raincoat, ensuring it was snug enough to hold his front-brimmed helmet in place and keep the rain out of his eyes. He knew that he'd also have to compensate for the added weight of his heavy combat boots and aramid fiber vest. Truthfully, he would've preferred to just wear his usual suit and tie, but his mother wouldn't allow it.

Technically, he was wearing clothes that she had personally prepared for him. He supposed that was one way to feel young again.

'Are you sure you don't want to take anyone with you?' asked Iziol.

'Yes,' said Dimas. There were a variety of abilities that could achieve flight, but some had an easier time of it than others, and even fewer had his level of control. Instead, he had already ordered Lorenzo Delaguna and cousin Carlos to begin their assault after he completed the first objective.

His boots lifted gently off the rooftop, and Iziol grabbed onto his back. He strengthened his entire body with his soul, flexed his folded arms, breathed deep and fully exhaled, and then rocketed off into the sky.

Marshrock wasn't that far, so there was no need to break the sound barrier. His view of the enormous fortress soon became much clearer. It really was a giant boulder with a few towers poking out from the top.

For the moment, he was not concerned with the castle itself. Instead, he turned upward and climbed toward the clouds. Lightning flashed again, only this time, it hit him.

This was expected. He was prepared for the impact with an invisible field of concentrated gravity. And yet, it still wasn't enough to trivialize the lightning. The sheer force of it knocked him off course, making him stagger in the air as electricity surged all through his body. After a moment, however, he regained his composure and kept climbing."  
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--BELATED donation bonus (day 6/7, page 2/3)--

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"848

Dimas reached the clouds and stopped. He saw more electricity crackling within that dark fog, brewing up another bolt.

This was the first objective. His troops didn’t need the added distraction of a lightning storm, and the underground units would no doubt appreciate a break from the rain while they worked.

He gathered his power into his hand and punched a hole straight up through the clouds. Then his gravity bomb went off. Space bubbled and distorted as gravitic force gathered and then suddenly reversed outward, sending a visible shock wave horizontally through the sky and dispersing all clouds for at least a kilometer in each direction.

Sunlight poured through the opening, lighting up the city below and making its many domed buildings glisten. He could see the rain still

falling like a curtain all around the hole he'd made.

The spectacle signaled the beginning of the assault for his comrades.

He released the orb of gravity around himself and plummeted into freefall, straight back down toward Marshrock's looming form. When he drew near enough, he pulled up and soared around the castle's upper reaches for a clearer view of its exterior.

'Can you sense the Elroy children?' said Dimas.

'No,' said Iziol. 'Melchor empowered the rock with his soul. I can't tell where anyone inside it is.'

'What if I make a hole?'

'It'd have to be a pretty big hole. Bigger than you'd be able to make, most likely. There's a reason Marshrock isn't just a pile of rubble after all these years.'

A part of Dimas wondered about that, but another part knew that this was not the time to be putting his pride to the test. 'Not a big hole, then. Many small ones.'

'That might work. You are going to piss off a lot of people, though.'

'That is the job, is it not?'

'So it is. But do be careful.'

He swooped down lower, just above a suspended extension on the western side. He mustered a gravitational bubble around his right hand. It pulsated, and he knew it was ready. He drew up close to the protruding tower and slammed his fist through it with force enough to make the entire extension crumble.

He'd been prepared to catch any hapless personnel that had been inside and take them hostage, but none had been there. Instead, he saw that the corridor that led into the rock had already been sealed off.

'I know I said small, but you'll have to do better than that,' said Iziol.

Dimas hovered there a moment. '...Very well, then.'



Dimas soared up high again. He could already see the clouds beginning to crowd back in on the hole he'd made. It would only be about half an hour until he needed to make it again, he knew.

He started plummeting back down toward the castle another time, gathering gravity around both hands and then combining them into one.

'Uh, Dimas, that might be a little too much...'

Dimas propelled himself even faster than freefall, veered horizontally along the top of the rock, and then barreled into it with both hands, releasing the gravitic force upon impact.

He tore through the rock like cardboard, gouging out a small valley of crumbling stone. He swooped back up into the sky to inspect his work.

Iziol sighed. 'I really need to teach you how to find the happy medium in things.'

Dimas moved closer to the craggy scar. Impressive as it was, it still hadn't made that much of a dent in Marshrock. The upper rock was so thick that the attack hadn't even broken through to a chamber or hallway.

'I sense someone close,' said Iziol. 'Eastern tower. Someone just exited.'

He turned and saw the man on the highest balcony there. Dimas recognized the flat face and pug nose from the picture he'd seen earlier. Horatio Blackburn.

The man shouted up at Dimas, exuberant enough to easily be heard over the bracing wind, "Could I ask you to kindly stop attacking my home?!"

Dimas let Iziol handle the response.

'We would love to do that for you! Just as soon as you release your hostages!'

Horatio gave a lame shrug. "I'm afraid that's not my call!" The man's friendly smile was entirely out of place, given the circumstances, and it reminded Dimas of a certain loud-mouthed Redwater. A loud-mouthed Redwater who had better still be alive. "Even so, I would really like to

avoid fighting you!" said Horatio. "So I'm not going to attack first! I'm just going to stand here and hope that you go in peace, amergo!"

And they waited--Dimas hovering above and looking down, while Horatio only stood there and steadily met his gaze with a wide grin.

'Oi,' said Iziol privately. 'I wasn't prepared for politeness.' A beat passed. 'In fact, this is worse than being attacked. This is diabolical.'

'...Are you ordering me to stand down?'

'Agh. No.'

'...So I should attack him, then?'

'No!'

'Iziol...'

"850

'Just wait,' said Iziol. 'I'm thinking.'

Dimas waited.

'Try insulting him.'

'...What?'

'See if you can goad him into attacking us first.'

Dimas nearly gave a mental sigh.

'Call him a... a turkey. Maybe that'll get a rise out of him.'

'...No, Iziol.' The sad part was, he knew the reaper wasn't joking.

'Dimas, come on, help me out here. I hate having to be the bad guy. You can even use a crude word, if you like. A pissing turkey, maybe. Oh, or would that be too harsh? I don't want to hurt his feelings.'

'...I'm attacking him now.'

'Dimas!'

'I'll remember to feel bad about it later.' And without any warning to Horatio, he shoved one hand forward and launched a gravity wave at the man.

However, Horatio was prepared. With an extended hand of his own, a sudden explosion appeared in the wave's path. It was large enough to neutralize Dimas' attack, though a cloud of dust particles washed back over Horatio's tower before the man dematerialized his work.

Dimas did not let up. He pressed forward with both hands this time and forced Horatio to either leap off the balcony or be shredded along with it. Horatio retaliated with targeted dust explosions as he dropped down to the uneven rock below.

'Dimas, how can you be so heartless?! You're a monster!'

'Shut up, Izio!'

Horatio's reaper appeared from the gaping hole in the tower and latched onto the man's back. To Dimas' eyes, reapers were small wyverns--winged and dragon-headed, but with only two legs and a double-barbed fishtail.

Dimas never stopped moving and fired off a series of gravity bullets that Horatio couldn't see until he'd already been riddled with bloody holes. Another moment may have been enough to finish him off right then and there, but an explosion caught Dimas square in the chest and sent him spiraling off course with an impressive hole in his vest. His raincoat flapped wildly as he brought himself to a hard stop in mid-air. He could feel a rib out of place, but the vest had more or less done its job. Pity it could only take one hit, though.

'That's what you get for attacking first.'

'Izio, please--'

'I sense more approaching. I believe it is time for us to go harass some other part of the castle.'

That information, Dimas could appreciate."

"851

He fled. It would have been nice to capture Horatio, especially

considering their files didn't have much information on him, but Dimas would probably need to use pan-moc in order to do so, and it was much too early into the siege to be going all out. If he didn't conserve his strength, he and Iziol would end up too exhausted to fight when they were truly needed. 'Were you able to analyze Horatio's ability?'

'No,' said Iziol, apparently focused on their mission again. 'There was too little to go on. I would need to see what else he can do with it.'

From his vantage point above, Dimas could see more Blackburns pouring out of Marshrock from different places. No doubt, Carlos and Lorenzo would be in need of his assistance very soon. He dove back down to go look for them.

--++--++--

The ground above them trembled, and trails of twinkling dust shook loose from the freshly materialized ceiling.

'Sounds like the battle has started,' said Garovel privately.

Their underground party numbered eight strong. Him and the three Najirs, along with four Rainlords--two destruction users for the tunneling and two integration users for the construction of the net.

Hector had carefully slung his shield over his back, positioned low so that it couldn't accidentally touch his bare neck and cause the pain that Sazandara had warned him about. It felt a little awkward there, but as long as he didn't need to sit down, he figured he'd be fine.

All things considered, Hector wasn't sure how much use he would be here. If they got attacked, the onus of protecting them would largely fall upon Lord Asad. But then, he supposed that was nothing new to him. It seemed like he was always relying on better fighters to do the real work. Hector just hoped he'd be able to find some small way of helping.

Asad also decided to handle the maintenance of the tunnel. Mushy didn't even begin to describe the ground here, and Hector could see veins of muddy water through the transparent ceiling and walls--which Asad made from crystallized quartz, according to Garovel's assessment.

They'd only just begun, but so far, progress seemed smooth. Flashlight in hand, Hector looked at his copy of the map, which said that their first checkpoint was located fifty meters from where they'd started. The net

itself would form a rough circle beneath a section of the city, capturing not just Marshrock but also a few of the neighborhoods around it. One of the other tunneling parties would have to go through a river, Hector noticed. He didn't envy that group."

"852

When they reached the first objective, Hector observed the integration users at work. Together, they'd brought along immense lengths of uninsulated cables and a duffel bag full of compact electrical devices. They'd been laying the cables down as the tunnel progressed, but they only now stopped to plant one of the devices into the ground. Then they attached cables to the device and used their abilities to somehow craft a barricade around the device.

Hector had a number of fresh questions for Garovel and decided to start with the broadest one. 'So, uh... what are they doing, exactly?'

'Making limiters for the soul net,' said Garovel.

'Limiters?'

'Yeah. Ever wonder what happens when you try to empower an energy field with your soul?'

'Er. I'm not even sure what that means.'

'Then this won't be an easy explanation.'

'Hmm. I'm sure you can do it.'

'Ha. Well, I suppose I'll start at the beginning. Quite a long time ago, something like a soul net would have been considered impossible. We only knew that servants could empower physical mass with their soul, and we thought that things like light and electricity didn't have mass, but as was later discovered, they do--it's just such a small mass that there isn't enough to attach a soul to. If you tried, the soul power that you expended would just bleed out into the air and attempt to fill the entire body of gas that makes up the planet's atmosphere. Which is impossible to do, by the way. It's simply too big for even the most powerful servant's soul to fill. It'd be equivalent to spitting into an ocean.'

'Okay, I'm with you so far...'

‘Anyhow, it was later discovered that soul power CAN occupy an energy field, as long as that field is strong enough within a contained area. Relativistic mass plays a role here, but that’s probably more complicated than is worth going into right now. Simply put, a soul net is an energy field that has been empowered with someone’s soul.’

‘Uh, alright...’

‘In this case, the Rainlords look like they’re going to use a magnetic field. Those devices they’re carrying are most likely protective relays, which will serve to prevent the net from overloading--and possibly also amplify the electric current that will run along these cables. Someone will empower the current with their soul, and since the magnetic field is a product of that current, it will also be empowered.’”

"853

‘Huh. I think I understand... mostly.’ Hector scratched his neck. The integration users had completed their work, and the tunneling party was making headway again.

‘There are various ways to go about making a net,’ said Garovel. ‘Generally, you want your strongest combatant to empower the net so as to make it as durable as possible. Opponents will often try to break nets with EMPs and the like.’

‘Can’t the enemy just break these relays or whatever?’

‘They sure can. That’s where the integration users come in. They conceal their work so that the opponent won’t have such an easy time locating the net’s weak points.’

‘Er... I’m still kinda unclear about what the integration type actually is,’ said Hector. ‘I know that it fuses materials together, but, uh... how?’

‘Are you sure this is the time and place to be asking about all these different things? I can’t help but feel you’d retain the information better when we aren’t in mortal peril.’

‘Maybe, but... uh... I mean, as long as we’re not being attacked right this second, it seems like as good a time as any to me.’

Garovel gave a small shrug. ‘Fair enough, I suppose. Integration

involves elements like materialization and transfiguration do, but it differs in that a single integration user can eventually learn to work with any number of different elements. An integrator starts off with only two elements already in their repertoire, and they have to manually acquire more from there.'

'How do they do that?'

'By using a hyper-state. Which is a whole different conversation, really, but the short of it is that integration and mutation users have a hyper-state called "pan-wzrost" which lets them learn to use new materials.'

'Hyper-states again... eesh. How many are there, anyway?'

'Four. Pan-rozum, -forma, -moc, and -wzrost. Rozum is the most difficult to use; wzrost is the easiest; forma and moc are about the same.'

'...I guess I need to know what they all do, huh?'

'Probably.'

'Ugh...'

Garovel chortled. 'What happened to that eagerness to learn you had earlier?'

'This is different. This shit is all, like... I mean, I'm nowhere close to using any of it, right? So... it's just...'

'Materialization can only use pan-forma and pan-rozum. But yes, they're both quite impossible for us, currently. I can save the explanation for later. Though, I do get the feeling we'll be seeing them in action fairly soon. I'd bet anything that Asad can at least use pan-forma.'

"854

Hector could hear more rumbling from aboveground. Part of him wondered if he wouldn't have been more useful up there with Lord Dimas.

'The hyper-states aren't so difficult to remember, though. Forma goes with the mass abilities; moc goes with the wave abilities; and wzrost

goes with the mixture abilities. Oh, and rozum goes with them all.'

'Uh-huh...' And then Hector paused, squinting. 'Hey, wait a minute.'

'What?'

'Mutation. You know how they develop their powers now. Back when I first asked you about mutation, you said you didn't know any of the details.'

'Your memory must be playing tricks on you.'

'No, I definitely remember.'

'Nah. That never happened. Trust me. I'm Garovel. The smart one, in other words.'

'...You had one of the other reapers explain it to you while I was unconscious, didn't you? Who was it? Voreese? Mehlsanz?'

'I've always known, Hector. In fact, I'm actually omniscient. I just didn't tell you before because you obviously weren't ready for the incredible truth. But I'm glad I can finally reveal my secret to you now. Concealing my all-knowing super-coolness can be such a burden.'

'Hmm. Wait, was it last night? Is that why you put me to sleep so suddenly when you were talking to Qorvass?'

'I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about.'

Hector shook his head and smirked. 'Then you obviously don't know everything, do you?'

'It's just that one thing. Everything else, I totally know. Go on. Ask me anything.'

Hector took a second to deliberate. 'How many raindrops are above Sair at this very moment?'

'Sixty-one billion, three hundred and forty-nine million, two hundred and fifty-two thousand, one hundred and thirty-three,' said Garovel. 'Now, how do you intend to check if I'm wrong, exactly?'

'...Shit.'

'See? That proves it. I really am omniscient.'



‘I’m sorry I doubted you.’

That seemed to catch Garovel off guard, making the reaper laugh publicly. It drew a few strange looks, but no one said anything. Hector did notice, however, that Asad’s daughter was watching them now. Those golden eyes were easy to spot even in this relative darkness.

Despite being in their presence non-stop for the last thirty straight hours or so, Hector hadn’t been able to figure the Najirs out at all. Jada seemed slightly more outgoing than her aunt, but that wasn’t saying much. Both of their reapers seemed equally content to simply follow Qorvass in silence."

"855

Hector wondered what they thought of him. Maybe they thought they’d be better off without him. And maybe they’d be right. These people obviously knew what they were doing. Of course they wouldn’t need him.

No. He couldn’t fall into that old thinking again. That wouldn’t help anything. He wasn’t here to prove himself to a bunch of people he barely knew. He was here to help Garovel’s sister. He just had to remember that. After all his meditating, his practicing and studying, his fighting and struggling and winning and losing--after all of that in the last eight months, he wasn’t the same person as before. And he knew it. Even if it was easy to forget, he knew he was different.

He just hoped that difference was for the better, meager though it might be.

The party continued on, listening to the destruction users burrow their way through the mud. And it was slightly weird, Hector realized. He’d heard it before, of course, but he’d never really stopped and listened closely to the actual sound that destructive paths made. It was a kind of faint piping noise, almost musical even, like a brief gust of air through a tube.

He also noticed that their tunnel had a gradual slope to it, taking them continually deeper underground, probably to avoid the city’s utility lines and ensure that the soul net would run below any basement levels that Marshrock possessed. It would’ve been more convenient if there were some type of subway network to work from, but Hector doubted such a

thing existed anywhere within the Rainlords' domain. If it did, it'd probably be more of a submarine network or something, he figured.

At length, Hector noticed the reapers all stop at the same time.

'A number of unfamiliar souls are heading our way,' announced Qorvass.

'Eighteen by my count,' said Garovel.

Asad took that as his cue. "Keep going," he told the four Rainlords, who voiced no objection. Then he turned to his sister. "Imas, protect them and construct the tunnel in my place."

Imas and her reaper both nodded and moved into Asad's previous position.

"Jada, Hector, you're with me."

Jada and Hector nodded as well.

"A vertical hole, please," ordered Asad, and one of the Rainlords punched a path through the roof of the tunnel. Asad lined the walls with quartz as Jada and Hector gathered around him, and then the Lord Najir pushed the three of them up on a crystal platform."  
"856

With his flashlight, Hector could see a second pillar of quartz above them, pushing up and clearing the rest of the way to the surface. They popped up in the middle of a street. It was no longer raining, thanks to an apparent hole in the overcast sky, but the pavement was still plenty damp.

Hector pocketed his flashlight and removed the shield from his back, then began materializing fresh iron armor for himself, beginning with the helm--which was something of a relief to be wearing again. He'd been aching for something to hide behind ever since leaving Warrenhold. Decorum aside, he wondered how feasible it would be to just start wearing armor all the time. Considering he could simply dematerialize it whenever it became an inconvenience, maybe...

Hector had to concentrate. He was going for a genuine, complete set of plate armor, this time. It had taken him so long to study and

comprehend all of the ins and outs of a full suit, but he was finally there. More or less. He'd occasionally tested his mobility in it during his downtime and patrols around Gray Rock, and it seemed to do well enough, but he had obviously not been able to test it against a true opponent yet. It certainly seemed to scare the hell out of the few criminals who'd seen it, though.

He didn't take shortcuts with it, either. The temptation was to simply coat himself in iron wherever he didn't need to worry about his joints or flexibility, but he knew that partial coatings would hang too loosely over his clothes and would not interlock with the other pieces of the armor. So he made sure that his ridged breastplate linked properly to the pauldrons, which linked to the segmented rerebraces, then to the spiked couters, then to the gauntlets--or rather, gauntlet, as he kept his left hand unarmored and also pulled off his glove there. He would need bare skin available on a moment's notice in order to use Haqq's shield to its fullest potential.

'Don't touch the shield directly until I tell you to,' Garovel said privately.

'Okay.'

The neck had been a bit of an issue, but he'd managed to come up with a gorget that allowed him to turn his head, and he'd also perforated the faceguard of his helm for a bit more visibility."

"857

Next came the faulds and modified tasset, which protected Hector's waist and crotch, respectively. Together, they basically looked like a metal skirt, though Garovel assured him that they made him seem very intimidating and manly. Hector wasn't too concerned either way, as long as they shielded his balls.

The piece covering his ass was called the culet, which had been perhaps the most difficult thing to find in his studies. There weren't many pieces of plate armor designed for the ass, probably because knights in full plate historically fought on horseback. Ultimately, he'd decided that a culet was slightly more practical than materializing a horse.

For his thighs, there were cuisses; for the knees, poleyns; and for the shins, greaves. All easy enough. And for his feet, he simply created a

series of riveted plates, called lames, over the top of his shoes. He certainly didn't want to lose the superior traction of his modern footwear, especially on this already slick ground.

All together, it was heavy as shit. Which was another strike against wearing it all the time, he supposed. But of course, he would be cheating with undead strength as soon as the fight started. The knights of ye olden times must have been monsters to be able to fight like this. But then, as he thought about it more and remembered how long reapers and servants had been around, he began to wonder if they actually had been monsters.

'Hey, Asad, would you mind?' said Garovel, motioning toward Hector. 'Lend us a bit of your soul.'

Asad paused when he saw Hector. "Interesting," was all he said before pressing a tattooed hand against the iron. After a few moments, he removed his hand and said, "That should last about fifteen minutes."

"Th-thank you..."

"You are welcome." Asad crafted a glassy helmet for his daughter and handed it to her. "Tell me what I need to hear."

Jada donned the gift immediately. "Only as a last resort," she said. Her hands rustled beneath her dark robe for a second, and then she revealed a handgun. "Otherwise, I will provide support from a distance."

"Good. I will be fine on my own, so concentrate on helping Hector."

"Yes, abbi."

Asad did not bother creating a helmet for himself, Hector noticed, despite still having time to spare.

'They are surrounding us,' warned Qorvass.

Hector could see them approaching now."  
"858 -- XCVIII.

Chapter Ninety-Eight: 'Tread not upon the Pride...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Garovel moved behind Hector. 'Nine servants with nine reapers.'

"Stay close to me," said Asad.

Hector intended to.

The Blackburns all wore brown-and-green raincoats that made them blend into the murky background of Luzo. He'd heard some of the other Rainlords referring to these people as the "Mudlords"--an unofficial title according to Garovel and from the sound of it, meant more as a slur than anything, but Hector was beginning to see where it had come from.

With their faces concealed beneath their hoods, Hector couldn't tell who they were. And weirdly, they did not seem interested in stopping to introduce themselves.

A massive copper boulder materialized before them, already hurtling their way.

Hector was about to dive out of its path when Asad simply raised a glass platform from beneath it, catching the hulking mass in mid-flight and smacking it away as if it had been nothing more than a kickball. The thing crashed down into a murky stream and tossed up a cloud of mud, blanketing a small footbridge entirely.

That seemed to give the Blackburns pause. They slowed their approach, and several of their reapers went underground.

"What is a Sandlord doing here?!" someone called out in a booming voice. It belonged to the man on their left. He pulled back his hood as he and two others stepped closer, all with their reapers still present. The remaining six servants in their party hung back.

Hector recognized the man's face from his file. Fidel Blackburn. And he was much more imposing than he was on paper, visibly muscular even through his raincoat. After a moment, the two others were revealed to be Silvia and Sabas Blackburn.

Hector's gauntleted grip on his shield tightened. Already, they'd encountered three of the people whom Lady Amaya had warned them about.

"You have no investment in this fight, amergo!" said Fidel, stopped now. "Begone! And no harm shall come to you! You have my word!"

"Very kind of you!" said Asad, shifting his feet and looking between them. "I have an even kinder counteroffer!"

"Is that so?! Go on, then!"

"Tell me why you have abducted the Elroy children! In exchange, I will do my best to avoid killing any of your reapers!"

"Aha!" said Fidel. "Very kind, indeed! Would you believe me if I said I do not know?!"

"I would, yes! As long as you bring me someone who does know!"  
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“Aha!” said Fidel. “Very kind, indeed! Would you believe me if I said I do not know?!”

“I would, yes! As long as you bring me someone who does know!”  
"859

Rather than responding, Fidel merely let the heavy atmosphere linger. Only the occasional booms of distant thunder and battle above broke the oppressive stillness.

‘Guess he’s not going to bring anyone,’ observed Garovel.

Hector could see a wall of rain approaching from the other end of the street, could hear its noisy patter growing quickly louder.

Asad decided to strike first. With a mere flick of the wrist, the six rear Blackburns had glassy spikes bursting out the top of their skulls. They dropped immediately, all dead.

Fidel, Sabas, and Silvia attacked in unison, all gunning for Asad.

‘Don’t let them gang up on him,’ said Garovel, touching Hector’s bare hand.

That familiar vigor burned through him, awakening every muscle in his body and rendering his armor no heavier than a blanket. Garovel retreated halfway underground in order to observe the fight a bit more safely, while Hector bolted forward, armor clinking with each rapid step he took toward the closest opponent.

Silvia Blackburn, it turned out to be--a lanky woman with big green eyes and short black hair. Her file had mentioned her explosive ability. Cesium materialization. Dangerous even in a novice’s hands due to its violent reaction with water and tendency to spontaneously ignite in air. And Silvia had already been a servant for twenty-five years.

She noticed Hector’s approach right away and doused him completely in her silvery-gold liquid metal, which instantly set itself ablaze and engulfed Hector in blue flames. This, of course, was not enough to stop him from charging, so Hector just powered through.

And then she clobbered him with a block of frozen cesium the size of a bus.

Hector went flying, toppling, bouncing, and scraping across the open road. And that was also the unfortunate moment when the curtain of rain caught up with him. Each raindrop popped with the force of a firecracker when it touched him, reacting to the still-flaming cesium. On the one hand, it put out the fire; on the other, it caused a chain of explosions from every direction at once, pummeling his plate armor and rattling him so furiously that he could only flail like a fish on dry ground.

When the explosions finally subsided, his fist slammed against the pavement, and he struggled angrily back to his feet. The armor had done its job, even if it now bore so many dents as to look like he’d



crafted it out of crumpled paper. Haqq's shield still looked pristine and untouched."

"860

Hector looked up to see that he was being ignored. And for good reason, too.

Asad was no longer on the ground. Rather, he seemed to be running on thin air, and it took Hector a second to notice the barely visible platforms beneath him. They didn't even touch the ground. The platforms were already moving in midair when Asad stepped on them, pushing him upward or outward or any which way he desired while the Lord Najir showered his opponents with an endless storm of glassy spears. So many at once, Hector saw, crashing down through the heavy rain and sticking into the pavement or shattering against each other.

It was all the Blackburns could do to weather the attack. Fidel's copper cage could hardly keep up with all the holes Asad was carving into it; Silvia had to focus on exploding the spears before they reached and skewered her; and Sabas appeared to have turned his whole body into a metal statue, sealing his own movement in exchange for making the quartz blades break ineffectually against his body.

Titanium transfiguration, Hector recalled from Sabas' file. Not the deadliest power but one that made him particularly difficult to kill, and if he was allowed to provide cover or a distraction for the other two, then it could be very problematic.

At the moment, however, Asad seemed to have the situation rather well in hand.

Jada had moved away from the battle and was now standing by behind a madega, busying herself with her firearms. Plural, Hector realized. He'd only seen the one handgun before, but she'd apparently been keeping a whole armory beneath her robe. The grenades especially caught his attention.

Hector still wasn't sure what her power was. Garovel had asked, but for whatever reason, the Najirs had kept that information to themselves. The reliance on firearms perhaps suggested destruction type, but now was not the time to be giving the matter more thought.

Soon, the Blackburns were buried in a mound of shattered quartz. But they were certainly not dead yet, and now Asad's own glass was in his way, so he let up on his attack and began dematerializing his work.

The Blackburns, of course, saw this as their opportunity to counterattack, and likewise, Asad seemed to predict as much. He leapt off his platform and grabbed a glassy handle that was already in motion, and for a brief moment, the man was flying--pulled quickly forward via the handle's momentum."

"861

Hector could only watch the Lord Najir in awe. The one glass handle could only sustain Asad's movement for a few seconds, but Asad created more on the fly, alternating between handles and platforms as he pleased, striding and soaring through the open air with such apparent ease and swiftness that Hector could hardly believe he and Asad shared the same ability type.

The Blackburns kept him busy, bombarding him with fleets of copper and cesium that he had to deflect while also keeping Sabas pinned down. They seemed to have regrouped very quickly, somehow.

'Careful, they're all using pan-forma,' said Garovel, and Hector understood why their three reapers had vanished from sight all of a sudden. 'Even headshots won't kill them now. You'd have to obliterate their entire bodies or tear their reapers away from them--neither of which you're capable of doing.'

Had the circumstances been less dangerous, Hector might have taken issue with how ridiculous that all sounded, but here and now, doubt was a luxury that he could not afford. He took Garovel at his word, and instead simply asked, 'What should I do, then?'

'Same as before. Asad needs space to breathe. Provide it for him.'

Jada was doing precisely that, Hector saw. She'd lobbed a cooked grenade at Silvia, which exploded before even hitting the ground and blew a chunk out of the woman's face. Silvia dropped but didn't stop moving, and Hector could see her head regenerating just as Garovel had said--and with a speed he'd never seen before, even. Combined with unrelenting gunfire, Jada had certainly earned the woman's

attention and would doubtless be receiving an overabundance of cesium momentarily.

Hector was already sprinting by this point. And because he had the distinct impression that trying to coat Silvia Blackburn in iron would be about as effective as attacking with a feather pillow, he instead decided to materialize an iron chain in his free hand, broad and strong as he could make it. When he drew close enough, he chucked it at her with all his strength, and it caught her around the torso, huge links wrapping around her but still not stopping her.

A hail of exploding cesium came for Jada, and the young woman only managed to dive partially out of its path, losing her left arm, shoulder, and ear in the process. It did, however, buy precious time for Hector."  
"862

Hector used the opportunity to accomplish two things simultaneously. First was simply adding to the chain around Silvia. The links grew thicker and more numerous, now carrying enough mass to actually weigh the woman down and give her a reason to break them--which Hector anticipated would not be a problem for her. Hence, the purpose of his second task. An iron meteor. It had served fairly well against Karkash, so he hoped it would do even better against someone without magnetic control.

He was quickly disappointed.

In spite of creating it faster than he could against Karkash, he still only managed to make about half the mass he wanted before Silvia noticed and decided that it was her turn to multitask. A cesium spear shot straight up and punched a hole through the iron like tissue paper, splitting it, exploding it, and knocking it off course. And simultaneously, she fired a second spear directly at Hector.

Shield raised, he braced himself.

The cesium exploded upon contact. Whether it was due to the impact or merely the rain, Hector could not tell, but he was quite surprised to find that the shield absorbed the blow very well, only pushing him back about a meter or so when he'd been expecting to be sent through a building. He glanced at the broadside of the shield another time and saw that it was scuffed but not at all structurally compromised.

Silvia seemed surprised as well, but she didn't get the chance to attack him again. A wave of molten quartz fell upon her, glowing harshly orange and yellow. It boiled the flesh off her bones in a matter of seconds, offering a faint hiss of steam with each drop of rain that fell upon it.

A vest provided Silvia with some protection, but Hector could see actual bone through the melted skin and muscle of her arms and skull. The quartz left her slowed, and Jada and Hector both capitalized--Jada with bullets, Hector with a materialized broadsword.

'Go for the limbs,' said Garovel while Hector was mid-sprint.  
'Decapitation won't work.'

Hector went for her left arm and got it, severing it at the shoulder. One of Jada's bullets caught Silvia right in the forehead, splattering brain matter out the back of her skull.

Yet it was not enough. Silvia was still moving, still regenerating; and she still managed to swirl up and dropkick Hector square in the chest."  
"863

Hector flew into the side of a car, which did not survive the impact nearly as well as he did. His weight collapsed the cabin like tin foil, but Hector certainly appreciated the softened landing. He could feel a few bones snapping back into place as he stepped back onto pavement, parts of the vehicle's shattered frame clinging briefly to his armor.

Already, Silvia had completely regenerated. It couldn't have been more than thirty seconds since he took his eyes off her, but all that melted flesh, even the missing arm, had returned. Only her shredded raincoat and still-smoldering vest remained as evidence of the attack she'd endured.

Jada was on the move now, bounding over fences and behind vehicles in search of fresh cover while cesium erupted in her wake. Hector helped her out, materializing a half-dozen iron logs above Silvia's head, granting them spikes for good measure. That bought Jada some space, while Hector thundered headlong into the breach for the third time.

A spear of frozen cesium shot toward him and broke upon his shield, causing him to miss a step and stagger to his right before finding his feet again. Silvia doused him in liquid cesium another time, but Hector was prepared. He stopped moving as soon as he heard the splash against his metal and added a much thicker layer of iron to the armor. The iron popped out all at once, shaking off most of the cesium before the rain could cause it to explode. A few splotches remained, but it was only enough for Hector to hear a handful of light pops from within his now brick-like iron shell. The cesium all around his feet was busy going off like a ring of fireworks as he annihilated his extra layer of iron so that he could move again.

Silvia seemed ready to receive him when a pyramid of solid quartz materialized all around her, sealing her movement.

And Hector stopped, abruptly unsure what he should do. Silvia Blackburn merely stood there, eyes moving while the rest of her was stuck fast, as if she were being preserved for posterity.

Hector looked toward Asad, who did not seem to be having very much trouble on his end. Fidel was suspended in the air, impaled on a huge glass spike while his melted arms and legs all struggled to regenerate; and Sabas was locked in hand-to-hand combat with Asad."

"864

Sabas was certainly getting his share of hits in, but Asad was hardly budging at all. Even when a titanium fist--no doubt with enhanced strength behind it--connected with his bare skull, the Lord Najir barely even flinched. But it also made something else happen.

With each blow that Asad received, his tattoos flashed golden yellow, lighting up for an instant and then returning to black just as quickly. Hector wasn't sure what he was seeing, but he didn't get the chance for further observation.

'She's breaking out,' warned Garovel, accompanied by the sound of cracking glass.

Hector went to work on a gigantic slab of iron high above Silvia's head. He could see that Silvia had coated herself in cesium, which seemed to be reacting with and corroding the glass; and after a few more moments, the cracks grew, and she was finally able to break herself

out of Asad's glass, at the cost of having melted much of her skin via her own cesium.

At the very second she was free, the iron slab was right there to greet her. Having started its fall at only about eighty meters above the ground, Hector knew from his own practical studies that it didn't have nearly enough altitude to achieve its terminal velocity.

But that didn't mean it wouldn't hurt.

The slab crushed her into the pavement. The impact force kicked up chunks of road all around the slab and sent them reeling into vehicles and buildings, even right past Hector.

'Nicely done,' said Garovel.

And Hector waited, wondering if that was really enough to keep the woman down. He seriously doubted it, though it did seem to have bought them some more time.

Jada walked up from behind. She didn't say anything and instead offered him a nod of approval.

Asad seemed to be finishing up. He carried a helpless reaper in one hand while in the midst of extracting the other from Sabas' glass-encased body. Fidel had been skewered in a dozen different places and no longer seemed to be regenerating, perhaps because his pan-forma had been forcibly ended. Hector was immensely curious how Asad had accomplished that and so paid close attention to him trying to extract Sabas' reaper, but Sabas appeared to be making it impossible. Even Asad couldn't pierce the man's titanium flesh, which Hector intuited to be a necessary step in the procedure."

"865 -- XCIX.

At length, Asad simply gave up, instead choosing to add several more layers of glass to the pyramid around Sabas. Then he raised a platform beneath the prison and pushed it along behind him while he ventured over to collect Fidel's severed head.

Hector annihilated his own work, revealing Silvia's flattened corpse, splattered against the pavement in gruesome enough fashion that it actually made Hector grimace a little beneath his helm. He'd seen

plenty of carnage before, of course, but it usually involved people who were still moving and regenerating. This brought back some of the more horrible things he'd witnessed. He had to remind himself that Silvia wasn't actually dead.

Garovel floated up behind Hector. 'Her reaper fled underground. We will be seeing Silvia Blackburn again, it seems.'

'Oh well,' said Qorvass. 'Two out of three isn't bad.'

'I see you've decided to spare their reapers after all,' said Garovel.

'You disapprove?' said Qorvass.

'Quite the contrary, in fact. It's nice to see a bit of mercy on the battlefield for a change, and I'm sure they'll make valuable hostages.'

'Indeed.'

They started back for the tunnel together with their captives in tow. Hector queried Garovel about Asad's tattoos, but the reaper didn't seem certain and so posed the question to Qorvass.

'By the way, why were Asad's tattoos flashing yellow?'

'Trade secret, I'm afraid.'

'Ah.'

Chapter Ninety-Nine: 'The Siege of Rheinhal...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Dunstan Rofal was not enjoying his new position very much, even if it was technically a promotion. All in all, the Rainlords hadn't pressed their assault very hard, but every time they did, he ended up directly in their line of fire thanks to his station in the southwestern tower. A week ago, Rhein's Keep boasted four towers, but the two easterly ones had since been knocked down.

A host of Vanguardian servants protected his tower from the outside, but only Dunstan had the privilege of occupying the tiny Watcher's Nest at its peak. There simply wasn't space for another person, especially not with this beastly swivel-mounted .50 caliber HMG in the middle of the chamber. It had an ammo feed up through the floor,

which one of Dunstan's comrades attended to.

For the most part, though, he didn't get to use the gun. His primary job was simply to keep watch, as per usual, and when enemies came within firing range, they were typically repelled by someone else--often Cpt. General Miles. And so, whenever Dunstan DID get to use the gun, it naturally meant that he was in imminent danger of being obliterated along with the entire watchtower.

And that was not a very pleasant working environment."  
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"866

As a measure of caution, Rezamaar did not occupy the watchtower with him. Dunstan didn’t like being separated from her, but there was nothing for it. Though, if being separated had meant that he could no longer hear her talk, then he might have liked it very much.

‘Hey, Dunstan,’ she said from wherever she was inside the Keep.

‘What?’

‘I’m bored.’

‘That’s too bad.’ Dunstan occupied his eyes with his binoculars. Nothing moved among the ritzy hotels and empty streets below. It had been a few hours since he last saw a Rainlord. Usually, they sent someone to harass his tower at least once an hour.

Most likely, this was a deliberate tactic meant to make him and his comrades lose concentration with a suddenly longer period of downtime. It wasn’t going to work. Not on Dunstan, anyway. Perhaps the Rainlords would have better luck after his shift was over.

‘Wanna know what I think?’ said Rezamaar.

‘Not really.’

‘I think this whole business of throwing in with the Vanguard has blown up in your stupid little face.’

‘Thank you for that tremendous insight.’

‘Four years, you let them train you. And now they’ve involved us in this crap. I don’t know what’s going through their fat heads, but I don’t think this is the sort of thing you imagined us doing when you told me we should join.’

She wasn’t wrong. Dunstan hadn’t left home to become a pawn in someone else’s war game. He’d left in order to finally do something positive with his life. And to get away from his family. ‘...True, it is difficult to be completely onboard with the abduction of children.’

‘Oh. Yeah. That’s. Whatever. Listen, what I don’t like is having to go up against the goddamnn Redwaters. Or the Merlos. Or the Sebolts. Or just any of the Rainlords, really. These aren’t the type of people we should be fucking around with, regardless of what Lawrence or Miles or any of your other idiot bosses tell you.’

‘They’re your bosses, too, Reza.’

‘Yeah, sure they are.’

Needless to say, she had never quite embraced the ways of the Vanguard like Dunstan had. She could be very convincing with her feigned loyalty when she needed to be, but she certainly didn’t have

any reservations about telling Dunstan what she truly thought. Ever since they'd joined, it was like being followed around by some kind of automated complaint dispenser."

"867

Dunstan hoped the conversation would die there so that he could return to watching in peace, but it seemed he was destined for disappointment.

'This is so stupid,' she went on. 'What is even the point of capturing these Rainlord children, huh? I've been asking all around, but no one fucking knows. Or they're just not telling me. Pricks.'

'Rumor is, the Elroys are Abolish spies.'

'I don't give a shit! Let them be spies! You don't screw with the Rainlords unless you have a damn good plan! And that twat Miles obviously doesn't!'

'Technically, it was Lawrence who ordered their capture.'

'Whatever!'

'If they really are feeding intel to our enemies, then we cannot simply allow them to continue.'

'Sure we can.'

'Reza.'

'Fine, then we could feed them false intel and try to lure Abolish into a trap. That'd be the smart thing to do.'

Again, she wasn't wrong. It was hard to imagine how the handling of this conflict could be anything but foolish and clumsy. If there really was some kind of greater plan at work, he couldn't see it.

'Maybe we should have joined Abolish instead,' said Rezamaar.

'Be serious.'

'I'm sure they aren't all crazy assholes. It'd just be a matter of finding the right faction.'

‘Abolish commits genocide, Reza.’

‘Well, yes, that is a problem.’

‘Even if certain factions were not physically involved, they are still guilty by association.’

‘Bit harsh. People make mistakes, you know.’

‘Genocide is more than just a mistake.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Sometimes, you trip over a loose rock and accidentally stab a thousand people in the face. It’s important to look at the bigger picture, Dunstan.’

‘Your wisdom continues to astound me.’

‘The Vanguard has never been very good with the big picture. They’ve always been too busy winning battles to realize that they’re losing wars. They could probably learn a few things from Abolish. Or maybe Sai-hee.’

‘If that’s really how you feel, then why did you even agree to join the Vanguard with me in the first place?’

‘Because that was when you were all passionate and adorable about everything. I couldn’t tell you no. But now that you’re a turgid old curmudgeon, I can.’

‘You’re talking about four years ago.’

‘Yes, and you’ve aged like a beautiful oak tree that caught fire, fell into a river, and then got pulled along by a current into an illegal dump site for toxic chemicals.’

‘You’re a true poet, Reza.’”

"868

‘Really?’ said Rezamaar. ‘Nothing? I wish you would at least pretend to be upset at me for a change.’

‘Sorry. Though, you’ll have to let the aging thing go sooner or later. I

know you wanted me to stay a teenager forever, but I--'

'That's not what this is about!'

'Sure it isn't.'

'Dunstan, I am so tired of your lip.'

'Are you, though?'

'Yes, I am! Agh! Don't test me! I will release your soul in a heartbeat!'

'Well, if you're gonna do it, then you're gonna do it.'

'What the fuck do I have to say for you to get angry?! It's really creepy the way you never get mad, you know! I basically called you a fucking swamp monster, and you don't even care!'

'I can't help it if you're into little boys, Reza.'

'I'm not into little boys!'

'Aren't you, though?'

'I'm into young men!'

'Are you, though?'

'And it's not a sexual thing! It's purely platonic!'

'Is it, though?'

'Shut the fuck up!'

'Alright.'

A long beat passed.

'I just find them adorable,' said Reza. 'Like teddy bears and puppies. Reapers don't even have sexual urges, you son of a bitch.'

'No judgment here. You're free to lust disgustingly over whomever you like.'

'God, I hate you so much, Dunstan.'

'Then I guess I am not long for this world.'

Reza just growled at him. For all her talk, Dunstan knew she wouldn't really do it. But even if she did, he honestly wasn't too concerned. He hardly considered himself alive, anyway. This was all just borrowed time, and it wasn't like anyone would miss him.

'You really need to make some friends,' said Reza. 'This is getting pathetic.'

'If you say so.'

'How about the Elroy boy? He seemed nice. Well, not nice, but loyal. Well, not loyal to us, but to his family.'

'He is also a frozen head, at the moment.'

'Yeah, but Dennex isn't.'

'Dennex?'

'His reaper. He and I have been talking. Dennex is cool.'

'Could you please not fraternize with the enemy when I'm not around?'

'I told you I was bored.'

'If the wrong person overheard the two of you talking, it could come back to bite us.'

'Please. I'm more careful than that.'

'Mm. Did Dennex tell you anything useful?'

'Well, he didn't admit to being an Abolish spy, if that's what you're getting at. But I have a sneaking suspicion that a spy might be reluctant to reveal that sort of thing.'"

"869

'Then what did you talk about?' said Dunstan.

'Mostly, Dennex has been trying to pump me for information. And he's pretty clever about it, too. I almost told him all sorts of juicy things.'

'Great.'

‘All in all, he seems like a bit of a stiff, but he’s still way better company than the rest of the reapers around here. Except maybe Overra. But I only got to talk to her a couple times. She’s always busy with Miles.’

‘I thought you hated those two.’

‘Oh, I do. But Overra is a hell of a conversationalist. She’s got a ton of ridiculous stories. Says she knows Tenebrach pretty well, and I believe her. And she’s met most of the strongest Abolishers in battle, too. She and Miles were there at the Battle of Lac’Vayce a few years ago.’

He was pretty sure that was more than a few years ago, but he didn’t bother trying to correct her. ‘Wasn’t that the one where nearly a million people were killed?’

‘Yeah. Lamont and Jackson against Jercash, Ivan, and Gunther. The fight leveled the entire city and completely wrecked the local ecosystem. And Lamont and Jackson almost lost. Barely managed to hold on until Sermung arrived and bailed them out. And Overra was THERE. Can you imagine?’

‘...Yes, I can. Quite easily.’

‘Oh. Well, I suppose this battle is somewhat comparable, but it’s hardly the same scale. Five of the strongest servants in the world all duking it out in one place. Overra said Lac’Vayce won’t be habitable again for hundreds of years. They basically made a mini version of the Dáinnbolg all by themselves.’

He didn’t much care for the way she talked about it as if they’d broken some kind of baseball record, but something caught his eye before he could tell her so.

A figure darted out from behind a building, only visible in the split second it took to reach a line of bushes.

He had a choice between two covered buttons on the arm of his chair. One was for the silent alarm, and the other was for the old analogue bell that would alert the entire compound. He lifted the cover and chose the silent alarm.

Without his binoculars, he surveyed the whole network of streets below, looking for any movement at all.

No more than a minute later, however, Cpt. General Miles appeared right outside the Nest, buffeting its bulletproof glass with a sudden

flourish of wind. Overra melted out of the man's body, and Miles gave Dunstan an unworried smile. "What did you see, Corporal?"

"870

How strange it was, looking at this man and seeing someone only slightly his elder. By appearance alone, Parson Miles could have quite easily passed for Dunstan's brother. Dunstan could almost forget that he was staring at one of the most powerful Vanguardians alive today. But perhaps that was the whole point.

"Only one person, sir," he said, swinging his chair around to point Miles in the proper direction. "Third street over on your right, behind the bushes, sir."

'He's right,' said Overra. 'From here, I can sense someone there.'

Miles fished a pair of compact binoculars out of his coat and gave a look. "Hmm. Can't see 'em. Let's wait 'till they come a little closer, shall we?"

"Yes, sir." And he realized that Reza was still blabbering on about one thing or another, so he interrupted and said, 'Can't talk right now, Reza.'

'Tch.'

He fixated upon the location of the figure he'd seen with his binoculars. A thick silence fell as they waited, but Dunstan had recently come to learn that the Cpt. General didn't much care for peace and quiet, and indeed, the man soon broke it.

"...So how are you doin' up here?"

"Fine, sir."

"Tedious work, isn't it? I was a watchman myself once, you know. Surprisingly little has changed about the job. With how quickly tech develops, you'd think it'd be completely different by now." He knocked a finger against the clear wall. "Armoring has gotten a bit better, I suppose."

Dunstan wasn't sure how to respond, so he just said, "Yes, sir."



For some reason, that seemed to amuse the man. “Do you consider yourself a company man, Corporal?”

“Sir?”

“A company man. A believer in the system. In the Vanguard’s mission to provide protection and justice.”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

“Good. That’s good. That’ll take you far.” A beat passed. “What about your family? How do they feel about the Vanguard?”

Dunstan hesitated. “...I’ve never told them about it.”

“Ah, so they’re just nice and normal folk?”

“Yes, sir. Though, I wouldn’t call them nice, exactly.”

“Mm. What is it that they think you do, then?”

“I... don’t know.” He blinked. He hadn’t meant to say that. He’d meant to tell some insignificant lie. That was what he usually did when someone asked him about his family.

“You don’t know?” said Miles. “How can you not know?””  
"871

Dunstan shifted in his seat. He wasn’t sure how they’d ended up on this topic all of a sudden. He never liked talking about his family, even with Reza. “The truth is, sir... I ran away from home when I was fifteen.”

“I see. And why did you run away?”

He hesitated again, impulsively pulling his eyes away from the battlefield in order to glance at Miles. A mistake, Dunstan immediately knew. Miles didn’t seem to notice or care, but Dunstan was kicking himself for his unprofessionalism as he refocused on observing.

It was odd, though. Like a faint pressure in his chest. And around his head. His whole body, even. And as much as he would have preferred not to answer that question, remaining silent seemed somehow

untenable, nor could he come up with an appropriate lie in time. "My family is full of criminals. If I didn't leave, I probably would've ended up like them."

"And your reaper didn't have a problem with that?"

"I didn't meet her until I was seventeen. She doesn't have any ties to my family. I doubt they even know reapers exist."

"I wouldn't be too certain of that."

Dunstan's gaze flickered again, and he had to concentrate in order to keep his eyes where they needed to be. "What do you mean, sir?"

But instead of answering, Cpt. General Miles chose to ask a different question. "Where was your family living when you left?"

And there it was again--that unexplained pressure, pushing him onward, compelling him to speak. "Dante. I think we had some cousins in Atreya, too. Why?"

"What is your grandfather's name?"

"Damian. Why, sir?"

"Ha. No reason."

"Sir, please stop being so mysterious. Do you know my grandfather?"

"I don't know anyone named Damian Rofal, no."

"Then...?"

"But you do remind me of someone I once knew. You have the same eyebrows he had."

'Same eyes, chin, and hair color, too,' added Overra.

"It's really the eyebrows, though," said Miles. "Very distinctive, those things. You could probably pull them off your face and use them as weapons."

'They're like angry boomerangs,' said Overra.

Dunstan tried to take that as a compliment. "Apart from his name, I don't remember much else about my grandfather. He only visited a few times when I was a child. I don't think he got along well with my

parents.””  
"872

“Ah, so you’ve actually met your grandfather in person?” asked Miles.

“Yes, sir.”

“Must be a different guy, then. The man I’m thinking of died about forty years ago.”

‘Unless he somehow survived,’ amended Overra.

Miles laughed lowly. “That would be awkward, wouldn’t it?”

Dunstan was curious now. “Who was the man you were thinking of?”

The Cpt. General took a second to respond. “He was a lunatic. The kind of person that the world is better off without.”

The abrupt severity in the other man’s voice did not escape Dunstan’s notice. “What was his name?” Dunstan asked.

“It’s not important. Best to just forget about people like that.”

Dunstan sensed something contradictory in that statement, but he decided to keep his mouth shut. Miles acted like the most laid back boss in the world, but the fact remained that Dunstan didn’t know the man very well. He’d rather not get on his superior’s bad side by asking too many questions.

Finally, something new caught his eye. Another figure darted across the street in the same location as earlier. Dunstan raised his binoculars in time to see it happen a third time.

“You see that?”

“Yes, sir.”

They waited, but there was no other movement.

Such was the thrill of being a watchman.

Personally, Dunstan didn’t mind the long periods of nothingness. Coping with tense downtime was a skill, like anything else. The trick

was to think without getting lost in thought, to wonder without daydreaming.

And in spite of the man's earlier claim, Dunstan could not imagine Cpt. General Miles doing this job. And this notion was soon reaffirmed for him.

"They could be luring us into a trap." Miles allowed a beat to pass. "I'll go check."

Overra melted back into his body, and then Parson leapt away in a gust of wind that made the armored walls shudder.

Dunstan could see the man going to work, tearing through the air like a missile and falling upon the enemy's location with just as much force. An explosion of air crushed four buildings at once and flung their remains up from the ground. Broken trees and vehicles and slabs of concrete tumbled down the road together, and Miles just hovered there in the middle of it all, waiting.

After a weighty pause, the storm hit him. Crowds of metal spikes, audible gunfire, visible distortions in space even from this distance, and all manner of flaming chaos came for the man at the same time."

"873

Miles zipped away from most of the assault, endured the rest, and counterattacked with a storm of his own. The resultant explosion made the ground tremble even from this distance, and a thin tornado swirled into existence around Miles, ripping up more of the city.

Dunstan could not keep watching, however. He had to keep an eye on the rest of the battlefield. If the clash with Miles was somehow a diversionary tactic, then Dunstan would not allow it to work. But his caution proved needless, as he didn't see any other disturbances.

Then the analogue bell inside the Keep went off.

Dunstan held his position, knowing it was not his job to deal with whatever the problem was. He did, however, ask Reza for an update. 'What's happening?'

'Shut up, I'm looking into it.'

And again, he found himself waiting.

Cpt. General Miles got back to Dunstan before Reza did, arriving inside another rumbling gale. The man's shredded clothes barely clung to his body now, and his airman's overcoat was still smoldering with blackened stains. "Yep," he said in the dual voice of pan-rozum. "That was definitely a trap."

Dunstan's brow receded. "A-are you alright, sir?"

"Oh, sure, don't worry about us. We could really go for an ice cream sandwich, though. Think we'll go get one from the kitchen. You want anything?"

"Er, n-no thank you."

"You sure? Not even a drink? A bag of chips? One of those giant pretzels, maybe? Do we have those things?"

"Sir, the emergency alarm is going off."

"Ah. So it is. Guess we'll look into that, afterward." He allowed a beat to pass. "So did you want a snack or...?"

"No, sir, I'm fine."

Miles stared at him. "...We'll get you something, anyway." And he was gone again, leaving his residual gust of wind behind as usual.

Dunstan wasn't sure whether to be impressed or worried. When he looked back at the enemy's location, he saw a street riddled with blood and body parts.

'Well,' came Rezamaar's voice, 'I found out what all the commotion is about.'

'Tell me.'

'Someone managed to break into the freezer and destroy one of the captive Rainlords' heads.'

Dunstan's eyes widened. 'Which one?'

'I'm listening for that answer now. Sounds like... oh shit. It was Zeff. They fucking freed Zeff Elroy.'

"874 -- C.

## Chapter One Hundred: 'How the Wind doth rise...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Lawrence's small office had begun to feel a bit cramped. Physically, only he and Parson were present, but the two reapers appeared to occupy plenty of additional space with their silent tornado bodies. There was also the matter of Dergoz' yelling.

'I know it was your doing! You're behind this somehow!'

Rather than responding, Parson seemed more interested in savoring the taste of his ice cream sandwich.

Overra answered for them. "Somehow," huh? Well, in spite of that very compelling, evidence-laden accusation, I'm afraid I'll have to go ahead and deny it.'

'It's painfully obvious!' said Dergoz. 'How stupid do you think we are, exactly?! It's no secret that you and Parson held this position before Lawrence and I did! Your affection for the Rainlords has clouded your judgment!'

Parson decided to interject now. "We don't really have time for this now, do we? The Rainlords--"

'Shut up!'

Parson frowned and went back to his treat.

'Parson and I were busy defending the western perimeter. You can confirm with Corporal Rofal, if you like.'

Lawrence wasn't sure what to make of the circumstances. He was mainly just glad to not be the target of Dergoz's ire for a change. Freeing Zeff had actually crossed his mind before, but pulling it off with Dergoz constantly attached to him would have been nigh impossible. If Parson and Overra really were responsible, then Lawrence would be impressed.

What Dergoz had yet to tell them, however, was that they'd already caught the supposed culprit. Lieutenant Colonel Adam Leroy was the one who actually destroyed Zeff's head, and the guards had only just

managed to prevent him from destroying that of Zeff's son as well--not that it would have made much difference, since they had the boy's reaper in custody, too.

Regardless, that didn't seem to be good enough for Dergoz. As far as subordinates went, Adam and his reaper had never proven themselves as anything more than blunt instruments. Good at following orders and not much else. The only reason they'd achieved a higher rank than Zeff and Axiolis was because the Elroys decided to raise so many children.

Which was another thing. Where was Mariana in all this? According to the watchmen, she'd somehow killed six highly trained servants by herself and escaped, which was almost as surprising to Lawrence as the fact that she had apparently conceded the responsibility of reclaiming the rest of her family to the other Rainlords."

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Regardless, that didn't seem to be good enough for Dergoz. As far as subordinates went, Adam and his reaper had never proven themselves as anything more than blunt instruments. Good at following orders and not much else. The only reason they'd achieved a higher rank than Zeff and Axiolis was because the Elroys decided to raise so many children.

Which was another thing. Where was Mariana in all this? According to the watchmen, she'd somehow killed six highly trained servants by herself and escaped, which was almost as surprising to Lawrence as the fact that she had apparently conceded the responsibility of reclaiming the rest of her family to the other Rainlords."

"875

'I'm sure you have any number of collaborators in this game of yours,' Dergoz was saying. 'I don't think we'll be trusting anyone's word concerning your whereabouts. Why don't you just admit it?'

Parson exchanged lingering looks with Overra, perhaps indicative of a silent conversation between the two.

'Easy, Dergoz,' said Lawrence. 'He may be ridiculous, but we do not want to pick a fight with Parson, especially not here.'

'They need us as much as we need them,' Dergoz said privately. 'Sanko is coming, so they can't afford to fight with us now, either. This is the perfect time to press them with hard questions. In fact, it's probably the ONLY time.'

Lawrence wondered how much truth there was in that, but he knew there was no point in arguing.

Parson finished off his ice cream sandwich. He smacked his lips a couple times and took a long breath. "I'm just going to tell them. If they're this suspicious of us, then there's really no point in pretending anymore. We're all on the same side after all."

Overra gave a public sigh. 'I suppose you're right. Go on, then.'

"Oh, but soundproofing first."

'Right.' Overra flew into Parson's body, and a moment later, Parson's forearms disappeared, leaving his sleeves to flap wildly in the sudden whirlwind that consumed the room.

Lawrence had seen similar techniques before. The airy hum of Parson's oxygen would prevent physical eavesdroppers, and the tightly controlled movement allowed the man to also press his soul into the air and thereby prevent reapers from hearing them through the walls.

And Lawrence felt abruptly unsettled. Such a precautionary measure was disturbingly unlike Parson and Overra. Whatever they were about to say was not going to be pleasant, he felt.

Parson stepped closer. "Time is short, so allow us to make this quick. First, we know your secret. You and Lawrence belong to a shadow faction within the Vanguard--a shadow faction which believes Sermung is no longer fit to lead all of us. Which is true. He isn't."

Dumbstruck, Dergoz needed a second to respond. 'That's not... We're not--'

"Please. Let's not waste time. We also know that Lamont is the head of your shadow faction, and that no one is able to speak with him about it directly due to the immense secrecy required. Because he is constantly surrounded by Sermung supporters, Lamont is restricted to passing along coded instructions until the time comes when he can reveal himself."

"876

Given the accuracy and detail, Lawrence could tell they were not bluffing, but he had to wonder how Parson and Overra knew so much. It didn't sound like they were members themselves, but even if they were, it wouldn't explain how they knew that Lawrence and Dergoz were. All members of Lamont's faction kept their identities hidden, even from one another. Only Lamont himself should've known who everyone was. Lawrence wanted to ask as much, but he didn't know if he should say anything at all. Fortunately, he didn't have to.

"Your shadow faction was not founded by Lamont," said Parson. "It was founded via proxy. By us."

That earned a blink from Lawrence.

"So you see, telling us that you are not members is a bit like trying to sell ice cream to the ice cream man. I am that ice cream man. Incidentally, I really was an ice cream man for a time when I was younger. My favorite flavor was--ah, wait, no. Forget we said that. Um... where were we? Lamont's faction. That's right. We founded it in order to give Lamont the support he needs in order to take Sermung's place. It was important that our involvement be an especially well-kept secret, because at the time of the faction's inception, we had to take on the even more pivotal role of growing close to Sermung and earning his trust. Which we've since accomplished. Soon, Lamont will make his move, and the Vanguard will experience a regime change for the first time in five hundred years. Exciting, no?"

Lawrence had no idea what to say now.

'If all of that is true,' said Dergoz, 'then why in the world did you free Zeff? You did free him, didn't you? I assume that is where this explanation is going.'

"Yes, I ordered Adam to free him because I was bored--wait, no. We ordered Adam to free him because the siege has been proceeding too slowly. We have a timetable to keep, and we cannot justify crushing the Rainlords until they press their assault much harder than they have thus far. And obviously, leaving the Keep to fight them would be tactically unwise. With any luck, Zeff will be able to motivate them for us."

'What timetable are you talking about?'

"All you need to know is that Lamont will be needing our full attention shortly, so we cannot spend much more time in Rheinhal. But if we leave before this siege concludes, then many of our precious subordinates here will be killed or captured. Present company included, of course. It is quite the dilemma.""

"877

Dergoz seemed duly hesitant now, though whether it was out of respect, confusion, or fear, Lawrence could not tell. Perhaps all three. 'What about Sanko? Is she involved in your plan, too?'

"No, unfortunately. She remains entirely loyal to Sermung."

'But she could arrive any day now. If she joins the Rainlords against us--'

"It won't come to that."

'How can you be sure?'

"You will just have to trust us."

'You have something up your sleeve?'

Parson only smiled.

And Lawrence began to realize how wrong he'd been about these two. For as long as he'd known them, Parson and Overra had been the most moronic of all his superior officers. Parson perhaps a little more so than Overra, but still. They'd always been goofball slackers, enjoying themselves just a bit too much for Dergoz's liking, and Lawrence couldn't really disagree.

And yet, now that Lawrence was thinking about it, they had been largely successful in most of the missions where he'd worked with them.

No.

There was more to it than that, wasn't there? By now, he and Dergoz had worked with them dozens upon dozens of times, but Lawrence was struggling to think of an instance when they'd truly failed a mission. Things had certainly gotten messy sometimes, and no doubt, some of the official reports would indicate failure as a result, but that wasn't the whole truth of it.

Lawrence recalled an incident during the Jungle Wars where Parson lost track of a certain unruly Melmoorian diplomat whom they were supposed to protect. They eventually found the diplomat in an Abolish prison and rescued him. The man was so grateful that he went on to provide the Vanguard with decades of key political support that probably ended up saving Melmoore from the same financial ruin that caused its neighbors to crumble.

Then there was the assassination attempt that should not have succeeded but did anyway, because Parson insisted on an overlong equipment check that morning. They caught hell from Lamont for that screw up, and yet, a few years later, documents surfaced which indicated that the man they let be assassinated had been maintaining secret prison camps for Abolish.

There was always something like that, Lawrence was realizing. Parson would make some mistake, be labeled an idiot for it, and then everyone would forget. Or at least, Lawrence would. Only in retrospect did it become clear that most of those "mistakes" had since been vindicated in some way."

"878

Lawrence didn't see the point, though. It was one thing to conceal skill from enemies; it was another to conceal it from allies. But then again, given Parson's rank, perhaps the right people already knew all they needed to.

Lawrence marveled at how young and stupid he could still feel after all these years. He would have liked to stop being the ignoramus that he knew he'd been in his youth, but it seemed that was not yet to be. Dergoz didn't have that excuse, though. The reaper had several hundred years on him, which admittedly made him younger than most other reapers, but the point remained. If Dergoz couldn't see through their ruse, either, then Lawrence didn't feel quite so bad.

It did give him pause, however. If he could be so thoroughly wrong about Parson, then perhaps he was also wrong to continue holding onto his faith in Sermung. Dergoz and Parson both seemed so certain, and Lawrence knew that--for Dergoz at least--it wasn't a personal matter, either. Dergoz simply believed Sermung and Tenebrach could no longer handle the burden of leadership. And indeed, Lawrence would be lying if he said he didn't see some merit in that belief.

But still, it was hard not to worry about what would happen if Sermung ever fell. The Crystal Titan was a name that carried so much weight behind it. In some places, its mere utterance was enough to prevent war. And as long as those other names were out there--names like the Mad Demon, the Living Void, the Monster of the East, and the Salesman of Death--as long as those existed, the Crystal Titan

seemed entirely needed. Lawrence could hardly imagine anyone ever being able to step up and fill those enormous shoes.

But he supposed one day, someone would have to.

--++--++--

Ismael Blackburn sat with his face in his hands. The Black Hall was deep enough into the castle that he could no longer feel the muffled quakes of the battle. He thought it would help him think, coming here, but all it did was make him mindful of the complete silence.

Three days had passed since the siege began. It wouldn't be much longer now. According to his scouts, the Sebolts and Delagunas had completed their underground net. It was only a matter of time until they launched an assault with their full strength."

"879

He needed to figure out what to do. Protecting the family was his responsibility. Even if Melchor was physically the strongest, Ismael was the one who had to lead the Blackburns away from the ruin that was knocking on their door.

It was such a mess. The whole reason he'd had Melchor bring the Elroy children here was to divide the other Rainlords' attention and make it easier for Parson to end the siege at Rheinhal quickly. After which, Parson would come to Luzo and help House Blackburn rout the enemy before anyone became the wiser. But now, Ismael doubted Marshrock would hold out that long.

If it had only been Houses Sebolt and Delaguna, then it might have been manageable, but that one extra Sandlord had proven to be the dreaded wrench in this machine. He was the reason they had completed their soul net so quickly. With all the attempts at interference that the Blackburns had been running, it should have taken at least twice as long. But no.

Certainly, it hadn't been the best plan with Ibai here, but Parson hadn't given Ismael much choice. If Ibai's presence were discovered, it would be the end of everything. It would not matter that Ibai had never actually killed anyone before, nor would it matter that Ibai was Ismael's only child--the only child that he and his wife had ever managed to

create in the past thirty-eight years of trying. The other Rainlords would never allow an aberration to live. There were no exceptions. Especially now, after having kept Ibai a secret for so long, after what his family had done in order to keep Ibai a secret.

No, it was much too late to reconcile. The Elroys would want his house to drown in lakefire before the end.

‘Have you decided yet?’ came Rholtam’s voice with the echo of privacy.

Ismael looked up to see him floating above the center table. To his eyes, the reaper was a pterosaur, glowing faintly gray all over but also with only about a third of its flesh still intact, the rest decaying gorily or just missing altogether. He’d always wondered why his subconscious had chosen to see reapers as undead, extinct flying reptiles. Even taking into account his youth studying paleontology, pterosaurs still seemed like a strange choice. He had more important things on his mind at the moment, however.

“No,” he said aloud, as there was no one else in the Hall to hear. “Tell me what I should do, Rholtam. Tell me how this can end well for us.””  
"880

‘Well, I suppose Parson and Overra could show up earlier than they promised and rescue us,’ said Rholtam. ‘But frankly, I’m not entirely convinced that they intend to show up at all. I’ve never been able to understand what their true goals are. Perhaps we’re just tools that have outlived our usefulness now.’

Ismael rubbed his forehead. “That was not what I wanted to hear...”

‘Now is not the time for lies, old friend.’

Ismael only sighed and let his eyes glaze over. The struggle was so exhausting. Perhaps it would be best to just give up already. Perhaps this battle was an inevitable reckoning. No stopping it. Even surrender would achieve the same outcome. Inevitable. Inevitable... And his mind drifted back.

A man. The day of his wedding. He has found the perfect woman. She

can be a bit impulsive and unpredictable at times, but he loves that about her. He can hardly believe Nere agreed to marry him. He wishes his parents could have met her. They were both killed just two years prior. Cousin Melchor did not take their deaths well. That poor man has grieved so much for this family, living through the extinguishment of two entire generations. The groom is glad that Cousin Melchor is able to smile on this day.

Bliss does not last long. Cousin Melchor has become a person others fear, a person that even some of his own family fear. Melchor is possessed of an abiding hatred, a need to find everyone responsible for hurting his family in years long past. Melchor leaves both the family and the Vanguard, allowing none to accompany him.

In the meantime, Marshrock knows peace as House Blackburn attempts to rebuild its damaged bloodline. There are many weddings in only a few short years. The family is growing. All except the man's own.

He and Nere are seemingly unable to have children. Even after multiple work-ups and analysis, doctors tell them the problem is idiopathic. Unexplained infertility, is what they call it.

Years go by without any solutions. Current medicine is of little help. Adoption is not even worth considering. As the primary branch of the family, they require an heir by blood.

For a time, he and Nere are so distraught that they can barely look at one another. With therapy, however, their relationship manages a slow recovery. And just when it seems they are growing closer than ever before, a miracle occurs. Nere is pregnant."

"881

Suddenly on the cusp of fatherhood. He has never felt this way before. The anticipation, the excitement. It is even more wonderful than he had imagined. He'd thought his line had reached its end, that one of the younger branches would lead the family after he was gone. And it will be a boy, he is told. A son.

This is fate. It must be. He has never much cared to believe in such



things until now, but there is no other way of explaining this avalanche of joy. Fate has blessed him after testing his family with hardship.

Nere's spirits are not quite as high, but he is only too glad to be the doting husband. He wants to do everything. Often, he sends her attendants away so that he can be the one to bring her whatever she desires. It annoys her, sometimes, and she tells him that he should concentrate on his work with the Vanguard; other times, she tells him she was wrong, and she cries as she urges him to stay with her. She is all over the place, even more unpredictable than usual as her hormones play havoc with her body.

And then the day comes. Ibai is born.

The moment he lays eyes on his son, his heart swells with such pride and joy that he can feel the change coming over him. He feels that he is no longer the same man. He is a father now, but it is also more than that, he realizes. He is a father by blood, but he has already been a father in spirit for some time. After the loss of the previous generation and the departure of Melchor, he is the one everyone looks to for answers and guidance. Rholtam has been trying to help him see this all along, and now he understands the depth of his responsibility. Ibai has shown it to him.

However.

Ibai is very strange. It first becomes clear when a doctor attempts to vaccinate him. The needle cannot pierce the boy's skin. A solid splotch of dark brown appears in its path each time piercing pressure is applied.

And they do not know why. They do not know what Ibai is. But they can tell that the brown shadow is a construct of imaginary power. The boy receives his vaccines with the aid of a soul-empowered needle. They take him home and attempt to understand what makes their son so special."

"882

By all accounts, he appears to be a normal baby, save only for that muddy shadow. After a week, the shadow begins to come and go at seemingly random intervals, twirling up from his tiny head and fingers and toes, only to vanish like smoke. At a glance, it could almost pass for some type of odd hair.

Then, Parson Miles arrives. As the current head of all Vanguardian forces in Sair, he has been a valued comrade and friend of the family for many years, especially after their most recent tragedy.

“Your son is what we call an aberration,” says Parson. He is normally jovial. He is not so now.

Knowledge of aberrations is still a top-level secret within the Vanguard, but given the family’s unique circumstances, Overra says they will make an exception.

And so Parson explains at length. Ibai is a monster in human form. How these monsters are created is yet unknown, but it involves Abolish in some way. Aberrations exhibit powers that are otherworldly, even by servant standards. And they grow more powerful by consuming souls. They are deadly beings. Ibai will only bring ruin upon their family.

So it would be best to kill the boy now.

They refuse, of course, and demand that Parson and Overra leave.

“Fine,” says Parson. “We will go. But if you will not kill him, then keep his existence a secret. You will eventually see the truth with your own eyes, and I suspect the rest of the Vanguard will learn about aberrations soon. When that time comes, you will not want them knowing what he is.”

Parson goes in peace, but the seed of doubt is planted.

He and Nere begin to worry about the future of their son. They decide to exercise caution and keep Ibai a secret from everyone outside the family. He orders all branches to return to Luzo. He wants his House brought together.

He explains their circumstances to all of the branch heads. They are all so terribly young. With Melchor gone, he is now the eldest servant by far, and similarly, everyone knows that Rholtam is one of the most ancient and loyal reapers in the family. As a pair, their age affords

them both a certain reverence that helps them gather everyone's favor; and in the long lingering and still deeply felt aftermath of their most recent losses, he has never seen his House so united and comforting as it is now."

"883

Five years transpire.

Ibai is found clutching a dead cat in his sleep. The animal has been mutilated. Ibai is covered in its blood.

They are not sure how--or even IF--they should punish him. In spite of their shock and dread, they attempt to approach this rationally. They decide to speak with the boy first.

"Do you understand what you did, mijoro?"

Ibai smiles eagerly. "Yes, Papa! I killed him!"

And they come to realize that, at the age of five, Ibai possesses a concept of death. The boy already knows that life can end, despite never having had it explained to him.

Nor does it frighten him in the least. Instead, Ibai chooses to ask, "What is death like, Papa? Will I be able to die soon?"

"Death is not something to look forward to, mijoro."

"Why not?"

"Because life is precious. In fact, it is the most precious thing in the world. Do you understand? Ibai, what you did, taking that cat's life, was wrong. You must not do it again."

Ibai returns a curious look. "But I wanted to do it, Papa. Why would I want to do it if it was wrong?"

They have a hard time answering such a strange question. "Just because you want to do something does not make it acceptable," says Nere.

It takes a while for Ibai to comprehend that, and even after the boy claims to, they are not wholly convinced that he does.

Moreover, they come to learn that, despite knowing about death, the boy possesses no concept of pain. It seems he has never felt it before. They must endeavor to teach it to him. It will serve as his punishment, they decide.

Their efforts backfire. Ibai does not mind pain at all. Rather, it seems to only make him happier.

An incredibly disturbing discovery, it is. They begin to see that Parson may have been correct. But they will not give up on Ibai. That is unthinkable.

They devise an alternate means of punishment. Isolation and boredom. After only one taste--alone in a soundproof chamber with nothing to do for a mere fifteen minutes--Ibai proves much more agreeable. They have found something he genuinely fears. They must use this tool carefully in order to guide his behavior in the proper direction.

And for the most part, it seems to work. It is worrisome, yes, and certainly requiring patience, but Ibai appears to learn that he must not hurt others."

"884

Ibai is a difficult child, to say the very least, but they are managing him. Really, the boy just needs entertainment and supervision--but those two needs are constant. It becomes clear that Ibai is unfit to be the House's heir. They attempt to have a second child, but it is thus far proving fruitless.

He appoints Cousin Horatio as the new heir as a precaution. It is unfortunate, of course, and he does not tell Horatio of his decision, but he can at least rest easy in the knowledge that Horatio is a man of admirable, if curious, intelligence and fortitude. It should really be Cousin Melchor, he feels; but he has no idea where that man is, and even if he did, Melchor had already refused the role of leadership before and doubtless would again should the time ever come.

They reach out to Parson Miles once more. They aim to apologize for being so brusque with him before and hope that he has learned more about aberrations in the intervening years. Parson sends word, saying that he was planning to visit them soon, anyway.

When he arrives, however, he does not seem very interested in helping them with Ibai. Instead, he requires a favor of his own. "As Lord of Marshrock, you oversee the Northwestern Border Guard, do you not?"

"I do. Why?"

"On the fifteenth of next month, could I trouble you to give your guardsmen the night off?"

"What ever for?"

"I have some friends who need to get into the country."

"What sort of friends would need to sneak past the Border Guard?"

"The sort you would be better off not asking questions about," says Parson.

He narrows his eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Ismael, I come to you with this because it is a matter that requires discretion, which I know to be one of your strong points."

"I understand that, but even so, I am afraid I must know more about these people if I am to help you smuggle them into my homeland. And the way you speak of them does them no service in my imagination."

Parson's youthful smile wanes. "Well then, this is awkward, because I can't tell you anything else about them."

"Then I cannot help you."

"But you can. And you will. Or would you like the rest of your kin to know about your son?"

And there it is. The façade drops at last, though they do not yet know the extent of it."

"885

For a time, he does not believe what he is hearing. It is true that, even as his superior, Parson could not have gotten away with simply labeling the matter “classified” as long as it involved Rainlord territory, but even still, this is more than absurd. That such an old friend would threaten his family while they are so vulnerable is a betrayal beyond anything he has ever experienced.

But all the same, he does what Parson asks in the end. An international road is left unguarded for a single evening. It only connects Sair and Intar. He cannot imagine what need Parson would have of it. Vanguardian troops can already move between the two countries with relatively little difficulty. Perhaps Parson intended to move such a large volume of people that taking them through the proper channels might have spooked the other Rainlords. But if that was truly the case, then why would Parson not simply tell him so?

Then the news arrives.

House Elroy has been slaughtered. Only a pair of teenagers have survived.

And he realizes. This is no coincidence.

He contacts Parson immediately.

“I advise you not to say anything,” Parson tells him. “Else you may find yourself shouldering the blame for their deaths.”

“Parson... What did you do, exactly?”

“Again, I’ll thank you for your discretion, as long as you’ll thank me for mine.”

He can pull no more information out of the general. He learns from the other Rainlords that Abolish was the culprit, but they are all disturbed and bewildered by how such an apparently large and dangerous sect of Abolish could infiltrate Sair undetected.

And he finds himself faced with a choice. Remain silent or risk telling them what he knows.

It tears his heart out, but he and Rholtam decide to say nothing. They believe that, with how little they know of Parson’s plot, even telling the other Rainlords a “version” of the truth would likely blow up in their

faces. They must not attract attention.

Thankfully, the other Rainlords discover a lead on the Abolishers, anyway. His House helps hunt them down while Ibai is kept under guard at Marshrock. The hunt ends abruptly and with little satisfaction when they find that the Abolishers have already been obliterated. Their severed heads have all been put on gruesome display. He later asks in private, but unsurprisingly, Parson does not claim responsibility."

"886

He does not know what to think. The Rainlords have been wounded many times in the past, but the massacre of House Elroy is undoubtedly the greatest scar of his lifetime. The losses in his own family a mere seven years prior pale in comparison and only serve to deepen his sympathy for what the young Zeff and Joana are going through.

And he played a part in it.

The guilt twists his stomach into knots. The shame rips his heart in half. And he can do nothing to mend them. If he confesses his involvement, the other Rainlords will learn of Ibai's existence. His family will fall to ruin. Parson Miles assures him of that. Only silence will protect his blood.

Years pass.

He observes with disgust and haunting dread as Parson is promoted to the rank of captain general. He is only glad that it means Parson will be leaving Sair.

A small measure of relief arrives when Cousin Melchor returns to Marshrock. After all this time, the man has finally achieved vengeance for their House.

He is fearful that Melchor will leave again--or worse, consider him a traitor for what he has done. But this is not a secret he can keep from the man. If he tried to, Melchor would never forgive him when he inevitably found out. So he explains everything.

And Cousin Melchor consoles him.

Of all the possible reactions, that was the last one he expected. It is enough to make him weep. He could not possibly be any more grateful for his cousin's return than he is in this moment...

Ismael blinked slowly as his mind came back to the present. The memories still weighed on him, on his soul. They wanted him to quit, to surrender and just let whatever happens happen. It was so tempting.

'I'm tired, too, you know.'

The reaper's heavy tone pulled Ismael out of his daze.

'Don't act like you're the only one,' said Rholtam. 'I've been right there with you the whole time. Your sorrow is my sorrow, Ismael. Your guilt is my guilt. And your worry--certainly, your worry is mine, too.'

Ismael only nodded.

'But our feelings don't matter now,' said Rholtam. 'It's time to stop being indecisive. If you intend to surrender, you can't put it off any longer.'

"Do you think surrendering would make a difference? Once they know the complete truth, do you think they would be merciful?"

'It's... possible, but...'

"887 -- CI.

"Even if they did show mercy, Ibai would still be executed," said Ismael. "As would you and I."

'I would be surprised if they let any of our reapers live,' said Rholtam. 'The non-servants might be spared, but they would be shunned for the rest of their lives and no longer be allowed to hold office in this country. Letting our House retain any power would just be asking our people to betray them the next time they were vulnerable.'

"I believe you are right."

'That sounds like a decision to me.'



“No surrender.”

‘Then let us see this through to the bitter end.’

And as if on cue, another reaper entered the Hall. It was Orric. ‘The enemy has breached the castle,’ he informed them. ‘Xuan Sebolt is leading their infiltration team, so Melchor and I will have to confront him. Your assistance would be most appreciated.’

Ismael stood.

Chapter One Hundred One: ‘The clash of Tide and Sea...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector climbed through the gaping hole in the rock that Lord Dimas had made for their group. They were entering through the front. The intention was to be noticed, after all.

With Xuan at the head of their party, Asad bringing up the rear, and Dimas and Salvador on either side, Hector was in awe of the power that surrounded him. These men were the strongest members of their respective houses, so it was a little intimidating, accompanying them to battle like this.

He had to keep his wits about him, though. There was a reason why it was only the five of them on this mission. They fully expected to face Melchor Blackburn, and according to Dimas’ father, combatants without the requisite soul defenses would only be a liability against the man.

Hector had figured that would disqualify him and Garovel from participating, but Garovel did not seem to agree. Instead, Garovel insisted on joining and even told everyone that Hector would be able to hold his own just fine.

‘Are you crazy?!’ Hector had said. ‘Don’t tell them that!’

‘Relax. You’ve got that shield of super-cheating, remember?’

‘This piece of shit isn’t gonna save me!’

‘You don’t think so?’

‘No!’

‘Well, let’s see if you’re right, then.’

‘Garovel, what the fuck?!’

Thanks to that, Lord Salvador had tested Hector personally. Which had been terrifying. But in the end, the shield did its job. Salvador hadn’t been able to hurt Hector and so did not object to the young Lord Goffe’s company."

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Thanks to that, Lord Salvador had tested Hector personally. Which had been terrifying. But in the end, the shield did its job. Salvador hadn't been able to hurt Hector and so did not object to the young Lord Goffe's company."

"888

None of the Rainlords seemed to realize that Hector's resilience was all the shield's doing, but Garovel wanted to keep it that way, lest they decide that they needed it more than he did. Asad might have known of its power, being the crafter's brother, but if he did, he wasn't saying anything.

And so here Hector was, having somehow lied his way into a situation where no one in their right mind would want to be. He felt like the most ridiculous member of their party, too, clad in full plate armor that clinked every time he moved, while everyone else hardly even bothered with bulletproof vests. At least it wasn't a mission that required stealth.

Their purpose here was to draw Melchor's attention so that Lord Abel and the rest of their forces would have time to rush in and seize the castle. If they defeated Melchor, then that would mean instant victory, since no one else would be able to stand against Lord Xuan; but even if they somehow lost, Lord Abel's forces would have already gone through and neutralized enough of the other Blackburns that they could simply focus on the weakened Melchor and overwhelm him with numbers.

As far as plans went, Hector thought Lady Amaya had come up with a pretty solid one.

The first corridor they found was completely dark. Lord Xuan lifted a burning hand and illuminated the way forward with a greenish light. At first, it only flickered faintly, and then it became bright enough to reveal even the high ceiling.

'Is that really necessary?' said Duvoss. 'You have a flashlight, you know.'

"Yeah, but how often do I get to use my glowy powers to actual effect?"

'You're hurting your hand for no reason.'

"You'll fix it for me, won't you?"

'Use your bloody flashlight before you fill the air with toxic smoke.'

"C'mon, I have more control than that."

Lord Dimas intervened. "I do smell garlic..."

"Really? Shit!" Xuan's hand dimmed suddenly and flailed up and down, apparently having trouble undoing his own work. "Eek! Ow! Ah...! Whew... that was close..." In total darkness again, there came a clearing of a throat, and Xuan's flashlight clicked on. "Not to worry, everyone. I meant to do that."

Hector no longer felt the most ridiculous. 'I don't want to be rude, but... this guy is our ace in the hole?'

'I... I'm sure we'll be fine,' said Garovel privately.

Qorvass and the others looked similarly dubious, however."  
"889

Hector hadn't wanted Garovel to join them on the mission, but the reaper insisted on it.

'It's fine,' Garovel had said. 'If we find Chergoa, I need to be there to talk to her; otherwise, she won't know she can trust you.'

'I could just tell her I'm your servant.'

'Could you, Hector? Could you really?'  
'...Y-yeah. I mean, probably.'

'Well, even so, I'm sure you'll have need of my observational support.'

Hector couldn't tell if Garovel was being brave or stupid, but he knew that he didn't have much room to argue about it. He wasn't exactly an expert on how much value one should place upon one's own life.

The group proceeded on, making slow progress. With the stony walls all soul-empowered, the reapers couldn't sense where the enemy would be coming from, so they had to be cautious each time they entered a new room. Hector consulted one of the maps he'd been given and noticed they were coming up on a large complex of rooms which had been collectively marked as a foyer. It seemed to be the center of transit in this area, bearing two staircases, two elevators, a pair of bathrooms, and connecting three major hallways and a massive auditorium.

And when they approached its double doors, they found that the foyer's lights were still on.

Xuan waddled through them without much care, and everyone followed.

With only Xuan's exceptionally modest stature ahead of him, Hector got a clear view of the room. Spacious was the first word for it, bearing

rectangular chambers on the first floor and staircases that led up to a second and third. Ornate was the second word, though perhaps not in the conventional sense. Polished rock was the theme of this place. The floor, the walls, the stairs, the guardrails, the chandeliers, even some of the furniture had been constructed from stone. The handful of chairs and sofas at least had darkly green cushions to go along with them, but it truly seemed like stone was utilized in every conceivable manner, save only where sheer practicality required otherwise.

The room reminded him of Warrenhold, actually--like what Warrenhold might have looked like in an earlier era, all furnished and obviously cared for. The only real difference to Hector's eyes was that the shadowy stone still didn't have quite the same pitch blackness that nightrock did.

Xuan stopped abruptly. "Ah. There you are, Darktide.""

"890

Hector saw the other man standing there on the second floor, watching them from over the hefty guardrail. "Hello, Seadevil. And company."

"I see you have decided not to ambush us," said Xuan. "That is appreciated."

"I figured you would want to talk," said Melchor.

Xuan chortled. "I'm surprised that you would."

"I am in no hurry."

Dimas took a step forward. "Only to tell us more lies, I imagine."

Melchor made no response.

Xuan picked up the slack. "How's about we stop all this nonsense, eh? Return the Elroy kids to us, and we'll leave you alone."

"I doubt that," said Melchor. "I'm sure you have pressing questions now that would keep you here, regardless. Not that it makes a difference. I cannot give you the children."

"Why not?" asked Xuan.

"I cannot tell you."

Xuan pursed his lips. "Are you sure? Because I really hate having to fight scary guys like you."

"Same old Xuan. I always did enjoy your ability to speak plainly. I would prefer to avoid this as well, if I am honest."

"Then why are we doing this?"

"Because your loved ones wish to hurt my loved ones," said Melchor.

Xuan frowned. "I don't think that's quite right."

"Unfortunately, it is."

'Why can't you tell us?' asked Duvoss. 'There must be a reason.'

"Of course there is. And I cannot tell that to you, either."

Several more people entered the foyer from the second and third floors. Hector recognized some of the faces from the photographs Lady Amaya had shown everyone.

'Nine new souls,' Garovel told him privately. 'Melchor makes ten. I also sense the woman from the other day.'

Hector remembered her. The cesium materializer, Silvia Blackburn. Already, Hector was wondering how much use he would be in this fight. He felt Asad touch his left pauldron and realized the man had soul-strengthened his armor for him again. He gave the Sandlord a grateful nod.

Lord Xuan pulled off his small coat and began rolling up his sleeves. "Well, then, if that's how it's going to be, then I hope--"

A gunshot cut him off, and Hector saw Xuan's head twitch and heard the ping of the bullet's ricochet. Xuan looked up to their right, but rather than looking up as well, Hector noticed the tiny bruise on the Seadevil's temple where the bullet had struck him."

"891

As Xuan eyed the apparent gunman, he burst into a laugh that had the

deep rumble of a man thrice his size. "I've never had the honor--no, the pleasure--of meeting House Blackburn in real battle. And seeing as you've refused every chance at clemency, I hope--" He paused, perhaps to see if someone was going to shoot him again. "--I hope you won't disappoint me. I haven't had any good mayhem in a while, and I hate when my opponents die too quickly."

That made Hector blink, along with everyone else in the room--including Melchor, Salvador, and even Dimas, the Seadevil's own cousin.

They did not have long to be surprised, however.

Xuan and Duvoss chose that opportunity to converge. In an instant, the little Rainlord's body disappeared within a column of white smoke, billowing up and out in a way unlike any smoke Hector had ever seen.

And chaos erupted. Gunfire rang out from all around, as did the piping reverberations of destruction users, and Hector decided that staying in one place was a bad idea.

'Stay close to Asad,' Garovel told him coolly.

Hector concurred. The lone Sandlord launched up to the second floor's gallery amidst a flurry of bullets, explosions, and shattering quartz, and Hector followed.

Their first opponent, Hector recognized straight away. That was the face of Ismael Blackburn, Lord of Marshrock. The man's file said his ability was potassium transfiguration, which now manifested in the violet flames leaping from Ismael's body and shooting toward Asad like a volley of arrows.

Rather than stopping the flames with a wall, Asad doused them completely with a blanket of sand, allowing Hector to push closer with shield and materialized spear in hand.

Ismael severed a forearm and retreated, and Hector certainly did not need to be told why.

The shield took the explosion well, though the force still sent Hector flying. He grabbed the guardrail to catch himself, but it snapped right off and came with him, all the way to the other side of the chamber where his armored body left an impressive crack in the far wall.

For a second, he didn't know where Garovel was, and then he realized



that the reaper had somehow wriggled into his armor and latched onto his back. 'Er--you okay in there?'

'It's actually quite cozy,' said Garovel. 'Wish I'd thought of this earlier. Careful on your right.'

Lord Salvador was there, dealing with three Blackburns all by himself."  
"892

It was like watching a bull facing down a trio of wolves. The three Blackburns were attacking him in unison with minimal effectiveness, due to the Lord Delaguna's passive defenses combined with his cobalt transfiguration. However, they did have one destruction user, who finally managed to hit Salvador's metallic shoulder. Cobalt burst apart into a thousand brittle chips, but scarcely a moment passed before it regenerated, allowing Salvador to charge forward undeterred. The destruction user was forced to retreat sideways so that the other two Blackburns could buy him time to avoid being flattened.

Hector couldn't tell if Salvador actually needed help or not, but he wasn't going to wait and find out. He dove in shield-first and materialized a pillar beneath the destruction user, knocking the mustachioed man off balance. Hector swung his sword vertically, looking to lop the man's arm off, but instead, the iron blade only cut partially through the armpit before snapping in half.

The man, whom he now recognized as Tomas Blackburn, did not look pleased. Tomas brought a meaty hand around to use his ability, and Hector wrenched away in time to lose an arm instead of his head. The heater shield endured a pummeling and went flying out of Hector's shredded grasp.

Hector didn't let the loss slow him down, though. He discarded his busted sword, wrapped his good arm around Tomas' half-severed one, and pulled with all his strength. The appendage popped right off in a cloud of blood, and Hector clobbered Tomas in the face with the man's own soul-strengthened bicep in one smooth motion. Tomas went toppling backward, and Hector moved to recover his shield, which had nearly finished restoring itself to perfect condition already.

When he looked back toward Lord Salvador, he found the man overpowering his two opponents. Tomas was scrambling back into

position, but it was already too late. A huge hand found one of their heads and tore it off as if nothing had been holding it in place. The other Blackburn retreated, and when Tomas arrived again, Salvador put him through the wall.

‘Maybe we should help someone else,’ advised Garovel.

Hector looked around the foyer and saw that everyone was quite occupied, apart from him. The frenzied collision of smoke and liquid metal in the middle of the room made the very air shudder, but he couldn’t even remotely tell if one of them was winning."

"893

Dimas had his hands full with the Blackburns on the third floor, but Asad seemed to be having the hardest time, forced to deal with Ismael, Nere, and Horatio all at once--probably the three strongest opponents after Melchor.

Hector broke into a full sprint as he cooked up the next strategy. Asad’s corner of the foyer blustered with flames and strings of targeted explosions, and Asad had to endure many of them in favor of dodging spatial distortions from Nere. It was clear enough that Asad needed some room to breathe. Perhaps another iron platform--

‘Shield above your head!’ Garovel yelled.

Hector brought the shield to bear in time for a swarm of mercurial spikes to break upon it, impacting with enough force to drop him on his ass. A spike skewered his left greave along with the leg therein. When the spikes subsided, he yanked the mercury out and clambered onto his right leg in order to limp onward while the other healed.

Before Hector could assist Asad, however, green light filled the chamber, and a veil of smoke washed past Horatio Blackburn, replacing the man’s body with a melting husk. Huge, snaking wisps of steam hissed off of Horatio’s vanishing clothes and boiling flesh. Even the man’s pan-forma-level regeneration was not enough to abate the Seadevil’s acid. Already, his limbs had been eaten through to the bone, dangling off of his torso like some kind of grotesque ornament and bringing him to his knees.

And Hector was abruptly glad that Lord Xuan was on their side.

The battle was clearly shifting in their favor now. With one less opponent to worry about, Asad was already getting in more shots of his own, pelting both Ismael and Nere with bursts of molten quartz and forcing them to give ground. His tattoos glowed an almost constant gold as he weathered Ismael's violet flames in order to keep pressing his assault. Salvador, in the meantime, had already cleaned up the three opponents on his end and went crashing up to the third floor to assist Dimas.

'Hold on,' said Garovel. 'Don't jump back into the fight just yet.'

Hector stopped, uncertain. 'Why not?' From his position by the second floor's staircases, he had a mostly clear view of everyone.

'Let's wait and see how things unfold. This battle might already be over. Be ready to jump in if and when you're needed, but not before.'"  
"894

Hector observed the fight with grim wonder, trying to keep an eye on everyone. Dimas and Salvador appeared to have their situation well in hand, with Dimas occasionally boring enormous holes in the rock, earning more aerial space for himself. Hector watched the man fly into a tunnel of his own making, only to return a moment later, exploding through a wall behind one of the Blackburns.

Meanwhile, Xuan and Melchor were still a thunderous mess of scarcely understandable chaos. Pillars of white smoke and whiter flames slammed against sheets of flexing metal, making both burst apart each time.

'What are they doing?' Hector asked.

'Trying to overwhelm one another,' said Garovel. 'They've both mastered pan-rozum, so there aren't many ways they can subdue each other. Hyper states can be forcibly undone by tearing the reaper out of the user's brain. But in pan-rozum, the user can melt their brain mass down into something incredibly small without losing any of its functionality--and on top of that, it can be MOVED, too. So right now, they're both attempting to surround and destroy enough of one another that they can locate their opponent's brain and end the fight.'

Hector understood. 'Process of elimination...'

'Exactly. The less original mass the user possesses, the fewer places the brain can be located.'

Every now and again, Hector could see the smoke take on a vaguely human shape, sometimes with too many arms, all grasping at Darktide's only slightly more humanoid form. Javelins of white flame punctured the mercury in multiple places, looking almost like fiery claws as they tore through the liquid body. Xuan's own body expanded and contracted as he pleased, billowing one way and then the other, and not being particularly bothered by Melchor's smothering walls. Even when Darktide actually succeeded in boxing some of the smoke in and compressing it, the Seadevil simply cut himself free with fire or acid.

'What is Xuan's element?' said Hector. 'Do you know?'

'No one told me,' said Garovel, 'because I guess they like to keep their trump card secret when they can, but seeing it now--it's almost definitely phosphorus. The sheer volume of smoke is somewhat telling--though I'm a little surprised he can control the product of his chemical reactions so well. To make the smoke an extension of his body... well, I am quite impressed.'

'They did say he was 106...'

'Yes, they did.'"  
"895

Hector kept thinking someone would attack him again, particularly Melchor, but it seemed that Darktide didn't want to divide his attention again, seeing as he did end up losing Horatio the last time he tried. Still, it was a very odd thing, just watching the violence unfold rather than participating.

Dimas and Salvador had thinned their opponents down to the last one, and Dimas moved to assist Asad, who'd been stuck in an apparent stalemate with Ismael and Nere up to now.

'This seems too easy,' said Garovel. 'The way they talked about Darktide, I figured he'd be able to do more with pan-rozum than flail

around like this.'

Hector was getting a similar vibe. 'You think he's holding back?'

'Maybe. I'm not sure why he would, though.'

'Well, if it were me, I might try to create an opening first--possibly by tricking the opponent into thinking they were beating me...'

Garovel paused. 'Colt taught you that, didn't he?'

'Er. S-sorta... But, uh. I'm probably wrong. I'm sure that's way too simplistic for a fight of this level. And if I could see through it, then Lord Xuan would obviously--'

As if on cue, a chunk of Darktide's body pierced the center of the smoke and detonated with such force that even Hector was thrown into the wall. The blast filled the whole foyer, leaving behind long-lingering tremors that made Hector feel like he'd been caught in a sudden earthquake. He could hear more crumbling rock, but the smoke was so dense that he could scarcely even see until Dimas' gravity swept the air clear again.

And when Hector returned to the busted guardrail, what he saw made his breath catch.

Darktide's hulking form had been torn asunder, and pieces of mercury boiled beneath pools of acid. But the liquid metal beast was still standing, while the white fumes had all but dispersed. And Darktide was already in the middle of tearing Duvoss free from the Seadevil's almost smokeless figure.

'Time to help,' said Garovel.

Hector leapt off the second floor and slid down on an iron ramp, already running when his feet touched stone again. He chucked a materialized spear as he charged forward, shield first.

Melchor saw him, but just carried on anyway and let his liquid body devour the iron as if it had been intended to feed him."

"896

Duvoss and Xuan were separated now, and Melchor's body began to

swallow them both.

Unsure what else he could do, Hector just kept flinging iron while he also worked on a spiked boulder above the liquid metal beast's head.

A visible pulse of gravity burst through Melchor's arm, and Duvoss fell away from him, still gripped by the severed hand.

And Hector dropped everything else, suddenly knowing his most important task. He bolted forward and lunged for the reaper. He snatched Duvoss up just before the wave of mercury could, and the mercury crashed against Hector's shield and armor both, sending him flying once more. But his concentration held firm, even as he crashed through the north wall into an auditorium and took out a row of seats before his armored body finally skid to a halt.

He pulled Duvoss close and kept him positioned just behind the shield, prepared to endure another metallic tidal wave, but it wasn't immediately necessary. He saw Lord Dimas buying them precious time.

'Can you move?' asked Garovel.

'N-no, I don't--agh...' Duvoss barely sounded conscious.

'Forget it,' said Garovel. 'Regenerate Xuan now. Hector will keep you safe.'

'W-where... where is Xuan's brain?'

'I lost him in the chaos. Just try regrowing him.'

And Hector saw a tiny speck appear in his own hand--a dot of brain matter. He had no clue how Xuan's previous brain had gotten destroyed, but he didn't have time to worry about it.

Melchor came crashing through the wall like a freight train.

Garovel's next words were kept private. 'It's time to cheat, Hector.'

And the young Lord Goffe switched hands with the shield. As soon as his bare skin touched it, he felt the enhancement course through him like a shiver that tautened every muscle, but he kept his focus. He raised a broad platform beneath Melchor, trying to throw him off and squish him against the ceiling, but the liquid mercury cut through his iron like butter and bounded closer, undeterred.

Hector launched himself away with a diagonal platform. The mercury caught up anyway and snaked around his leg, stopping him in mid-air before yanking him back toward Darktide's gaping maw.

The iron spikes came out, completely engulfing his body, and Melchor crunched through them without a single care. Hector's armor shattered and pressed against his flesh.

But Hector himself remained. Curled into a ball, he protected Duvoss and Xuan with his body alone."

"897

The mercury wanted through, but Hector wasn't budging. He could see the brain growing slowly larger with each passing moment.

'I think you owe your shield an apology,' said Garovel privately. 'It's clearly not a piece of shit, and it's definitely saving your ass right now.'

'I'll make an iron girlfriend for it later,' said Hector. He felt his bones cracking under Darktide's constant pressure, but it wasn't fast enough to be a problem for Hector's undead regeneration. The bones just kept breaking and healing again and again, though it wasn't exactly comfortable. He couldn't even move.

"You cannot win," came the calm double-voice of Darktide. "Give up Duvoss, and we will let you live."

'Don't answer,' said Garovel.

Hector didn't intend to. The fact that Darktide was trying to bargain now seemed indicative of a stalemate having formed, and a stalemate was in their favor, because all they needed to do was buy a few minutes for Xuan.

But it was going to be a long few minutes.

Abruptly, Hector felt the crushing pressure let up for a moment, only to be replaced by a dozen points of spinning force. Mercury drills, digging into his arms and back and neck and skull. And they were making progress. He tried to fight them with iron, but it wouldn't even materialize in here. The field density of Darktide's soul was much too strong for him.

Hector didn't know what else he could do. He was plainly overmatched, and Xuan still needed a lot more time.

Then Garovel decided to intervene. 'HEY!' he shouted, making Hector blink. 'WE'RE STILL ALIVE IN HERE! AND WE COULD REALLY USE SOME HELP RIGHT ABOUT NOW!'

Silence.

Then Darktide's belly splattered apart with gravitic force, and Lord Salvador's huge arm reached in. Liquid metal was on the man in an instant, but he already had a grip on Hector's forearm and yanked him out. Melchor still held Hector's legs, but Dimas was there to pummel the liquid beast with invisible bullets until Hector was finally free again.

Hector hit the ground rolling. His armor clattered off his body in sundered chunks, and the clothes beneath were full of rips and bloody holes and still-writhing mercury as his skin and muscles regenerated. But Duvoss and Xuan were safe in his arms, and Hector hoisted himself onto one knee, watching Dimas and Salvador engage Darktide in unison."

"898 -- CII.

Dimas kept his distance, staying in the air while trying to keep the army of silvery tendrils from overwhelming Salvador, who was busy sacrificing and then quickly regenerating his hands in order to hit Melchor with molten cobalt. And Melchor was handling them both, swirling around their attacks while countering with his own. It was all they could do to keep him from simply blowing past them and going after Hector again.

Hector, in the meantime, worked on remaking his armor. Much as he would've liked to help, he knew that rushing back in would just put Duvoss and Xuan in danger. The best he would've been able to offer was a distraction, but that was exactly what Dimas and Salvador were trying to provide for him now.

'Careful behind you,' said Garovel. 'We've drawn everyone's attention.'

Indeed, Hector turned in time to see Ismael's purple flames



descending upon him. They smacked against his shield as he rolled away, but he found that they would not come off. Melting flesh stuck to the metal like glue, continuing to provide potassium fuel for the flames. Hector smothered them with an iron coating.

Asad appeared next to him, materializing a storm of glassy spikes to keep Ismael and Nere occupied. "Are you alright?" he asked with two voices.

"Yeah," said Hector. "You?"

"Wouldn't mind a little assistance. Here." Asad pressed a tattooed hand against Hector's fresh armor, but they were interrupted before he could finish strengthening it again. He and Hector were forced to dive in opposite directions to avoid a destructive path from Nere.

And Hector just tried to keep moving as he raised his shield to deal with more flames.

Chapter One Hundred Two: 'The demon in the mud...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Dust trickled down from the ceiling with each successive tremor, and Ibai Blackburn bit his lip as he stared up at it.

He'd been trying to ignore the shaking. He really had. But it just kept reminding him that a battle was going on out there. A real battle. And so close.

But Mama and Papa would be so cross with him if they found out that he left the room. Worse, they'd be disappointed in him. And of course, if he ended up having to explain precisely how he managed to get out, that would only make them even more upset.

But it had to be done. These quakes were simply too enticing to go uninvestigated. Maybe if he was sneaky about it, no one would find out."

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"899

The walls had been soul-empowered by Papa and then later overridden even more strongly by Mel, so Ibai already knew that he couldn't simply bust his way out. What Papa and Mel didn't know, however, was that Ibai's ability had manifested a long time ago. He'd kept it a secret for nearly two decades now, knowing that it would only upset his family and make them look for a way to counter its effects. And that would've sucked all the fun out of it.

He had the layout of Marshrock more or less memorized. He'd probably spent more time here than anyone else in the entire world.

So teleporting out of this room was not going to be difficult.

He stood in the middle of the chamber, thought about where he wanted to be, and then wrapped himself in the brown shadow. It swirled around him and then winked out of existence, taking his body with it.

And for an instant, he could see.

The infinite void.

Everything and nothing. Life and death. A trillion burning stars in the sky and all around him. Souls suspended in space. Eleg, too, spinning and breathing and alive.

And all of them, ethereal. Massless shadows of reality. The universe of zero weight, where space itself was of no consequence.

In a flash, it was all gone, and Ibai reappeared in the next room over, stepping from his muddy shadow onto Marshrock's dark stone again.

Ibai frowned. No one was around. But wait, no, that was probably a good thing. He was supposed to be sneaky. He jumped through space again, this time reappearing on the next floor up. Still no one. He jumped again, and this time there was a group of strangers looking directly at him, including several reapers. Many of them carried guns.

"Hello!" said Ibai.

'An aberration!'

"Kill it!"

He teleported away as the gunfire erupted, reappearing in a bedroom a few floors down. "Well, that was unfortunate." He shrugged it off and looked around.

He saw a girl with four horns on her face. She was staring at him with wide gray eyes.

"Hello," Ibai said cheerily. "You don't look like you want to kill me. What is your name, young lady?"

She stood up from the edge of her bed, hesitant. "...Who are you?"

"Oh, my name is Ibai. And yours?"

"...Emiliana.""

"900

“What a pretty name,” said Ibai. “Why are you in here all by yourself?”

Emiliana lowered her brow at him. “Shouldn’t you know that already?”

“Mm. Probably. But I don’t. Do you know what is going on outside?”

“Some kind of battle.”

“Right. It’s dangerous. You shouldn’t be here. So why are you?”

“...I’m being held prisoner.”

“Prisoner? Why? Did you do something wrong?”

“No.”

“Oh, so like a hostage, then?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Well, that seems pretty unfair. Not to mention boring.”

She only squinted at him.

Ibai laughed suddenly. “I understand! Not being allowed to leave! You can’t possibly know how much I sympathize with you! By the way, what’s wrong with your face?”

Emiliana chose not to answer that.

“Oh, I bet you’re a servant, aren’t you? You’re one of those super-rare mucus users I heard about, right? Do you fight using snot bubbles? Could you show me?”

“Er, I think you mean mutation users...”

“Do I? Well, that sounds way less cool. Hey, where’s your reaper?”

“I don’t know, actually. She’s being kept somewhere else.”

“Oh, should we go find her, then? I bet I know where she is. Ooh, and then we could all go on an adventure together!”

Emiliana hesitated again. “What do you mean by adventure?”

“I don’t know. That’s how adventures work, right?”

“Uh...”

"Sounds like a plan!" He grabbed her hand and teleported them both into the next room. They appeared in midair, having to fall a few inches before touching the floor again, and Emiliana ended up stumbling forward.

"What in the world was that?!"

"Neat, eh?"

"But--all that--?! What was all that stuff that flashed by?! All those lights!"

"Oh, those?" A beat passed, and then he gave a lame shrug. "Anyway, let's keep going. It'll take a couple more jumps to reach the dungeon."

"Dunge--"

They teleported once more, three floors down this time. Another troupe of armed strangers with reapers was right there to greet them.

'It's an aberration!'

"Hellooo!"

'It's got an Elroy!'

"Bye-bye!"

And they vanished behind a muddy curtain. When they reappeared, there was no light, and Ibai had to fumble around in the dark for a bit before finding the switch on the wall.

The ceiling lit up in intervals, revealing a long, arching corridor full of musty prison cells, all wrought from ancient rock and steel but still airtight even to this day."

"901

"How do you know she is here?" Emiliana asked.

"Well, I don't, but the cells on this floor are super old and were designed specifically to hold reapers. Normal cells won't work even with soul-empowerment, because normal cells have to allow air in, and

reapers can squeeze through even the smallest of physical gaps. Unless you're using a soul net, I suppose. But those require added maintenance since they need electricity and other science-y stuff. Which didn't even exist way back then, anyway. Or hadn't been discovered yet, I guess. Whatever."

"You... seem to know a lot about it."

"Do I? That's cool. Studying is boring, but knowing stuff is fun. Hey, what's your reaper's name?"

Emiliana seemed reluctant, still, but said, "Chergoa."

"Lovely. HEY, CHERGOA! CAN YOU HEAR US?!"

After a beat, Emiliana blinked. "She can."

"You lead the way, then," said Ibai.

Emiliana proceeded down the length of the hall, shouting out to Chergoa intermittently, and soon, Ibai could hear the reaper's responses.

'You sound really close now.'

Emiliana stopped in front of a cell on their right. "I think she's in here."

"Okay," said Ibai. "Be right back." And he teleported inside on his own.

It was pitch dark inside, but he did not need light to see her. To his eyes, reapers were very small, human-shaped toys. Tiny action figures, in truth.

As soon as Chergoa saw him, she began bobbing frantically up and down. 'Holy shit, an aberration! How did you--?!'

With nowhere for her to run, Ibai just scooped her up with his shadow. "Shh, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

'What--?!'

They jumped out again, and he held the reaper up for Emiliana to see. "Here she is! Safe and sound!"

"Thank you!" Emiliana moved to take Chergoa from him.

Ibai recoiled from her touch, keeping the reaper well in hand. "Ah.

That's okay. I'll keep her safe for you."

The relief on Emiliana's face disappeared. "No, please, I would much rather she be--"

"Sorry," said Ibai. "It's not that I don't trust you. It's that I don't trust her. No offense, Chergoa."

Chergoa made no response.

"I know how most reapers see me." He frowned. "If I let her go, I'm sure she'll just run away. And then she'll make you run away. And then we won't be able to go on an adventure together! So I'll hold onto her for now."

"902

Emiliana didn't seem pleased by that information, but she chose not to argue.

Ibai took her hand again, but then paused, thinking. "Oh, I almost forgot to ask: is there anyone else you want me to bust out of here before we go? The more the merrier, I say!"

"...No," said Emiliana.

"Are you sure? No other hostages or anything? It seems odd that you two would be the only ones."

She kept a flat expression and shrugged. "If there are any others, they weren't with me."

"Hmm." Ibai tilted his head and squinted. "That's funny, because I heard one of those soldiers earlier say that I had 'an Elroy'--as if to imply that there was more than one. I forget how many children House Elroy currently has, but it seems a fair bet that you're one of them and that more are being held hostage here right now."

That seemed to put Emiliana at a loss for words.

Chergoa spoke up for her. 'The rest were killed. Very recently, too, so it's not surprising that those soldiers didn't know. Please don't ask her any more about it. She's been through considerable trauma already.'



“Ah, that makes sense, then. Oh, and I’m sorry to hear that.”

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Chergoa, abruptly changing her tone. ‘So what’s this you said about going on an adventure? Because that sure sounded interesting.’

Ibai’s face lit up again. “I’m glad you think so! Let’s go find some fun stuff to do! See if we can put her mind at ease!”

Ibai jumped all three of them up a few floors and immediately ran into another group of unfamiliar soldiers. These ones were already in the middle of subduing a handful of Blackburn guards, and they were all facing the other way or otherwise too busy to notice the new arrivals. Even their reapers didn’t seem to sense Ibai’s presence yet.

“--word of an aberration in the building!” one the soldiers was yelling. The target of his anger was a Blackburn servant with a half-melted face, pinned against the wall alongside his reaper. “If you know something, tell me now!”

As Ibai looked over the scene, his smile waned. That servant’s name was Rafael, and Rafael was a dynamite checkers player.

After a beat, however, Ibai’s smile returned, even wider and toothier than before."

"903

Ibai teleported, leaving Emiliana behind but keeping Chergoa wrapped in a brown tail, and reappeared next to the man who’d been hassling Rafael. Ibai’s shadow ballooned around the man and his reaper, and Ibai jumped away again with both in tow. This time, he reappeared next to the wall.

The man, however, reappeared in the wall. In an instant, his flesh completely fused with the rock, cracking it only slightly and creating a lifeless human statue embedded in otherwise smooth stone.

He didn’t get time to admire the craftsmanship, however. The other reapers had noticed him by now, and the fight broke out anew. Ibai jumped from enemy to enemy, creating even more havoc while they were already scrambling to contain the thrashing Blackburns.

It didn’t last very long at all, and by the end, Ibai had collected two

more reapers for himself. One final reaper was fleeing down the hallway, but Ibai caught up to him easily enough, bringing the number of trophies to four. He could've called it five, but he decided that it wasn't fair to count Chergoa. All the same, he returned to the other Blackburns with a grin on his face and a hop in his step.

"Thank you, m'lord," one of them said. "You saved us."

'Indeed,' said Rafael's reaper. This one's name was Ustox. 'But you aren't supposed to be here, are you?'

"Aw, c'mon!" whined Ibai, waving his captured toys around. "All the action's out here!"

'As you say, m'lord. We could certainly use your help. But how long have you possessed this teleporting power?'

"Er. N-not long..."

'Indeed? I suppose it doesn't matter. Here, m'lord.' Ustox bobbed his tiny body toward the others, and they all seemed to understand. In addition to Ibai's captives, the others had captured five more enemy reapers, all currently rendered unconscious.

And the Blackburns offered them to him.

Ibai blinked at the apparent gifts. "W-what are you doing?"

'Our House is outnumbered,' said one of the other Blackburn reapers. 'We need you strong, Lord Ibai.'

This was too sudden.

Ibai could hardly believe what he was hearing. For more than thirty years, everyone had told him the exact opposite of this. They'd told him how much trouble he'd been in, how he should try to be more thoughtful, more careful, more gentle.

That was simply the way of things.

But now...? He didn't understand. Were they testing him? Surely not. That would be cruel."

"904

--BELATED donation bonus week (day 7/7, page 1/3)--

A ripple of cries and protests went through the few captive reapers who were still conscious, but it was Emiliana who proved the most vocal.

"You can't be serious!" she yelled. "These are your fellow Rainlords! They would certainly have showed you mercy! You must do the same for them!"

'Don't listen to her, m'lord,' said Ustox. 'Perhaps they would have been merciful at first, but once the full truth came out, our executions would be assured.'

"What 'full truth'?!" said Emiliana.

Ustox ignored the question.

Rafael spoke up now that the burns on his face were gone. "It's okay, m'lord. You won't get in trouble this time. Go on, if you want to."

Oh, he wanted to. That wasn't the issue. "But what if Mama and Papa find out? Or Mel? They would never forgive me."

'As far as anyone else is concerned, you were never here,' said Ustox. 'The battle in this corridor simply grew too chaotic, and we were unable to take any of the enemy reapers alive.'

"No!" cried Emiliana. "You mustn't kill them!"

Ibai's eyes widened with anticipation, and he bit his lip. "I-I've never consumed a human soul before..."

'That can't be true,' said Ustox, sounding abruptly surprised. 'To manifest that ability of yours, you must've consumed at least a few.'

"No," said Ibai. "It was only ever animals. I... I tried to think of it like hunting. I even put the meat and fur to use. When possible. So... this is... this is new."

'I see,' said Ustox. 'I apologize, then. Please forgive my ignorance, m'lord. I thought--well, never mind. We will speak no more on the matter, if that is your wish. I implore you to do whatever you think is best.'

Emiliana was shouting again--something about honor this time--but Ibai had stopped listening.

Ibai truly did not know what to do now. He stared at the reapers with hunger in his eyes. Just this once, it might be okay. He would be able to see what it was like. He had a feeling that humans souls were much more potent than animal souls--and another feeling that reaper souls were stronger still. All he needed to do was crush them with his shadow and then teleport before their ethereal remains disappeared. It would be so easy.

But for some reason, he didn't. He stopped himself."  
"905 -- CIII.

Ibai handed the reapers off to Rafael and the others, keeping only Chergoa for himself.

And everyone abruptly stopped yelling. They were all staring at him now, even his own family members. Only the faint rumble of distant battle prevented complete silence.

"Ensure no harm comes to them," Ibai said, uncertain if those words were his own or his father's or Uncle Mel's. "They don't deserve to die, and we won't be so afraid of their future actions as to execute them unjustly, either."

More silence, until Rafael spoke up. "...A-are you certain, m'lord?"

Ibai grinned. "The rain fears not the torch," he said.

That only made everyone stare again.

Ibai became impatient. "What's the matter?"

'We are just--' Ustox broke himself off. 'As you wish, m'lord. Rafael, let us go.'

Rafael still seemed a bit awestruck, but after a moment, he blinked and looked at Chergoa. "What about her, m'lord?"

"Oh, she's with me! We're going on an adventure together!"

Chapter One Hundred Three: 'Ye who must hold firm...!'

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Hector's armor kept crumbling. His clothes kept burning. And he kept losing extremities to the Lady Blackburn's very annoyingly well-placed attacks. Even Haqq's shield couldn't stand up to her destruction power--Hector had lost an arm, shoulder, and half his face figuring that out. She seemed particularly intent on clipping his legs, and Hector was equally intent on not allowing that to happen. If it weren't for Asad, he definitely would've been dead by now.

But here he was. Still alive. Still keeping hold of Duvoss and Xuan. He really wished they'd hurry up and finish regenerating already. He knew the chaos of a fight tended to make time feel longer, but this was getting to be a bit much.

He just focused on avoiding Nere's attacks. His shield and body could weather Ismael's flames, if absolutely necessary. Ismael seemed to be trying to close in on him, probably for some kind of explosive attack, but Asad was keeping him at bay while also giving Nere glass javelins to worry about.

And then he saw Darktide finally snatch Dimas out of the air and snap the man in half, ripping Iziol from his body in one smooth motion.

Hector didn't get the chance to keep watching, but knowing that Salvador was now alone against Melchor, Hector had a dreadful feeling that he was about to be seeing a whole lot of liquid mercury again."

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feeling that he was about to be seeing a whole lot of liquid mercury again."

"906

Hector tried raising platforms beneath Nere to trip her up, but she was simply too fast; and the one time he actually succeeded, Nere just leapt off the platform as if she'd expected it to be there.

Asad, however, employed a better strategy. With a clenched fist, he raised a huge bed of powdered quartz beneath Ismael and Nere, slowing them both down as they suddenly had to go from running on stone to stomping through clumps of sand. Of course, they also had superhuman strength in their legs, so the sand only offered a brief opening as they adjusted their running motion accordingly. But that was enough for Asad.

A quartz spike gored Nere through the stomach, then spawned dozens of barbed branches in quick succession, exploding out of her torso and severing the top half of her body from the bottom. Her arms moved to destroy the quartz, but it was already too late. The glass cut cleanly up through both shoulders, stopping her movement completely before proceeding to encase her neck and head.

Hector looked on in horrified awe. He would definitely have to steal that technique, he decided.

And it had gone almost unnoticed thus far, but Asad was the main reason why none of the fallen Blackburns had been able to return to the fight. Even when he'd been fending off two or three opponents at once, Asad managed to coat the severed heads in quartz and prevent regeneration. Ismael or Melchor would sometimes break someone free, but Asad would just coat them again without losing a beat. Hector, at least, managed to provide some assistance on that front, recoating a couple with iron when Asad didn't have the time.

Now, with Nere taken down, Hector checked on Lord Salvador again. Darktide already had him pinned and was almost finished extracting his reaper.

Only Ismael, Melchor, Asad, and Hector remained. The last four combatants. How he'd ended up in this position was entirely beyond him, but the good news was that Xuan's head, neck, and shoulders

had finished regrowing.

He heard Garovel ask the question that was already on his mind.

‘How much longer?’

‘He just needs one hand,’ said Duvoss.

In calmer circumstances, Hector might have asked why. He also might have complained about it, because that was still way too long to wait--especially now that he was watching a living metal monster barreling toward him."

"907

Hector was getting accustomed to running in full plate armor. He glimpsed a nearby corridor and considered fleeing through it, but the narrower quarters struck him as more of a death sentence than anything. He proceeded straight ahead, bounding over a pile of rocks that used to be part of the high ceiling and trying to reach Asad.

Frozen mercury shot up around Hector, caging him in completely, but Asad was close enough now to punch through with glass-coated fists. They kept running together. Hector decided to leave a few iron walls in their wake, while Asad was busy keeping Ismael away.

The first wall was simple enough--it spanned the entire length of the foyer, but it wasn't nearly tall enough, and Darktide just splashed right over it. The second wall, at least, was a large enough obstacle that Darktide chose to break through rather than lose time scaling it. The third was the same, not enough to buy even a moment of extra time.

The fourth, however, was not a wall at all. Instead, Hector materialized a sphere where he expected Darktide to be, but still made it massive enough to look like a wall for the brief glimpse Melchor would get of it after busting through the third. So when his liquid body slammed into it, no doubt expecting to smash it down, the sphere began rolling away instead, creating a moment of stumbling confusion as Melchor ended up rolling with it. Hector had even added a few dents in its surface, so the giant ball ended up veering off to the left and distracting Melchor for a moment more.

It was a stupid trick, Hector knew, but extra time was extra time,



regardless of how he achieved it. And now he had the opportunity to work on an old scheme: a soul-empowered maze. It had hidden his presence against Karkash. Maybe it could do so against Melchor.

He set to work, creating a four-way intersection with himself and Asad at the center, then expanding each branch in three different directions. Then again. And again. All while he and Asad kept pressing through the tunnels together.

Melchor wasn't having it, though. The same kind of explosion that had subdued Xuan shook the chamber once again. Hector's tunnels shattered under the impact and went flying, sending him and Asad along with them. White dust filled the air just as before, but Dimas wasn't around to clear it away this time."

"908

Hector found himself upside down and in a corner, bundled around Duvoss, Garovel, and Xuan. He scrambled back to his feet, a bit surprised to discover that he wasn't missing any limbs or even armor. His shoes had blown right off his feet, and his ear drums had been ruptured, but he was too concerned with present circumstances to even notice. The only thing on his mind now was that he'd lost track of Asad through all the dust.

But Garovel hadn't. 'Run left. Melchor is still after us.'

Hector bolted, following the scarcely visible wall. Then he stopped, but not because he wanted to. Something had a grip on his armor below the knee. He couldn't quite see what it was, but there was no way he was going to wait around and find out. He annihilated the armor above the knee, slid his leg free, and kept running.

He came upon a sudden clearing in the dusty clouds and saw Asad. The Sandlord was already fighting Ismael yet again. Hector hadn't been able to watch their repeated clashes very closely, but knowing all he did about Asad, it was informative enough just seeing that the Lord Blackburn had not yet fallen to him.

"Oh, hey, I'm still alive," came Xuan's voice, and Hector looked down to see that the man had regained consciousness. His already small body was still only half-regenerated, but at least he had lungs and elbows now.

Hector didn't get a chance to respond. A tidal wave of mercury barreled through the fog after him. He launched himself out of its path with a slanted iron platform, but the mercury made a sharp turn and kept up the chase. Wide-eyed behind his helm, Hector launched himself again before he could even stop to regain his balance and went flipping sideways through the air.

A bed of sand softened Hector's fall, and a massive barricade of crystalline spears shot up to defend him from another cage of frozen mercury that tried to box him in. They kept an escape route open for him while simultaneously launching daggers at Melchor, not that they did much good. Hector fled the glass shelter just as Darktide crashed through it, sending fist-sized shards in all directions.

Another iron platform shot Hector up past the second floor, all the way to the third, and his bare feet hit cold rock again. He checked on Xuan again and wanted to cry when he saw that barely any progress had been made after all that effort."

"909

Already, tendrils of mercury had made it up to the third floor. Hector leapt away from them with the aid of more platforms, scraping the broken ceiling with the back of his breastplate and jostling another boulder loose. It fell toward Melchor, who slapped it aside like a volleyball.

Meanwhile, Xuan was busy laughing. "That Darktide sure is a tough bastard, isn't he?"

Hector landed with a metal thud and promptly launched himself away again. "Please stop distracting me, Lord Xuan."

Midair, a tendril caught up to him and found his shield. Hector gripped the handle with all his might and wrenched it free, but the tendril settled for his bare leg instead. And when Hector landed again, a second tendril was already there, snaking around the other leg and crushing its armor.

He was in no position to run away this time, he knew, and in a moment, the mercury would surround him again, preventing even his ability to materialize iron. So he used it while he still could. He poured

everything into adding spikes to his armor. Maximum volume.

The spikes exploded out, each one thick as a tree trunk, covering his armor and his shield and creating a small pocket at the center for Hector and his three passengers. The spikes also appeared on the back of his armor, lifting him off the floor and sending his giant cluster of iron needles over the third floor's guardrail.

They fell, though Hector could hardly feel it from inside. He couldn't see the fruits of his concentration, either, but it didn't matter, because he just kept pushing for more. More spikes. More iron. More defense.

Hector's work quickly filled the length of the chamber and caught on the second floor's porous walls and crumbling staircase. They were stuck fast now, suspended above the first floor like some kind of grisly ornament, all while the iron spikes continued to grow, touching the ground and even reaching toward the ceiling.

Hector pressed his soul into the iron, hoping the shield's passive enhancements would be carried along as well, but unfortunately, that did not seem the case. And with no light, he couldn't see Xuan's progress. He could only hear the muffled crack of iron above him and feel the fierce vibrations in his metal cocoon.

And then Darktide broke through. The foyer's dim light poured in, along with a river of living mercury, searching and grasping for Xuan."

"910

Hector tried to stay bundled up, but too much of Xuan had regenerated. The Seadevil could no longer fit inside the small pocket of safety between Hector's chest, arms, and shield. So the mercury seeped through the cracks, and Hector could only thrash against it.

It was like trying to fight ten opponents at once, all with invisible hands guiding the flow of mercury, pummeling Hector's whole body, tearing at him, swarming him. A tendril wrapped around one of Xuan's regenerating arms and tore it off. Another tendril tried to do the same to the other arm, but Hector used the point of his shield to chop it off. And he saw Xuan's one remaining hand. It was nearly complete. The stubby fingers were all that was still needed.

And then Hector felt himself being pulled away by the legs. Only

Garovel stayed with him, having somehow repositioned himself to Hector's hand, hiding just behind the battered shield. Melchor spat the pair of them out like old chewing gum, and Hector clattered to the floor in his crushed armor.

Before even standing, he stared back up with wide eyes, wanting to know if he'd bought enough time for Xuan. And he still couldn't tell. Chunks of shattered iron were falling all around him, crashing into the rock and making the room tremble, and Hector had to annihilate the pieces that would have otherwise fallen on him.

When he saw Darktide again, the man was a writhing mass of marbled silver. Moving, shifting. Struggling.

And then a white flame burst out of the mercury like a sword, smoldering and bright. Swirling trails of white seeped through the hole, growing as the flame did, until a plume of smoke finally spewed outward, accompanied by a booming laugh that filled the foyer.

Darktide splashed down to the first floor while the Seadevil billowed up to the second. The liquid mercury shuddered violently, almost boiling, and Hector couldn't tell if that was the result of anger or just a dose of Xuan's acid.

'Hector,' came Garovel's strained voice, 'stop using the shield...'

Hector let it drop to the floor and heard Garovel let out a groan of relief. He armored up his other hand so that he could pick it up again. The leather glove underneath was shredded, but he wasn't presently concerned about the added discomfort."

"911 -- CIV.

'You okay?' Hector asked, mindful of Darktide's bristling form.

Garovel did not answer.

'Garovel?'

Still nothing.

He supposed there was no use worrying about it now. Melchor seemed more interested in Xuan at the moment, but Hector knew he could turn and crush him anytime. But of course, given that Melchor

didn't know about the shield's power or the temporary nature of it, the man was probably thinking Hector would be too annoying to kill first. Hopefully.

He watched as the two monstrous Rainlords clashed again. Xuan appeared to be keeping his distance this time, letting his smoke waft around more so that he could use it to screen his attacks. Pillars of white flame flashed intermittently, lighting up the foyer each time like a very slow strobe. And Melchor's inhuman shadow appeared during each flash, sweeping across the smoke with a boom that invoked more earthquakes.

It was quite obvious to Hector that his role in their battle was concluded. He decided to go help Asad, who was still occupied with Ismael.

Theirs was a battle of more human proportions, though only just. Asad flipped through the air on clear platforms, hurtling glass boulders and molten quartz and inconvenient mounds of sand. Ismael proved quick on his feet, however, and with pan-forma, he could pick and choose which attacks to avoid while still drawing upon a plentiful supply of flesh for his potassium-fueled volleys of lavender fire.

Hector moved to intervene, but something else stopped their battle cold.

A brown shadow appeared in thin air, and from it, a smiling man stepped forth, along with a reaper and a young woman.

And even with the horns on her face, Hector immediately recognized her from her photograph.

He saw Ismael's sunken eyes go as big as marbles.

Chapter One Hundred Four: 'Chaos, be ended...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

When Ibai saw his father there, he bit his lip. "Oh. Um. Hello, Papa."

"Ibai!" the man yelled with two voices. "What are you doing here?!"

"Um. Frankly, I didn't realize you were in this room."

"You can't be--! You have to leave now!"

"Aw, but I can help!" He looked toward the man with the tattoos. "Is that the guy you're fighting? Mm, he looks scary. Here." Ibai teleported behind Asad and wrapped his arm around the man.

"Behind you!" came someone else's warning.

The Sandlord turned but not fast enough."

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--BELATED donation bonus week (day 7/7, page 2/3)--

Ibai pulled Asad through the hole in space and, with a great crack, relocated the man inside the northern wall.

The tattooed man and the wall competed for existence. And the wall lost.

Asad's tattoos burned fiercely golden, enhancing the surly look in his similarly yellow eyes and illuminating Ibai's gaping face as he fled into

another teleport.

Ibai reappeared next to his father. "Okay," he said, watching the Lord Najir step from the crumbling wall unscathed, "I may have miscalculated that one."

Ismael grabbed his son's arm. "How did you--?! Agh, it doesn't matter! Just leave! These people will kill you!"

"Eh, I don't know, Papa. I'm pretty tough to kill."

"Ibai!"

Asad interjected with two voices as well. "Did that aberration just call you 'Papa'?"

Ismael placed himself in front of Ibai. "Stay away from him!"

And even though Ibai was interested in their conversation, he couldn't help noticing the thunderous clash between Xuan and Melchor on the other side of the room. He stared with wide eyes and a wider grin as each attack made the castle shiver. "So this was where the quakes were coming from!"

A glass prison brought Ibai's attention back to his father and Asad. Ismael was already bashing it down with burning fists. Ibai figured he should just teleport everyone out, but then he noticed that Emiliana was missing.

The girl was with Asad and Hector now. And she was yelling something at them that Ibai couldn't hear over all the mayhem. He could, however, hear Chergoa speaking up, as the reaper still remained in Ibai's grasp.

'If you are Ibai's father,' she said, 'then you must be an important member of House Blackburn.'

Ismael merely ignored her and pulled Ibai toward the door, but the reaper wasn't done.

'If I promise to support you in protecting Ibai, will you agree to a temporary ceasefire?'

That made Ismael acknowledge her, at least. "Why would you possibly do that?!"

'I doubt I can make you understand right now,' said Chergoa. 'But I am



a member of House Elroy, and I am giving you my word. If you are still a true Rainlord, like I believe you are, then you know that I will honor my promise.'

Her words stopped the Lord of House Blackburn in his tracks. The man stared at her hard, then at Asad, whose attacks had noticeably stopped.

'Please,' said Chergoa. 'I'm only asking for a ceasefire. Not your surrender.'

"913

--BELATED donation bonus week (day 7/7, page 3/3)--

Ibai frowned at his father. "It's not over already, is it, Papa? I barely got to fight!"

Ismael didn't seem to hear him. "A ceasefire," the man said, almost inaudibly. "Yes, a ceasefire..."

'So you agree, then?' said Chergoa.

"Yes."

'Alright, then call off your monster.'

Before Ismael could move, however, Melchor came splattering toward them. The mercury bubbled and sizzled beneath trails of smoke and steam, and Melchor's liquid mass seemed to have trouble keeping its shape, dripping like hot wax.

Ismael ran over to him, pulling Ibai along as well. "Melchor!" he shouted. "Stand down! For now, this battle is over!"

"What are you saying?" came Darktide's growling voices.

"Just stand down! I command you!"

And Melchor needed no further convincing. The mercury liquid coalesced into a human form once more and regained the pale skin color that all Blackburns shared. Orric melted out of the man's naked body and fell into his hand. Melchor dropped to his knees, breathing heavily and sweating, looking as if he were about to retch.

Xuan arrived, still bursting with smoke and fire, as Ismael was pulling off his own overshirt to drape around Melchor's shoulders.

"What's all this, then?" said Xuan. "Surrendering? Wait--is that an aberration?"

Ibai was busy pulling off his pants.

Chergoa spoke up again. 'We've reached a temporary understanding,' she said. 'Em, tell him.'

Emiliana placed herself in front of Melchor and raised both hands toward Xuan. "Please stop fighting. There's been a big misunderstanding, and we're requesting a ceasefire. Please."

The Seadevil just continued to hover there, swirling in place and hardly seeming human enough to have a voice at all anymore. Slowly, however, he lowered himself down to the ground and took on his usual, smaller visage. And of course, he was also stark naked.

Asad lent him his robe, which fit Xuan like a blanket.

Everyone else had released their reapers, and by extension, their hyper-states, but Xuan still clung to his. "Return the children to us," he said with two voices. "Only then will my cousins agree to talk to you."

"Very well," said Ismael.

"Good." Xuan looked over at Asad and Hector. "Don't let that thing eat Duvoss while I'm out, yeah?"

"What do you--?"

Duvoss melted out of Xuan's body, and Xuan fell flat on his face, unconscious.

And when Melchor saw that, he collapsed onto his side, also out cold."  
"914

"I believe an explanation is in order," said Asad.

'Several explanations,' added Qorvass.

“Indeed.” Ismael took a haggard breath and exchanged looks with Rholtam. “But first, we must inform everyone of the ceasefire. Does anyone here have a working phone or com device?”

Asad shook his head. “My earpiece was destroyed in the fight.”

“As was mine,” said Ismael.

They both looked at the young black man, who seemed to have difficulty removing his gaze from Ibai even as he answered them.

“...I didn’t bring anything,” Hector said. “I figured it would just get broken.”

Ismael turned to Ibai, who was still trying to put his pants on Melchor. They seemed a little snug around the thighs. “Ibai, can you... tell our forces to stand down? Quickly?”

Ibai popped up to his feet again, leaving Melchor with an impressive butt crack. “Sure thing, Papa!”

Ismael held up a hand. “Ah, but before you do--please, release the reaper.”

“Aw, but we were gonna go on an adventure...”

“Ibai.”

“Tch.”

‘We’ll take a rain check on that adventure,’ said Chergoa. ‘Ha. Get it? Rain check?’

Ibai laughed. “I do get it! You’re funny!” He let her return to Emiliana and then teleported away in his underwear.

--++--++--

The feeling was that of a slow boil, beginning in the pit of his stomach, reaching up through his chest and all the way into his head.

It had been thirty years since he’d felt anger like this.

Raw fury. So powerful and blinding that he knew the dam inside him would burst if he so much as moved. And he wanted to save this anger, to bottle it up inside and use it later. But right now, he couldn’t even blink. He just stared at the wall, expressionless, waiting for his

brain to stop feeling so numb, for his sense of reason to start working again.

It was just too much to process at once. Everything Axiolis had told him.

The children, captured. The Rainlords, at war with each other, in addition to the Vanguard.

And Mariana...

Zeff had thought he would be able to handle it better than this. They'd both been members of the Vanguard. The notion that she might leave on a mission one day and never come back had crossed his mind before, as the reverse had undoubtedly crossed hers. They'd both known it could happen. They'd planned for it.

But not this. Betrayed by their own comrades. This was something else."

"915

--donation bonus day (Page 1/3)--

Zeff could feel that old well filling up. In the back of his head, he could feel it. He thought it had run dry ages ago, but now he realized that every drop was still there. And now there was more.

Hatred.

That was how he'd kept himself sane the first time. He'd poured all of his anger, misery, and confusion into that dark place. And the result was the old well. Distilled and purified. A reservoir that he'd kept for Abolish. It had helped him more than a few times in the past.

It would do the same for the Vanguard, he figured. For Lawrence and Dergoz and whoever else stood in his way.

He only needed to focus. To let it all drain in there. To add it to the well. Years of meditation, of discipline, of emotional control--it all served him now.

And at length, as his head finally started to clear, Axiolis' voice began to register again.

'-please.. it's been over an hour... Talk to me, Zeff. Please, just say

anything.'

He turned his stone gray eyes toward the reaper. But what Zeff saw made him rear back in his seat.

Axiolis was different. The reaper wasn't a large bat with white eyes anymore--like he'd been for as long as Zeff had known him. Instead, Axiolis just looked like some kind of abominable monster--so much so that Zeff still wasn't even certain what he was seeing.

'...Are you okay?' the reaper asked.

Staring, he said, "You're not the same."

'...What?'

"You look... very different."

Ax was briefly quiet. 'Hmm. What do I look like, exactly?'

"Ah..."

'Take your time and tell me.'

Zeff sat up straight and tried harder to understand what his eyes were telling him.

It almost looked like some kind of gnarled dragon, though decidedly more marine, what with its lithe body and dark-on-top, light-on-bottom coloration. It did have wings, but Zeff couldn't tell how large they were, because they were kept retracted into long grooves on its back, with sections rearing up into the shape of a dorsal fin. The scaly underbelly was similar, bearing space for its thick legs and hooked claws to fold up into its chest cavity. A pair of small, twisted horns crowned its head, just above its reptilian eyes.

But it was the creature's huge mouth that made Zeff realize what he was looking at, because just beyond the jagged teeth poking out, he noticed a few faint trails of lingering white frost."

"916

--donation bonus day (Page 2/3)--

Before informing Axiolis, however, Zeff had something else he wanted

to say. “I’ve never heard of this happening before. I thought each servant could only see reapers one way for as long as they live.”

‘Usually, that is the case, but in rare instances, it can change. Very rare. I’ve never had it happen to a servant of my own.’

“Do you know why this happened?”

Axiolis seemed hesitant. ‘Mm... well, it sounded sensible enough to me in the past, but now I’m not sure I want to believe it.’

“Explain.”

‘Supposedly... a change in the way you view reapers is reflective of a change that has already occurred in yourself. It indicates a kind of mental paradigm shift.’

“Ah. Then I suppose it does not bode very well for my mental state that I am now seeing you as an ice-breathing hellbeast of Lhutwë.”

The reaper floated back a little. ‘Of Lhutwë? You mean I’m--?’

“A lhugleoth, yes. It’s quite hideous.”

‘...Huh. A full-size one?’

“Full-size?”

‘Yes. They could grow to be twenty meters in length, you know.’

“They were also mythical, Ax.”

‘You don’t know that.’

“You’re, what, four thousand years old now?”

‘Thereabouts.’

“Have you ever seen a lhugleoth?”

‘Well, no, but maybe I just never looked hard enough.’

“I’m sure that’s it. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

‘I’m not entirely in love with your tone right now.’

“You do recall our people putting a stop to all of that water god nonsense back when my grandfather was a child, don’t you?”

‘Yes, well, just because the rest of you are dirty heathens doesn’t mean I have to be.’

Zeff merely gave a resigning nod.

‘I still love you, though.’

“Thank you.”

A beat passed. ‘...So am I full-size or not?’

“No,” said Zeff, able to release an amused breath but not quite able to manage a laugh. “You’re about the size of a horse.”

‘Mm. That’s a little disappointing.’

Zeff sighed and rubbed his face. He stood up and realized that he was half-dressed. He’d only managed to get that far before Axiolis had told him to sit down and listen. He resumed the task now, appreciative of the armored vest that someone had left for him by the fireplace.

‘By the way, you shouldn’t tell other people that you see reapers differently now.’”

"917

--donation bonus day (Page 3/3)--

“Why?” asked Zeff, pulling his vest on. “Are you worried people will think I’ve gone mad?”

Axiolis paused. ‘Yes. Exactly that, yes.’

“Do you think I’ve gone mad?” Zeff considered wearing a tie. It wasn’t the most battle-appropriate attire, but a significant part of him didn’t really care about that right now. He was thinking more about what calming effect it might have on him. A certain sense of order and professionalism could help him keep a clear head. Maybe.

‘To be honest, I hope you have. A little, at least. Because I’m fairly certain that I’ve lost some of my marbles, too.’

“Oh? How so?” He decided in favor of the tie. He liked the blood red one on the dresser.

‘Well, for instance, I know we shouldn’t fight Lawrence. He and Dergoz have a good forty years on us in terms of both experience and soul-syncing. And they can use pan-rozum. In my mind, I know these things. Attacking them by ourselves would almost be suicide. And yet... I’d go with you to hunt them down right now, if you asked me to.’

Zeff nearly smiled. “That’s not fair. I wanted to be the unreasonable one.”

‘I apologize.’

He stared at himself in the mirror, not able to see Ax reflected behind him but still knowing the reaper was there. “It’s alright. I just have to remember them. Francisco, Emiliana, Marcos, Ramira. And Gema. Any word on her whereabouts?”

‘No. I would’ve told you earlier if there had been.’

“That girl...”

‘We’ll find her.’

Zeff straightened his tie. “Yes, we will.”

They left the room. His brethren had chosen one of Rheinhal’s nicer hotels for their headquarters, he noticed, and that was saying something in this resort town. If he were in a better mood, the luxury might have been appealing.

Axiolis led him out into the street, and Zeff immediately turned east in order to see the castle on the hill there. A few of its turrets were missing, and the red paint on its walls was rather heavily marked up, but Rhein’s Keep was still standing.

Zeff didn’t have to go any farther, however. Octavia Redwater found him before he could find her.

She smiled that tiny, wrinkled smile of hers. “It is so very good to see you again, Zeff.”

He hadn’t even thought about what he should say to this woman, and that seemed like a mistake now that she was in front of him. Too many thoughts stirred in his head at once. Gratitude, apologies, questions. Far too many.

He settled on a silent hug, instead."



The little old woman shivered with apparent surprise at his embrace. "Oh! I didn't realize you were the hugging type, Zeff."

'He usually isn't,' said Ax, sounding perhaps even more surprised.

Zeff released her. "Thank you for everything you have done for my family."

Octavia gave a low snort. "Fat lot of good it's accomplished." She locked arms with him, and they began walking together. "Honestly, darling, I'm surprised you don't hate me. I assume Axiolis has filled you in on everything?"

"He has."

"Then you know three of your children were captured under my watch."

'While you were here,' Ax reminded her, 'trying to rescue Zeff and his son. We can hardly fault you for another House's betrayal.'

"Even so, you shouldn't--"

'I'll hear no more of that,' said Ax. 'Not when you could have turned the Eloys over to the Vanguard whenever you wanted.'

"Ax is right," said Zeff. "You will accept our appreciation, whether you think it appropriate or not."

She snorted again. "You are much bossier than I remember."

It was true that it had been some time since he'd last spoken with this woman. There'd been various Council meetings over the years, sure, but those were purely business, and Zeff recalled multiple occasions where Octavia had attempted to converse with him afterward, only for him to brush her off. And all because of that old resentment he'd felt when she'd tried to forbid him from rejoining the Vanguard in his youth.

What a fool he'd been.

He wanted to apologize to her a dozen times over, but he was too ashamed of himself to broach the subject now. And of course, there

were more pressing matters at hand, anyway. "When will you launch your next assault on the Keep?" he asked. "I would like to be a part of it."

"This evening."

He frowned.

"I know," she said. "That is longer than you care to wait, right now. But Sanko is supposed to arrive sometime today. Wendy is waiting for her at the airfield right now. So as difficult as it may be, I must ask you to be patient."

He tried not to scowl. "Patient..."

"I'm sorry."

And when Zeff did not respond, she seemed to become uncomfortable.

"Perhaps you would prefer to depart for Luzo, instead," Octavia said. "I hear the siege on Marshrock has been proceeding more quickly than expected, thanks to your Sandlord friend.""  
"919 -- CV.

Ax had informed Zeff of Asad's involvement, along with the sudden appearance and assistance of Chergoa's brother, and while Zeff was thoroughly glad to hear that their siege was progressing well, he could not imagine leaving Rheinhal right now, not while he knew that Francisco and Dennex were here.

"I will wait with you," he said.

"Are you sure?" Octavia asked. "Because if I were in your position, I don't know if I would be able to control myself."

Zeff nearly told her that 'he was not her' before thinking better of it. "I'll stay close to you," he said instead. "If I step out of line, you can give me a good caning."

The day drew on from there, painfully slow. He met with the other family heads in turns, as they came and went from their patrols, and he exchanged words with each. It was frustrating, to say the least, but he

felt that it was also good, seeing everyone's support like this. These were his people. His kin. Redwater, Merlo, Stroud, Garza, and Zabat. Commanding more than sixty servants in total.

They offered him their sympathies, of course. But they also offered him their anger, which he found much more comforting. Their desire for justice. The Rain's justice.

But of them all, Rayen Merlo surprised Zeff the most. By appearance, she had not changed since Zeff's childhood. Unlike Octavia, Rayen was a large woman, soft-faced and motherly-looking, until she really started sharing her feelings. The vitriol in her voice nearly rivaled that in Zeff's own heart. And he could not have appreciated it more.

At length, however, word finally arrived.

"Sanko is here," said Octavia.

## Chapter One Hundred Five: 'The Gargoyle of Korgum...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Zeff had never met Field Marshal Sanko before, but he knew the woman as soon as he saw her. She had that inexpressible something about her, a kind of invisible aura that every servant who stood at the top of the world seemed to possess. He'd felt the same thing when he met each of Sermung, Jackson, and Lamont. The Crystal Titan, the Star of the West, and Iceheart.

And now, the Gargoyle, too.

Axiolis had explained it to him once. These were people who had acquired such immense synchronization with their reapers that it made their passive soul defenses begin to feel oppressive to the less powerful people around them. It was a kind of gravitational pull created by the sheer strength of their souls."

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"920

--donation bonus day (Page 1/3)--

Zeff didn't know very much about Sanko, but that wasn't especially surprising. Promotions within the Vanguard tended to work that way. As servants moved up through the ranks, their identities became increasingly concealed so as to protect any uninvolved family members or friends from Abolish. Naturally, the promotion from captain general to field marshal was the most dramatic, which was why none of the field marshals had last names. Sanko was undoubtedly not the woman's birth name, either, and given her age--likely pushing two hundred years, if not more--there would not be many people left alive who knew what her original name was.

But it was easy enough to see why she was called the Gargoyle. She wore a gray mask with a grotesque devil's face on it, bearing stubby horns at the top and long fangs around the open mouth. It hid everything but her pale lips and large eyes, which were so darkly blue that they almost looked purple.

If she had hair, it was concealed beneath the hood of her uniquely black overcoat, which she chose to drape over her shoulders like a cape rather than wear properly. Beyond that, however, her uniform was no different than the average member of the Vanguard's ground forces--simple brown-on-white camo.

All-in-all, one could be forgiven for assuming she was a man. Only the subtle curves in her uniform offered any real visual clues.

"Octavia Redwater," the woman said in two voices.

And her audience of Rainlords shifted uncomfortably as they realized that she was already using pan-rozum.

Octavia kept composure well enough. "How've you been, you old crone?"

Sanko responded with quite a long pause, perhaps not appreciating the Red Lady's attempt at affection. But she did answer the question eventually. "We have been fine."

'Why are you using pan-rozum already?' said Wendy, apparently unafraid of asking the question everyone was thinking.

"Merely a precaution," said Sanko. "For the unlikely case in which you intended to ambush us upon arrival. Do not take offense." It sounded more like an order than an apology.

Wendy wasn't through asking questions. 'Why have you come alone? Shouldn't you have a security escort with you?'

"We did not come to fight. And we will not be staying long. We must return to Korgum as soon as matters here are settled." She started walking for the airfield office's exit, and the Rainlords made way for her, soon falling in behind."

"921

--donation bonus day (Page 2/3)--

"Ah," said Octavia, "we were hoping to conduct a quick meeting before going to the Keep."

"Nonsense," said Sanko. "We understand the situation well enough."

"Yes, but--"

"Explain what you will on the way."

Zeff certainly had no complaints about the woman's attitude. After being told to wait all day long, the sudden forward momentum was most welcome.

They led Sanko to one of the two limousines waiting to carry them to their next destination, which was apparently going to be the Keep now. Octavia, Rayen, and Zeff joined her. Evangelina Stroud, Socorro Garza, and Santos Zabat took the other limo, but their three reapers stayed to listen in.

Octavia and Rayen began offering a quick outline of all the forces they currently had in Rheinhal, but Sanko didn't seem very interested.

Instead, Sanko's gaze lingered on Zeff. "You have a familiar face."

Zeff raised an eyebrow. "Do I?"

"Would you happen to be this Zeff I've heard of?"

'How did you know?' said Axiolis.

"Elroy family resemblance. But we are confused. It was our understanding that you had been captured."

"I was released. For what reason, I don't know."

"Ah. That bodes well for negotiations, then."

Zeff wasn't so sure he agreed. He hadn't given it much thought before, but it certainly did seem strange that he had been let go.

"I knew a man named Agam Elroy rather well," said Sanko, and the sudden change in pronouns did not escape Zeff's notice. "Was he an uncle of yours, perhaps?"

The name was only vaguely familiar, but Axiolis had him covered.

'Agam was an uncle to Zeff's grandfather.'

That seemed to surprise her. "Really now? Oh my, how embarrassing. I suppose that is what I get for attempting to connect with the younger generations."

'Don't feel bad,' said Ax. 'I'm sure I knew Agam even before you did. He was a charming fellow.'

"That he was." Sanko's nostalgia and sentiment seemed to die there, however.

Fortunately, it made little difference, as they were nearly there. Their two vehicles pulled up in front of the closed gate and parked. Everyone exited.

Zeff looked up and saw that Xavier Lawrence was just then joining Parson Miles atop the gate. Doubtless, their reapers had sensed the Gargoyles' presence.

Zeff had to muster every modicum of restraint he had left. It probably would not go over very well if he immediately started attacking them in

front of Sanko."

"922

--donation bonus day (Page 3/3)--

"Captain General Miles!" Sanko called out. "And General Lawrence! What manner of welcome is this?! Open the gate!"

Parson leaned over the wall with his arms folded. "I'd rather not do that! Sorry!"

"You know why we have come, do you not?!"

"Yes, indeed!"

"And yet you still test our patience! You have five seconds to start explaining yourselves before we arrest you for insubordination!"

"Now just hold on!" After a moment, Parson leapt off the gate. His legs vanished as he neared the pavement, letting the pants of his airman's uniform flap wildly while his descent slowed within a rising gust of wind. His socks and shoes popped off of his missing feet and flew up past his head, and when his freshly reappeared legs touched the ground, he was barefoot. One of the falling shoes smacked his shoulder as Overra melted out of his body.

However, there was a reason Parson had chosen to vanish his legs instead of his arms. The man carried a box with him. "Before you go getting all intimidating and whatnot," said Parson, "I hope we can have an honest conversation."

"Honest?" Zeff growled. He could feel his fist shaking involuntarily and had to consciously relax it.

"Ah, Zeff!" said Parson. "It is good to see you again, my old friend, though the circumstances are disappointing. As are you." The man's expression turned suddenly grave. "In your youth, you demonstrated such potential. I'd hoped to foster greatness in you, but since I've been away, it seems you've grown content with being the willful stooge of more conniving men."

Zeff was almost as confused as he was angry. "What the hell are you talking about?"



‘And Axiolis, too,’ added Overra. ‘Such complacency in the face of wrongdoing is very unbecoming of someone as old as you.’

‘I see the two of you haven’t lost your gift for spouting complete nonsense,’ said Ax.

Sanko intervened. “Make your point, Miles. Before we make ours.”

“Okay, well, first of all, the attempt to apprehend the Elroys was motivated by a suspicion that they were harboring a fugitive.”

“Gema Elroy,” said Sanko. “We are aware. That is far from sufficient cause for the unlawful capture of this man’s other children.”

Parson began rifling through his box. “Of course. I won’t do you the disrespect of assuming you don’t already know the details of what transpired after Zeff was questioned by General Lawrence up there.” He retrieved a string-bound folder and offered it to Sanko. “But I don’t think you know the whole story.””

"923

Sanko took the folder, and Zeff watched her silently flip through its contents.

“Project Blacksong,” said Parson.

And the Gargoyle stopped flipping briefly, then continued.

“Those reports all confirm it. Gema Elroy sabotaged Blacksong. I’m sure you understand what that means, ma’am.”

‘Sabotage?’ said Ax. ‘Lawrence told us that Gema had killed an Intarian diplomat, so what are you saying now?’

‘I am afraid that information is classified,’ said Overra.

Sanko started handing papers off to Zeff. “And now it isn’t.”

Parson almost jumped. “Ah--! Um! Ma’am--those documents! They’re not really meant for other--!”

“Oops,” Sanko said flatly.

Parson just stared with wide eyes.

Overra remained calm, however. 'I suppose that's one way to negotiate. Fine, then. An Intarian diplomat WAS killed, but we have not confirmed who was responsible. Gema Elroy is a suspect, but she and her reaper are primarily wanted because they are traitors.'

Zeff was busy skimming through the report in his hands. It referenced some kind of information leak. The word 'Blacksong' was indeed mentioned multiple times. The text didn't go into detail, but Zeff had seen reports such as this before. The vague language. An overabundance of codenames. These reports were from the Covert Intelligence Division.

Spies. Ramira would have been excited. Zeff, however, was not. There were few things worse than having to deal with people who lied for a living.

'What is this Project Blacksong?' said Axiolis.

"It does not matter," said Sanko, eyeing Parson and Overra. "The point is moot. Even if Gema Elroy were attempting to destroy the whole of Intar, that would still not give you the right to detain her family members for more than a single day of questioning. And as we understand, you held Zeff for much longer than that and are in fact still holding his son."

"Well, yes, but--"

"Unless you have further evidence that proves the other Elroys were conspiring with Gema in her sabotage, then you are obligated to release Zeff's son now and stand down."

'Well, you see--'

"And as we do not currently have the time to conduct an investigation into your unit ourselves, you and all of your men will leave for Jesbol immediately and report to Field Marshal Jackson for a mandatory evaluation. If you do not comply with these orders--"

"Wait!" Parson nearly dropped his box. "You can't just--!"

"Do not test us, Miles. Patience and mercy have never been our strongest points. If you have conclusive evidence, then present it now.""

Parson rifled through his box another time while Overra picked up the conversation for him.

‘Believe it or not, we aren’t trying to annoy you,’ she said. ‘We DO have the evidence you’re looking for, but we also wanted to establish a more precise sense of what is at stake here. Hopefully, you understand that much now, yes?’

The Gargoyle might as well have been made of actual stone, for all the response she gave.

‘And... well, the evidence involves some photographs... which I’m sure Parson will find... any second now.’ She tossed a few glances at her servant. ‘They depict the Elroys in various places, you see. And I’m sure you’ll understand once--’

“Got ‘em!” Parson pulled out another folder. “Sorry about that. It seems it was misfiled.” He threw a look up at the General still atop the gate. “Lawrence can be such a dolt, sometimes.” He offered the folder to Sanko, but she didn’t take it just yet.

“If these photographs are so damning, then why were we not informed of their existence earlier? Over the telephone, for instance. Did you not think to save us the trip here?”

“Ah, well, I apologize for that. It was an unfortunate miscommunication. And you know how these things are. With so much going on--so many moving parts. Sometimes the right hand forgets to tell the left hand that it has been conducting covert surveillance on suspected traitors.” He gave the woman a big smile.

It didn’t seem to do much for her. She snatched the folder away from him, though, and started thumbing through the pictures.

Parson pointed one out to her. “This here--we suspect this is Gema Elroy crossing the border into Sair. A mere twelve hours after the information leak took place, I might add.”

“This photo does not even show her face,” Sanko observed. “It could be anyone. You call this conclusive evi--?” The sentence was cut short as she stopped on a different photo. She flipped it over, perhaps to inspect the timestamp.

'Is something wrong?' asked Axiolis.

Sanko held the photo up for Zeff to see.

It was a shot of Juliana Salazar leaving the Elroy's home. Zeff and Mariana were standing on the porch, watching the woman go.

"Explain your relationship with this person," said Sanko.

'She was the commanding officer of Zeff's wife, Mariana, before they got married. Why?'

"Because this woman is a known traitor.'"

"925

Zeff exchanged looks with Ax and the other Rainlords. After everything that had happened, Salazar's visit had been the furthest thing from his mind.

"This is your home in this picture?" Sanko asked.

"It was," Zeff said through gritted teeth. "Until the Vanguard attacked it without warning or cause. I have yet to return there to see if it is still standing."

'I'm sure someone told you,' said Axiolis. 'That was the attack that resulted in the death of Zeff's wife.'

Parson blinked. "What? Mariana is dead?"

"Yes," Zeff said lowly. "Did you not know the extent of your crime?"

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Zeff. I had no idea."

"You're not sorry, Parson. Not yet."

"Zeff, I swear to you, the orders were always to take your family alive."

Zeff glowered. "You say that like it makes a difference."

"Doesn't it? No one was supposed to die, Zeff. I would never have ordered--"

"Keep talking, Parson. That seems to be all you are good for

anymore.”

Oddly enough, that seemed to shut him up, which was perhaps why Overra decided to chime in.

‘You’re being unreasonable,’ she said. ‘If Mariana had simply followed her orders, then we could have avoided this whole mess. And she would still be alive, I’m sure.’

Axiolis responded with a hoarse laugh. ‘Don’t try to goad us, you stupid bitch.’

‘I wasn’t trying to goad anyone. But it sounds like it wouldn’t be very difficult. Have you all inherited Mariana’s paranoia now that she’s gone?’

That very nearly broke Zeff’s composure.

But Octavia stepped forward first, tapping her cane against the pavement. “Have some respect for the deceased, lest you find yourself joining them shortly.”

‘Ah, the bloodthirsty Redwater clan. Tell me, are those old stories about how you got your name true?’

“Enough,” said Sanko, and the ground trembled beneath everyone’s feet. “No one says another word unless it is in answer to my questions.” She pointed at Overra. “You. Back inside the Keep. Now.”

‘Why? I’ve done noth--’

The ground shot up around the reaper, encasing her in a cage molded from pavement before anyone could even blink. And then the whole cage moved, speeding away like a shark’s fin atop water. It smashed a hole through the gate and kept going, undeterred until it was out of sight.

Sanko looked to Parson next. “I suggest you join her. And advise her not to return.””

"926

Parson smacked his lips as he observed the gaping hole in the gate. Then he just looked at Sanko, bobbed his head a little, and proceeded

to do as he was told without another word.

Once he was gone, Sanko turned her attention up toward Lawrence, who was still watching from atop the gate. "Bring me the officers who took these photographs!" she yelled.

Lawrence nodded and disappeared from view.

She turned her attention back to Zeff and Axiolis. "Now. Explain why Salazar was visiting you."

Zeff folded his arms. "She said she was abandoning the Vanguard. She wanted us to join her. We did not appreciate the offer very much and instructed her to leave."

"And you simply let her go?"

'Rather than fight a Vanguardian general in our own home?' said Ax. 'Yes. You'll have to forgive us for prioritizing the safety of our children.'

"I see," said Sanko. "However, a mere day before this photo was taken, Juliana Salazar and several of her subordinates stopped reporting for duty. A large number of important items disappeared along with them, including weapons and classified documents. Their actions have jeopardized many sensitive operations all over the world. So I am sure you can understand my reluctance to trust your word alone."

'If we'd taken Salazar up on her offer, then we would have disappeared with her,' said Ax.

"They would have also avoided a lot of trouble," said Rayen Merlo. "Instead, they chose to stay--for the good of your organization. And look how their loyalty has been rewarded." And when Sanko offered no response, Rayen only seemed to grow angrier. "How do you plan on rectifying this situation?"

Sanko glared at her. "Be silent. Circumstances here are more complicated than you seem to appreciate, and I did not ask for your opinion."

The Lady Merlo scowled. "I do not answer to you, Gargoyle."

"You do today."

Octavia pressed a tiny hand against Rayen's arm. "Calm your blood."

But she also spared a look for Sanko. "And you can bark orders all you like, but remember that we are not Vanguard."

"You may not be, but the Elroys are."

'No, we aren't,' said Axiolis. 'Not anymore.'

Sanko stared at him now. "You claim you are not traitors, yet now you tell me you have abandoned your duty?"

"You cannot honestly expect them to stay with you!" said Rayen.

"They are Rainlords first and foremost," said Octavia."

"927

Zeff could feel his brethren crowding in around him, as if preparing to shield him with their very bodies. Rayen and Octavia stood in front, Evangelina and Santos in back, while Socorro circled around to the right.

And they weren't alone, either. Farther away, servants from the five presiding families had gathered to observe. They squatted inside blown-out buildings or stood upon nearby rooftops or hunkered behind manmade barricades, and there was no doubt in Zeff's mind that they would all jump in to lend a hand if the need arose. Not necessarily to protect Zeff, of course, but certainly to protect the respective head of their household.

"Ha..." The sight of their collective body language seemed to make an impression on Sanko. "You Rainlords... you certainly are a curious lot. You asked me to save you from this mess, and yet now you believe you can defeat me?"

"We didn't ask you to save us," said Rayen. "We asked you to do your job. Out of respect for the Vanguard's jurisdiction, though that respect is diminishing rather quickly at the moment. And, perhaps, we also hoped that corruption had not spread to your core."

"Ah."

"Do you not consider yourself responsible for the actions of your men?" asked Octavia.

Sanko fell briefly silent as she looked over her audience another time. "Honorable Rainlords," she said, almost laughing. Whether it was amusement or awe, Zeff could not rightly tell. "Nearly to the point of madness, but honorable nonetheless. Very well. Let us speak terms. What would it take to placate your anger here?"

The six ruling Rainlords exchanged looks with one another.

Octavia was the first to speak up. "This is why we wanted to have a meeting earlier. We have three conditions. First, you must return Francisco Elroy and the reaper Dennex to us. Second, you must also give us Xavier Lawrence and the reaper Dergoz, so that we may ensure they are given a proper trial for their crimes." And perhaps Octavia expected to be interrupted there, because she paused.

But all Sanko said was, "And the third condition?"

"The Vanguard must leave our territory. That means all of Sair west of the Wares Mountains, including Rhein's Keep here."

"Quite demanding, that last one."

Octavia returned a thin smile. "In another age, we would have simply executed all of your men without consulting you."

"928

Sanko breathed a laugh. "Simpler times, to be sure."

Then came silence as the Rainlords responded no further, deciding only to wait as Sanko deliberated. In the intervening period, the watchmen that she ordered out earlier arrived through the hole in the gate. She spoke to them in turns, quietly enough that the Rainlords could not hear what she was saying. She showed them the photographs they had taken, presumably attempting to corroborate as much of Parson's information as she could.

At length, she concluded with the watchmen, took one more opportunity to mull things over on her own, and then returned to speak with the Rainlords.

"I find your demands agreeable," she said. "I am willing to grant you all three of them."



Rayen was the one to say it. "But?"

"But I have one condition of my own," said Sanko. "This matter of potential treason is not something that can simply be overlooked. If not properly addressed, the ripple effects could result in the loss of hundreds, if not thousands, of good Vanguardian soldiers--and by extension, the countless civilian lives that they protect."

"State your condition," said Rayen.

Sanko gave her a look. "You must submit yourselves to a formal investigation by the Vanguard so that these allegations against you may be put to rest."

Zeff saw the shifting postures around him. Already, he could tell that they were going to reject her.

"Once your innocence is confirmed," Sanko went on, "you have my word that all of your conditions will be met."

Rayen shook her head. "After everything your people have put us through, why would we ever believe that such an investigation would be fairly conducted?"

"Because I give you my word that it will be," said Sanko.

"Of course you do," said Octavia. "But even if we presume that you are trustworthy, your people have already proven that they are not."

"Your condition is unacceptable," said Rayen.

Sanko tilted her head. "Can the two of you merely decide that by yourselves? And so quickly? Should you not at least discuss the matter among you? What do the other four say?"

"This is not something which requires debating," said Evangelina Stroud. "You may consider this our resignation as well."

"Indeed," said Socorro Garza. "We have already told you to leave, and you have responded by offering to invade our privacy more than ever before."

"The Ladies have the truth of it," said Santos Zabat. "I stand with them."

And when Zeff didn't add anything, Sanko took notice, indigo eyes lingering on him.

“...Do not ask my opinion,” said Zeff. “You would like it even less than theirs.”

Sanko exhaled a heavy breath and stiffened. “Well, then,” she said, still with two voices. “It appears there is nothing more to say.”

Octavia Redwater placed both hands upon her cane. “So it does.””  
"929 -- CVI.

Chapter One Hundred Six: ‘When the waters run red...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It seemed like no one wanted to make the first move. Even the gentle wind had gone, leaving the air so still that Zeff could feel his own heartbeat. And perhaps that wasn't a coincidence. Zeff had heard that a strong enough soul could affect the atmosphere physically.

Indeed, the pressure of the Gargoyle's presence was palpable. Zeff had felt it as soon as he met her, but now it was on another level. Everything seemed heavier. Even breathing felt somehow more difficult. Was this really just the field density of her soul? Filling the air with pure willpower?

It was a warning, he knew. His own body was telling him. This person standing before him was not someone he should fight. This person was a monster. And he was nothing. Thirty years as a servant? A child, by comparison. Helpless.

But no. That wouldn't work on Zeff. He wouldn't succumb to mere dread. The old well wouldn't let him. His pit of boiling hatred. It wouldn't let him forget everything that had brought him here.

Gargoyle or not, this woman was standing between him and his son, between him and the people responsible for Mariana's death. So he maintained his concentration and tried to assess the situation.

The first point was hyper-states. None of the Rainlords were using them yet, but Sanko was already wielding pan-rozum. If any of their reapers moved to merge with them, she would undoubtedly attack. But she probably didn't know who had which abilities, so she wouldn't

know whom she should target first. What they needed was a distraction so that Octavia and Rayen could safely merge with Wendy and Lonogren. Perhaps he could provide that for them.

At least, that was what Zeff was thinking until Octavia Redwater surprised everyone by stepping forward.

"Everyone, wait a moment," the little old lady said. "I have something I need to show you." She ripped the top of her cane off, revealing a white inner piece, which she grasped with one hand.

And immediately, Zeff could sense it, as could everyone else, he was sure.

Octavia pulled the rest free. A white blade, thin like a rapier but so much more deadly than that. Because it was made from bone.

Zeff didn't need to look any closer. The foul aura leaking from it told him everything he needed to know."

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"930

Sanko's eyes filled the holes in her mask. "Where did you get that?"

"My grandson, Diego," said Octavia. "Said he nearly killed himself trying to use it, so he thought I would like it as a birthday present. He is now my favorite grandson."

"You fool," said Sanko. "Do you know whose bones those are?"

"Sure do."

"You'll kill half your allies. Or all of them."

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ve been practicing. It is pretty terrifying, though, isn’t it? Are you sure you still want to fight us? I promise we won’t think any less of you if you decide to back down now.”

“Quaint. But your trinket won’t stop me. I faced the monster it belonged to, you may recall.”

Octavia frowned. “Did you really? Y’know, I was kind of hoping that was just a rumor.”

“You are an amusing person,” said Sanko. “I only wish I were better at holding back.”

“Oh, I know the feeling. It’s quite frustrating, isn’t it?”

But Sanko was through talking, it seemed.

The Gargoyle took a single step, and a series of ripples ran across the pavement as if it were a pond, unsettling the Rainlords' footing for a moment before the ground came shooting up all around them in a dozen geysers of living stone.

Octavia responded with a flash of her blade, and shadow gushed forth, pure blackness, enveloping the six of them in a brief cage that exploded outward, knocking the rocks down and letting the Rainlords free.

By this point, they were already merging with their reapers.

Zeff could feel his mind shifting. Ax's mind was there now, too. He could feel every emotion that Ax felt, share every thought as if it were his own. And the memories. They were an ocean. A thousand lifetimes, and hardly a thing forgotten. Names and faces, histories and places, firsthand knowledge and endless information.

The pan-forma merge completed itself. The normal enhancements paled in comparison to this feeling. This was beyond adrenaline. This was fire with all of the heat and none of the agony. Burning in glory, flirting with death, certain in the strength of their two minds.

When the moment passed, and Zeff and Axiolis returned to the present, they were already mid-stride, running adjacent Rayen and Evangelina. Santos and Socorro were running with Octavia in the opposite direction."

"931

Everyone was moving now. The dozens of other Rainlords all around them were already either opening fire from a distance or rushing in to provide upfront support. Rayen Merlo's flesh was in turns vanishing and reappearing, but always with a faintly violet glow. And Zeff, of course, was launching a storm of frozen spikes toward Sanko.

But it was Octavia who got to the woman first. The white blade shuddered visibly, and Zeff saw light bend around Sanko's torso, distorting like a bubble in space itself. It was similar to the destruction type abilities, but this was a single point, not a path, and the sound was different. This was the rushing of wind past his ears. He felt the violent shift in gravity, as well, pulling him and everyone else suddenly

forward.

In an instant, he watched as Sanko's body imploded, sucked into the bubble and spaghettified.

And just like that, the bubble was gone again, disappeared into thin air, leaving a small crater in the ground along with the dusty remains of Sanko's body.

But there was no blood--no bits of flesh, even though a few busted stones lay where Sanko's feet should have been.

She was not dead, rather obviously. The Rainlords needed no assurances on that point. Even if they had believed that the Gargoyle could be defeated so easily, there was still the matter of that oppressive presence having not diminished whatsoever.

It was common enough knowledge that the Gargoyle's power involved earth in some way, but if not for Axiolis' memories, Zeff would have lacked any genuine details. Instead, he was able to recall tales from half a century ago about Sanko's fearsome control of integration.

Hers was an ability type most often relegated to the supporting role, but she had lived long enough to become an exception. She'd used pan-rozum to do more than simply fuse elements together. She'd learned to fuse herself into them, to become an entity of dirt and rock and stone. Integration may not have allowed her to create her own elements, even with pan-rozum, but that was a small price to pay when she could wield almost every element of every type of ground in the world as an extension of her body.

Everything beneath the Rainlords' feet belonged to the Gargoyle now. Axiolis didn't know what her maximum range was, but anything less than a kilometer was just wishful thinking, Zeff knew.

And it was no surprise when the ground began to tremble."

"932

The six retreated to the air--Rayen's group on a platform of ice, Octavia's group on one of platinum, courtesy of the Lady Socorro.

Rather than pursue them, however, Sanko went after their support. A tidal wave of rock and dirt launched up and swallowed a building full of

Rainlords some thirty meters away. One moment, the structure and all the people were there, and the next, there lay only flat land and a few sinking chunks of broken roof tiles.

There had hardly been time to react. More Rainlords were rushing up the hill to the Keep's entrance, but if the six heads didn't hold the Gargoyle back, then those new Rainlords were practically dead already.

Rayen went full tilt. Pan-rozum brought out the full strength of her alteration ability, transforming herself into a being of ultraviolet light. To the naked eye, her flesh was almost invisible, save only for the dimmest of purple outlines around her body, making her clothes appear to float in space. Zeff, however, could at least see the woman's soul now--a kind of translucently blue whirlpool that completely filled the space where her body should have been.

And in a blink, she was gone, launching her assault at the speed of ultraviolet light. She carved a swath into the ground so fast that it left a second wave of exploding rock in her wake. She zigzagged faster than any human eye could follow, and then focused her efforts into a concentrated burst of high invisible light, creating a shock wave that left a massive crater behind and a fresh hole in the Keep's front wall.

That seemed to grab Sanko's attention.

The other five heads attacked as well--Octavia with another singularity that sucked up one of the Keep's towers, Zeff with a pair of building-sized spears of ice dropped from the heavens, Socorro with a gigantic slab of platinum dropped above the Keep, Santos with a series of earth-shattering explosions, and Evangelina with a splash of fuming acid that melted half the Keep's gate.

Parson Miles burst up above the castle and knocked Socorro's slab away with an arching tornado. Lawrence and his men would not be far behind, Zeff knew.

But of course, they were not the real threat.

The sundered earth convulsed and bloated skyward, and from it, a gargantuan figure began to rise."

"933



It became a giant, born of rock and clay and dirt and grass, carrying whole trees and sidewalks up its body. Its head and shoulders alone were enough to dwarf the crumbling castle by its side.

The Rainlords wasted no time attacking. In unison, explosions and materials and gunfire and beams of nearly invisible light all bombarded the earthy titan with a furious maelstrom, carving out chunks of its body and causing it to shower chipped rocks across the battlefield.

But it wasn't enough. The giant's body repaired itself as quickly as they could damage it. Even a pair of rapid singularities from Octavia did little more than make the golem shiver before refilling the gaping caverns in its stone flesh.

The ground all but vanished beneath the beast's clawed feet, sunken in so greatly that it flattened the hill that they had all been standing on. Rhein's Keep shifted as its foundation did, losing many of its broken pieces to a sudden landslide but otherwise remaining intact.

The beast grew to its full height, a living skyscraper for Rheinhal, complete with the same devil's face as Sanko's mask, this time bearing a devil's body to go along with it. It had the hunched posture of a gorilla with its short legs and long, powerful arms; and from its huge back jutted two enormous wings, crooked and grotesque and almost certainly incapable of flight, if that mattered. It probably didn't, Zeff felt.

From his position of momentary safety atop an icy platform, Zeff reached for everything he could muster from his mind. Pan-forma burned inside him, granting three important increases: soul defenses, physical regeneration, and connectivity of his creations. The latter bonus was often overlooked somewhat, but it meant that Zeff could create complex structures more easily, treat multiple creations as one in his mind, and even have his materialized mass regenerate on its own, if he wanted it to.

And he called on each of those material enhancements now as he created something that had been in his mind for years but that he had never quite been able to manage without forma to help him.

The body of it was a long tube of soul-strengthened ice, thick enough to withstand cannon fire--because that was exactly what this was going to be: an enormous cannon. Only without the fire."

It required an explosion, which was the difficulty of the trick. If the explosion were too weak, the cannon would be useless. If it were too strong, the cannon itself would burst apart. He and Axiolis had to strike the correct balance between power and structural integrity.

Zepp plugged up the cannon and filled it with warm, swirling water. The time was ticking now, because the surrounding ice would freeze the water if he took too long, but Zepp knew the timing. From there, two things needed to happen in near succession. First, he had to create a vein of superheated steam inside the sloshing water. The heat would cause the water to boil in a violent flash, resulting in the explosion he needed. Second, he needed to materialize the soul-strengthened cannonball with his maximized velocity. This way, the explosive velocity of the steam would increase the already moving cannonball, granting it much greater punch than Zepp could give it otherwise. And it all had to be done in an instant, with immense precision.

With full concentration, Zepp wrenched one open palm upward and created the vein of superheated steam, and with the other hand, this one a closed fist, he threw a backhanded punch, creating the cannonball of solid ice while simultaneously unplugging the cannon.

The cannon jumped from the force of the explosion, and the cannonball rocketed into the sky and barreled into the Gargoyle's stomach, shattering on impact.

And Sanko hardly even seemed to notice.

Zepp scowled inside his own mind and just kept firing. He'd hardly expected it to end the fight, but still, this was more than a little frustrating. His ice became all but lost in the huge flurry of other attacks that the Rainlords were launching. Multiple paths of destruction, little more than splinters against the Gargoyle's skin. Octavia's singularities managed to poke bigger holes into her, but they didn't seem to be doing very much.

Then the Gargoyle finally launched an attack of her own.

Earthen spires shot out of the giant's body in every direction--thousands of car-sized arrows looking for Rainlord blood. And finding it, too, because Sanko also chose that moment to send an earthquake tearing through the ground, throwing everyone off balance.

Zeff tried to avoid them by leaping off his platform, but one spire took his head clean off, along with his arms and chest."

"935

--Monday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

Even without his brain, however, the Lord Elroy remained conscious, still able to sense the relative positions of other souls. Pan-forma allowed his mind to reside with Axiolis', and reapers, of course, did not require a physical brain for their own consciousness. So instead of regenerating from his splattered brain matter, Zeff's body regenerated from his legs as they tumbled to the ground. Pan-forma would always regrow the body from the largest surviving section of their merged souls, regardless of whether it was the head or the little toe or only the soul without any flesh whatsoever.

In mere seconds, Zeff had a skull again, and after that, his gray eyes returned as well, allowing him to witness the result of Sanko's attack. Spears of jagged rock littered the uneven earth, having created a sloped field of stone spires, almost like a maze. Aftershocks were still making the ground quiver.

And the blood. Pools of it were everywhere, growing with each moment as dozens of Rainlords lay dead or nearly so, smashed beneath piles of stone.

Octavia and Rayen were still attacking Sanko, Zeff saw. Evangelina, Socorro, and Santos looked like they would be on their feet momentarily, but he also spotted Parson and Lawrence descending from the broken cliff that the Keep now stood upon.

Zeff didn't even think. His body just started moving on its own as he felt the old well boil to the utmost brink, ready to explode now that he finally had those two men in sight. No doubt, they were hoping to finish Zeff's brethren off while they were down.

He was absolutely not going to let that happen.

The old well loosed an explosion of burning water. Not steam. That wasn't the kind of water that could hold his hatred. Only lakefire could fulfill that purpose. Flaming water, eternally burning and boiling, never extinguishing or evaporating.

This was the old well's purpose. To preserve the ingredient he needed for when the moment presented itself, the moment that demanded explosive refusal. And it worked. Almost too easily. It had been many years, but Zeff felt the response. Emergence found him once again.

A mountain of ice blinked into existence, already hurtling toward Parson and Lawrence. The two men noticed it rather immediately and diverted courses--Parson zooming up and away, while Lawrence launched himself down toward the three Rainlords via a radium projectile.

Unfortunately for Lawrence, however, there was a second mountain of ice, and it clobbered him into the cliffside."

"936

--Monday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

Before Zeff could press his attack any further, however, a tornado swirled down from the sky and whipped him and the other Rainlords into the air. Zeff coated himself in ice, but the oncoming blades of wind chiseled through it in rapid succession and slashed his flailing body from a hundred different angles.

Then he was free again, left to fall back down to the ground in peace. It was Rayen's doing, he saw. She and Parson were both practically invisible, but their souls could be seen in direct conflict. A beam of ultraviolet light had gored a swirling vortex through its center, but somehow, the vortex was preventing that same light from escaping. A series of booms rang out as they struggled there in the sky, but Zeff had already turned away from their fight in order to focus on his own.

Evangelina and Santos had gone off to support Octavia, and so it was only Zeff and Socorro now, perched on a field of half-broken spires as they readied to face Xavier Lawrence.

After going up against Sanko and Parson, Lawrence almost seemed like an easy fight. But that was wrong, Zeff knew, and he reminded himself that this was not a man to be underestimated.

A radium dome arrived first, trying to bathe the two Rainlords in soul-enhanced radiation, but Zeff was ready with four enormous pillars of ice--more enormous than he had even intended them to be, in fact--and they knocked the dome away before it could do any damage.

Then came a bed of radium, instead, and Socorro and Zeff both platformed themselves away. Zeff's platform, however, didn't let up. It grew upward and sideways and then back down toward Lawrence with increasing speed. It was almost too fast, like flying on a rocket made of ice, and Zeff barely managed to maintain control.

But his reliance on only ice was limiting him, he realized. The decreased temperature made it more difficult to produce. So this time, he reached for water, as much of it as he could create.

And a tsunami appeared.

It reached nearly as high as the Gargoyle's head and came crashing down on Lawrence, who merely shielded himself with a radium shelter. The water hissed angrily against the white metal, making it jostle from the sheer force of the wave, but the radium held strong nonetheless.

But Zeff already knew what he wanted to do next."

"937

--Monday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

Spikes of radium jumped out of Lawrence's shell, and Zeff met them with a pair of pressurized water drills. Previously, he'd only been able to make them the size of his thumb, but now, the drills were bigger than each hand. So when Zeff pushed them into the spikes, they carved the radium down and left cracking holes in the wall, allowing the Rainlord to do the rest of the work with brute strength alone.

He punched through, and Lawrence was there, right in his face, having caught Zeff's fist with his own radium-coated palm.

With both men wielding super strength, a brief hand-to-hand struggle occurred, and for a moment, they were able to look each other in the eye.

"I'm sorry for what I am about to do, Zeff."

"Don't apologize for dying, Lawrence."

Zeff coated himself in spikes of his own, aiming to skewer the old man with them, but Lawrence released him and used a sudden block of radium to knock Zeff and his spikes back.

Zeff toppled back, bouncing atop a row of spires. A hail of platinum shards bought him time to find his footing again.

But the General did not press his attack yet, Zeff saw. Instead, Lawrence's body flashed pristinely white as pan-rozum transformed him into pure radium. And his body did not tarnish with air exposure like normal radium did. Rather, it began to glow fiercely blue, even in this bright daylight.

And Zeff knew what that meant. Lawrence was pushing the radiation to absurd levels with the power of his soul. Already, Zeff could feel its debilitating effects, attacking his flesh on a cellular level, weakening muscles and hindering regeneration. This skill was the reason Lawrence was called the Blue Bear.

But Zeff was not in the mood to be intimidated. He lobbed another tsunami and followed in its wake, preparing to materialize another drill. A rapid series of platinum javelins came flying to his aid as well, providing extra support.

Lawrence's glowing body pressed through the water, hissing inside a billowing cloud of steam, and the man launched a wall of radium spikes toward Zeff, each one glowing blue as well.

Zeff propelled himself out of their path with a vertical platform and pulled out his two-finger hand guns. Icy bullets burst forth as Zeff sailed through the air."

"938

A glowing cage materialized around Zeff in midair. He immediately felt the radiation degrading his body, slowing his movement, and he knew that it would spell the end for him if he stayed inside it for more than a few seconds. His water drill punched through, and Zeff fell toward the ground again.

Jaws of radium leapt up to meet him, and Zeff responded by filling the open maw with a sudden geyser. The water shot up with enough force to carry Zeff with it, removing him from danger. He caught himself with a twisting slope of ice, allowing him to create a path that brought him right back down to both feet again.

But Lawrence was there now--a figure of blue heat, looming directly in front of Zeff--and the radiation was at its most potent, destroying the Rainlord's muscles and numbing each of his physical senses.

A platinum wrecking ball slammed into the General, but not before he grabbed Zeff's arm. Rather than be taken along with Lawrence, however, the limb tore free, spewing blood and melted flesh from the gaping wound.

Even with pan-forma, Zeff needed a few extra moments to recover. The effects of soul-empowered radiation lingered still, and he could see his own skin forming a puddle of slop around his hands and knees. Lawrence, on the other hand, would be requiring no such time.

The Lady Socorro Garza picked up the slack. She hadn't stopped attacking once, materializing boulder after boulder, pinballing the Vanguardian General around in an effort to keep him off balance. He seemed to have had enough of that, however, and punted the next boulder right back at her. It dematerialized before reaching her, and she started creating multiple boulders at once, all gunning for Lawrence from different directions. Lawrence met each of them with soaring blue lances, sparing one for Socorro as well. She barely managed to sidestep it, but a horizontal blade jumped out of its shaft at the last moment and slashed her neck and arm, very nearly decapitating her.

Then an earthquake interrupted, halting both attackers as they had to stop and steady themselves.

To Zeff's amazement, the Madame Redwater had not yet fallen. She'd been holding off the Gargoyle for a solid minute without assistance, keeping the endless streams of rock at bay before they could smother and crush her."

"939

--Wednesday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

The black shadow swirled around Octavia in a mad frenzy, dicing up the rocks it could get to; and the ones it couldn't, it left to Octavia's magnesium transfiguration. With pan-rozum, the little old woman was no more, replaced with a white hot flame that burned with such intensity as to render Zeff hardly capable of looking at it. Rocks soared into that bright core and were rendered to ash. And intermittently, a

singularity would pop up as well and devour a chunk of the Gargoyle's body.

She was a whirlwind of light and darkness now, exuding more power than Zeff had ever witnessed in a single Rainlord. He couldn't tell what had become of Evangelina and Santos, but if they had gotten caught up in the middle of that chaos, then they were probably not faring so well right about now.

The ground beneath their fight sunk lower and lower as the Gargoyle continued consuming it, requiring more for her giant form as Octavia kept destroying it. But more and more, the Gargoyle was getting closer to that white hot flame, swarming it with increasing mass. And soon, the heart of the fire was no longer visible, engulfed too greatly in earth.

Then, in a blink, Rayen's swirling form was there in front of Zeff, wrapping her plump arms around him. And in another blink, Zeff was suddenly standing on a bridge somewhere, confused. Until the acceleration sickness caught up to him. He bent over to retch, and for a moment, every muscle in his body felt like it had disintegrated. Pan-forma struggled to heal him, and Rayen said something, but Zeff didn't catch it. When he looked up, she was gone, replaced with the half-smashed corpse of Evangelina Stroud.

After a beat, Rayen reappeared with Socorro Garza, who fell to her knees and heaved all over the pavement.

Rayen said something again, and this time, Zeff could actually hear it.

"We are going back for the others," she said in two voices. "If we are gone longer than twenty seconds, run and do not look back."

And before he could so much as protest, the woman was gone again, leaving only a trail of faintly visible light to indicate the direction she'd gone. It led toward a cityscape in the distance.

A cityscape. At the foot of an enormous mountain range.

Rheinhal, Zeff finally realized. The hilltop that appeared to be moving must have been Sanko. Rayen had carried the three of them to safety."

"940



--Wednesday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

At the speeds that Rayen's body moved, a normal human would have been rent to dust. If it weren't for Zeff's passive soul defenses, he knew that he and Axiolis would not have survived, either.

Such were the limits of Rayen's ability. She could move within one of two speed ranges: that of an unaided human, or that of pure light. Everything in between those two extremes was impossible. And unfortunately, this also meant that Rayen could not bring any of the weaker servants here without maiming or killing them. Even carrying reapers by themselves would not work because it was impossible for her to maintain a strong enough grip on them. If she tried, her soul would simply tear through the reaper, instead.

Moreover, the speed was a danger to Rayen herself, Axiolis knew, on top of being difficult to control. If she went too far with a single leap, her own body would break down, taking the merged souls with it. It was the same for every "light-wielder" who dared to use pan-rozum.

For now, Zeff would have to stifle his anger at Rayen for forcing him to retreat. He understood why she had done it, of course, but still. His and Axiolis' collective pride wanted to rush back to the battlefield at that very moment.

But he didn't. Reason won out as he helped the regenerating Evangelina to her feet and then did the same for Socorro. He tried to explain the abrupt change in circumstances.

And he remembered Rayen's words. Twenty seconds, she had said. That didn't seem like nearly enough time to wait before deciding on a full retreat. Zeff wasn't even done talking to Socorro and Evangelina before time expired.

Nonetheless, they waited, and it very quickly became clear that Rayen was not going to return.

They had a decision to make.

"We must not delay," said Socorro. "Rayen gave us the opportunity to run. We should trust her judgment and go."

Zeff wanted to argue, and so did Evangelina, by the look on her face. But neither did. Difficult as it was to admit, Socorro was probably correct. Even if it meant abandoning all of their forces. Abandoning Francisco...

Socorro started walking, and after a fashion, the Lady Stroud and the Lord Elroy followed.

They had taken too long, however.

Zeff and Axiolis sensed someone approaching from the sky, moving at jet speed. Captain General Parson Miles was not going to let them flee so easily, it would seem."

"941 -- CVII.

--Wednesday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

Chapter One Hundred Seven: 'Thy strangling breath...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The fight came quickly. And ended nearly as fast.

The objective wasn't to win. With only the three of them, a battle against Parson Miles was unfavorable, to say the least. And so, if defeat was all but guaranteed, then the most important task at hand was to ensure someone was able to escape to Luzo and warn everyone else. With that goal in mind, the trio of Rainlords stopped using pan-forma all at once and let their reapers flee underground in separate directions.

This was a mistake, they soon realized.

Rather than attacking them, Parson whipped his own body into a tornadic fury, becoming a veritable blade of gale force winds that carried the strength of his and Overra's soul. And with that blade, he barreled straight into the ground, kicking up a cloud of swirling dust that became a whirlwind unto itself.

No more than a minute later, Parson returned to surface with all three reapers in his clutches.

Parson descended slowly, accumulating into the form of a man once more and watching the Rainlords carefully as he landed on the bridge with them. Perhaps he was waiting to see if they would force him to kill their reapers right then and there. They didn't.

"Have you all calmed down?" Parson asked.

None answered.

"Mm. Really, though, you should have known better. Lady Garza, sure, you have the excuse of never having been Vanguard, but Zeff and Angie? We spent years together. And yet even now, you underestimate us?"

Zeff could feel the old well boiling again.

"But then again," Parson went on, "Rainlords never do make very good tacticians. All that honor and bloodlust mixed together. Small wonder why you always seem to make the wrong decisions."

Evangelina Stroud kept her voice level. "If you are going to take us prisoner, then please get on with it. I know how much you love to talk, but I would honestly rather be stuck in a holding cell for the next twenty years than listen to you yammer on for another five minutes."

Parson chuckled with two voices. "Oh, Angie. Silly girl. Now that the Gargoyle isn't watching, we can do as we please. Naturally, we're not going to take you prisoner."

Socorro's reaper burst apart in a sudden gust of wind and evaporated into nothing."

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"942

Socorro doubled over onto the pavement, hands spread wide as her breathing turned irregular and the muscles in her body began to twitch. Then a blade of wind split her head down the middle, and a gale picked her body up and sent it flying over the side of the bridge, leaving her to fall into the empty gorge below.

The old well erupted once more, and Zeff felt the response another time. He clenched both fists at once, and a boiling tidal wave fell upon Parson, converting to steam in midair as it tried to melt the man alive.

A whirlwind blew it all away.

And Parson smiled. "There's that devil's blood in your veins! A second emergence!"

Spikes of ice now. Hundreds all at once, shooting at Parson from every conceivable direction as if fired from hundreds of invisible guns. A whirlwind took them, too, and then came for Zeff and Evangelina, propelling them both skyward and holding them there with pressurized air currents.

"Too bad it's still not enough," said Parson, rising to look him in the eye. "Story of your life, eh? Always a step behind. Always needing someone to hold your hand and protect you, despite acting like you're the one doing the protecting. And Angie--oh, you're even worse than him!"

Hardly able to move, Zeff clenched his teeth and finally just yelled, "Why are you doing this?! Parson! What possible reason could you--?!" But the sentence went unfinished as oxygen flew directly into his lungs and filled his chest nearly to the point of bursting.

And Parson gave a snort. "Reason? Singular? Dear boy, you really did learn nothing from me, didn't you? Never run with any plan in which there is only one desirable outcome. Fundamentals, Zeff. There's no substitute for a good grasp of the fundamentals."

Zeff and Evangelina both struggled there in vain. The soul-strengthened air currents might as well have been concrete.

But of course, Parson wasn't done talking. "Ah, well. It doesn't really matter, anyway. Because it's not about the plan. It's never about the plan. It's about what you do when the plan blows up in your face--how you react to unexpected problems. Because plans fail all the time, especially the complicated ones. That's why it's so important to leave

yourself some wiggle room--so that you can improvise later. You understand?"

"943

As he writhed there, Zeff could not understand why the bastard was taking so long to kill them. Parson had always been an absurd motormouth, but Zeff had never known the man to gloat. This was pure cruelty and stupidity. Ridiculous. All it did was make the old well boil another time.

"I know it's a bit late for a lecture," Parson was still saying, "but I hope some of this is sinking in. Oh, but I should commend you for one thing, at least. In spite of all the other mistakes you've made, you were correct to not allow Sanko to investigate you. That would not have gone your way. I assure you. For many reasons. One of which is named Blackburn. But I suppose that's neither here nor there. Let's see, what else did I want to talk about? Umm... hmm..."

Evangelina's whole body began to sizzle and burn at once. She might have been immobilized and weakened, but the explosive potential of sulfur transfiguration was not to be ignored, even by Parson. If she empowered the blast with her soul, he would die along with the rest of them. And of course, if Parson was going to kill them anyway, then the Rainlords didn't have much to lose.

And by the sudden look in the Cpt. General's eyes, Parson understood these facts instantly. A surge of wind propelled the woman away at the very last moment, and the explosion detonated in a searing flash, ripping through one of the bridge's center columns. Dozens of cables snapped free at once and whipped around like giant snakes as Parson and all of his captives went soaring across the crumbling structure, pursued by a trail of smoke.

But captives, they still were. Parson retained his grip on Zeff, Axiolis, and even Evangelina's reaper.

"Whew!" said Parson. "So impatient! Always was her problem! And what a temper!" He'd regained control and started flying with Zeff stuck in front of him. "Not like you, Zeff. In fact, you had too much patience, didn't you? Never did learn how to strike while the iron was hot. Always needed that extra push."

Still, Zeff tried to attack with ice. And still, it was fruitless.

“Well, it’s okay,” said Parson. “Because Gema isn’t like you. She’s better than you ever were.”

And Zeff stopped attacking and just stared with hard, wide eyes at the man’s deceptively young face.

“That’s right, Zeff. Gema works for me. I know exactly where she is. I’ve known all along.”

"944

Thankfully, Axiolis was there to ask the question that Zeff couldn’t. ‘Parson, what are you saying?’

Parson abruptly stopped flying. “I’m saying... well, I’m sure you’ve been wondering, right? Why all of this suddenly happened to you and your family? Why it seemed like the Vanguard just betrayed you out of nowhere? What I’m saying is... it was me. I fabricated the entire incident with Gema’s apparent treason and subsequent disappearance. I mean, she’s good, but there’s no way she could’ve avoided the Vanguard this whole time without a bit of help from someone with clout, right?”

Zeff shut his eyes. He focused on the old well as he listened. Focused on his anger and hatred and everything wrong with the world. Focused on what he needed.

“Well, Zeff? Do you understand what I’m saying? I set this all in motion. Oh, but perhaps you’re still wondering why? Like I said earlier, there are multiple reasons, really, but the primary reason is because you have wicked blood in you. And even though I don’t have a problem letting you live--because I know you’re a good guy--I still can’t really take that same risk with your children. They could become real problems when they get older, see? So I have to make sure they die before that happens--preferably without being labeled a child killer, myself. For the greater good, you--”

But by now, Zeff had stopped hearing him. And for the third time that day, he felt it. The response. Fiercer, perhaps, than ever in his life. The old well was gone. It had exploded, and now a volcano of steam and water resided there in its place.

A wave of power and clarity coursed through him, urging him onward, telling him to do something impossible.

The air currents held him fast, even more so than before, preventing the slightest movements of his arms and legs and neck and back, preventing even his lungs from contracting.

But he could still move his face. He could still blink. So that's where he poured his concentration.

A huge volume of water materialized. But it was all packed into a single point. He didn't press his soul into it, but he did press as much velocity into it as he could possibly muster. And for the direction in which the water would move, Zeff chose all of them. Three hundred and sixty degrees.

The result, just as he'd imagined, was an explosion."

"945

The burst of water seemed to catch Parson off guard and ripped into the man's air currents, including the ones composing his own body. The water didn't touch Zeff, but the shock wave that it created did, and the Rainlord found himself suddenly falling.

But he was free. Finally. And he could see the two reapers, as well. Parson had lost his grip on them, since they had not been affected by the purely physical blast. Zeff had bought them precious few moments. The reapers could try to flee, of course, but as Parson had proved earlier, they did not possess the speed to escape this enemy.

Zeff, however, could. Or at least, his instincts told him that he could. Fighting Parson and actually winning? Certainly not. The difference in soul power was too great. But escaping? With the power of emergence coursing through him and with a head start of a few seconds, that seemed abruptly possible.

He raised an upward-moving platform of ice beneath himself. And kept raising. "To me!" he called out, and both reapers rushed to meet him. He grabbed one with each hand as he shot past them on his growing platform, bending it horizontally.

By now, he had more speed, but it still wasn't enough for him. He



could do more. He knew he could. And when he pressed his mind harder, the jump in acceleration was so violent that he felt a dozen bones snap at once.

And then he was flying. On an icy rocket that arched across the sky, he was flying.

Still, he knew that he could do more.

He removed the cooling aspect from the ice so that he could focus everything on velocity. Water exploded forth on a sideways geyser, growing perpetually forward so as to never lose any of its initial power or momentum.

Then, he finished merging with Axiolis. The added control that pan-forma afforded him was the final push. The speed jumped another time, and Zeff felt the punch of the sonic boom as he rocketed toward the rain clouds in the distance.

--++--++--

Wide-eyed and grinning, Parson watched Zeff zoom away. He didn't bother giving chase and instead chose to land. Overra melted out of his body, and Parson let out a weary breath, wiping the sweat from his brow. He started the long walk back toward Rheinhal as Overra kept pace behind him."

"946

--Monday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

'Wow,' the reaper said privately. 'That went even better than planned!'

'I know, right?! I thought for sure we'd have to let him escape!'

'Dang. When was the last time ANYTHING went better than planned?'

'Hmm, not sure. Lac'Vayce went really well... until everyone died.'

'Yeah, but that one wasn't even our plan,' said Overra.

'I know, but I still feel kinda responsible.'

'Mm. But anyway! How about that triple emergence from Zeff, eh?! I know he hates us, but I'm so proud of him!'

‘Oh, I know! I really didn’t think he had it in him! Frankly, I was happy with just the double. I only kept pushing him ‘cuz we had so much extra time on our hands, and then he went and did THAT. Just--agh! Beautiful.’

‘And he was even smart enough to flee instead of trying to fight us! That was one of my biggest concerns!’

‘Oh yeah! It would’ve been so annoying if he’d just decided to throw his life away!’

Overra laughed. ‘Ah, Zeff, you darling boy. Now I feel kinda bad for all those mean things we said to him.’

‘Yeah. But nobody ever got stronger by listening to comforting lies.’

‘Indeed.’

They arrived at the crumbling bridge that the Rainlords had been using to escape. Parson had been taking Zeff away from Rheinhal, rather than toward it. It would have been annoying if Sanko interrupted them, after all. Now that the bridge was out, however, he had to briefly merge with Overra again in order to fly over it. They resumed walking afterwards, knowing that they would tire themselves out if they used pan-rozum for too much longer. Parson stuffed his hands in the pockets of his ragged white overcoat and began whistling the tune to Turkey in the Straw.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘why did we decide to kill Socorro? I can’t remember.’ Now that he wasn’t sharing his mind with Overra, all knowledge that had been acquired during the hyper state had been split between the two of them.

‘Oh, that was mainly to rile Zeff and Angie up--but also, because platinum materialization is way too risky to leave unattended. That woman could’ve crashed the Continental Market by herself if she’d wanted to.’

‘Ah, right. Good call.’

‘With everything else going on right now, we really didn’t need that as an extra variable. And with their backs to the corner, who knows what the Rainlords would’ve done?’”

"947 -- CVIII.

--Monday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

'I remember the last time some jerkhead crashed it,' said Parson. 'Agh! That was such a pain in the butt to fix!'

'Exactly,' said Overra. 'I mean, sure, we have other folks safeguarding that sort of thing nowadays, but eh. Whatever. Two birds, one stone.'

'I gotcha. Though, the Garzas certainly won't be happy when Zeff tells them what we did.'

'Yeah, well. Greater good 'n all that.'

'So how upset do you think Sanko will be with us?'

'What do you mean? We didn't do anything wrong. Socorro wanted to surrender, but Zeff and Angie went crazy and killed her for betraying them.'

'Ooh.'

'In fact, they went SO crazy that they achieved emergence multiple times, which is what allowed them to wound us and escape.'

'Hmm. You really think she'll buy that?'

'Almost definitely not. But she won't be able to prove anything. And that woman is all about the proof. At the very least, we should be able to avoid a court martial. And if not, well, Lamont'll help us out.'

'He'd probably be even angrier than Sanko.'

'Probably.'

Chapter One Hundred Eight: 'Thy ancient likeness...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It had taken a while for the hostilities to finally end. Informing everyone of the ceasefire had been proven quite the undertaking. Without any working phones or coms, they had to search Marshrock for their allies and inform them in person, and they encountered a few Blackburns along the way who had definitely not gotten the news yet. Not that it

was too big a problem. Hector and Emiliana didn't have to do anything other than carry their unconscious friends, while Asad participated in a series of civilized discussions that definitely didn't end with anyone being splattered against the ceiling like a bag full of chicken bones and a very old curry.

In time, they found a platoon of Sebolts with working coms, and from there, word of the ceasefire began to spread much more quickly.

Not long into their venture, however, Chergoa realized that one of the unconscious reapers in Hector's grasp was her brother. But Hector's thoughts had been so preoccupied with the new aberration he'd seen that he'd nearly forgotten about Garovel's sister, and when she started bombarding him with questions, the young Lord Goffe found himself settling into old habits and falling painfully silent.

She didn't seem to appreciate that much.

Thankfully, though, after only three hours of awkwardness, Garovel began to stir."

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"948

--Monday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

'Hey!' Chergoa yelled. 'Are you finally awake, you big doofus?!'

Garovel gave a weak laugh, still sounding exhausted. 'Good to see you, baby sister.'

Chergoa snorted and nodded to Hector and Emiliana. 'Told you, didn't I?'

'What did you tell them?' said Garovel.

'That the first thing you'd do would be reassert your status as the older sibling.'

'Agh. Gimme a break. I'm tired, and I was expressing how pleased I am to finally see you again. And you ARE my little sister, aren't you?'

'Yeah, by like one year! One out of--' She hesitated. 'How old are we again?'

'Three thousand something, I think.'

'See? You don't even know.'

'Don't need to. Even if you were infinity years old, I'd still be infinity plus one.'

'What the hell are you doing here, anyway?'

'Did Hector not tell you?'

'No, he didn't. Great servant you got here, by the way. Can't even answer a simple question.'

'Hey. Don't make fun of Hector. I didn't make fun of your freaky-lookin' mutant girl.'

'Whoa! Take that back, you asshole!'

'Or what?'

"Garovel," said Hector, realizing he should intervene before this escalated into another four hundred years of them not seeing each other. "Apologize."

Garovel required a moment of reluctance before granting an admmissive nod and turning to Emiliana. 'Ah... I'm sorry, young lady. You aren't a freaky-looking mutant. In fact, you actually look kind of badass with that mask on. I was just upset because your reaper is a terrible person who eats babies and steals from the poor.'

'Alright, that's enough,' said Chergoa. 'Tell me what you're doing here, already.'

'We're here for YOU, you dingus. We ran into Axiolis in Kuros, and he informed us of the monumental shitstorm you've gotten yourself involved in. And naturally, being the wonderful, selfless people we are, we decided to--'

'Okay, okay. Hector, thank you for all your help. Garovel, go fuck yourself.'

'Wow, watch your language. There are young people present, you know.'

'You literally just said "shitstorm."'

'Yeah, but when I swear, it's funny and endearing. When you do it, it's inappropriate and childish.'

She glanced at Emiliana. 'See this? See what I have to put up with?'

But Emiliana seemed more interested in something else Garovel had said. "You met with Axiolis? Do you know where he is?"

"949

'We parted ways with Axiolis at Rheinhal,' said Garovel. 'He said he wanted to be there when your father and brother were freed. But Asad and Qorvass could've told you that much. You should've asked them.'

Emiliana gave a muffled sigh. "If only I'd thought to."

Chergoa looked around. 'Where'd those two go, anyway?'

'Don't ask me,' said Garovel. 'You're the ones who've been awake this whole time.'

Hector knew the answer to that one and knew that he should probably

make more of an effort to contribute after the less-than-stellar first impression he'd made. "Er--uh... Asad said he was going to, ah... t-to see about retrieving the other hostages."

'Oh,' said Chergoa. 'Let's go find him again, then.'

They started moving through the Sebolt encampment as a small group, which meant leaving the hotel lobby they'd been waiting in. As ever, it was raining outside, and the thunder had returned as well, but before they even made it five steps, a familiar man descended from the heavens with folded arms.

"...Why are you leaving the hotel?" asked the Lord Dimas Sebolt.

'Dimas, that was way too imposing,' said Izio, clinging to the man's back. 'You have to sound friendlier, or they'll get the wrong idea about us.'

"...I am here to ensure the young Lady Elroy's safety. If there is something you require, I will send someone to fetch it for you."

'Okay, that was a little better, but, eh...'

Chergoa decided to chime in. 'We were just wondering when we would be able to see Marcos, Ramira, and Shenado again. Do you know? It's been a couple hours since the ceasefire began, and Ismael said he would release them.'

"They will be brought to you as soon as we have them," said Dimas.

'Eh, let's just go with them,' said Izio. 'We might be able to see Diego sooner, too. Besides, with Melchor down for the count, there's no one here who can really threaten you.'

'Lord Asad might argue that point,' said Garovel.

Izio returned a laugh. 'Thankfully, he's on our side. But you know, if it came down to it, I bet Dimas could take him.'

'Well, I admire your confidence,' said Garovel.

That made Izio laugh again, and with the two added members, their party of six proceeded onward together. Emiliana tried to share her umbrella with Dimas, but he was so much taller than her that she almost poked his eye out. The man chose to hold the umbrella for the both of them, instead."



Luzo had a strange charm to it, Hector felt. When he'd first arrived, the place had seemed kind of ominous and horrible to him, perhaps because the thunder had been so loud before, but now that it had mellowed out into a series of faint rumblings, he was beginning to enjoy himself. Combined with the constant drumming of rain and the moderate temperature, Hector found this place actually quite relaxing. Though, the ceasefire had surely contributed to that feeling as well.

Still, he was beginning to understand why people might choose to live here, despite the threat of floods and lightning. At least a third of the buildings on this street had been crowned with huge metal spires, and the road didn't seem to have any trouble draining all the water. Hector could only imagine how insanely efficient a Rainlord sewage system needed to be.

'So why were you in Kuros?' Chergoa asked. 'And how in the world did you end up crossing paths with Axiolis?'

'We were escorting Atreyan royalty,' said Garovel.

Chergoa paused. 'Are you joking?'

'Nope. Prince Meriwether of House Lumenbel. We're on pretty good terms with his sister, the Queen, so she asked us for a favor.'

'Huh.' Chergoa allowed a beat to pass. 'There must not be very many servants in Atreya.'

'Rude. You don't know how strong Hector is.' Garovel also allowed a beat to pass. 'You're right, though. I only know of like three others.'

'Ha. So this prince didn't mind you just abandoning your duty to come help us?'

'He had another bodyguard to rely on, and we were only doing it as a favor, anyway. Also, I don't think he was particularly worried for his safety once he made it inside the Golden Fort. He's married to one of the Saqqaf women, after all.'

'Ah,' said Chergoa. 'Woulda been nice to have those folks on our side. Are the Saqqafs as impressive as their reputation suggests?'

‘We didn’t meet any of them personally. The Lord Abbas Saqqaf, though--we saw him speak during a meeting, and his soul was strong enough that Hector could actually feel his presence a little bit, which suggests to me that he’s even older than Melchor and Xuan. So just from that, I would have to say, yes, Hahl Saqqaf was quite impressive.’”

"951

Hector’s memory of that meeting was foggy at best. Garovel had translated it for him, since they had been speaking in Valgan, but Hector did recall that odd feeling Garovel was talking about now, like the air was slightly thicker. It wasn’t until later that Garovel had explained how very powerful souls could affect the physical atmosphere. And while he was certainly grateful that Lord Abbas had permanently soul-strengthened Haqq’s shield, Hector was not in any hurry to encounter someone like that a second time--especially now, after witnessing what Xuan and Melchor could do.

Chergoa and Garovel continued speaking, but Garovel spared a private moment for Hector. ‘You should express your gratitude to Dimas for saving our asses.’

Much as he would have liked to remain silent, Hector knew the reaper was right, so after taking a moment to gather his courage, he went for it. “Uh, um, Lord Dimas, uh... thank you for your help earlier. Darktide would’ve definitely, er... I mean, if you hadn’t... uh... Y-you and Lord Salvador saved us. So... er...”

The man’s expression was as unreadable as ever. “...Think nothing of it. Rather, I should be thanking you for protecting Duvoss and my idiot uncle.”

“Ah, uh... heh...” Hector thought better of wading into that territory and instead chose to change the subject. “Are you, um... aren’t you tired? From using pan-forma, I mean?”

“I use pan-moc,” Dimas corrected.

“Oh. Right.”

“...But yes, I am exhausted.”

"You... uh... you don't really look like it."

"I will not be sleeping until Xuan is awake."

'I will, though,' said Iziol. 'In fact, I think I'll do that right now. Pardon my snoring.'

Hector exchanged looks with Dimas. "Can reapers actually snore?"

"No. Iziol was attempting to tell a joke. He is not very good at them."

'Hey. I... I'm... I'm mediocre at them, at least.'

Dimas met Hector's gaze and just shook his head with silent honesty.

'Here, let me tell a real joke,' said Iziol.

And for the first time, Hector saw Dimas lose composure as a haggard expression flashed across his face.

'Two clowns walk into a bar. The bartender says to them, "Hey, none of your funny business in here!"'

Then there was dead silence. Even Chergoa and Garovel had stopped bickering.

'Well?' said Iziol. 'What did you think?'

Hector had still been waiting for the punchline. "Uh--er, that was... um. Wow."

Dimas was less kind. "That was possibly the worst joke I've ever heard in my life."

"952

'Bah,' said Iziol. 'Dimas just doesn't know anything about comedy. He and I have been together for more than twenty years, and I've only heard him laugh four times. Four! Can you believe that?!'

Hector could.

Dimas made no retort.

Chergoa spoke up for the man, though. 'He's not wrong, Iziol. That

joke was horrendous. In fact, if comedy were a human being, you would have just committed murder.'

Iziol hesitated a moment. 'Darn it... Ah! I'm sorry. Please excuse my language. I'm just frustrated.'

Hector saw the other two reapers exchange looks.

'Don't feel bad,' said Garovel. 'Chergoa and I will share our secrets with you.'

'Better just leave it to me,' said Chergoa. 'Garovel will only teach you how to insult people.'

'That's not even remotely true. Hector, tell her how hilarious I am.'

Hector opened his mouth but no words came out.

'Buddy, c'mon!'

"G-Garovel is... very funny..."

Chergoa busted into a laugh. 'What an endorsement! Clearly, you've awed him with your comedic genius!'

'That's just Hector's personality! You already know he has trouble speaking!'

'Oh, sure, blame it on Hector.'

'Alright, fine. Hey, Emiliana, how funny is Chergoa?'

'Oh god no. Em, you know that I--'

"She is quite awful."

'Agh! How could you?!'

'Thank you for your honesty,' said Garovel.

'I just haven't had enough time to win her over!' said Chergoa. 'She'll appreciate my humor eventually!'

'I'm sure that's it,' said Garovel.

'Em, we are gonna have a long talk about this later.'

"I will look forward to it."

As they walked, Chergoa and Garovel soon returned to their bickering, and Garovel had to privately remind Hector to be sociable again. 'Talk to Emiliana.'

Hector racked his brain in search of a topic. When nothing immediately sprung forth, he tried taking a step back and thinking about everything that had happened, and then the most pressing question in the world smacked him in the face. "Emiliana," said Hector, abruptly sterner, "please tell me more about this... aberration that you were with."

That grabbed Garovel's attention. 'Wait a minute, what? You were with an aberration?'

'Oh yeah,' said Chergoa. But she didn't elaborate, perhaps wanting to let Emiliana participate more.

"Yes," the young woman said. "Lord Ibai Blackburn. He is... quite different."

"Go on," urged Hector."

"953

"Ah... perhaps I am not the best person to consult," said Emiliana. "I have never met any other aberrations."

"But you know of them," said Hector.

"Yes... I know they are supposed to be vicious creatures without humanity. And I have hardly spent any time with him, so I cannot claim to know him very well. But Lord Ibai--he had an opportunity to kill several reapers and consume their souls, yet he chose to spare them. He even had assurances that no one would ever find out. His own men were encouraging him to eat them so that he would grow more powerful. But he did not do it."

'It's true,' Chergoa confirmed. 'If I hadn't seen it myself, I probably wouldn't believe it.'

Hector's brow lowered. "Could it have been a trick?"

Emiliana bobbed her head to the side. "I suppose so... but to my mind, that was a genuine display of mercy. And if aberrations are truly all

inhuman monsters, then I cannot imagine one of them doing what Lord Ibai did.”

‘He had the opportunity to kill me as well,’ said Chergoa.

‘What?!’ said Garovel.

‘I had nowhere to run or hide. I was completely at his mercy. But he didn’t hurt me. And when his father asked him to, he let me go.’

For a time, no one said anything further, perhaps needing a moment to digest that information.

Hector didn’t know what to think. He’d been told that all aberrations were violent and dangerous, but maybe that was wrong. He’d only met one other aberration before, so how could he presume to know what the rest of them were like?

But it wasn’t that simple, either. As much as Hector tried to separate his own feelings from the subject at hand, his memories wouldn’t be ignored. Memories of Geoffrey Rofal. So much had happened since Hector killed that son of a bitch, but not much actual time had passed. Only a few months. Those old wounds, they hadn’t healed. They’d barely begun to feel like scars in his mind.

Still, it wasn’t up to Hector to decide what to do with Ibai, and for that, he was glad; but he also wondered how the Rainlords would handle the situation. When it came to aberrations, he doubted he was the only one who’d had bad experiences.”

"954

After a fashion, the chatter among their group began to return, but something else cut through it before long.

‘Oh.’ Chergoa abruptly stopped moving, which made everyone else do the same. Her skeletal grin widened, and she looked to Emiliana, then nodded down an adjacent side street.

They all turned in time to see a little girl rush up to Emiliana and hug her.

Hector recognized Ramira Elroy from her photograph, along with Marcos Elroy following not far behind. Asad and Qorvass were there,

too, as was an unfamiliar reaper.

Chergoa handled introductions. 'Garovel, Shenado. Shenado, Garovel.'

'The brother?' said Shenado. 'What an unexpected pleasure.'

'It is very nice to meet you,' said Garovel. 'I was sorry to hear about everything your family has had to endure. Axiolis told me all about it.'

'I see, thank you,' said Shenado. 'Ah, and this is Marcos Elroy. Say hello, Marcos.'

The boy looked exhausted. "H-hello..."

'Hello there,' said Garovel. 'This is Hector Goffe.'

Hector offered him a handshake, and Marcos took it. "It's, ah... nice to meet you," said Hector.

Marcos just returned a polite nod. When Dimas offered him a handshake, however, the boy dove in for a hug, instead. "You came back for us," he mumbled into Dimas' torso. "You kept your promise..."

Dimas was slow to return the hug, but after a moment, Hector saw the man's face soften.

Next up for introduction was Ramira, and Hector stiltedly made his way through it. But soon afterward, the adults and the reapers began conversing, and Hector and Ramira were left standing there with nothing to do. He didn't mind being excluded himself, but he felt a bit bad for Ramira. She didn't appear to have a reaper of her own, which meant she couldn't even hear half of what was being said.

After a period of deliberation and brainstorming, Hector knelt down next to her and with effort, forced himself to ask, "...What's your favorite animal?"

She stared at him with big gray eyes, perhaps wondering what he was getting at. But then she smirked and said, "A trapdoor spider!"

Hector's expression faltered. "Uh... really? Not, like, a giraffe or something?"

"Psh. Can a giraffe camouflage itself to take its prey by surprise, and then eat them by liquefying their body with its venom? Because a trapdoor spider can."

"Ah..." Hector had to laugh a little. "Okay, then, tell me what a trapdoor spider looks like..." He materialized a generic spider figurine in the palm of his hand."

"955

--Monday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

"That's way too skinny," said Ramira. "The abdomen has to be fatter."

"Abdomen?" said Hector.

"You don't know what an abdomen is? It's the butt!"

"Ah, okay..." He annihilated his work and tried again. "Is this closer?"

"Better. But the legs are too long. And there aren't enough eyes. And can you add some hair?"

He gave it another shot. "How about now?"

"Agh, here, just give me your phone. I'll find you a picture on the internet."

Hector did as he was told.

The group continued on together, and Hector just kind of followed mindlessly along as he and Ramira became absorbed with creating the perfect spider for her. She found multiple pictures for him to work from, but they were all different species and so bore variations that kept tripping him up. At length, though, he came up with something quite realistic-looking, even down to the fine hairs on its back like Ramira had asked for.

"Wow, there you go!" she said. "You're really good at this! It's perfect!"

He handed it to her. "You sure? It's not too heavy? I can make it smaller, if you want."

"No, no, it's cooler this way! I can beat people with it!"

"Ah..."

"Just kidding." She prodded him in the stomach, pretending the spider



was biting him. "Bragh! I like it a lot! Thank you!"

"Ha... you're welcome."

She turned it over in her hands. "You know, it's kind of like a Melchor action figure."

Hector blinked at that. "You've seen him fight?"

"Yep. It was really scary."

"Oh. I'm sorry..."

"It was really cool, too." She frowned, though. "But I don't think I want to see it again..." She made the spider bite him on the arm this time.

Hector wondered how many terrible things she'd seen already. She didn't look traumatized, but who could say what effect everything actually had upon her?

What an unfair world it was. He'd known that all along, of course, but it seemed different now, maybe because he felt so powerless again. For a long time now, he'd felt strong, like he at least stood a chance against the problems he saw before him. If someone was in danger, he could just save them. Simple enough. But this little girl here was caught up in a conflict so far out of his reach that he couldn't even imagine how he might genuinely help her. She and Marcos and Emiliana--they needed more than some stupid lump of iron."

"956 -- CIX.

--Monday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

In time, they arrived at their destination. It was a modest building overlooking a muddy river with Marshrock standing in the distance. And since he hadn't been paying attention to what everyone had been saying, Hector wasn't sure why they were here.

Once they were inside, Asad stopped to address everyone.

"Before we go any farther," the Sandlord said, "there is something I must tell you all."

His audience gave him their attention.

“Earlier, I received word that the siege in Rheinhal has failed.” Asad let the murmurs pass before continuing. “I’m afraid the details are still unclear, but at the moment, everyone there is being presumed captured or killed. I’m very sorry. I felt you should know now, because I’m sure it will come up during negotiations.”

‘None escaped?’ said Shenado.

‘We don’t know,’ said Qorvass. ‘It’s possible, but unlikely. There were a handful of messages that came in at once, all saying that Sanko was attacking the Rainlords. And since then, we’ve received no further contact from anyone.’

There were no other questions after that. Everyone seemed to need time to process what they’d just heard. Hector was tempted to ask what they planned to do now, but then he realized that was why they had come here. He saw the Lord Ismael in the front lobby with an entourage of Blackburns around him. Ibai was there, as well.

Chapter One Hundred Nine: ‘O, stalwart deluge...’

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The negotiations were taking a while, but Hector wasn’t complaining. He still just felt privileged for being allowed to observe.

Abel Sebolt and Salvador Delaguna headed up their side of proceedings, though for Salvador’s part, it was his reaper Mevox who did most of the talking. Various others voiced their opinions as well, including Asad and Amaya Sebolt. Naturally, though, Chergoa and Emiliana’s testimonies proved the most crucial.

That was the heart of the issue--how to handle the presence of this aberration. Even now, the Blackburns gave very little ground. They offered testimony from a variety of people, all claiming that Ibai could be trusted, which of course just made everyone on the other side of the table skeptical. At a few different points, Hector grew worried that another fight might break out. And when the arguably more pressing subject of Rheinhal came up, a resolution to the problem of Ibai had still not been reached."

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"957

--Monday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

Ismael Blackburn stood. "Before moving forward on that subject, I must tell you all about Parson Miles of the Vanguard. I am sure most of you are familiar with him, but I do not think any of you know him the way I do."

'I know he's one of the more powerful assbags we're up against,' said Mevox. His nonexistent bones had a darker glow than any other reaper Hector had seen so far. It made him easier to pick out of a crowd.

"Zeff, Evangelina, and I trained under him for several years," said Abel Sebolt. "As did Santos, though only for the few months before Lawrence took Parson's place."

"Let me guess," said Ismael. "You think Parson is a fool?"

Abel tilted his head. "He is a fool. But I was never able to determine if that made him bad at his job."

"Then I give you credit for seeing that much," said Ismael. "But Parson Miles is more than a fool. I am convinced that he intends to destroy each of our houses. He knows of Ibai's existence, and he used that knowledge to coerce us into kidnapping the Elroy children."

'How convenient,' said Mevox. 'Someone to take the blame for you.'

Horatio stood up with Ismael. "We do not pretend to be blameless, but please try to understand our reasoning. Ask yourselves: what did we have to gain by abducting the children? If we wanted them for our own nefarious purposes, then why would we keep them in Marshrock, where we knew you would come looking for them?"

‘Maybe that’s where you keep your freaky torture devices,’ said Mevox.

Horatio’s expression slackened. “This is hardly the time for jokes. The children will confirm that we did not harm them.”

Mevox shrugged. ‘Fine, then, what was your reason?’

“Because the whole point was to draw you away from Rheinhal and keep you occupied,” said Horatio.

“He speaks the truth,” said Ismael. “Parson wanted to divide your forces so that he could deal with you more easily. And given the recent news of Rheinhal, it appears his plan is working. He promised that he would come to Luzo after Rheinhal was secured and rescue us from your siege. Our task was merely to hold out. His only miscalculation seems to have been Lord Asad over there, whose presence allowed you to push your siege more quickly than anticipated.”

The whole room looked to Asad, who just kind of flattened his mouth and scratched his cheek as he observed all the stares.”

"958

Lord Abel spoke next. “What do you hope to gain by telling us this information? I presume you intend to propose some new course of action for us to take.”

“Now that you know about my son, Parson holds no leverage over us,” said Ismael. “I have no reason to lie. And yes. I propose we leave Luzo immediately.”

“You would come with us?” said Abel.

Ismael nodded. “If you allow it, yes. I do not know what Parson would do if he arrived to find only my family here.”

“We cannot simply flee,” said Salvador. “If our kin are held captive, we must retrieve them. Vanguard or not.”

“I understand that,” said Ismael. “Perhaps you do not believe me when I say this, but I do feel similarly. If we had strength, I would agree with you. But you must realize that our forces need time to rest. Melchor and Xuan are both unconscious, and without them, we stand very little chance against Parson--assuming it is he who arrives and not Sanko.”

The Lady Amaya Sebolt nodded. "For all we know, Parson could arrive within the day. I believe the Blackburns speak the truth. Surely, they would not wish to accompany us otherwise."

'Hmm,' mused Mevox. 'I suppose Ammie has a point. I can't imagine you Blackburns would abandon Marshrock just to convince us.'

"Exactly," said Ismael. "The only problem is where do we go? I do not think retreating to Intar would be wise, given how strong the Vanguard's presence is there."

'Not to mention the Intarian Rainlords,' said Mevox. 'Those dickholes haven't lifted a finger to help us. They might turn on us if we show up on their doorstep.'

"To be fair," said Abel, "would we have gone to their aid?"

'Of course not. They're dickholes.'

Abel returned a calm stare, as if waiting for the reaper to realize the hypocrisy there, but it didn't seem to have much effect on Mevox. Hector was fairly certain that Mevox understood what he'd said perfectly well and just didn't give a shit.

And then, it occurred to Hector that if these people needed a place to lay low for a while, he could provide exactly that. But it could also be a terrible idea, another thought argued. He didn't actually know the Rainlords very well, and offering them refuge might well steer an angry Vanguard toward Atreya. What would the Queen think?

Before he could give the matter any more consideration, however, Asad beat him to the punch.

"I invite you all to Moaban," the Sandlord said."

"959

The Rainlords were briefly silent until Mevox piped up.

'Why Moaban?' the reaper asked.

Qorvass chimed in now. 'We have a summer home there which can

accommodate you all comfortably. It is a lovely place. Asad and Imas grew up there. We would invite you to Kuros, but we are not sure how our kin would react to your presence.'

"If you stay in your own territory, the Vanguard will be more likely to find you," said Asad. "But my involvement in your affairs is still a secret, no? Therefore, I think it would be best if you relied on me in this case."

"What are we supposed to do once in Moaban?" said Salvador. "Wait around and hope the Vanguard has a sudden change of heart? They have our kin!"

"It is a bad situation," said Lord Abel, "but our priority now should be to regroup. We can determine our next move later. I believe we should accept Lord Asad's hospitality and leave Luzo immediately."

"Agreed," said Amaya. "In fact, I believe we have already wasted too much time here arguing. The sooner we leave, the better."

Lord Salvador grumbled but conceded a nod.

'Alright, fine,' said Mevox. 'But what about--?'

The reaper stopped talking when the east door opened and a young attendant rushed up to Lord Abel and whispered something to him.

Abel stood up instantly. "I have just been told that the Lord Zeff Elroy has arrived in Luzo."

Hector heard a chorus of gasps, but for his part, he was mainly just confused.

--++--++--

The group gathered beneath the wide overhang of the modest building's front entrance. Zeff and Axiolis lay unconscious in the back of a parked limousine while the reaper Ezura recounted the tale of what had happened to them and her servant, the Lady Evangelina Stroud.

Asad was still having trouble believing that was really Zeff lying there. A part of him had thought he would never see his old friend again, and these were strange circumstances in which to be proven wrong. But after listening to Ezura, it was difficult to feel very relieved.

The ruling Rainlords stood there alongside him, as did the Elroys and Hector. Everyone else who'd been present for negotiations had since dispersed, given instructions to prepare for an immediate departure.

Once Ezura was done talking, Lord Salvador eyed the Blackburns. "It seems you were not lying about Parson Miles."

Lord Ismael merely returned a grim look."  
"960

"Do we have any of the Garzas with us?" asked Abel.

"A few, yes," said Amaya. "Cousin Carlos is quite close with Socorro's daughters."

"So is Lorenzo," said Salvador. "I remember wondering if he was going to ask one of them to marry him."

Amaya smiled weakly. "Those two boys. I would not be surprised if they intended to have a double wedding."

And for a time, no one seemed able to find anything else to say.

Asad hadn't known Socorro very well at all, but it was enough just witnessing the impact that the news of her death was having. These people were well-acquainted with death, of course, but Socorro was one of their peers, someone they had grown up with--not just kin, but an old friend as well.

And this was the second time. Perhaps the Vanguard could claim Mariana's death as incidental, but not so here. Parson Miles had killed Socorro in cold blood.

Asad wished he could do more for these people. Most of all, he wished his own kin could see them the way he did. Maybe things wouldn't have turned out this way.

At length, the conversation resumed as they remembered the sense of urgency. Amaya spoke of finding Socorro's daughters to deliver the news personally. Abel spoke of finding a private place for Ezura to regenerate Evangelina. And they gradually began to disperse.

It was Mevox who stopped everyone. 'Ismael. We never settled the



matter of your son.'

"I suppose we will have to discuss it further in Moaban," said Ismael.

'Not sure that's good enough,' said Mevox. 'What if your son hurts someone during the journey?'

"He won't."

'If only it were that simple,' said Mevox. 'I'd like to believe you; I really would. You probably think I'm just a cynical jackass trying to cause problems for you, but we have to keep your boy under guard. You must be able to understand that much, right?'

"I do," said Ismael. "That is why House Blackburn will be the one doing so."

'That's not good enough, and you know it. How can we trust your people to do what is necessary to stop him?'

"How can I trust that your people will not harm him?"

Qorvass floated forward. 'Might I propose an apparent compromise?'

They waited for him to explain."

"961

--Friday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

'Four servants will remain with Ibai at all times,' said Qorvass. 'Two will be chosen by House Blackburn, and two will be chosen by us. This way, if anyone steps out of line, be it Ibai or one of his guards, someone else will be there to help keep things in order.'

'Or to help escalate things,' amended Mevox.

'That is why I advise everyone to pick your guards wisely,' said Qorvass. 'But I believe this may well be the only fair solution, and since we are pressed for time, I ask that you decide quickly.'

"Very well," said Ismael. "I can agree to those terms."

"As can I," said Abel.

Salvador nodded, and Mevox gave a relenting sigh.

“Go and bring Ibai here,” said Abel. “We will have our two guards chosen by the time you return.”

The Blackburns departed immediately, and shortly thereafter, so did Lady Amaya along with a few of the other Sebolts.

Mevox sighed another time. ‘Agh. Why do I always end up being the asshole?’

Salvador smirked. “Perhaps it is just your natural state of being.”

‘So you’re saying I should embrace it? Alright. Salvador, you have a tiny head.’

“Hey...”

‘You look like a little dude piloting a big dude’s body.’

That earned a chuckle from Asad.

“Don’t just do it to me!” said Salvador. “Asad is standing right there!”

‘Asad, you’re bald, and your tattoos look like doo-doo.’

‘Okay,’ said Qorvass, ‘Perhaps we should go now. Always a pleasure, Mevox.’

‘Same to you, Qorvass, you pile of cancerous dog balls. You son-of-a-bitch-baby’s shit-filled diaper. You stupid-name-having motherfucker. You--’

Everyone was staring.

‘...I’m really sorry. I got too excited.’

A beat passed, and then Qorvass said, ‘I don’t think we should allow Mevox anywhere near the aberration. Agreed?’

“Agreed.”

“Yeah.”

“Indeed.”

‘I hate you all.’

“So who should we choose?” asked Salvador. “I would volunteer myself, if not for this guy.”

‘Oh, whatever! I can control myself, if I want!’

‘Asad can take a later shift, if need be,’ said Qorvass, ‘but he needs to rest first.’

Dimas stepped forward. “I volunteer, at least until Xuan is awake.”

Asad blinked at the man. “That could be days.”

“I will be fine.”

“Dimas has chronic insomnia,” said Lord Abel, eyeing his son. “That does not stop him from becoming tired, however. I will allow you the first shift.”

Dimas nodded.

‘Well, that’s one,’ said Mevox. ‘Who else? How about Lorenzo?’

Hector stepped up. “I, uh... I volunteer, as well.”

"962

--Friday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

Asad eyed the young Lord Goffe. “Are you sure?”

Hector’s expression suggested he was. “I just... I would like to know more about this aberration.”

“I see no problem with that,” said Salvador, slapping a huge hand against Hector’s shoulder. “He held his own against Darktide, didn’t he? And myself, of course. I’d say he qualifies.”

The lone Sandlord frowned. Salvador and the others didn’t know about the shield, but Asad recognized his brother’s work well enough. Hector and Garovel hadn’t explained the details--which was their right, of course--but it still left Asad slightly concerned for them.

He held his tongue, though. He certainly understood the desire to keep one’s true strength a secret. He’d been able to do something similar in his youth, thanks to his tattoos. Without a doubt, they were the

greatest gift his mother had ever given him, though he certainly hadn't thought so while receiving them.

And while Asad reminisced to himself and watched the Elroy children hovering around their sleeping father, his hands drifted into the pockets of his still-tattered robe.

Something metallic was there, he realized. Small and round. A ring.

He pulled it out and stared at it with wide eyes. It was simple enough in design--featureless tungsten carbide on the outside, concealing a row of tiny black spikes on the inside. They would tear into his skin if he put it on, Asad knew, but it was indeed meant to be worn on either one of his middle fingers.

Qorvass noticed the item. 'A new ring?' he said privately and in Valgan. 'When did you get that?'

'...Before we left Kuros,' Asad said, also in Valgan.

'And what does this one do?'

'It enhances the effects of my tattoos.'

The reaper paused. 'Enhances how, exactly?'

'It allows them... to absorb more damage and reflect it back at my opponent.'

'What?! You had something that useful on you this whole time?! Why didn't you ever use it?'

'...I forgot about it.'

'Asad! Are you kidding?! Do you know how helpful that would have been?!'

'I... yes.'

'Why didn't you just show it to me when you first got it?! I would've remembered it for you!'

'...I'd already forgotten by then.'

'That quickly?! Asad!'

'I'm sorry! I remembered it later, on the plane to Rheinhal, but then I

forgot again!"  
"963 -- CX.

--Friday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

'Agh, holy oasis!' said Qorvass. 'I knew your memory wasn't the best, but wow! Even for you, this is a new low. You're only forty-five years old, man. Are you already going senile? Should I stop you from aging any further?'

'I... I'm sure I would've remembered it if things had ever become too desperate.'

'Oh, you mean like when we were fighting off three people at once? Or when Darktide was stomping the hell out of all of our comrades?'

'Hey, everything worked out in the end, didn't it?'

'Yes, and if things had gone differently, you would have let us both die like idiots.'

'You're partly to blame, too. We were sharing memories for quite a while there, and you didn't remember, either.'

'How was I supposed to know that you had forgotten something so important?!'

'You should have checked. You just said that you knew I had a bad memory.'

'I cannot believe you, right now... Agh. If it is that powerful, then you should have just put it on and never taken it off.'

'I was afraid it might blow up.'

'It's a ring. Why would it blow up?'

'Because Haqq made it.'

The reaper hesitated. 'Okay, fair point. But why did you not test it, then?'

'There wasn't time! He gave it to me as I was leaving!'

‘Agh...’

‘Would you stop saying that? I apologized!’

‘AGH.’

Asad pursed his lips and looked over the Rainlords and Hector another time. ‘...Let’s never tell anyone about this.’

‘...Agreed.’

Chapter One Hundred Ten: ‘O, curious devil...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector didn’t let Garovel anywhere near Ibai. Lord Dimas kept the unconscious Izio on his back the whole time, but Hector didn’t have that much confidence. He had Garovel stay with Chergoa and the Elroys, instead.

The reason he’d volunteered was to see for himself whether or not this aberration could be trusted, but so far, there was little clarity to be found. Ibai didn’t do or say anything particularly volatile or dangerous, but perhaps that was only because they were all stuck in a limousine together as their host of Rainlords embarked on the long trip to Moaban.

The Blackburns had chosen Horatio and Silvia for their two bodyguards, and Ibai seemed to enjoy their company greatly, talking about all manner of subjects with them, asking their opinions about what would be fun to do together. Ibai acted like they were all going on a pleasant trip to an amusement park or something."

"963 -- CX.

--Friday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

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"964

Hector didn't much care for the aberration's enthusiasm. Even if it wasn't carrying malicious intent, it still reminded him of Geoffrey.

Eventually, Ibai rounded on Hector and Dimas.

"So what are your names?" he asked. "You never did tell me. Mine's Ibai, but I bet you knew that, eh?"

Hector didn't feel like answering, and apparently, neither did Dimas.

Ibai's smile lessened somewhat. "Mm. You don't like me. I get it. Some of my own family members don't like me very much, either. Fidel, for instance. I always beat him when we thumb wrestle. He hates that."

Was that supposed to be a joke? Or did he actually think that way? Hector honestly couldn't tell. Maybe it was a bit of both.

At their continued silence, Ibai shrugged. "You two don't like to talk much, do you? I understand. And I don't want you to worry, either! I thought this might happen, so I came prepared!" The man reached behind his seat and began pulling out several long, flat boxes.

They were all board games, Hector realized.



Hector didn't need to refuse to talk anymore. He was genuinely speechless. This fucking guy had brought board games to play with the two people who would kill him if he did anything wrong.

"See?" said Ibai. "This way, you don't have to talk. You can let the game speak for you!"

Hector couldn't decide if this was one of the stupidest ideas he'd ever seen or one of the most brilliant.

"What should we play? Hmm, maybe not Monopoly. Probably shouldn't have brought that one..."

What followed was, without a doubt in Hector's mind, the most uncomfortable game of Snakes and Ladders that had ever been played on the face of Eleg.

The second game was slightly less tense. For the third, they switched to Parcheesi; and for the fourth, they played a game called Waterwall, which Hector had never even heard of. The objective was to trap all of one's opponents by building dams and rerouting water, which moved every turn and was represented by a cluster of squiggly-lined pieces.

Ibai won every single game. It didn't seem to matter whether the game was skill- or luck-based. Horatio almost beat him once, but every other time was a complete trouncing.

Hector kept Garovel apprised of everything that was happening--or not happening, rather--and by the time Hector and Dimas' shift ended, Hector was even more confused than when they had started."

"965

The Rainlords had stopped on one of the larger bridges Hector had seen for a brief refueling break. The two gas stations on either side of the road looked a bit overwhelmed by the dozen vehicles that had suddenly arrived. Hector and Dimas walked together as they made their way back to the head of the entourage.

Now that they were away from the aberration, Hector was more interested in talking. "Well, that was... different than I expected."

"Indeed," said Dimas.

"What do you think?" asked Hector.

Dimas nodded lightly. "I think he seems genuine. You?"

"I don't know..." Hector frowned at being the cynical one. "Have you encountered many aberrations before?"

"Two," said Dimas. "I doubt that qualifies as many."

"What were they like?"

"They both tried to kill me within about ten seconds of meeting me."

"Ah..."

"What about you? You seem strangely interested in them."

"Me? Oh... I've only met one, but... but, ah..."

Dimas waited patiently.

A part of Hector still wasn't ready to talk about it. A part of him would never be ready. But a different part urged him to. It wanted him to tell this person. Dimas would understand, Hector thought. Just about any Rainlord would, probably.

So he tried. "The aberration I met... he, uh... he killed my dad. And... many of my friends."

Dimas was briefly quiet. "I am very sorry to hear that," was all he said.

Hector hadn't really been expecting anything more from the man. In fact, that was probably why he decided to tell him. He didn't want to be asked a dozen questions and end up reliving that nightmare.

He tried to think of something else to talk about, but nothing came to mind, and soon enough, they were back with the Elroys. Zeff was still asleep, and now, so was Asad. Asad's daughter Jada had since joined them as well, along with his sister Imas, and with Hector and Dimas added in, the limousine was nearly at maximum occupancy.

The conversation never reached higher than a low murmur. Most everyone seemed either too tired or just not in the mood to talk much, but through the relative quiet, it was clear enough to Hector that Jada knew the Elroys pretty well. She kept the topics light and infrequent, Hector noticed, bringing up things like pets and food and a bit about what Moaban would be like."

--Monday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

"I have been there several times," Jada was saying in that faint Valgan accent. "Raml'hahl is always very nice. Or--I think they call it Dunehall in Mohssian?" She looked to Atalim, her reaper. "Is that right?"

'It is, yes.'

'Dunehall?' said Garovel. 'Is it a fortress?'

'It used to be,' said Atalim. 'It weathered many assaults during its day, but now it serves as home to the local steward, who takes care of it for whenever Hahl Najir visits.' The reaper gave a laugh. 'I imagine he will not be very pleased to see us with so many unannounced guests.'

'Will that be a problem?' asked Chergoa.

'Oh, not at all. He would never disobey Asad. That would jeopardize his cushy job.'

Garovel threw a glance Hector's way. 'Speaking of fortresses,' he said publicly, 'Hector was given a really nice castle by the Queen of Atreya.'

Hector felt compelled to interject. "Nice might be the wrong word for it, Garovel..."

'Okay. We have a really interesting castle. You guys should come visit. And perhaps stay awhile.'

'Uh,' said Chergoa, 'we're kinda busy with things here in Sair, in case you haven't noticed.'

'Busy? Are you planning on getting kidnapped a second time?'

'Hilarious. We're not going anywhere without Emiliana's family.'

'Well, I didn't mean right this second. And they're all invited, too, of course. Warrenhold has plenty of room.'

'I wasn't questioning its spaciousness. Most castles are pretty big.'

'Ours is a little TOO big, actually. Enough so that we're not really sure

what to do with it all. It's possibly the largest castle I've ever seen, now that I'm thinking about it.'

Chergoa cocked a skeletal eyebrow. 'Ever?'

'Maybe. I'm not sure. You definitely have to see it for yourself, someday. It would be a great place to lay low, if needed, and we would certainly welcome you, despite all of your horrendous character flaws.'

'Thank you,' Chergoa said flatly.

'Did you say Warrenhold?' asked Shenado. She'd been mostly quiet up to now, which seemed to make everyone more interested in hearing what she had to say.

'I did,' said Garovel. 'You know of it?'

'Not from personal experience, but I've heard Axiolis talk about how much he hates that place,' said Shenado.

Garovel let out a laugh. 'Really? Why? It wouldn't have anything to do with the Redwater Uprising, would it?'

'Ah, so you know about that.'"

"967

--Monday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

'A friend of ours was able to tell us some of Warrenhold's history,' said Garovel. 'It's our understanding that the castle caused trouble for some folks who were looking to kill a few kings, yes?'

'Yes,' said Shenado. 'Those kings needed to die in order for several of the Rainlords' allies to seize power and provide much needed aid during the Uprising. Many of the Rainlords themselves were dispatched to help take the castle, but instead of the swift victory that they were expecting, they encountered a struggle that lasted decades.'

'Ah, well, perhaps Axiolis will be pleased to know that Hector bears no relation to any of Warrenhold's previous occupants,' said Garovel.

Shenado tilted her skull to the side. 'He said if it weren't for Warrenhold, the Rainlords would have had all the support they needed in a dozen other key battles across the continent and wouldn't have

suffered such heavy losses.'

'Mm. Then... hopefully, he'll be pleased to know that it is now occupied by a friendly face.'

'He also said that it was cursed.'

'Oh, well, that's not--'

'He said, even after it was taken, the castle drove people mad and caused all manner of political turmoil.'

'Axiolis is mistaken. I would be happy to--'

'You tryin' to invite us to some cursed pile of dog shit?' said Chergoa.  
'The hell is wrong with you?'

'It's not cursed! It's just misunderstood!'

'Uh-huh, sure it is. I bet it's just teeming with ghosts 'n shit.'

'Ghosts aren't real,' said Garovel.

'You don't know that.'

'Actually, I do. And so do you.'

'If ghosts aren't real, then what do you call us?'

'Reapers aren't ghosts!'

'Aren't we, though? I mean, we're people who've died, right?'

'It's not the same!'

'It kinda is.'

Garovel sighed. 'Okay, so by that logic, you are therefore worried that Warrenhold is teeming with reapers.'

'Well, I was more worried about the dog shit part.'

'There's no dog shit!'

'So you say...'

'Ugh. Whatever. You'll see it for yourself when you visit.'

'I don't wanna visit a place filled with that much dog shit.'

'Chergoa, I will end you.'

She just laughed.

Hector would have kept listening, but Ramira poked him in the face with her iron spider. She'd insisted that he sit next to her, and he couldn't very well refuse. And besides, sitting next to a little girl was way less intimidating than sitting next to anyone else in this car. Except maybe Dimas, who was sitting on Hector's other side.

"What's the matter?" Hector asked.

"You never told me your name, you big lump."

She was right, he realized. The reapers had handled all the introductions, which she obviously hadn't been able to hear."

"968

--Monday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

"Ah... sorry. My name is Hector Goffe. I'm from a country called Atreya."

"Where is that?" Ramira asked.

"It's, uh... to the southwest of here."

"Why did you come to Sair, then? To help us?"

"Er... s-sorta..."

"And why are you helping us, huh?"

"Oh, um, because my reaper is the brother of Emiliana's reaper."

Ramira squinted at him. "So you're the servant... of the brother... of the reaper of my sister?"

"Y-yes... I think."

"That's really hard to remember."

"Y-yeah..."

Emiliana decided to pitch in. "Perhaps it would be easier to think of Lord Hector as a very distant cousin."

"Ah--" He raised a hand slightly. "Lord--um--you don't have to--I mean, I'm not really a... er..."

"Oh, I am sorry," she said. "Was I mistaken? I thought you were an Atreyan Lord."

"Well... I am, technically."

Emiliana tilted her masked head at him. "Then what is the problem?"

"Ah, uh, sorry." He could feel himself losing what little composure he had. He needed to concentrate and find his footing again. "I'm just, er-- I'm just not a--accustomed to it, I guess. Because I wasn't born into it, I mean. So, um, please, um. Please j-just call me Hector. Please." There were way too many pleases in there, he realized.

Emiliana just stared at him a moment. "Very well..."

Ramira eyed him another time. "Cousin Hector, huh? Mmkay."

And he was abruptly reminded of having that same thought when he first saw their pictures. Cousins. The memory made him blush, and he had to hide it by rubbing his face, as if out of exhaustion. Thankfully, he actually was exhausted, so that wasn't too much of a stretch.

He could hardly believe they'd said that. And agreed about it. Cousins. Family. When the thought had been his own, he'd chalked it up to wishful thinking and dismissed it, but now... now, it actually had a sense of legitimacy. Of reality.

But maybe he was overreacting. In fact, he definitely was, he decided. These were Rainlords. They probably had more distant relatives than they could keep track of. One more cousin wouldn't be a big deal to them, surely, so he shouldn't let it be a big deal to him, either.

But it was. In spite of himself, it was. And he had no idea what to do about it, because it embarrassed the living shit out of him."

"969

Ramira yawned and then prodded him with another question. "So how did you become a lord in your country if you weren't born into it?"

"Ah, uh... it's a recent thing. And kind of a long story."

Her big gray eyes seemed to be telling him that she was ready for a long story.

He hesitated, of course, but he gave it a go, beginning with how he met the Queen and giving the highlights from there. And before long, he could see the little girl slowly drifting off to sleep. He didn't really blame her, though. He wasn't so great at this storytelling thing, and in spite of all her energy, Ramira had looked pretty tired even since before leaving Luzo. And it actually made the story easier to tell, he found. There was less pressure to get it right when it felt like she was hardly even listening.

At length, Ramira was out cold. And the mask made it hard to tell, but judging from Emiliana's breathing and the fact that she hadn't moved her head at all in the last few minutes, she seemed to be out, too. Marcos, as well, had fallen asleep on Dimas' shoulder.

'We might as well get some rest, too,' said Garovel. He attached himself to Hector's shoulder, and Hector fell quickly into unconsciousness.

The warm darkness washed over him. Familiar and welcome and gone too soon.

He awoke to the realization that the limousine was no longer moving. Garovel was awake, too, but the Elroy children were still asleep.

And Ramira was leaning against his shoulder.

He tensed up, having to resist the impulse to jump out of his seat. If not for a very potent concern that he would accidentally hurt the poor girl, Hector was pretty sure that he would have ended up ripping one of the doors off the vehicle while trying to escape.

Garovel floated in front of him. 'You okay there, buddy?'

Hector just glared at the reaper with a clenched jaw.

'Just relax,' Garovel said privately, unable to hide his laughter completely. 'She's not going to hurt you.'



‘Garovel...’

‘Think of this as practice. Y’know, for when you have to touch someone who is actually conscious.’

‘You did this on purpose...’

‘Hey, I didn’t make her fall asleep on you. She did that on her own.’

‘You woke me up.’

‘Oh, did I? My hand must have slipped.’

‘Garovel!’

‘I do have hands, don’t I?’”

"970

Hector sighed through his nose. ‘Why do you have to torture me like this?’

‘Shits and giggles, primarily.’

‘Garovel...’

‘Oh, come on. This is adorable. Just try thinking about something else. Like why we’ve stopped or where Dimas went.’

Hector hesitated. He hadn’t even noticed that the man was gone. He couldn’t hear the rain anymore, either.

‘You’ve all been out for a while,’ Garovel went on. ‘We’ve already reached the Waress Mountains.’

‘...I’ve heard of those, I think.’

‘I should hope so. They divide the whole friggin’ continent.’

‘R-right...’

‘Also, we flew over them when we left Kuros.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’re gonna have to get you an atlas or something when we get back to Warrenhold. Oh, or you could craft a big iron globe! That could be a neat project. Make it big enough for people to walk into and look at from the inside. I saw a globe like that once. It got destroyed in a fire, though. Yeah, I should definitely have you recreate it. Could be good for tourism, too. Though, if it’s for tourism, then it might be best to put it above ground somewhere. Hmm. It’d look good underground, too, I’m sure. Maybe we could just have--’

‘Uh, Garovel?’

‘What?’

‘Where DID Dimas go?’

‘Oh, he’s scouting ahead to make sure the Tunnels are safe.’

‘Tunnels?’

‘Yup. That’s the other reason why I woke you up. You haven’t seen them before, have you? The Wares Tunnels?’

Hector tilted his head. ‘Uh...’

‘C’mon, then. Get out of the car.’

‘But I’ll wake up Ramira if I move...’

‘Eh, I think you can avoid waking her. C’mon.’

Slowly, Hector pulled himself away from the little girl. He tried not to jostle her too much.

She woke up, anyway.

Hector threw Garovel a look.

The reaper shrugged. ‘Well, maybe she’ll want to see them, too.’

Hector tried to apologize to Ramira, but she didn’t seem too concerned about it, and then Marcos and Emiliana began to stir as well. In the end, they just exited the vehicle together.

And finally, Hector could see what all the fuss was about.

A rocky cliff face towered before the entourage of limousines. It shot up at such a steep angle that, if not for its eroded ridges, Hector would

have thought it was manmade. And yet, even with how tall it was and how much of his vision it consumed, the mountain peaks behind it were still more gigantic."

"971

The Tunnels themselves were rather difficult to miss. There were three of them, right in a row, and they were so massive that Hector wasn't sure they qualified as tunnels anymore, particularly because he could see buildings inside them. There were restaurants, gas stations, a few office buildings, and even what looked like residential housing. Sure, they were a bit crammed together--some being partially embedded into the walls or serving as a foundation to an immense support column--but Hector could still hardly believe his eyes.

Most of all, though, Hector admired the vast inlaid stonework. Perhaps it was because he'd recently been trying his own hand at construction back at Warrenhold. The sheer volume of individual bricks that lined the walls here astounded him.

The Elroys observed alongside him, though did not seem particularly surprised. No doubt, they had already known of this place or even been here before.

Garovel offered Hector some context in private. 'The Lyzakks made these tunnels. You remember them, right?'

'Your people,' said Hector.

'Yep. The Wares Mountains stood between them and the Armans. But instead of going over, they punched through.'

Hector scratched his head. 'So I guess these were servant-made?'

'Servants in conjunction with slave-labor.'

'Oh. That's... kind of horrible.'

'Yeah. It was a different time. A time full of shitheaded motherfuckers.'

'Mm...'

'Not that we have a shortage of those nowadays.'

‘A tunnel seems like a dangerous way for us to go,’ said Hector. ‘It’s, um... like, a pretty obvious funnel point, isn’t it? I mean, won’t the Vanguard be guarding it?’

Garovel shook his head. ‘The Wares Tunnels are more than just the three you see here. Just in Sair alone, they number in the hundreds. The Vanguard would have a hell of a time trying to block them all. But yes, in the off chance that the Vanguard picked one of these three, Dimas has taken a scouting party ahead.’

‘Ah...’

From their vantage point atop a southern bluff, Hector could see all the different roads converging in front of the Tunnels. It seemed like some kind of major intersection, what with all the directional signs about, but there wasn’t very much traffic to speak of. Only a handful of cars dotted the road. Hector wondered if it was always like this or if the Rainlords had evacuated the place while he’d slept."

"972

‘You should give Lynn a call,’ said Garovel, still privately.

Hector pressed his lips together flatly.

‘Don’t you want to know how things went in Kuros? And how she’s doing? And what she’s wearing?’

Hector just sighed and rubbed his brow with one hand.

‘Seriously, though, you should call her. She might be able to give us an idea of what’s going on with the Sandlords.’

‘She might’ve already returned to Atreya,’ said Hector.

‘Yup.’

Hector paused. ‘Uh... how are WE gonna get back to Atreya, by the way?’

Garovel shrugged. ‘Asad seems pretty rich. Maybe he has a jet we can borrow.’

‘Who the fuck would let anyone “borrow” a jet?’

‘Well, maybe a motorcycle, then.’

‘Agh...’

‘Come to think of it, you should probably call Amelia, too. Seems like we might not return to Warrenhold for a little while.’

That brought up a question that had been lingering in the back of Hector’s mind. ‘Ah... how long are we going to stay with these people, do you think?’

‘Not sure.’

‘It’s just... after we get to this Moaban place, uh--I mean, then what? We can’t just stay with the Rainlords indefinitely...’

Garovel made no response.

‘Er--I’m not saying I wanna abandon them or anything,’ Hector added. ‘It’s just, uh... ah--’

‘I know,’ said Garovel.

‘Do you have a plan?’ Hector asked, fishing into his pocket for his phone.

‘Well, I’d like Chergoa to return with us,’ the reaper said. He threw a look toward his sister, who was busy hovering around Emiliana. ‘But that seems unlikely, at the moment. I’m hoping I can find a way to convince her.’

‘...What if you can’t?’

Garovel gave an echoing sigh. ‘Then I guess we’ll just have to go our separate ways again. But at least she’ll know where to find me, if she needs to. I suppose that would be enough.’

Hector frowned. He hated feeling so helpless, but he didn’t see much point in pressing the issue. He found Lynn’s number and called her.

She answered after a few rings. <“Hector?”>

Predictably, he had trouble responding.

<“...Are you doing that thing you always do, or did the call actually drop?”>

“N-no, I’m here.”

<“Okay, good. What’s up?”>

Again, no words came out.

<“...Good goddess, Hector. Come on.”>

“Ah--sorry. I was just... uh, wondering, um... ah... I, er...”

<“...You were just wondering what?! Don’t say something like that and then leave out the important part!”>

"973

Hector just froze up again. He heard Lynn sigh.

<“Alright, well... can you at least tell me if you will be returning to Kuros anytime soon?”>

“Oh. Um. Er... are you still in Kuros?”

<“Yeah. After you left, Prince Meriwether decided to stay a while longer and spend some extra time with his children. I think he was worried about leaving you without a ride back to Atreya.”>

“Ah... o-okay. But I don’t, uh... I don’t think I’ll be back in Kuros very soon. You probably shouldn’t wait for me. I’ll try to bum a ride off the Rainlords or something.”

<“Okay. How are things going with them, anyway? I’ve been following the news, but it hasn’t been able to tell me much, other than the fact there’ve been a lot of evacuations.”>

“Ah, things have...” He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “Er, things’ve gone fairly well, actually. I was kinda surprised, uh. I thought there’d be a lot of casualties, but I haven’t seen any whatsoever.”

<“Really?”>

“Yeah. The Rainlords are really nice, too. Very, um--very careful and respectful.” He paused. “Well, most of them, anyway...”

<“Huh. That’s good to hear.”>

Hector felt an awkward silence creeping in and snapped to the realization that it was his turn to pose a question. "W-what, um, what about you? How did the, uh... the thing go?"

Lynn breathed half a laugh. <"The thing?">

"The, ah... agh, the negotiation thing? Between the Prince and Lord Saqqaf?"

<"Oh, I'm not too sure. Lord Saqqaf agreed to provide us with some money, but I think Prince Meriwether had been hoping for a lot more.">

Hector scratched his cheek with his free hand. He felt like there was a more important question he should ask, but all he could think of was, "What was Lord Saqqaf like? I mean--er, did you meet him?"

<"Yeah, I met him. He asked me where I got my gauntlet.">

"Oh. What'd you tell him?"

<"That the Vanguard gave it to me.">

"Eesh... you sure that was wise?"

<"Not really, no. What would you have said?">

"Uh... hmm."

<"Exactly.">

"Maybe... an unnamed friend gave it to you."

<"Then he might've asked who.">

"Well, you could've said that you were protecting their identity or something."

<"Oh yeah, because that doesn't sound suspicious.">

"Hmm..."

Garovel decided to intervene. "This is a lovely chat 'n all, but you should ask about the Sandlords."

"974

Hector straightened. "Ah... Garovel wants to know about the Sandlords."

<"What about them?">

"What about them, Garovel?"

The reaper's bony brow twisted. 'Ask what they're up to. We heard they were having trouble with Abolish before, so have there been any notable developments with that? Or any other problems, maybe?'

It took him a bit longer, but Hector relayed the reaper's questions. More or less.

<"As far as I can tell, the Sandlords don't like to discuss that type of thing openly,"> said Lynn. <"But the news has been a little odd.">

"Odd, how?"

<"Ah---um, I should preface this by saying that I had to ask someone to translate for me. The news is in Valgan, you know, so... just, don't get mad at me if I got something wrong here, alright?">

Hector blinked as he listened, feeling a sudden worry that his own awful speech patterns might be having some kind of negative effect on her. And without even thinking, he said, "I doubt I could ever get mad at you."

There came a very long pause.

His eyes widened as he realized what had just come out of his mouth. He wanted to take it back, but he was too afraid to say anything else. When he looked at Garovel, the reaper's hollow eye sockets had grown larger as well.

<"...Well, uh."> It was her turn to clear her throat. <"I just thought the news seemed odd because there are a lot of mysterious reports going around. Freak industrial accidents. Disappearing pets. Brushfires. Even a rise in burglaries and murders.">

Hector's brow lowered. "Where have these things been happening?"

<"Zebul, Guldamere, Shara, Egas--all over eastern Sair.">

"Hmm... Do they think it's Abolish?"



<“I assume so, but who knows? This place has been so busy. It seems like the Sandlords have had to dispatch people to investigate a new problem every few hours.”>

“Huh. That’s... unsettling.”

<“Yeah.”>

“Maybe you should head back to Atreya soon...”

<“Ha. That’s not up to me, Hector. Why? Are you worried about us?”>

“Uh... well, yeah. These Rainlords and Sandlords... they’re no joke, Lynn. I’ve seen them fight with my own eyes, and they scare the hell out of me--way more than anyone we fought back home. So... I mean, anyone who thinks they can go up against these guys is either really stupid or really dangerous.”

<“I see. Well, I’m sure Prince Meriwether knows that, too, but I’ll tell him what you said.”>

"975

Again, Hector wasn’t sure what to say, so he just said, “O-okay. Uh. Good.”

<“You’re being careful, too, aren’t you?”> said Lynn. <“Maybe I’m not the best person to give a lecture on not taking risks, but... um...”>

Hector felt like he was supposed to say something here, but jack shit came to mind, and he looked to Garovel another time.

‘Tell her you’re being careful, you idiot.’

‘But I’m not really--’

‘SHUT UP AND LIE TO HER. DO IT NOW.’

“Uh--y-y-yeah,” Hector blurted, “I’m being cautious. I mean, I have to protect Garovel ‘n all, so...”

<“...Right.”>

He couldn’t tell if that meant she’d bought it or not. After a few more

moments of unbearable silence, however, he decided to try and end this before he said some other stupid thing. "Well, uh... I should probably go now..."

<"Ah--alright. Talk to you later, then.">

"Bye. Uh. Good to--er. Bye." His expression twisted as he hung up. He took a deep breath and shook his head.

'Hector.' Garovel's voice was perfectly flat. 'What in the holiest of fucks was all that about?'

'I don't know... I always fuck things up. Agh...'

'Hmm. You don't even realize it, do you?'

He sighed. 'Realize what?'

'How WELL you just did. I mean. For you. That was pretty incredible.'

'What? Garovel, I'm really not in the mood to be made fun of right now...'

Garovel just stared at him.

And Hector didn't understand the reaper's abrupt silence, but he was grateful for it, nonetheless. He sifted through his phone for Madame Carthrace's number, and his feet wandered closer to the edge of the small ridge, allowing a better view of the road directly below. It wasn't a long drop, and he noticed a few people with familiar faces standing at the base. One of those faces belonged to Ibai Blackburn.

As luck would have it, the aberration happened to be looking up at that same moment and so noticed Hector immediately. A swirl of brown shadow later, Ibai was standing right there next to him.

Hector decided to pocket his phone and call Amelia later.

Ibai was smiling, of course. "Hello again," he said as his four bodyguards bounded up from behind him. They landed with one quick thud after another, but he paid them no mind. "Ah, is this your reaper? We were never properly introduced. I'm Ibai."

'Charmed,' said Garovel."

Horatio was still among the bodyguards, Hector noticed. "Ibai, you have to stay with us," the man said with bags under his eyes. "You cannot just teleport away whenever you like."

"Eh, I'm pretty sure I can."

"No," Horatio growled. "What if you accidentally teleported inside of a person?"

"There's no risk of that," said Ibai. "I can see everyone's soul when I do it. Here, let me show you."

"Wait--"

Ibai grabbed his cousin's arm, and they blinked away together. Hector couldn't tell where they'd gone, but it didn't matter, because they returned to the same spot a moment later. Horatio looked like he was about to puke.

"Oh, whoops," said Ibai. "Sorry. I didn't even think about your motion sickness. Did that actually trigger it? You weren't really moving, you know."

Horatio just held up a hand and stared at the ground. Everyone waited for him to speak, but he said nothing further.

Ibai shrugged and turned back to Hector. "Well, anyway! Would you believe you're the first black person I've ever met?"

Hector did not respond.

"I've seen some of you on television and such, but I've never had the pleasure to speak with one personally. Isn't that something?"

Hector had to refrain from telling him that he still did not have the pleasure of speaking with one.

"I know there's a pretty profound age difference here," Ibai went on, "but would you like to be my first black friend? I've always wanted one."

Hector could only squint at the man. With the way Ibai spoke, it was somehow easy for Hector to forget that this person was quite clearly a middle-aged man.

“Or wait. Was that a racist thing to ask? If so, then I apologize. I’ve never had very many friends, you see. Well, I’ve had my family, of course. They’ve provided such fantastic companionship; I wouldn’t want to give the impression that they haven’t. I love them very much.” He slapped Horatio’s shoulder.

Horatio turned and barfed over the edge of the cliff.

“There you go, cousin,” said Ibai. “Feel better?”

Horatio just returned a deathly stare as he wiped his mouth.

“But yes,” Ibai continued to Hector, “they are my family. It’s a different sort of relationship. I feel there is something uniquely special about becoming friends with someone who is in no way obligated to you already. It’s a bit purer, in an odd way. Or perhaps I am just romanticizing it. What do you think?”

"977

Strangely, Hector knew exactly what Ibai was talking about. In his lonelier days, he’d often pondered the nature of companionship himself, and indeed, he’d reached a similar conclusion. There was something different about the approval of others, of strangers. It vindicated one’s existence, perhaps. That was what he’d come to believe, anyway.

But he certainly hadn’t expected to be reminded of that now of all times.

Hector still didn’t know how to respond, though. No one had ever been so direct about asking for his friendship before, but he wasn’t sure how he felt about becoming someone’s token black friend, let alone an aberration’s token black friend. His gut told him there wasn’t much harm in it, but even still...

Garovel spoke up in his stead. ‘We would love to be your friends.’

Hector gave the reaper a look.

Ibai’s eyes lit up. “Really?!”

‘Sure, why not?’ said Garovel. ‘You seem like a nice enough fellow--

and not a bloodthirsty psychopath. People who aren't bloodthirsty psychopaths are my favorite, you know.'

"Is that so?! Well, that's just wonderful!"

'Oh, and I'm sorry that my buddy here is so quiet,' said Garovel. 'It's nothing against you. He's like this with most people. He's super shy, you see.'

"Oh! Shy! That explains it! Aha!" He gave Hector an even bigger smile, somehow. "I was afraid that you hated me! Wow! That is such a relief, then. Whew."

Hector could only wonder where Garovel was going with this.

'We heard all about you from Chergoa. She's my sister, as it happens.'

"Wow, that's amazing! I'd love to talk to her and Emiliana again! They were so nice!"

'I'm sure they'd like that,' said Garovel. 'By the way, how old are you?'

"Oh, I'm thirty-five. Why?"

'Ah, no reason. I'm curious to know how long aberrations have been around. I wasn't familiar with your kind until very recently. It's just that the last aberration we met was only about twenty years old or so.'

"Ooh, what was he like?"

'Not nearly as pleasant as you, to be sure. He hurt a lot of innocent people.'

"Aww... I'm sorry to hear that. I suppose I should have guessed. What happened to him?"

'My buddy here killed him.'

Ibai looked to Hector again. "Did you, now? Hmm. Was that difficult?"

Now there was a question that Hector wanted to answer. "Not so much so that I wouldn't do it again."

Ibai's smile waned for a second, but then he broke into a laugh.

"You're kinda scary! I bet you'd get along with Uncle Mel!"

Hector wasn't surprised by that reaction in the slightest, but this "Uncle Mel" caught his attention.

Garovel inquired for the both of them. 'Uncle Mel? He wouldn't happen to be Darktide, would he?'

Ibai nodded. "Mmhhh. Technically, he's not my uncle. He's just a super old cousin, but he's always been like Papa's big brother."

'How is he doing, by the way?' Garovel asked. 'Still sleeping, I take it?'

"Yes," said Horatio, who seemed to have regained his composure. "And what of your Seadevil?"

'Oh, he's not OUR Seadevil,' said Garovel. 'We're not Rainlords, in case you hadn't already guessed.'

"Ah." Horatio tilted his head. "I thought your servant had perhaps married into one of the families."

'No, no. I'm Garovel, and this is Hector Goffe, the Lord of Warrenhold in Atreya. We only came to see my sister. Got a little more from this visit than we bargained for, you might say.'

"Oh, so you're not even from Sair!" said Ibai. "Is this your first time seeing the Tunnels, then?" He didn't wait for an answer this time. "Mine, too! Pictures really don't do them justice! Did you know that they've been used since ancient times in order to transport vital resources? Even when the Rainlords and Sandlords were at war! They traded valuable materials even while they were trying to stab each other in the back!"

'Really?' said Garovel, and Hector couldn't tell if the reaper was genuinely interested or just playing along. 'That seems kind of counterintuitive, doesn't it?'

"I know, right?!" said Ibai. "They used to poison each other's stuff! But the thing was, neither side trusted the other, and they would always expect it to be some kind of trap. So they'd test their imports really well, and decontaminate it and use it, if they could. If not, they'd try to find some sneaky way of sending it back. It was a really crazy time! Our ancestors were lunatics! I wish I could've met some of them!"

‘Some of your family’s reapers must have lived through those times, no?’

“Well, sure, but it’s not the same,” said Ibai. “And besides, Rholtam and Orric never share any of their stories, even though I’m sure they must have tons of juicy ones. What about you, Garovel? You must have some neat stories.”

‘Oh, of course,’ said Garovel. ‘But unfortunately, I sense Lord Dimas returning from his scouting mission. Story time will have to wait.’

“Aww...”

"979 -- CXI.

Chapter One Hundred Eleven: ‘Thy respite, embrace...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The Wares Tunnels were longer than Hector could have imagined. Much of the journey was spent in darkness. The headlights of all the limousines in their party often weren’t enough to reach the walls or ceiling, which gave the illusion of a pitch black night all around them. Exceptions came via the brightly lit intersections where the Tunnels crossed paths with one another, usually accompanied by some kind of refueling station or resting point. They didn’t stop at any of them, but Hector wondered what it would be like to work in such a place. He didn’t think he’d be able to handle something this isolated. More than that, though, he wondered about any poor folks who’d had their vehicles break down in here. He supposed that problem was one of the main reasons for all the rest stops, but even still. That’d suck pretty hard, he figured.

At length, they finally made it out, and even the limousine’s tinted windows were not enough to stop everyone from having to shield their eyes from the daylight. It had only been a few hours, according to Hector’s phone, but it felt like an entire night had passed.

Chergoa and Garovel never seemed to run out of things to talk about. On and on and on, they spoke, exchanging information, talking about new and old friends, discussing politics and science and history and something about a dog smoking a cigar. Hector had kind of stopped

listening by that point--and so had the Elroys, by the look of it.

After a while longer, Hector managed to get a bit more sleep. When he awoke, he saw that Dimas was still awake if the dark circles under his eyes were any indication.

“...You should really get some sleep,” said Hector.

Dimas’s gaze was even more potent than usual. “I did,” he said. “For about ten minutes.”

Hector just frowned at him.

“I am not staying awake because I want to,” Dimas added. “I cannot usually sleep unless Iziol knocks me unconscious.”

“Oh,” Hector said. “What about sleeping pills?”

“...I cannot swallow pills.”

“Ah... er, don’t they make stuff you can drink?”

“...It tastes funny.”

Hector opened his mouth and then closed it again.

‘Don’t bother,’ came Iziol’s groggy voice. He stirred on Dimas’ shoulder but didn’t detach himself. ‘I told him there are different flavors, but he never listens.’”

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"It all tastes funny," said Dimas, sounding rather unlike a lord--or even an adult person, Hector thought.

Hector kept that opinion to himself, though.

'So unreasonable,' said Iziol. 'He was like this even before I became his reaper, you know. When he was a child, he would stay awake for days upon days and eventually just pass out from exhaustion. One time, he collapsed in the middle of a track race, and another child tripped over him and broke a tooth.'

"Uh, wow..." Hector checked Dimas' expression, but the man just looked out the window.

'It was quite bad,' said Iziol. 'At one point, Lady Amaya resorted to having his dinner laced with soporifics.'

Dimas turned back around. "...Is that true?"

'Oh indeed. You never talked, so people could not tell that, in actuality, you were a spoiled brat who rarely ever did as he was told.' Iziol gave a faint laugh. 'And that, I would say, has not changed very much.'

Dimas exhaled a short breath, and Hector saw him crack a tiny smile.

After that, Iziol offered to knock him out, but Dimas refused, citing the fact that Xuan and Duvoss were still unconscious. Iziol argued, but not very fervently, and soon drifted back to sleep himself.

And Hector just sat there in silent awe of this person next to him. He barely even knew the man, but his respect for Lord Dimas had already grown by leaps and bounds. He could imagine the weight that Dimas must have been feeling upon his shoulders after hearing the news of Rheinhal. This man was one of the strongest remaining Rainlords. So many people were relying on him to protect them.

Of course, Hector had felt that kind of pressure before, as well. A few times, in truth. And it had never stopped being terrifying, especially after seeing just how badly things could go wrong.

But that was also the point, he was realizing. Yes, of course, the worst could happen. Everyone could end up dead, and everything could be for naught. That was why people needed someone to protect them.

Things were not going to just be okay on their own. Someone had to make them okay.

And that was why he wanted to keep living. To be that someone.

He'd felt all of these things in the back of his mind for some time already, but it was somehow different here. Making them explicit. Asserting his own sense of purpose to himself."

"981

Hector rubbed his face, trying to clear his head again. He wasn't sure where all these thoughts were coming from. Maybe it was just the Rainlords' presence. He envied the bond they all shared. Even after nearly killing each other, they were still trying to work through everything together.

At length, Garovel rounded on him, wrapped in the echo of privacy. 'How ya doin', buddy? You've been staring out the window for a while now.'

'Oh, I'm fine,' he said. Ramira had ceded the window seat to him. Now she was sitting perpendicular to him, adjacent her sister against the side of the limousine. 'I was just, uh... er, lost in thought, I guess.'

'About what?' said Garovel. 'Ibai?'

That wasn't the correct answer, of course, but now that Garovel had brought it up, it seemed like a much more interesting subject for discussion. 'What do you think of him?' Hector asked.

'Oh, I have no fucking idea,' said Garovel.

'You were awfully friendly with him back there...'

'We're not here to make enemies, Hector.'

Hector's expression hardened. 'We are if they're going to kill innocent people.'

'Ha.' Garovel returned that hollow stare of his. 'Allow me to put it another way, then. If Ibai is our enemy, it's better that he believes he's our friend.'

Hector looked out the window again. 'Hmm...'

'And if he's NOT our enemy, then he could be a very valuable ally. A power like his? Can you imagine how helpful that could be?'

Hector could. 'A good aberration... I'd like to believe it.'

'I think most of us would.'

'The trouble is knowing so.'

'It's impossible to know. Even if he weren't an aberration, it would be impossible. Anyone could betray us, under the right circumstances.'

'Yeah, but you know what I mean. It's not the same.'

'Maybe it is the same. There are plenty of normal people out there who are complete lunatics, too, y'know. And all things considered, we really don't know very much about aberrations.'

'I realize that. And I realize that Ibai might help us learn more about them. But that doesn't mean I'm in a hurry to trust him.'

'Mm. Well, there's no use worrying about it right now. And you look gloomy as hell in your little corner here. Let's talk about something lighter.'

'Like what?'

'Like how much fun that fight against Darktide was!'

Hector gave the reaper a look. 'Fun?'

'Yeah. Y'know. Fun in a pants-shittingly-terrifying kind of way.'

"982

'I didn't realize that qualified as a kind of fun,' said Hector.

'Oh, sure. Like mountain climbing. Or skydiving. Or playing that version of rock-paper-scissors where the loser gets kicked in the testicles.'

'...I knew some guys in middle school who did that last one.'

'Really?'

‘...I did it, too, actually. I was part of their group.’

The reaper paused. ‘You’re fuckin’ with me.’

Hector flushed a little and covered his embarrassed smile with one hand. ‘Sadly, I’m not...’

‘Wow. I bet that was a learning experience.’

‘You could say that...’

‘These weren’t the kids from the carpentry club, were they?’

‘Oh, no. Carpentry club was high school. These guys were middle school.’

‘Right. And these idiots were your friends?’

‘I wasn’t... I mean, they weren’t... ah... Yeah, pretty much.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘Well, one moved away. One got expelled for punching a teacher. And the last one got sent to juvie for setting the school on fire.’

‘What the fuck?’

‘I don’t think he meant for it to get that big. And nobody got hurt. He was just kind of a pyro and...’

‘And a dumbass?’

‘Well... yeah.’

Garovel snorted a laugh. ‘I’m seeing you in a whole new light, Hector. Were you a troublemaker, too?’

‘I, uh... I tried to be, but I wasn’t very good at it.’

‘Oh, well, now I need details.’

‘Ah... okay.’ Hector took a breath and scratched his chin. ‘One time, I tried to steal a pack of cigarettes from a guy. I accidentally took his wallet, instead. I felt so bad that I just pretended he’d dropped it and gave it back to him.’

‘Wow.’

‘He gave me twenty troas.’

Garovel snorted again. ‘Smooth. What other terrible crimes have you committed?’

‘Uh... I put graffiti inside a public bathroom.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yeah. It said, “Wait here if you wanna see some real shit go down” and had a picture of a dude pooping.’

The reaper laughed publicly this time and drew glances from the others in the car. ‘You didn’t really do that, did you?’

‘I thought it would get me in trouble! That was the whole point! Then I saw a fucking cop walk in. He asked if I was the one who did it. I said yes. He just laughed at me, took a really loud dump, and left.’

‘Knowing you, I one hundred percent believe that story.’

"983

‘Really?’ said Hector. ‘I figured you would think I’d never be able to do something like that.’

‘We were all young and stupid once,’ said Garovel. ‘Hell, you still are.’

‘Fuck you.’

The reaper snickered. ‘Actually, I’d say you’re strangely mature for your age. In fact, sometimes I forget how young you are.’

The sudden compliment made Hector hesitate. ‘...Really?’

‘Yep. But then again, it might just be your natural gloominess. Adults are all jaded fucks, y’know, so a kid can seem older by acting all dour and cynical. Little tip for ya.’

‘Mm. I kinda knew that already, I think...’

‘Not surprising. Were there any other bad things you tried to do?’

‘Well... uh... nah, I guess not.’

‘Seriously?’ said Garovel. ‘That’s it? Two things? That’s your terrible list of past misconduct?’

‘...I jaywalked a couple times.’

‘What a thug. I guess you were just fated to be on the side of righteousness and broken motorcycles.’

'I thought you didn't believe in fate.'

'Oh, I don't. It's just amusing to think about some cosmic, universal force thwarting a little preteen's bumbling efforts at being a badass.'

'...I could be a bad guy, if I wanted.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I could! I mean, it's not like I'm a saint. Technically, I've done all sorts of bad things. Stole drugs. Beat people up.'

'First of all, saints are overrated as hell. And secondly, none of that shit even counts.'

Hector frowned. 'I broke a cop's arm once...'

'Oh, you mean that thing you felt really bad about afterwards? That thing I'm sure you STILL feel really bad about?'

'I... uh... that's beside the point.'

'Pfft. Y'know, despite how keen you might have been to get arrested back then, it really shouldn't have been that difficult for you. All you had to do was throw a brick at a police car or something.'

'Eesh, I didn't wanna do anything THAT bad.'

Garovel just stared at him.

'...Alright, fine,' Hector relented. 'I'm a fuckin' goody-two-shoes. Are you happy?'

'Mhmm.'

'...By the way, if we ever make it back to Atreya, don't let me forget to visit Klein and find that cop again.'

'Ha. What do you mean to do for him?'

'I don't know, but there's gotta be something. I'm the Lord of Warrenhold, right?'

'Indeed, you are, my friend.'

--++--++--



Marcos Elroy hadn't slept this well in over a month. There'd always been something getting in the way. Something in his head. Something fueling the nightmares that he couldn't even remember after waking up. All he'd known was that they left him sweating and his heart racing in a panicked way.

It was only here and now that things had changed."

"984

Marcos wasn't sure what the reason was, but he suspected that finally being able to see his father again had something to do with it, even if the man was still unconscious. The presence of the other Rainlords might have helped, too. Dimas in particular.

The party of limousines didn't stop for another break until they reached Seisoro, and by then, it was nearly dark again. They'd been driving all day long, and yet Moaban was still a few hours away. Everyone needed to stretch their legs, use the restroom, and finally get a bite to eat. Marcos entered the gas station's little store with his sisters and a host of guardians, including Dimas and Hector.

Marcos didn't know what to make of the Atreyan lord. He looked to be about Cisco's age, but that didn't mean anything. The guy could be eighty years old for all they knew, and from the sound of it, perhaps he was, since he'd apparently gone up against Melchor Blackburn and not died in two seconds. Marcos had been hoping someone would ask Hector about that, but no one did, and Marcos wasn't comfortable asking himself, so he just let the matter drop.

It did make him think of Cisco, though. And Gema. He wondered where they were now. He wondered if he would ever see them again. But mostly, he wondered if they would hate him.

When Shenado had told him what his mother had done, he hadn't understood. It had taken a while. It was a difficult thing to grasp. That someone had actually sacrificed their life for his...? That it had been Ma...? That she was just gone now...?

It still didn't really make sense to him, if he was honest. How could she do a thing like that? How could she have loved him that much? He'd never done anything to deserve that kind of love. He'd caused her nothing but problems. How could...? It didn't...

‘Marcos,’ came Shenado’s echoing voice.

And abruptly, he realized that he was just standing there in front of a shelf full of chips. His nose was running, and his eyes were hot with tears. He wiped his face with his sleeve. ‘Sorry,’ he said.

‘There’s nothing to apologize for,’ said the eagle with burning black eyes. She wasn’t quite perched on the shelf, instead hovering just slightly above it.”

"985

Marcos looked over the assortment of junk food another time. He was starving, but somehow, he still didn’t have much of an appetite. He supposed it didn’t really matter. He grabbed something without even looking at what it was and then went to stand blankly behind Emiliana. It would be easiest to put his brain in autopilot and follow her around. She stuck out like a sore thumb with that black mask of hers.

His eyes glazed over as he let his mind wander. A question occurred to him. ‘When will my ability manifest?’ he asked.

‘It varies from person to person,’ said Shenado privately. ‘Give it time.’

‘It’s been a month. And Emi’s manifested after only a few days...’

‘Hers was stress-induced.’

‘So I should be more stressed?’

‘That is not what I am saying.’

‘Then what are you saying?’

‘I am saying be patient. We’ll worry about it after we reach Moaban.’

He took a long breath. Really, he was just trying to keep his mind busy. ‘What do you think my ability will be?’

‘It could be anything.’

‘...Could I get the same ability as Pa?’

‘It’s not very likely, but it is certainly possible. Servant abilities are

determined by genetics.'

'They are? I thought it had to do with personality. Or just... brain... stuff.'

'Well, there's some debate about that, I suppose,' said Shenado. 'But "brain stuff" is genetic, too, you know. As are personalities, to an extent. So there might well be a link there, but it is probably a case of correlation rather than causation.'

'I'm not sure what that means...'

'It means that genetics might make it LOOK like servant abilities are determined by personality, even though they aren't necessarily.'

'That's confusing...'

'Most things are. As much as we might like the world to be simpler and easier to understand, it usually isn't. And that can be good. Sometimes, complexity is wonderful. Usually, though, it sucks big time.'

He spared her a cock-eyed glance. 'What do you mean?'

'Have you ever heard the old saying that the more complicated your plan is, the more opportunities it'll have to go wrong?'

'Uh, sure.'

'Well, it's the same for everything else in life. For example, the thing we were just talking about. Genetics. DNA is extremely complex. And rather predictably, all sorts of things can go wrong with it. People can be born with so many different kinds of genetic deformities or diseases. And they all suck. Apart from the very occasional one that is actually helpful, maybe offering the person an immunity to something terrible.'"

"986

Marcos bit the inside of his lip. 'You're not a very optimistic person, are you?'

'I consider myself a pragmatist,' said Shenado.

For some reason, that made him smile. And after a moment, he realized why. 'You... um...'

'Yes?'

'Ah... never mind.'

'Oh, come now. Tell me. There's no need for secrets or hesitation, Marcos. I know you're still getting accustomed to seeing me, but I've known you your whole life. I watched you grow up.'

'Right. It's just... er, this might sound weird.'

'I'm sure I've heard weirder.'

'It's just--you kind of... you kind of remind me of my mother.'

That gave the reaper pause.

'Sorry,' Marcos said hurriedly. 'I didn't mean to--'

'No, it's fine,' said Shenado. 'More than fine, actually. I don't mind being compared to Mariana. Although, you might have things a little backwards.'

'Backwards?'

'Not to toot my own horn, but Mariana probably took after me more than I took after her.'

'Oh...' Marcos blinked a few times. 'How old was she when you met her?'

'She was twenty.'

'That doesn't sound like a very impressionable age to me.'

'Yes, well, I was somewhere around fifteen hundred, so I think I was a little more set in my ways than she was by then.'

'Ah...' It was weird to think about, that this reaper he barely even knew had influenced his mother so much. He supposed she was practically his grandmother. Very weird.

But it also opened up an avenue of inquiry that he hadn't thought of before. 'How did the two of you meet?' he asked.

‘Mm. That is not an altogether pleasant story.’

Marcos had figured as much. ‘Please. I want to know.’

The eagle stared at him a moment. ‘Very well. I met her in a little town called Saloma, which is in Steccat, far to the east of here.’

‘What was she doing there?’

‘Ha. You might be surprised to hear this, but your mother was a Cocoran missionary when she was younger.’

Marcos’s brow receded. ‘As in the goddess, Cocora?’

‘The very same.’

‘But she hated religion.’

‘By the time you came along, yes. Even by the time I came along, she’d pretty much lost her faith already. But she told me that she was extremely devout in her youth--enough to embark on a journey to aid people across the world. While also trying to convert them, of course.’”  
"987

‘I don’t really know much about Cocora,’ said Marcos. ‘Why did Ma stop believing in her?’

‘Oh, well, Cocora is supposed to be this benevolent and all-powerful being who is just the greatest thing ever in the history of the universe. And I think during her travels, your mother began to have trouble consolidating this idea of Cocora with the state of the world around her.’

‘Hmm...’

‘Mariana saw a lot of death, even before she met me. A lot of senseless brutality and suffering. And even the holiest, most convincing rhetoric in the world has a difficult time standing up against all of that.’

‘I get the impression you’re not very religious, either...’

‘Oh, me?’ Shenado laughed. ‘I’m even worse than Mariana was. In

spite of everything, your mother still believed in SOME kind of ultimate creator. She just thought all religions were bullshit.' The reaper hesitated. 'Agh, sorry, I keep forgetting you're only twelve.'

'It's fine. I don't mind.' It was hard to take much offence to swear words after having seen Darktide literally squash several people into a bloody pulp.

'Mm. But yes, Mariana still possessed a tiny morsel of spirituality. I, on the other hand, do not.'

'Really? You don't think there's like a reaper god or something?

'Nah.'

'How can reapers exist without some kind of creator?'

'The same way that people can.'

'Uh... then how can people exist without a creator?'

'Ah. A very old question, that. One that has been used to justify all manner of deistic belief in the past. Nowadays, though, we know about something called "spontaneous quantum creation." It's a bit difficult to explain, but in very simple terms, it means that the natural forces that make up the universe are such that there is no reason why the universe could not have created ITSELF. No divine intervention necessary.'

'Uh...'

'There have been other ideas about godless creation throughout history, too, and perhaps there will be still more in the future, but spontaneous quantum creation is what currently seems to make the most scientific sense.'

'...But Ma didn't believe any of that, did she?'

'No. She could be quite stubborn.'

'Unlike you?'

Shenado laughed again. 'Excuse me?'

'I'm sorry. That was ruder than I meant it...'

'I can already tell that you're going to give me a lot of sass as you get

older.' She didn't sound particularly upset about it, though."  
"988

As Marcos deliberated over what his next question should be, he abruptly realized that he was outside again. And someone had put a cold sandwich and drink in his hands, along with his bag of chips-- which didn't contain chips at all, now that he was looking at it. It was actually a bag of dried seaweed. That sounded pretty gross to him, but he resolved to at least give it a try.

Everyone else was already eating, he saw, so he joined them. The sandwich's bread and meat were nearly frozen, making the task more difficult, but he didn't mind so terribly. A cool meal was quite welcome in this baking heat. Even with the sun going down, the temperature didn't seem to care. This was definitely Sandlord territory.

And that sunset--a mural of blazing streaks above the mountainous horizon, deep yellows and oranges and reds, even a few purples burning around the edges of an occasional cloud. They sure didn't get that back in Aguarey.

Before anyone could even finish eating, the refueling was done, and everyone returned to their respective limousine so that the entourage could get on the road again.

And as he polished off his sandwich, Marcos finally thought of another question for Shenado. 'Do a lot of reapers believe like you do?' he asked.

'You mean are a lot of us doubting, cynical bastards?' Shenado shrugged. 'Yes. In fact, I would say the majority of us are.'

Marcos glanced at Dimas. 'What about IzioI?'

'IzioI is a freak of nature. I have no idea what he believes, but it is probably something ridiculous.'

'That's a little mean...'

'Oh, IzioI is wonderful. Don't get me wrong. I adore him. Being half-crazy is part of his charm.'

'Ah...' That made him curious about something else, and he looked

toward his unconscious father and the equally unconscious reaper attached to the man's arm. 'What is Axiolis like? I still haven't met him yet, but you and he are... uh...?'

'Axiolis is also wonderful,' Shenado said flatly.

Marcos just stared at her, waiting.

'...But don't listen to anything he tells you about Lhutwë.'

That almost made Marcos smile. 'He still believes in the old water god?'

'Yes,' sighed Shenado. 'He will probably try to teach you all about it, at some point. Preserving the old ways, he calls it.'

'Really? I wouldn't mind learning.'

'Ugh.'

That actually did make him smile. 'How much do YOU know about Lhutwë?'

"989 -- CXII.

'I know plenty about him,' said Shenado. 'Like the fact that he isn't real, for instance.'

'What else?' asked Marcos.

The reaper's beak twisted impossibly into a frown, and her burning eyes flared up a little. 'Why the sudden interest?'

'I was just thinking that it might be good to learn about religion from someone who isn't also trying to make me believe it.'

Shenado blinked at him. 'You want a more objective teacher.'

'Well, I don't know if I'd call you "objective," but--'

'Ha, fine, alright. I suppose you have a point. When Axiolis inevitably brings it up, I shall make sure that I sit in on all of your lessons.'

'...Will he be okay with that?'



‘Probably not.’

## Chapter One Hundred Twelve: ‘The house of four flames...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

As they continued north, Hector was surprised to find the vast stretch of barren and cracked flatlands gradually give rise to fields of grass and even the occasional tree. Considering that they were going to a place called Dunehall, he hadn’t been expecting to see much other than sand.

When they finally reached Moaban, it was the dead of night, but even through the darkness, Hector could see that the city wasn’t struggling for water. Rows of trees with arching canopies covered many of the roads, blocking out the night sky’s vibrant half-moon. The foliage was so thick that the first few areas they drove through made it feel like they’d suddenly entered a forest. After a time, however, there came a break in the trees, revealing an array of buildings buried in sand.

The change was so stark that it took Hector a while to understand what he was looking at.

Mountains of sand in the moonlight. In the middle of an otherwise lush, sand-free city. Hector could see four bulbous towers just barely peeking out from the centermost mound, each one topped off with a jagged spike pointed skyward.

As they pulled closer, the fortress before them became more obvious. Tall lamps illuminated the path into its heart, making the sand all around them glisten like still water. A tunnel guided their entourage up to an underground entrance, where the limousines finally eased to a stop. Everyone began exiting.

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"990

Asad appeared and led everyone inside. Hector moved to help carry Zeff, but a pair of much larger men were already there, so he just stuck close to the children.

The building's interior left him gawking again. Polished black tiles covered the floor of the entryway, matched by an obsidian lion that looked pretty much life-size, by Hector's estimation. A team of butlers were there to greet them as well, offering to take luggage that most of the Rainlords chose to hold onto. Hector did the same with his one bag.

'Wow,' Garovel said privately. 'We knew Asad was rich, but holy shit. This place is ridiculous.'

Hector had to stifle a laugh. 'Do you think he's richer than Roman?'

'Ha. Dunno. Now that I think about it, we seem to have a lot of rich friends, don't we?'

Hector gave a sideways nod. 'Yeah, I guess so. How the fuck did that happen?'

'Maybe it's because whenever you meet a poor person, you usually just save their life and leave, you classist prick.'

'What--?'

'You should take a good long look at yourself.'

He knew the reaper was joking, but he also knew that there was some truth to be found there as well. They'd discussed the topic at length back in Gray Rock and come to the conclusion that he should work on achieving a better relationship with the lower classes. Indeed, that had been the purpose of his visits to homeless shelters just prior to his trip to Sair. Thinking about it now reminded Hector of all the things that still needed doing at home.

It still felt a little strange to think of Warrenhold as home. Strange in a good way, though.

He glanced over and saw Emiliana lagging behind her siblings. Hector pulled back to ask her, "Are you okay?"

She looked at him, as if surprised, and adjusted her mask. "Ah. Yes. I apologize."

Chergoa floated up beside her. 'Something wrong?'

"No," said Emiliana. "It was only an odd shiver."

'A shiver?' said Chergoa.

"Goose pimples. They surprised me. But I am fine." She walked on ahead, not waiting for a response.

Hector exchanged looks with Chergoa before the reaper left to join her.

'Hmm,' hummed Garovel privately, who'd apparently been close enough to overhear. 'A shiver, huh? Is it cold in here?'

'Not really,' said Hector. 'Well, maybe compared to outside...'"

"991

Hector expected Garovel to ask another question, but the reaper said nothing further. They hurried to catch up with everyone.

Soon, the butlers began showing different people to different rooms. Hector's room shared a hallway with the Elroys. There were no windows, but to his eyes, the chamber would have been fit for a king. It was almost too nice, in fact. The giant rug at the foot of his bed had been woven with such a complex fractal design that he didn't even want to step on it.

As lovely as it was, however, he didn't linger in it for long. He was more interested in exploring the rest of Dunehall, and Garovel seemed to agree with him.

After only a short while of wandering, he and Garovel found themselves in a globular chamber full of paintings and artifacts on pedestals. There was one particular pedestal which caught Garovel's attention. It seemed to have been relegated to a position by the wall, enough so that Hector might not have noticed it if the reaper hadn't pointed it out. On its mantle lay a transparent case filled with four large slivers of crimson glass.

And before Hector could even ask a question, Qorvass arrived, flanked by Asad.

'Hello again,' said Garovel cheerily.

'Hello,' said Qorvass. 'I see you've found the gallery.'

'Indeed. It's lovely, as is everything here. But I am wondering--are these what I think they are?'

'I don't know,' said Qorvass. 'Do you think they are a bunch of shiny rocks? Because you would be right.'

Hector saw Garovel tilt his head.

'Actually, I was thinking they were the Quta Jaf'lah.'

'Mm,' hummed Qorvass. 'Well, they're not.'

'Oh?' Garovel paused. 'I see.'

Hector was lost, but he didn't want to interrupt.

'Supposing they were, though,' Garovel went on, 'why might you keep them here? This seems like an odd place for objects of such value. Hypothetically speaking.'

'Perhaps they are not as valuable as you are imagining,' said Qorvass. 'Or perhaps this place is more secure than you are imagining.'

Garovel laughed faintly. 'I suppose your suspicion is understandable, but I assure you that my interest is purely academic. And I am quite certain that these are indeed the Quta Jaf'lah.' He turned to Hector. 'The Shards of the Dry God.'

Hector was only slightly less lost now.

'I got quite a good look at them once,' said Garovel, facing Qorvass again. 'Ages ago.'

'Is that right?' said Qorvass."

"992

'It is,' said Garovel. 'However, I remember there being many more shards than this. I remember a mound of them. As big as a person, one might say.'

Qorvass' hollow eyes narrowed a moment. 'Where are you from, Garovel?'

'I was born a Lyzakk.'

'Ah. A most ancient brother.'

'You were born a Lyzakk as well?' Garovel asked.

'Of course,' said Qorvass. 'But you must have guessed that by now.'

'I try not to presume too much these days,' said Garovel. 'Rather, I find it more surprising that your loyalties haven't shifted in three thousand years.'

'Three thousand? I am not as old as that, but yes, it has been a while. My loyalty may not have wavered, but my curiosity has certainly led me to wander on more than a few occasions. But I am curious as to why you did not tell me of your heritage sooner? You must have realized it would have gone a long way with the Sandlords.'

'Well, I wasn't a Sandlord. And I don't exactly have a birth certificate to show you.'

'Even so,' said Qorvass, 'I would have liked to know that I was fighting alongside my kin this whole time.'

Garovel's skeletal face twisted somewhat. 'You are very kind. But I get the impression that your experience with the Lyzakks was more enjoyable than mine.'

‘Yes, I am getting that impression as well,’ said Qorvass. ‘Perhaps you would care to share your story with me.’

‘Perhaps I would. But for now, I am more interested in these jewels. I remember hearing about their creation, and I went to see them shortly thereafter. Why are there so few now? What happened to the rest of them?’

‘The War of the Three Sands happened to them,’ said Qorvass. ‘Strange that you are able to recognize the Shards but not know their history.’

‘Ah,’ said Garovel. ‘I was on the other side of the world when that was going on. So these were what that whole fuss was about, huh? I probably could have guessed as much.’

Hector just had to interject now. “There was a war fought over these things?”

‘Pretty much,’ said Garovel. ‘It was a war between the Sandlords themselves. That’s the trouble with a system built on divine right.’ He looked to Qorvass. ‘But you must know more about it than I do.’”  
"993

‘That is largely correct,’ said Qorvass. ‘We have never had “kings,” per se, but we did believe that individuals with a certain power had been chosen to guide our people.’

Hector put two and two together and looked at Asad, who was busy yawning and hardly even seemed to be paying attention.

‘Such individuals are historically quite rare,’ Qorvass went on. ‘They usually appear only once in five generations. Oftentimes longer. There were several instances where we went without a clear leader for extended periods of time. But then the gods decided to play a cruel prank on us, and three children manifested the divine ability in the span of a single year.’

‘I suppose it would’ve been too much to ask for them to just rule together,’ said Garovel dryly.

‘The children themselves were not the real problem,’ said Qorvass.

‘They were children. They did as their Hahls told them. And each Hahl feared--perhaps quite correctly--that one of the other two Hahls would betray them for power. And precaution became escalation, and escalation became war.’

Hector still didn't understand something. “But, er... uh, how did the Shards factor in?”

‘The Shards are powerful catalysts for servant abilities,’ said Garovel. ‘And they work for anyone, divine power or no. They would even work for you, for instance. But there is a catch.’

Hector was not surprised.

‘They fall dormant when there remains no living person who wields the Sandlord’s divine ability with sufficient skill.’

“Uh... not sure I understand...”

‘It has to do with the way they were made,’ said Garovel. ‘The so-called “Dry God” was, in truth, just another person who happened to have the divine ability. Like our good friend Asad here.’

Asad matched Hector’s gaze evenly. His expression seemed somehow sad.

‘The Dry God’s real name was Rasalased, and he was one of the most powerful servants of his age,’ said Garovel. ‘The story goes that he was so powerful and so heavily relied upon by his people that he became terrified of what would happen to them if he were ever killed in battle. As was known to happen. So he created the Shards, hoping that they would help keep the Sandlords safe after he was gone. The only problem was that in order to create them, he had to fuse his soul with his ability so completely that he turned himself to crystal. Which killed both him and his reaper, ironically.’”

"994

‘You are more or less correct,’ said Qorvass, ‘but there was also more to it than just that.’

‘Oh?’ said Garovel.

‘It is an oft repeated tale that the Dry God was a fool who mistakenly



ended his own life, but that is untrue. Rasalased knew exactly what he was doing. He had been searching for a way to die for some time, but as you said, he worried what would become of his people. He made the Shards for his successor, who by that point, was already powerful enough to use them.'

'I see. Did you know him personally?'

'Near the end of his life, yes. I took one of his grandchildren as my servant for a time.'

Hector wondered how that relationship had turned out, but it seemed an impolite thing to ask, and of course, if the servant wasn't here now, then Hector didn't imagine that it could have ended well.

Hector eyed the Shards again. He'd considered them beautiful before, but now that he knew the story behind them, that they were the remains of a person, he found them rather unsettling. Perhaps that deep red hue of theirs was no mere coincidence.

Garovel had another question, though. 'So how powerful does Asad have to become in order for the Shards to reactivate?'

Qorvass was silent a moment. 'Please do not be offended. I'm sure you can appreciate why I would not wish to share such information.'

'Ah. Well, I guess that's better than lying to me.'

--++--++--

Asad soon returned to his room on his own. He was glad to see Qorvass getting along with another reaper so quickly for a change, but there was nothing about their conversation that Asad didn't already know. He'd only accompanied Qorvass to the gallery in order to make sure their guests had no designs on stealing anything.

Qorvass always worried about the Shards. It didn't seem to matter that no one had been able to use them in more than seven hundred years or that hardly any non-Sandlords remembered their existence. Still, the reaper's concern was not without justification, of course. The Shards had indeed been stolen many times in the past, always from some kind of super vault or otherwise absurdly guarded chamber. That had apparently been a difficult lesson for Asad's predecessors to learn: if the wrong person came for them, it would not matter how many thick walls were in the way. It was better to hide them until they were forgotten.

Now that Garovel had demonstrated memory of the Shards, however, Qorvass would probably insist they be relocated again."

"995

Asad took a seat on the edge of his bed and rubbed his forehead, trying to think. If he was being completely honest with himself, he had no idea what he was doing, bringing the Rainlords to Dunehall. Sure, the Vanguard wouldn't find them here, but how was he supposed to explain this to Abbas and the others? It was only a matter of time before they found out.

And of course, there was still the matter of the Rainlords themselves. Hopefully, they would be able to reach a peaceful solution concerning Ibai, but if that didn't happen, then Dunehall might well become their new battleground. Asad just hoped he wasn't a fool for trusting them in this place.

He hadn't visited Dunehall in months, but it wasn't for lack of wanting to. Really, he would have liked to simply live here again, but his wife's family lived in Kuros, and for most women, that might have given them cause to leave, but not for her. Samira was very much a daddy's girl. Asad had tried bringing her here after their marriage, but it made her miserable, and her happiness was much more important than his nostalgia. And besides, Kuros wasn't so terrible. It just didn't really feel like home to him, even after twenty years--or at least, not like Moaban did.

It felt a shame to leave Dunehall without a Najir to watch over it, but he'd tried passing the reins over to Haqq or Imas, and to his surprise, both had refused him. Haqq cared only for the Golden Fort's research facilities and nothing for tradition; and Imas said she didn't wish to live so far away from her brothers--an argument Asad could hardly refute, given the sacrifice he was making for his wife.

Dunehall, therefore, had passed into the hands of the lesser lord Yasir Faheem, a blustery man who had been following Asad around for much of the evening and rambling about so many different things at such high speeds that Asad had only caught about half of them. Most of it had been assurances that the staff in Dunehall had been doing their jobs thoroughly and properly.

There came a knock at Asad's door, and he half expected it to be Faheem again. "Enter," he said in Mohssian.

Orjand phased through the door before Imas opened it and followed, closing it again behind her."

"996

"Relaxing already?" Imas said in Valgan. "Where is Qorvass?"

"With Hector and Garovel," said Asad.

'They seem to have become fast friends,' said Orjand. Her little scorpionfly wings buzzed silently as she hovered there in midair. 'Qorvass is usually the last of us to warm up to new people.'

She wasn't wrong, Asad knew. It had taken Qorvass years to finally accept his friendship with Zeff. "I think he senses an opportunity for an alliance," said Asad. "Or maybe he just wants me to stop calling him a surly bastard."

"An alliance?" said Imas. "With the young Atreyan lord? Why? Not to knock the boy, but his strength is not his own."

"So you noticed it, too," said Asad.

"Of course. And I am a little annoyed that Haqq did not give that shield to me. Or something like it, at least."

"Be sure to chew him out when we get back to Kuros."

"Oh, I will."

Orjand hovered closer. 'By the way, have you heard the news? We just heard about it downstairs.'

"Which news would that be?" Asad scratched his cheek absently.

'The war between Jesbol and Horsht. It's over.'

Asad blinked and sat up straighter. "What? Since when?"

'Since earlier today. Jesbol won. They're already talking about dissolving Horsht completely. It seems Jesbol will have territory on the

mainland now.'

"So sudden," said Asad. "How long has that war been going? It's been so long, I've forgotten."

'Oh, it's been a collection of wars, really,' said Orjand. 'The one you're familiar with started about thirty years ago, but it's been on and off for more than a hundred now. I'm still not sure whether to believe it. If it were merely news of another "cease in hostilities," I wouldn't buy it for a moment, but this is the first time that one of them has been reported of conquering the other.'

"And there's more to it," said Imas. "The victory is being attributed to Field Marshal Jackson. They're saying he cut through Abolish like a knife and killed Gunther and Dunhouser both."

Asad's eyes widened. "By himself?"

She nodded. "And in order to pull something like that off, the smart money says he achieved emergence."

'If it's all true, then this means a major victory for the Vanguard.'"  
"997 -- CXIII.

--Non-donation bonus in order to make up for pooppy February (Page 1 of 3)--

"Jackson might very well be second only to Sermung now," said Imas, unable to conceal her smile. "I know we are currently in conflict with the Vanguard, but I am so excited about this news."

"Why?" said Asad.

"Because! The Radiant Sentinel! The Star of the West! He's done it again! And this time, he probably saved millions of lives! Oh, a man like that--I wonder what he's really like."

Asad exchanged glances with Orjand. "I didn't realize she was such a fan of his."

'...I did.'

"Have you ever seen him?" said Imas. "He is so handsome. And I bet he's amazing in bed."

Asad was incredulous. "You're a lesbian!"

She shrugged. "Yeah, but I wouldn't say no. Not to him."

Asad just sighed and laughed at the same time.

"Everyone has their exceptions," said Imas. "I'm sure there's at least one man you'd make an exception for, right? There has to be."

Asad returned a flat stare.

"Just give it a little thought," she urged.

He shook his head.

"Whatever. Big tough Sandlord can't even admit when he wants to have sweaty, passionate sex with another man. It's not like I would tell anyone."

"...Is there a reason you're still in my room?"

Chapter One Hundred Thirteen: 'O, worldly warrior...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Rezamaar wouldn't stop fidgeting.

'Would you relax?' said Dunstan. He wasn't exactly comfortable, either, crammed into the back of a plane with the rest of the Seventh Watcher's Unit. 'You're going to lose your grip on my arm.'

'Ugh. Fine.'

The concern wasn't that she would fall through the plane. The aircraft's hull had been soul-empowered to prevent that from happening. But unfortunately, that also made circumstances more dangerous for her. Save only for the planet itself, reapers were not affected by relative motion in physical reality. If she let go of Dunstan, she would become suddenly stationary relative to Eleg but not the aircraft. The result, therefore, would be her smashing into the side of the cabin at eight hundred kilometers per hour. And even a reaper would not be able to survive that.

This was why soul-empowering airplanes was generally never done,

with the one exception being in the transportation of captives. Technically, they were being “reassigned,” but the Gargoyle clearly didn’t want any of their reapers escaping.”  
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"998

--Non-donation bonus in order to make up for poopy February (Page 2 of 3)--

‘God-fucking-dammit,’ said Reza privately. ‘Why couldn’t she just let us go to Jesbol with that dickhole Miles?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I don’t want to go to fucking Korgum!’

‘So you’ve told me. Several times now.’

‘Why are you so calm?! Do you even realize how much of a shitfest that place is right now?!’

He had an inkling. It would have been strange if he didn’t. ‘You did say that you didn’t want to fight the Rainlords anymore.’

‘Oh, yes, what a bright side. We’ve fixed a broken finger by chopping off the hand. Just wonderful.’

‘Why is Korgum so chaotic, anyway?’

‘You don’t already know?’

‘Not the details.’

‘Well, I’ve avoided that place like a syphilitic monkey cock, so I can’t claim to be an expert, but my understanding is that there are several locations in Korgum that are strategically important, and Dozer keeps trying to get at them like a horny dolphin at a nude beach.’

‘...I hate the way you explain things.’

‘Dolphins are fucked up animals, y’know. They’ll kill their own babies out of sheer boredom.’

‘...Is that true?’

‘It’s either boredom, or because the females become ready to mate again when they don’t have babies anymore. The males kill the kids so that they can have more sex.’

‘...Wow.’

‘And yet everyone loves them. Then you’ve got animals like vampire bats. Everyone thinks they’re creepy and gross because they drink blood, but they’re actually super fucking nice.’

‘I feel we’ve drifted away from my question about Korgum.’

‘It’s not my fault that you ask boring questions. Anyway, about vampire bats--they’re fucking harmless, and they’ll even adopt little bat babies that have been orphaned. That’s cool as shit! But because they’re not all cute and happy-looking, everyone thinks--’

‘Alright, I get it. Were you a zoologist when you were alive?’



‘Yes, Dunstan. Because I know two things about animals, that means I was a zoologist. Way to insult an entire profession, you fucking ignoramus.’

‘You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking. I may never recover from the shame I’ve brought upon myself.’

‘Don’t give me your dry sarcasm. I’m still upset here.’

‘You say that like it’s somehow abnormal.’

Reza’s glowing red eyes glared at him a moment. ‘I wonder if I could get Sanko to give you latrine duty.’”

"999

--Non-donation bonus in order to make up for poopy February (Page 3 of 3)--

Dunstan made no response, and for a while, there was actual silence, much to his surprise. None of the other watchmen seemed especially talkative, perhaps busy conversing with their own unhappy reapers. Normally, a bit of peace and quiet was incredibly welcome, but here and now, it only felt uncomfortable. It made him think that Reza was genuinely worried and not just bitching and moaning like usual. At length, he grasped for a new subject of his own.

‘Why do you think she decided to bring us to Korgum with her?’

‘Probably because our unit did most of Lawrence and Miles’ dirty work, trying to capture the Elroys. She doesn’t want us carrying out any more secret orders from them, I’d wager.’

Dunstan could believe that. He and Reza had heard about how Sanko had basically given Overra a time out like some kind of kindergartener. He’d also been one of the officers that Sanko called out to talk to, so he ended up right there behind her when the Rainlords decided not to cooperate. He didn’t think he’d be forgetting that battle anytime soon. And frankly, after witnessing that level of combat, he felt more or less prepared for whatever Korgum would throw at him.

He tried to keep the conversation going. ‘...What do you think Sanko intends to do with the Elroy boy?’

Reza required a moment to acknowledge the question. ‘Oh. Who

knows? I'm sure she just didn't want to leave Cisco and Dennex with Miles.'

'Mm. Maybe she means to protect them herself.'

'Or interrogate them. Or both. I'm more concerned about what she intends to do about the Rainlords she didn't capture. As things stand, there aren't even any Vanguardians left in Sair trying to hunt them down.'

'She'll probably just dispatch a new division, won't she?'

'Probably, but until she does, the Rainlords will be able to do whatever they like. PREPARE whatever they like. And they have a history of being complete motherfuckers when it comes to that sort of thing.'

'Are you speaking from experience?'

'As it happens, I am. I was killed by one of their fucking booby traps.'

That made Dunstan pause. 'Now I'm curious.'

'Oh, you want gory details? Because I have gory details. Literally details of the gore.'

"1000

'Well, I wasn't really--'

'Imagine stepping into a puddle,' said Reza, 'only to realize it was about a meter deeper than you expected. Imagine finding a bed of frozen spikes at the bottom, which then skewer your foot and dig up into your shin. Imagine writhing in agony, unable to move, as you watch a levee in front of you suddenly break and a tidal wave come crashing toward you. Then imagine being crushed nearly to death by the impact, only to slowly drown.'

'...I was more interested in knowing why you were there.'

'How about some fucking pity?!'

'I'm sorry your death was so horrible, Reza. I'm sure you remember how wonderful mine was.'

‘All things considered, I’d say getting ripped apart by a pack of Dantean wolves is a pretty radical way to go.’

‘I think I would’ve rather drowned. Or been set on fire, maybe.’

‘Oh, I doubt that. Burning alive is one of the most excruciating. I’d definitely take the wolves.’

‘Hmph.’

‘Alright, then, let’s up the ante. Which would you choose? Lasers slowly burn your eyes out of your head and pierce your brain, melting it? Or you have to keep eating your favorite food until your stomach ruptures and kills you?’

‘Why my favorite food?’

‘Because it would gradually turn into your most hated food as you ate it until you puked. But you’d have to keep eating it, anyway, and every time you vomited would just mean that you have to eat even more of this thing that you once loved but is now your worst nightmare.’

‘...You have a twisted imagination, you know that?’

‘Fine, I’ll give you a third option.’ She paused. ‘Uh... shit yourself in front of the person you love most until you die from embarrassment.’

‘Wow.’

‘And if you’re somehow not embarrassed, then you just keep shitting forever.’

‘Okay, I think we need some quiet time.’

She did not shut up, however. She pestered him with inane questions for the next hour and a half, and Dunstan regretted ever worrying about her.

Relief finally came when the aircraft hit a patch of turbulence. It lasted a while, then died down. Then a thunderous pop made the plane jerk violently upward and to the side, leaving half the watchmen in the room to dangle upside down from their crisscrossing seatbelts."

"1001

‘Can you tell what’s happening?’ Dunstan asked.

‘Call it a hunch, but I think someone is attacking us,’ said Reza.

‘Who?’

‘I don’t sense anyone flying near us.’ After a beat, however, she said, ‘Oh shit. Brace yourself.’

He did, but he didn’t get the chance to ask why. Another, much louder pop arrived, this time accompanied by the very unwelcome sound of metal breaking. A lot of metal. The cabin lurched again and began spinning much too fast to have been in anything other than freefall.

Then the airplane unfolded. Dunstan watched the walls distort and peel themselves apart. Cabin pressure dropped in an instant, and the escaping wind tunnel pulled the air right out of Dunstan’s lungs. For a moment, everyone dangled toward the hole in the cabin, but that didn’t last long, because the hole grew so quickly that, soon, it ceased to even be so. Rather, it was just the open sky, the sun dawning there over the horizon, beautiful and entirely unfitting as the punishing winds started tearing passengers directly out of their seatbelts, leaving them to be swallowed by storm clouds below.

The plane was not gone, however. The metal had twisted and reformed beneath them. And it was moving now. Up and down like wings on either side. Dunstan, struggling even to keep his eyes opened, saw a metal neck rear up in front of them, rising into the shape of a bird’s head.

It was Sanko, he realized. She had become the plane, integrating herself into it, making her body a bird of literal metal. And then he realized why.

A half dozen missiles were right there on the giant bird’s tail, twirling and drawing closer with each passing second, even as Sanko swooped down to pick up speed. They were heat-seekers, without a doubt--and probably soul-strengthened as well, since it seemed like Reza had been able to sense them at the last moment.

The metal bird shuddered and then rolled forward in midair. Its left wing distorted and then slapped all of the missiles away like flies. They staggered off course, and one detonated, which caused all of the others to explode in a chain that made the air tremble.

The Gargoyle's body swooped down into a dive again, and Dunstan had to soul-strengthen his own body before the wind and g-forces broke any more of his bones."

"1002

He could see what Sanko was gunning for below. The front chunk of the plane, which was carrying the pilots and most of the captive Rainlords. It vanished into the storm clouds, and Sanko pushed in after it. Wet and murky darkness washed over everything.

He tried to stay calm. He could only see gray. He could only hear howling winds. And at any moment, it felt like he might puke or pass out or both. Staying calm wasn't really an option.

But Reza's words were there in his head. 'I told you Korgum would suck!'

It took all his focus just to respond. 'Can you sense anything yet?!'

'Well, there are six fighter jets out there! At least! Happy you asked?!'

They finally made it through the clouds, and Dunstan could see that Sanko had nearly caught up to the missing half of the plane. She closed the gap by stretching her metal neck down and biting onto the hull. And that was all it took for the rest of the plane to become hers. The metal bulged and grew, adding to the Gargoyle's avian bulk.

Dunstan saw the jets Reza had mentioned. They broke through the stormy ceiling above, hardly more than specks to Dunstan's eyes at this distance, but the cloudy trails they left behind made their positions clear enough.

More missiles were already en route, but one of the jets had boldly decided to draw in close to Sanko in order to spray her with a hail of gunfire. It only lasted half a heartbeat as the jet sped by, but that was still enough time for the Gargoyle's wing to shoot out and snatch the jet out of the air. Her body wrenched to the side as she held on and devoured it whole, bulking up once again.

The next batch of missiles were there now, and Sanko bundled up around her passengers, wrapping them in a suddenly windless darkness. Dunstan heard a loud swiping sound, followed by the clang

of metal on metal, and then a string of explosions. One of them, however, caught the Gargoyle's side. Fire and shrapnel shredded Dunstan's cabin.

And then he was falling through open sky without a parachute, his two seatbelts still attached to him but not the wall that used to be at his back.

His fellow watchmen were all around him, most of them in multiple pieces."

"1003

The fall took a while--a few minutes, in fact, which was long enough for it to become surprisingly boring. Dunstan had never been skydiving before, but it didn't strike him as particularly thrilling. Without being able to alter his trajectory very much at all, he was stuck watching as the vast forest slowly crept closer.

Reza's excitement level seemed to have dropped significantly as well. 'Hey, do you think you'll survive this? A hundred wingwangs says you don't.'

'I don't know what a wingwang is.'

'It's any unit of money. I'd pick a specific one, but we're in Korgum now, and I don't really keep up with that shit anyway. You know how many different currencies have come and gone during my lifetime?'

'Three?'

'A little more than that, smart guy.'

'So four, then?'

Reza snickered. 'Y'know, I kinda like it when you play dumb. It makes you seem more innocent and charming. In fact, from now on, just do that forever.'

Dunstan finally reached the forest and crashed through the canopy at terminal velocity. The net of leaves and branches tried to break his fall and only narrowly succeeded. Wood exploded into splinters and fell with him, and his right leg snapped and then tore clean off. The final impact into the underbrush still shattered almost every bone that he

could feel, and as he regained his senses, he was fairly certain that at least a few of his organs had been liquefied, though he was mainly just surprised that his brain had not been one of them.

The regeneration was already in effect as he struggled to leverage himself onto one arm. The blood that came shooting out of his mouth, nose, and eyes informed him that it would be a little while longer before he would be able to stand again.

‘Hey, uh, Dunstan,’ said Reza, more nervously again, ‘I know you’re still having a rough time right now, but we’re not alone down here.’

He couldn’t quite formulate a response yet.

‘There are a bunch of servants around us,’ she said, ‘and most of them have fucked up souls. And I don’t wanna worry you, but I think they’re gonna be tryin’ to eat our faces here in a little bit.’

He rolled over and found the brunt of a thick tree for support. ‘Hide underground for now,’ Dunstan told her.

‘Yeah, about that, uh, I’m sensing some weird shit underground, too, so...’

‘Weird, how?’

‘I’m not really sure. But if you could stand up right now, that’d be awesome.’”

"1004

When his eyesight returned to him, it didn’t help very much. The forest around him was so dense that hardly any of the early morning sunlight made it through the treetops. But he could hear now, too, so he held his breath and listened.

Rustling leaves. All around him. And a low, faint rumble beneath his feet. The ground was trembling. It could have been the Gargoyle’s doing, but he was fairly sure that she was still in the sky.

‘Straight ahead of you,’ came Reza’s warning, and Dunstan braced himself just in time to see a howling blur leap out from behind the forward treeline.

Unable to stand, and with only half of his body responding to him, Dunstan knew he would have to make some hearty sacrifices to his krypton transfiguration if he were to have any hope of winning. And indeed, when the salivating human monster landed on him and started biting into his face and digging into his chest, Dunstan converted huge chunks of his flesh into superheated gas. Every point of physical contact between the two of them burned. Even Dunstan's own face melted into a bloody, smoldering mess.

With his one good hand, he found the mindless person's head, which immediately bit his fingers off with metal teeth.

Dunstan sacrificed the whole hand and shoved through their skull. Brain matter blew out the back of their head, and the flailing body on top of him went suddenly limp. He shoved the corpse off and tried to stand again, finding a bit more success now that most of his legs had regenerated. He'd given up much of his torso, arms, and head, but the trade was worth it so long as he was still conscious.

'Can you still see me?' Reza asked.

'Yeah.' To his eyes, she was still perfectly visible in the low light, despite being a pitch black wraith.

'Follow me, then.'

She flew off, staying low and with a slack enough pace for Dunstan's shambling footsteps to keep up.

No more than twenty steps later, burning bright light came piercing through the darkness, but Dunstan was far from relieved when he saw that the source was another broken servant who'd set himself ablaze. The forest was already catching, Dunstan saw--orange flames licking bark and climbing into the canopy or leaping across the undergrowth."

"1005

Dunstan bounded through the fire and barreled into the burning servant. He expected to have to wrestle with the creature, but instead, the impact made its melting head pop off its shoulders and bounce into a line of bushes, igniting them.

Still largely without the use of his arms, Dunstan rolled over and flipped



himself back onto his feet so that he could keep running. He and Reza pushed through the growing flames without regard. His coat or his pants would occasionally catch, but it was easy to suffocate such small fires with his krypton.

Oddly enough, the wildfire actually made circumstances easier for him, clearing his path of more broken servants who, unlike him, were not fireproof. Not to mention, it bought him the time he needed in order to fully regenerate.

Reza came to a sudden stop, and Dunstan phased through her and nearly fell over. He looked around for more threats but didn't see any. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

Dennex flew through the wall of fire. Chunks of him were missing.

'You got free,' observed Reza.

'Hello there,' he said, quite calmly. 'Would you mind terribly if I tagged along?'

'Don't wanna try flyin' through this mess on your own, eh?'

'No, I do not. I am guessing that those are Abolish soldiers that I sense above us.'

'And below us? Do you know what that is?'

'No, I don't. I thought it was a soul net at first, but it's not, is it?'

'No. It's moving, whatever it is. Like it's alive.'

Dunstan wanted to speak aloud, but the crack and roar of burning wood was too loud, and there was almost as much smoke as there was breathable oxygen, anyway. 'We're wasting time,' he told Reza.

'Right,' she said publicly. 'Well, come on then.'

They proceeded on together, keeping within the relative safety of the fire, letting it make way for them. Dunstan kept hearing explosions go off in the sky above them. As trees fell over and opened up his line of sight, he began seeing people and low-flying aircraft there. It gave him little more than a glimpse of what was happening, but if Dennex didn't want to brave that airspace, then it must have been pretty bad up there, he figured.

And then the ground heaved up in front of him, very nearly knocking

him off his feet."

"1006

Dunstan caught himself on one knee, and when he looked up, he saw multiple pillars shooting out of the ground. Each was as broad as a school bus, and when they stopped moving, Dunstan realized that they had heads.

Gigantic worms, they appeared to be. Their hulking bodies bristled with visible electricity, and their beady eyes looked straight at him and Reza.

Noticeably, however, they were not attacking. They just remained there, motionless and staring.

Then a voice rang out. "Aha! I knew you would survive! Good job, Dunstan!"

Dunstan squinted as he noticed a figure standing atop the centermost worm. He couldn't place the voice, but it sounded familiar. He found a full breath of air and called out, "Who are you?!"

"Why, it's me! It's your grandpa!" The figure waved a hand, and the worm beneath him knelt down low enough for Dunstan to get a good look.

And Dunstan could hardly believe his eyes. He hadn't seen that wrinkled face since he was a child, but it hadn't changed a bit. As little sense as it made to him, there was no doubt about it. This was certainly Damian Rofal before him. His grandfather.

Damian laughed. "Feromas thought my plan would get you killed for sure, but ha! Shows what he knows!"

Dunstan finally found the words. "Grandpa, why are you here?!"

"For you, obviously! I've come to get you, my boy! Everyone else was easy to find, but it took months to track you down. You shouldn't run away from home, you know. Not that I'm complaining. How often do you get to blow up a field marshal's plane, eh?"

"That was YOUR doing?!"

“Well, yes and no. Abolish might’ve been under the impression that certain precious artifacts were onboard. But anyway! The important thing is that we’re together now! Oh, and is this your reaper? Ah, no, but there are two with you. Which one do you belong to? Regardless, it is lovely to meet them both! I hope they’re nice!”

Dunstan had so many questions that he just reached for the first one he could hold onto. “What the hell are these giant worms?!”

“Oh, don’t worry about them! They’re my buddies! Don’t pet them, though. I know they look nice and squishy, but they’ll zap you.”

‘Mind hurrying this along?’ said Feromas. ‘We’re still in danger, you know.’

“Ah, right. Let’s get out of here, shall we? I’d rather not have to fight that Gargoyle you were with!”

"1007 -- CXIV.

## Chapter One Hundred Fourteen: ‘Thy discerning nature...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Rather than sleeping, Hector spent most of the night exploring Dunehall. And he wasn’t the only one. He saw other people wandering around wherever he went. It must have been a side effect of the long day trip, he figured. Everyone had slept on the way here, and now they were all restless.

He finally managed to give Madame Carthrace a call and inform her that he would be staying in Sair a while longer. She told him that the reconstruction was proceeding steadily, though at a slower pace than when he’d been there to assist. Apparently, the workmen kept asking about him. He hoped he’d be able to return soon. This elaborate sand fortress was a feast for his eyes, but it really just made him want to work on Warrenhold again. In particular, there was a windowless gallery that was giving Hector ideas. It overlooked Dunehall’s domed courtyard, offering a lovely view of sandstone monolith surrounded by humble greenery and a small stream. The whole thing reminded Hector of Warrenhold’s central plaza, that open space between those eight hulking towers. He wondered if there was any kind of plant that

could grow in Warrenhold. Probably not, he supposed.

When he wasn't thinking about decorations and structural design, however, he was wondering about what the Rainlords were doing. The heads had all gone into another meeting not long after their arrival, no doubt still trying to reach a consensus about what their next course of action should be. Mostly, Hector wondered if they had reached a consensus concerning Ibai Blackburn yet, especially because he kept seeing Ibai pop up all over the place.

Though, that might've also been because Hector was slightly following Ibai around. Just a little.

The man seemed to be giving his guardians a hell of a time keeping up with him. Hector overheard Horatio chastising him a few times.

Upon the fifth sighting, Ibai spotted Hector and didn't hesitate to teleport over.

"Hello there!" said Ibai. "Can't sleep, huh? Me neither. Well, I don't sleep much in general, but still, it's pretty exciting, isn't it? This place is so neat! I hope we can stay here a while."

Frankly, Hector was surprised that Ibai had been allowed to roam freely, but he guessed there wasn't a whole lot they could do to stop him from going wherever he liked."

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"1008

'We're glad to see that you are enjoying yourself,' said Garovel.

Horatio and the other bodyguards caught up again, but they must have been growing accustomed to it by now, because none of them bothered to chastise Ibai. Horatio was looking even more haggard than the last time Hector had seen him.

“By the way, Garovel,” said Ibai, “the last time we spoke, I believe you promised me a story time.”

‘Ah, I suppose I did.’ The reaper began floating away, and Ibai walked with him.

Hector made sure to keep pace as well so that he would always be between them. He remembered what Garovel said about not antagonizing Ibai, but that didn’t mean he was going to leave Garovel wide open to a sudden attack.

‘What kind of story would you like?’ said Garovel.

“Something exciting!” said Ibai.

‘Hmm. Alright. Are you familiar with the story of the Dáinnbolg?’

“Of course,” said Ibai, “but I’d be more interested to hear a story of your own.”

‘It IS a story of my own,’ said Garovel.

That made the aberration blink. “What do you mean?”

Garovel spared a glance at Hector. ‘I mean I used to live there. Before all the devastation, that is.’

Hector had more than a few questions of his own now, but he decided to let their conversation play out.

Horatio Blackburn, however, chose to chime in. “You used to ‘live’ there? As in, before you were a reaper?” The man’s own reaper looked interested as well.

‘That’s right,’ said Garovel. ‘Chergoa and I grew up there.’

“Wow,” said Ibai. “What was it like? Was it fun?”

‘I suppose it depends on what you consider fun.’

“Were there birthday parties?”

‘No, I’m afraid there weren’t.’

“Pity. But there had to have been some parties, right? Seasonal celebrations and the like?”

‘Sure.’

“Then I think it could’ve been fun,” said Ibai. “But anyway, what was the story you wanted to tell me?”

‘Well, you see, when my sister and I were very young, we witnessed the slaughter of an entire village of people. It was quite bloody, and in the span of a single day, the village became a ghost town.’

Hector saw Horatio and the other guards shift uncomfortably, but it was Ibai who responded first.

“That’s horrible. I thought you said this story would be exciting.””  
"1009

‘You don’t find it exciting?’ said Garovel.

Ibai’s smile waned as he looked at the reaper. “No, I’m afraid I don’t. And if you don’t mind, I’d rather not hear the rest.”

‘Really? But there’s a lot more to tell.’

“I’m sorry for confusing you, then. I prefer happier tales.” The aberration required a moment to find his cheer again. “Do you have anything with unicorns?”

“fraid not.’

“I see. Well, never mind, then. I’m suddenly in the mood for something sweet. Does anyone else want a snack?” He didn’t wait for anyone to answer. “I’ll be in the kitchen.” And he teleported away again.

Horatio gave a sigh, and Hector watched the man’s silent exchange with his reaper, no doubt asking where Ibai went. The reaper pointed, and the bodyguards all rushed off.

Hector decided to follow along. ‘What was that about?’ he asked Garovel as he ran. ‘Trying to test his bloodlust or something?’

‘Pretty much,’ the reaper said privately. ‘I just wanted to see how he would react, really. Didn’t expect him to run away, though. Not sure what to think now.’

'I can't imagine he would've confessed to enjoying that story.'

'Sure, but I thought he'd at least be curious. I mean, aren't you?'

Hector had to concede that point, at least. He hadn't heard the term Dáinnbolg before, but he had a fair idea what it referred to. If it was where Garovel came from, then it was probably on the other side of the world, where the Lyzakks originated; and if it had been 'devastated,' as Garovel said, then it was likely related to Exoltha, the dead continent. Or perhaps the Dáinnbolg was just another name for it.

Exoltha was a land torn asunder by ancient wars, but that was where common knowledge ended. Today, that land was considered beyond uninhabitable. From what Hector understood, few people ever dared to go there anymore, because none had done so and returned to tell the tale.

Or so the story went. Hector had experienced a passing fascination with the place a couple years ago, but now that he knew about reapers, he wasn't quite sure what to believe. He remembered scouring the internet for information on Exoltha and finding nothing scientific, save only satellite images of endlessly dark storm clouds." "1010 -- CXV.

Hector wondered what Garovel might know of Exoltha, but now wasn't really the time to ask, he supposed. He hoped he would remember to bring it up again later.

As they neared the kitchen, a familiar smell caught Hector's attention. Too familiar.

Blood. A lot of it.

He quickened his pace and reached the kitchen's wide entryway just as Ibai's four bodyguards did. And he was not prepared for what he saw.

Ibai was standing there with one foot stuck through the chest of someone on the ground. A corpse. It had been eviscerated.

When Ibai saw them, his eyes widened. "Aha! Um. This isn't what it looks like?"



## Chapter One Hundred Fifteen: 'A devil's paradox...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

For a long moment, no one seemed to know what to do. They all just stared at Ibai, too shocked to say anything.

And then Hector watched Horatio take a slow step forward.

"...Tell us what happened here," the man said very calmly. The second Blackburn bodyguard was right behind him.

Hector became keenly aware of the sudden division in the room. Those other two bodyguards belonged to the Delagunas. He recognized both their faces, but he only knew one of their names. Lorenzo. Lord Salvador's son. And right about now, they were both looking rather twitchy.

"Well, uh, I just--um..." Ibai was still trying to get his foot unstuck. "I'm not sure, actually. When I teleported, he was already--but I didn't--this wasn't supposed to--aha... ah... I'm so confused!"

"It's okay," said Horatio. "Calm yourself and think. And first, why don't you teleport yourself out of there?"

"I tried," said Ibai. "The body just teleports with me." He motioned behind. "We were originally over there."

And Hector noticed the blood stains on the other side of the kitchen. When he looked to the Delagunas again, he saw that their reapers were missing. Gone to tell someone, no doubt.

The situation would soon get extremely complicated, Hector felt. He decided to keep his eyes on the Blackburns.

Horatio was trying to help Ibai free himself. "You know I have to ask," Horatio said. "Did you kill this man?"

"No, I--" Ibai scratched his head. "No. He was already here. I just. I teleported and he was--I didn't. I wouldn't--" His foot came free, covered in a bloody brown shadow."

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"1011

Hector just watched as Horatio kept questioning Ibai and receiving no further answers. The aberration was fumbling over his words now, repeating himself when not merely looking confused. Hector kept expecting Ibai to flee, but the man never did, and Hector wondered what was stopping him.

More Rainlords arrived--all Sebolts and Delagunas. And Hector was surprised yet again when a fight did not immediately break out. Instead, they simply escorted the Blackburns out of the room, leaving a group behind to secure the scene.

Hector noticed the group of Sebolts eyeing him and Garovel, and sure enough, it wasn't long before they ventured over. Hector braced himself for interrogation.

"Lord Goffe," said the foremost gentleman, "are you well? Might we ask you to assist us in our investigation?"

Hector's expression only flickered, but it required all of his composure in order to prevent his own mouth from just hanging open. And as usual, he let Garovel do the talking.

'It would be our honor,' the reaper said. 'But I'm surprised that you

would ask outsiders like us for help.'

"In this instance, we believe an outsider's perspective might prove advantageous," said the same gentleman. By the look of him, he had to be at least twice Hector's age. "You were also among the first on scene. But you are correct. If you were total outsiders, we would not ask this of you. I think, however, we can all agree that you are not total outsiders." He offered Hector a handshake.

Hesitant, Hector took it.

"My name is Carlos Sebolt," the man said. "This is my reaper, Olijas."

'Call me Ollie.'

"H-hello," said Hector.

Carlos proceeded to introduce the rest of their group. Jesenia, Nico, and Perla Sebolt, along with Manuel and Lorenzo Delaguna. Those last two had been Ibai's bodyguards and therefore also witnesses, just like Hector. And of course, everyone had reapers of their own, but there was no way that Hector was going to keep all those weird names straight.

Carlos eventually got around to asking about what Hector and Garovel each saw, but then Asad and Qorvass arrived, and the conversation shifted over to them as explanations were demanded.

Garovel, however, did not seem interested in listening to what he already knew. Hector saw him drifting over the crime scene to inspect the body and the accompanying trail of blood.

Hector followed him."

"1012

The victim's body was so torn up that Hector couldn't even guess the gender. He was a bit surprised at how much sights like this still affected him. Part of him wished that he could just get used to it all, that he could be unflappable in the face of this sort of thing, but there was just something about seeing the aftermath of brutality. Seeing it actually unfold was horrible, too, but he could deal with that. It was only when he saw the outcome, the terrible end, that it really started getting to him, making his chest hurt and his stomach turn.

This poor person. Whoever they were, their death certainly did not look painless.

At length, Garovel stirred Hector out of his morbidity with a private question. 'So what're you thinking?'

Hector rubbed his chin with one hand. 'Probably the same thing as everyone else. Ibai lost control and killed someone.'

'That's it? Nothing else?'

Hector's mouth flattened.

'C'mon, Hector, we're investigators now. Doesn't any of this strike you as strange?'

'Well, there's a dead person here.'

'You know that's not what I'm talking about.'

'...I take it you don't think Ibai did this?'

'I don't know. I'm asking your opinion. Your REAL opinion. The one you've formed using your actual brain. I know you're a rational person, Hector.' A beat passed. 'Well, most of the time.'

Hector cocked an eyebrow at him.

'Agh, I'm asking for your help. Don't be an asshole about it. A fucking terrible thing happened here, and we need to figure out exactly what it was. Because if Ibai isn't responsible for it, then that means someone else is, possibly with the intention to kill again.'

Hector knew the reaper had a good point. He'd known all along, really. He'd just wanted to be stubborn this time. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be an option. 'Alright,' said Hector. 'Well... I mean... this IS kinda weird. When I imagined Ibai losing it, I didn't think he'd be so... stupid about it.'

'Exactly. Only an idiot would kill someone this way. And with his powers? He could've easily hid the body before anyone discovered it.'

'Maybe, but he couldn't have hid the mess,' said Hector. 'All this blood--this doesn't strike me as something that was planned ahead of time.'

'Maybe that's what the killer wants us to think,' said Garovel."  
"1013

Hector tilted his head. 'You think someone is trying to frame him?'

'Well, either he did it, or someone went to a lot of trouble to make it look that way. I don't imagine that Ibai "just happened" to stumble onto this dead body during the very brief window when none of his bodyguards had eyes on him. That would be one hell of a coincidence.'

'Hmm. But if someone framed him, then how could they have known where he would teleport to? Like you said, that window of opportunity was pretty damn small, and Ibai isn't exactly predictable.'

'Yeah, that's a good point. If someone did frame him, they did it quite well.'

A question occurred to Hector, and he realized that he probably should have asked it earlier. 'Where is the victim's soul?'

'I don't know,' said Garovel. 'It wasn't here when we arrived, but I did sense that it was in here with Ibai just beforehand.'

'Wait a minute, what?' Hector looked over the scene another time. 'So you know for a fact that the victim was alive and alone with Ibai just before we got here?'

'Not necessarily alive. Just that there was a second soul with him and that now it's gone.'

Hector gave the reaper a look.

'I know,' said Garovel. 'It's rather strong evidence that Ibai consumed the soul. I'm not disregarding that as a possibility.'

'It kinda seems like you are.'

'I'm just saying that we should be thorough about this. Whichever way this ends up going, we need to be certain. Or at least, as certain as possible.'

'Except, if Ibai and the victim were the only ones in the room at the

time of the murder, then I don't really see how anyone else could've done it.'

'Hector. This building is full of servants. People with ridiculous powers. People who would also know to account for the reaper's ability to sense souls.'

'You're talking about the Rainlords. You really think one of them would kill one of their own just to frame Ibai?'

'We don't actually know that the victim was a Rainlord, yet. It could've been one of Asad's people. Maybe a staff member here. And the Blackburns seem unlikely to turn on Ibai now, after how far they went to protect him, but almost any of the Sebolts or Delagunas might've wanted negotiations between the families to break down.'

"1014

He supposed Garovel had a point, but Hector really didn't want to believe that could be true. The idea that some of the Rainlords might sabotage their own peace did not sit well with him. In the brief time he'd spent with these people, he'd seen nothing but reasons to respect them. Even their aberration--somehow, they'd made a monster seem honorable. The kind of people who could pull off a feat like that deserved the benefit of the doubt, didn't they?

Maybe they didn't. That was the question at hand, after all. When it came down to it, maybe Ibai really was nothing more than a monster.

Hector touched his forehead as he realized that he was just going around in circles and confusing himself.

'There's another option we haven't thought of,' said Garovel, still privately. 'Perhaps this whole thing is a fake out.'

'What do you mean?'

'The victim's wounds are obviously excessive. Unless, that is, they are meant to prevent us from identifying the body. In which case, this "victim" could actually be a servant, and the reason their soul isn't here is because their reaper took it and regenerated them somewhere else.'

'Oh... you mean like we had Colt do.'

‘Basically, yeah.’

Asad and Qorvass seemed to have finished their conversation with Carlos and ventured over to inspect the corpse.

Garovel posed the most pressing question. ‘Can either of you tell us who this is?’

The Lord Najir merely frowned, but Qorvass hovered closer to the victim’s feet.

The old skeletal Sandlord let out a heavy sigh. ‘This is Fuad,’ he said.

Hector saw Asad stiffen.

“How do you know?” Asad asked.

‘The shoes,’ said Qorvass. ‘They’re a little torn up, but you recognize them, don’t you?’

Asad just shrugged.

‘No one else around here wears that brand or color. It’s Fuad. I’m sure a DNA test will confirm it.’

‘Does Fuad have a reaper?’ asked Garovel.

‘No. He was just a normal kid. He was living here as part of an apprenticeship.’

Garovel spared one last word in private. ‘Shit.’

‘It was a good theory,’ said Hector. And then he saw something on Asad’s face that bothered him. Not sadness or anger, but worry. And a sudden question occurred to Hector. “What was Fuad’s last name?”

Asad returned a hard stare. “Saqqaf.””

"1015 -- CXVI.

Chapter One Hundred Sixteen: ‘Vision in the dark...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)



The Elroys' shared room was quiet. The three children hung around their father's bed. Ramira was sleeping; Marcos looked like he was having a silent conversation with Shenado; and Emiliana--she was trying to read a book she'd grabbed off the shelf.

Trying and failing, unfortunately. She just couldn't seem to focus on the words anymore. Things kept distracting her, things she couldn't quite grasp. Fleeting sensations. A flicker in her eye. A twitch in one of her horns. And sweat--warm and then cold and then warm again. Even her own breathing was starting to play tricks on her. Easy and then erratic and then easy again. Over and over.

She didn't know what was happening. Some kind of panic attack? She'd never had one before. Was this what they were like?

But for some reason, she wasn't even concerned. Not about herself, at least. The only thing on her mind was to bottle it up. To not let anyone else find out. They'd just worry about her. Become scared for her. It made no sense, but right here and now, in the middle of whatever madness this was, not inconveniencing anyone seemed like the most important thing in the world.

At this point, the book in her hands was just a tool to help conceal herself. As long as she could look like she was reading it, everything could still be okay. The problem, whatever it was, could still pass. It could just go away. It could. It had to.

Then came Chergoa's echoing voice, ruining everything. 'Hey. Is that interesting?'

Interesting? What was she talking about? Oh, the book. Of course. Emiliana had to answer, though. What was this damn thing even about? She'd picked it off the shelf for a reason. She just had to remember.

Birds? No. Eyes. The book was about eyes. Bird vision was just one of the earlier parts. She'd picked it in hopes of learning more about ocular anatomy, but it wasn't particularly helpful, as she already knew everything that she'd managed to read.

'...Em? You awake?'

Emiliana's hands twitched as she realized she'd taken too long to respond. 'Y-yeah.' Oh no, that was stupid. She could have just pretended to be asleep.

‘You okay?’ Chergoa asked, hovering in front of her. ‘Hey. You’re shaking. What’s the matter?’”

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"1016

It seemed there was no hiding it now. Emiliana just tried to keep herself from sounding as panicked as she felt. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I'm--I... ah--' When she looked up from her book, she realized that there was something else wrong.

Spots. Distortions in her vision. It was like the light in the room was bending, somehow; and it made her blink involuntarily, but nothing changed. Those spots weren't going anywhere. She could feel her breathing becoming even more erratic.

Chergoa's voice cut through everything. 'Listen to me,' the reaper said, more urgently now, yet still carrying that same calmness that she always had. 'Emiliana, it's okay. I'm right here. Everything is fine. You're perfectly safe. Just listen to my voice. Now I want you to try and stand. Slowly. Don't rush yourself. There's no hurry.'

Emiliana latched onto those words as if she were lost at sea and they were the only thing that could keep her afloat. She gradually made it onto her feet while a whirlwind of muddled thoughts and twisting light threatened to knock her off balance.

'We're going to the bathroom,' said Chergoa, suddenly much more casual, presumably for the others in the room. 'Be right back.'

Emiliana saw the door ahead of her. She just had to make it there. To walk straight. If only the floor would stop moving.

‘Good,’ said Chergoa privately. ‘You’re almost there.’

It didn’t look like it, but after a moment, Emiliana realized that the reaper was correct. Her hand was touching the doorknob. She was leaving the room. And it almost felt like she wasn’t the one who’d done it.

All the way to the nearest bathroom, this strange sensation continued.

Then she was in front of a mirror, removing her mask in order to look at her face, at the stubby horns there.

‘Does anything hurt?’ asked Chergoa.

Emiliana had to think about it. ‘No.’

‘Good. That’s good.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘You can’t tell? Em, your power is growing.’

Emiliana’s expression twisted into a scowl. Clearly, Chergoa thought this was a good thing, and perhaps it was, but Emiliana would’ve been quite pleased to never have to deal with this again.

Chergoa had told her about this, though. One of the things that made the mutation type so volatile was that, eventually, it had to be used, whether the user wished it or not."

"1017

Chergoa floated in front of Emiliana’s face. ‘Open your eyes wide for me,’ the reaper said.

Emiliana tried and encountered resistance. Her eyes had been more sensitive to light ever since her power manifested, and now she had to struggle through the discomfort of forcing them open so wide. She could feel them twitching even more than earlier.

‘Yeah,’ said Chergoa. ‘Whether you want them to or not, your eyes are about to mutate. Try to guide the mutation.’

Emiliana grimaced. Impulsively, she wanted to ask how the hell she

was supposed to do that, but she already knew. They'd gone over this already.

There was really only one trick to it. She needed to imagine the desired change clearly in her mind. Simple.

The catch, of course, was that if she imagined something too ambitious, her power would go crazy in an attempt to compensate and do something random, instead. Random--and probably horrific, she figured.

So she had to concentrate. On her eyes, apparently. She hadn't realized that such specific mutations could occur on their own, but now wasn't the time to be worrying about it. Her thoughts went to her studies. The book she'd been reading earlier.

The temptation was to imagine something like an avian eye, perhaps to enhance her ciliary muscles for more versatile lens movement, but she had to keep her limitations in mind. At the moment, her mutation power only allowed her to manipulate the protein known as keratin; and unfortunately, keratin didn't have much to do with vision, unless she intended to grow hair on her eyeballs.

And for a few terrible seconds, that's what she thought she might have to do. There was no stopping this change. She had to do something.

And then she recalled a structure in the eye which humans didn't have but that certain animals like cats and dogs did: the tapetum lucidum. It sat right behind the retina and reflected light back through it, which ultimately increased night vision and made it look like the animals had glowing eyes in low light conditions.

That, at least, seemed like a better plan than eyeball-fuzz. The only problem was whether or not she could construct a tapetum lucidum out of keratin alone. She had no idea how feasible that was.

She supposed she was about to find out."

"1018

She shut her eyes and poured all of her concentration into her work. A curved structure encapsulating the back of each eye. Right now, that was all she needed. All she wanted.

Searing pain arrived, as expected. Tearing tissue, she figured. Something had to be moved in order to make room for the keratin. She'd forgotten to ask Chergoa to numb her beforehand, but the reaper must have been able to tell from Emiliana's expression alone, because abruptly, the agony disappeared. Only a lingering shiver was left behind.

In her head, she completed the image of what she wanted half a dozen times before finally realizing that everything had settled. Her heartbeat, her breathing, even the panic, for the most part. She was still sweating, and her nerves were still putting her a little on edge, but at length, she decided that there was nothing left to do but open her eyes and see the results.

Slowly, her eyelids peeled back, letting light in again. And she was confused. And panic spiked through her chest another time when she saw how blurry everything was. Then a quick wash of relief as the world began to come back into focus. The mirror was still there in front of her.

There were, however, splotches. Great dark spots. Hovering in the middle of her vision. Quivering. And the light--it made her squint. It didn't quite hurt, if only because she was numb, but she found it difficult to keep her eyes open now.

But she supposed that only made sense. She'd been a bit sensitive to light before, and now she'd added a structure that only increased the amount of light on her photoreceptors.

'How's it look?' Chergoa asked. 'Can you still see me?'

Emiliana blinked very slowly. 'Yes... but I think I am going to need sunglasses from now on...'

Chergoa's laugh was full of relief. 'I'm sure we can manage that.'

Emiliana rubbed her face and washed it in the sink before putting her mask back on. It did dim the light in her eyes a little bit, but she would certainly be needing more than just this now.

They started back toward the Elroys' room together as Chergoa offered reassurances and Emiliana only half-listened. She still had holes in her vision. Everywhere she looked, murky pits of black and gray seemed to swallow light or distort it, and she wasn't sure if she should tell Chergoa. At length, though, she decided that she probably should."

'I see,' said Chergoa. 'Er, I mean--I understand.'

Emiliana just looked at her.

'Well, hey, you barely even need your eyes anyway. If it comes down to it, I'll just tell you where everything is.'

That reminded Emiliana that this was going to happen again. It was only a matter of time. Unless she did something about it, of course. She knew she only had herself to blame on this one. Chergoa had warned her previously that she needed to use her power in small, controlled ways, and Emiliana had been neglecting that. It might've been irrational, but a part of her had been hoping that she could just sit back and never have to worry about making things worse.

Foolishness, she knew. She was just grateful that Chergoa wasn't rubbing it in her face.

She didn't know how she was supposed to get used to this. Everything was so bright, despite all the gaps everywhere. The oddest thing, though, was that not all of the holes were the same. There seemed to be two types, actually. Some were just strange fluctuations in light, occasionally even moving to and fro, shrinking and growing, creating an illusion of distance from her. The others were just big dark spots, blurry and completely stationary, making it feel as if she were stuck looking through a pair of mucked up binoculars.

Before they made it back to the room, however, a commotion at the far end of the hall caught Emiliana's attention. A number of Rainlords had gathered there, and when she turned to Chergoa again, she saw that the reaper had stopped and seemed to be concentrating.

"Is something happening?" Em asked.

'I think so. There's a lot of movement a couple floors below us.'

"Do you want to investigate?"

Chergoa thought a moment. 'Nah. It doesn't seem like a fight's broken out. We should stay close to Zeff. I'm sure someone will find us if there's anything we should know.'

Emiliana had no problem with that. They finished returning to their room.

Something still felt odd, though. She couldn't quite tell what it was. A stray shiver ran down her spine, and she became abruptly conscious of the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck. And even after rejoining her family, the feeling didn't go away. It lingered, keeping her on edge and making her scan the room over and over again, trying to reassure herself that nothing was actually wrong.

If not for the holes in her vision, she might've had an easier time believing that."

"1020 -- CXVII.

## Chapter One Hundred Seventeen: 'Riddle in the sand...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

'So what do we know?' said Garovel, addressing the full audience of investigators, which now included the three Najirs and their accompanying reapers. 'We don't have the luxury of a DNA test to confirm whose blood this is or even if it all belongs to poor Fuad here, but we are all in agreement that these blood patterns seem strange, at least.'

'It's difficult to tell,' said Qorvass. 'Given the extent of mutilation, one would assume that there would be plenty of blood on the walls, counters, and ceiling, but it is only on the floor.'

'Which suggests that Fuad was not killed here in the south kitchen,' said Atalim.

'But that could also be consistent with Ibai's story,' said Qorvass. 'He said he teleported AFTER colliding with the body. We assumed he meant from one end of this room to the other, as described by the two separate blood stains, but he could have just as easily teleported twice. The first teleport would have been from wherever the murder took place.'

"Can any of you corroborate that?" asked Asad. He was staring at the



group of reapers who'd been close enough to sense Ibai.

They each shook their head.

'He was too difficult to follow,' said the one bound to Lorenzo Delaguna. His name was Marosso, Hector was pretty sure.

Garovel decided to move on with the summation. 'Pretty much everything we've found points to Ibai. He was also the only one in here just prior to the disappearance of the soul that we can only presume to have been Fuad's. That's fairly strong evidence that he consumed Fuad's soul, even if we DO assume that he didn't actually murder him.'

"However, the position he was found in was also odd," said Carlos Sebolt. The thick lines of his middle-aged face deepened as he spoke. "His foot was stuck inside the body, as if he had decided to stomp the boy to death, but this is inconsistent with the extensive mutilation. He would've had to tear the body to shreds in a matter of seconds before suddenly resorting to stomping. Why would he have done that?"

"Because he's an aberration," said Lorenzo Delaguna. "It's no use trying to understand how they think."

Hector had a pretty good idea whose side that guy was on. Not that he completely disagreed with him."

"1020 -- CXVII.

Chapter One Hundred Seventeen: 'Riddle in the sand...'

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"1021

'It's not inconceivable that someone could have framed him,' said Garovel. 'And according to Ibai's own account, Fuad was dead before he arrived.'

“He also sounded extremely confused,” said Lorenzo. “Could be that he didn’t realize what he’d done until it was too late, but that doesn’t change the fact that he did it.”

“That is not a fact until we confirm it as such,” said Carlos. “You are also not a part of this investigation. You’ve given us your witness statement. You may leave now.”

“And who put you in charge, exactly?” said Lorenzo. “This isn’t Roth.”

“You are correct,” said Carlos. “But this is not Deynos, either. This is Moaban. And as we are guests here, we should defer to the Lord Najir. Agreed?”

Lorenzo gave a slow nod before he and everyone else turned to Asad and Qorvass.

And despite having been put on the spot rather suddenly, the tattooed Sandlord lost none of his composure. “Lord Lorenzo. It is my understanding that you worked as a constable in Deynos for many years, no?”

“I did, yes.”

“And Lord Carlos, you served in the Vanguard’s OSI, did you not?”

“Yes.”

That caught Hector’s attention. ‘OSI?’

‘Office of Special Investigations,’ Garovel said privately.

“I would like the both of you to head up your own investigations, independent of one another,” said Asad. “Do not waste time sharing information. Simply return to me in six hours with whatever you have learned.”

Lorenzo shifted his feet and tilted his head. “Six hours isn’t much to work with.”

“You’ll keep investigating afterwards, but I need your preliminary reports by then. At most, I can buy us twelve hours before Hahl Saqqaf shows up and starts asking a lot of difficult questions--not the least of which will be why the hell I chose to give refuge to so many Rainlords without informing them.”

“Do you think they will kick us out?” said Carlos.

"No," said Asad. "This is my jurisdiction. But they will certainly not be pleased."

"All the same," said Lorenzo, "perhaps we should be ready to leave in a hurry."

"I won't discourage your people's caution," said Asad, "but just focus on the investigation right now. I will inform Abel and Salvador of what I am having you do."

'What about the Blackburns?' asked Garovel."

"1022

"For now, no one is to take action against House Blackburn without my approval," said Asad. "Speak to them if you feel it necessary, but if you do anything more than that, then regardless of the outcome, expect that your entire house will no longer be welcome here at Dunehall. This is not a matter for debate. Have I expressed myself clearly?"

"You have," said Lorenzo.

"Indeed," agreed Carlos.

"Very good, then. Now please hurry on with your work. I do not have time to assist you myself, but Imas, please accompany Lord Lorenzo, and Jada, please accompany Lord Carlos. I will see you all again soon." And with that, the Lord Najir departed, no doubt going to talk to the ruling Rainlords. Between them and the Saqqafs, Hector didn't envy Asad's position right about now.

"Never thought I'd be taking orders from a Sandlord," said Lorenzo.

'Never thought one would stick his neck out so far for us,' said his reaper. Marosso hadn't said much thus far--at least not aloud--but that particular statement earned some points with Hector and, by the looks of it, with the two Najir women and their reapers, as well.

After that, the group split up as Asad had dictated. And since Carlos had been the one to ask Hector and Garovel for assistance, they went with him.

Their first order of business was to talk to the Blackburns and get a

second, and hopefully clearer recounting of events from Ibai. However, the only thing that became clear was that House Blackburn did not intend to let Ibai talk to any of the investigators again. Perhaps they were afraid that he would be ganged up on, or perhaps they were simply afraid of what he might say; either way, it didn't bode well for the family's position.

From there, the investigation was already at a bit of a loss for leads, so they decided to spread out and begin questioning people. And Hector and Garovel found themselves on their own again, going from corridor to corridor while searching for more clues.

'So what're you thinking now?' said Garovel.

'Uh... well, I guess I'm just trying to figure HOW someone could have possibly framed Ibai. Even a servant, I mean. It just doesn't seem very... easy.'

'You're wondering what ability they used?'

'Yeah.'

"1023

'I suppose that's as good a place to start as any,' said Garovel.

'Well, it WOULD be,' said Hector, 'if there was any sort of evidence to go on.'

'Actually, the lack of evidence might itself be a kind of clue.'

'How do you mean?'

'Just think about it. If someone framed Ibai, then they did it without leaving any real evidence behind. And which ability type has the easiest time not leaving any traces of their work?'

'Ah. Materialization.'

'Yup. Not that it proves anything, of course. I'm sure someone with one of the other types could've figured a way to be clever with their power. And moreover, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. But it's something to think about as we investigate.'

Hector paused a moment. 'Isn't it also possible that Fuad Saqqaf is still alive? I mean, Qorvass only identified him by his shoes. Someone could've taken them off him and used them for the frame up, right?'

'Mm. Technically, yeah, that's possible. Not very likely, though. For such a plan to work, the culprit would've had to know that Qorvass could identify Fuad from those shoes. And if you'll recall, even Asad seemed surprised when Qorvass pulled off that bit of absurdity.'

'Absurdity? You don't think you could've done the same thing?'

'Sure, if I paid attention to the shoes of everyone we meet. But why the fuck would I do that?'

'For situations like this, apparently.'

'Apparently.'

Hector smirked. 'Oh well. I guess Qorvass is just better than you.'

'Oh, fuck you. I remember plenty of other seemingly worthless shit. Like your dumb birthday.'

'What does that have to do with anything?'

'It's in two weeks, you know.'

'Is it? I thought it was closer, actually. How long've we been in Sair?'

'Hardly even a week.'

'Seriously? That can't be right. It feels like ages already.'

'When we weren't waiting around for something to happen, we were busy trying not to be mashed into a meaty pudding, as Lord Xuan phrased it. And both of those things tend to make the time drag.'

'Hmm.'

'Anyway, my point was that I doubt the killer would've expected Qorvass to identify Fuad the way he did.'"

"1024

'Well... maybe the killer knows Qorvass really well.'

'Better than Asad, huh? Fine, I'm sure that's a possibility. But I'm hearing a whole lot of speculation and not very much actual investigating.'

'I'm just trying to narrow down our pool of suspects.'

'Ha. Did you watch a lot of cop shows when you were younger?'

'Uh. Maybe.'

'Was this before or after that little stint as a criminal mastermind you told me about?'

'L-let's just focus on the investigation.'

'Yes, let's.'

Hector stopped walking as he realized that he was staring at one of the building's exits. Dunehall was still practically a maze to him, so he'd just kinda been following Garovel around, but now he had to ask, "Where are we going?"

'Everyone else is questioning people around the castle, so I think they've got that covered. We're going to talk to people outside.'

"Uhh--" When he saw that Garovel had not stopped along with him, Hector jumped to a brisk walk in order to catch up again. "Why would anyone outside Dunehall know anything?"

'Not sure, actually. That's why I didn't ask anyone to come with us. I don't want to waste their time.'

"...But?"

'But what Lynn said is still bothering me.'

"Lynn?"

'Don't you remember? Those mysterious reports she told us about?'

"Oh." Frankly, he'd all but forgotten. Strange occurrences all across Sandlord territory, is what Lynn had said. And he supposed Garovel had a point. Fuad Saqqaf's apparent murder certainly qualified as a strange occurrence.

Soon, they were outside and venturing up the underground path into

the fresh air of early morning. It felt a little strange, sneaking off like this. He'd already grown accustomed to following the lead of these more experienced and powerful lords. He hadn't realized how much he enjoyed this sense of independence. Though, he WAS still taking orders from Garovel, but that didn't really count, Hector felt.

Without any other method of transport, Hector resorted to running. He considered using iron platforms to launch himself over long distance--like he'd practiced in Gray Rock--but Moaban made that seem like a bad idea, what with so many trees everywhere. The deep forestation might have been pretty to look at, but it sure didn't make navigation any easier. After about five minutes, he'd already lost track of which direction Dunehall was in."

"1025

'So do you have an actual destination in mind?' Hector asked. 'Or are we just going to wander around and hope for the best?'

'What's wrong with wandering around and hoping for the best? Maybe the universe will do us a solid for being such nice people all the time.'

'So you believe in karma now?'

'Not even a little bit. If the universe rewarded people for being nice, there wouldn't be so many rich assholes in the world. Also, nature itself would be fundamentally different, and evolution as we know it would be dramatically altered. "Survival of the fittest" would be "survival of the friendliest." Which sounds pretty awesome, actually. If I ever visit an alternate reality, I hope it's one where that's somehow a rule.'

'...So we're really just wandering around right now, is what you're telling me?'

'No, I'm scanning the area for souls that are carrying the aura of death around them.'

'Oh yeah,' said Hector. 'I keep forgetting you can do that.'

'Well, it's not the most useful power when I'm just watching servants tear each other limb from limb. Which is something you seem pretty keen on taking part in.'

'Hey, you can't blame me for that shit. That first time when we went to



meet the Queen--that was YOUR stupid plan.'

'Well, maybe you shouldn't be such an unthinking follower, then. Maybe you should come up with some amazingly clever plan of your own instead of relying on me all the time.'

'Maybe I will,' said Hector.

'Alright, then.'

'Good.'

'I'll be waiting with bated breath to hear what ingenious plan you formulate for us.'

'Of course. But, uh. In the meantime, are you sensing anything?'"  
"1026

Garovel laughed. 'Not just yet, but give it a--' And that sentence's abrupt ending brought them both to a halt, though Hector was the only one left skidding across the sidewalk. Garovel tapped his shoulder, and Hector felt the familiar surge of vigor course through him. 'This way,' the reaper said, phasing through the stone wall next to them. 'And hurry.'

Hector bounded up and over and hit the ground rolling. It was a large yard, he discovered, leading up to a three-story house among a crowd of trees, but this didn't seem to be their final destination. Hector cut across the manicured lawn in pursuit of Garovel and leapt over the next wall at the other end. Another yard now, and another full sprint across it until they reached the next property over, where Garovel finally slowed.

'Armor,' the reaper told him, hovering up close to envelope himself around Hector's torso. 'Not sure what we're running into here.'

He crouched next to the small staircase that lead up to the house's rear patio. He reached for full iron plate with his mind, and it started clapping around his body in segments.

'It seems to be a family,' said Garovel. 'They're just sitting together, presumably at a table having breakfast. But they all have the aura. I don't sense any--'

‘...Garovel?’

‘What the--? It’s gone now.’

‘What’s gone? What do you mean?’

‘The aura. It went away. None of their souls are in danger anymore.’

‘Why? What changed?’

‘I... I don’t know. I’m scanning the house... but I don’t sense anyone else inside.’

Hector looked around the backyard another time. A bunch of trees, a swing set, an inflatable pool. It all seemed normal enough. ‘What do you want to do?’”

"1027

‘I’m thinking,’ said Garovel. ‘Hmm. Well, if this was going to be some kind of horrible accident, then the aura definitely would NOT have just vanished like that. An exploding gas main can’t just stop itself from killing someone. But a person can. The only thing that makes sense here is that the would-be murderer suddenly changed their mind.’

‘Or... someone else saved them, somehow?’ offered Hector. ‘We aren’t the only reaper and servant around here, y’know.’

‘Mm. That’s possible, too. Alright then, let’s just leave for now and check up on them later.’

Hector bolted across the yard and bounded over the wall. He hit the ground with a heavier thud this time, leaving a more noticeable indentation in the grass, thanks to all his armor.

‘Actually, wait,’ said Garovel, as Hector was about to start running again. ‘This is really strange. So let’s just... stick around for a little bit.’

‘Okay...’ The new yard they’d found themselves in looked a lot like the previous one. Hector hoped the owner wouldn’t be too upset about some armored weirdo messing up their grass. Mostly, though, he hoped they didn’t come outside and stare at him.

'Ah!' said Garovel. 'The aura's back! They're in danger again!'

And again, Hector flung himself over the wall. When he rushed back toward the house, however, Garovel stopped him.

'And now it's gone,' the reaper said. 'What the fuck is going on here?'

Hector caught a glimpse of the family through the window this time, but he didn't linger for a better look. He ducked behind their patio again.

The last thing he wanted to do was scare them for no reason.

'Garovel... this isn't some kind of terrible prank that you're playing on me, right?'

'Of course not. C'mon. If I were pranking you, it'd be way funnier than this shit.'

"1028

'Then what the hell?' said Hector. 'One minute, they're in danger; the next, they're not; and the one after that, they're in danger again?'

'I don't know. This shit never happened in Atreya.'

'Hmm.'

'Hold on,' said Garovel. 'I think I know what's happening. It's us.'

'What?'

'When we get close, the danger goes away. When we leave, it comes back. Why might that be?'

Hector's eyes widened inside his helm. 'The killer sees us.'

'But there's no one else within eyeshot,' said Garovel. 'So the killer is either spying on this family with cameras, or the killer has a reaper who senses our presence.'

'...Or both.'

'Yup.'

'Great. What now?'

'Well, we don't really have time to just wait for this to play out, but

obviously, we also can't just leave these people to get murdered, either.'

Hector could tell where this was going. 'You want me to go in there and talk to the family? They'll flip.'

'Even so, that might be the best option here. The whole family had the aura of death. Even the kids. If we wait too long and let them split up, then you won't be able to protect all of them.'

'Agh...' And perhaps he was just grasping for excuses, but a question occurred to Hector. 'What I don't get is... if the murderer can see us but still intends to kill this family after we leave, then why does the aura of death go away? Shouldn't it stay?'

That made Garovel hesitate. 'You're absolutely right. So THAT'S what was bothering me so much about this. I knew it was something.'

'Maybe we're wrong, then. Maybe it's not us that's making the aura go away.'

'Agh, but I can't think of what else it would be. Dammit. Mysteries are supposed to be fun. I don't like it when they're weird and unsettling.'"  
"1029 -- CXVIII.

'Well, we can't just sit here all day,' said Hector. 'Should I go talk to them or not?'

'Mgh. No. Not yet. This is too strange. My gut tells me this must be related to what happened with Ibai, somehow.'

'The same gut that you don't physically have, you mean?'

'That is a very corporeal thing to say, and I resent you for it.'

'Sorry.' Hector began annihilating his iron, but Garovel interjected.

'What are you doing?'

'Er... plate armor isn't exactly ideal for stealth. In fact, I'm a little surprised they haven't noticed me already.'

'I'd rather you left it on, at least until we know more about what's going

on here.'

'But--I can't--I mean, it'll make me noisy... and just... super weird.'

'If anyone spots you, you can pretend to be a statue.'

'...No, Garovel. That's dumb.'

'C'mon, it'd be like a game.'

'Look, I'll still have the shield. Just conceal yourself behind that. It's probably the safest place for you, anyway.'

'Ugh, fine.'

Hector finished destroying his metal and felt Garovel shifting over to his arm, which was still both gloved and gauntleted.

'For the record, though, my idea was NOT dumb. You're dumb.'

'Duly noted,' said Hector.

Chapter One Hundred Eighteen: 'O, radiant Star...!'

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It had been ages since Parson Miles last visited Jesbol. The capital city of Corpei looked nothing like he remembered. It was all cloud-grazing towers now, making the mountains they stood upon seem almost like an afterthought. Parson remembered when this place was little more than a hamlet, snuggled up to a lone salt mine and barely scraping by because of it.

He wondered if Jackson remembered that as well."

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The Vanguard's central facility in Corpei was no impressive thing. It looked just as humble as every other building they owned in this country. Field Marshal Jackson was a firm believer in the old Vanguardian tactic of blending in, Parson knew. Leaders like that were becoming less and less common, it seemed, so that was a quality Parson could admire.

He walked right into the tiny headquarters, and a lone guardsman reading a newspaper with his apparent reaper just waved the captain general on. Parson proceeded farther in but soon noticed something amiss.

'What's that look on your face?' Overra asked him.

'There's an ashy smell in the air,' he informed her. To his eyes, she was a faceless angel, winged and glowing all over with a soft white light, save only for her halo, which emanated gold instead. 'Do you sense anything strange?'

'No,' she said, as ever devoid of any sort of expression. 'Jackson is ahead and to the right.'

When they turned the corner, the hallway became abruptly black. Charred, to be specific, and he could hear the floor crunching under his boots.

Odd.

He shrugged and kept going.

Jackson's small office was entirely burnt black as well, save only his desk and chair in the middle, both of which looked new. The room was also missing a ceiling. Instead, it was just open blue sky there, in spite of the fact that there should have been another two floors above them.

"Did we catch you in the middle of redecorating?" Parson asked. "I like it."

Jackson looked up from the document he was reading, but as soon as he took his eyes off the paper, it burst into flames and disintegrated in his hands. "Dagh!" The man stood up from his chair and took an

exasperated breath."  
"1031

It was only then that Parson was able to get a good look at Jackson's unique overcoat. The thing was a complex swirl of white and crimson, and it was supposed to be fireproof, Parson knew, but about half of it was missing, and now it looked more like some kind of torn and melted cloak.

Parson had heard about Jackson's recent victory here, but he'd been too pressed for time to find out any of the details. Frankly, the whole thing had been a surprise--perhaps even to Jackson, by the look of things.

By appearance alone, Jackson was actually quite short, but his face could have been chiseled from bronze, dark complexion and all, and his eyes were as brilliant a blue as Parson had ever seen.

"Best not get too close to me," the field marshal warned. "I accidentally incinerated Kane earlier."

Parson blinked at that. "Kane? As in, Field Marshal Kane?"

"Yes."

"And by 'incinerated,' you don't mean...?"

"Oh, no, of course not. He's fine now. Though, if you run into him, I wouldn't advise bringing it up. He seemed rather upset."

Parson decided to take a few steps backward. If he was being completely honest, Jackson's power was one of the ones he feared most in this world, if only because it held such an overwhelming advantage against him. So to then find out that the man was having difficulty controlling it--this was not the most comforting news.

"Where is Hyozen?" Parson asked.

"Resting," said Jackson.

Parson didn't want to let the conversation slacken. The longer he could dance around his reason for being here, the better. "So Abolish has really been run out of Horsht, huh?"



"It seems so."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

Parson didn't like the way the man was staring at him. "I know you're not one for celebrations, but I doubt anyone could argue that you don't deserve one. A big party. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"1032

"A celebration would be one of the most foolish things I could possibly do right now," said Jackson.

"You're much more uptight than I remember," said Parson. "Is that your wife's influence?"

"Are you trying to annoy me?" said Jackson. "I don't see why. You usually do it so effortlessly."

That pulled a barking laugh out of Overra. 'I'm glad to see that biting wit of yours hasn't changed. You'll have to forgive Parson. I think he's somehow getting stupider with age.'

Parson just frowned.

'One could argue that Abolish is at its most dangerous after taking a major loss like this,' she went on. 'I'm sure they'll be feeling the need to reciprocate. And soon, too. Else the balance of power will begin to shift in our favor. And Dozer can't very well let that happen.'

She was right, Parson knew. Morgunov was about as predictable as a lottery that used imaginary numbers, but Dozer, at least, would certainly not take this lying down. Gunther and Dunhouser had both belonged to him. Their deaths would undoubtedly leave a power vacuum that many of Dozer's other men would be looking to fill, and what better way to distinguish oneself in their master's eyes than through battle?

There was no need to voice his concerns, though. Overra had it covered, and besides, he was supposed to be the stupid one.

"The only question is where Dozer will strike," said Jackson.

'Certainly not here,' said Overra. 'Trying to retake Horsht from you would be messy, at best, and draw Sermung's attention, at worst. If I were him, I'd redouble my efforts to seize Korgum.'

Doubtful, Parson figured. While it was true that finally getting a hold of Korgum would certainly make up for losing Horsht, it would still be a long shot. At the moment, winning that territory meant courting Chaos itself."

"1033

"I don't think he would push any harder for Korgum," said Jackson. "He'd run the risk of overextending himself there, and Dozer isn't one for gambling."

Parson had to agree. That old bastard had built his empire upon calculated strikes and measured responses. He wasn't the type of opponent who could be expected to make any strategic mistakes. A most irritating enemy, to be sure. And against such a foe, even the most carefully laid plans were all but worthless. Parson Miles had spent many years learning that lesson the hard way.

"Perhaps we should accelerate Blacksong," Parson suggested.

Jackson scowled, and Parson's coat caught fire. "Oh!"

Parson hurriedly patted himself down, trying not to panic with the knowledge that if he used his own power right now, Jackson's flames would swallow him whole.

"Sorry," said Jackson. "But honestly, Blacksong? The project that your Gema Elroy might have leaked to Abolish?"

Parson was still patting. The flames weren't going out. "Did you soul-empower these?!"

"No."

"Well, could you put them out, please?!" Now they were spreading.

"Eh, I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Sir, please!" Parson dropped to the floor and started rolling. It made no difference whatsoever. He could feel the searing pain beginning to pierce his passive soul defense.

"Oh, very well."

And in a blink, the fire extinguished itself, leaving only his smote uniform and smoking flesh behind. No actual damage had been done, as far as Parson could tell, but it was more than enough of a glimpse at the power that this person now possessed. Perhaps that had been the marshal's intention.

"Project Blacksong has always been a fool's errand," Jackson went on. "Now, it has only become more so."

"1034

Flames aside, that was the reaction Parson had been expecting. Jackson's disapproval of Blacksong was only natural.

On the surface, Blacksong was a multinational operation with the expressed purpose of discovering and exploiting weaknesses in Abolish's territory. Specifically, it was an initiative which would mount a simultaneous offensive against twenty-nine Abolish strongholds spread all across the Eloan continent. It was going to be the largest coordinated assault carried out by the Vanguard in decades.

But that was not the part Jackson had a problem with, Parson knew. Jackson disliked one of Blacksong's many hidden objectives--albeit the primary one.

That was, to turn the Monster of the East away from Abolish. Or at the very least, away from Dozer.

Parson doubted anyone would ever be able to convince Jackson that this was a viable strategy. The Star of the West and the Monster of the East--these monikers were not coincidental. Even among non-servants, their rivalry was well-known.

Jackson saw Gohvis purely for the monster that he quite literally was, but Parson had seen shades of something else, something that still retained at least some semblance of humanity. He'd seen it thirty years ago, thanks entirely to the massacre of House Elroy, the one from

which only two young teenagers and a single reaper survived.

The one Parson had helped orchestrate.

In truth, however, it had not been a plan of his or Overra's making. Rather, they had simply been following the orders of Air Marshal Artemis.

In all his years, Parson had never known a more ruthless and vengeful member of the Vanguard than Artemis. Save, perhaps, Lamont. But that was another matter. Ultimately, Artemis was the one who decided to exterminate the Elroys, and his motivation for doing so had been a largely primitive combination of fear and hatred. Because, as Artemis discovered, House Elroy was the bloodline which spawned the monster now known as Gohvis."

"1035

Naturally, the Vanguard could not simply go around massacring people. Which was why Abolish's involvement was necessary. Disgusting scum though they were, they still had their uses, and Parson knew how to handle them. That was why Artemis had promoted him in the first place, after all.

But Zeff, Joana, and Axiolis survived. Artemis considered that a problem, especially with the Rainlords on high alert. Worse still, the survivors were able to identify the Abolishers contracted for the job. That, in turn, meant that there was a chance--a very, very slim chance, but still a chance--that the Rainlords would've been able to discover who those Abolishers worked for. Parson had been careful, so the Rainlords still would've had a rather long and winding road to the truth ahead of them, but Artemis wasn't one for loose ends.

And hilariously, that very tendency proved to be Artemis' downfall. The air marshal went to extinguish the Abolishers they'd used, but the Monster was already there, killing them all and mounting their heads on spikes. And when the Monster sensed Artemis' presence in that place, that was it. A death sentence. Artemis escaped, sure, but it hardly mattered. Over the next three years, Gohvis hunted him down.

All the while, Parson was profoundly glad that he'd only ever used Artemis' name when dealing with Abolish. If he'd allowed himself to be identified even once, then the Monster probably would've hunted him

down, too.

Now, there was no one else left who knew the truth of that story. Only Parson and Overra.

But it had been enough. A glimpse of the Monster's lingering humanity. Surely, that demanded further investigation. So over the next several years, that was exactly what Parson did. And during that time, Zeff Elroy resurfaced, wishing to rejoin the Vanguard.

Parson could not have been more pleased."

"1036

Zeff didn't know of his family's connection to Gohvis, and even Axiolis seemed unaware, though Parson could never be entirely sure how much the old reaper knew. Regardless, the best way to discover more about Gohvis was to groom Zeff. This much was obvious.

But there was a problem. The more Parson got to know Zeff, the more it became clear: this boy would never be able to pull it off. Parson needed someone who could infiltrate Abolish and get close to the Monster. An Elroy should have been perfect for the task, but Zeff simply did not have the temperament. The boy was not a spy. He could hardly tell a lie to save his own life. Most of these modern Rainlords were like that, it seemed. According to Overra, they used to be so much more skilled in sabotage and deception, but generations of governing, power, and self-congratulations had made them too proud for their own good. How could they claim "honor" was of such importance when their ancestors practically invented guerrilla warfare? Where was the logic in that?

Instead, the key went to waste, reduced to normal service like any other Vanguardian, and Parson was left to scrounge for scraps of intel wherever he could find them. Painfully slow and inefficient. Which was actually strange. Gohvis did not make a habit of showcasing his exploits like most of the other Abolishers. His deeds were few and far between.

After years of negligible progress, the mission was all but dead. The Covert Intelligence Division had given up on turning Gohvis and moved on to other, more appealing targets. It was a common enough tactic, and Gohvis had by no means been their first attempt.

But then Gema Elroy appeared. And Parson saw new life in that old string of failures."

"1037

Unfortunately, he could not simply tell his superiors of the girl's connection to Gohvis. Even if they did believe him, they could decide to simply kill her the way Artemis would have done--or worse, begin asking questions about his involvement in the Elroy massacre.

No, it had to be more discreet than any of that. So instead, he manufactured false leads in order to convince the marshals to revive the old intelligence-gathering mission on Gohvis. Which worked out better than expected. Project Blacksong was conceived around it--though by now, Blacksong had grown into an entirely new beast with many different objectives. Excepting Jackson here, all of the marshals had their own goals for Blacksong. Jackson seemed to be of the opinion that there were already far too many cooks in the kitchen, as it were.

As for Gema, her name was too famous for her to become a plant inside of Abolish, but at the same time, Parson needed Abolish to know her name, otherwise Gohvis might never even realize his connection to her. Therefore, the only viable recourse was to change her family's affiliations. If the Elroys became fugitives of the Vanguard, Gema's credibility with Abolish would improve tenfold. Whether that would be enough or not remained to be seen, but Parson had confidence in the girl.

And besides, even if she did fail, at least the resulting conflict in Sair would offer plenty of new angles from which to work. Like Zeff, for instance. Finally, that boy's potential had begun to surface. And then, of course, there were the Sandlords. Ideally, they would secede too, before any of the Vanguard's maladies began to infect their ranks. Parson just hoped they weren't too afraid of Abolish to let go of the Vanguard. He would've liked to take more steps to ensure their departure while he was in Sair, but the Gargoyle's intervening had rendered that impossible."

"1038

All things considered, Parson felt that Sair was on the right track now-- not the safest track, perhaps, but the correct one. That was something so few of these political types seemed to comprehend. Always worried about avoiding conflict, but sometimes, conflict was necessary. Sometimes, a little bloodletting now prevented future disaster.

And Jackson was not a stupid man. Or even an incompetent one. But that was the kind of hard truth that the Radiant Sentinel would never be able to accept. As much respect as Parson had for this man, as much as the Vanguard needed more people like him, there were still some things that Jackson needed to be kept in the dark about. For the good of all.

"The other marshals will never agree to stop Blacksong," said Parson. "Isn't it about time you got on board with everyone else? Even your wife has a horse in that race."

"That may be true," said Jackson, "but Sanko is free to do as she pleases." His expression hardened. "You, however, are not."

Parson realized where this was going and had to stop himself from wincing.

"I have a job for you," the Sentinel said, reaching down beneath his desk. He pulled out a box, and from it, he retrieved a pen and notebook and pushed them both toward Parson. "Actually, I have several jobs for you, but first, you will provide a full report of your activities in Sair. Spare no details."

Parson frowned. Of course it would have to be handwritten. If it was sloppy, Jackson would no doubt force him to rewrite it. Or perhaps the marshal would just "accidentally" light it on fire.

"Once that's done," Jackson went on, "you will be handling the local call-ins and write-ins. You will investigate every request thoroughly, no matter how trivial it might seem. The point of this, in case that is not already clear to you, is to remind you of who it is the Vanguard is protecting. I'm sure a bit of time at the bottom of the ladder will do you some good. And of course, I will be expecting full reports on each of your investigations. Additionally--"

Parson's frown only deepened as he listened. If he had one weakness that he'd never quite been able to overcome, it was paperwork. And boy, did Jackson love his paperwork."

## Chapter One Hundred Nineteen: 'Shadows in space...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It had been nearly half an hour, and Hector was starting to feel rather uncomfortable about this whole waiting-outside-a-family's-house thing. Garovel had stopped talking as well, which indicated to Hector that the reaper wasn't feeling particularly comfortable in these strange circumstances, either.

'Are you sure they're still in there?' Hector asked, not for the first time.

'Yes. They're watching television.'

'You can sense that much detail?'

'The way their souls are positioned together, all looking the same way. That, and if you listen, you can hear it through the wall.'

So he could. Hector took a breath and tried to settle himself again. He scratched his neck. It had been itching like crazy in the same spot for a while now, and the added nuisance of it wasn't doing anything to calm him down. Really, though, it was all the unanswered questions that were bothering him.

The bushes along the side of the house rustled.

Hector and Garovel both looked.

There was nothing there.

He supposed it could've been an animal small enough to be completely concealed by the leaves. But Hector's gaze lingered, and his ears worked overtime, listening for any other noises.

And a noise indeed arrived, this time above. Deep creaks from the roof, slow and repeating.

'Footsteps?' Hector asked.



'I don't sense anyone there,' said Garovel.

Then came a hushed sound, too quiet to make out but distinct in its own way. A breath? A whisper? Or just the wind?

Hector placed his back to the wall and armored up. There was a very good chance he was just being paranoid, but there was no harm in playing it safe.

'Garovel, am I going crazy?'

'No, I don't think so... unless I'm going crazy along with you.'"

"1039 -- CXIX.

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"1040

‘That wasn’t a rabbit or something in the bushes just now?’ Hector asked.

‘No, it wasn’t,’ said Garovel privately. ‘Not on the roof, either. Nor in the grass, right now.’

Hector hadn’t even noticed that last one yet, but sure enough, he turned just in time to see a patch of tall grass by the patio stop shaking.

‘The next house over,’ said Garovel. ‘Hurry. Now the people in that one have the aura, instead.’

Hector launched himself over the stone wall one more time, but before he even landed, Garovel was already amending his statement.

‘And now it’s gone...’

He kinda figured that might happen. ‘The hell is going on here, Garovel?’

‘I don’t know. Just be ready.’

“This is getting boring,” came an unfamiliar voice.

Hector looked around but saw no one. ‘Garovel?’

‘No, there’s no--’ The reaper cut himself short at the sound of muted whispering.

“No, just do something bigger,” said the same voice.

More whispers.

“Oh, what does it matter now? You’ve hardly been subtle. They clearly know something’s going on already. If you’re going to play with them, you might as well really play with them.”

“But we’re not supposed to,” came a new voice.

“Ha, look at him!” said still another. “He’s so confused!”

Hector’s eyes kept telling him that there was no one around, but he was beginning to get the picture. Garovel said it before he could, though.

‘They’re invisible. Even to me.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know.’

“Don’t worry, metal kid!” came yet another voice. “We’re not real! We’re all in your head! You’re going crazy, see?!”

“Pfft, he’ll never buy that now. Use your brain, you bloody idiot.””

"1041

“We’re your collective subconsciousness! Arguing with itself! Pure madness, eh?!”

“C’mon, even if you convince him, there’s still his partner.”

“You’re all morons.”

Hector tensed up with each new voice that chimed in. Whoever they were, there were a lot of them. His mind raced as he considered his options. If they were really invisible, then his priority was surely locating them somehow. To that end, iron dust might serve. But it would almost certainly antagonize them as well, and he wasn’t sure that was necessary just yet. Certainly, if they wanted to harm him, they would’ve done so without alerting him, right?

“This better not mess up the mission,” one of them was saying.

“How could it? If anything, it’ll give us less to worry about later.”

Hector began slowly slipping one of his gauntlets off. Thankfully, he'd already been holding his shield, so he used it to conceal his work.

"Idiots. We don't even know who we're dealing with here."

"Yeah we do. Don't you remember?"

"What?"

"Looks like you're the idiot, idiot. Hey, Darksteel! Are you scared yet? Or are you just stupid?"

Hector pulled the rest of the gauntlet off and started on the glove beneath, going a little faster now.

"Oh, you're right," said another new voice. "It is him, huh?"

"How many of us do you think there are, eh? Why don't you have a nice guess. Go on."

Hector decided to take a pass on that.

"Hey, how much time do we have for this?"

"Plenty. Don't worry."

"Think he'll try to run?"

"Ooh, I hope so!"

"Go on, Darksteel! Make a run for it! You might be able to get away!"

"1042

If they wanted someone to be afraid of them, they'd come to the wrong place. By now, he was more than accustomed to being outmatched in a fight, and these assholes hadn't even proved themselves yet as anyone he should be afraid of. For the moment, however, it was probably better if they held onto that confidence of theirs, so Hector made his arms tremble.

One of them started laughing. "Look, he's shaking!"

Someone else joined in. "He's too scared to move! Aha! This is what happens when you get famous too early, little boy!"

“That’s right! You made an awfully big splash over in Bumblefuck, Nowhere. Mighta been fine if you’d killed all your enemies, but ya didn’t, did ya? And now it’s about to bite you on the ass, ‘cuz we all know how weak you are.”

“Life lessons for the dead boy.”

‘These dumb fuckers are in for a rude surprise,’ said Garovel. ‘Don’t hold back. They’re definitely Abolish.’

Hector had gotten that impression as well, though he hadn’t been as sure as Garovel sounded. In different circumstances, he might’ve asked what made Garovel so certain, but here and now, he was content to just trust his reaper’s word and concentrate on the matter at hand.

The only caveat was the presence of civilians. He certainly would’ve preferred not to fight where innocent people might get hurt, but at the same time, if he tried to lead his opponents away, there was no guarantee that some wouldn’t stay behind and slaughter these poor people anyway--which seemed especially likely, given that he was apparently dealing with multiple enemies.

He could try to call Asad, perhaps, but his phone was inside his armor, and if he moved to retrieve it, even these idiots would probably notice.

No, the best option was to simply fight and protect everyone as best he could."

"1043

All of these thoughts flashed through Hector’s mind in rapid succession, until he ultimately decided to just take the initiative while he still could. He created a thin cloud of dust over the area--tens of thousands of iron flakes, just big enough for his eyes to register specks in the air but also small enough that they would hover like tiny feathers instead of falling like raindrops.

“Hmm?”

“What’s this?”

“Oh!”

But they were too slow to realize. Hector had gotten his glimpse. There were many more gaps in the dust than he could count in a single look, some crouched on the adjacent roof, some on the wall between the houses, some sitting in the trees above, but none in the grass, presumably because it would've revealed their footsteps. Specific numbers weren't important, though. Right now, Hector only cared about general proximity, and by the time they'd begun voicing their surprise, Hector was already slamming an iron fist at the ground.

Clusters of iron pillars shot out at each area, their bladed tips extending forth at arrow-speed, all retaining physical contact with his fist so that he could empower them with his soul.

A few of the pillars struck true. Horizontal geysers of blood appeared among the dust, and a couple of the voices cut off mid-sentence, but the invisibility itself remained unchanged. The victims of Hector's attack were not suddenly revealed in full to him as he'd hoped they'd be.

He could, however, see new movement among the dust--all converging on him.

"He actually intends to fight!"

"Good!"

"Now we can have some real fun!"

And the first challenger must not have realized that Hector could see him coming, because the fool charged headlong into a gauntleted uppercut, which--from the sound of it--rocketed him right into one of his buddies in the trees."

"1044

His next opponents were a bit smarter. The abilities started coming out--strings of explosions, flanked by flames and acid and flaming acid.

It ripped into his armor, but that was the extent of the damage. His barehanded grip on Haqq's shield held firm as each attack leveled against him felt about as dangerous as a warm breeze. Even the force behind the explosions, detonating at point-blank range, broke against his body like they were nothing more than water balloons.

Through it all, Hector propelled himself upward on a metal platform, out of the smoke and materializing a fresh cloud of iron flakes to help him regain his bearings.

On the rooftop, right there next to him, were four invisible bodies just waiting. He could already see acid spewing out of one of their apparent mouths.

Instead of dodging, however, Hector dove straight into the acid, his free hand reaching for the spitter's apparent mouth. He found it, and immediately, an iron disc exploded out of the invisible servant's head, chopping it clean off. Blood gushed free, but the separated head and body both remained invisible. By the time Hector hit the roof, more ineffectual attacks were slamming into him, and he just concentrated on the iron disc he'd made, adding iron walls to it so that it became a coating for the severed head. He slid down toward his trophy and grabbed it before it rolled off the roof.

That was one less opponent that he had to worry about, but with the amount of shit they were flinging at him now, he figured that there had to be at least a dozen more of these assholes.

"What the fuck?! You said he was weak!"

"Idiots! Stop messing around and just kill him!"

And then he heard the deep piping noise of destruction users."  
"1045

Without waiting to see where they were coming from, Hector launched himself away on an iron pillar.

Explosions chased him, and even though they did little more than tear his clothes, they were becoming a problem due to all the smoke they left behind. If he allowed his vision to become obscured, he really would be fighting blind, because he couldn't rely on Garovel to locate his opponents' souls.

The solution was a platform, he decided. A platform for everything--all around the houses, filling the backyard and rising past the rooftops and nearer the trees above. He aimed to raise himself up along with everyone he couldn't see. He even covered the roofs with iron and



raised those sections as well, making sure to attach them to the greater platform horizontally so that they didn't put pressure on any of the houses and cause any cave-ins.

It was tricky work, because he had to do it whilst avoiding the scarcely visible distortions in the air from the multiple destruction users who were ganging up on him, but Hector kept his bearings, and soon enough, the fruits of his labor revealed themselves. A broad plateau of solid iron stretched out before him, pressing among the trees and indeed, crushing most of the branches in its way. He'd been far more concerned with maintaining precise construction around the civilian homes to bother himself with protecting all the damn trees, too.

Most importantly, however, he could hear the constant drum of footsteps rushing across the iron. He couldn't see any of the bastards, but they were definitely there, and they were already tearing into his work with theirs--explosions, acid, destruction, all cutting into what he'd done.

So he converted the plateau into a bed of spikes, save only where he was running. A half-dozen streams of blood revealed immediate results, and Hector prepared his next move."

"1046

A bladed disc was what Hector conceived. It began small in the grip of his free hand, but after one quick spin on his heels, the disc had grown as broad as a coffee table. And it kept growing even after it left his grasp, thrown with all his strength and then some, as he tried to add velocity to each new growth. By the time his invisible opponents began reacting to its approach, the disc was already as wide as a basketball court.

Paths of destruction cut into it, and acid melted down the rest, leaving behind huge trails of smoke. Ultimately, the disc did no damage. It did, however, succeed in pulling their attention away from the iron plateau. And that was all Hector really needed.

He slapped the iron floor, and spikes shot up all around him, each one becoming a tower unto itself. More blood informed him of the results, along with a handful of tree branches shattering on impact with seemingly nothing.

After a moment, he turned his field of spikes to iron dust and charged ahead again, still weathering an almost constant assault of explosions as he ran.

‘You okay, Garovel?’ he asked in the meantime.

‘Yeah. And you’re doing well, but you’re never going to get them all. We have to get back to Dunehall and warn everyone.’

‘What about the civilians here?’

‘Abolish will focus on us. Because they HAVE to. If we make it to Dunehall, then whatever they have planned is fucked.’

He grit his teeth but didn’t argue. ‘Alright.’ In an instant, he annihilated his plateau almost completely, save only an iron slide for himself, which then too disintegrated after he’d hit the ground running.

‘By the way,’ said Garovel, ‘I’m getting extremely tired, and I’m probably going to pass out soon, but don’t you let go of that shield until you’re sure we’re out of danger.’

Another reason not to drag this fight out, he supposed."

"1047 -- CXX.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty: ‘O, coveted children...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Ibai Blackburn rubbed his mouth and chin as he stared at the floor. He applied enough pressure to distort his own face in turns--scrunched, elongated, then scrunched again.

He couldn’t figure it out. He’d been playing the scene back in his head over and over again. He was sure the body hadn’t been there when he’d teleported, but he had seen someone. A soul. One which simply disappeared as soon as he arrived. By now, he was at least certain of that much.

Beyond that, though, he couldn’t understand what had happened.

And of course, everyone thought he did it. Even his family, it seemed. He told them it was some kind of misunderstanding, but he saw the looks on their faces. They clearly feared the worst.

But they still intended to protect him. They'd kept him confined to his room, but his father hadn't left his side even once, continually reassuring him that everything would be fine, that they wouldn't let any harm come to him.

Ibai wasn't so sure about that.

If the other Rainlords found evidence against him, he honestly didn't know what his family would do. Sure, they'd tried to protect him before, but they hadn't believed he was a murderer then.

Or maybe they had? He wasn't too sure about that, either, now that he was thinking about it.

Regardless, he didn't much care for this sitting around and waiting for judgment. Though, to be fair, he didn't much care for sitting around period. He was supposed to be on an adventure, and this didn't feel very adventurous.

Naturally, Papa was trying to keep him distracted while they waited, but Ibai was wise to his tricks. Or maybe the man was just too exhausted to put his heart into it. Ibai could see the toll that everything had taken on him."

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"1048

"Your turn," said Ismael.

Ibai looked up from the gameboard and smiled at his father. His wide eyes absorbed the other man's expression with eager interest. "We don't have to keep doing this," said Ibai. "You don't have to keep doing this."

The Lord Blackburn tilted his head and squinted faintly. However, it was his reaper who asked the question for him.

‘What are you talking about?’ said Rholtam.

Ibai poked the tallest figurine on his side of the table. Its colorful little body toppled over, and he picked it up to look at it. “I could just go,” he said. “It might be better if I did.”

“No. Don’t even talk like that.”

“I know you love me, Papa. I love you, too. But I’ve done nothing but cause problems for you ever since the day I was born. Maybe I should just--”

“No,” Ismael said again.

For some reason, that broadened Ibai’s smile. He glanced at his father another time before returning to the figurine in his hand. It wore a tiny gold crown. It was the most important piece on the board, the one that all the others were tasked with protecting. “Do you still worry that I’ll hurt innocent people?”

The question seemed to take Ismael by surprise.

Ibai nodded. “I suppose you would. Especially now. I’d have doubts, too.”

“There’s no need for you to worry about any of these things. Let’s just keep playing the game.”

“Life’s not a game, Papa. You taught me that.”

Ismael just blinked at him.

“But, if it WERE a game, then it’d be a really difficult one with way too many moving pieces and poorly defined rules. And hidden objectives, too. That would be the most unfair part, I think. Sometimes, the game would tell you to do one thing when you really needed to do something else.””

"1049

Ismael only returned a heavy-eyed stare.

Briefly, Ibai wondered if he could put the man to sleep by droning on long enough. If it weren’t for Rholtam’s presence, he might’ve tried.

"Papa. Let me be direct with you. I don't think anyone is going to prove my innocence for me. I think I will have to either do that myself or just run away and take all these problems with me."

"No, Ibai. I won't let you do that."

"Yeah, I didn't think you would. That's why I've always snuck out. That's why I never told you that I could sneak out anytime I wanted. And that's why I'm going to sneak out right now. Well, I guess it's not sneaking out anymore now that I'm telling you about it, huh?"

His father stood. "Ibai--!"

Ibai held up a hand. "Look, the point is, I'm not going to hurt anyone, and you're not going to hurt me, so you can't really stop me. But even if you were going to hurt me, you probably still couldn't stop me."

Ismael's brow depressed enough to make his eyes look like they might disappear beneath it. "Now you listen to me, mijoro. If you leave this place, the other Rainlords will hunt you down and kill you. Would you do that to your mother? To me? Don't you understand? You are our son. Everything we've done was to keep you safe from a world that hates you. You cannot simply throw all that away now."

Ibai placed the figurine back on the board and stood as well. "I understand, Papa. Protecting me is important to you." He moved around the table to give his father a hug. "But protecting you is important to me. And you've done more than enough already. So I'm going to go now. I intend to come back, but if I don't, then please don't worry about me. I will be fine." Then he let his father go. "Okay, bye."

"Ibai--" growled Ismael, but his voice was cut off as the aberration teleported away."

"1050

In a flash, Ibai was in an empty corridor. The cool sandstone beneath his toes reminded him that he'd left without putting shoes on. It was too late now, he supposed, but he regretted not wearing socks at least. Now he couldn't even pretend to be ice skating.

He knew his father and Rholtam would be hot on his heels, so he jumped again, this time two floors down, then once more into another

hallway a couple rooms over.

"Oh, it's you!" came a sudden voice. "Careful where you pop in, man!"

Ibai looked around, but no one was there. Nor should there have been. He was certain that he hadn't seen any souls in this hallway when he teleported here.

"Running away, huh? Want some help?"

"Who's talking?" said Ibai. "Where are you?"

"Oh, right."

And abruptly, a ripple appeared in mid-air, distorting an area of Ibai's vision for a moment before a young man's face revealed itself. Then the neck, shoulders, and everything else followed. The clothes were clearly foreign--Steccati in origin, if Ibai wasn't mistaken. That country's attire was popular in movies, which was where this guy looked like he belonged. Ibai liked the sparkling jacket in particular.

"Sorry for the confusion," the guy said. "We're supposed to keep our presence hidden, but it's okay now, because someone else already screwed up. I won't get in trouble."

Ibai returned a big smile. "My name is Ibai. What's yours?"

"Reever," he said, smiling similarly.

And Ibai's gaze flickered as he realized. This man. Something about him. Already, Ibai was almost entirely certain that this person was an aberration. "You're like me," he said curiously.

"You can tell," said Reever. "Well, of course you can. You must be a monster by now, huh? I've never met one of us who was as old as you."

"1051

Rather than responding, Ibai merely broadened his smile.

"By the way," Reever said, "why have you been letting these people hold you captive? We've all been wondering what you were even doing here."

"We?" said Ibai. "There are more aberrations here?"

"Oh yeah. There are six of us. All with Invisibility like me. You wanna--?" Reeveer broke himself off to stare behind Ibai, then said, "Oh, come on. Those buttoholes out front already screwed up the mission for everyone. No way things'll stay quiet until the Saqqafs show up, so we might as well take this guy with us now."

"Who are you talking to?" said Ibai.

"Oh, right, here." Reeveer waved his left hand, and another figure was revealed, this time behind Ibai.

"No, you idiot, don't--!" the new person was saying as the invisible facade fell away, but as soon as he realized that Ibai was looking at him, he shut his mouth.

"Hello there," said Ibai. "And what's your name?"

The man frowned but still said, "Arnold. Nice to meet you."

After a second, Ibai noticed the toy figurine floating behind the man's back. A reaper. So Arnold was not an aberration, then. Ibai was getting the distinct impression that these folks were not supposed to be here. "So why have you come to Dunehall? And why were you hiding?"

"It's complicated," said Reeveer. "Anyway, how about I help you get out of here? With my power, even reapers won't be able to sense your presence."

Ibai bobbed his head. "You don't say. How many people can you conceal at one time?"

"Me? Only about fifty or so, still. But I'm working on it."

Arnold shifted his feet. "Why don't we talk about this somewhere else? It's not safe here."

"1052

Reeveer shrugged. "Don't be rude. He's just curious. It's in our nature. You can't expect an aberration to join you if you don't answer his questions first. That's simple diplomacy."



"Their reapers can still sense us," said Arnold.

Reever waved his hand again. "And now they can't."

At first, Ibai didn't realize that anything had changed, but then he noticed the faint glow around everything. And it became gradually more prominent, until the hallway around them was all but burning, as if an ethereal fire had descended upon the entire world, excepting only the four of them. Reever, Arnold, and the unnamed reaper all looked just as they did before.

However, when Ibai looked around another time, he saw that there were actually several more servants and reapers in the room than Reever had previously allowed him to see.

Ibai gave them all a wide grin. "Hello!"

The many new faces stared at him. But only briefly. Then they broke into smiles of their own.

"Heya, big man!"

"How the heck are ya, pal?!"

"You gotta tell us! How'd you end up here all by yourself?!"

"Didn't you hear? He was born into one of the families."

"What?! That can't be right, can it?!"

"Dunno, let's ask him."

Reever stepped next to Ibai and put up his hands. "Alright, alright. Don't smother the poor guy." He turned to Ibai. "We have been wondering, though. If you wouldn't mind answering. Were the Rainlords studying you?"

Ibai pursed his lips. "Pretty much, yeah. But speaking of burning questions. You never really answered me. What are you all doing here? Because--and correct me if I'm wrong--but it seems like you're planning some kind of attack." Reever's brief mention of Hahl Saqqaf had not escaped his notice."

"1053

“Well, of course we are,” said someone else. “It’s kind of what we do. We’re dicks.”

“That’s D-I-C,” added Reeve. “Deep Infiltration and Cover. That’s our sect. Everyone just calls us dicks, though.”

“As they should. We voted on the name.”

“Did we? I didn’t.”

“Yeah, because you’re new. Dumbass.”

“I just think we should have a name that’s more professional-sounding or something.”

“Like what, huh?”

“I dunno--like, well, the Vanguard has that watcher’s division, right? We’re basically like them, only cooler. So we should have a similar-but-cooler name, right? Like the Infilifilers.”

“That’s not a word.”

“Yeah, but it’s like a combination between infiltrators and defilers. Infilifilers. What do you guys think?”

“Y’know, I actually kinda like it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Sounds retarded.”

“Hey, fuck you, Ted.”

“Yeah, Ted, shut the fuck up.”

“Me shut the fuck up? No, you shut the fuck up!”

“You wanna dance, fat man?!”

“Bring it on, choads! I could kill you both with my left ass cheek!”

“Oh, I--!”

“Everyone,” interrupted a soft voice, “please be quiet. Remember that we are still in the middle of a mission.”

And they actually did. Perhaps they were more disciplined than they seemed, Ibai thought. Or perhaps they were simply afraid of that little voice. Ibai's attention shifted to the similarly little man that it belonged to. If not for the full mustache, Ibai might have mistaken him for a child.

The small man addressed Ibai now. "Greetings. My name is Caster Egmond, and while it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I must ask you to keep your voice down while we remain here." His smile was much fainter than everyone else's as he adjusted his gray tie.

With wide eyes, Ibai's curiosity had certainly been piqued by this person. By appearance alone, the man could have evoked a sense of harmlessness, but now that Ibai was observing more carefully, he could sense it. That vague pressure. The same thing he could feel from Uncle Mel."

"1054

"Very well," Ibai said, more quietly now. "What was that you said earlier about the mission being messed up? Is there already fighting going on somewhere nearby?"

"Ah," said Reeve, "itching to join, eh? Yeah, the guys out front revealed themselves to someone, and now they're scrambling to kill the guy before he makes it back here."

"You are not scrambling along with them?" Ibai asked.

"Orders from above," said Caster. "Besides, if we did that, we would lose many strategic positions. Even while invisible, it is quite time-consuming to move around this place without alerting anyone. If someone sees a door opening on its own or hears footsteps where there should be none, it could become problematic. And naturally, cameras only serve to complicate the issue."

Ibai tilted his head. "Who do you take your orders from? Any names I would recognize?"

"Certainly," said Caster. "Our sect answers directly to the Salesman. He is back at camp, if you would like to meet him."

By now, Ibai had more or less intuited that these people belonged to Abolish, but that name was more than enough confirmation. Ivan, the

Salesman of Death. Widely regarded as one of Morgunov's strongest followers. "Back at camp?" Ibai asked. "He's not here at Dunehall?"

Reever shook his head. "Unfortunately, even aberrations wouldn't be able to hide his presence. But I'm sure he had other stuff to take care of, anyway."

"Hey, I heard the Monster was there, too," said Ted from earlier, not quite so loud this time.

"What? Why would the Monster be there?"

Ted gave a heaving shrug. "Heard he was looking for someone."

"Even if that is true, it is none of our concern," said Caster. And that was enough to shut them up again."

"1055

"Hmm," mused Ibai, stroking his bare chin.

"It seems you have a choice to make," said Caster. "Would you like to stay here with us and attack your captors? Or would you like to go meet Ivan?"

Indeed, there was a choice to be made, though it was not as Caster described. Unfortunately, however, Caster hadn't identified which of the reapers here was his own. The one nearest him could've just as easily belonged to Ted or Arnold, and if Ibai chose incorrectly, it would quite likely mean his death. And he didn't really feel like dying right now.

The preferred target, therefore, was perhaps Reever. Ibai gave him a friendly look as he thought about it, and then said, "Actually, at the moment, I'm most curious to meet these other aberrations you mentioned. Despite my age, I've not met many of our kind, you see."

"Oh, of course," said Reever. "I'll be sure to introduce you to all of them after the mission is over."

Ibai frowned. "You can't introduce me now? I'm a bit anxious. What if they die during the fight?"

"That is not possible," said Caster. "The mission takes precedence,

and it would be imprudent to interrupt the others.”

“I see,” said Ibai. He nodded as he threw another look around the room. “Well, then...” His gaze landed back on Caster, who merely returned an unwavering stare.

The little man was still sizing him up, it seemed. Was he figuring it out? No, probably just being vigilant.

Regardless, Ibai only saw one course of action left to him. He wasn’t going to be able to kill Caster or Reeve by himself. But they didn’t know that.

Ibai teleported behind Reeve and wrapped an arm around him. “We’ll be back,” he lied as he blinked away with the other aberration in tow.”  
"1056

With a fresh hallway all to themselves, Ibai kept his shadow out to swarm around Reeve. He didn’t use it to actually hold him down, knowing Reeve could probably tear right through it. Instead, he used it only for intimidation--a cluster of brown spears all pointed at Reeve’s head.

“I’m gonna need you to release your power now,” said Ibai. “Let only the two of us remain invisible.”

“Er--I’m really not supposed to do that.”

Ibai pushed the spears closer. “Please? I’d like to talk to you, but you need to do that first. Privacy, you see.”

“Aha. Okay. Fine.” Reeve waved a hand. “Done.”

Ibai used another teleport to check the man’s work. Indeed, he was able to see the souls of the Abolishers suspended in the ethereal void above them now. In a new room again, Ibai relaxed his shadow somewhat. “Thank you.”

Reeve shifted slightly, still held fast with Ibai’s arm, but didn’t struggle any more than that. “Would you mind letting me go now?”

“In a minute. Ask me a question.”

“What?”

“Ask me a question,” Ibai repeated. “I’m sure you have one in mind. A very pressing one, hmm? Go on. Ask away.”

Reever took a moment. “What’s your favorite color?”

Ibai brought the spears back, closer than ever before now, making Reever tense up. “Come on,” said Ibai. “That’s not the one.”

“Why are you doing this?” Reever asked.

“There you go. That’s the right question.” He pulled the spears back another time. “I’m doing this because your time in Abolish has clearly caused you to forget what being an aberration is all about. Assuming they even let you learn it in the first place.”

“What are you talking about?” said Reever.”

"1057

“I’m talking about fun,” said Ibai. “Being an aberration is all about enjoying yourself.”

Reever was indignant. “I know that! I am having fun!”

“No, you aren’t. Don’t you see? This is just some boring mission. Abolish has tricked you in order to take advantage of your power.”

“Nuh-uh! Sneaking around and surprising people is super fun!”

“Sneaking? Sure. Waiting around for orders? No. Which is exactly what you were doing just now. Waiting for Hahl Saqqaf to show up so you could ambush them, right? How dull!”

“Well... that’s true, but... it wasn’t so bad... And the pay off would’ve been--”

“Tch. You poor thing. They’ve really sunken their claws into you, haven’t they?” He let Reever go. “Let your Uncle Ibai teach you a few things.”

Reever turned to face him. “What things?”

“Well, for example, this mission: where’s the fun in slaughtering your opponents before they even realize what’s happened? We aberrations thrive on chaos. Literally, our power in a fight depends on our capacity to enjoy ourselves therein. So tell me, how are we meant to enjoy anything if the battle ends before it even begins?”

“Ah, well... I suppose you have a point.”

“Of course I do. That’s why we can’t just ambush the Rainlords like this. We have to reveal everyone’s presence and let the fight really get rolling.”

Reever pursed his lips and squinted. “Hmm. But what about our comrades?”

“Eh, they’ll be fine.”

“You think?”

“Sure! Caster will take care of them.”

“I don’t know. These Rainlords seem pretty dangerous.”

“That’s why it’ll be great! Who ever enjoyed a fight with a weak opponent, huh? No one, that’s who!”

“I’m still not sure...”

“Alright. Fair enough. Clearly, we require a third opinion here. We should ask one of our brothers.”

Reever nodded. “Good idea. One second. Let me see who’s closest.””  
"1058

Ibai observed Reever carefully. He’d had a suspicion that the guy would be able to find the other Invisibility users for him. Presumably, they needed some means of maintaining communication, even during their deep cover operations.

But all Reever did was place his hand in front of his own eyes like a blindfold and then look around. “There. Over two rooms. You’ll want to appear next to the hearth so as to avoid bumping into anyone.”

“Alright,” said Ibai, preparing to jump again. “My favorite color is obviously brown by the way.”

--+-+--+--

Emiliana couldn't stop staring. The rifts in her vision were beginning to drive her mad. The stationary ones were no longer bothering her, though--or at least, not as much. Inconvenient as it might have been, she felt like she could get accustomed to having her vision uniformly obscured. But the rifts that moved. Those were another story.

Why were they moving? Were they the result of something that was moving inside of her eyes now? Not the most comforting question, she felt.

So she stared at them, determined to discern some kind of useful information for herself.

And gradually, she did.

They weren't the product of something living inside of her eyes, she decided, because if that were the case, then the rifts should have moved all over the place, up the walls and onto the ceiling and even across her family member's faces.

But they didn't.

They were a bit disorienting to look at, almost to the point of forcing her to turn away, but they didn't actually move that much. They stayed on the ground, hovered around the door, and generally kept their distance from everyone. Their movements were bound by the room, she realized, not her eyesight.

Which confused her even more. If they weren't caused by something inside her eyes, then what were they?"

"1059

Emiliana looked toward her family. Marcos and Ramira were sat on opposite sides of their unconscious father. Each child had a book in hand, though Shenado and Chergoa both floated behind Marcos, reading along with him and trading commentary. Apparently, they were in disagreement over the merits of its contents.



‘Agh, this book is even more idiotic than I expected,’ Shenado was saying.

‘That’s pretty harsh,’ said Chergoa. ‘The original was written a thousand years ago. It’s only natural that it’s become a bit dated.’

‘A bit? The author treats all these things as if they’re real.’

‘Maybe they were. Depends on who you ask.’

‘Ugh, you WOULD say that. You’re as bad as Axiolis, sometimes.’

‘You’re very closed-minded, you know that?’

‘Really? Okay, so you’re saying that you think this three-headed lion monster might have existed at some point?’

‘Well, maybe not THAT one...’

‘Of course not THAT one! Or ANY of them!’

“So if it never existed, then where did the idea come from?” asked Marcos.

Shenado hovered around him, her wispy blue flames crackling silently.

‘Wonderful question, darling. The three-headed lion is merely a symbolic representation of the War of the Three Sands that some group of idiots actually took seriously.’

“Oh. That’s a little disappointing...”

‘Perhaps so,’ said Shenado, ‘but it’s important to keep a clear picture of reality. It’s good that you’re thinking critically about the world around you. It’s best not to simply accept things like this at face value.’

‘That is very true,’ added Chergoa. ‘But I think it’s alright to leave ourselves a bit of wiggle room for the stuff of legends. Who doesn’t love a nice dose of mystery and wonder every now and again?’

‘You want mystery and wonder? The natural world is full of it. Ramira knows what I’m talking about. Marcos, ask her about arachnids.’

The boy frowned. “I’d rather not...”

"1060

‘Okay, so maybe not the three-headed lion monster,’ said Chergoa, ‘but what about the ONE-headed lion monster that it’s based on? The arasaba could have been real, I think. I remember reports of sightings in the olden days.’

‘Those reports were never substantiated,’ said Shenado. ‘And really? Reports of a lion-like monster? Gee. I wonder what could someone have possibly mistaken it for. Perhaps an ACTUAL lion?’

‘In the desert, though?’

‘Most of those reports didn’t come from the desert. They came from people returning to the desert after having spent time abroad. And the ones that were from the desert? Easily mirages. That would also explain why the arasaba seems to possess the convenient ability to turn itself into sand.’

Chergoa gave a glowing shrug. ‘Your cynicism saddens me. Don’t the Rainlords have their own monster like this, too?’

‘The lhugleoth, yes.’

‘You don’t think that could have existed, either?’

‘Of course not. It could breathe ice.’

‘So can Zeff.’

‘Ah--that’s different, and you know it.’

‘I know no such thing. Reapers aren’t the only ones who can bend the rules, y’know. Tell me, Marcos, have you ever heard of the Jaskadan Forest?’

He shook his head as he eyed the reaper curiously.

‘Oh, then--’ But Chergoa stopped herself. She held there a moment, hovering in silence, then looked to Shenado. ‘Did you sense that?’

‘Something is going on downstairs,’ the other reaper said.

‘But did you--? Those souls. Were they there before? Am I going crazy?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Shenado. ‘I wasn’t really paying attention to things down there, but that did feel odd...’

Emiliana turned back to the rifts in the room. They were still moving around, but not by much. They hadn't strayed any closer."

"1061

'Do you sense anything else?' asked Chergoa.

'Like what?' said Shenado.

'I don't know. Where is my brother? I can't find him or Hector.'

'They probably just went to have a look around the city.'

The more she stared at the rifts and the more she listened, the more Emiliana began to feel a knot growing in her chest. 'Chergoa,' she finally said.

'What?' the reaper said privately.

'There's something in the room with us.'

The reaper paused. 'What do you mean?'

'I see something in here with us. I don't think I'm hallucinating. You don't sense anything?'

'No, I don't. What does it look like?'

'It's like... light is being bent. Distorted. They look like, just... weird lumps in empty space.'

'They? You see more than one?'

'I see four. And they're moving. Chergoa, they're moving like people move.'

The reapers didn't respond, and Emiliana didn't turn around to look at them again. She kept her eyes forward, staring through her mask at each of the rifts before her, waiting.

Then Ramira walked into her vision, headed for the door. "I want to see," she said.

Emiliana's one clawless hand shot out and grabbed her little sister by

the arm. Ramira jumped at her touch, and Emiliana pulled her closer, realizing she'd scared her. "Sorry," she said. "Not just yet. Let's stay here."

Ramira seemed hesitant. "Why?"

Emiliana reached into the big front pocket of her gray hoodie. She felt for the compact firearm there and found it. She pulled it free, using Ramira's body to help keep it concealed, and pushed it hilt-first against the little girl's stomach. "Trust me," said Emiliana, looking past her sister's head. "Don't make a fuss, or there will be trouble. Understand?" She felt Ramira take the weapon.

"...I understand."

"1062 -- CXXI."

Emiliana noticed one of the rifts twitching. It began moving slowly closer, and the others followed. She supposed she could be jumping to conclusions about what these rifts were. She had no real evidence that they were hostile, but her mother's cynicism was telling her that if they were friendly, they would not be hiding themselves from everyone else. And after everything she'd been through, she was not about to take chances with the lives of her family.

Emiliana locked eyes with Ramira as she waited for the right moment, keeping the rifts in her peripheral vision. The distance had to be perfect. And when it was, Emiliana leapt out from behind her sister, claws-first.

And at the center of the nearest rift, she found blood.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-One: 'Thy boiling will...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Marcos hardly had time to understand what was going on. He'd noticed Shenado and Chergoa giving each other strange looks, and then Shenado gave him a private and incredibly vague warning that something was about to happen, but then Emiliana was suddenly slashing at thin air and apparently tearing bloody chunks out of it.

Shenado grabbed his shoulder, and he felt the undead vigor burn through him. This wasn't his first experience with it, as he'd been practicing periodically, but it was certainly the first time he'd had to actually use it.

He wasn't sure what to do. He merely watched as Chergoa bolted over to Emiliana, who was already spinning around to kick a second invisible opponent.

However, when he saw a spiked block of bluish-white metal crash into her and slam her against the far wall, Marcos didn't require any more information. His mother's training took hold, and he reached for the firearm that Emiliana had discreetly given him after Luzo."

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"1063

Marcos fired at thin air, aiming where Emiliana's targets had been. spurts of blood guided his aiming as he moved toward Ramira, who'd started shooting even before he did. The little girl was on the move as well, trying to avoid the cluster of metal spikes that were shooting up from the floor.

One of them found her. It skewered her shoe, and she screamed as she fell to the floor. In the next moment, Marcos was there, scooping her up with one arm and pulling her out of the next spike's path. But there were still more to evade, and one of them caught his left leg, which it then began coating with newly materializing metal, trying to slow him down.

Marcos dropped to the floor with his sister still in his grasp, scrambling to shield her with his body.

That was when the room heaved, throwing everything into confusion, and briefly, Marcos thought there'd been some kind of explosion or earthquake.

And then he saw the crystalline spears. The area by the door was completely filled. Glassy pillars, so numerous and densely packed that they almost looked like a wall. The only anomaly among their brilliantly clear bodies was the blood, long streaks of crimson, splattered and dripping and pooling on the floor.

He looked around for Lord Asad, thinking it must've been the Sandlord's doing, but instead, he saw his father, standing at the foot of

the bed he'd been using only moments ago. It hadn't been glass. It had been ice.

"Pa!" said Marcos. He wanted to rush over and hug him, but he was still mindful of Ramira's injury. By the time he made it to his feet again, he realized that something was off.

His lord father was just standing there, silent, face drawn downward. Axiolis was still attached to his back and also saying nothing."

"1064

Emiliana was closest and approached him first. "Papa?"

No response.

Shenado floated over to Zeff now. 'Unbelievable,' she said as she inspected his face. 'He's still asleep.'

Marcos didn't understand. "What?"

'Your father protected you unconsciously,' said Shenado. 'I've heard about things like this happening, but I've never seen it myself... Wow.'

'Instinctive knowledge and awareness,' said Chergoa, hovering up behind Emiliana. 'You don't need to be a servant to possess those things. Still, I am quite--'

Ramira's muffled cries interrupted her.

"She needs help!" said Marcos.

'Bring her over to the bed and take her shoe off,' said Shenado. 'Emiliana?'

The older sister was already rifling through the far cupboards for supplies. Chergoa told her to try under the bed, where she found a first aid kit. Emiliana took over for Marcos in sterilizing and dressing the wound.

Of all the things their mother taught them, Marcos had always thought this would be the least valuable. He'd figured that once they became servants, they would have no need of such skills, but now he saw how wrong he'd been.

As Emiliana finished her work, Chergoa picked up the conversation again.

‘What do you think? Should we leave or stay put?’

‘We seem to be safe for the moment, but we don’t know enough about the situation to be sure. Asad and Dimas are both relatively close. We should meet up with one of them.’

‘Agreed,’ said Chergoa. ‘Em, how’s about you help Big Papa Elroy here walk with us?’

Marcos watched Emiliana place a hesitant hand on the man’s back. She had to take the lead, but just as Chergoa had said, Zeff began to keep pace with her.

Marcos picked Ramira up again and then stopped. “Uh. There’s still a wall of ice in the way...”

"1065

“Papa?” was all Emiliana had to say, and the ice dematerialized. The bodies of Zeff’s victims were still not visible, Marcos noticed, but there was so much blood that it dripped from the ceiling and splashed against a dozen red puddles on the floor.

With her arm around one of Zeff’s, Emiliana led everyone out of the room, and together, the Elroys left blood-soaked footprints as they made their way down the hall.

-+--+--+-

Dunehall was finally in sight again. The constant assault from every direction made it feel like he was running underwater. He’d tried launching himself on platforms, only to be knocked off course and forced back to the ground. He couldn’t remotely make out what was hitting him. In the low light, it was just an indistinguishable flurry of shit, but he had little doubt that it had all been materialized.

The shield did its job, though, and he pushed onward, recreating his full plate armor each time it was destroyed. On that front, he was also seeing progress. At first, the armor had only lasted a few seconds before being melted away or exploded apart, leaving his shield-



strengthened flesh to weather the brunt of the force; but now, the armor was lasting longer, and while Hector had a vague idea why that was, he didn't have time to stop and question right now. He only knew that he wanted his armor to be stronger and that his soul power was making it happen.

'Garovel,' Hector thought in the middle of a fully armored sprint, 'can you sense Asad yet?'

He waited, but there was no answer.

'Garovel!'

A pair of deep piping noises demanded his attention, and Hector rolled through a picket fence to his right, out of the way of two destructive paths that dug up the sidewalk and sent chunks of dirt and concrete and splintered wood flying past him."

"1066

Hector pushed on through the debris. If he couldn't rely on Garovel, then he would just have to find Lord Asad himself. He materialized a cloud of iron dust ahead of him in order to scout out for any more invisible opponents in his path.

There were at least a dozen.

Hector summoned a field of spikes over the whole area but didn't stop moving for a moment. With a flourish of his free hand, he annihilated a path for himself. His opponents were already doing similarly for themselves.

'...Agh, Hector...'

'Garovel?!'

'Go to... shards...'

'Shards?'

Another string of explosions stole his attention, nearly knocking him off his feet. He stumbled through a wall of smoke and fire but found his balance again and kept stomping onward. He'd nearly reached the underground entrance.

‘Garovel?’

The reaper did not respond.

Hector racked his brain as he ran. Shards? What shards? Was that supposed to help him locate Asad? How would--?

And it hit him. He knew exactly where to go now.

The doors on the underground entrance flew from their hinges as Hector bulldozed through and stormed up the nearest staircase. It was time for another cloud of iron dust, he decided, and sure enough, there were plenty more hostiles waiting for him down the next hallway.

There was nothing for it, he supposed. He just had to push through. He leaned even farther into his run and prepared to weather still more shit.

Something changed, however. In an instant, all of his opponents were suddenly visible. It happened so suddenly that he lost focus and nearly stumbled.

A path of destruction caught his shield, which took the attack admirably, but the impact still put him through a wall. He brought down a line of bathroom stalls and landed on his back."

"1067 -- CXXII.

Hector knew he didn't have time to stay down. He rolled off the pile of lavatorial debris he'd made and sprinted for the door, but a string of explosions sent him through another wall instead. He could hardly tell what was happening, but he could hear acid hissing against his armor and feel the fumes burning his nostrils. He found himself in a darker room this time, perhaps some kind of storage closet, but he didn't get the opportunity to check, instead hearing that deep piping sound closing in again.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Two: 'Diversion of Fire...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The evening fete was finally underway. There had to be hundreds of

people here, most with very recognizable faces. Unfortunately, he needed to find a face that he didn't recognize. At the moment, all he had to go on was a name.

"Jimmy, don't walk so fast!" came that agonizing voice.

The last twenty-four hours had been an exercise in patience, thanks to that voice--or rather, thanks to the person it belonged to.

He had to resist the urge to break out into a run. "Yes, Miss Reach," he said instead.

"What're you in such a hurry for, anyway?" She held her hand out for her purse, and he gave it to her. She retrieved a compact mirror from it, checked her face for half a second, and then promptly returned it to him. "Excited to see someone?"

"Something like that."

"Mm," she mused. Even among all the fanciful dress around, her attire stuck out. The strings of feathers in her blond hair and the huge sleeves on her long dress gave it a faintly tribal look, even if the colors on it were probably too varied and bright. "Well, if you're nice to me, maybe I'll go talk to whoever it is you're interested in."

"Impossible," he said."

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"1068

Her face scrunched up. "What's impossible? I could talk to anyone here tonight! Why do you think they invited me, huh? I am a goddess in this country! They love my movies!"

"No, I was talking about being nice to you. No way I'm doin' that."

"Ugh! Again with this?! Why did my agent even hire you?!"

"Because you fired your last ten assistants over stupid shit, and now no one else wants this job?"

"What?! How dare you talk to me like that!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Reach."

“Oh, you’re sorry?! You’re sorry?!”

“Nah, I was just being polite.”

“WHAT?! I will can your ass so quickly--”

“Hey, isn’t that your ex-boyfriend?”

She stopped cold and looked where he was pointing. As soon as she spotted the other man, she spun back around. “Oh my god!” she whispered “What is he doing here?!”

“I imagine he was invited.”

She pressed her lips together a moment. “Is he with someone?”

“Looks like it.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Shit!”

“Why don’t you go talk to him?”

“Are you kidding?! No!”

“Well, I think he noticed you.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, he’s coming this way.”

“Shit shit shit! I didn’t bring a date! Jimmy, you have to distract him--”

“Too late.”

Miss Reach spun around, all smiles. “Darius! Sweetie! Great to see you!”

Darius returned a smile of his own. “You look well, Madison. Ah, and this is Amanda, of course. I’m sure you know of her.”

“Of course!” said Madison. “You were amazing in Elementary Love! Really knocked it out of the park! Y’know, I’m surprised we haven’t met before, actually! We should definitely do lunch sometime!”

The other woman gave a nod and a placid smile. "And who is this?"

"1069

"Oh, this is my date," said Madison, pulling him closer. "Jimmy. James, I mean. He's--" She hesitated as she glanced at Darius. "He's not from around here."

"Interesting." Darius offered a hand. "You seem a bit underdressed, friend. Not that I'm one to judge people on that sort of thing."

After a beat, he took Darius' handshake with a confident laugh. "Oh yeah, the outfit. Don't tell anyone, but I'm actually a billionaire in disguise. This is all a very delicate undercover operation."

And to the man's credit, Darius returned a laugh of his own, though it seemed more polite and uncertain than actually amused. Darius turned his attention back to Madison.

Their conversation meandered between pleasantries and probably a few veiled jabs at one another, but he wasn't interested enough to keep listening. Instead, he scanned the crowd and tried to focus on the other conversations going on around him. Though, really, his search would be dramatically simplified if he could just spot one of those ethereal crows.

Then came the interruption that he'd been expecting for the last hour.

'So how's it going?'

'Fine,' he said.

'You sure? 'Cuz I can still book it on over there, if you need me.'

'I don't.' Having a reaper following him around would just give his position away to any other servants here. But she knew that already and was probably just bored.

'You find your lead yet?' she asked.

'Still looking.'

'I really hope this one pans out. Why isn't there just like a number we

can call, huh? A hotline or something. You'd think someone called the Peacemaker would be easier to make contact with.'

'You should tell her that after we find her.'

'I know you're being sarcastic, but fuck you, maybe I will.'"

"1070

As he surveyed the crowd for the tenth time, trying to put a bit more distance between himself and Miss Reach, his ears finally caught whiff of a promising conversation.

"--oh, the Hammer?" an elderly man's voice was saying. "You mean that old lummoX has finally returned?"

"Oh yes," said the voice of an elderly woman. "Hadn't you heard?"

"What prompted--? Oh, the war! Of course! Wow. So does that mean he's back for good, now that it's done?"

"Who knows? I can't imagine the Peacemaker's people will be too pleased about it, though."

"Mm. They have gotten comfortable here, haven't they? They'll probably worry that he's come to stir up trouble."

"You know, I hope he has. It's been so dreadfully dull around here, and I can think of a few folks who deserve a right good thrashing."

"Oh, you terrible woman! Not that I disagree, though!"

They shared a laugh, which devolved into hacking coughs on both sides.

As he listened to them slowly recovering, he couldn't help glancing in their direction. Unless his eyes deceived him, that old man used to be Steecat's Chief Treasurer, while the old woman had been the Chief of Defense. He might not have recognized them if he hadn't done his homework on all of the attendees tonight.

As soon as their phlegm-filled intermission ended, the old woman spoke up again. "Honestly, young people today have gotten too full of themselves. And why? Because of a few movies?"

"We've become a nation of entertainers, it seems."

"Don't I know it! All the glitz and glamour has gone to their heads--and this, in spite of the fact that they're clearly this country's softest generation since the Hammer left."

"Mm. Steccati aristocracy--it's become synonymous with 'high art.' Whatever that means."

"1071

"As far as I see it, the Hammer can do nothing but good things for this nation."

"Maybe our young folk'll finally have a real role model to look up to for a change."

"Wouldn't that be nice. Assuming they even know who he is!"

"Oh, don't even joke! They must, surely? The man is practically a founding father, for goddess' sake."

"I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if they claim to have never heard the name Kane before in their lives. If it's not a musician or a movie star, they probably--"

He wasn't sure he wanted to keep eavesdropping, but after another moment, it didn't matter, because Miss Reach was pulling him away, having apparently concluded her conversation with Darius.

"Ugh, that was a nightmare," she said, already looking like she was ready to leave. But then she rounded on him. "And you! What the hell was that, huh, Jimmy?! There's no way he believed you! I've never seen anyone so bad at lying!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Reach."

"Agh, whatever. I guess I can't really blame you. Dressed like that, there's not much you could've done, anyway."

Indeed, his generic coachman's hat and coat probably hadn't impressed Darius very much. He noticed, however, Miss Reach had not let go of his arm yet. And it seemed she was not going to, now that



he was supposed to be making Darius jealous.

This was far from ideal. He wasn't sure how much actual scouting he would be able to get done if he had to be anchored to this woman for the rest of the night.

After a while of superficial mingling and no progress, he was beginning to grow restless and was actually relieved at the soundless interruption for a change.

'Hey, Roman, why is your plan so boring?'

'It's not... that boring,' he said.

'It's pretty boring,' said Voreese."

"1072

Another look around the fete had Roman agreeing with her. 'Yeah, it is... But I'm trying to not get us killed. That's important, you know.'

'Yeah, whatever.'

'I did find out that the Hammer of Steccat has returned from Jesbol, though. That's something, right?'

'No,' she said flatly. 'You're not there to learn about the Vanguard, you shit burger.'

'Yeah, I know that, you ass crack. But I don't even have a face to go on here.'

'Well, that sounds like your problem.'

'Well, it's not. If I don't find this 'Andalero' person, then all of this has been for nothing.'

'Have you asked Madison about the name? She probably knows lots of people.'

'Egh. I'd rather not get involved with her any more than I already am, but...'

'Use all resources at your disposal,' said Voreese.

‘Yeah, alright.’

Between all of the introductions and agonizingly light conversation, it was actually quite difficult to find the opportunity to ask Miss Reach anything, but after they sat down for a meal together, he finally managed it. “Do you know anyone named Andalero?”

Madison paused mid-bite, a chunk of her leafy salad dangling from her mouth. She stared at him as she finished chewing. “Is that supposed to be a joke?” she eventually asked. “If it is, it’s not funny.”

Roman returned a confused look. “Did I say something wrong? I wasn’t trying to upset you. And believe me, I’d tell you if I was.”

She pursed her lips at him, but then said, “Andalero isn’t someone’s name. It’s a club. A clique, really. One that Darius belongs to.”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t know.”

She just shook her head and went back to eating. There were other people at the table, but they’d given up trying to converse with her. Roman hadn’t really been paying attention to what she’d been doing, so he didn’t know what had put her in such a bad mood. Probably something to do with Darius, he figured.”

"1073

Regardless, he had something to go on now. If nothing else tonight panned out, he could at least resort to following Darius around in order to find out more about this Andalero group.

He considered asking Madison for more information, but he didn’t think he could manage it without arousing her suspicion. Instead, he stood up from the table. “Bathroom,” he said. “Back in a bit.”

Miss Reach barely even acknowledged him.

Roman ventured off, navigating his way through the crowd as he searched for Darius’ face again. All he needed to do was plant a tracker on the man, and then he would be set. Any more intel he could gather after that point would just be a bonus, as far as he was concerned.

Unfortunately, Roman couldn’t find the damn guy. After a good ten

minutes of looking, he was about to give up when something entirely different caught his attention.

A ghostly crow. Finally, a reaper. It was hovering next to a woman with rainbow-colored hair.

Roman averted his gaze just enough to keep the pair of them in his peripheral vision and moved closer until he could make out what the woman was saying.

--ha, that's very kind of you to say, but please, don't do anything dramatic on my account. I won't be staying long. I doubt anyone who's looking for me will bother you, but if they do, just cooperate and tell them everything. I can protect myself, I assure you. I'd feel much worse if something happened to you just for helping me."

"Ah. I do not like it, but as you wish."

"I'm glad you see things my way. Anyhow, I wanted to ask: is there any chance that we might see the Peacemaker here sometime tonight?"

Roman blinked as he kept listening."

"1074

"Oh, no, madame, I'm afraid there isn't," said the other voice. "From what I hear, she is quite busy abroad and won't be visiting us for another few months."

"Is that so? What a shame. I've been hoping to meet with her for a while now. Not an easy person to find, that one."

"Indeed, indeed, I know that problem well. Both the president and the prime minister have been attempting to coordinate a meeting with her for more than a year now. They haven't been very pleased by how little regard she seems to have for them."

"Mm, I'm sure to her, a five-year presidency feels like little more than a fad, at this point."

"They fear she sees them as children. I only worry that she would be justified in doing so. Some of their suggestions to me about how I might get her attention... they strike me as no better than tantrums."

The rainbow-haired woman laughed. "I do sympathize." She paused, perhaps for a drink. "But that's also why I come to you, Enrico, and not them. Middle management is always more reliable when push comes to shove, I've found."

"Upper middle, thank you."

"Of course."

Enrico cleared his throat. "Mm, but now you've made me curious. What business does the Vaghrakaanas have with Sai-hee, exactly?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't really give details."

"Oh, come on. You have to give me something. That's how we're able to maintain this lovely little give-and-take, you and I."

"Of course, but you never know who could be listening."

Roman scratched his nose and turned toward the banquet of hors-d'oeuvres behind him. They had crab puffs, he noticed. No sense in letting those go to waste just because he was working."

"1075

Enrico wasn't giving up, though. "Does that mean I can expect a nice bit of intel, later tonight?"

"Oh, you can expect much more than that, my bad little doggie."

Roman immediately began choking. Then he horked up the crab puff, which sailed right into the wine glass of the Steccati President, who was already staring right at him. Roman frowned and bit his lip at the same time.

They shared a moment of silent contemplation from different sides of the snack table, and then the other man slowly set his wine glass down. Roman fled into the crowd behind him.

He made his way back toward Madison, traumatized and determined to keep his head down for the remainder of the evening. His only solace was the fact that Voreese hadn't been here to see that.

His bath of hot shame was interrupted, however, when he spotted

Madison's table from a distance, but saw someone leaning over his chair. Judging from the familiar suit, it was Darius. The man seemed to be whispering into Madison's ear as he eyed the crowd around them.

Suitably suspicious, Roman decided. Fortunately, he was still far enough away for Darius not to notice him, so he decided to resort to a new trick that he'd been working on.

He turned his body perpendicular to Darius and Madison, then rubbed his ear with one hand. A funnel of controlled particle vibrations extended out from his hand, completely invisible to the naked eye as it searched for the words coming out of Darius' mouth.

It required quite the delicate touch, this technique, and he still hadn't really mastered it yet, but after a few moments of careful tuning, Roman found what he was looking for.

"--never seen anything so pathetic," came Darius' voice. It was muddled but still clearly him. "It's incredible that you still think you belong here. It's incredible that you thought you ever could belong here."

Roman cocked an eyebrow and squinted as he listened."  
"1076

"You think a few movies and a bit of fame have changed you?" Darius went on. "I suppose I can't blame you. I thought so, too, at one point. That's the only reason I ever bothered dating you. But I learned, so why can't you? You have no value, Madison. Those gaudy clothes are worth more than you are. You can play dress up all you like, but we both know the truth. You'll always be a junkie. And the only reason these people let you near them is because you amuse them. Their drug-addled little monkey."

Roman could hardly even process what he was hearing. Mostly, though, he didn't understand why Madison was just sitting there, listening to this. Granted, he didn't really know her very well, but he would've expected her to tear Darius' head off by this point. It made no sense.

Or wait--was she actually listening to him? Maybe she'd fallen asleep or something. Roman's view of her was obscured by Darius' head, so

he couldn't be sure. He refocused his hearing another time, trying to find Madison's voice. There was something there, behind Darius' rambling. Breathing? Uneven, maybe. Erratic. And slight hiccups, perhaps? Faint, but--

Roman's expression went completely blank as he realized.

She was crying.

And Darius was still going. "But hey, it's not your fault that you came from trash. Both parents addicts? You had no chance. Don't you see? No one understands you the way I do. You'll never find--" He cut himself off when he saw Roman pushing through the crowd toward him and stood up straight. "Ah, Jimmy. Is something--?"

Roman punched him hard enough to break his own fist.

The man dropped like a sack of bricks, but he wasn't dead. Probably. Roman had deliberately not used his ability or soul power."

"1077

"Jimmy!" Madison shrieked, leaping out of her seat while still trying to brush the tears from her eyes.

Roman spared her a look as he nursed his hand. Admittedly, he'd never been very good at normal fighting. He'd been full of fiery confidence a second ago, but now that he was thinking about it more clearly, he might be in trouble if Darius decided to get back up.

Which he did. And then a few apparent buddies emerged from the crowd to join him.

"Gentlemen," Roman tried, "I'm sure you're all very reasonable. Your friend here had it coming. Just look at the young lady there. He was clearly upsetting her."

None of them so much as glanced at Miss Reach. "How dare you lay a hand on one of us, peasant," someone said.

Roman scratched his brow. "Did you just call me a peasant? I'm sorry, did we travel five hundred years into the past, or are you just an idiot?"

Surprisingly, that didn't seem to placate their anger.

And Roman sighed, knowing what was about to happen. In order to maintain his cover, he was gonna have to get his ass beat, at least until security got here. Assuming they would even bother to come help him.

‘Agh, I’m so bored,’ came Voreese’s unhelpful interruption. ‘This plan of yours is really unfair, you know. At least you get to enjoy all that ritzy, high society bullshit. Meanwhile, I’m stuck here with someone who can’t even see me.’

Roman watched them close in around him. ‘Well, it’s not the most enjoyable party I’ve ever been to.’

‘Oh, why? Do they not have those crab shits you like so much?’

He avoided the first punch, as well as the second, but the third caught him right on the jaw and sent him stumbling into the grip of a much larger man. ‘They’re not crab shits.’

‘Man, I wonder what Hector and Garovel are doing. Whatever it is, I bet it’s way better than this monotonous fuckery.’

‘Voreese. Gonna need you to shut up right now.’”  
"1078 -- CXXIII.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Three: ‘O, rending union...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The ground rumbled again, this time with enough force that Emiliana had to stop moving so she didn’t trip. How her unconscious father managed to keep his footing with so little help from her, she had no idea.

‘Almost there,’ Chergoa assured her.

They’d descended a staircase already and fought their way through more invisible assailants, along with a few not-so-invisible ones. Emiliana didn’t know what prompted the change, but she wasn’t about to complain. It hardly seemed to make a difference to Zeff, either way.

It was enough to make Emiliana wonder just how far these “instincts” or whatever extended.

Finally, they found Asad. The Sandlord was holed up in the middle of a large chamber--the remains of a gallery, perhaps. The globular design with balconies all above them didn't exactly seem ideal. Emiliana felt like enemies could pour in from almost any direction, and perhaps Asad felt similarly, because it took him a moment to recognize them.

“Zeff?” Asad said, coming closer. He had a bag tied around his waist.

“He's not--” Emiliana wasn't sure how to explain. “He's not quite awake.”

Asad put a hand on the Lord Elroy's shoulder as he searched his sleeping face. “I'm glad you're all safe,” he said after a moment. “This is not the best place for you, however. You should--”

‘Incoming!’ Qorvass warned.

Fire and explosions rained down from the ceiling, and in an instant, a blanket of sand and water extinguished them before vanishing into thin air.

Emiliana expected more attackers to fall through the smoke, but none did. Instead, another big tremor shook the gallery, followed by silence.

‘Looks like Dimas got them,’ Chergoa informed her privately. ‘Not sure why he isn't joining us.’

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"1079

'More on the right,' said Qorvass. 'No, wait, that's Hector and Garovel.'

Sure enough, the Atreyan lord came barreling through the door, clattering and sliding against the stony floor in battered armor. He chucked an iron boulder behind him, which smashed the hallway he'd come from.

The boulder shifted and crumbled, so Asad helped him out, and quartz spikes filled the corridor.

“Th-thank you,” said Hector between panting breaths. He shifted his shield from one hand to the other. “I was coming to warn you about them, but, uh...”

‘Glad to see you’re alright,’ said Chergoa.

Hector returned a nod as his armor destroyed and reshaped itself. “Do we know what they’re after?” he asked.

“No,” said Asad. He lifted the bag on his waist a moment, and Emiliana heard a glassy clinking from therein. “Might be these, though.”

Shenado interrupted. ‘No time to figure it out, I’m afraid. North entrance.’

Emiliana felt her father shift away from her grasp, and she looked up. “Papa?”

The man stepped in front of her. “Stand back,” said Zeff.

And she wanted to say something else, but she couldn’t find any words. It felt like ages since she’d heard his voice.

Marcos looked like he was about to shout something, but the north doors opened before he got the chance.

A small man strolled in and stopped on the far side of the room. “Greetings,” he called out in a soft voice. He had a reaper with him. “If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind answering a question for me?”

No one responded.

“Where did Darktide and the Seadevil go?”

Still no answer.

“They were in their rooms a minute ago,” he said, “but now, they’ve mysteriously vanished. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“1080

“Who are you?” Asad asked.

“Caster Egmond. Are you going to answer my question or continue to ignore me? I dislike impolite people, you know.”

“Uninvited guests are extremely impolite,” said Asad.

“Ha.” Caster bobbed his head. “I suppose you’ve got me there. But you know how it is. Orders being orders.”

Asad took a step forward. “What are you doing here, Marauder?”

“Ah, you know of me. How nice. And I know of you, Lion.”

“Of course you do.”

That made Caster laugh. “Cocky, for one so young.”

Zeff stepped silently next to Asad.

And Emiliana observed the ensuing staredown, able to feel the oppressive tension filling the whole chamber. The pressure of this Caster’s soul power was enough to tell her that he was no normal foe.

And yet, the sight of her father and Asad there, standing together before her--it was enough to make her feel, for a fleeting moment, as if no one in the world could possibly harm her.

--++--++--

If he was honest, Zeff didn’t entirely understand what was happening. Or where he was. Or why Asad was here. Or who the guy in the armor even was.

But he understood enough. Somehow, when he’d woken up, he already knew what he needed to. Or, more likely, that was why he’d woken up. Because of that person’s presence. That dangerous aura.

He’d heard of the Marauder of Calthos before. A man responsible for the destruction of dozens of towns over the last decade. A rising star among the Abolish elite. Abolish didn’t really have formal “ranks,” as far as Zeff was aware, but from all he knew, this man before them was probably near Parson’s level of strength.

Because of course he was.

Zepp might have been disappointed otherwise. He was growing accustomed to being perpetually overmatched."

"1081

'Ax?' Zepp tried, able to feel the reaper's presence there on his back.

There was no answer.

Zepp pushed him with his soul. 'Ax, wake up.'

'Ah--mm? What's happening? Zepp?'

'We're about to fight the Marauder of Calthos.'

'What? How the--?' The reaper gave an inaudible groan.

'Do you know what his ability is?' Zepp asked.

'No.'

On the other side of the room, Caster shifted. His reaper twitched, and Zepp and Asad both responded. A storm of ice and glass materialized in an instant and crashed down on Caster. Or looked like it did, at least. White shards flew in all directions, creating a cloud of sparkling dust, but it quickly cleared and revealed the expected: Caster was entirely unharmed.

The man's hands, however, had changed. They were scarcely visible, having become vague distortions in the air, pulsating in place.

Zepp grit his teeth, immediately recognizing the enormous problem before him.

'Oh god,' said Ax, horrified. 'Destruction with pan-rozum. Zepp, we can't win this.'

Zepp's mind went to his children. 'We can't lose it, either.' He concentrated, pushing himself, searching for the limit of his power. He hadn't had the opportunity to properly test himself since achieving emergence against Parson so many times.

One might consider that a problem, being ignorant of one's own

capabilities, but Zeff also felt somehow strangely empowered by it, because at the moment, anything seemed possible. Even against an opponent with such an overwhelming soul as this, victory felt achievable.

Because it had to be.

Zeff's hand trembled as he made all the muscles in his arm go taut, pouring his focus into it. He wanted a pressurized drill. What he got was a hovering maelstrom of freezing water, larger than his whole body."

"1082

It swirled with quivering force, dozens of jet streams constantly creating and then annihilating themselves before they could fly out of Zeff's control. Over and over and over again. The result was a kind of drilling bomb, so fierce that it whipped up a whirlwind as it waited to tear into something.

He didn't know if he could even contain this thing. And he didn't have time to worry about it, either. He pressed his soul into it, strengthening it further still.

'Holy hell, Zeff.' Axiolis pressed himself into his servant's soul, and Zeff could feel the pan-forma merge beginning. 'Let me help before you kill us all, hmm?'

Of the three enhancements that forma afforded him, the heightened connectivity was the most immediately useful. It granted him a clearer picture of what he wanted in his mind and tighter control over the materialized particles. Most importantly, though, it allowed his creations to maintain themselves, once created. And as a result, within seconds of the merge, Zeff's bomb reshaped itself and stabilized.

Such was the nature of pan-forma. It aided in the maintenance of the body--not just for the wielder, but for that of their work, as well.

And it was fortunate timing, too, because the Marauder was already barreling toward them--a living path of destruction.

Asad acted before Zeff could, having apparently prepared something of his own, because his tattoos were already burning gold, even

through his robes. But it was more than that. Everything happened so quickly that Zeff could hardly interpret what he was looking at, but he could've sworn that he saw Asad's tattoos moving, growing out of the man's body like golden snakes.

Asad took the Marauder's attack with freshly materialized, crystalline armor. The glass exploded against the impact, and Asad went flying back, straight over the children and into the wall behind them, leaving a vertical crater and a half-dozen fissures in Dunehall's stone.

But Caster had been made to stop. Or pause, at least. And Zeff saw his opening."

"1083

Zeff relied on pan-forma in order to tie the position states of every little piece of his creation to that of his left hand, allowing him to move the whole, chaotic mass at once with a flick of his wrist.

With all his strength, body and mind together, he slammed the bomb into Caster.

And indeed, the result was akin to an explosion. The flurry of water drills engulfed Caster all at once, and the Abolisher's destructive body tore into them, which made them tear into one another, setting all of that highly pressurized water off in a chain reaction. This, together with the already hectic air currents whirling around it, created a burst of wind and water that didn't just punch, but also shred.

The impact force was sustained for several seconds, as well, and Zeff had to hold his ground in front of everyone, annihilating every deadly dagger of soul-strengthened water that would have surely found them otherwise. A triangular safe zone with him at the tip. And even still, he earned himself several tears in his clothes and cuts on his face and arms. His flesh healed immediately, of course, and he annihilated the rest of the lingering mist so that he could see the Marauder.

The man had been blown back across the room, clothes in tatters and even some apparent distortions in his nearly invisible form. He seemed to be on one knee, translucent fingers having dug into the floor and left streaking claw marks therein.

A deep piping noise arrived, but it was different, sustained and

reverberating and masking an alternate pitch inside it. After a moment, Zeff realized it wasn't an attack. It was the Marauder laughing.

"Interesting," Caster said in two voices, altered through the bassy filter of destruction. "We did not realize that we were facing the new Water Dragon, too. Tell us your name, won't you?"

Zeff and Axiolis saw no reason to do that."  
"1084

"Mm," Caster mused. "How curious that we would not have heard of you until now. The Vanguard's doing, no? Pity you've decided to burn that bridge."

Zeff was hardly even listening. Asad took the opportunity to rejoin him, and indeed, it was as Zeff had thought. Those tattoos were moving. He noticed Asad fiddling with his left hand, where the golden glow seemed the most prominent.

"Perhaps you would like our assistance, instead," Caster was saying. "Abolish is renowned for its generosity. Tell us where Darktide and the Seadevil are, and we shall go discuss the matter with them."

"We are the lord of this place," said Asad, also in two voices. "If you would speak terms, then do so now."

"Adorable. But we grow impatient. This is your last chance. Be good lads and tell us. Where are the grown ups?"

There was little doubt in Zeff's mind that he could not have withstood Caster's attack himself. If not for whatever Asad's tattoos were doing right now, this fight might've very well been over already. And all they'd managed to accomplish was briefly inconveniencing Caster. They needed to approach this differently, before the Marauder overwhelmed them.

Escaping was obviously the best option here, but how to go about it? Ramira couldn't even walk on her own, and Axiolis could sense dozens of unfamiliar souls moving all throughout Dunehall.

"Shenado," Zeff and Axiolis said.

'Yes?'

“Be ready to run. Guide everyone out, but don’t stray too far.”

‘Okay.’

Zeff would have liked to elaborate further, but the Marauder was through waiting for his answer, it seemed. A destructive path came right for Zeff, and he dodged right, circling behind Asad as the Marauder himself rushed head on another time.

Zeff prepared the next strategy: temperature warfare."

"1085

Freezing mist was a difficult trick. Water vapor would simply desublimite into ice crystals if he tried to materialize it at zero degrees Celsius. The key, therefore, was knowing the triple point of water: that was, the combined measurement of temperature and pressure at which water could exist in any of its solid, liquid, or gas phases.

Pinpointing the temperature was simple enough, but Zeff had always struggled with manipulating the pressure just so. The problem was always atmospheric conditions. The pressure that Zeff applied to his water had to cancel out that which was already being applied by the environment.

But now, his control had moved forward by leaps and bounds, and he was certain that he could manage it, especially in the familiar environmental conditions of Dunehall. He must’ve spent a good third of his youth in this place with Asad.

Zeff manifested his water, and white fog shot across the chamber in billowing chunks. He pressed his soul into it, but he knew it wouldn’t obscure Asad and Caster’s vision. So long as they could see souls, the clouds would only conceal Zeff himself. But that was not the point. He was merely laying the groundwork. Already, Zeff could feel the temperature in the room beginning to plummet.

The rest of his freezing efforts had to be poured onto the Marauder directly. If he acted too carelessly, it would be Asad who was slowed, not Caster. And so Zeff concentrated on creating an endless stream of icy water, locked onto Caster’s soul as it moved through the fog. For extra measure, he threw in a few dozens of flying daggers of genuine



ice. Of course they shattered against Caster's body, but that was just as helpful. So long as Zeff was standing, the cold would follow Caster wherever he went. Even when the Marauder drew close to Asad, Zeff didn't stop. He merely altered the angle from which the cold struck."

"1086

It would take time for the freezing effects to really take hold, even with soul-enhancement, but Zeff was certain that it was still their best chance. And in the meantime, Caster wouldn't be able to pin him down in the fog.

Unfortunately, that also left Asad to deal with Caster almost entirely on his own. And the Sandlord was not faring very well on that front. The Marauder flung him around like a chew toy, bulldozing through all of his materialized defenses as if they'd never been there to begin with and then smashing Asad face-first against the floor or wall or ceiling, even. If not for those tattoos, the first attack would have certainly ended it.

Zeff wanted to help, but there wasn't much to be done. The Marauder's movements had changed, having become decidedly more difficult to predict than they were before Caster's encounter with Zeff's drill bomb. The man was more cautious now, seemingly. It didn't seem like the same trick was going to work twice.

But the children were moving, at least. He could sense them escaping down the rear hallway. Just as he'd wanted, Shenado was seizing the opportunity.

And even as he pummeled Caster with icy water, Zeff made sure to keep moving in the same direction as the children, albeit more slowly. He aimed for a difficult balance. More distance between the kids and Caster was undoubtedly good, but that wouldn't mean much if they ran right into the clutches of some other bastard while Zeff was busy.

So many moving parts. So many things to keep track of. Far too much for one mind. Fortunately, he had two.

Down the hall, spears of ice launched out of the rolling fog and skewered the group of abolishers that would have stood in Emiliana's path."

"1087 -- CXXIV.

## Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Four: 'Bind ye, in confidence...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It was all Hector could do to keep track of what was happening. First there was fog, then there wasn't, then there was again. Then there was water flying everywhere, then glass, then ice--and all the while, a half-invisible man barreled through everything. So much of it blended together that he wasn't even sure how to approach any of it, let alone if he could make any sort of difference. His instinct was no.

But he'd felt this way against Darktide, too. So he tried to think. If Garovel were conscious, what would he tell him to do? The same as before, probably. Be patient and watch for an opportunity. Be ready to act as soon as an opening presented itself.

But that was assuming that one would present itself. The pessimist in him was beginning to win out. It was apparent enough that this Caster Egmond guy was using destruction with pan-rozum--the familiar sound was a dead giveaway--and against that, Hector didn't see very many options other than running.

Which was what they were doing. He stuck close to the Elroy kids, mainly just trying not to lose sight of them. At least they seemed to know where they were going.

But then something heavy flew up from behind them and sailed over all their heads, dispersing the fog in its wake, and Hector heard it crash against the wall ahead of them. A bit more running, and they saw what it was.

Lord Asad. Battered half to death. Broken bones stuck out of his flesh, twitching and adjusting themselves, struggling to regenerate as the man tried to stand. His tattoos burned with golden light, snaking off of his body like flames as his neck cracked back into place.

"Move!" Asad yelled, and a sudden glass wall shoved Hector and the children out of the way of the oncoming Marauder."

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"Move!" Asad yelled, and a sudden glass wall shoved Hector and the children out of the way of the oncoming Marauder."

Caster plowed through the quartz and put Asad through the wall. Glass shattered in all directions, but among it, a crimson glint caught Hector's eye.

There was a bag on the floor by Caster's feet. The one that had been on Asad's waist a moment ago. A couple of the red shards had spilled from it, but the half-invisible man didn't seem to have noticed them yet and chased after Asad, instead. The Lord Elroy came following quickly after, bringing the endless fog and icy fire hose with him.

At once, Hector knew his task. He sprinted for the bag and slid into it, hurriedly pushing the errant shards back in as he tried to scoop the bag up.

A tremor interrupted him, violent enough that Hector lost his grip for a second, and three shards flew away from him. They clattered toward the Elroys as Hector scrambled back to his feet, but again, he was interrupted.

Lord Dimas came crashing through the ceiling and hit the ground so hard, it made the walls crumble. Hector flew from the impact, toppling over in midair and earning himself a broken leg from the debris. He found himself up against some other wall now as he struggled onto one knee and tried to get his bearings.

There was a shard by his foot, he realized. He bagged it and ran stiltedly over to the gaping fissure in the wall ahead of him. He could see Dimas through it, facing off against two apparent abolishers. The Elroys were there as well, though at a safe distance off to the side. They hadn't gotten the same taste of Dimas' arrival as Hector had, it seemed. Emiliana was holding one of the shards, as well.

Good enough, Hector felt. But there was still one more. Where was it?"  
"1089

The red shimmer caught his eye, and Hector saw the shard by the ruined doorway that led back in the direction they'd come from. A pair of unfamiliar men came running through it, only to get clobbered by a gravity pulse that brought down the whole door frame and a chunk of the ceiling.

The shard would have to wait, Hector decided. An iron javelin materialized in his already-throwing free hand. It launched from his grip, having hardly been there in the first place, and flew true, catching one of Dimas' opponents in the side.

The abolisher didn't seem too bothered by the presence of a spear in his gut, perhaps being more concerned with Dimas. Hector was fine with that. He used the spear as a growth point and added iron to it in all directions, ballooning out and stretching around the man's torso and down his legs.

That was enough for him to take notice. He grimaced and tore through the iron like cardboard, then looked in Hector's direction.

Hector prepared to wield his shield barehanded again, but a visible gravity pulse intervened, knocking the guy off his feet and juggling him into a sudden wall of icy skewers.

Hector might've taken a second to feel relieved if Caster hadn't come charging back into the room, chased by a flurry of ice and fog. The Marauder went straight for Dimas, and the gravity wielder only just managed to slip out of the way, losing half a leg to destruction.

But of course, Dimas didn't need the leg and caught himself in midair, hovering. Hector watched him clap both hands together, and instantly, the space around Caster distorted visibly, bending toward him.

Zeff's fog flashed and turned to ice, and for a fleeting moment, the half-invisible abolisher became a snowman.

Caster pushed through it, of course, but he wasn't nearly as fast as he was before. At first, Hector couldn't tell what was happening. It was like watching a man running underwater."

"1090

The combination of crushing gravity and freezing temperatures seemed to be taking a toll--and not just on the Marauder. Even at this distance, Hector could feel the effects himself--wave after wave of debilitating pressure, weighing him down, stiffening his muscles. If he dared go any closer, he was sure that he wouldn't be able to move at all.

Caster, however, was still going. Slow as molasses, but going. And the snow and gravity stayed on him. Caster launched path after path, but even those were stunted. He seemed like he was trying to hit Dimas, but the young Lord Sebolt had no trouble avoiding them.

The Elroy children took the opportunity to flee, and Hector considered following. But that last crystal remained. Certainly, it wasn't more valuable than his and Garovel's lives, but all he needed was an opening. And it looked like there was going to be one. The Marauder was moving away from the shard, heading toward the room at the end of the hall.

Hector waited briefly longer, letting the distance from Caster draw out, and then sprinted for the red crystal.

He reached it just as he heard the sandstone above his head shift and crack. A path of destruction tore sluggishly through the ceiling and bent down over him into the floor and adjoining wall. It wouldn't have hit him, but Hector moved away from it instinctively.

He had the shard, though. He didn't even remember picking it up, but there it was in the grip of his bare hand.

The corridor rumbled another time, and Hector had to avoid a cluster of falling debris. But the rumbling didn't stop. It sustained itself, and he could hear the walls moaning under stress."

"1091

Hector saw more paths of destruction whipping slowly around him. Caster had stopped aiming for Dimas entirely. And Hector understood why. The Marauder wanted to give Dimas and Zeff something else to do, even if that meant bringing down all of Dunehall on top of them.

He knew he had to keep moving. He sprinted after the Elroys, but before he even managed five steps, the wall next to him shifted, then exploded, showering him with debris. The shield ate most of it, allowing Hector to hold his ground this time. But that was not a good thing, he saw.

The Marauder was right there, already coming this way. And neither was he looking particularly slow anymore.

Hector's brain reacted on reflex, and an iron platform shoved him out of Caster's path. But the man had noticed. Before Hector could even hit the floor again, he saw the immense path of destruction that Caster left for him. A rending wave. Practically a wall. Too wide and tall to avoid in midair like this.

No choice.

He raised his shield to take it. The thing buckled and disintegrated. The path connected with his body, and the impact made every nerve in his body pulse and twitch at once.

The world bent in half. Everything around him distorted and shattered and melted--white, then gray, then black, then entirely without color altogether. Indescribably so. Hector wasn't even sure if he was still seeing, if he even had eyes or a brain to perceive anything with.

Was this a feeling? Was this pain? Familiar, but he couldn't tell.

There was something else, though. No. Not something. Someone. He could sense them there. Their presence. Two--no, three. Three souls suspended there along beside him. Or--no. Not beside him. Just, there. Somewhere. Distant. But also close. With him, somehow."

"1092

One of the souls was Garovel. That much, Hector could sense straight away. It was friendly, he knew, as if that were somehow a physical characteristic, no different from shape or temperature or weight.

'Well, this is terrifying,' came another voice. It belonged to Chergoa, Hector realized.

If one of those souls was Chergoa, then the other was almost certainly Emiliana.

Hector tried to speak but found no voice for himself--or mouth, for that matter. So he tried merely thinking, instead. 'What's happening?'

'I believe we're experiencing a hyper anomaly,' said Chergoa.

'What does that mean?' Hector asked.

'I dunno. I just made it up.'

Hector would have shaken his head if he'd had one. He was beginning to notice a family resemblance.

'It's okay, though,' Chergoa went on. 'I've seen this kind of thing before.'

'You have?' Emiliana said.

'No,' Chergoa said.

They all allowed a beat to pass, and Hector heard an inaudible sigh from Emiliana.

'Do you have anything useful to tell us?' the young Lady Elroy asked.

'Jokes are useful. It's important to keep the mood light whenever possible, y'know.'

'I wouldn't call those jokes.'

'Ouch.'

'Chergoa.'

'Alright, well, if you want my best guess, then I'd say we've been sucked into a pocket dimension.'

'What?' said Hector. 'You mean like an alternate reality?'

'Not really, no. But kinda. A little.'

'What do you mean?' said Hector.

'I dunno. Look, I said it was a guess.'

'Agh...'

'Sometimes, servant abilities clash in dramatic ways and end up creating really weird shit. Kinda like what we're seeing. Maybe. And between Dimas and that Marauder asshole, it's possible that the resulting spatial distortions caused a pocket dimension to be created. I mean, that is basically what the destruction type is. Sort of.'

"1093



‘I think I get what you’re saying,’ said Hector.

‘You do?’ said Chergoa. ‘Could you explain it back to me, then? Because I’m pretty sure half of that was bullshit.’

Hector could only return a faint laugh. He appreciated her efforts to keep them from panicking, but he wasn’t sure it was helping much.

Emiliana had the important question. ‘Are we stuck here?’

‘Uh...’ And Chergoa took quite a long time before finally saying, ‘Yeah, probably.’

Hector and Emiliana groaned in unison.

With that, however, something else occurred to him. ‘Why is it just us four?’

‘Uh--’

A different voice interrupted. ‘The shards,’ said Garovel. ‘You were both holding one.’

‘Garovel!’ said Hector.

‘Hello...’ He sounded rather groggy, now that Hector was listening.

‘How are you even awake?’ Hector asked.

‘Mm... dunno.’

Hector thought a moment. ‘And how did you know that Emiliana and I were holding shards?’

‘...Dunno that either.’

‘Garovel, c’mon. You’re supposed to have all the answers.’

‘Hey, I’ve been unconscious. What’s your excuse?’

‘I, uh. Well, for one thing, I’m not thousands of years old.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t have been born so late, then.’

‘Wow, Garovel.’

‘Anyway, Hector, I’m glad we’re not dead, but shut up for a second.

What was that about a pocket dimension earlier?’

‘You were listening?’ said Chergoa.

‘To you? Never. I must’ve thought someone else was talking.’

‘Mm. Speaking of assholes, why were you sleeping on the job, anyway? I mean, laziness and idiocy are the clear answers, I know, but I was wondering if you wanted to make any excuses for yourself.’

‘It’s a side effect of Hector’s shield. Whenever he wields it barehanded, it heightens his soul defenses at the expense of exhausting me.’

‘I see. Where’d you come by something like that?’

‘A Sandlord named Haqq Najir. He wasn’t very cooperative at first, but then I told him all about my sister, and he offered the shield to us in exchange for a promise that we would never introduce her to him. It was very curious.’

That one actually earned a laugh from Chergoa."

"1094

Garovel brought the conversation back on track. ‘So you think we’re in a pocket dimension. Is that right?’

‘Pretty much,’ said Chergoa. ‘You got a better theory?’

‘Well. “Better” is a strong word. A strong, accurate word.’

‘Uh-huh. Go on then, genius.’

‘I think you’re right. I think this is a pocket dimension. And I think we’re inside the shards, right now.’

‘Yeah, I already put that together,’ said Chergoa.

‘Shame you didn’t mention it, then. Now the credit’s all mine.’

‘No one cares.’

‘Hector cares. Don’t you, Hector?’

‘...I’m not involved in this conversation.’

Expectedly, the discussion derailed for quite a while. The reapers went on and on, back and forth, and Hector was about to just stop listening entirely until Emiliana intervened.

‘This is all very interesting,’ she said, ‘but how do we leave this place?’

And both reapers shut up for a moment.

‘Well,’ said Garovel. ‘There’s good news and bad news with that.’

‘More like okay news and weapons-grade-terrible news,’ said Chergoa.

‘Wonderful,’ said Emiliana. ‘Bad news first, then.’

Both reapers hesitated again, perhaps waiting for each other to take the liberty of explaining.

‘Come on,’ said Hector. ‘Tell us.’

‘Okay,’ said Garovel. ‘When we say that we’re stuck here, we mean it. There’s literally nothing we can do besides wait for the pocket dimension to degrade on its own and let us out.’

‘Yep,’ Chergoa added. ‘And the wait could be very long.’

‘HOW long?’ said Emiliana.

‘Dunno,’ said Chergoa. ‘A few hours, if we’re lucky. A few decades, if we’re not.’

‘DECADES?!’ Hector and Emiliana both said.

‘We’d have to be stupidly unlucky, though,’ said Garovel.

‘We ARE stupidly unlucky!’ said Hector.

‘Eh, I’m sure it won’t be that long,’ said Garovel. ‘Though, even if it were, that could be a good thing.’”

"1095

‘Why in the world would that be a good thing?’ Emiliana asked.

‘Soul-synchronization,’ Chergoa answered. ‘Obviously, it’d be boring

as hell, but it would allow us to safely increase our soul power in a relatively short amount of time.'

'Short amount of time?' Emiliana sounded confused. 'You just said it would be decades!'

'Yes, in here it would be,' said Chergoa. 'But out there? Not so much.'

'I don't understand.'

'Time and space are like butter and toast,' said Chergoa. 'When there's a lot of toast, the butter gets spread out really thin. When there's only a little toast, you end up having to cram a ton of butter on it.'

'...Wouldn't you just use less butter?' said Hector.

'No, see, the amount of butter is fixed.'

'...Why would it be fixed?'

'Look, I never said it was a perfect metaphor. The point is, time passes more quickly here.'

'I thought time slowed down near black holes,' said Emiliana.

'This isn't a black hole,' said Garovel. 'Black holes are created by condensed matter. I don't think there's any matter here. Only space.'

'Oh.'

'Also, if this were a black hole, we'd probably be dead.'

'We ARE dead,' said Chergoa.

'Super extra dead, then.'

'Eloquently put.'

'H-hold on,' said Hector. 'Didn't you say there was "okay" news, too?'

'Yeah, that was it,' said Garovel. 'In theory, you and Emiliana could grow significantly more powerful in this place. Assuming we don't go insane, that is.'

'Eh, we won't go insane,' said Chergoa. 'Not with four of us here. It'd be different if any of us were alone or unable to communicate with

each other. Then we'd be fucked--I mean, er, screwed. Emiliana, plug your ears. You, too, Hector.'" "

"1096

Garovel laughed. 'You don't need to worry about Hector's ears. I know he doesn't seem like it, but he's a total potty mouth.'

'Is he really?'

'Oh yeah. Drops f-bombs all the time.'

'Hector!' said Chergoa. 'How very dare you! That is no way for a lord to behave, y'know.'

Hector decided to ignore that avenue of discussion. Something else was bothering him, anyway, and the reapers had yet to address it. In fact, he had a feeling that they didn't even realize it yet. '...Aren't you guys forgetting to explain something?' he asked.

'What do you mean?' said Garovel.

Rather than answering, Hector waited for Chergoa. And when she didn't say anything, he instead heard Emiliana snickering faintly.

'They did forget,' said Emiliana.

'Ah--you realized it, too?' said Hector.

'Indeed.'

'Realized what?' said Chergoa. 'What are we forgetting?'

Now Hector had to laugh a little, as well. 'This is pretty fun.'

'Isn't it, though? Is Garovel always as smug with you as Chergoa is with me?'

'Yeah. He's always bragging about how much he knows.'

'Ha.'

Both reapers spoke up in unison. 'Alright, you two.'

'Out with it,' continued Garovel.

'Seriously,' said Chergoa.

'Hmm,' Emiliana hummed, still half-giggling. 'Should we tell them?'

'I guess so,' said Hector. 'We'd probably... be here forever if we waited for them to figure it out on their own.'

That pulled a bigger laugh out of Emiliana.

'I'm glad you're enjoying yourselves,' said Garovel. 'Are you done?'

'Couple of real jerks, our servants.'

'It makes sense, though,' said Hector. 'That they wouldn't think of it, I mean. This is how they always talk.'

'Oh, that is true,' said Emiliana.

'Would you just spit it out already?' said Garovel. 'This is getting ridiculous.'"

"1097

'Okay, okay,' said Hector. 'I understand everything else you said, more or less. Pocket dimension or whatever. No bodies here, no matter. Only our minds. Right?'

'Yeah?' said Garovel.

'And uh, I get that we can hear your guys' thoughts. You're reapers. You can, er, communicate with souls directly or whatever. That makes sense.'

'Uh-huh?' said Chergoa.

'But then... why can Emiliana and I hear each other?'

'Oh, well, that's...' And Garovel just stopped.

Hector waited, but the reaper didn't finish. '...Garovel?'

'Uh... hmm.' Garovel paused another time. 'Actually, that's a really good question.'

Chergoa had to chime in now. 'Er... yeah. Huh. You two shouldn't be able to hear each other. Your souls aren't bound together. You should both be able to hear me and Garovel, but you definitely shouldn't be able to hear one another. That's... really weird.' And she waited a second before giving them another, 'Huh.'

'I can't tell if they really don't know,' said Hector, 'or if they're just messing with us again.'

'I think they are being serious,' said Emiliana. 'They would not purposely make themselves look ignorant.'

'Ah, you're probably right.'

'Hmm,' said Garovel. 'I don't like how well these two are getting along all of a sudden.'

'Me neither,' said Chergoa. 'It was a mistake to allow our servants to mingle. We should release them and start over.'

'Good idea.'

'So basically,' said Hector, 'you two have no idea what's happening here at all.'

'Agh, it must be the shards,' said Garovel.

'You're just gonna blame everything on the shards, aren't you?' said Hector.

'It's the only explanation, really. Stupid soul-catalyst bullcrap. I wonder if even Qorvass understands how they work. I bet he just pretends like he does.'

'Because that's what you would do?' said Hector.

'Hell yeah. Bullshitting is a very valuable skill, my friend.'"  
"1098 -- CXXV.

'So you guys don't even have a theory?' Hector asked.

'Not really,' said Chergoa. 'Why? Are you saying that you two whelps do?'

‘Oh, uh, no,’ said Hector. ‘Or at least, I don’t.’

‘We were only teasing you about forgetting to explain something,’ said Emiliana. ‘We didn’t think there WASN’T an explanation.’

‘Hmm,’ said Garovel. ‘Well, anyway, it looks like we’re going to be here a while. We should try to keep ourselves entertained. How have you been, baby sister?’

‘Oh, I’ve been good. Apart from the whole almost-dying-thing, today’s been lovely.’

‘Mm. And Emiliana, how are you?’

‘Ah... confused.’

‘Wonderful. Anyone up for a game? I’m thinking of a number between one and six hundred billion. Take your time answering. No rush.’

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Five: ‘Diligent souls, abide...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Ultimately, the conversation kept going back and forth between serious contemplation of their circumstances and fanciful distraction when no great revelations were uncovered.

At length, even Garovel and Chergoa began struggling to keep talking. Hector had kind of stopped listening a while ago, and without anything to pay attention to, time began to blur into itself. Strangely, it was the realization that no one was talking anymore that brought him back around. Somehow, the silence had become odd.

‘I guess I’ll just meditate,’ he threw out there.

And it took a second, but then Emiliana said, ‘Good idea. I will, too.’

‘Alright,’ said Garovel.

‘We’ll try not to leave without you,’ said Chergoa.

Hector tried to focus. Instinctively, he wanted to take a deep breath, but he couldn’t. He wanted to close his eyes, but he didn’t have any. It hadn’t occurred to him how much of a role his own body played in



meditating before. This was different. And not altogether comfortable, either. It was almost too easy. He felt like he might lose himself here, like he was falling asleep on the edge of a cliff."

"1098 -- CXXV.

'So you guys don't even have a theory?' Hector asked.

'Not really,' said Chergoa. 'Why? Are you saying that you two whelps do?'

'Oh, uh, no,' said Hector. 'Or at least, I don't.'

'We were only teasing you about forgetting to explain something,' said Emiliana. 'We didn't think there WASN'T an explanation.'

'Hmm,' said Garovel. 'Well, anyway, it looks like we're going to be here a while. We should try to keep ourselves entertained. How have you been, baby sister?'

'Oh, I've been good. Apart from the whole almost-dying-thing, today's been lovely.'

'Mm. And Emiliana, how are you?'

'Ah... confused.'

'Wonderful. Anyone up for a game? I'm thinking of a number between one and six hundred billion. Take your time answering. No rush.'

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"1099

As he focused his mind, Hector could feel something different. Something he'd never felt from meditating before. Slowly, hesitantly, he concentrated harder, allowing his thoughts to be consumed by this world of empty space.

In a way, it was absolutely terrifying. Floating. Forever. Nothing to hold onto. No destination. Neverending darkness. And the more time he spent focusing, the more of it he could sense. A vast ocean of nothingness. This was a pocket dimension? Wasn't it supposed to be tiny? It felt gigantic beyond reckoning. Or was his mind simply playing tricks on him? Maybe this one remaining sense of his was wrong, somehow. It wasn't like his normal senses were infallible, either.

If it weren't for those three other souls there, Hector was sure he would have begun panicking a long time ago. They were his only anchors, the only things keeping him from being completely overcome by this unfathomable place.

Yet still, he lost time. And he could sense himself losing it, too. The strange, disjointed progression of his own nebulous thoughts was how he could tell. Sluggish, fast, sluggish again, then even slower. On and on in varying patterns and speeds.

At length, however, he sensed something else. A glimmer. A crack. In the distance. So far away. Farther than normal sight could have told

him, surely.

Then, another one. Another crack. This time in the opposite direction and just as far away.

Then another. And another. And still another. Then five more. Then ten. Dozens. Hundreds? All cracks but all different, too. Each one rippled, pulsed, echoed. Thousands. Maybe even millions. Far too many to count, at least. And they were everywhere around him. Closer than seemed possible. On top of him. Phasing through him.

Where had they come from? Had they been there the whole time? Something told him they had, something in his one sense. Like he'd been looking through a window this whole time without realizing there was glass there. But now he could see the glass. Now he could tell.

This wasn't emptiness. This wasn't just space."

"1100

Hector's concentration shattered. He had to talk to Garovel. His mind yanked itself out of meditation with an intangible shudder. 'Ah! Garovel!'

'Hector, holy shit!,' the reaper said. 'You came back!'

Hector needed a second to gather his thoughts again. The sudden disorientation felt like he'd just been torn out of a dead sleep. Which confused him. Was that what that had been? Had he been sleeping? Dreaming?

He tried to shake it off. '...How long was I gone?'

'It's been fifty years! We thought we'd lost you forever!'

'W-what? I don't--'

'Only joking. It's been about a day and a half.'

Hector sighed mentally. 'You asshole... I was really about to freak the fuck out.'

'See? Didn't I tell you he had a potty mouth?'

‘You sure did,’ said Chergoa. ‘How scandalous. And in front of a young lady, no less.’

Somehow, he’d forgotten that Chergoa and Emiliana were there as well. ‘Uh--I... I didn’t mean to--I’m s-sorry, I just... agh...’

‘Don’t listen to them,’ said Emiliana. ‘You do not need to censor yourself for my sake.’

‘I wasn’t talking about you, you narcissist,’ said Chergoa. ‘I was talking about me. I know I seem like a stoic monster, but I have the heart of a delicate maiden, and I can’t bear listening to such uncouth language.’

‘Right,’ said Emiliana. ‘Garovel, please tell your sister to fuck off. Oh, nevermind, it seems I managed it on my own.’

‘Mm, I’d like to volunteer my services, anyway,’ said Garovel. ‘Chergoa, fuck off.’

‘To you as well, dearest brother.’

‘Er, uh, Garovel?’ said Hector, realizing he would have to be the one to push the conversation in a relevant direction again. But he wasn’t yet sure how to phrase his biggest question, so instead, he asked, ‘How do you know it’s been a day and a half? I mean, it’s not like we have a clock to go by, so, uh...’

"1101

‘A clock would be nice,’ said Garovel, ‘but it’s not strictly necessary. I’ve just been counting, instead.’

‘Counting?’ said Hector. ‘Counting what?’

‘The seconds. Ever since we got here, that is.’

Hector paused. ‘You can do that? That sounds impossible.’

‘Only needs to be a rough estimate. It’s not as hard as it seems. Plus, I’ve had practice.’

Chergoa barked a laugh. ‘Sounds like a story. Why don’t you tell us about that? Seems we’ve got plenty of time for all your long, boring tangents.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Garovel, ‘but as it so happens, it’s not boring at all. It’s actually--’

‘Uh--er, before you get into that,’ said Hector, ‘there’s something else. Er, I think.’

‘We’re listening,’ said Garovel.

‘Well, um...’ Really, he still wasn’t sure how to begin. ‘When I was meditating, uh... there was, uh... agh. It felt like this place... wasn’t... empty. I don’t know how to explain it, but I sensed something here. I think.’

‘...Can you elaborate?’ said Garovel.

‘Uh... it was like, space wasn’t... space. Does that make sense?’

‘Not really.’

‘Agh... I just, er--it felt like there was something else here. Or maybe that “here” was something else. I mean, I don’t know how else to... argh. Emiliana, did you sense anything?’

‘Oh. Um. Well, now that you mention it... perhaps I did. I thought I had just fallen asleep, but...’

‘So you both sensed something really weird while you were neck deep in meditation?’ said Garovel. ‘That doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Sometimes, the mind just makes its own...’

‘...Garovel?’

‘No. Wait a minute. Did you--? Would that even be--? Hmm. Do either of you sense it now?’

‘W-well, no,’ said Hector.

‘Me neither,’ said Emiliana.

‘What are you thinking?’ said Chergoa.

‘...I think they sensed the dormant soul of the Dry God.’”

Hector needed a few seconds to process what Garovel had just said.

‘Are you sure “soul” is the right word for it?’ said Chergoa. ‘It’s not like the guy’s just sleeping. You and I would be able to sense him if that were the case.’

‘You might be right,’ said Garovel, ‘but I think he’s definitely still alive. In some form. And if he is, then maybe we can talk to him.’

‘I suppose it’s possible,’ said Chergoa. ‘But if he hasn’t noticed us by now, then how do we get him to?’

‘Hmm.’ Garovel paused. ‘Jaf’lah! Ai! Jaf’lah!’

‘Truly ingenious.’

‘Ai! Jaf’lah! Rasalased!’ Garovel kept going, but Hector couldn’t really follow what else he said.

It was a bit strange, hearing Garovel speak in Valgan. The reaper spoke Mohssian so fluently that Hector had never really imagined him speaking anything else. He’d known, of course, that Garovel knew a ton of different languages, but it was different, actually hearing it firsthand.

After a short time, though, Garovel stopped. ‘I don’t think it’s working,’ he said.

‘Color me surprised,’ said Chergoa.

‘Yeah, well, it was worth a shot,’ said Garovel. ‘Looks like meditation is our best bet, then. Hector?’

‘Oh, uh. O-okay.’

‘Em?’ said Chergoa.

‘Very well.’

Hector focused. He settled his thoughts and concentrated on his one sense again.

It was faster this time. He felt his mind plunge down and down and down, felt it become enveloped in that familiar darkness, so thick it felt somehow physical. And soon enough, he was there again, feeling it all again, cracks echoing in space, breathing all around him.

Only then did he realize that he had no idea what he was doing. Was he supposed to ask this bodiless mass a question? He probably should have asked Garovel about that before diving back in. It was difficult even to think. Part of maintaining the meditation meant keeping his mind clear and just soaking in everything, but now his mind wanted to think while meditating. And he wasn't sure that was even possible."

"1103

Even so, he still tried. Maybe it was impossible to think in this state, but there was no harm in trying. Probably. He wasn't sure of that, either, now that he was thinking about it.

Hold on. He WAS thinking now. And it felt strange. Like he'd wrapped a blanket around his mind, every thought cradled in an intangible headspace. It was strangely easy. But he still wasn't solidifying each thought yet like he had to do when talking to Garovel privately. Maybe that would be the difference.

'...Hmm,' he tried.

And the whole world resounded with that one syllable. He sensed it--felt it. Each crack reverberated against his soundless voice, stirring all at once for a moment. But only for a moment.

'...Is anyone there?' said Hector.

And the world lit up again, trembling, echoing.

'Please,' Hector went on, 'if you're there, say something. Please.'

The echo hardened and sustained itself. It grew. And grew. And grew still more. And Hector began to feel like he'd been caught in an earthquake.

'On second thought, if you'd rather not be bothered--'

The cracks exploded, and a wave hit him, punching him clean out of his meditation.

Hector struggled to regather himself. '...Garovel?'

'Back already?' the reaper said. 'That didn't take very long.'

‘...Did I fuck that up?’ said Hector.

‘What?’



As his sense returned to him, he realized that nothing was different. It was just the four of them there, still.

And then it wasn't.

An ocean converged on them. From seemingly nowhere, Hector sensed its arrival. Soul power. Endless, as far as he could tell. Crushing strong, pressuring him from every conceivable direction.

'Oh shit,' said Garovel."

"1104

There came an unfamiliar voice from the abyss, but Hector couldn't understand anything it was saying. It had to be speaking Valgan, he figured, but it didn't sound much like when he'd heard Asad speak it.

Garovel answered the voice, also in Valgan, probably.

Chergoa was kind enough to keep them informed. 'Yeah, that's definitely the Dry God,' she said. 'Garovel is attempting to explain our circumstances, along with who we are.'

Hector had about a thousand questions, but he certainly wasn't going to interrupt.

'Now he's explaining what is presumably still going on outside. I'm not sure that's wise, though. It might be better to take it slower and just--'

'Mohssian?' came the unfamiliar voice. 'You speak Mohssian?'

'YOU speak Mohssian?' returned Garovel, sounding truly shocked.

'Yes.'

'When did you learn it?' asked Chergoa.

'When is when?'

'...What?'

'As a child, I learned. An inelegant language. Lazily structured. Full of hard noises.' His accent was incredibly strong, but Hector had no trouble understanding him. Every word sounded quite deliberately

chosen.

Emiliana decided to speak up. 'How old are you now?'

'I do not understand the question.'

'Er...' She took a second before trying again. 'You just said that you have memories of your childhood. So do you know how much time has passed since then?'

'No,' he said flatly.

'Oh,' said Emiliana.

'Time is not time,' said the Dry God.

'What does that mean?' said Chergoa.

'Everything. It means everything.'

No one had a response for that, apparently.

Garovel chose to change the subject. 'Rasalased. That is your name, yes? Rasalased?'

'Yes. No. It was. Once. Is it still? It should be. Yes. Time is not time.'

Hector was beginning to get the picture."

"1105

'Do you remember the last person you talked to?' asked Garovel.

'I remember everything,' said Rasalased. 'Al'raml yatahmmaluh.'

'Ah,' said Garovel. "The sand endures." Indeed, it does.'

'A petulant whelp, the last one was. Believed the blessing alone made him worthy. But I learned my lesson after the three. I looked into his soul and saw him truly. Saw his dreams. His intentions. His secrets. Just like I am doing to all of you now.'

'Oh,' said Garovel. 'Is that so? Well, then. I would say that such a thing is impossible, but... aha, for you, it probably isn't, is it?'

‘My spiritual kin,’ said Rasalased. ‘Both of you. Very old, indeed.’

‘Mm, you can sense that, huh?’ said Garovel. ‘Chergoa and I were born Lyzakks, yes.’

‘Very troubled, as well,’ said Rasalased. ‘Very concerned. Very earnest. Selfless, in many ways. Ambitious, in others. Deceptive, too. Hungry for power. As all reapers are.’

‘Hey--’

‘I’m--’

‘And the two young ones, let me see. Emiliana Eirwen Elroy. How anachronistic. Ha! A Rainlord! All is explained, then.’

‘How do you know my--?’

‘You, too, have a troubled spirit. Aching in all aspects. But also still being forged. Burning away remnants of selfishness. Of naivete, too. And there is deep worry. For yourself. For your kin. A terrible homesickness. You, child, have my sympathy.’

‘Ah, um--’

‘And the last one...’

And Hector couldn’t stop himself. ‘Aw, shit,’ he thought aloud.

‘Hector Alexander Goffe,’ said Rasalased. ‘The mixed heritage of a common mongrel.’

‘What the fuck do--?’ tried Garovel.

‘And such an incredibly weak soul. Troubled even by its own existence. Twice broken, now mending. Desperately reforging itself. And angry at its own workmanship. In dire search of purpose and fortitude.’

Well, that hurt even more than he’d expected.

‘However,’ said Rasalased, ‘therein dwells supreme selflessness. And a curious strength in weakness. Almost indescribable. How strange, you are.’”

‘Are you done?’ said Garovel. ‘We didn’t come here to have our worthiness measured.’

‘Yes,’ said Rasalased, ‘you found yourselves here by chance and are now trapped. And you wish me to do something about that, I assume?’

‘Would that even be possible?’ said Garovel.

‘Of course. I will free you all once your souls have finished tempering.’

That left a brief silence in its wake.

‘...Excuse me?’ said Chergoa. ‘What do you mean “tempering”?’

‘Did you not notice? Garovel, for instance. He was exhausted and unconscious upon his arrival here, and yet now, he is perfectly well.’

‘Wait,’ said Garovel. ‘Your soul was dormant when we arrived. How could you know that I was--?’

‘Time is not time,’ said the Dry God.

‘Right,’ said Garovel. ‘If that’s true, then why are we “waiting” for this tempering of yours to finish?’

‘We are not waiting. We are talking. The tempering will finish after we are done.’

‘But then--’ said Garovel. ‘Wouldn’t that mean--? What? Does that mean you’re controlling when the tempering finishes?’

‘Am I? Perhaps I am. It matters little. Time is not time.’

‘Uh-huh...’

Chergoa tried to intervene. ‘I’d like to know more about what this tempering--’

‘Young Hector,’ said Rasalased. ‘What is this that you have brought me? I sense its residue in your soul, so it must be yours.’

Hector was confused. ‘Uh...?’

‘An offering? Very kind of you. But then, you ARE very kind, aren’t you? I see that, too. A deserving young soul, yours is. In need of help.

But I have no use for gifts. I have no use for anything.'

'Please don't ignore me,' said Chergoa. 'Tell us what you mean when you say our souls are tempering.'

'Recovering,' said Rasalased. 'Simple. You were exhausted. Now you are not. But for the young ones there, it means more.'

'...Go on.'

'You will see.'

'Ugh.'

'You may be angry with me at first. But hold true, and you will see.'

'I'm sorry,' said Garovel. 'You're not being cryptic enough for my tastes. Could you add in something about believing in ourselves when the time is right?'

'Time is not--'

'Not time, yeah, I got it, thanks.'"

"1107

'Brother dear,' said Chergoa, 'let's try not to anger the ancient warrior god who's able to manipulate our souls, shall we?'

'That's a fair point,' said Garovel. 'But I don't think there's much point in tiptoeing around him. Not when he's already staring into our souls and passing judgment on us.'

'Yeah, well, even so--'

'You need not fear me,' said Rasalased. 'I will not harm you.'

'See? What a nice guy. Aside from all the interrupting, he's actually quite--'

'Young Rainlord.'

'Um--yes?' said Emiliana.

'What is this shadow on your soul?' said Rasalased.

It was her turn to sound confused. 'Uh. I don't know what you mean.'

'A dark thread,' said the Dry God. 'Something watches you from afar.'

'What? What's watching me?'

'A demon.' There came a pause. 'Powerful. He senses me, as I sense him. He blocks my sight. He does not wish me to know his soul. But he comes for you. That much, I could see.'

'...Does he have a name?' Emiliana asked. But she didn't sound especially surprised, Hector noticed.

'He hid it from me,' said Rasalased.

'Well, that sounds wonderful,' said Chergoa. 'Anything else you can tell us?'

'You are all caught in a storm,' said Rasalased. 'Strength of arms will not avail you.'

'You don't say,' said Chergoa. 'I don't suppose you could help us with that somehow, hmm?'

'I cannot. But hold true, and you will see my blessing.'

'Great.'

'I advise you: do not fight. Resist, but do not fight. Hold true and see.'

Hector just heard Garovel sigh.

A long silence followed--so long that Hector thought that might be the end of it. There was still more he wanted to know, but he wasn't sure if he should--

'Ask your question, Young Hector.'

That one was really fucking creepy, Hector felt."

"1108

'Er, uh,' Hector tried, 'you, um... you mentioned someone earlier. Someone you thought was unworthy of your help?'

‘I remember.’

‘W—who was that?’

Rasalased took a moment to answer. ‘Ease your mind. It was not the Lion you know. It was his predecessor.’

Hector couldn’t deny that he’d been thinking about that. He’d only known Asad for a few days, but in those few days, Hector didn’t think he’d seen anyone show more strength, compassion, and integrity than that man. Remembering it all made Hector worry for him now. Asad hadn’t been doing too well the last time he saw him.

‘I would like to meet the new Lion,’ said Rasalased. ‘I hope you will help him live long enough.’

‘Uh--I’d like to, but I’m not sure, uh... I mean, how can I help him?’

‘Hold true, see, and understand.’

‘Uh...’ Hector wasn’t too big a fan of these vague instructions, either. It was funny when Garovel was the victim of them, but not so much now. ‘Are you, um... are you really able to see the future?’

‘Do you believe I am?’ said Rasalased.

The question caught him a bit off guard. ‘Uh. I don’t know. Er. I mean, that’s why I asked...’

And the Dry God chortled. ‘So it is.’

Hector didn’t know what was funny, but he was more surprised that Rasalased could even laugh in the first place. Everything the Dry God said sounded so serious. Apart, perhaps, from that moment when he’d realized that Emiliana was a Rainlord, but even that hadn’t been laughter.

‘In truth,’ Rasalased went on, ‘no, I do not see the future. I see only the present. But I see it clearly and thoroughly. And the present knows the past. Combined, this knowledge may predict the direction of the world, if only briefly.’

‘...I don’t understand,’ said Hector.

‘Unsurprising. It is not for the young to perceive.’

‘...Does that mean I’ll be able to see the future when I’m older?’

‘It is not seeing the future.’

‘...It kind of is, though, isn’t it?’

Rasalased laughed again."

"1109

--Monday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

Emiliana decided to speak up. ‘Do you know what is happening outside right now?’

‘Yes.’

‘The fighting, I mean. You can sense it? My father and everyone?’

‘Of course.’

She hesitated. ‘Do you know who is going to win?’

Rasalased fell quiet a moment. ‘No. There are too many choices. But without all of you there, I predict the Marauder will be victorious. He will have much help.’

‘Without us?’ said Emiliana. ‘What difference can we make?’

‘What, indeed.’

Hector saw that one coming, though he was surprised there was no mention of holding true or whatever.

‘I have another question,’ said Emiliana.

‘The answer is no,’ said Rasalased.

‘What? But--’

‘You cannot stay here,’ he elaborated. ‘That was your question, no? You wish to stay and meditate. To grow. And return stronger. This is a reasonable desire. But you must not.’

‘Why?’ said Emiliana. ‘If we’re stronger, we can help. And time is



slower in here, so--'

'Time is not time. If you remain with me, my soul will consume yours. You will all disappear.'

'Oh,' said Garovel. 'Well, that's unfortunate.'

'Thank you for telling us,' said Chergoa, 'rather than letting us find out the hard way.'

'I suppose that explains why you can read our thoughts,' said Garovel. 'Because they're slowly becoming YOUR thoughts, hmm?'

'Yes,' said Rasalased. 'I must release you now. I wish you well. Each of you.'

'Anything else to tell us before we go?' asked Garovel.

'You will be weakened.'

'What?'

'Resist, but do not fight. Hold true and see.'

'Great.'

The world shuddered, blackness and perception trembling together.

And Hector tried to brace himself."

"1110 -- CXXVI.

--Monday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Six: 'O, burning Sea...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector felt at once as if he were waking from a dream while also sliding off a cliff. Lethargic and rushing. Fleeting sensations of up and down movement. Both pleasant and uncomfortable.

Then reality came bleeding back in. Sight and smell. Taste and touch. Balance and sound and motion and pressure. Everything was there.

He had a body again. Or some of one, at least. A huge chunk of his torso was gone, as if some giant had taken a bite out of him, leaving a cavernous and bloody hole where his left arm, leg, and most of his rib cage should have been.

That wasn't quite how he remembered leaving it.

But he was still regenerating. He'd become little more than a crumpled heap on the floor, but the vigor hadn't worn off just yet.

The sound of fighting echoed distantly, shaking the floor, loosening dusty debris from the ceiling.

"Garovel?" he tried. It came out coughing, but he was still mildly surprised by his own voice. It sounded almost foreign to him. And he was pretty sure one of his lungs was missing.

'I'm here,' the reaper said. 'You don't look so good, friend.'

He felt a shard in his one hand. It made him smile briefly as he wondered how the hell he'd managed to keep hold of it. He rolled over, trying to look around while he waited for his stomach to grow back.

He'd ended up in a cubbyhole of sorts. Whatever this room was before, it was so annihilated now that its walls were just piles of rubble. Maybe it wasn't even a room. It could've been a hallway, for all he knew.

"Alright," he said, tasting blood in his mouth. "Tell me what to do, Garovel."

'Uhh--'

He was interrupted by Asad flying through a wall of debris."  
"1110 -- CXXVI.

--Monday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

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"1111

Hector started crawling toward Asad through the shower of shattered stone, but the Lord Najir was already standing up again, visibly broken bones shifting back into place with the heightened speed of pan-forma.

The man's tattoos, however, were flickering. The golden glow had been constant before, so long as Asad was sustaining damage, but now it seemed to be lagging. Fewer of them were leaping from his body, as well, and the look on Asad's face spoke of disorientation.

And through the fresh hole in the debris, Hector could see the distant Marauder's translucent form moving toward them.

Hector already knew he wouldn't be able to do anything, but impulse told him to try anyway. He let go of the shard in order to thrust his hand out and concentrate on a barricade of iron walls. However, even his low expectations were not met, because no wall materialized. With a confused blink, he tried again, and this time, he managed to create a faint spray of dust.

His eyes widened as he realized. This was what Rasalased had meant by being weakened.

'Garovel, you need to run,' Hector thought.

'Don't worry about me,' the reaper said.

And Hector was about to wonder where Garovel even was right now, but something else stole his attention.

Between Asad and the oncoming Marauder, a flash of brown swirled into existence, then promptly vanished, leaving three figures behind. Hector recognized them immediately.

Ibai Blackburn, Darktide, and the Seadevil.

Hector could only stare, but the two Rainlord juggernauts wasted no time. Billowing smoke and liquid metal charged headlong toward Caster.

Hector braced himself for another explosion, but Ibai was suddenly in front of him, grabbing him by the shoulder, and teleporting him away. Hector barely remembered to scoop the shard back up in time.

The brown shadow dispersed as quickly as it had come, but they were in a new room now. And the explosion did indeed arrive a moment later, shaking perhaps the entirety of Dunehall, but for once, Hector

didn't find himself getting caught in the blast radius."  
"1112

"Hello again, my one black friend," said Ibai. "You seem to be having a hard time."

Hector grunted as Ibai set him down. His freshly regenerated lung squished against the stone floor, not yet having a rib cage to protect it.

"I'm sorry it took us so long to come help," the aberration went on. "I've been a bit busy, what with all the sabotage and so forth. But now we've got a moment to rest."

It made sense, Hector realized. "You're the reason the Marauder couldn't find Darktide and the Seadevil."

"The Marauder?"

"That Caster guy."

"Oh, him. Yes. I figured Abolish would go for them first. They are our strongest combatants, but they were also unconscious and vulnerable. If I didn't hide them and wake them up, this battle would have been a foregone conclusion, I think."

Hector understood. He wondered if Ibai's sabotage hadn't also had something to do with their assailants no longer being invisible.

"Where is your reaper?" Ibai asked.

'Here.' Garovel's skull peeked up through the floor.

"Please come with me," said Ibai.

'Where to?'

"To gather the non-combatants. I would like to take as many as I can to safety, and your help would be appreciated."

'Hector?'

He'd just about finished regenerating and was trying to find his footing again. In truth, he still felt a little woozy. His thoughts were largely

clear, but there was a certain light-headedness that was throwing him off. "Sure," he said.

"...Are you okay?" said Ibai.

Hector closed his eyes, concentrating. "Yes," he said. When he opened them again, Ibai had no pants on.

The aberration stood there in his underwear, offering his belted trousers to Hector. "You should have these."

Hector's own pants had been shredded, of course, along with his shirt. The left leg was completely gone, and Hector didn't need to look down in order to tell that half his junk was hanging out."

"1113

He decided to accept Ibai's offer. He had a bit of trouble with the left leg. The whole left side of his body still felt a little sluggish and weird, but he powered through.

Ibai didn't seem too concerned about having to run around in his underwear. If anything, he looked happier.

Before Hector even realized it, they'd teleported again, and he saw a group of vaguely familiar faces huddled in the corner. Non-servant Rainlords, they were. Sebolts, he was pretty sure.

"By the way," said Ibai, "I wanted to ask. You seem fairly experienced. Have you been on many adventures?"

The question might as well have been in another language for all the sense it made to Hector at the moment. He just concentrated on gathering the Rainlords around Ibai.

--+-+--+--

Xuan Sebolt could not have been more disappointed.

When he'd heard Ibai talk about how Caster Egmond was in the building, he'd immediately gotten his hopes up. The famed Marauder of Calthos? Opportunities like that didn't come along every day. This could have been his most satisfying fight in a dozen years, especially since he wasn't even fully recovered from Marshrock yet. The

desperate and exhausting battles were always the best.

If only the Marauder hadn't turned out to be a destruction user.

Xuan almost pitied the man. It wasn't like destruction was a categorically inferior ability or anything. Obviously, it was very potent and deadly, and most servants were right to fear pan-rozum users who had it. But none of that applied to the Seadevil.

Caster hadn't even seemed to realize it yet. But then, that wasn't so surprising. There weren't very many servants in the world who could wield a gas the way Xuan could."

"1114

The continuous streams of destruction were certainly impressive as far as demonstrations of skill went, but the thing was, they couldn't actually destroy smoke. The concussive force of the destruction type was certainly powerful, but it was also slow by comparison to, say, a soul-empowered explosion, which could disperse Xuan's smoke very rapidly in all directions and thereby shred his soul.

Essentially, the only thing a destruction user could do to Xuan was push his smoke around. The molecular structure of gaseous matter made it a perfect counter to everything the Marauder wanted to do.

And that wasn't very exhilarating.

The only obstacle to victory here was reaching the Marauder's mind. Since he'd more or less become a being of living destruction, his one weak point in pan-rozum was going to be well protected.

But that wouldn't make much difference, either, so long as Xuan kept him smothered.

And so the fight unfolded. Xuan and Duvoss' two minds sat there in the phosphorus fumes, examining Caster's body, searching for the weak point. Caster could send waves of destruction through the smoke, which certainly still threatened Zeff, Asad, and Melchor, but Duvoss had them covered. A blatant, arrow-shaped smoke signal would shoot out and warn their comrades whenever an attack from Caster was imminent.

And soon enough, Xuan found the weak point. A speck in the

Marauder's soul. Xuan could attack himself, but Darktide could hit harder, so he created an opening in his smoke and pointed the old bastard to it. Sure enough, soul-empowered javelins of frozen mercury flew into the opening and smashed against the Marauder's body.

But even with Darktide's help, this would be slow going. Caster had been declawed, but it would be a while before his defenses crumbled.

Which was why Xuan grew bored so quickly. This wasn't a fight so much as an exercise in tedium. It was enough to make his mind wander in the midst of it. Duvoss was still there anyway, and he'd always had more patience for these kinds of things."

"1115

The fight with Darktide had been much more satisfying. Now there was a well-rounded opponent. And that name. A bit superfluous, really. "Melchor" was intimidating enough already.

As Xuan recalled, Melchor had gotten that name after going on a number of vengeful killing sprees many years past. For his fallen brethren. That was the kind of man Melchor was, the kind he'd always been. Even as a child. Xuan had only met him a few times in those early days, but he remembered that same severity, the same humorless demeanor.

But now that he was thinking about it, Xuan had been that way, too. They all had, really. Back then, the life of a young male Rainlord was even harder than it was now. None of this waiting until adolescence to become a servant. If you could walk, you could fight. And all the rituals. All the trials. Drowning, studying, fighting, training--all while maintaining the appearance of a sophisticated gentleman, of someone with high moral fiber.

And of course, they had to watch their elders fall in battle. One after another. Year in and year out. Death upon death. Some sacrificed themselves, trying to secure the next generation. Some died honorably in glorious battle. Others were simply murdered in cold blood.

Melchor hadn't changed. He was a product of his time--perhaps made a bit pricklier by his kin frowning upon homosexuals during his formative years, but still a product of his time nonetheless.



No, it was Xuan who'd changed. And he wasn't sure when that had happened, exactly. Or why.

Oh, but he was getting lost in thought. He checked back in on Caster.

Eh, it was the same as before. Duvoss was doing a fine job.

Maybe it was just all the loss, Xuan wondered. It certainly made life easier to just embrace the chaos and the blood, rather than letting it bring him down again and again. And again. And still again.

So many friends, he'd had. A hundred years' worth."

"1116

This was why he was unfit for leadership, Xuan knew. He didn't have the temperament. Or rather, he didn't want it. He could keep calm well enough. Think clearly well enough. But the fight was all he really cared about. Because that was what it always came down to. In the end, the fight was what mattered most. Diplomacy might win the day, but there was always tomorrow. The fight was inevitable.

And that was why, he realized. That was why he'd changed. He remembered that lesson well. Field Marshal Kane had tried to teach it to him. It took Abolish for him to truly understand, though.

Quite possibly the greatest diplomatic victory of his life. Working directly under Kane. A very delicate mission in Hoss, Vantalay, and the recently-emerged state of Steccat. All three countries had been flirting with war for a good five years or so, and Abolish had been doing its damndest to help them make the final push.

Kane's task force grew by leaps and bounds during that time, learning new tactics, relearning old ones, refitting itself to become one of the most flexible paramilitary units in the world. By the time all was said and done, Xuan had fought Abolish in almost every conceivable manner--as a counter-terrorist, as an ambassador, as a bodyguard, as a propaganda officer, as a spy, as a negotiator, as a mediator, even as a mailman and a deli shop employee.

It was some of the hardest, strangest, and most rewarding work he'd ever been a part of. Without a doubt, Kane and his men saved tens of thousands of lives, if not more.

And the very next week, after returning home to Waterbreak in Roth for the first time in over four years, Xuan heard the news.

Lac'Vayce. A million dead in less than three days of fighting."  
"1117

Xuan had known people there, of course. He'd visited Melmoore several times in his youth. He'd been fond of Lac'Vayce in particular for its combination of lush tropical vistas and ancient cultural heritage. Sure, it had been something of a tourist trap, but that was probably why the locals were so absurdly welcoming and friendly.

He visited the battleground afterward. The Vanguard had walled the whole island off, but Xuan managed to get inside for a look.

Only a smoldering wasteland remained. Where once had been dozens of skyscraping hotels and office buildings, only a few piles of rubble stood. The very ground itself was mushy under his feet, even smoking and oozing in places. And the stench.

Indescribably awful.

He didn't know why he was thinking about all this now.

No. On second thought, he did know. This was exactly why he hated being bored. It made him introspective; it brought out the old man in him. And all in all, there just weren't enough good memories--not when compared with all the bad ones.

What a sour old fart, he'd become.

But wait.

Wait a minute.

This wasn't supposed to be happening.

His mind was joined with Duvoss'.

Pan-rozum.

It was perfectly fine to multitask.

Concentrate on two things at once.

But drifting like this.

These thoughts shouldn't have felt so far removed.

This wasn't right.

No.

Where were Duvoss' thoughts?

At this very moment, what was the reaper thinking?

No.

NO.

Xuan seized control again. Smoke gathered, swirled, and his hand formed. It found his point of control, his merged mind, and pulled.

Duvoss came free, exhausted and unconscious.

The smoke shuddered and dispersed, giving way to Xuan's small frame. He hit the floor with his reaper in hand and struggled there as his body refused to listen to him."

"1118

Xuan tried to concentrate, to understand what was happening, but it was a challenge even to stay conscious. Every muscle felt numb and sluggish, and his vision kept blurring in and out.

They'd pushed themselves too hard, his brain finally realized. He and Duvoss had known this might happen. Of course they had.

But that was how hyper state exhaustion worked, subtle and creeping and numbing. A quiet crevice between the two minds would form, and it was only too common for neither one to realize what was happening until it was too late.

And because he'd drifted, he didn't know how much time had passed since the fight began, either. It could have been one minute; it could have been twenty.

It couldn't have been that long, though, because he was still himself. Mostly. He hadn't totally lost it and started attacking his own comrades, at least. That was something.

But that was definitely where his mind had been headed. He could still feel the lingering weight that had been growing in his soul a moment ago. A twisted mixture of despair and rage. If it had progressed to hunger, too, then...

He didn't think about it. He needed to focus. What was happening?

He looked around. Everything was a mess. The room was unfamiliar. Had they moved? Of course they had. Where were they now? Too difficult to tell. Who was still fighting?

Asad and Qorvass were down, Xuan saw. The reaper was bleeding out of the Sandlord's torso.

Zeff and Axiolis were on one knee--still alive and covered in thin trails of fog and ice. But they were struggling to hold it together. Their merge was probably going to end soon, if it wasn't already happening.

Dimas? Xuan couldn't see--no. There he was. Him and Iziol. On the ground behind Darktide.

Darktide was still standing? Still fighting? Of course he was. That ridiculous bastard."

"1119

Xuan writhed on the floor, gritting his teeth as he tried and failed to stand. He hated this. More than anything. Only being able to watch? No. He had to get up. He had to fight.

Liquid metal splashed across his vision as Darktide clashed with Caster. But it wasn't just Caster, he realized. More Abolish trash had arrived. A half dozen unfamiliar souls were in the room with them now, all behind the Marauder. Xuan hadn't even sensed them. What a failure, he'd become. Useless.

Four of them attacked alongside Caster, flanking Melchor. The lone Rainlord grabbed two and tore them both to pieces, but Caster barreled through the mercury like a bull.

Then came a flash of light. An explosion. Xuan couldn't hear it, but he could feel it. The ground lifted out from under him, and a vague sense of movement enveloped him. He hit something. Probably the ground again. And when he looked out another time, he saw smaller figures.

Children.

His vision focused.

The Elroy kids. They hadn't gotten out? No, there was a wall of debris in their way. The older girl was trying to punch and claw through it, but she looked unsteady. The younger girl was injured, and the boy was trying to set her down, probably to help the older one.

They needed help. But Xuan couldn't provide it. He could only lay there, watching.

Darktide came splattering into view. Splotches of mercury hit the broken floor and puddled together, struggling to make their way back to the main body mass.

Zeff, Asad, Dimas, and all of their reapers oozed out of Darktide's liquid form. Xuan had no idea how Melchor had managed to keep them safe. All but Zeff were unconscious.

The Lord Elroy punched the ground, trying to stand. He'd separated from his reaper, who now sat on his shoulder, apparently out cold like the others."

"1120 -- CXXVII.

Darktide was having trouble getting back up as well, now. His mercury bristled like fur, trying to retain its shape.

The Abolishers arrived through the cavernous hole in the far wall, even more numerous than before. They moved to engage again.

But then everyone stopped. All at once. And Xuan saw why.

A new figure was standing there in the middle of the chamber. Pitch black and tall. Too tall. Taller than any person should be. And bearing a tail. Along with eyes that glowed deeply crimson.

Primarily, though, it was this pressure that had halted everything. This

presence. How had Xuan not sensed it sooner? He should have been able to sense a soul this powerful from a mile off.

Caster was the first to break the silence. "What are you doing?" he asked with two voices. He sounded as confused as anyone.

The figure didn't respond.

But he didn't really need to. The Seadevil knew who this was. Practically anyone would. That inhuman physique. This imposing pressure. Those black scales. There could be no doubt.

This was the Monster of the East. This was Gohvis.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Seven: 'O, dire Scourge...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"Please do not ignore me," said Caster. "I asked you a question. You are not supposed to--"

A huge black fist cut him off, and suddenly the Marauder was gone, sent flying diagonally through the ceiling. The hole he left behind didn't stop on the next floor, either. Xuan could see blue sky through the rubble and sand.

"Wha--?"

The Monster moved so quickly that Xuan didn't even see what happened to the next two Abolishers. They simply vanished into two more holes on either side of the ceiling.

The Seadevil's eyes did, however, manage to catch the next three strikes. Two punches and a tail swipe. Two of the receiving Abolishers exploded into a cloud of blood and guts on impact, and the third joined the others through yet another hole in the ceiling."

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Four Abolishers remained, but Gohvis stopped mid-punch in front of the next one. The guy blinked at the Monster's torso in his face and staggered back, falling on his ass and trying to crawl away.

Gohvis didn't move any more than that, as far as Xuan could tell, but a blue glow had gathered around his whole body. And after seeing what had become of Caster, no one in the room seemed brave enough to ask the Monster what he was doing another time. Instead, Xuan heard the ceiling groan and shift as Dunehall settled.

Xuan noticed that the sound of battle had ceased elsewhere as well. Previously, he'd been able to hear muffled gunfire or explosions, but no longer. That might well have been Gohvis' doing, too. Even if they didn't know who it belonged to, every reaper and servant in the building should have been able to feel this soul's presence.

There came a loud crash from the next room over, and everyone but the Monster turned to look at the half-broken door leading there.

And Xuan blinked, sensing it again. A second one. There was another soul with that same oppressive aura in the building. Had it only just arrived? Or had he simply been too distracted by Gohvis' soul to realize? Perhaps a bit of both.

The door opened, and a man stepped through. The door snapped from its hinges and fell on the floor. The man spared it a look of mild surprise. "Well, this sure has gotten messy," he said.

He wore so much yellow that he looked like a banana. His hat, suit, and briefcase were all so bright that they bled into one another. Only his shoes, his thin tie, and the slim band around his hat broke the trend, all by being jet black."

"1122

There was little doubt in Xuan's mind that the man in yellow was Ivan, the Salesman of Death.

Gohvis, the right hand of Dozer. And Ivan, the right hand of Morgunov.



What they were both doing here, Xuan had no idea, but he could feel the whole room change, somehow. Possibly the whole castle. It was like there was some sort of wall all around them, encompassing everyone. Trapping them. Judging from the soul, it was the Salesman's doing.

It didn't matter for Xuan so much. He and Duvoss weren't about to get up and run away. The children, though...

Xuan had to do something. He pressed his palm against the floor, but he still didn't have the strength to even push himself onto his knees.

Ivan stepped closer to Gohvis. "I believe I asked you not to interfere," he said. "And yet, here I find you, punching my men--quite literally--into a different time zone. Do you know how annoying that is? Being lied to by your friend?"

The Monster returned a low-toned growl, and for the first time, his lipless, nearly invisible mouth opened. "Release me. Before I release myself." He spoke with two voices, though they sounded a bit strange, perhaps because one was so inhumanly deep.

"Why? Are you afraid the blowback will harm these nice people here? I presume that is why you--"

"No." And the Monster disappeared into thin air, only to reappear a few steps over with his huge hand wrapped around the yellow man's throat.

"Ha." A blue glow engulfed the Salesman's neck and loosened the Monster's grip, allowing Ivan to step back. "One day, you will have to explain to me how you do that."

"Stay out of my way," the Monster said.

"Stay out of mine," the Salesman said."

"1123

There came a tense period of silence as the two giants of Abolish stared at each other.

Xuan wondered what the others were thinking. Darktide was still maintaining pan-rozum somehow, but he and Zeff were only

observing. It did seem like the Monster had come to their aid. Even if it didn't make any sense, they were probably hoping they wouldn't have to fight him.

The air shuddered around Gohvis. "You think you can stop me?" Something about the way he said it made it feel like the whole room was shaking.

Ivan seemed nonplussed, however. "Of course I can stop you," he said plainly. "But that is beside the point. We both know that I do not need to do anything. Unless, of course, you want to make that old man of yours very angry with you."

"Why would he be angry? I am here on his order."

Ivan broke for a laugh. "Who do you think you are talking to? Beyond doubt, I know that to be a lie."

"Is that so?"

"It is. But there's no need for this dance. Attack me and prove me wrong."

The Monster made no response.

"As I thought," said Ivan, looking quite pleased with himself. "Now, why don't you explain why you apparently care so much about the fate of these people?"

Gohvis did no such thing.

"I'm not unreasonable," Ivan went on. "If it's a good explanation, I might let you have them."

Still, he remained silent.

Ivan nodded and stepped toward Darktide, whose vague mass rose to face him, launching a flurry of frozen javelins.

The Salesman waved his hand, and a translucent wave of blue knocked them aside, along with Darktide himself. Mercury splattered against the wall, and Melchor and Orric melted out separately, finally down for the count."

"1124

Only the barely-standing Lord Elroy remained. And without warning, a surge of water appeared, jetting toward the Salesman, only to break upon a faintly blue wall. The waves swished back and slammed against another nigh-invisible barricade, becoming suddenly boxed in. The crashing waves were abruptly silenced as no sound was able to escape the Salesman's box.

"Stop," said Gohvis.

Ivan tilted his head as he eyed his new aquarium. "Water? Ha. Look, Monster. It's the new Water Dragon. This one's name is Zeff Elroy, as I recall."

Zeff was pinned to the floor now beneath a blanket of blue energy. Xuan hadn't even seen when the Salesman managed to do that.

Gohvis took a step closer, but that was it. With reptilian eyes and no visible mouth, his expression was unreadable.

"But perhaps you already knew that," said Ivan. "Is this why you are here? You have some affection for these rare abilities? I know the feeling. It is a bit of a shame to just snuff it out like this, but on the bright side, there will probably be another one in a few generations, right?"

"Stop," said Gohvis again. "...Please."

That gave Ivan pause, along with everyone else in the room. "Excuse me?" said Ivan, sounding genuinely stunned. "Did you just say please?"

Xuan saw a new expression on the Salesman's face. Confused thinking. Gears turning.

"Wait a minute," said Ivan. "Don't tell me... oh, Monster, don't tell me. Oh my, oh no. Ha. Aha. Monster, are these people your kin?"

"NO." That one word made the room tremble, sand and dust trickling from the perforated ceiling again. Gohvis didn't wait for a response this time, however. He melted out of sight and reappeared behind Zeff. "Take them all. I don't care. But the girl in the mask is mine."

"1125

“Girl in the mask?” Ivan scanned over their audience before settling on Emiliana Elroy. “Interesting. What makes her so special? Tell me, and I’ll give you all the rest of them, too.”

“No, you won’t,” said Gohvis.

“Ha. Fine. So if I give her to you, what will you give me in ex--?”

“You are not giving her to me,” said Gohvis. “She is mine. Try to take her, and I will kill you.”

“Ah...” The yellow man’s gaze returned to Gohvis and lingered there. “I actually believe you this time. You really would fight me for this girl, wouldn’t you?”

Gohvis just stared at him.

“Hold on. Is she--?” Ivan broke for a look of genuine excitement. “Is she your kid? Can you have kids? Is she your lizard baby?!”

For some reason, the Monster chose not to respond to that.

“Does she have a lizard face?! Gohvis, please! I’ll let you have them all if you just show me her lizard face!”

“She is not my child.” The Monster was beginning to sound exasperated.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“...So no lizard face?”

“No.”

“Well, forget it, then. Anyway, I’d enjoy fighting you, but not over something so trivial. You can have her if she means that much to you.”

A muddy brown swirl chose that moment to arrive.

-+-+-+-

Hector had felt it like everyone else. Even the non-servants they’d gathered outside the castle were talking about it. This ominous

pressure. Most of them were Rainlords, though, so they seemed to have a better idea of what it was. Hector needed Garovel to remind him.

True giants were here. Two of them, according to Garovel. And the Elroys were caught in their path, naturally.

Hector didn't know what to do. More so than usual, even, because Garovel didn't know what to do, either. That, and he was still feeling a little woozy from whatever Rasalased had done to him.

Ibai, on the other hand, was a different story."

"1126

From the moment they'd sensed the two big souls, Ibai hadn't stopped blabbering--mostly to himself and with such speed that Hector couldn't even follow what he was saying. It sounded like Ibai was trying to formulate a plan or something, and kept looking at Hector as if looking for approval, only to continue talking anyway.

And now, Hector found himself here, in another decimated room, staring at the back of some giant, black dragon-man-thing. He looked around and saw a host of downed servants that he recognized. Zeff, Dimas, Melchor, Xuan, Asad.

"Why, hello there," Ibai was already saying. "You gentlemen are from Abolish, am I right? Wait don't tell me! The Black Scourge and the Salesman of Death! Yeah? My name is Ibai. I'm an aberration, if you couldn't already tell. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Well, aren't you friendly?" said the yellow man. "How did you get in here?"

"Oh, are you asking because you sealed this room off?" Ibai asked. "How did you do that, by the way? A force field? Are you a force field guy? I've never met a force field guy! How does your power work? Or is that a rude thing to ask? If so, I apologize. I'm just naturally curious. Always have been. You know how it is."

Ivan was stepping closer. "It's been a while since I met someone who likes to talk as much as I do. I'd rather you answer my questions first, though." He raised a hand to encase Ibai in a blue field, but the

aberration was already gone by then, ported to the other side of the room and leaving Hector standing next to Gohvis.

Ibai and the Salesman kept talking, and Hector was a bit too concerned with those glowing red eyes to look anywhere else. And so he and the Monster of the East just kind of stared at each other as they listened.

Hector was surprised at how calm he felt--at how he wasn't immediately shitting his pants, anyway. He couldn't seem to change the massive frown on his face, though. Or his wide-eyed stare. Or the way that his whole body was leaning backward, as if preparing to be stepped on."

"1127

"Boy," said Gohvis, "tell me your name."

It took a second for Hector to realize that the question had been addressed to him. "Ah--uh. Hector Goffe." That was dumb. He should've just made up some bullshit.

"How are you still alive, Hector Goffe?"

"Er... good question. Dumb luck, I think."

"No such thing exists," said Gohvis. "Destiny controls all."

"...I disagree. There's way too much pointless shit in the world for that to be true." What the hell was he saying?! Who did his brain think it was talking to?! His body knew to be terrified, but his brain--

"Why are you here?" the Monster asked.

The question went unanswered, however, as Ibai teleported behind them and promptly vanished with Chergoa, Shenado, and all of the Elroy children.

Gohvis growled, and then he too was gone, just like that.

Hector was left standing there on his own, feeling like some kind of asshole. Precisely what kind, he wasn't sure.

It was then that he realized Garovel wasn't in the room with him, either.

‘Garovel, where are you?’

‘Very far underground,’ the reaper said. ‘How’s it going up there?’

Hector saw the man in yellow looking over this way now. ‘Terribly.’

‘How terribly?’

That question went unanswered as well, as Hector’s attention was consumed by the Salesman’s tilting head and curious expression.

“I’ve never seen a black Rainlord before.”

“Ah--I’m not a Rainlord,” said Hector.

“No? Unfortunate to find yourself here, then. Don’t tell them I said anything, but I think the Rainlords might be a little racist.”

“They seem pretty nice to me,” said Hector. Maybe his brain wasn’t paying attention to what was happening. Or maybe it just wanted to get him killed.”

"1128

The Salesman tilted his head the other way. “Are you not afraid of me?”

“...I guess not,” said Hector.

“And why might that be?”

“I don’t know. You are very frightening.”

“Ha, I know, thank you. I’ve been this way for a long time--long enough, in fact, that it gives me pause when I meet someone unfazed by my presence.”

Hector understood. This guy was wondering if Hector was powerful enough to not be bothered by his ridiculous soul pressure--powerful enough to oppose him, in other words.

“I don’t sense much from you,” said Ivan. “I don’t sense anything, actually. Quite strange. Are you that weak? You’d have to be less than a year old as a servant in order to have a soul that pathetic. And yet,

from the way you speak to me... You have lipid proteinosis, don't you?"

"What?"

"The inability to feel fear. It's a genetic disorder. You have it."

"...I don't think so," said Hector.

"No? Tell the truth, now."

Hector felt the air grow heavier. The field density of the Salesman's soul had increased, he was pretty sure. But what was the point? Judging from the man's last sentence, was it supposed to make Hector tell the truth? Was that even possible? It did feel a bit oppressive, but Hector still felt perfectly capable of saying whatever he wanted. And so, after mulling it over for a few seconds, he decided to respond with, "I am telling the truth." He hadn't been lying anyway.

But the realization gave him an idea.

"Huh," said Ivan. "You're a curious one. How old are you, then?"

"...How old are you?"

Irritation flashed across the Salesman's face, and his field density increased again. "Answer me."

"1129

Hector considered what to say. He could just lie. But would that actually help? Would that put this guy off or just make him more excited to fight? The fact that Ivan was asking at all suggested that he was trying to be cautious, which further suggested that it would put him off. Maybe.

"I'm a little over three hundred years old," said Hector. He had to keep his focus. Slow, measured responses. At his own pace. He'd done this sort of thing before--maybe not on this level, but he'd done it before. "I've... I've grown so accustomed to keeping my soul's field density suppressed... that I do it without even meaning to now."

Ivan's mouth twisted slowly into a manic smile. "Ha! Excellent!"



Well, that backfired.

“If not for my big lizard friend, I would have left this operation to my men. What with the Rainlords being exhausted and none of the Sandlords but the Lion present, I was sure there wouldn’t be anyone here who could show me a good time. I do love a nice surprise.”

Hector recognized the mad expression on the Salesman’s face. Perhaps it was some kind of prerequisite for becoming one of Morgunov’s followers.

He’d guessed wrong. Now the Salesman was going to stomp him into the dust. Unless he did something about it. He already knew fighting wasn’t an option. This guy could probably kill him with a sneeze.

That only left talking. Not his strong suit, to say the least. In fact, he’d already cocked it up pretty badly. But he did know what he wanted to say next.

“Agh,” Ivan said first, “all these interruptions. Pardon me a moment.”

Hector didn’t know what he was talking about, until the right wall exploded as a floating blue cage came crashing through it.

Hector shielded his eyes from the ensuing cloud of dust and sidestepped a chunk of debris the size of a horse. Briefly, he was quite pleased with himself for being able to see that coming. And then a smaller one pegged him right in the face.”

"1130

Nothing felt broken, at least. Hector couldn’t tell if his regeneration was still active or not. With everything that had transpired, he’d completely lost track of time. It could have been thirty minutes since Garovel started the regen. It could’ve been five.

As the dust cleared, Hector saw the blue cage again, more clearly this time. Inside of it was a man, hanging upside down.

“Ismael Blackburn,” said Ivan. “What are you doing, sneaking around?”

Indeed, it was him. Hector hadn’t registered the face at first, having only seen the man a couple times before.

Lord Ismael chose to remain silent.

Ivan kept talking anyway. "That aberration. Ibai. Tell me about him." And when Ismael still did not respond, Ivan said, "He is your son, I hear. Is that true?"

"...Y-yes," said Ismael. "It is."

"Funny, I'd always heard you couldn't have children. Do you know how aberrations are made?"

A groan passed Ismael's lips, as if the words were being torn from his lungs. "No... I... I do not."

"Ha. Where is that wife of yours? I should like to speak to her, too."

Ismael's face twitched, his mouth fighting to remain closed. And this time, it did.

"Oho. Resilient."

Hector could only look on in horror. He wanted to help. Of course he did. But he knew better. He had to keep his focus. No matter what happened here, he had to keep it. Because Rasalased had been absolutely right.

"Tell me about your son," said Ivan.

"...N-no."

"Don't be difficult. I am a patient man, but not that patient."

"I won't tell you anything more."

The Salesman frowned, then turned to the unconscious Darktide. "Tell me, or he dies."

"...You will kill him anyway," said Ismael.

"Ha."

Hector felt he had to intervene. "Our conversation isn't over. Leave them alone."

"1131 -- CXXVIII.

--Monday donation bonus (Page 1/3)--

Ivan seemed amused at Hector. "You're still trying to talk? These people are your comrades, no? The fact that you haven't attacked me yet is proof enough that you aren't as powerful as you claim."

Hector's jaw clenched.

"Don't get me wrong," said Ivan. "I admire your moxie. Trying to play me for a fool? Do you know how rarely people try to do that? To me?! It's been ages!"

"You're wrong," said Hector, not yet sure how he was going to back that statement up.

"Am I? Oh, then please explain. I would love to hear this."

It couldn't end here. He had to keep this up somehow. He hated talking. He hated how much he sucked at it. But this was something else. This was bullshitting. And he could do that. Probably.

True, the stakes were a tiny bit higher than usual. But strangely, that only made things clearer to him. He had to bullshit like he'd never bullshitted before. And his mind was calm. Maybe it was Rasalased's doing. Maybe he'd lost his goddamn mind. He couldn't worry about that right now. Whatever the reason, in this moment, it was helping him. There was no panic. No anxiety. No distractions.

Only the knowledge that if he lost control or simply gave up, then everyone here would die.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Eight: 'Hold true...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

There was only one thing that Hector knew Ivan wanted. One thing that Hector could hold hostage.

"If you kill them... then I won't fight you," said Hector.

Ivan let out a laugh. "What?"

Hector knew he couldn't let up. "Listen. My power. It's too volatile right now. If I use it here... then... everyone will die, anyway. It would be... ah, it would be the same as just letting you kill them. That's why I

haven't intervened. That's why... I didn't kill your Marauder, even though I could have. Obviously."

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"1132

--Monday donation bonus (Page 2/3)--

"So," Hector went on, "if you want to fight me, then we can't do it here. We have to go somewhere else. And you have to... leave these people alone."

Ivan looked over their audience another time before returning to Hector. "For a second there, I almost believed you. Playing up to my fun-loving bloodlust. Smart. Thing is, though: it's been done and done and done. So I'm just not buying it. I'm a stingy customer in that way. More of a seller, you know. Ha."

"I'm not lying," Hector lied. "I don't care what happens to me. I'll let you kill me or capture me or whatever. And then you won't get the fight you want."

"Nah. You won't do that. Even if you do have a power that puts your buddies at risk, you wouldn't just let them die."

Hector glared at him. "You don't understand how dangerous my power is."

The Salesman met his gaze evenly. "Hmm. And what is this oh-so-dangerous power of yours, exactly?"

Garovel could've helped with that one. Hector very much wanted to consult the reaper right now, but there just wasn't time. He couldn't allow himself to get distracted. So instead, he said, "What's yours?"

“Ha. Do you know what the weak interaction is?”

With hesitation, Hector shook his head.

“Then there’s no point in explaining.” He turned to the Lord Blackburn again. “What’s his power?”

“...I-I don’t know,” said Ismael.

“Mm. Well, at least you were honest.”

The blue cage converged. A flash consumed Ismael’s body, and then the man was dust. Dead. As quickly as that.

“No!” Hector yelled. “I told you--!”

“Relax,” said Ivan. “It was only the servant. The reaper yet lives.” Another blue cage came through the same hole in the wall, this one holding a reaper. “See?”

And Hector wavered. His focus. His resolve. He didn’t know if he could just stand here and watch what was about to happen.”

"1133

--Monday donation bonus (Page 3/3)--

But he had to. He couldn’t act emotionally now. If he made a move, did anything stupid, then everything would have been for naught. It was clear enough that the Salesman at least partly believed him--otherwise he would’ve attacked Hector already--but the man in yellow still had full control of the conversation.

“Tell everyone your name,” said Ivan.

The reaper in the cage groaned but didn’t answer. Hector felt the air grow heavier again, but still, the reaper remained silent.

“This one is resilient, too,” said Ivan. “Well, that’s fine. As it so happens, information is my great hobby. Everyone, this is Rholtam. He is the reaper for Ismael Blackburn. Rholtam is one of the oldest remaining Rainlords. One of the first generation. Not many of those left. Isn’t that right, Rholtam?”

The reaper gave a slow nod.

Hector had to try again. "Stop this. I won't fight you unless--"

The cage converged. A blue flash annihilated Rholtam in an instant.

Hector's breath caught, and his face grew hot with anger. This was worse than torture. Having to watch this motherfucker kill people? He couldn't hide his scowl, and after a few moments, he stopped trying to.

Ivan just stood there, though. Observing him. Waiting with that look of expectation. Hoping for Hector to do something.

Hector resisted. He seized his mind back, his calm. And with it, he took the opportunity to talk to Garovel. 'Stay away. I might be captured by the Salesman soon.'

'Hector! What are you--?!'

He had to block the reaper out again. Even that stray thought in the back of his mind--the one asking how he was even capable of blocking Garovel out--that had to be ignored, too. He needed all of his concentration for whatever Ivan said next. He couldn't miss anything. Not a word. Not a movement. Not anything."

"1134

Ivan folded his arms. "I guess you didn't care much for those two. Alright. How about Darktide, then?" He turned toward Melchor.

"Stop!" said Hector. But he was powerless as he watched a cage surround the fallen Rainlord. It was going to happen again. And he had to watch.

A jostling of debris interrupted them, and a green light filled the room. Hector saw a horizontal pillar of smoke shoot toward Ivan. The Salesman saw it, too, but not in time to prevent himself from being enveloped in it. After a second, a blue wave knocked the smoke away, and Hector witnessed the results.

Xuan Sebolt was there, missing most of his body. Some had been sacrificed for smoke, still smoldering even now, but the majority had been given to acid, in which the Salesman had been entirely coated.

Hector remembered seeing it before. The Seadevil's acid had eaten

through Horatio Blackburn in a matter of seconds, even despite the enhanced regeneration of pan-forma.

But this was the Salesman of Death. And Hector could hear a low laugh behind the loud hiss of the acid.

Ivan's yellow suit was tarnished, missing chunks here and there. His hat sizzled, mostly eaten through. And some of the flesh on his face was gone, revealing more of his teeth and parts of his bare skull.

And that was it.

"Ouch," Ivan said, sounding more amused than pained.

A blue field converged on Xuan, and the few remains of his body disintegrated in a flash. After a moment, the Seadevil's reaper floated out of the rubble, too, though not by his own volition. Duvoss was still unconscious, instead being carried in another blue cage.

"S-stop," Hector tried.

"What a lunatic," said Ivan. "I bet that guy would've become a real problem, one day."

And he crushed Duvoss as well."

"1135

Hector was losing hope. Maybe this was pointless. Maybe the Salesman was the one deceiving him. The bastard could probably tell how weak Hector was all along and was just using this opportunity to fuck with him. With each passing second, Hector grew more convinced. It was over. It had been over this whole time, and he'd just been too stupid to realize it. How could he have even hoped to win anything against one of the most powerful people in the world?

But in spite of all those thoughts, he didn't flinch. He couldn't let himself. He kept eye contact with the Salesman.

The man wasn't regenerating, Hector realized. His half-melted face stayed that way, even as the sizzling subsided. And then Hector realized something else. The man wasn't using a hyper state. This whole time, he'd only been hearing Ivan speak with one voice. It was such an obvious thing that he'd missed it, somehow. Where was this



guy's reaper?

Regardless, Ivan didn't seem to be in much pain. Or any, for that matter. He set his briefcase down and popped it open. He pulled out a small mirror and a handkerchief. He looked at himself and dabbed the wounds, but the acid hadn't left much blood flowing.

"What do you think?" Ivan asked. "Charming, in its own way, no?"

Hector didn't respond.

"Not very presentable, though. If I wasn't meeting clients all the time, I think I'd just stay this way."

Hector didn't understand. Was this a trick? Or just more psychotic rambling? It didn't seem right to engage him, either way.

"Well, if you're not going to do anything, then I've got an idea. Stay right there." He dropped his mirror and handkerchief back in his briefcase, then pulled something else out. A phone, it looked like. He pointed it at Hector. "Smile for me."

Hector did not.

"C'mon, no one likes a sourpuss."

Hector just waited."

"1136

Ivan took the picture and then tinkered with his phone for a bit. "Let's see. You told the Monster your name was Hector Goffe, right?"

"...What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Be with you in a minute."

Hector tried to think. What would Ivan want his picture for? Ah. No. That could be bad if Ivan found out--

"The Darksteel Soldier," the Salesman said.

Hector had to keep himself from wincing.

"And--oh? Lord Darksteel? Of Warrenhold. Well, well. You didn't

mention you were nobility.”

“...It’s a recent development.”

“Ah, indeed. A self-made man, I see.”

Hector wasn’t sure that was true, but he didn’t see much point in contesting it. In fact, maybe he could use this.

Ivan wasn’t done reading from his phone, though. “You fought some of my men. And only a couple of them reported back.”

Reported back? Hector had thought Ivan was just consulting the internet. Was that not the case?

“Mm, perhaps I’ll have a talk with this Desmond Grantier fellow.”

So Desmond survived. That was news to Hector. This was really weird, though. Somehow, he’d managed to pump a morsel of information out of the Salesman. Dare he try for more? No, he didn’t give a shit about them. He had to stay focused. He had to get ahead of it. “I’d like to take credit for that,” he said, “but, uh... I wasn’t the one who wiped out your men.”

“No?”

There was no sense in lying about that part, Hector figured--not when Ivan apparently had firsthand reports from other people who were there. “That was the Vanguard’s doing. Not mine.”

“Ah. I see.”

And Hector sensed a plan forming. In the back of his mind. Maybe. There was something. A lifeline to latch onto. Possibly. It wasn’t all there yet. “Actually, that whole thing... um. It was a very complicated... misunderstanding.”

“Oh? How so?”

"1137

Hector could see it on the Salesman’s face. He’d piqued the man’s interest. This was good. Now he just had to... do... what, exactly?

"I'll tell you," said Hector. And, as he didn't actually know how to finish that thought, he instead followed up with, "...But only if we take this conversation somewhere else."

"Ugh!" Ivan groaned. It had enough force behind it to make the room tremble again. "You're still going on about that?" The Salesman sighed and looked around the room another time. He tossed his phone back into his briefcase. "You really will just let them all die unless I do as you ask, won't you? That is pretty heartless, you know. I think that's heartless, and I'm me."

Hector just maintained his composure.

"Agh, fine. Such a hassle. Where do you want to go, then?"

Hector required a silent moment. He'd actually agreed?! This was actually working?! No, shut up. Focus. Poker face. The Salesman could still be fucking with him, even now. "...Just take us a few kilometers past the city limits."

"Excuse me? 'Take us'? You expect me to carry you?"

"I told you. If I use my power, then it would kill everyone that I--"

"Yeah, yeah, alright. C'mere, then."

Blue enveloped him, and he shot through the ceiling with such force that he thought his body might tear apart. But it held. And he could see the Salesman following closely behind as they soared through the clear mid-morning sky together.

The sandy horizon stretched endlessly around the forested oasis of Moaban. But those golden yellow dunes were fast approaching. Soon, this small reprieve would be gone, so Hector decided to make use of it while he could."

"1138

'Can't talk long,' he thought. 'I'm with the Salesman, still. What can you tell me about him?'

'What are you--Hector, I don't--'

'Quick, Garovel. Life and death situation here.'

‘Ah--okay. Um. The Salesman is best known for war profiteering. Supposedly, he has a gigantic network of spies all over the world and heads up most, if not all, of Abolish’s intelligence-gathering operations.’

That was about what Hector had been expecting. ‘What about his power?’

‘Wha--uh--I don’t know.’

‘What can you tell me about the weak interaction?’

‘Er--is that--? Agh, I can’t explain that quickly! I don’t even understand it that well to begin with! And I’m not sure anyone does!’

Not very helpful, but oh well. ‘Okay.’

‘Hector, why hasn’t he killed you by now?!’

‘He may be under the impression that I’m three hundred years old.’

‘What?!’

‘I have a plan. It’s stupid as shit, though. You should keep running.’

‘Hector!’

He could feel his blue cage slowing down. ‘Gotta go.’ He tuned the reaper out again as his feet neared the sand. They stopped just short of touching it, however. And the blue cage around him did not dissipate, either. Hector gave the Salesman a look.

“What?” said Ivan, easing himself down on the apex of the nearest dune. “I’ve done as you requested. You shouldn’t need me to free you now, right?”

There was no good answer to that question, Hector felt. Better to just sidestep it. “Yes, well... before we get to any of that... I have a small confession.”

“Is it that you were lying about how powerful you are? Because I suspected as much.”

He could’ve come clean here, but that didn’t seem like the right move. He didn’t intend to give ground until he absolutely had to. Instead, he said, “No. I was lying, but not about that.”

The Salesman snorted. "Do explain, then."

"1139

"I didn't ask you... to come all the way out here... in order to spare bystanders from our fight. At least, not just that. Really, I asked you to do it... because I didn't want anyone to overhear our conversation."

"Is that so?"

Hector took a silent breath and braced himself. This was it. This was where the stupid-as-shit part came into play. "...They don't call you the Salesman for no reason, right? So I was wondering... do you like to make deals?"

The yellow man paused at that. He gave Hector a wide, empty-eyed stare, as if he'd become a porcelain doll all of a sudden. Then he smiled faintly. "You certainly aren't a Rainlord. Ha."

Hector didn't know what to make of that.

Ivan blinked a couple times, still smiling the whole time. "To be frank, I'm about eighty percent certain that what you're telling me is complete nonsense, but I must admit: I am curious as to where you think you're going with any of this. Are you trying to stall? For whom, exactly? There is no one in this entire country who could possibly show up to save you from me right now. Trust me, I keep track of these things."

"...I'm not lying," Hector said again. "Why would I need anyone to save me from you? The only way for me to be capable of lying to you... is if I'm powerful enough to resist you. So from your perspective, I'm either lying but not in need of saving... or simply telling the truth."

"Mm, yes. But you see, I've heard stories. About certain people. Certain irregulars. And these folks, for whatever reason, seem to be entirely immune to the psychological effects of oppressive soul power. It's quite strange."

"1140

That was the first Hector had heard of that. He couldn't let it shake him, though. "...Have you ever met anyone like that?"

"Well, no. It does seem like a bit of a tall tale. And yet, as I stand here, speaking to you, I am made to wonder."

"Look," said Hector, "the truth is... that whole mess that I got into with your men in my home country... like I said, it was a misunderstanding. I was trying to work with them. Not against them."

"Oh," laughed Ivan, "is that so?"

"I was never trying to kill them. Otherwise, I... would've done so as soon as they arrived. But they wouldn't listen. And... I'm sure they... misreported my... capabilities in battle, as a result of that."

"Uh-huh."

Hector grit his teeth. "...Don't tell me you actually believe that Atreya could have survived all this time on its own. Without someone protecting it?" That was a pretty good point, actually. He surprised himself but didn't have time to dwell on it. More bullshit was already on its way out of his mouth. "Your men... they weren't the first to try something like that, you know. They were just... the loudest. They never understood that I was... letting them stay in my country. For months, I left them alone. But still... they just wouldn't understand. And then, of course... the Vanguard interfered."

"Mm."

Hector couldn't tell if he was buying any of this. The man's smile was unreadable. So he just kept pushing. "I never killed any of your men," he said. "I wanted to work together. In fact, uh--that's why I came to Sair. I was... I heard that Abolish was operating in this area, so... I came to find out more."

"1141

The Salesman returned that hollow-eyed look of his. "Unlike certain others, I'm not that difficult to get in touch with. Why would you come to Sair and not Calthos or Kavia?"

"...My information network isn't as good as yours, obviously. I didn't know I'd run into you so soon. I just started looking a few days ago. As

a matter of fact, um... ah..."

Hector faltered. The thought was there in his head, ready to be finished, but his stupid mouth wouldn't do what he wanted. And he could just tell that his tongue would trip over the next word a dozen times over if he pushed on too hard right now. He had to relax. And he had to concentrate. Wait, were those opposites? Shit.

Ivan was waiting. "...Yes? As a matter of fact, what? You sure like to take your sweet time with explanations, don't you?"

"Ah. Y-es. Well... that may've contributed to, uh... to the misunderstanding I had with your men." Hector refocused. Half of this crap was coming out of thin air. But it felt like it was making sense. Hopefully. No time to worry about it, though. "But, ah... I was trying to say that, your information network... is exactly the reason why I wanted to work together. With you, I mean. Mine's not so good, like I said. Or, uh, rather, it's more... nonexistent."

Ivan seemed amused again. "Well, you certainly wouldn't be the first person to want that from me. But you've failed to explain what it is that you are offering. Even if you really are three hundred years old, I can't say you've intrigued me with your battle prowess thus far."

"I'm not offering my strength," said Hector. "I'm offering... all of Sair."

The Salesman laughed outright. "Oh, you are, are you?! Well, then! I can't wait to hear your explanation this time!"

"1142

"Obviously," Hector said slowly, "I was going to offer you something else... but seeing as you're here now, you clearly want Sair. And I am... in a position to deliver it to you."

"And how's that, exactly? You're the new leader of the Sandlords, are you?"

"Of course not... Don't be ridiculous. But if you know who I am... then you know that I am close with the Atreyan royal family... which is close with the Sandlords."

"Ha. One political marriage does not make them close."

“Fine. Not close, then. But connected. And... I can use that connection to your advantage.”

And Hector gave him the opportunity, but Ivan didn't say anything. He merely waited with that too-still expression on his face.

“I have a free pass into the Golden Fort,” Hector went on. “In fact... I was there a few days ago.”

“So you want to be my inside man, do you? Why would I need that? I don't know if you've noticed, but I have invisible soldiers at my disposal.”

“Invisible soldiers who aren't very reliable,” said Hector. “But hell... maybe I'm wrong. Did this attack on Dunehall go the way you wanted it to?”

The Salesman's smile soured somewhat. “And you. You are reliable?”

Hector felt he'd already given enough ground. Possibly too much. He had to pull it back here. “Maybe,” he said. “Depends on what you offer me.”

“Ha. You grow more brazen by the second. What is it you want, then? I assume you want me to spare your Rainlord friends, no?”

“Of course. But also... well, you might not like my second request.”

“How nice of you to warn me.”

“...I want you to leave Sair and pretend that I... repelled you.” He'd nearly said ‘defeated you’ before thinking better of it.”

"1143

Ivan's brow raised and he laughed. “What?”

“It would give me... even more clout with the Sandlords,” Hector said, “and by extension... make it easier to hold up my end of the deal.”

“Ha! And be quite the boon to your reputation!”

“...Well, yeah. Wouldn't be a very good deal for me, otherwise. You're getting an entire country.”



The Salesman relinquished a nod. "That is a fair point and well-made, sir. Thing is, though: I have absolutely no reason to accept such a deal."

"You have every reason," Hector countered. This guy hadn't been listening to him this whole time just for shifts and giggles. And even if he was, Hector couldn't let himself believe that right now. He had to press forward. No matter what. "If your invisible soldiers could... infiltrate the Golden Fort just like that... then you would've had them do it a long time ago. You would've killed all the Sandlords in their sleep. But you didn't do that. You waited."

"I like to play with my food," said Ivan. "Clearly. I'm doing so at this very moment. I know it's a bad habit, but what's life without a few bad habits, hmm?"

No, that was bullshit. The Salesman was smarter than that. He had to be. Hector remembered those news reports that Lynn told him about over the phone. They fit into this. "You've... you've been harassing the Sandlords. Trying to pull them out of the Golden Fort. Spread their forces thin. Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you just send a cloaked team in and kill them all while they're sleeping?"

"Like I said--"

"Please." The word ended up sounding even more sarcastic than he'd intended, but oh well. It would have to do. "It's because... it's because the Golden Fort is so crowded right now, isn't it? These invisible men of yours... they can't just push their way through a crowd. They need space to work. And I bet they can still trip physical alarms, too, huh? Like from... a broken window, maybe?"

"...Ha," was all the Salesman said."

"1144

"An inside man would be a big help to you," said Hector. "You'd be able to avoid a difficult fight."

"Perhaps. But who doesn't love a good fight?"

"You don't. Not when it means... that you'll have to fight the Vanguard soon afterward."

Ivan didn't have anything to say to that.

Finally, Hector could sense an advantage. It felt like he'd just about puzzled it all out. "Isn't that what you're really worried about? I mean... sure, you could take the Golden Fort. It would be messy, but you could take it. Problem is... what happens when the Vanguard comes to take it back? Because you know they will."

Ivan was no longer smiling.

Hector wasn't done, though. "And... if you let the Sandlords weaken your forces too much, then... you definitely won't be able to hold onto the Golden Fort. Much less, the rest of Sair." Agh, shit. 'Definitely' was probably too strong of a word there.

For a long moment, however, Ivan just stared at him, the dead-eyed look on his face even more unsettling than usual.

Hector couldn't think of any more ammunition, though, so he just waited.

"Supposing I accept," said Ivan, "how would you use your inside influence to assist me?"

Oh fuck. Hector hadn't expected to get this far. He had to keep the shock from reaching his face. "...Ah. Well. It's obvious, isn't it?"

"Pretend it isn't." The Salesman didn't sound very jovial anymore. In fact, he sounded a little annoyed.

Thankfully, Hector did have an idea to fall back on. "I will... uh, I will use my free pass to kidnap a few important Sandlords. Key children."

Ivan just looked at him.

At first, the idea had felt like it just sprang out of nowhere. But now Hector knew. That tactic was exactly what the Vanguard had done to the Rainlords. His time spent at Marshrock had taught him more than he'd realized, it seemed."

"1145

Hector still couldn't tell what this bastard was thinking. Ivan was giving

him plenty of opportunity to keep blabbering on in elaboration, but Hector decided against it. He didn't mind playing the waiting game. If anything, he preferred it.

"...You think you can just waltz out of the Golden Fort with a bunch of Sandlord children?" the Salesman finally said.

That was a damn good point. Hector needed to stall. So he just calmly said, "Yes." And nothing else.

The Salesman's expression flickered with irritation. "How?"

"I'll... make a game of it. They... won't even know that they are being kidnapped."

"Details."

"...You don't need the details."

That hollow look came over the Salesman's face again. And then he put his smile back on. "You're right," he said. "Here, let me give you my phone number."

Hector felt his left arm lift by itself. A slew of blue lasers appeared and tore through his arm, blowing it to bloody pieces.

The Salesman burst out laughing. "Wow! I figured you were weaker than you let on, but holy cow! You're really that weak?! You really are less than a year old!"

What? That was it? The jig was up? It happened so quickly that Hector could scarcely process it. Ivan had known all along? Everything he'd just said had been for nothing? His annihilated arm didn't hurt, but the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach was one of the worst things he'd ever felt.

But he'd be damned if he allowed his composure to slacken even a little bit. Even if it was completely hopeless now, even if everything he'd been working for was crumbling in front of him, he absolutely was not going to give this bastard the satisfaction of seeing it break him. Fuck that.

"That's alright. I'll be gentler with your other arm."

"1146

Hector felt his right arm lift, and this time, the lasers that appeared were not blue, but red. They burned a long series of numbers into his bare flesh and then dissipated.

"I hope you like your new tattoo," said Ivan. "It's going to be there a while."

Hector didn't know what he meant. His left arm wasn't growing back, it seemed, but he thought his regeneration had simply worn off. This was not the case, he soon realized.

Ivan gave a short flourish with one hand, and then the meat and bone began to culminate and reform itself around Hector's shoulder, regrowing again. "I suppose you'll be needing that back."

Hector was reluctant to say anything. Impulsively, he wanted to ask Ivan what he was doing, ask why he hadn't killed him yet, but Hector held his tongue. He wasn't sure how much, if any, of this ruse might still be salvageable.

"Ah, that look on your face. Ha. You really don't care whether you live or die, do you? I was right. You are one of those irregulars. Interesting."

Everything had gone wrong so quickly, but Hector's brain seemed like it had forgotten how to panic properly. Perhaps it was just too sudden, and he hadn't processed everything yet, but whatever the reason, he was still trying to figure a way out of this, still calmly searching for solutions.

Sadly, none were coming to mind.

"Did you honestly think I wouldn't bother to test your defenses?" Ivan asked. "I'll admit: I was hesitant to, in case it provoked a fight before our lovely conversation concluded, but I was always going to get around to it sooner or later."

He just clenched his jaw in silence.

"Oh? Are you genuinely at a loss for words this time? Or are you going to explain this away, too?"

Hector had nothing."

“Ha. Well. Credit where credit is due. I do appreciate a capable liar. And you were right. On several points. And by now, you’ve probably realized that I don’t intend to kill you. So I’ll tell you what: you can have your deal.”

Hector’s eyes narrowed.

“I will leave,” said Ivan, “just as you asked. And I will spare all of your friends--well, the ones that I haven’t already killed, anyway. But in exchange for this generosity, you will do exactly as you promised, as well.”

Shit. He could see where this was going.

“You will lead the Sandlords out of the Golden Fort. You can do it however you like. Murder. Kidnapping. Stink bomb. Duck, duck, goose. I really don’t care, as long as you keep them occupied somewhere else for at least two days.”

He didn’t bother asking what would happen if he failed or refused, figuring Ivan was going to tell him regardless.

“Tell me something,” the Salesman said, straightening his acid-eaten tie. “What do you think is the worst way to die?”

“...I don’t really think there is one,” said Hector.

“Oh, there is. Trust me. I’m a veritable connoisseur of these things. But it’s not surprising that you don’t know. So many people overlook it. Probably because it’s so common. Everyone thinks, oh, fire is the worst. Or being eviscerated. Or listening to smooth jazz. And sure, those are all equally horrible things. But none are truly the worst.”

Hector just waited.

“The worst way to die is simply starvation. Do you know why?”

Hector shook his head.

Ivan motioned with his right hand, as if to help him explain. “It’s the hope. Starving to death is slow. It takes you a long time to accept that it is even happening. You hold onto hope for quite a while, which only serves to enhance your suffering, really. And you’re never certain

when your final moment is going to arrive. Each time you begin to fall asleep, you wonder if you'll wake up again, and even when you do, it's not relief you feel, but dread. Until, eventually, that same hope turns on you, and you begin hoping that you won't wake up again. Because you exist in constant agony. You only know suffering. And at that point, you even lack the physical strength required to end your own life. You're simply waiting for it to be over. Let me tell you, that is true horror.'"

"1148

Hector didn't think he could argue with any of that. But he did feel gutsy enough to ask the question on his mind. "...Is that how you died? Originally, I mean."

"Yes, that was indeed the voice of experience you were hearing just now." His voice had grown softer. "Though I'm surprised you noticed. Everyone seems to think that we of Abolish are simply callous, unfeeling monsters, that we don't understand suffering and loss and sadness and remorse. But they could not be more wrong. We understand all of these things even better than they do." Ivan paused for a beat. "Well, most of us, anyway."

Hector couldn't resist the obvious point of contradiction. "If that's true... then why do you hurt so many people?"

Ivan gave him that empty-eyed stare again. "That is a very innocent-minded question from such a shameless liar."

"I'd... just like to understand why you do what you do. I always thought it was just... for fun."

"Ha. Fun is the effect, not the cause."

"Then... please explain. I'm listening."

Ivan let his gaze linger on him another time. "Mm... nah. It'd be best if you figured it out for yourself. Take a good, long look at the world and try to see things for how they really are. Then, maybe you'll understand. And if not, well, perhaps I'll explain it to you the next time we meet."

Hector didn't like that last notion very much. He wanted to say something to contest it, but the words weren't coming now.

"I'll give you one year," said Ivan.

And Hector blinked. In spite of himself, he said, "Why a whole year?"

"Because I like the cut of your jib."

Hector raised a dubious eyebrow. "...Now who's lying?"

"1149

"Alright, fine," said Ivan. "The real reasons are boring political ones. And you don't want to listen to me explain all that, do you?" The man allowed another beat to pass. "Also, I'd have to kill you after I told you. So there's that, too."

Hector had to force himself not to react to that. Maybe it didn't really matter at this point, but he didn't want Ivan to see any sense of relief on his face.

After another moment of repose, the Salesman picked the conversation back up. "I suppose I don't need to mention this, but, well. I want to. Naturally, if you fail to deliver your end of this bargain, I will hunt down everyone you care about in this world and kill them. Slowly, of course. By starving them to death. That's why I brought that up earlier, see? That wasn't just a random tangent. It was foreshadowing. I was using foreshadowing."

"Yeah, I got it."

"Of course you did. You're a smart kid. That's why I'm sure you won't let me down. That's why I'm sure I won't have to go to all the trouble of finding all your friends and family and then gradually depriving them of food until they begin begging for death. I was never threatening you, you understand? Although, I could do that, too, if you like. In addition to your loved ones, I mean. Not instead of."

"...Do you always ramble this much when threatening people?"

"Usually, yes. What can I say? It gets me excited, and I just can't stop talking. But I suppose I should. We've been at this a while, you and I, and I have a lot of important business to take care of."

"I'm sure you do."

"1150

"I look forward to hearing from you," said Ivan. "You have my number. Oh, and if you don't call me at least once a week, I may decide to renegotiate the terms of our deal."

Hector's expression stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just make sure you keep me apprised of your progress. A weekly update is all I ask. That's not so unreasonable, is it?"

Hector turned his head slightly, reevaluating Ivan from the corner of his eyes. "Are you... I mean... do you not have many people to talk to?"

"What?! No! I have tons of people!"

A suddenly awkward silence intervened.

"It's just--" Ivan tried. "They're all--they're very same-y, you know what I mean? And this was an unexpectedly pleasant conversation, so I-- look, shut up. Don't make this weird. I'm cutting you a lot of slack here. The least you could do is call me once in a while."

"...O-okay."

After that, the Salesman just stood there, looking like he wasn't entirely sure what to do next. "Alright, well. Good, then. I'll talk to you later."

"W-wait, uh."

"What?"

"Uh. You didn't clarify. Are you going to pretend that I forced you to retreat from here? I mean, ah... I only ask because i-it would help me help you."

Ivan seemed to regain his composure all at once. "Mm. Right. Yes. I suppose I could oblige. Doesn't matter to me how much--" He cut himself off.

Hector waited, but Ivan just stared blankly past him. Then Hector saw that mad smile again.



“Ha. Well, well. Who is that?”

Hector didn't know what he meant. But he did hear a noise. A distant hum in the direction of Dunehall. An airplane? Probably not, his gut told him."

"1151 -- CXXIX.

"Is that really the Sunsmith?" Ivan asked, not to Hector, seemingly, but simply aloud. "To come to me alone like this--does he fancy himself a warrior now? Have his days of cowering beneath the corpses of better men come to an end?" He threw Hector a knowing glance. "If so, I'm disappointed. Bravery doesn't suit him."

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Nine: 'O, guardian of the Sun...!'

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After receiving the distress call from Raml'hahl, he'd come to assess the situation personally. It was certainly not proper for the presiding head of the Qal'majilis to attend such a matter alone, but he could not abide waiting for everyone to catch up. In terms of first responders, none in Sair would best him, save perhaps Rayen Merlo, but by all accounts, that woman was quite possibly a traitor and now captive of the Vanguard.

And now that he'd seen the devastation--not just in Raml'hahl but all across Moaban--his mood had only worsened. The fact that he now sensed this overwhelming soul power was just icing on the cake, really.

Over the years, he and Haqq had tested the suit as intensely and exhaustively as they possibly could. In theory, he was prepared, but he held no illusions about it. No simulation could match a real fight with one of Eleg's juggernauts.

The Lord Abbas Saqqaf tapped his index finger and thumb together, holding them there for a second, and the suit answered him. Two drones deployed out of the shoulder mounts and began following closely behind him as the fusion-propulsion jets on his back carried him across the sky. The drones couldn't break the sound barrier under their own power like his suit could, but they could still take advantage

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"1152

‘Time until the others catch up?’ thought Abbas in Valgan.

‘You’re about eighty minutes ahead of everyone,’ said Worwal from all the way back in Kuros.

The number surprised him, somewhat. The suit was performing very well. Almost too well. Unless this fight somehow turned into siege warfare, eighty minutes was far too long to attempt holding out for reinforcements.

But that was fine. With all the trouble and foul rumors about Calthos, Abbas had left the Golden Fort knowing that he might meet one of Abolish’s strongest today.

Already, he could see the Salesman in great detail. The ocular replacements were doing their job. Someone had gotten a good hit in, judging by the man’s half-eaten face and smote clothing. And with the onboard computer drilled directly into his thalamus and cerebral cortex, he was able to get an easy targeting lock from more than two miles off.

Abbas tapped his little finger to his thumb and held it there. The suit responded by detaching the front chest piece, which immediately fell off behind him. But it would catch up soon enough. Once it transformed itself and repositioned its inner components, it would become a cruise missile, strengthened by his own soul.

The Salesman could sense him now, too, it seemed. Abbas saw him looking up in his direction.

Abbas veered up higher and let his twin drones go in first. Soul-strengthened bullets rained down on the Salesman from their customized submachine guns as they zig-zagged toward him. They didn’t carry much ammunition, but that didn’t matter, because their real purpose was only to serve as a distraction while trying to get in close and self-detonate.

Ivan didn’t allow the latter to happen. Both drones exploded inside a blue cage before they got anywhere near him.

This was also as expected.

The suit’s shoulder mounts began regenerating. In forty-five seconds, Abbas would have both drones back, complete with full ammunition

and detonators."

"1153

It was fortunate that he'd found the Salesman all the way out here in these empty sand dunes. It meant he didn't have to worry about the citizens of Moaban. Because there would be no holding back in this fight.

First, he required his soul-empowered smokescreen. If the Salesman landed a solid hit, Abbas didn't know if even this suit would be able to withstand it. So that was what he'd been doing while Ivan was occupied with the drones. He'd only gained enough time to create a relatively small cloud to conceal himself within, but it would have to serve until--

In a blink, the cloud was gone, dissipated into nothingness. Abbas didn't get the opportunity to question it, either, as his sensors warned him of the Salesman's approach from below.

Abbas made two fists, and the suit answered. The jets bolted him straight up, tearing higher into the sky at maximized acceleration.

Then came the system alerts. Every component of the suit was experiencing rapid power loss and structural degradation.

It was that man's power, Abbas knew. The Salesman's control over atomic interactions meant that he could quite literally suck the energy out of anything.

Well. Almost anything.

Antimatter was another story.

Abbas didn't typically use his ability in combat. In fact, he didn't typically participate in combat. The Sunsmith had earned his name from the technological support he provided his more battle-oriented comrades. But in the end, his support wasn't enough to save any of them. In the end, Abbas outlived them all. Without ever holding such ambitions, he'd become the eldest Sandlord--and indeed, the eldest servant in all of Sair. Even Octavia Redwater was younger by a good thirty years or so.

And as such, he'd been working to change that part of himself.

Because he had to. For the sake of his homeland, he had to."  
"1154

Integration was not inherently powerful. Abbas had learned that lesson very early. But it did help him keep his brethren at the forefront of technological advancement.

As such, the most valuable--or at least, most difficult--piece of technology that he currently possessed was the fusion-propulsion system that powered the jets on his back, calves, and upper arms. Six, they numbered in total, and their thrust-to-weight ratio was unrivaled by anything else he'd ever made--probably, even, by any other currently existing technology.

But that was only half of it.

Their real secret--one Abbas hadn't even shared with Haqq--was their ability to create antimatter particles. He'd gotten the idea from the still-fairly-recent discovery that antimatter could be created by lightning storms. Needless to say, it was still an emerging technology, and unfortunately, even these jets couldn't withstand the combustion force that resulted from it. They would regenerate, but the antiparticles would interfere and slow the process to a crawl. Functionally speaking, that meant he had six and only six jets to work with.

Six chances to defeat the Salesman of Death, in other words.

And he had to use one right now, or the fight would already be over. He chose the one on his left calf. The whole section of the suit up to the knee ejected itself, leaving only its thin underlayer of rubber and cotton behind.

It detonated less than a second after ejection, but Abbas couldn't just leave it at that. He had to make a hard U-turn and catch the explosion's aftermath. Wind and sky and scorching sunlight all screamed past his vision as he curved back around.

He also needed to account for the missing jet. He could actually use the imbalance it created by working it into the U-turn, but as his course straightened out again, he had to adjust his right leg with delicate precision.

And then, of course, there was still the Salesman to account for. A head-on collision with the man was imminent."

"1155

He couldn't see the Salesman's translucent ability against the blue sky, but he could certainly feel it. The draining effect. Even this suit wouldn't be able to withstand it for long.

But Abbas had counted the seconds correctly. His cruise missile arrived in time to flank the Salesman for him. Ivan noticed it too late, only capable of giving the warhead a look of bug-eyed anger before impact.

The force of the explosion might have knocked Abbas off course if not for the suit's automated impact mitigation system. Far quicker than Abbas himself could have reacted, the suit calculated the path of least resistance and corrected his course for him in order to incur as little turbulence as possible. This meant that, rather than curving out and away from the explosion, the suit dove headfirst into it, keeping his body perpendicular to the blast's point of origin, like an arrow piercing a balloon.

He came through it, no worse for wear, and the Salesman was no longer in the way. Abbas knew that he only had precious few moments to press this fleeting advantage. He rocketed toward the smoke and radiation and lingering antiparticles of his expended jet and let his suit absorb their effects.

The result, as expected, was more explosions. But these were only physical, and his suit had soul-strengthening on its side. The antiparticle effects were not going to last long as they tried in vain to collide with their oppositely charged counterparts, so Abbas had to act immediately, even while wreathed in subatomic annihilation.

He curved around and pushed through the debris of his cruise missile. He saw the Salesman, a half-missing husk tumbling through the air. One might be forgiven for thinking that the man was no longer a threat in such a state, but Abbas knew better. This job was not yet done."

"1156

The gap between them closed within seconds, and Abbas reached out to grab him.

Ivan saw him. Half his face was gone. Only one eye, a few teeth, burned muscles and shattered bones remained. But the man was still able to fight back.

Abbas felt it. The sudden crushing weight all around him. Even with the antiparticles protecting him, a sea of pressure was trying to swallow him. And the debilitating effects, too. He could still feel them as well. Weakening his grip, blurring his vision, numbing his mind, sucking the very breath out of his lungs--the very life out of his body.

But he reached him. Abbas' armored hand found its target, and the suit still had enough power to clamp down on Ivan's neck. His other hand arrived to help, and suddenly he had the leverage he needed. He didn't need to think. His hands reacted on their own and tore the rest of the Salesman's head off his shoulders.

Immediately, the pressure lessened, and Abbas could sense himself again. His hands were still going to work, tearing the rest of the smote flesh from Ivan's head, leaving only the bloody-and-hairy skull with the still-living brain inside.

Abbas had to consciously stop them.

He lingered there in the air, floating in place, still struggling to come back to himself. A few more blinks and he realized.

He'd won. The Salesman was incapacitated.

He almost couldn't believe it. Theory was one thing, but to think that it had actually worked...

His whole body was trembling.

'...I have captured the Salesman,' Abbas reported in Valgan.

There came a long silence. Or at least, he thought there did. It might've been that he just didn't catch what Worwal said.

'Abbas...' That seemed to be all the reaper had to say."

"1157

The suit was warning him about a dozen different things, Abbas abruptly realized. He began his descent, having no real choice in the matter, and just tried to focus on not crashing. He managed it well enough, but the suit buckled around him, and he toppled down the side of a sand dune.

He could hardly breathe or feel any of his limbs, and these were problems, because his reaper wasn't around to invoke the regeneration. He ejected the chest piece in order to alleviate some of the pressure on his lungs. It felt like he'd broken a rib or two, though he wasn't sure at which point that might've happened. His grip had grown weak as well, and the Salesman's skull slipped out of his hands and rolled to the bottom of the dune.

Abbas tried to stand back up but found he could barely even crawl. The Salesman's ability had taken an even larger toll on both the suit and his own body than he'd realized.

He had to hurry, though. It was true that without a body, the Salesman had no conduit through which to channel the ability from his brain, but there was still the matter of severing communication. So long as Ivan's brain remained unfrozen, he would still be able to talk to his reaper.

Abbas was kicking himself for not freezing it as soon as he'd gotten his hands on it. Sure, it was a surprising victory, but that didn't excuse such amateurish work. He'd acted like he'd never captured an enemy combatant before. He grumbled Valgan curses into the sand as he crawled after the skull.

"Are you okay?!" came a sudden voice.

Abbas twitched. Who was that? There shouldn't have been anyone else out here. He wanted to check the suit's sensors, but they were down for the count, too."

"1158

Abbas reached the skull again, but he could hear stomping footsteps in the sand now. He extended all the fingers of his right hand and then touched them all together in unison.

The suit did not respond.



He tried the motion again.

Still nothing.

“Sir, can you hear me?!” The footsteps were louder. And the voice was speaking Mohssian, too, Abbas noticed.

He ignored it, though, and tried to run system diagnostics, but the information streaming into his brain was garbled and irritating, so he turned it back off. He would have to work on some kind of durability improvements for that feature, he decided.

Then he saw the dark figure appearing over the rise, kicking up sand as he rushed closer. “Sir, are you--?!” His words cut off as he saw Abbas staring right at him. A young boy, it seemed to be.

But appearances were not reliable. Abbas’ grip on the skull tightened. “Identify yourself,” he said in Mohssian. It had been a while since he’d needed to speak this language.

“Ah--I’m Hector Goffe. I’m--er--I’m a friend of Lord Asad. Are you--? ”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Ah... oh... er, it’s a long story. Do you, er--do you need help standing?”

“Stay where you are,” Abbas said with as much authority as he could muster. “Answer my question.” He could barely even move, at the moment, but this Hector didn’t need to know that yet.

“Ah, well... I was... uh... I was trying to get the Salesman to leave without killing anyone else.”

“...You were what?”

“I was trying to trick him. And it was... sort of working. But, uh, I’m pretty sure he would’ve hunted me down and killed me later. So, ah, th-thank you for showing up when you did. That was incredible.”

This child was tricking the Salesman of Death? Abbas didn’t quite understand."

"1159

“Oh,” said Hector. “I should tell you, uh. Abolish is, er--they’re using invisible soldiers. To harass your people. Trying to spread your forces thin.”

Abbas just kind of squinted at him.

The boy trudged onward through explanations, though he seemed to grow increasingly worse at it. Mercifully, however, the boy’s apparent reaper arrived, and things began to make a little more sense to Abbas. Hector pulled out a familiar crimson shard, and Garovel clarified numerous details, particularly about hailing from Atreya, as well as meeting Haqq, Asad, and... Rasalased?

Admittedly, that part was still rather confusing, but Abbas at least knew that there were more pressing matters to attend to right now.

He allowed Hector to assist him in finally freezing Ivan’s skull so as to cease all brain activity. To do so meant venting one of the suit’s supercoolant packs, but that was fine. In its current state, the suit wasn’t about to be flying anywhere. The lingering effects of Ivan’s power would take a few days to wear off, at the very least. Perhaps longer.

Hector had to help Abbas walk. The boy seemed to be having trouble using his own ability. Garovel said it was probably because of something Rasalased had done, but Abbas was too exhausted to ask for clarification on that subject, too.

Together, they dragged themselves back toward Moaban at a pace that would have rivaled a very determined tortoise.

‘By the way,’ said Garovel during the intervening period, ‘I am terribly impressed that you were able to achieve victory over the Salesman of Death. As far as feats go, that is not one that the world is likely to forget anytime soon. Congratulations, Sunsmith.’

And maybe it was because he felt so battered and weak, but for whatever reason, Abbas wasn’t in the mood to let such unwarranted praise stand.”

"1160 -- CXXX.

“The only reason I won was because I took him by surprise,” Abbas said. “His power could have countered mine quite easily, if he had known what he was facing.”

Indeed, if that fight had not ended so quickly, Ivan would have surely won, Abbas knew. The Salesman would have soon figured out that Abbas was using antimatter against him. And sadly, antiparticles did not truly nullify the Salesman’s control over weak interaction--they only required Ivan to use his power differently.

Naturally, this would become a problem if the Salesman was ever freed. And it was probably just a matter of time until someone came to Sair in order to do exactly that, Abbas figured.

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty: ‘Thy persistent shadow...’

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This wasn’t how he’d planned it. Ibai hadn’t intended to leave Hector and Uncle Mel and everyone else behind. He’d meant to grab the Elroy kids and quickly get them out of danger. They were obviously the most vulnerable. It only made sense to help them first and then go back for the others.

But the Monster was bloody fast. Each time Ibai teleported, Gohvis was less than a second behind.

But it was more than that, too. After the first few jumps, Ibai noticed Gohvis’ soul in the void, not because it looked particularly different from any of the others, but because it was the only one that was clearly moving. Toward them, no less.

It was almost like the Monster knew where they were going, like he could sense their location even while they were teleporting. In different circumstances, Ibai would’ve liked to stop and ask him.

But after what must have been the thirtieth jump or so, there was a change. Emiliana Elroy shoved her little brother and sister out of Ibai’s shadow."

"1160 -- CXXX.

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## Chapter One Hundred Thirty: 'Thy persistent shadow...'

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This wasn't how he'd planned it. Ibai hadn't intended to leave Hector and Uncle Mel and everyone else behind. He'd meant to grab the Elroy kids and quickly get them out of danger. They were obviously the most vulnerable. It only made sense to help them first and then go back for the others.

But the Monster was bloody fast. Each time Ibai teleported, Gohvis was less than a second behind.

But it was more than that, too. After the first few jumps, Ibai noticed Gohvis' soul in the void, not because it looked particularly different from any of the others, but because it was the only one that was clearly moving. Toward them, no less.

It was almost like the Monster knew where they were going, like he could sense their location even while they were teleporting. In different circumstances, Ibai would've liked to stop and ask him.

But after what must have been the thirtieth jump or so, there was a change. Emiliana Elroy shoved her little brother and sister out of Ibai's shadow."

Ibai didn't realize what the girl had done until it was too late. They teleported away, leaving Shenado and the children behind.

Ibai's first impulse was to go back for them. But when he saw the Monster still following, he understood. So he fled into another teleport, pulling only Emiliana and Chergoa along.

Soon, he stopped even paying attention to where they ended up after each jump. He only watched the void for guidance--the souls suspended in it, the ethereal surfaces of buildings and of the ground, of the planet itself. He had to minimize the delay between teleports as much as possible if they were to have any hope of escaping.

Faster, faster, and faster still. He tried not to worry too much about the fact that it didn't seem to be working, that the unrelenting soul actually seemed to be getting slightly closer after each jump.

And then Ibai felt a giant hand around his neck. Everything had stopped moving, he realized. His muddy shadow dispersed, revealing the jet black dragon-man in front of him. Chergoa was already in Gohvis' other hand.

Well.

This was unfortunate.

Ibai wanted to say something, but the Monster's grip on his throat wasn't allowing it.

"Please stop," said Emiliana, sounding exceptionally calm, given the circumstances. "I'll go with you quietly, if that's what you want. Just don't hurt him. He hasn't done anything wrong."

To be honest, Ibai was a bit surprised to hear her come to his defense like this.

The Monster locked gazes with Ibai.

Never had the aberration seen such demonic eyes. He'd never really believed it was possible to stare into someone's soul, but with the way Gohvis was looking at him, he was beginning to have doubts.

In fact, he was starting to think it might be possible to look at someone to death.

After a few more moments of flirting with oblivion, the Monster's huge hand loosened slightly."

"1162

Ibai wasn't sure if he should say anything now. There were plenty of questions running around his head, but he probably wasn't the one who should ask them, considering Gohvis could still snap his neck at any moment. It'd be best to let Emiliana and Chergoa handle things. There was no reason to gamble with his life here.

Could be fun, though.

He decided to risk it.

"So what do you want with her, anyway?" he said, having to choke through some of the words.

Gohvis digned not to answer.

He supposed he should've seen that coming. It was fine, though. He'd gotten plenty of practice with people like this recently. "Want to play a game? I spy with my little eye--"

The Monster's grip tightened back up, and the words stopped coming out again.

Emiliana decided to speak up again. "You obviously do not want me dead," she said. "For now, at least. So what do you want from me?"

Gohvis' tail snaked around her and scooped her up off her feet, but the giant lizard man did not answer her question. Instead, he simply crouched down low and stayed there for a moment.

Ibai wondered what he was doing, but the inability to breathe was becoming distracting. Thankfully, Gohvis loosened his hold again, this time deciding to roll Ibai up under his arm like a newspaper. Ibai didn't get another chance to speak, though, because he saw the Monster's huge legs become suddenly even more so. In one beating pulse, they grew by maybe a third of their previous size.

And then Gohvis jumped.

The ground flew away from Ibai's vision at rocket speed, and he very

nearly lost consciousness, even with his muddy shadow protecting him. Still, he did catch sight of the mushrooming cloud of sand that Gohvis had left behind."

"1163

Through the disorientation and roaring wind, Ibai had a difficult time following what was happening, but after a fashion, he did notice Emiliana. The poor girl was as limp as could be. The sheer force with which they'd left the ground had probably been enough to break every bone in her body and rupture most of her organs. He wondered if she was unconscious or simply dead. There was a fair chance that her brain had been turned to jelly.

It was a bit humbling to know that he would be in the same boat right now if not for his shadow. Humbling--and exciting.

Also, they were still ascending, Ibai realized. Was this really the power of a single jump, or had Gohvis grown wings and started flying? Both seemed equally likely.

Oh, but back to the shadow--he found it surprising that it hadn't protected him completely. He knew that it wouldn't shield him from soul-empowered damage very well, but what were its physical limits, he wondered? Come to think of it, he'd never really thought to test that before. Why not? That kind of experimentation could have been super fun.

Hmm. He supposed he'd just never had much occasion to. He'd always thought the shadow was basically perfect. The idea that it actually had some kind of impact threshold hadn't really crossed his mind.

Maybe it didn't even matter. Clearly, the threshold was pretty high. A proper experiment would mean that he'd have to do something pretty extreme.

Like what?

Like falling out of the sky and hitting the ground at terminal velocity? Would the shadow protect him from that? He could test that right now, if he wanted. He could teleport out of Gohvis' hand and just let himself fall. It'd be easy.

Nah, that was a bad idea.

Wasn't it?

Yeah, an awful one.

But maybe...

Nah. The Monster might just catch him again anyway. Somehow.

But, fun?

Bah, he should stay with these three. That was what a responsible person would do.

Wasn't it?

Ah, hey, they were descending now. So it was just a jump, after all."  
"1164

As they neared the ground again, Ibai could see the edge of the desert--or of the sand, at least. The barren landscape stretched on for a while yet, but he could see more green on the horizon.

They hit the ground again with the force of a bomb, and just as before, Ibai lost track of what was happening. When his senses returned, he expected to be in the air again, but that was not that case. Instead, he found himself staring at the ground as it rushed past.

The Monster had resorted to running, Ibai realized.

And it was surprisingly enjoyable. Even dangling under Gohvis' arm like this, the ride wasn't bumpy at all. The Monster's gigantic footsteps were so nimble that it felt like being carried along a rail line, curving smoothly up and down the long stretch of foothills in front of them.

At least, that was what Ibai imagined it felt like. He'd always wanted to ride on a train.

Ibai saw a cliff ahead. Approaching fast. Too fast, actually. Gohvis didn't intend to go around it, did he? Nope, he was accelerating toward it, Ibai realized.



They surged forward, faster still, and tore through the cliff like wet paper. Ibai barely even felt it, too.

Then there was more running. Lots more running.

Ibai ended up contemplating the subject of that cliff for a good long while, though. Gohvis hadn't even raised his hands to punch through it. The guy had literally parted solid rock with his face. Plus a ton of momentum and inertia, but still. What was even the point of doing that? Certainly, the Monster could've jumped over it with ease. Was he just showing off? Or did a dozen meters of solid rock really mean so little to him that it genuinely felt the same as running through open air?

Agh, he wanted to know so badly, but there was no way Gohvis would answer a question like that. Ibai could see it now. He would ask, and then Gohvis would just give him that silent look that made him feel like he might die horribly in the next few seconds.

Eh, maybe he'd try asking later anyway."

"1165

As the landscape changed around them, Ibai began wondering where the Monster was taking them. If nothing else, it seemed apparent that they were leaving the Sandlord's territory, but that wasn't exactly surprising.

After a spell, his old nemesis finally arrived.

Boredom.

He shouldn't just teleport out of Gohvis' grip right now. There was no reason for it. That would be a very stupid thing to do. And he wasn't stupid. He was responsible.

But supposing he did... what would Gohvis do? Would he just leave him behind? Would he chase Ibai again? Hmm.

Anyway, it was a bad idea.

But... this was taking forever. And he was so bored. It had been like three minutes since an interesting thought had occupied his mind. That had to be some kind of personal best. Really, he'd done an amazing job holding out this long.

So he teleported. To his left, he jumped through the void and waited to see where he would end up.

He felt freedom. Tumbling through the air while utterly disoriented, and the resulting rush of excitement brought him back to himself.

But then it was gone. Before he could regain his bearings, before he could even touch the ground again, he felt the Monster's arm there, having reacquired its hold over him.

Ibai didn't understand. When he actually DID regain his bearings, he was precisely where he had been before--tucked snugly under the Monster's left arm.

But. But.

Had he not teleported? No, he was sure that he had.

So he tried again.

He jumped. He saw the flash of mud, the void, and felt the freedom.

And now he was here again. Somehow, Gohvis had caught him. Just that quickly, Gohvis had caught him.

Another question Ibai wanted an answer to. If nothing else, though, it gave him something to ponder for a good long while--so long, in fact, that his brainstorming was interrupted by the realization that the Monster's pace had finally begun to slow."

"1166 -- CXXXI.

Ibai looked around, searching for any kind of clue about where Gohvis had brought them. The sand and barren desert had been replaced by craggy rocks and equally barren highlands. A steep valley lay ahead, and Ibai could see its narrow central path branching off in a dozen different directions, seemingly offering a variety of routes up to higher ground.

Ibai felt his feet touch ground as Gohvis plopped him down.

"Flee now, if you want," said Gohvis with his two voices. "I will not chase you."

Well, now Ibai didn't feel like it. He was much more interested in learning what Gohvis wanted with the Elroy girl. He'd been more interested in that all along, though admittedly, it had slipped his mind a bit when boredom reared its ugly head.

Ibai wasn't sure if he should say any of that, though. So far, the Monster didn't seem to appreciate talking very much. More information gathering was required first, Ibai felt. So he just kind of stood there, waiting.

Gohvis didn't seem to like that, either. "I will not give you this opportunity again. If you do not leave now, then you will be staying with me indefinitely."

Ibai shrugged. "Okay."

"Make me chase you one more time, and I will not bother capturing you alive."

Ibai felt shivers run down the length of his body.

Huh. Weird.

"I understand," said Ibai. "So what do you want with her, anyway?"

Gohvis' tail finally set Emiliana down. Rather than answering Ibai's question, however, he held Chergoa near the girl's limp body. "Revive her."

The reaper hesitated but did as she was told.

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-One: 'The Monster of the East...'

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Emiliana coughed from behind her mask, making her own hot breath splash back onto her face as her eyes slid open. Slowly, she rolled over and sat up."

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"1167

The giant black lizard man was still there, Emiliana saw. It hadn't been a dream.

When he first arrived back at Dunehall, Emiliana had begun questioning her sanity again. It wasn't until she was sure that everyone else could see him too that she started to think she might not have gone crazy.

But there was another reason why it was so surreal for her. Not only was this hallucination suddenly NOT a hallucination at all, but her brain had been disturbingly undisturbed by it. Every thought was so calm, so quiet, having no trouble assessing her circumstances despite the rest of her body being on the verge of panic.

By now, she'd attributed it to something being wrong with her fight-or-flight response. It was a natural biological process triggered by the brain's perception of extreme danger. Her body had responded appropriately, but seemingly, her brain had not.

Or... perhaps it had responded, only differently. This calm did feel rather unnatural.

She could only imagine that it was Rasalased's doing--though, whether or not the effects were temporary or permanent, she couldn't say. If they were temporary, then they were taking a while to wear off, because she could still feel them even now, even with the Monster of the East looming over her as if he were the abyssal god of lakefire himself.

Emiliana stood and brushed herself off. She had plenty of questions she wanted to ask, but she decided to wait for Gohvis to say something first. It was obvious enough that he was the one in control here, and she would've only been repeating herself, anyway.

"How long ago did your power manifest?" the Monster asked.

Emiliana had to think about that. "A month or so." She actually wasn't

sure. Too much had happened. Maybe it had only been a couple weeks. It felt more like a year, though. "Why do you want to know?"

Gohvis ignored the question. "Show me your face."

"1168

Emiliana would have liked to protest, but she knew there was no point in it. Slowly, she removed her mask. The sunlight on her face was much more unsettling than she remembered. It felt almost irritating against her skin, but that was probably just psychological, she figured.

Gohvis' crimson glare lingered on her.

She grew more uncomfortable by the second. "What do you want from me?" she said, sounding a bit angrier than even she'd anticipated. "Just tell me, already."

The Monster spared a glance in Ibai's direction before returning to Emiliana. "I am a collector of our kind."

Emiliana didn't buy that. "...So I am some sort of toy to you? You certainly went through a lot of trouble in order to collect me. Going against your own comrades."

"Comrades is a strong word."

She could feel the air growing heavier. The Monster's doing? It didn't matter. Right now, she only wanted answers. "I heard what Ivan said. Is it true? Are you and I related somehow?"

Gohvis just stared at her.

How annoying. "If you are, then just say so. Don't play these games. I will find out one way or another. I promise you." Her mind was far too calm, she was sure. Far too confident. This wasn't how you were supposed to talk to someone like Gohvis.

But right now, she didn't care. For some reason, she wasn't afraid of him. Well, no, she was. She was very afraid of him. It was more like... the fear she felt couldn't touch her thoughts, couldn't hinder her concentration. If anything, it seemed to be helping her focus.

"Misinformation has all but destroyed your family," said Gohvis. "You

have the Vanguard to thank for that. I am not an Elroy. I am not a Rainlord. I never have been.””

"1169

“Then why are you bothering with all of this?” Emiliana asked. “Only because I have mutation? There must be thousands more like me.”

“I am not an Elroy,” Gohvis repeated, “but I did share a bond with House Elroy, once.”

Emiliana blinked. “What do you mean?”

“A man named Agam Elroy. He and I were linked. Our mutations tied us together in an anomalous way--a way which, to my knowledge, has never occurred again, either before or since.”

She wasn’t sure she understood.

“But it would seem that you have inherited his power,” said Gohvis.

Her head reared back. She was beginning to get the picture.

The Monster crouched down to look at her more closely, but he was still taller than her by a good meter or so. His red eyes seemed like they might burn holes into her. “I have been awaiting his successor for a very long time.”

“...Why?” was all Emiliana could think to ask.

Gohvis took his time with that one. “I must study our link. It possesses untold potential.”

That brought up other questions for her. “How much do you know about this link?”

And perhaps that was too far, because Gohvis stopped answering her.

Emiliana waited, but a long period of silence was all that followed.

Before it could get too long, however, Ibai chimed in.

“So where are you taking us?” the aberration asked. “Is it somewhere fun? Perhaps I’m being presumptuous, but I thought it might be

somewhere very far east. Given your name and all. Will we get to see the Luthic Ocean? I have always wanted to go there. I heard there was a big resurgence in piracy there a few years ago. I would love to meet some real life pirates. Do you think we could do that? Oh! Or maybe you'll take us all the way to Ardora! Maybe we could--!"

"Please be quiet," Emiliana said, having grown increasingly worried that the Monster would snap the man's neck if for no other reason than annoyance."

"1170

Ibai did as she asked, but he didn't look disappointed, as she might have expected. Perhaps he'd just been trying to revive the conversation.

Emiliana decided to try a different approach. "Why are you with Abolish?"

The Monster tilted his head at her.

She understood his reaction. The question probably wasn't contextually appropriate. But this calmness was playing on her, it seemed. She wanted to get a better idea of what she was dealing with here, of who she was dealing with. If rumors were to be believed, this thing standing before her was without humanity or mercy, more like a force of nature than a human being.



Though, to be fair, as she looked at him, she could certainly see where those rumors had come from.

“You do not seem so terrible,” Emiliana went on, wondering if she was pushing her luck here. She felt like she had a bit of leverage to work with, though she couldn’t tell how much.

“What do you know of Abolish?” Gohvis asked her.

Emiliana wasn’t sure how to answer that. It sounded like a loaded question.

The Monster answered for her. “You know only what the Vanguard wants you to know. You know half-truths and propaganda.”

“Enlighten me, then.”

“I will,” said Gohvis. “In time.”

The way he said that made Emiliana feel almost as if it were impossible to question him. If not for this stillness in her mind, she might have succumbed. “Why not now?” she asked.

Again, Gohvis took his time. “This is not the place for it.”

That made Emiliana look around. Rocky wilderness was all she saw--excepting, perhaps, the narrow valley in front of them. It did seem like a strange place for Gohvis to have stopped, and she was about to ask why when an interruption arrived.”

"1171

It was another man, Emiliana saw. He dropped out of the sky in a flurry of wind, stopping in mid-air, just above the ground. A gusty wave passed over Emiliana, rustling her hair and clothes and stealing the breath from her mouth for a few moments.

“Kind of you to wait up for me,” the man said in two voices.

Gohvis hadn’t bothered to turn around and look at him. He remained crouched in front of Emiliana as he said, “Why are you following me, Vanderberk?”

“You don’t already know? I figured that was why you stopped. To clear

the air.”

“Clear it of what?”

Vanderberk paused to look at Gohvis’ guests, and Emiliana observed him in return. He seemed normal enough. Perhaps too normal. His flip-flops, tie-dyed shirt, and knee-length shorts didn’t exactly make him look like a typical member of Abolish. Assuming he was one, of course--but Emiliana was reasonably certain about that, considering the way he and Gohvis were talking to each other.

“You must know how this looks,” said Vanderberk. “Ivan having just been captured, you coming from the direction of Sair--where, apparently, you attacked some of Ivan’s men. Until you stopped to talk to me, I was worried that you might be fleeing the scene of some foul treason you’d committed.”

Gohvis still didn’t turn around. “And?”

“Hmph. And... I’m just wondering what you’re doing out here. Where you’re headed. And why.”

“It doesn’t concern you.”

“No? I’m not sure about that. See, the report is that Ivan was captured by one Abbas Saqqaf. One of the Sandlords. Curious thing about that, though, is that according to our intelligence--the Salesman’s own teams--Abbas Saqqaf should not be capable of such a thing. Supposedly, he was using some type of suit of armor, but even still. It’s quite the unexpected development, wouldn’t you agree?”

"1172

“Get to the point,” said Gohvis.

“Oof. Did you betray Ivan?”

“Do your reports say that I did?”

“Well, no--”

“Then you have your answer.”

“Mm. I see. Good. Then you won’t mind coming with me to free him.”

"I'm busy."

"That is a shame, but I do think this takes precedence. And I'm sure the others would agree with me. You and I are the closest to Kuros right now, therefore it falls to us to take care of this as quickly as possible. Come."

"No."

Emiliana felt the atmosphere shift. The ensuing period of silence was abruptly heavier.

"I'm sure it won't take long," said Vanderberk. "Between the two of us--"

"No."

Vanderberk smacked his lips and scratched his forehead. "See, when you say things like that, it makes you look suspicious. Either that, or it makes me think that you don't respect me as your equal."

"I don't."

Vanderberk's face scrunched up. "Bold words, considering it's just you and the old man now. The two of you are running low on reliable friends. Doesn't make much sense for you to be treating me this way."

Gohvis finally deigned to stand all the way up and look at the man. Even in this relatively high sunlight, the Monster's giant shadow reached almost all the way to Vanderberk. "Have I hurt your feelings? Perhaps obliterating another orphanage will dry your tears."

"Hoh! Maybe it would! But hey, don't knock it 'till you've tried it, my friend. Solving future problems today--that's my motto. And every soul counts, isn't that right?"

"If you are so interested in avoiding future problems, then I suggest you leave me alone. Now."

"1173

"Threats, now?" said Vanderberk. "You're being very stupid. Think about our circumstances for a moment. It's you, me, Jercash,

Morgunov, and Dozer. That's all we've got right now. What if the Vannies decide to take advantage? Hmm? What if they launch a full-scale assault tomorrow? Or next week? The five of us would have to repel the eight of them. Do you honestly not see the importance of freeing Ivan as soon as possible?"

Gohvis did not answer him.

Emiliana felt the air grow heavier still.

Vanderberk smacked his lips again. "Fine. You don't consider me your equal yet. Comes with being the new guy, I suppose. But tell me. What about the Star? Is he your equal, you think? Because I imagine he'd like to put that to the test. And sometime soon, am I right? I mean, after Horsht and Jesbol, he must be feeling very good about himself. And oh, I have heard such tales! About how he tore your boys to pieces! Gunny and Dunny both! Always thought they were two peas in a pod, so I suppose it's only fitting that they went out together like that--but by the Star? Of all people? Oof, it must be eating you up inside."

The air grew heavy enough that Emiliana felt like a thick blanket had been thrown over her. She heard rocks shifting and settling all around them.

"Hey, don't get mad at me," said Vanderberk. "I didn't kill your friends."

"They weren't my friends. And neither are you."

"Oh, is that right? Is that why you've been sitting on your ass this whole time instead of avenging them? Why you're not en route to Jesbol right now in order to make things right? Because they weren't your friends? Because Dozer doesn't care that two of his top three were killed in one night? Doesn't mind how weak that makes him look--especially to us? No, sure, I get it. Obviously. Makes total sense. It's certainly not because you're scared or anything like that, right?"  
"1174 -- CXXXII.

"I'm not your errand boy," said Gohvis. "If you want Jackson dead so badly, go kill him yourself."

Vanderberk's face flashed with annoyance. "It must be humiliating,

having to follow a man who can't even protect his most valuable assets."

"The only thing that would humiliate me is working with a man who thinks himself my equal and yet still wants someone else to protect him."

This time, anger arrived on Vanderberk's face and stayed there. "This is not productive."

"Then go and fetch your Salesman. I am not stopping you."

Vanderberk only stood there.

"You fear the Sandlords," Gohvis observed. "Admit that to yourself and then go find Jercash. I'm sure he will hold your hand for you."

Rather than responding, Vanderberk's eyes just glossed over, and he looked from Gohvis to Emiliana to Ibai.

The Monster didn't seem to have anything more to say, either.

Unsurprisingly, though, Ibai did. "Hey, does anyone know where we are?"

No one answered him.

"I only ask because that valley over there sort of looks like the Valley of Peace, so it would be kind of ironic if you guys decided to fight here."

"Who are these two?" asked Vanderberk.

"Not your concern," said Gohvis.

"Well, apparently, you consider your business with them to be more important than rescuing one of your most valuable allies. So perhaps they are my concern."

"I am not going to tell you again," was all the Monster said.

Vanderberk nodded and took a deep breath. "I understand. This relationship of ours won't be able to move forward until I adjust that attitude of yours."

And Emiliana watched the sky darken.

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Hector certainly had his hands full over the next few days. Due to the almost complete destruction of Dunehall, along with Moaban's geographical isolation, the city had been deemed unfit for civilians, and the Sandlords had issued a mass evacuation. More than three hundred thousand people were in the process of relocating south to Egas."

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Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Two: 'Resound! Thy swelling regard...!'

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"1175

Between trying to help people out of the city and all the meetings where his presence was requested, Hector didn't find much time for sleeping or even eating--though the latter wasn't so much of an issue after the first day, because the Moabanis just started giving him food. They were rather enthusiastic about it as well, even getting into arguments over it.

Apparently, word about the young black lord from a foreign land had gotten around, and now he couldn't go anywhere without people

recognizing him. It was even worse than back home. At least in Gray Rock, his skin color didn't immediately give away who he was. Hector wasn't sure he'd seen even just one other black person since he'd arrived in this country. There had to have been someone in the Golden Fort, though, he figured. That place was packed.

Still, at least all the attention wasn't negative. As painfully embarrassing, uncomfortable, and distracting as it all was, it did feel pretty nice, at times. He just wished that he could hide in his armor again. That would have made it a little more bearable.

He'd been hoping that his materialization would just snap back to how it was before, but so far, no such luck. It didn't seem to matter how hard he concentrated; at the moment, all he could produce was a bit of powder.

When he'd been in Ivan's presence, he could have attributed the sudden weakness of his materialization to the Salesman's insanely oppressive soul power, but that couldn't be the explanation now. Garovel didn't have any relevant knowledge on the subject either, sadly, which only made Hector even more convinced that this was Rasalased's doing. To what end, remained to be seen, but Hector was trying to give the ancient Sandlord the benefit of the doubt. Surely, this was as intended. Rasalased wouldn't have screwed him over like this... probably.

He tried not to dwell on it too much. Time would tell. Or at least, that's what Garovel told him."

"1176

Primarily, though, the subject causing Hector the most concern was not himself. It was the Rainlords. Or rather, what would become of them. Several more Sandlords had arrived in Moaban not long after Abbas, and despite how supportive they'd been so far, Hector had seen the discontent in their ranks.

Those were the meetings that Hector was the most interested in. He'd been dreading what the Sandlords would decide to do--not just with the battered Rainlords but with Asad, too. And it didn't help that so many of them were still unconscious.

Or dead.



Xuan Sebolt and Ismael Blackburn had not been the only losses that the Rainlords had suffered. Far from it, Hector had learned. Caster and Ivan had not been the only big threats in Dunehall that day. Hector had since heard about two other terrible opponents who were present, only one of which the Rainlords had managed to kill--through the combined efforts of Salvador Delaguna, Joana Cortes, Diego Redwater, and Horatio Blackburn.

But even that feat had not been accomplished before the Lord Delaguna lost his wife Elba and his son Lorenzo--both of them, along with seventeen of the man's cousins, nephews, and nieces.

Word was, emergence had factored into that fight enormously, and Hector didn't doubt it--especially after seeing for himself how vacant-eyed Salvador had become. He seemed like a totally different person, compared to the raucous man that had laughed while testing him in Luzo.

And yet, even with how badly House Delaguna had been hit, House Sebolt had been hit even harder.

Among the family's thirty-nine casualties, Lord Abel and Lady Amaya had both been among them. Xuan, too, of course. Dimas, however, was still alive, though he had not yet awoken."

"1177

House Blackburn was having its share of fresh troubles as well. With Ismael dead, Darktide unconscious, and Ibai missing, the person who everyone expected to lead them was Lady Nere. But apparently, the woman had suffered a nervous breakdown, and now the family was in disarray. Garovel hadn't been able to get all of the details yet.

And then, of course, there were the Elroys.

Quite possibly, Zeff looked worse than anyone. He didn't just have bags under his eyes. He had bags around his eyes, as if the upper half of his face were trying to sink into itself.

Hector thought he felt tired. Zeff looked like he never intended to let himself fall asleep ever again.

Before Hector had even made it back to Dunehall with Abbas, Zeff had

gone off in search of his children. After a few hours, he returned with Marcos and Ramira, who was finally able to receive proper medical attention for the wound on her foot. Since then, Zeff had been going out periodically in search of Emiliana. Hector, among others, had even accompanied him a few times.

But finally, it seemed, the Lord Elroy had given up. For the time being, anyway. Hector didn't imagine he would ever really stop looking. It was probably just a matter of finding some kind of lead.

Currently, though, Zeff wasn't letting Marcos and Ramira out of his sight. He would even bring them to meetings with him, despite the looks of disapproval from various Sandlords.

All in all, Hector had never seen so many devastated people in one place. The somber air was so heavy among the Rainlord encampments that Hector could practically feel it on his bare skin, as if their sorrow had somehow manifested physical weight.

Though, maybe it had. Garovel said that these were just the effects of normal human empathy, but Hector wasn't entirely convinced. At this point, he wouldn't have been surprised if soul power played some subtle part here, too."

"1178

Garovel had been noticeably preoccupied as well. Hector sometimes caught the reaper lost in thought, and whenever he asked about it, Garovel avoided elaborating. At first, Hector chalked it up to worrying about Chergoa, but after it kept happening, Hector decided to push harder.

'Alright, alright,' Garovel finally said. 'I've just been thinking about our next move.'

'Well, me too,' said Hector. 'There's no reason for you to be all coy about it.'

'I wasn't being coy. I was being careful.'

'...Somehow, I doubt that.'

'Hey, fuck you. I'm being serious here. There are a lot of gears in motion all around us right now. A lot of things to take into

consideration.'

Hector thought about giving him more crap but decided to just keep listening as he lifted a young family's couch onto the back of a flatbed truck.

'We might have an opportunity to do something that would have a big impact on a lot of people,' said Garovel. 'There's a very good chance that the Sandlords will try to send the Rainlords away. Maybe helping them go into hiding, maybe just flat out exiling them. In either case, we have a place where they can lay low for a while, don't we? We should invite them.'

Hector stopped in front of the couple's old refrigerator and spared Garovel a glance. 'Uh... well, actually, I was planning on doing that, anyway.'

'What? Are you serious?'

Hector hugged the fridge tightly and lifted it. 'Yeah.'

'Why didn't you tell me sooner?'

'Er... I thought you'd disapprove, considering we only met them like two weeks ago or something.'

'Ah, well, that's true, but I also have Chergoa's judgment to go on. She obviously trusted the Rainlords enough to join up with them, and I trust her, so by extension, I think we can consider them trustworthy, too. And if they do end up betraying us someday, I'll just blame her forever.'"

"1179

Hector and Garovel had discussed the subject of Chergoa already and come to the difficult conclusion that there wasn't anything they could do to help her right now. Garovel didn't show it much, but Hector was pretty sure that he was extremely worried about her. The telling trait was how closely Garovel followed everything that Zeff was up to, because if anyone was going to find Emiliana and Chergoa, it was Zeff.

'Hold on,' said Garovel. 'So you would've invited the Rainlords to Warrenhold even if I'd told you not to?'

'Uh...'

'Here I am, trying to be cautious and think through all the possible consequences of our actions, and you're just jumping in headfirst, not even giving a shit.'

'I gave a shit. I was thinking, maybe... I mean, maybe they could help us rebuild Warrenhold. If they want.'

'Yeah, maybe. Or bringing so many people there at once will become total chaos. Or the Queen will get upset at us for not consulting her first.'

'...Should we try and call her?'

'Hell no. What if she tells us not to do it?'

It didn't take much longer to finish loading up the Moabani family's truck. They'd only needed help with the big things, and they didn't seem to own very much in the first place.

Hector didn't think that was a coincidence. Sure, they weren't much older than he was, but at this point in the evacuation, there weren't many people left in Moaban, and he'd begun to notice a trend among many of those who remained.

They all bore a distinctive mark on their left cheek.

At first, he didn't think much of it. Maybe it was some kind of popular tattoo--maybe like Asad. But then he saw the way other people were looking at them. Avoiding. It wasn't a tattoo. It was a brand. And it was intended to humiliate them."

"1180

When he asked Garovel about it, the reaper was able to explain further. The brand meant that these people had broken the law in some way, and if they ever attempted to conceal their brands, they would probably be beaten or arrested, depending on local law or custom.

It made Hector wonder what this young couple could have done to earn such a harsh punishment. They looked harmless enough to him--

both very gaunt with wary eyes, as if they expected Hector to turn on them at any moment. Their baby certainly looked plump and healthy, though.

He never exchanged a single word with them. They probably didn't speak Mohssian, he figured. He was content to leave at that and be on his way, but as he turned to go, the husband raised his voice and began speaking in Valgan.

'He's saying you smell like the inside of an old diaper,' said Garovel.

Hector had to stop himself from squinting.

The baby-holding husband came closer and grabbed Hector's hand, shaking it up and down while nodding furiously. He looked like he might start crying.

'He's telling you to go eat your own shit forever. Like an ouroboros made of your own feces. Man, this guy sure has a mouth on him.'

The husband let him go, making room for the wife to come in and wrap her arms around him.

'Yeah, she hates you, too. She's not really saying, but I can just tell.'

The woman was sobbing into Hector's shirt now.

Hector just kind of stood there, trying not to move. This was way more physical contact than he'd bargained for, but he was hoping he could just clear his mind and wait it out.

It took a while, but she did eventually release him.

Hector remained frozen there, trying not to look traumatized by a hug.

'Wait a minute.' Garovel floated across Hector's vision. 'I may've been mistaken.'"

"1181

Hector didn't stay with the young family for much longer. There were still others in need of assistance, but the encounter certainly left a lasting impression on him. Hector had been a bit reluctant to ask Garovel for more details, but now he was simply growing too curious.

As he was helping a similarly-branded old man with a large stack of boxes, Hector had to ask, 'Can you tell what crime these people committed? I mean, like, does the brand specify or something?'

'Yes, it does.' Garovel allowed an appreciable pause. 'This guy you're helping now defaulted on a loan from the state.'

Hector had to stop and look at Garovel. 'What?'

'The Sandlords take debt very seriously. If you fail to pay off your debts, you're considered untrustworthy. It's a pretty strict cultural taboo.'

Hector eyed the old Moabani man another time. If anything, Hector felt even worse for him. The brand didn't exactly look recent, and the old man looked about seventy years old or so. After a moment, though, Hector set back to work loading boxes into the back of the old man's station wagon.

'So that couple we helped earlier couldn't pay off their loans, either?' asked Hector. 'That's horrible. They're so young, and this is gonna follow them for the rest of their lives?'

'Yep. But their brands weren't for debt. Women can't be branded for debt. Only men can.'

'What? Why?'

'Well, it used to be that women couldn't even take out loans in the first place. These days, though, they can. And the branding laws haven't changed to account for them. Which, I suppose, is a good thing. Sort of. It created a new kind of gender inequality, which is unfortunate, but the branding laws are pretty fucked up in the first place, so. It's good that more people aren't getting branded, at least.'

'Huh... Then what were their brands for?'

'Incest.'

Hector nearly dropped the box he was holding. 'Oh...'

'Yeah.'"

"1182

'Uh... I don't, uh...'

'Yeah.'

'They... they had a baby with them...'

'They sure did.'

'Er, I mean... I'm not judging...'

'You're kind of judging.'

'Well, it's--I, ah--it's... uh--'

'Yeah. It's weird. And the Sandlords don't exactly smile upon it.'

'I see...'

'There are reasons for that, too. Historical reasons, that is.'

'Wait... You're not just telling me all this because you wanna give me another history lesson, are you?'

'Hey, I'm not telling you anything that isn't true. If a history lesson just evolves organically out of my own scholarly truthfulness, then who are we to go against that? Is that what you want, Hector? To go against the laws of nature?'

'...“Truthfulness,” huh? I seem to recall you lying right to my face not too long ago.'

'Oh, yes, well, exemptions from the truth can be made when something is hilarious. Everyone knows that.'

'It wasn't hilarious.'

'It was to me.'

'I'm gonna get you back for that, by the way.'

'I'm shaking in my nonexistent boots.'

Hector just sighed. At least he was almost done loading up the old man's car.

'So do you want my history lesson or not? It's super interesting. You'll

like it. C'mon.'

'Fuckin'... yeah, alright. I'm sure you'd just tell it to me, anyway.'

'Okay, so back in the day--we're talking, oh, 1700 years ago or so--a little group emerged from the then-very-powerful Valgan Empire. You may have even heard of this little group. They were called the Sandlords.'

'Nope, never heard of 'em.'

'Their rise to power was facilitated by the discovery of their "divine ability." You know the one.'

'Explain that to me again.'

'Well, it's the materialization that Asad--'

'I was joking, Garovel.'

'Never joke about asking me to explain something, because I will always take you seriously and explain the shit out of it, just in case.'

'Alright, geez.'"

"1183

'Anyway,' said Garovel, 'the point I was trying to make was that the Sandlord's divine ability used to be even more important than it is nowadays. It was how Sandlord families distinguished themselves from the "common folk," as it were. It was a really crazy time, actually. A poor family could, literally, be propelled into the upper class overnight if one of their bloodline manifested the ability.'

'Whoa...'

'Naturally, this created all sorts of chaos. Fraudsters and the like tried to capitalize, if only to flee the country with a handful of riches. It didn't usually work out well for them. We're talkin' public executions with barely even a trial. Beheadings, torture, tying people to a post until the sun cooked them to death. The Sandlords' displeasure with such criminals became pretty well known, even in distant countries.'

Hector didn't have a hard time believing that.



‘So of course, the Sandlords became very suspicious of others and, well, elitist. Even more than they already were, that is. When everyone considers your bloodline “divine,” I imagine it’s pretty difficult not to get at least a little full of yourself. And it just grew worse over time. The Sandlords became more and more isolated from society.’

‘Which is where incest factors in?’ Hector guessed.

‘Basically, yeah. Trying to keep their precious bloodlines as “pure” as possible.’

‘Right...’

‘There was about a 150-year time period where incest was commonly practiced among the Sandlords, and at its peak, some Hahls were so paranoid that they wouldn’t even allow marriage with any of the other Hahls. They would actually force siblings or first cousins to marry, and it would be treated like a status symbol.’

‘I’m guessing all this didn’t end very well.’”

"1184

‘No, it did not,’ said Garovel, ‘and for two big reasons, madness being the first. There were a LOT of insane Sandlords who cropped up during this time period. And a few of them were fun. Or even brilliant. In fact, one of them built Dunehall. Others, though... not so much. They started to fight--sometimes with each other--and frequently neglected their subjects. Or worse. The most famous example was probably the family that began a tradition of cannibalism.’

‘Whoa, what?’

‘Hahl Rahhak. They don’t exist anymore.’

‘That’s good, I guess. They really ate people, though?’

‘Yup. Story goes, a famine gripped their land for several years, so they resorted to cannibalism as a means of coping. But then the famine ended... and they just kept on eating people, anyway. Acquired a taste for it, apparently.’

‘Ugh, wow...’

‘Yeah. The story of how that family was finally destroyed is pretty interesting, too. It was an elaborate plot of Hahl Duxan--which does still survive to this day, by the way. And it was pretty dastardly on their part, I must say. But in a good way, y’know? Since the Rahhaks were a bunch of man-eating assholes ‘n all. I guess I should give some context on the conflict between the two families, though. Basically, it started when the head of Hahl Duxan allowed the Rahhaks and many of their subjects to take refuge in--’

‘Hey, ah, hold on,’ said Hector, sensing that this tangent was going to derail the conversation entirely, ‘what about the second thing?’

‘What second thing?’

‘With, um... how all the incest stuff ended badly?’

‘Oh! Right. Yeah. Insanity was the first reason. The second reason, you probably know already. Ever heard of the Wiseman’s Plague?’

‘Uh... sounds kinda familiar.’

‘Hmm. Maybe you know it better as the Great Green Sickness.’

‘Oh. Yeah. I read about that in school. It sounded horrible.’”

"1185

‘An understatement if ever there was one,’ said Garovel. ‘Having witnessed it first hand, words can’t really express how awful it was. For a while, there was a widely prevailing belief that humanity was just... done. Hell, even I was starting to think so. It genuinely felt like the end of the world, at times.’

‘Really? Even though servants couldn’t be killed by it?’

‘I never said my belief was entirely rational. You have to understand--it was like being in a nightmare. Literally, it felt like that. Surreal. Because, just, everywhere I went, people were suffering and dying. And I went to a LOT of a places. The Great Green Sickness ravaged all of Eloa and Ardora and most of Qenghis. Eventually, though, I did find out that Luugh had made it through untouched.’

‘Damn. What about the Undercrust?’

‘Untouched as well. But that’s not so surprising, I guess. Anyway, the point I was getting at, was that possibly the worst pandemic that humanity has ever known occurred while the Sandlords were widely practicing incest.’

‘Ah... that means... what does that mean?’

‘It means that genetic variation within their ranks was at an all-time low. None of them were immune--or even mildly resistant, for that matter. So the plague simply DECIMATED them. Every single non-servant among the Sandlords was dead in under six months.’

‘Holy fuck...’

‘Holy fuck, indeed,’ said Garovel.

Another question occurred to Hector, and he figured he should ask it before Garovel started blabbering on about something else. ‘When was Rasalased in relation to all this? I mean, when did he... er, happen?’

‘Oh, he was born right before all this shit went down.’

‘Really? Does that mean he’s... uh...?’

‘A product of incest? Possibly. I don’t know. I bet Qorvass would, but let’s avoid bringing it up, shall we? He might not appreciate us asking that kind of question about one of his most beloved ancestors.’”

"1186

‘I wonder what he and Asad will think about the fact that we actually talked to the Dry God,’ said Hector.

Garovel chortled. ‘I hope they’re jealous.’

Soon enough, Hector had to start heading back. Garovel kept going on about history, but Hector was only half-listening now. His mind had returned to worrying about the present. The Sandlords were scheduled to reconvene this afternoon, and now that the evacuation of Moaban was nearly finished, their excuse for delaying was more or less gone.

Hector could understand their reluctance to make a decision. They

were stuck between the Vanguard and the Rainlords. One way or another, they had to betray someone's trust. And of course, the well-being of their own subjects was at stake--and wasn't that a lord's priority?

It was enough to give Hector pause. He was a lord, too. Technically. This whole time, he felt like he hadn't really understood what that meant--the responsibility it implied. And the potential consequences. He certainly didn't envy the Sandlords' position right now, but he was realizing that he might very well find himself in a similar one, someday.

He arrived at Dunehall again as the sun neared the height of its arc in the sky. From the outside, the castle looked largely the same. Hector supposed that was one advantage of being covered almost entirely in sand: structural vulnerabilities were hidden. Apart from the scarcely noticeable lump or depression in the sand's surface, Dunehall seemed no different.

Most of the Sandlords were waiting in tents all along the castle grounds. The Rainlords were no longer here. They'd headed for Egas the previous day, while Hector and a handful of representatives had stayed behind at the request of Abbas."

"1187

The separation had been rather sudden, but it couldn't have been helped. The Sandlords had learned that the Vanguard was much nearer than anyone realized. Apparently, they had been repelling Abolish forces in Calthos for the past few days, keeping them away from the border with Sair.

Hector heard the names Iceheart and Lamont a few times. They both referred to the same person, he eventually realized, and according to Garovel, Lamont was a Vanguardian who wielded as much power as Ivan or Gohvis.

And even though there'd been no official announcement, the Sandlords seemed to believe that Lamont would show up in Moaban any day now--probably due to all the media attention surrounding the attack and subsequent evacuation.

When the meeting finally began, Garovel translated for Hector as usual. A few arguments broke out among the Sandlords, which weren't

exactly new, but this time, they had more vitriol behind them. Hector could feel the growing dread in the air, the desperation. Several times, they talked about how there could be no more delays, how Iceheart would make the decision for them if this stalemate continued.

Hector also noted that Jada Najir, despite attending every meeting as her Hahl's representative, never spoke. She only ever observed. Which might have been for the best, he figured. The other Hahls were not exactly pleased with Asad and his family at the moment, even if no legal consequences had been discussed as of yet.

As the meeting drew out and familiar talking points were retread, Hector began to feel his attention slipping. This was going to be another day of indecision, after all, it seemed. If he'd known that, he would've put this time to better use.

Then Garovel stopped translating for him, and Hector's attention snapped.

'...Garovel?' said Hector."  
"1188

The reaper's skeletal face wore an expression that Hector didn't recognize. Was that... annoyance? Mixed with anger, perhaps.

'I'm going for it,' said Garovel.

'Going for what?' Hector asked.

Instead of answering him, Garovel drifted forward and began speaking rather loudly in Valgan. Whatever the Sandlords had been saying was lost as everyone turned to Garovel.

Of course, Hector couldn't tell what was being said, but there was only one thing that he could imagine Garovel would be telling them here and now.

All things considered, the Sandlords hadn't required much convincing. If anything, they seemed relieved. Perhaps they'd been hoping this whole time that Hector and Garovel would take the Rainlords off their hands and had just been too polite to come right out and ask.

As soon as they had their consensus, the entire atmosphere of the

meeting shifted. Word was sent almost immediately to the Rainlords in Egas about the offer of asylum, and from there, the meeting became about how they might actually be able to sneak four hundred fugitives from the Vanguard out of the country.

It was very quickly agreed upon that simply trying to fly everyone to Atreya was not going to work. Even if the Vanguard wasn't watching all their borders like a hawk, the Lorentian government's Air Traffic Control would certainly be suspicious of a sudden fleet of private jets in their air space.

The Sandlords were talking about splitting the Rainlords up into several groups and trying to sneak them out separately in all different directions.

But Hector saw that expression on Garovel's face again.

'Please excuse my use of Mohssian here,' said Garovel, 'but I would like my servant to understand what I am about to ask of you.'

A heavy silence elapsed as the Sandlords waited. Lord Abbas gave a nod from the other end of the table.

Garovel returned it gratefully, then addressed the bearded man on Abbas' left. 'As I recall,' said Garovel, 'Hahl Duxan controls a passage to the Undercrust, no?'"

"1189

The question made Hector's eyes widen.

The Lord Duxan's answer was in Valgan, but it did seem to be an affirmation.

'Our home has such a passage as well,' said Garovel. 'I believe that is our most discreet option available here, though I will need to make a call first.'

A rumble of voices passed over the Sandlords as they discussed it amongst themselves, but they soon came back with a nod from Abbas and a few more Valgan words for Garovel.

Garovel answered in Valgan this time, too, and then moved away from the table, motioning for Hector to follow.

Hector excused himself and exited the tent with his reaper. He'd mostly followed what had happened there at the end, but the details had eluded him. He shielded his eyes as the harsh sun greeted him again.

'Tell me you still have Gina's number,' said Garovel

Hector searched his pockets for his phone. "Yeah..."

'Call her. I need to talk to Voreese as soon as possible.'

Hector hesitated, frowning.

'What's the matter?'

"Nothing. It's just... international rates are ridiculous. I think I lost like thirty troas just letting Ramira browse the internet for pictures of spiders the other day."

Garovel's bony face twisted impossibly. 'Really? THAT'S what you're worried about? Since when do you give two shits about money?'

"Since I need it in order to rebuild my busted-ass castle. Not to mention, uh... feeding everyone who's apparently gonna live there."

'Yes, well, I'm glad you're trying to be so financially mindful, but a couple hundred troas isn't going to make much difference with that, either way.'

"Wait, what? A couple hundred?!"

Garovel shrugged. 'It might be a long conversation. I dunno.'

"Agh. I need a better data plan..."

"1190 -- CXXXIII.

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Three: 'Thy deepening concern...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Gina wiped her nose for what felt like the fiftieth time in the past hour.

She lay in bed, nestled in a small fortress of blankets and pillows as she browsed through old emails on her laptop.

She was not alone, however. The girl not-really-watching television on the other side of the room was her guest--a guest whose stay was currently indefinite.

Madison Reach pursed her lips absently. "So, um... any word yet on when Roman will be back?"

Gina had to consciously avoid rolling her eyes. "No."

"Right. Of course. Sorry to keep asking."

"It's fine," said Gina.

Another long period of silence intervened, leaving only the background noise of the television in the room.

Gina didn't necessarily mind Madison's company, as such. The girl needed a safe place to stay. Apparently, things had gotten a little crazy in Steccat, and now, the Andalero group wanted her dead or captured. And it was largely Master Roman's fault.

Not too surprising. Gina understood.

But Madison's apparent obsession with Master Roman had become rather grating. And it didn't even make sense. Shouldn't she have been upset? From what Master Roman had said, he'd nearly gotten her killed and quite possibly ruined her entire livelihood. And yet she hadn't mentioned any of that to Gina even once. Was she just incredibly forgiving? Somehow, Gina didn't think so.

It was distracting, to say the least. Gina just wanted to lie in bed, chug cold medicine, and maybe find some new intel on these Andalero people.

But no. Madison had to be here, too. Being all nice and thoughtful. Making Gina breakfast, lunch, and dinner--and well, too. How did she even know how to cook, huh? Weren't movie stars supposed to be crap at that sort of thing?"

"1190 -- CXXXIII.



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crap at that sort of thing?"  
"1191

Gina couldn't figure this girl out. Worse, still, was the fact that her search for information on Andalero had so far turned up bupkis. And she was supposed to be recuperating, not twisting herself into a ball of muted frustration.

At length, she caught herself caving in and searching instead for intel on Madison Reach. She caught herself. And then went ahead anyway.

She quickly found more than she bargained for.

Many people did not have nice things to say about Miss Reach. Apparently, she was all types of bitchy and arrogant, making her notoriously difficult to work with. And a hypocrite, too, for multitudinous reasons, though the biggest seemed to be a drug addiction, which some said she'd kicked while others said she hadn't.

To her credit, though, she did have many passionate supporters as well--enough so that the flame wars Gina found were among the most vitriolic she'd ever seen. Which was saying a lot.

In the end, though, none of it was helpful to her. If anything, she was even more confused about what to think than before.

She didn't need to rely on random forum posters, though. She had plenty of informed associates from all over the world. Maybe one of them knew something about Madison. Ah, but shady people were looking for Madison, so asking about her might draw suspicion from nosy data miners. She'd have to encrypt her emails and make sure not to send them to anyone she didn't think--

"So are you and him...?"

The question made Gina put a pin in her evil plan. "Excuse me?"

Madison was fidgeting in her seat. "You and Roman. Are the two of you...?"

She must've been holding onto that question for the last couple days, Gina figured. Gina wasn't entirely sure that she wanted to answer that question, though. Maybe she'd just play dumb a little longer and hope

for the best. "I'm not sure what you mean.""  
"1192

Miss Reach's brow lowered. "I'm asking if you two are lovers."

Gina had to stop and blink at her sudden bluntness.

Madison waited.

"I..." Gina reconsidered what she was about to say. Something on Madison's face was telling her that there was little point in dancing around it. "No, we're not lovers, but..."

"Good. That's a relief. Because I'm sure you've noticed by now that I like him. And I wouldn't want to interfere with anything the two of you have."

"Well, I don't know if... agh..."

Madison tilted her head. "You don't know if, what? You wouldn't mind if I started dating him, would you?"

Gina's expression tightened. "Yes! I'd mind!" She might've said that louder than she'd meant to, because Madison flinched in apparent surprise. Gina took a second to settle herself. "To be perfectly honest, yes, I would mind. It would bother the crap out of me."

"...Oh."

A part of Gina wanted to just leave it at that, but it wouldn't have felt right. "But, look, it's not that simple with Master Roman. He's not... agh... how do I put this...?"

"Oh, you mean he's gay?"

"No..." A beat passed. "At least, I'm pretty sure he's not."

"You aren't certain?"

"Well, I've never seen him with a guy. Intimately, I mean. But the thing is... I've never seen him with a woman, either."

"Ah, so he keeps his private life private, huh?"

That was one way of putting it, Gina supposed--an inaccurate way, but a way, nonetheless. She could've elaborated. She could've told Madison about her own past obsession with Master Roman, about how she used to watch his every move on the mansion's security footage, how she tracked his phone and kept logs of all his conversations.

She could've brought all that up. But she decided against it."

"1193

Gina tried to concoct a more diplomatic means of sharing her ill-gotten knowledge, but Madison wasn't done talking.

"You really like him, though, don't you?"

Gina just flattened her lips and said nothing.

"Hehe, you don't like admitting it? The way you blurted it out a second ago, I thought you were pretty comfortable with your feelings."

Gina tried not to scowl. "Yeah, well. I just didn't want there to be a misunderstanding. I would've felt bad if I caused some kind of confusing... emotional stuff."

Madison giggled, then laughed outright. "You have no idea how much I appreciate that!"

Gina tilted her head at her.

"I've had my share of relationship drama," said Madison. "I am definitely not looking to get myself tangled up in a mess like that again. So as far as I'm concerned, he's all yours. I won't go after him. I promise."

"...Just like that?" said Gina.

"Just like that."

Gina gave her a dubious look.

Madison breathed a laugh. "Look, I don't need to go after your stupid boyfriend. I can get any guy I want. I am a beautiful, self-actualized young woman. And I have lots of money."

Gina laughed faintly. "First of all, he's not stupid. And secondly, he's not my boyfriend."

"Yeah, whatever. As far as I'm concerned, he's off the market now."

Gina wasn't sure how to feel. Had she just ruined something for Master Roman? Didn't seem fair to him.

Oh well, though. He probably wouldn't have gone for Madison, anyway. Miss Reach could say whatever she liked, but Gina didn't think anyone could get Master Roman. She'd seen him turn down countless women--even a few supermodels who said they just wanted a fling.

Come to think it, she didn't know why she'd allowed herself to get so worked up in the first place. She could've just kept her mouth shut, and everything would've been fine. She blamed the cold as she wiped her nose again. All this sinus pressure was muddling her brain."

"1194

"So, uh," said Madison, "from the way you said all that just now, I presume you haven't told him how you feel?"

Gina's expression stiffened.

"How long have you known him?" Madison asked.

Gina just frowned.

Madison seemed amused. "A while, huh? A year or two?"

More like five, but there was no need to admit that and embarrass herself, so she just nodded.

"Heh. How about I help you out, then?"

"What?"

"You know, like, put in a good word for you. You wouldn't know this about me, but I can be quite the matchmaker."

Gina could see where this was going. Over a cliff, basically. "Please don't," she said firmly. "That would probably make me hate you."

Madison blinked at her, then giggled again. "Alright, geez. But you've gotta tell him how you feel. You can't just pine after him forever. You've gotta--"

"Stop right there." Gina held up a hand. "I know all that crap, okay? And it's not that simple."

"Why?"

"Because I know Master Roman better than anyone. He's just not emotionally available. Which is fine. I'm perfectly content with the way things are. I don't need some fairy godmother to show up and wave a magic wand around and fix everything." That was a weird and rambling analogy. Gina felt her forehead. It was pretty warm.

Madison made a face. "Emotionally available? What does that mean? Is he, like, hung up on a past girlfriend or something?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

"Then what?"

Gina hesitated. Was it okay to tell her? Eh, probably, who cares? "Master Roman took a vow of celibacy."

Madison reared back in her chair. "What?"

Gina bit her lip. Maybe she shouldn't have said that. Would Master Roman be upset? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe he wouldn't care.

Shit."

"1195

"Why did he take a vow of celibacy?" Madison asked.

"Uh..."

"What, do you not know?"

"It's just. He's building... things. Look, that's not important. I mean, it is important, and I respect his decision, but the details aren't... Agh, why are we even talking about this?"

“Um. Because it’s relevant to your happiness? Don’t wimp out on me now. Tell me. How does him building stuff relate to him not having sex at all?”

“It’s a matter of responsibility and personal... things.”

“More things, huh?”

“Look, it’s his business. It’s not for me to gossip about.”

“Sure it is! In fact, you should’ve just told me that from the beginning! Why didn’t you?”

“Agh, because it makes people treat him differently, and now you probably think he’s really weird...” Gina rubbed her forehead and closed her eyes. “Also, I’m stupid right now... I think I might have a fever.”

Madison stood and replaced Gina’s hand with her own. After a moment, she nodded. “Be right back.” Then she left the room.

She soon returned, however, with more medicine and a wet towel.

Gina took both gratefully and settled herself even deeper into her pillows and bed sheets.

Madison allowed her a few minutes of peace before asking, “Better?”

Gina shut her eyes and sighed comfortably. “...I think so, yeah. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Madison let another beat pass. “So let me get this straight: you’ve got a crush on someone who took a vow of celibacy.”

Gina groaned. She was starting to wish she was even sicker so that she could just start barfing and end this conversation.

“Girl, if that’s the case, then you’ve gotta let him go. I mean, unless you’re interested in a sexless relationship, I guess.” Another beat passed. “Are you?”

Gina opened her eyes to glare at her.”

“...Or convince him to break his vow,” Madison went on. “Or end it. End probably sounds better than break, now that I think about. Yeah, definitely don’t ask him to break anything. Unless you’re into that sort of thing, I suppose.”

Gina squinted. “What does that even mean?”

“...I don’t know. I’ll be honest with you. Men who’ve taken vows of a sexual nature are a bit outside my area of expertise.”

“You don’t say.”

“Call me when you fall in love with someone else. Preferably not a priest or monk.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“You’re not going to call me at all, are you?”

“Probably not, no.”

“That’s unfair. It’s not my fault that your circumstances are so weird right now. If he were a regular guy, I would be able to help the crap out of you.”

“You would, huh?”

“Oh yeah. I’ve helped loads of people find love. Haven’t you seen my movies?”

Gina just looked at her flatly.

“I’m joking,” said Madison. “Relax. I’m not that much of an airhead.”

“...Good one.”

Madison giggled. “So stiff. Fine, then, how about you help me find a boyfriend? I hate being single.”

“Well, I wouldn’t open with that line.”

“I’d like someone who’s tall and maybe kind of--what’s the word? Stoic? Yeah. My last boyfriend was a total asshole who just loved to hear himself talk. And the one before that--ugh, I could practically write



a book about how much of a douche he was. In fact, maybe--”

Gina stopped listening. Her eyes were already closed, so it was easy to just kind of drift off while Madison’s voice melted into background noise.

At length, however, a ringing phone stirred her out of it.”  
"1197

Gina looked over and saw that Madison was already moving to answer it for her. Gina held up a hand, then motioned for Madison to hand it to her instead.

Madison did so, perhaps only then remembering that no one was supposed to know that she was here.

“Hello?” Gina said into the receiver.

<“Gina? It’s Hector.”>

She blinked, then smiled. “Ah. How is everything?”

<“Uh. Not so great. As usual, I guess.”>

“Mm. Should I be worried?”

<“Oh, uh, no. But I need to talk to Roman. Like, right now, if possible.”>

“Ooh...” Gina bit her lip. “It’s not possible, unfortunately. Master Roman is away on business.”

<“...Hmm. Well, um. This is really important, though. Is there no other way I can contact him? Specifically, I need information from Voreese.”>

Gina frowned. With everything she knew of him, she didn’t think Hector would exaggerate about the severity of a situation. “Unfortunately, there isn’t. Even I can’t contact him right now.”

<“...How can that be?”>

Gina had to mull her answer over first. She supposed if it was Hector

she was telling, then Master Roman wouldn't get mad at her. "He's in the Undercrust."

<"Ah...">

"You know about that, don't you?"

<"Yeah, I do.">

"So you know that I can't just call him up. His service provider doesn't exactly have coverage there. Assuming he even took his phone with him in the first place."

<"I get it. Okay. Hold on a second."> There came a rather long pause.  
<"Alright, um. How did he get to the Undercrust?">

"Uh. He went down a big hole?"

<"Yeah, but which hole? They have names.">

Gina shrugged to herself. "I don't know. It was in Steccat."

<"Mm.">

"Oh, and, I guess... he may have infiltrated a paramilitary base belonging to a certain lady-servant emperor. Or empress, as it were."

<"What the--? Are you kidding?">

"Nope."

"1198

<"What is he trying to do?"> Hector asked.

"Not sure I'm allowed to tell you that. I've already told you a lot, so."

<"...Is it a mission from the Queen?">

Gina opened her mouth but realized that she didn't know what to say. Dammit, Hector.

<"...Nevermind. Sorry to bother you.">

"Sorry I couldn't be more help."

<“Actually, um... you’ve been a big help.”>

Gina tilted her head. “Have I?”

<“Yeah. Take, uh--take care.”>

“You, too.” And she moved to hang up.

<“Oh, uh--hold on, there’s something else,”> said Hector. <“Um, do you, um... uh...?”>

“...Yes?”

<“Sorry. My reaper is explaining something. Um. He wants to know if you have a picture of Roman.”>

“A picture? What do you need a picture for?”

<“It might help with finding him. Apparently.”>

“Mm. I doubt it. Master Roman likes to disguise himself, remember? Especially when he’s traveling. I don’t think anyone will recognize a normal picture of him.”

Another long pause transpired. <“...Even so, I’m being told it could be useful. In fact, um, if you have more than one picture of Roman, could you just send me all of them?”>

Clearly, Hector didn’t know what he was asking.

“Sure,” said Gina. There was no need to correct him. She’d just have to pick out a few of the ones that looked like they’d been taken with Master Roman’s permission. “I’ll send them in a few hours. Is that okay?”

<“Yeah,”> said Hector. <“Thanks.”>

“Anything else?”

<“Ah... no. Thank you. Again. But, uh. I feel like I’m always asking you for stuff. I mean, I’m stupid-busy right now, but, um, is there--is there anything I can help you with, maybe?”>

Gina’s head reared back a little. “I... don’t think so, no. I’m fine.””  
"1199 -- CXXXIV.

<“You sure?”> said Hector. <“Want, like, your own room in my castle or something? Or, like, a souvenir from Sair?”>

“You’re in Sair right now?”

<“Oh, uh, yeah.”>

Gina had to stop and rethink what else she’d just heard. “Wait, did you just ask me to live with you?”

<“Uh... that’s not... I mean, when you put it like that, it sounds creepy.”>

She smirked. “How was it supposed to sound?”

<“I meant, y’know, as... a special guest... type... thing. VIP status or... whatever. And Roman could stay, too, of course. Or any of your family or... I didn’t mean... I, um. Just... Nevermind.”>

Gina laughed. Her nose started to run again, and she had to dab it with a tissue. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m all good here.”

<“Alright, well, I definitely gotta go now,”> said Hector. <“Talk to you later. If you think of a way I can return any of these favors, then just, uh, let me know.”>

“Hector, they weren’t really favors. We’re on the same team here. I’ve just been doing as Master Roman says, more or less.”

<“Yeah, that, uh... that sounds like bullshit. I owe you big time. Oh! Ah! Yeah, alright!”> A brief rustling noise intervened on Hector’s end. <“Talk to you later.”> And he hung up.

Gina pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it.

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Four: ‘O, unknown messenger...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Five times now, Hector had asked Garovel to explain this to him, but the reaper was intent on being mysterious with him again. They couldn’t call, email, meet up with, or even know the whereabouts of

Roman Fullister; but apparently, that didn't matter, because... of something, Garovel assured him. Something that Hahl Duxan had at its disposal.

That was as much as Hector had been able to get out of Garovel. He tried Jada Najir's reaper, Atalim, but Garovel intervened then, too, asking Atalim to help him "preserve the surprise."

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All these reapers were far too pleased with themselves, Hector felt."  
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"1200

The trip to Egas happened very quickly after his last meeting with the Sandlords. Hector was able to sleep the whole way there, but Garovel stirred him awake as they neared the seat of Hahl Duxan's power.

'They call it Sununeash,' said Garovel. 'In Mohssian, it's known as the Swallow's Nest.'

Still a little bleary-eyed, Hector hadn't even gotten a good look at Egas itself yet, but he was already seeing the buildings all around them fall away as a hulking structure came into view.

Another castle, Hector abruptly realized.

Instead of having one large outer wall, the Swallow's Nest had three--each one rising up and then sloping smoothly back down at different points, creating a waving, layered formation. Because of the design,

the foremost wall had obvious gaps, but they were all covered by lookout installations built into the second and third walls.

Hector found himself gawking again, and he was reminded of all the other castles he'd visited in the past few weeks. Mostly, though, it made him think of Warrenhold, of its reconstruction. Maybe there was something to be learned from all these visits. He only wished he'd had more opportunity to examine each castle in greater detail.

As he passed through the front gates of Sununeash, he tried his damndest to take it all in. Four towers, by his count, all constructed from the same brown stone as the walls. Not as tall as the ones in Warrenhold but definitely broader. There was also no garden to speak of, but sparse foliage did exist in the form of gangly tall trees with big, bulky leaves. Covered walkways were abundant as well, and Hector was thankful for them as everyone exited their vehicles and stepped out into the punishing heat again."

"1201

The more he looked around, the more Hector noticed the defensive design choices present in the Swallow's Nest. Each walkway was flanked on both sides by enormous pits and burrows, all of which were manned by dozens of patrolmen. And since these walkways appeared to be the only means of approaching the towers, any invading forces from this entry point would doubtless have to expose themselves to an onslaught of attacks.

Then there were the towers themselves, on which he could see embrasures, where more defenders would be able to fire from. And inside, of course, the very first room they encountered was partially walled off, bearing even more embrasures. Even the staircase seemed to be--

Garovel's laugh pulled Hector out of his imaginings. 'Yeah, I thought you'd want to be awake for this.'

Hector couldn't help smirking a little. 'How'd you know?'

'I saw the look in your eyes at the Golden Fort and Dunehall. Even a little bit in Marshrock, once the fighting was done. And then what you said about needing money for Warrenhold? You've been developing a real thing for castles, haven't you?'

Hector just bobbed his head, unable to deny it.

'I guess you've always been a bit of a nerd about construction, haven't you?'

'Carpentry club is hardly the same thing as building a freaking castle,' said Hector.

'Yeah, whatever.'

'I mean, it's important, though, isn't it? A good castle can protect a lot of people, and seeing all these incredible places now... it makes me realize how amazing Warrenhold could be.'

'Yes,' said Garovel. 'With just a little love and five easy payments of ten million troas, it could be our dream home.'

'Agh. You really think it'll take THAT much money?'

'Maybe not, but it certainly won't be cheap. And our new friends aren't going to pay for all of it, no matter how much they like us.'

"1202

'You're probably right,' said Hector. 'And Asad's got his own wrecked castle to worry about now, too.'

'He sure does.'

A suddenly long pause intervened.

'I'd like to help him rebuild it, if I can.'

Garovel groaned. 'Of course you do.'

Hector laughed a little now, too. 'I'm just saying, like, someday.'

'Uh-huh.'

'He's an important ally now, right?'

'Yeah, he is.'

'And, I mean, Dunehall was just so... cool.'



‘Uh-huh,’ said Garovel.

‘What, am I wrong?’

‘Maybe you can trick Roman into footing the bill on that one.’

‘Somehow, I doubt that,’ said Hector. ‘Isn’t tricking rich people kind of his thing?’

‘I bet he wouldn’t see it coming from the likes of you, though.’

‘Yeah, let’s just... build everything on a foundation of tricks and lies. I’m sure that would go great.’

Hector could see that they were about to head underground, so he made sure to check his phone beforehand. Thankfully, Gina had come through with the pictures of Roman, though Hector still wasn’t quite sure how they would help.

At length, after an elevator ride down and a staircase going even deeper, Hector finally began seeing some familiar faces. He was almost surprised by all the space down here, but then he remembered that this place had its own path to the Undercrust. He wondered if it would look any different from the one in Warrenhold.

That was not their first destination, however. Instead, the Lord Duxan broke away from the rest of their party and guided Hector and Garovel through a pair of corridors and down another flight of steps. They arrived in a large bedchamber--so large, in fact, that Hector could imagine it belonging to the Lord Duxan himself.

Lord Hasan Duxan had not spoken to Hector directly at all thus far, and Hector was beginning to get the impression that the man simply did not speak Mohssian--or at the very least, not fluently.

Not that it mattered, of course. Between Garovel and Hasan’s own reaper, Emiross, there was no lack of translators."

"1203

Lord Hasan beckoned them deeper into the room until finally stopping in front of a tall cabinet. He opened it, revealing a mirror and nothing else.

Hector was still confused and waiting for answers from Garovel.

‘Have a closer look,’ was all Garovel said.

Hector did so. And indeed, he soon noticed something. The mirror. He could see himself in it, but there was a kind of fog behind the reflection. And maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him, but it looked like the fog was moving.

His reflection was strange, too. It mirrored his movements, but it did it too slowly, as if the image were on a delay.

‘The fuck?’ thought Hector.

‘Creeped out yet?’ asked Garovel.

‘A little. What is this thing?’ Yeah, that fog was definitely moving, Hector decided. He backed away from the mirror again and saw that Lord Hasan had pulled up a chair in order to sit in front of the thing. The man was also holding a candle in one hand and a book in the other.

Lord Hasan said something in Valgan.

‘He said you can sit wherever you like while we wait,’ said Emiross.

‘Wait for what?’ asked Hector.

‘Patience, dear boy,’ said Garovel with the echo of privacy. Then he turned to Emiross and said publicly, ‘Pen and paper?’

‘On the table by the window,’ Emiross said.

Garovel nodded and floated over to it. Hector followed suit and sat down there, still awaiting instruction. The window next to him didn’t lead outside, instead offering a pleasant view of an underground courtyard. Hector spotted a few Rainlords conversing by the central fountain. Blackburns, he was pretty sure.

‘Okay, Hector,’ said Garovel privately, ‘now you need to write a letter to Roman.’

Hector blinked. ‘A letter? Like a snail-mail letter?’

‘Yep.’

‘...Why?’

‘Heh. I mean, obviously, I could tell you, but what would be the fun in that?’

‘Ugh...’”

"1204

Hector set to work on the letter. Garovel was kind enough to help with that much, at least. Hector didn't think he could've explained their current circumstances with the Rainlords without Garovel's input. Additionally, the letter included two locations in the Undercrust where Roman would be able to meet up with them.

Hector had even more questions now, but he figured he should just save them until Garovel stopped being a secretive asshole.

He finished writing with ample time to spare, apparently. He tried to just relax and enjoy the peace and quiet while he could. He considered meditating, but now probably wasn't the time for that, he figured.

Then he saw it.

A man appeared. Or the figure of one, at least. From thin air, it simply faded into existence, standing directly in front of Lord Hasan.

Hector just stared.

No flesh of any kind was visible. A dark gray cloak covered most of the figure's body, save only the head and hands, which were instead concealed by sandy brown bandages--including even the eyes, nose, and mouth.

‘...Is that a fucking mummy?’ said Hector.

‘Yep,’ said Garovel.

‘But--? Why is it--? I mean, what does it--?’ An appropriate question evaded him.

Lord Hasan stood and looked at Hector.

Hector took that as his cue and walked over with the letter in hand.

Then he realized he wasn't sure who to give it to, but when Lord Hasan held out his hand to receive it, that was good enough for Hector.

The Sandlord took the letter, then promptly handed it off to the mummy.

'Roman Fullister,' said Garovel publicly.

"Roman Fullister," Hasan repeated, though more slowly and in his thick accent. And then again, "Roman... Fullister."

'Now the pictures,' said Garovel."

"1205

'Oh.' Hector whipped out his phone and found the photos that Gina had sent him. He tried to show one of them to the mummy's bandaged face, but it didn't provoke any kind of response.

Lord Hasan took the phone from Hector and showed it to the mummy himself.

The mummy grabbed the phone.

Lord Hasan seemed surprised but didn't say anything.

Then the mummy pulled up the hood of its cloak, shuffled back a step, and bowed before the Lord Duxan. And without uttering a single word, it disappeared again, vanishing into thin air as quietly as it had arrived.

Hector looked to Hasan, who just kind of scratched his beard, avoided eye contact, and then walked away with his reaper.

'...He stole my phone,' said Hector.

Garovel hesitated. 'Gonna be honest with you. I didn't see that coming. I hope you weren't attached to it.'

'What?' said Hector. 'What do you mean you didn't see it coming? Haven't you done this before?'

'Sure, but that was before phones could store pictures in them.'

Hector didn't quite know how to put his disbelief into words.

'I guess this makes sense, though,' said Garovel. 'Normally, you give them pictures, and then they just take those pictures with them. I guess we should've printed them out first.' A beat passed. 'Whoops.'

'Garovel, are you fucking kidding me, right now?'

'Look, I'm sorry, alright? It's just a phone. You can always get a new one. You were wanting a new service provider anyway, weren't you?'

Hector sighed as they started heading for the door. 'Okay, whatever, I need a new phone now. No big deal. But what happens if my old phone's battery dies, and then the mummy guy can't see the pictures we gave him?'

The reaper hesitated again.

'Garovel, are you shitting me?!'

"1206

'Eh, don't worry too much,' said Garovel. 'It'll be fine.'

'Are you sure?!'

'Yeahhh,' said Garovel unconvincingly.

Hector just gave him a look.

'Alright, just relax,' said Garovel. 'These "mummy guys," as you call them, were doing this sort of thing for a VERY long time before pictures were ever a factor. They are insanely reliable. Trust me.'

Hector didn't see how he had much choice otherwise. 'Okay, so what if Roman gets the message but is too busy to meet up with us? Or just decides not to? I mean, the Rainlords ARE fugitives from the Vanguard.'

'Ugh, I hope that doesn't happen. Because then it would be up to me to guide us back to Warrenhold.'

'But you don't know the route.'

‘I know it’s near a place called Capaporo. Given time, I’m sure I could suss out the right path.’

‘Given time, huh?’

‘Don’t look at me like that. I’m trying my best here. If you’ve got a better plan, I’d love to hear it.’

‘Not saying I do. But I might be able to help you more if you didn’t keep shit from me for no reason.’

‘Oh, come on, that was a great surprise.’

‘Are you even gonna tell me who or what that mummy guy was, exactly?’

‘Well, the truth is, even with my incredible powers of exposition, that is not an easy task.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘They’re a rather mysterious bunch, those couriers. There’s not a whole lot that’s actually known about them. For instance, no one even knows WHY they do what they do. We just know that they’ve BEEN doing it for thousands of years now. And that they’re really good at it. Though, maybe a bit slow by today’s standards.’

‘Huh. Well, what DO you know about them, then?’”

"1207

‘We know, more or less, HOW they operate,’ said Garovel, ‘but the specifics are still pretty unclear. Their movements are especially confusing. You saw how that one just “appeared” out of nowhere, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘They can all do that. They can just show up wherever they want, seemingly.’

‘Sounds like Ibai’s power.’

Garovel paused at that. ‘You’re right. I hadn’t put that together.

Aberrations are still a relatively recent development in the world. I wonder if that's just a coincidence, or if there's some underlying reason behind it.'

'You think aberrations and the mummy guys are related somehow?'

'Alright, well, before anything else, I should probably mention that they're not actually called "mummy guys."'

'I find that hard to believe,' said Hector.

'In Valgan, they're generally called "zalabaram." In Mohssian, they're called dark walkers. Or dark messengers.'

'Or mummy guys.'

'Yes, Hector. Or mummy guys. Might be easiest to just call them Couriers, though. But capitalized. Because capitalizing things means they're special.'

'So I should capitalize Mummy Guys, in other words.'

'You're not gonna stop calling them that, are you?'

'Why would I?'

'Because you're supposed to be an Atreyan lord now, and calling a group of ancient and mysterious beings "Mummy Guys" makes you sound about as dignified as an eight-year-old playing in the mud?'

'...That's a really good point.'

'I know.'

Hector wanted to say "Mummy Guys" again, and could see Garovel waiting for it, too, but he resisted, choosing to go for another question instead. 'Do they ever talk?'

'No,' said Garovel. 'As far as I'm aware, none of them have ever spoken.'

'...Little creepy.'

'Maybe. But they've never been hostile. Not to anyone.'

'Or maybe everyone who ever noticed their hostilities is dead.'

‘Or that highly unlikely thing you said, yes.’”

"1208

Hector had another question already queued up in his head. ‘What’s the deal with the foggy mirror?’

‘Ah, that’s how they choose who they work for,’ said Garovel. ‘I’m sure you noticed how the Courier only responded to Lord Duxan. When a Courier chooses to work for you, they just show up out of nowhere and give you one of those mirrors.’

‘Hmm. Weird. How do they choose people, then?’

‘Dunno. That’s what I meant by not knowing why they do what they do. They can apparently choose anyone, and their reasons for doing so are never made clear. It’s all very odd, but they do seem to gravitate toward people with power and influence.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Hell, one of ‘em could show up at Warrenhold and give you a mirror, someday. You’ve been getting pretty famous, lately.’

‘Does, uh... does that mean they work for Abolish, too?’

‘Yep. They don’t have any set allegiances that I know of. Oh, and they can decide to take their mirror back at any time and stop helping you.’

‘...This sounds like some conspiracy-type shit. Controlling the flow of information or whatever.’

‘You’re not the first to have that thought.’

‘You trust them?’

‘For the most part. They have a very solid track record when it comes to keeping sensitive information secret.’

Hector supposed he’d have to take Garovel’s word on that.

They’d been walking for a while now, with Garovel leading the way, but only now was Hector finally starting to see some Rainlords again. This place was a bit of a maze, but with the way Garovel navigated it,



Hector wondered if the reaper had been here before. It wouldn't be too surprising, he figured.

But before any of that, he still had more questions about the Couriers. 'Where do they come from? They're mummies, right? So they used to be human?'"

"1209

'Yeah, that's the theory,' said Garovel. 'Mummification used to be pretty common. These days, people seem to think it was only royalty and the super rich who were mummified, but that's not quite true. Anyone who worked under those people could also be mummified--sometimes, even while they were still alive.'

Hector's brow lowered. 'What? Why?'

'Because tradition, that's why. For example, if your job was washing the king's feet, and then your king went and died before you did, some cultures believed that you should be entombed with him.'

'That's... so fucked up.'

'Such were the ancient customs and religions of the world.'

Hector still had more questions about Couriers, but they got shoved out of his mind when he saw Asad and Qorvass approaching.

"You're awake!" said Hector.

'Good to see you both,' added Garovel.

Asad looked pretty sore, judging from how stiff his movements were, but he offered Hector a handshake as soon as he was close. "When I heard about what you did for everyone, I had to come thank you."

A bit confused, Hector took the handshake. "What I did?"

Asad tilted his head at him. "Zeff told me all about it. You lured the Salesman away from Dunehall and saved all our lives."

Hector blinked. Zeff had been conscious through all that?

Really, though, that whole affair felt so surreal now, like a dream he'd

had, rather than anything he'd actually lived through. A dream. Or nightmare, maybe.

Hector wasn't sure what to say. You're welcome? No, that was stupid. Shit, this was getting embarrassing very quickly.

Garovel helped him out. 'You're welcome.'

Hector gave the reaper a look, but Asad and Qorvass both laughed.

Dammit.

'Zeff also brought us up to speed on the current plan,' said Qorvass. 'We were wondering if there was some way we could help.'

'You're asking me?' said Garovel.

'It is your plan, is it not?' said Qorvass."  
"1210

Garovel relinquished a nod. 'I suppose it is. And now that you mention it, I was hoping to ask you for a favor. Would you mind going to Warrenhold ahead of us? Aboveground, I mean.'

'We could do that,' said Qorvass, 'but would it not be more prudent to stick together?'

'Perhaps, but it would also be very helpful to have someone who can open the entrance for us when we get there. The door is rather strong, and trying to break it down might prove problematic.'

'Curious,' said Qorvass.

'I understand,' said Asad. "I will send my children to do this task for you. I fear I may be needed in the Undercrust. One never knows what one will encounter down there."

'True enough,' said Garovel. 'How many children do you have, by the way?'

"Only two," said Asad. Then he turned around to talk to his daughter, who'd been standing behind him the whole time. "Were you listening?"

“Yes, abbi,” said Jada.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “Go to Kuros and fetch your brother. Then take him to Warrenhold and wait for me.” He turned to Garovel and Hector again. “Can you give her directions?”

‘Of course,’ said Garovel.

Jada interrupted, saying something in Valgan, to which Asad responded, also in Valgan.

Hector glanced at Garovel.

‘She’s asking about her mother,’ said Garovel privately. ‘Wants to know if she should bring her to Warrenhold, too. Asad says no. Jada says taking her brother will upset her mother. Asad says they’ll discuss it later.’

‘Apologies,’ said Qorvass to Hector and Garovel. ‘Please have no doubt that we will see this task completed.’

‘Your diligence is appreciated,’ said Garovel. ‘But before you send anyone to Warrenhold, there’s something I should mention. It concerns mental health.’”

"1211 -- CXXXV.

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Five: ‘Thy temperate descent...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector felt like some kind of robot in this thing. And not a cool robot, either. A robot that could barely move or function at all, was his impression.

‘Agh, this shit is so heavy,’ he thought.

‘That’s because you’re basically wearing a refrigerator on your back,’ said Garovel.

Sounded about right. ‘How are the non-servants supposed to move around in these suits?’ Hector asked.

‘They’re not,’ the reaper said. ‘Their suits are much newer and lighter. But the Sandlords don’t have enough for everyone. So you get the old and shitty one.’

‘Great.’

‘Heh. Be thankful you get a suit at all. At least you’ll get to see the Undercrust this way.’

Hector tried to stand up, but the bulky suit resisted too much, and he just kind of settled awkwardly back down. He eyed Garovel through the visor in his helmet.

‘Just think of it as training. Like you’re wearing heavy armor. And building muscle mass.’

‘Does muscle mass even matter for servants?’

‘Kinda. If you arm wrestled Dimas, for instance, and you both were using your super human strength, he’d probably still beat you, ‘cuz he has more natural muscle mass.’

‘Huh...’ A weird example, sure, but Hector hadn’t thought about it that way before. He’d been under the impression that doing push ups and stuff like that was a complete waste of time, but he supposed now that it wasn’t. He’d have to remember that whenever he found time to train again.

He looked over to the other side of the room and saw the huge containers being carted in. Climate-controlled pods, Hector knew. Garovel had told him about them earlier. With so many non-servants needing to make the trip through the Undercrust, some would have to do so in medically-induced comas, packed together in cooling chambers like sardines."

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Simply getting everyone down into the Undercrust was going to take a while, Hector had learned. The passage was identical to the one in Warrenhold--the only difference being that the Sandlords had built a working elevator for theirs.

A simple enough idea, certainly, but Garovel made it quite clear what an impressive technological feat it was. The sheer distance the elevator needed to travel was problematic enough, but the added complexities of tectonic movement and regular maintenance meant that Hector shouldn't get too eager to build one at Warrenhold.

Even with the elevator, however, several days would be needed for all the Rainlords to make the trip. The hole was simply not wide enough for more than a handful of people to go down at once.

As Hector understood it, the elevator had been carrying people down practically nonstop since the Rainlords arrived at the Swallow's Nest. And being that Hector and Garovel hadn't gotten here until a few days afterward, much of their traveling party was already waiting for them down there.

Hector boarded the elevator as soon as it returned, sharing it with the Najirs. It wasn't exactly spacious, especially in this refrigerator suit, but at least there was a place to sit. And light.

A kind of grinding hum filled Hector's ears as the elevator shifted and began moving. The noise was a bit faint, though probably muffled by his suit, he figured.

This trip down was going to take six hours, according to Qorvass. And apparently, that was considered quick.

Hector was surprised to see that Jada wasn't wearing a suit like he was. Asad and Imas, sure, but Jada, too? He wondered how old she was as a servant.

Well, if nothing else, at least he'd have plenty of time to pester Garovel with questions. He tried to remember all the different ones he'd been meaning to ask."

"1213

‘So how old do I need to be in order to not need this suit?’ Hector asked. ‘As a servant, I mean.’

‘Bare minimum?’ said Garovel. ‘Eight years. Your passive soul defense would be strong enough to protect you from all the heat, though you’d still be sweating like a dog. Which doesn’t make sense, because dogs don’t sweat. They primarily use their tongues in order to cool off. Point is, though, you’d still be uncomfortable, even at eight years old.’

‘Thank you for shoehorning that extra bit of trivia in there.’

‘Well, if you’re not laughing, you’re learning. Win-win, right?’

‘Yeah, but I was already--whatever. Is there anything else I should know about the Undercrust before we get down there?’

‘Oh-ho yeah,’ said Garovel, all but laughing.

Hector waited. ‘...Well?’

‘Eh.’

‘Garovel, don’t be an asshole!’

‘Alright, alright. I was about to bring this up anyway. Ever heard of something called a feldeath?’

‘A what?’

‘Feldeath. As in, a death that’s... fel.’

‘What are you even saying, right now?’

‘You would’ve heard of it in myths and legends, if at all.’

‘Doesn’t ring a bell,’ said Hector.

‘Mm. Well, there’s a moderate chance that we’ll run into one, so I should probably warn you so that you don’t shit your pants.’

‘...Why would I do that?’

‘Because they’re some of the most dangerous and terrifying beings in existence.’

‘Oh, is that all?’

‘Bit of background is probably needed here,’ said Garovel. ‘So you know how, after a normal person dies, their soul is removed from their body and begins to degrade over time?’

‘Uh, yeah? I think. I remember you saying something about the soul becoming a prison of agony within a couple days.’”

"1214

‘Ah, good memory,’ said Garovel. ‘Technically, I said “raw agony,” but that’s neither here nor there. The point I’m getting at is that souls have power. As you’ve seen. Many times now. And over the course of human history, an absolutely RIDICULOUS amount of people have died. Each one leaving a soul behind, a little packet of power. And even with all the reapers in the world--try as we might--sometimes, we miss them.’

‘I think I see where this is going...’

‘Mmhmm. Now, if we miss a few souls here and there, nothing happens. It’s very sad and unfortunate, of course, because those souls are left to suffer constantly until one of us finally stumbles onto them, but beyond that, there aren’t any “real world” consequences, as it were.’

‘But?’

‘But, let’s say... an entire town gets wiped out. And let’s also say that no reaper finds them for, maybe, a decade or two. Or a century, even. All those souls just sit there. All that power. Think for a second about the potential there. A reaper and a servant together, only TWO souls--but given long enough to synchronize? Those two can become virtually unstoppable.’

‘Oh...’

‘Over time, even without a reaper to bind them, all those souls together will coalesce. It’ll become like a melting pot, cooking by the heat of that same “raw agony” that I mentioned before. Their shared suffering gradually fuses them together. And that is how a feldeath is born.’

‘Shit...’



‘Now, a whole town being obliterated and then completely forgotten, even by reapers? Historically, that is a rare occurrence. At least, on the surface world, it is. There’ve only ever been a handful of feldeaths on the surface, which is why they’re regarded as largely mythical up there. But in the Undercrust... not so much.’

‘Why’s that?’

"1215

‘In the past, there were a lot of isolated places in the Undercrust. Communication and traveling were so difficult that people just didn’t do them. In fact, I’m sure that’s still the case, to a large extent. Advancing technologies make it easier and easier, but still. We’re talking about solid rock that is so thick, a man could spend his entire life trying to tunnel through to the other side and still die of old age before he gets there. And what happens when there’s a cave-in? Which is a frequent occurrence, by the way.’

‘So you’re saying the Undercrust is a breeding ground for these feldeath things?’

‘Sadly, yes. By now, I imagine there must be tens of thousands of them down there.’

‘How... uh... how dangerous are they, exactly?’

‘Depends on how many souls they were born from and how old they are,’ said Garovel. ‘But, broadly speaking, if you happen to see one, and your name’s not Sermung, you should probably just run.’

‘Seriously? They’re that strong?’

‘Potentially, yeah. And since there’s no real way to gauge their strength until you’re neck-deep into a fight with one, running is the preferred solution. But there is some good news.’

‘Really? Are some of them friendly?’

Garovel laughed. And then kept laughing. ‘Ah... no.’

‘Fuck.’

'The good news is that they're only REALLY dangerous if you piss them off.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means don't piss them off.'

'Yeah, I got that. I meant, more like... how do I avoid pissing them off?'

'Well, don't attack them.'

'Wasn't really planning on it.'

'Also, don't be named Hector. They hate that.'

'Garovel.'

'No, they like Garovels just fine.'

'Please stop.'

'Ask me a good question, and maybe I will.'

'Agh. Alright. So... as long as we don't attack these feldeath things first, they'll leave us alone?'

'No no no. If they sense us, they'll try to kill the shit out of us. But they'll only half-ass it, is the thing.'

'You've lost me.'"

"1216

'The thing about feldeaths is that, as long as you don't antagonize them, they'll only take a swat at you. Like how a dog snaps at flies buzzing around its head. That's pretty much how feldeaths see us, I'd wager. Annoying bugs.'

'Hmm.'

'They're actually kind of animalistic, in many ways. Even though they're arguably the deadliest creatures in the world, they're not necessarily a big threat to humanity.'

'They aren't? But couldn't they just waltz into a city and kill everyone?'

‘They could, and that’s what everyone worries about, but historically speaking, that’s an exceptionally rare occurrence.’

‘It is? Why?’

‘Well, for one thing, they tend not to wander around very much. They just kinda hang out in their own territory. And annihilate anyone that gets close.’

‘Huh...’

‘Unfortunately, their territories can be pretty enormous. These days, though, Sai-hee famously devotes a lot of resources to keeping track of feldeath movements and protecting cities from them. The Vanguard helps out quite a bit, too--oftentimes, Sermung himself, as I understand it.’

Hector couldn’t even imagine what a fight between a feldeath and an emperor-level servant would look like. ‘Geez...’

‘Anyway, the takeaway from all this, is that you don’t want to attack a feldeath, even if you’re doing it defensively. Because that’ll make it mad at you, and if it gets mad at you, it’ll chase you. And you never wanna be chased by a feldeath. Ever.’

‘Are they super fast or something?’

‘Yes. But also, they don’t give up. They’ll chase you to the other side of the planet, if they have to.’

‘Hmm.’ Hector paused, thinking. ‘That’s weird.’

‘What is?’ said Garovel.

‘Well, uh... I mean, if you get far enough away, shouldn’t they give up? Like, once you’re out of their... sensing range... or whatever? They wouldn’t know where you are anymore, right? So how could they keep chasing you if they don’t know where to go?’

"1217

‘I think the problem with that is their “sensing range,” as you put it,’ said Garovel. ‘Once they memorize your soul, they’ll be able to track

you no matter where you go.'

Hector paused again. 'No, that doesn't make sense.'

Garovel gave him a look. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, earlier, you said that if they sense us, they'll try to kill us. So if their sensing range is like half the planet, then they should always be sensing tons of people.'

'No, when I said that, I meant "sensing us within their territory." I'm sure their ability to sense souls goes beyond just their chosen territory. The fact that they usually keep away from cities is pretty strong evidence.'

'If that's what you meant, then that's what you should've said. How am I supposed to understand all these explanations that you love so much if you don't say what you mean?'

'Alright, Captain Pedantry, calm down. I apologize.'

'Apology not accepted.'

'Wow, Hector.'

Hector could feel the vigor wearing off. He'd needed it just to get inside the elevator. He was beginning to notice, however, that whenever the vigor wore off, it didn't leave him feeling quite so exhausted as it used to. Perhaps his body was finally getting accustomed to it. Frankly, he thought it never would.

A different question popped into his head. 'So, uh... are there any other terrible hellbeasts of the Undercrust that I should know about?'

'Oh, definitely. A couple are even comparable to feldeaths, actually.'

'Are you serious? Like what?'

'Golems, for one. Rock beasts.'

'The fuck is a rock beast?'

'Exactly what it sounds like. A big ass monster made of solid rock.'

'Like a bunch of rocks held together by a soul?'

'No, they don't have souls.' Garovel paused for a pensive expression.

‘Or at least, not really.’”

"1218

‘Then, how the--?’ Hector needed a second to locate the question he wanted. ‘What? How are they alive, then?’

‘They’ve got something that functions like a soul, at least for them. We call it “ardor.” Or “the planet force.” Because that’s where it comes from. It’s like a normal human soul, except MUCH more powerful.’

Hector’s eyes widened as he let his imagination run with these ideas. ‘...I feel like you should’ve told me all this a long time ago.’

‘Eh. What would’ve been the point?’

‘I... well, I mean...’ He couldn’t find the words.

‘Anyway, golems are very strong. They’re pretty docile, though, so we generally don’t need to worry about them. In fact, occasionally, they’ve been known to protect humans.’

‘For real?’

‘Yep. But you know what we DO need to worry about? Worms.’

Hector cocked an eyebrow inside his suit. ‘Worms?’

‘Ugh. Worms are the worst. They have ardor, too, and they are definitely NOT friendly.’

‘...Worms, though? How can a worm be dangerous?’

‘Oh, you innocent child. Worms on the surface are harmless. The worst you’ve got are parasitic ones--which, admittedly, are not fun. But in the Undercrust... oh... Thankfully, the really big ones are rare.’

Hector was almost afraid to ask. ‘How big are we talking, here?’

Garovel paused, perhaps thinking it over. ‘What’s the biggest animal you know of?’

‘Uh... elephant?’

‘Bigger than that.’

‘No, wait, uh. Blue whale.’

‘Bigger than that. Well, longer, anyway. Maybe not heavier. Yeah, a blue whale is a decent comparison. They’re similar sizes.’

‘How is that possible?’ said Hector. ‘I mean, what do they eat?’

‘Everything.’

‘Agh...’

‘Including people and reapers.’

‘AGH.’

‘Oh, and it gets better. Some can generate electrical currents so strong that they can barf lightning at you. Or acid. Or lightning AND acid--which can combust. And their bodies are all squishy and slimy and tough as hell, due to the ardor.’”

"1219

‘Okay, so then... between these worms and feldeaths, which is worse?’

‘Worms, no question,’ said Garovel. ‘Like I said, unless you piss them off, feldeaths will just take a swipe at you as you pass. Dangerous, sure, but you can just run. Worms, though--those motherfuckers will chase you. And they’re not slow. They’ve been known to steamroll through entire cities, just eating everything.’

‘Hmm. But in terms of, like, power level or whatever--aren’t feldeaths stronger than worms?’

‘Not necessarily. The strongest worms could fight a feldeath no problem. But they’re incredibly rare--or at least, they were. I suppose they could be extinct by now, but I kinda doubt it.’

‘Huh...’

‘Y’know, killing worms was how Sermung got really famous,’ said Garovel. ‘Originally, that is.’

Hector blinked.

‘You see, the previous leader of the Vanguard was killed by a worm-- arguably the most dangerous one that has ever lived. I remember, they called it Nla Erujeje. “The Great Terror.” By this point, Sermung had already made a name for himself as a worm slayer, but in those days, there were many such warriors. And besides, this was something else. This was another level. The beast that had killed the most powerful servant in the world? Everyone in the Undercrust lived in fear of that thing. Renowned warrior after renowned warrior fell to it, and the beast only grew stronger each time.’

‘Wow... you mean, it could, like, absorb their powers or something?’

‘More or less, yeah. That’s what makes worms really dangerous. The big ones, anyway. The slime covering their bodies is like a nasty glue that slowly digests anything that gets stuck in it, allowing the worm to absorb whatever it touches into its body.’

‘That... sounds horrible.’

‘It is.’”

"1220

‘And Sermung killed the strongest one ever?’ Hector asked.

‘That, he did.’ A beat passed, and then Garovel added, ‘Arguably the strongest one ever, that is.’

Hector hesitated with his next question. ‘Is there... like, a similarly strong one that’s still alive?’

‘Not as far as I know,’ said Garovel.

That didn’t sound as conclusive as Hector would’ve liked.

‘If one like that did exist, I have to imagine that either Abolish or the Vanguard would’ve launched a campaign to kill it. But you never know.’

‘Wait, Abolish fights them, too?’

‘Oh yeah. Morgunov and Dozer have both been known to hunt worms.’

‘Why would they bother? Aren’t worms basically doing their job for

them?’

‘I can’t pretend to fully understand their motivations, either,’ Garovel admitted. ‘But it’s not so unthinkable that Abolish would want to protect its own interests. Worms don’t exactly pick sides, and you can’t fight a war very well when a giant slime monster is flattening your fortresses and devouring your resources.’

‘I guess that makes sense.’

‘Plus, I bet they want to study them. As far as mad scientists go, Morgunov is right up there at the top. Or so I’ve heard.’

Hector gave a grim frown. ‘You’re just full of comforting thoughts, today.’

‘Also, some worms leave trails of toxic sludge behind, rendering places completely uninhabitable for decades.’

‘Ugh...’

‘Alright, fine, you want comfort? I saw a golem kick the shit out of a worm, once. It was awesome.’

‘Really? You saw it happen? And you’re not lying to me like an asshole?’

‘Yes, really. The golem was protecting a little village. And that same little village went on to become a big center for tourism. The people there took the dried husk of the worm and turned it into a monument. The golem stuck around, too, and kept on protecting everyone there.’

‘That’s amazing.’

‘See? I can offer comfort.’

‘I appreciate it.’”

"1221

Abruptly, Hector realized he was sweating. The increase in temperature had been gradual enough that it snuck up on him, and he was suddenly reminded of why he was wearing this cumbersome suit.



‘Should I turn this thing on?’ Hector asked.

‘Yeah, go ahead,’ said Garovel.

Hector flipped the series of switches on his chest and then hit the button in the center. The cooling unit on his back roared to life, loud enough that Hector nearly jumped, and after a few moments it settled into an only slightly quieter hum, like a wild dog growling endlessly behind him.

It worked, though. Boy, did it work. It felt like he’d been dunked in ice water. Quite the relief, at first, but soon, he decided to turn the knob on his stomach a couple times. The temperature in the suit gradually balanced to a comfortable level.

When the elevator finally began to slow down, Garovel invoked the vigor so that Hector could actually stand up again.

The elevator eased to a crawl, then jostled into a dead stop. The half-circular doors slid open, and Hector saw a crowd of earlier arrivals. Hector and the others exited and joined the mass of waiting Rainlords.

His suit garnered its fair share of attention. He could tell that the noise was disrupting a few conversations, so he tried to put some distance between himself and everyone else.

Garovel followed, of course. ‘This feels familiar,’ the reaper said privately, though with a hint of laughter.

‘What do you mean?,’ said Hector.

‘You all on your own while the other kids are having fun.’

Hector found a conspicuously bench-shaped rock and clunkily sat down.

‘Sorry,’ the reaper said. ‘If I’d realized this would happen, I might not’ve agreed to have you wear this thing.’

‘I think I’ll be fine, Garovel.’”

"1222

‘Oh, is that so? Well, look at you, Mr. Well-Adjusted.’

Hector snorted a quiet laugh. 'Shut up.'

'I liked you better when you could barely even speak to people.'

Hector shook his head. 'What?'

'You heard me. In fact, you should try to channel that old part of yourself, from time to time--so that you don't forget how to do it, I mean.'

'What are you even saying, right now? I honestly have no idea.'

'Hector, listen to me. That old shyness of yours could come in very handy, one day.'

Hector just blinked, incredulous. He wasn't sure if he'd ever heard anything so stupid in his entire life.

'Don't look at me like that. Hector, that meek persona could be used to trick people.'

'What?' he said again.

'You could use it strategically,' said Garovel. 'Think about it. You could intentionally give certain people the wrong impression. Make them think that you don't know what you're doing, that you're incompetent, that you're not a threat. Make them underestimate you, in other words.'

'...Y'know, usually, I can tell when you're joking. But now, I'm just confused.'

'Hector, don't you see? If you could but learn to harness the power of shyness within you, then you and I could rule this gullible world.'

'Okay, Garovel. Please shut the fuck up now.'

The reaper laughed. 'I'm only half-joking. A part of me is convinced that it would work. If you hone your acting skills, that is.'

'Excuse me? It's not an act that I can just do! I was never acting!'

'I'm not saying you ever were. But you could take that experience and turn it into an act, is the idea. And then we could use it to trick people.'

A part of Hector wanted to get genuinely upset at Garovel. It was still a sore spot for him, to be sure, but he knew the reaper didn't mean anything ill by it. So instead, Hector merely sighed. 'I don't want to trick people, Garovel.'

'Excuse ME?' the reaper said. 'You don't want to trick people? YOU? The guy who tricked the Salesman of Death into sparing hundreds of Rainlords?'

Hector opened his mouth to argue, only to realize that he couldn't.

'Oh, I get it,' said Garovel. 'You're trying to trick ME now. Well, it won't work! I'm too smart!'

'That's not--I don't--' Hector didn't have the words and just ended up laughing.

'Don't play games with me, young man.'

'I'm not, uh--I mean, ah... aha... I don't know what to tell you...'

'Uh-huh.'

An awkward silence arrived.

Hector wasn't sure how to articulate what he wanted to say. He'd already told Garovel that the whole deal with the Salesman had felt like some kind of crazy fever dream, but he didn't know what else to say beyond that. And Garovel was as much in the dark about it as he was, apparently.

The prolonged quiet brought Hector's mind back to Rasalased, to what the ancient Sandlord had done to him. "Tempered" his soul. Whatever that meant. It had to have been connected to what happened with the Salesman. Didn't it?

'Hey, are you meditating?' said Garovel.

'Uh... well, I was thinking about it.'

'Alright, then I'm gonna go talk to Qorvass. Let me know if you make any progress.'

Hector gave a nod and watched the reaper float away. He certainly

envied Garovel's ability to make friends so quickly. The reaper made it seem so easy, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Then again, perhaps it was."

"1224

--Donation Bonus Day (page 1 of 4)--

Still, Garovel did seem a little too good at it, sometimes. It had not escaped Hector's attention how many of their "alliances" were the result of Garovel's plans or old connections. It was enough to make Hector wonder if Garovel had some kind of greater motive that he hadn't told him about yet.

Just one more thing to ask about, Hector figured.

He tried to focus.

The truth was, a part of him had been dreading this, dreading what the result of Rasalased's "tempering" might actually be. After the first few failed attempts at trying to use his ability, Hector had, perhaps, not been allowing himself as much time as he should've in order to continue trying. It was hard not worrying that his ability was gone for good, that his iron would not be returning--and the longer that thought remained there, the more disheartening it became.

But there was nothing for it now. He didn't have an excuse to put it off, at the moment. No civilians in need of help or meetings to attend. Not down here.

So he steadied his breathing and searched his mind for that familiar feeling, the indescribable sensation that he'd always felt when summoning his iron. It was so strange. He'd never really been conscious of that feeling until now, when it was present but his metal was not.

It was so uncomfortable, so hollow. Another reason why he'd grown reluctant of these attempts. He didn't like this emptiness.

But he had to ignore these feelings, he knew. He had to push onward. His power was there. It had to be.

Maybe he was going about this the wrong way. Maybe concentrating harder wasn't the answer. Maybe he needed to meditate more deeply.

Like how he'd done when he'd first met Rasalased. That time had certainly felt different, somehow.

Worth a shot, he supposed."

"1225

--Donation Bonus Day (page 2 of 4)--

Hector cleared his mind again. No more thoughts. No more worries. No people, no abilities, not even himself. And then he recalled it: that sense of immeasurable enormity that he'd felt just before meeting the Dry God. Like floating through an infinite space and being slowly consumed by one's own sense of triviality and smallness.

Then, through the eternal dark, there came a great ring. A shaking. A light. All at once, all connected.

It was enough to startle Hector out his meditation entirely, and he looked over at the crowd of Rainlords. And the few Sandlords. It was Asad Najir who Hector found himself focusing on. The epicenter of that ringing light--Hector had a sense that Asad was standing right where it would have been, if it were real.

Or, had it been?

And at once, Hector understood. It was the Shards. Hector had sensed their presence--their exact location, even. Hector had returned them to Asad after the battle at Dunehall, and now Asad was carrying them--in the inner pocket of the large bag over his shoulder, to be precise.

Hector just... knew they were there. As if he'd placed them there himself, as if he could see them right now through the bag's rigid cloth.

As he realized all of these things in rapid succession, Hector could only stare. After a fashion, he blinked a few times and tried to think. He wasn't sure what to do with this knowledge, but it was a bit unsettling. So he could locate the Shards of the Dry God. Was there some reason for this? Moreover, was there some use for it?

Didn't seem like it.

Wait a minute. He felt something on his left hand. Inside the suit, he felt something. A familiar kind of... dust. Or powder."

--Donation Bonus Day (page 3 of 4)--

He blinked another time. With his hands covered by the suit, he couldn't look at them directly, but hope swelled in his chest as he imagined what it was. He concentrated, and sure enough, he was able to make the powdery feeling vanish, then reappear, then vanish again.

True, he'd been able to make powder already, but only when concentrating hard. This time, he hadn't even been thinking about it. Maybe this was progress? It was enough to give him hope, anyway.

There was no point in stopping here, he decided. He pushed harder. He wanted a metal lump in the palm of his hand--outside the suit, this time.

He got a lot more than he bargained for.

A full heater shield materialized in an instant and dropped onto his left hand with unexpected heft, then clattered to the ground. Even inside his bulky suit, Hector had jumped with pure surprise.

A moment of stunned silence longer, and then Hector was laughing. 'Garovel!'

The reaper came rushing over, quick to notice Hector's work on the ground. 'Whoa. What've we got here?'

Hector looked down at the shield. It was more than a little familiar. The vertical stripes. The darker color. It was metal, certainly. But that was not iron.

Disbelief struck, and Hector's eyes narrowed. 'It can't be...'

'Is that what I think it is?' said Garovel.

Hector waved his left hand, and the shield annihilated itself. Hector still couldn't believe it. Another wave of his hand, and the shield reappeared, this time resting comfortably in his grip. 'Garovel...'

'You're able to materialize Haqq's shield,' the reaper said, sounding about as shocked as Hector felt.

Hector couldn't help the smile that crossed his lips. He made the shield disappear and then reappear again. It really was true."

"1227 -- CXXXVI.

--Donation Bonus Day (page 4 of 4)--

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Six: 'Thy renewed vigor...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

'Make something else,' said Garovel.

'Oh, uh...' Hector blinked, trying to think. He waved his right hand, aiming to make the first thing that popped into his head. A metal bench, shaped like the rockier one he was currently sitting on.

And indeed, a bench appeared. But it was not the same as his shield. Granted, the lighting was a bit low in this place, but Hector was sure that he was looking at iron this time. Slightly lighter and grayer and plainer. And familiar, too, in that strange way. It was almost like he didn't even need to look at it in order to know that it was iron.

'Hmm,' mused Garovel.

Hector was confused, to say the least. He annihilated the bench and tried again with something else. This time, he made a big cube, as tall as a person. It, too, was iron, Hector knew. He destroyed it and tried again, but the result was the same.

'Wait,' said Garovel before Hector could give it another go. 'Try destroying the shield first this time.'

Hector did so, but it didn't change anything. He kept getting iron.

'Keep trying,' said Garovel.

Iron, iron, and more iron. And then the heater shield again. And then more iron. And then the shield.

Hector was at a loss. What the hell had happened to his power? It was

like he could only control it some of the time.

‘It’s your hands,’ Garovel observed.

‘What?’

‘Well. Technically, it’s probably NOT your hands, really. It’s probably an unconscious thing, utilizing the different sides of your brain. But the point is, when you use your right hand, you make iron, and when you use your left hand, you make the metal of Haqq’s shield.’

"1227 -- CXXXVI.

--Donation Bonus Day (page 4 of 4)--

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"1228

Hector blinked and stared at his hands. ‘I don’t understand...’

‘I do. We thought Haqq’s shield was destroyed, but it wasn’t. Rasalased absorbed it and returned it to you. Now you can materialize it from scratch. This must be what he was referring to when he said that you’d brought him a “gift.” Hmm. He did say that he sensed its “residue” in your soul. Must’ve been an effect of you using it. So then, I suppose, he figured that it belonged to you.’

‘But... that shield was... I mean, what was it even made of?’

‘The dark vertical stripes were tungsten carbide,’ Garovel recalled. ‘The rest of the shield was a combination of steel and titanium alloys. Or at least, that’s what Sazandara told us.’

‘So...’ That just made Hector even more confused. ‘So I’m able to materialize all of that stuff now?’

‘Seems like it.’

‘But, uh... what?’

‘Hmm. Try and make something with your left hand. Something that ISN’T the shield.’

A bit hesitant, Hector did so. His left hand tensed into a kind of claw-formation as he concentrated, and the result of his work materialized all at once.

It was the exact same shield again.

Hector frowned. He annihilated it and tried one more time, but the result was the same.

‘What were you trying to make?’ said Garovel.

‘Just a box,’ said Hector.

‘Hmm. So you can only make the shield, then.’

‘I guess so.’ He gave it another shot, just to be sure, but indeed, there was no change. The only object that he could materialize with his left hand--or with the left half of his brain, rather--appeared to be this shield. Haqq’s shield.”

"1229

It was a bit disappointing, to say the least. And upon further investigation, he discovered that he could not materialize a second shield, either. The volume limit of his new materialization power must have been exactly that of the original shield, Hector figured. He couldn’t even generate any extra dust afterward.

‘Well, this is certainly strange,’ said Garovel. ‘I’ve never heard of anyone being able to add on to the materialization ability this way.’

‘Never?’

‘I wouldn’t have thought it was possible if I weren’t seeing you doing it right now.’ He was almost laughing. ‘Rasalased... after all these years, what kind of monster has he become?’

Hector was beginning to have doubts, however. He flipped the shield over in his hands, inspecting it up and down. True, it certainly looked like Haqq’s shield. But could it really be identical, he wondered? In every way?

Garovel seemed to be having the same thought. ‘I wonder how strong

it is,' the reaper said. 'Does it still carry the soul-strengthening effect from Abbas?'

If he could touch it with bare skin, that question might be answered, but unfortunately, this suit was in the way. And it was probably too late to take it off, he figured.

'Let Asad hold the shield,' said Garovel.

"Ah, good idea," Hector said aloud, though it might've been lost over the noise of the suit. He stood and made his way over to the Sandlord, who noticed him approaching and decided to come meet him halfway.

"Something the matter?!" Asad said over the racket.

Hector offered the shield to him and let Garovel do the explaining.

It didn't take long for Asad to understand what they were asking. He grabbed the shield, held it pensively for a few moments, then looked blankly at Hector and Garovel."

"1230

'You don't feel any different?' Garovel asked.

Asad glanced at Qorvass.

'He feels perfectly normal,' the reaper said. 'As do I. And shouldn't I be affected by it as well?'

'Yes, you should,' said Garovel. 'Hmm...'

'Let's test it on Jada.' Qorvass hovered quickly away, then soon returned with her.

She seemed a bit confused about what was going on but took the shield nonetheless.

Everyone waited, but nothing happened.

'Curious,' said Garovel. 'Would you mind helping us test its strength now, as well?'

'Not at all,' said Qorvass.

The small troupe ventured off together, wanting to put themselves a safe distance away from the crowd. They found an isolated, yet well-lit spot near the bench where Hector had been sitting. A broad corridor lay far to the right, but no one was using it.

And Hector paused, abruptly realizing that he had yet to see anyone other than the Rainlords and Asad's family. He wondered when he would see his first inhabitant of the Undercrust. He wondered if they would look any different from normal people. Or "surface" people, at least. He wasn't sure he knew what qualified as "normal" anymore.

He pushed the thought out of his mind and set the shield down, propping it up against the wall. He backed away and decided to use the same hallway he'd seen before. He wasn't terribly concerned about getting hurt, of course, but he figured it would be bad if he let the suit get damaged. Using the corner as cover, Hector poked his head out to watch Asad work.

The Lord Najir started off easy. He clapped his hands together, and then, as he brought them apart again, a large spear of solid quartz materialized, which he grabbed with both hands, as it continued to grow beyond his own wingspan."

"1231

With one deep breath and a bit of vigor from Qorvass, Asad gripped the spear tightly in his right hand and threw it with full strength.

It hit the shield dead on and shattered in all directions, some of which were toward Hector, who made full use of his cover.

'Was that soul-strengthened?' Garovel asked.

Hector peeked out again and saw Asad returning an affirmative nod. Hector's eyes returned to shield, which didn't have so much as a scratch on it.

He couldn't help smiling a little.

Asad tried again, this time with molten quartz, also strengthened with his soul. It splashed against the shield with a steaming hiss. Asad let it sit there for a bit before annihilating it, and they discovered some of the rock around the shield had been melted away, but the shield itself remained perfectly pristine.

Asad gave a frustrated look.

'In his defense,' said Qorvass, 'he is still quite tired.'

Garovel probably wanted to make some retort, Hector figured, but the reaper restrained himself.

Hector saw some Rainlords coming over to join Asad, no doubt wondering what was going on. After a brief conversation, a few of them decided to give it a go, as well.

Try after try, servant after servant, the result remained the same. It quickly developed into a contest, of sorts, with more and more Rainlords lining up to give it a go--until, at length, the challengers ceased their attempts and instead began searching for representatives.

They found the Lord Dimas Sebolt.

And apparently, the man didn't wish to waste anyone's time. He merged with IzioI straight away and invoked pan-moc. Hector could see light distort and bend around the man's whole body, and so could everyone else, it seemed, as they collectively backed away from him."  
"1232

Hector could barely see Dimas' attack, but he could certainly hear it--like a hail of bullets without the gunfire, all pinging off the shield.

After a moment, Dimas let up, and Hector craned his neck to get a good look. The shield bore only two small holes in it, though a plethora of dents littered its body. And then, even those disappeared, melted

back together as if nothing had happened.

All in all, Hector had expected more damage. And so had Dimas, it seemed.

‘Don’t look so disappointed,’ said Qorvass. ‘Considering you are younger than Asad, that was very impressive.’

Hector wondered if anyone else would step up. He noticed the Lord Salvador Delaguna observing, along with a few people urging him on, but the man just waved them off.

A lull came over the crowd of Rainlords as they searched for another contender.

The Lord Zeff Elroy stepped forward.

He still looked mostly terrible, as if he hadn’t been sleeping, and even Asad put a hand on his shoulder, as if to say that this wasn’t necessary.

They exchanged a few words, which Hector couldn’t hear, and then Asad’s concern appeared to be placated.

Zeff merged with Axiolis and invoked pan-forma. He placed his hands close together, as if holding an invisible ball, and then steam began erupting from within. It spewed out in all directions, loudly enough and violently enough that many of the Rainlords decided to back away even farther.

And slowly, an orb of rushing water coalesced. The water spun with such force that it made the wind howl around it.

Hector watched intently. He’d seen Zeff do this before in the fight against Caster Egmond. It seemed more stable now--and perhaps smaller, too, though that might’ve also been because Zeff was holding back."

"1233

Then the orb vanished completely. Annihilated harmlessly by Zeff. And Hector was briefly confused--until the splashing boom came in the next moment, this time located right on top of the shield.

The impact was so strong that it shook the huge chamber and nearly knocked Hector on his ass. Streams of water vaulted in all directions before dissipating into a light drizzle, and for a few lingering seconds, it was actually raining underground. The water quickly turned to steam, however.

Hector's eyes searched for the shield but didn't see it anymore. He ventured out from behind his corner in order to get a closer look, and at length, he found a sliver of it remaining. A chunk of its pointed bottom, he was fairly sure.

It was steadily regenerating, he noticed, but it was still a bit slow, comparatively. He waved his left hand, and the shield retook its full shape almost instantly, just as pristine as before.

Garovel hovered over to him. 'Well, that was informative.'

'Yeah,' said Hector. 'It's definitely just as strong as before. But the self-regeneration seems a little redundant now.'

'And not being able to materialize anything else with the right side of your brain could be problematic.'

'Don't you mean the left side of my brain?' said Hector.

'Ah. No, I don't, actually. The right side of your brain controls the left side of your body. And vice versa.'

Hector tilted his head. 'Really? But that's so counter-intuitive.'

'I know, right? Evolution should really get its shit together.'

Hector stooped down and picked up his shield. He held it up in front of himself and turned it over, inspecting it another time.

'We still don't know for certain if it can boost your passive soul defense,' said Garovel. 'I'm guessing not, since Asad didn't feel anything when he held it, but I suppose it's possible that the boost only works for you now.'

'Hmm.'

'Probably not, though. And this isn't a good place to test it out.'

"1234

Hector continued staring at the shield, but his gaze began to hollow out as his thoughts drifted. An inkling of an idea nagged at him from the back of his mind. It wasn't quite fully formed as of yet, but there was definitely something there, he felt. Something he'd almost forgotten about materialization but that could be relevant now. He squinted as he racked his brain, trying to grab the thought before it slipped away.

And then he got it.

He blinked, eyes shifting as his brain worked, evaluating the idea even further. Was it really possible now? Maybe not. Maybe there was some new limitation that he simply didn't know about yet. Hmm.

But still. If it was possible...

He had to test one more thing, Hector decided.

He finally looked up to discuss his idea with Garovel, but the sight of the Elroys approaching made Hector put it on hold.

Zeff was carrying Ramira in his arms now. Her little suit looked much sleeker and less cumbersome than Hector's, though it did bulge around the cast on her foot. Zeff also had her tiny crutches strapped to the bag on his back.

She gave Hector a wave, which he gladly returned. It was nice to see her in relatively high spirits again. The last few times he'd visited her, she'd seemed to be in considerable pain.

'That was quite a performance,' said Garovel.

'Thank you,' said Axiolis.

'What was that technique, by the way?' asked Garovel. 'Do you have a name for it?'

'It is still quite new,' said Axiolis. 'We haven't been able to come up with one yet. For now, hand signals will have to suffice.'

'Ah.'

Hector grew impatient. He didn't want to interrupt their conversation, but this was probably more important. Or better yet, maybe the Elroys could help him."

"1235



Zeff's hands were full, so Hector looked at Marcos, suited up and standing next to his father. Hector held the shield out to the boy. 'Ask him to hold this for me, please,' he told Garovel.

'Uh. Hey, Marcos, would you mind holding this for Hector?'

Marcos hesitated but took it. Its weight seemed to surprise him.

Hector threw another look around the area. There was plenty of space here, but which direction would be best? That hallway from before. It was very long, he remembered. Hector pointed in the direction opposite of the hallway. 'Ask them to go that way for me,' said Hector.

'Um. Hector?'

'Oh.' He probably should've explained, he realized. 'I wanna try to make a second shield.'

'Ah...'

'I've gotta get this first shield outside of my ability's max range,' said Hector. 'Because then my volume limit should reset, right?'

'Hmm.' Garovel was quiet a moment, perhaps thinking.

Hector wondered if the reaper was about to inform him that he was being stupid. But that didn't happen.

'Alright,' said Garovel. The reaper proceeded to explain Hector's reasoning and instructions to the Elroys.

As Zeff listened, his gaze fell upon Hector, and the young Atreyan lord began to feel increasingly self-conscious.

Hector wasn't sure he'd ever seen such a stern face staring at him like that before, but he tried not to worry about it too much. From what he knew of the Lord Elroy, that was just the man's normal face.

Why'd he have to stare like that, though? Hector didn't need another reason to be second guessing himself.

In the end, though, neither Zeff nor Axiolis voiced any sort of

disapproval. They ventured off with Marcos and the shield, just as Hector had wanted.

Hector and Garovel made for the hallway together."  
"1236

‘If this works,’ said Garovel, ‘what do you intend to do with it?’

Hector thought that should be obvious. ‘I’ll make shields for everyone here--or, y’know, as many as I can in the time we have left.’

‘Mm.’

‘...Something wrong with that?’

Garovel paused. ‘Not necessarily. But what about after we make it out of here?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well. I can see this power making our lives very complicated.’

Hector cocked an eyebrow. ‘Our lives aren’t exactly simple, right now.’

‘Ha. Even so, I think it’s best that we try to keep this ability secret as best we can. And if you’re gonna be handing these shields out to the Rainlords like it’s no big deal, then they need to understand how important this secret is, too. And YOU need to understand just how much trust you’re placing in them to keep that secret for us.’

‘Uh... would it really be so bad if people found out?’

‘Hector. I know you just want to protect people, but these shields are incredibly powerful. And, I mean, it took Haqq Najir months to craft just one of these shields. And now, potentially, you’d be able to make them in, what? An hour or two? Maybe even less? Hector, if you can start mass producing these things... Do you see what I’m getting at? Essentially, you’d be able to single-handedly turn the tide of... practically any war in the world.’

Hector stopped. He stared down the length of the empty hallway as he let Garovel’s words sink in.

‘That, my friend, is something that only a VERY small number of people on this planet can do,’ the reaper went on. ‘And don’t you think there are people out there who will want to take advantage of you? Especially if they find out how young you really are?’”  
"1237

‘...I see your point,’ said Hector as he started walking again.

‘Good.’

Hector tested his ability with his left hand, but as expected, he couldn’t make anything yet. Doubtless, he still wasn’t far enough away. He kept trying as they moved down the length of the corridor.

‘You might be tempted to sell these shields,’ said Garovel, ‘but I’d advise against that. While we could certainly use the money for Warrenhold, it would be a big problem if word got around about an Atreyan merchant selling something that so many people might want.’

‘Selling them?’ The thought hadn’t even crossed Hector’s mind.  
‘Wouldn’t that basically make me, like... a war profiteer or something?’

‘Pretty much, yeah.’

‘...I don’t exactly consider the Salesman of Death a role model, Garovel.’

The reaper laughed at that. ‘Good to know. But I’m just saying, it wouldn’t be too difficult to rationalize. The idea, of course, would be that you’d only sell to people you trusted. Like the Rainlords, perhaps. But the problem would be that some customers simply aren’t going to take no for an answer, unless you have the power to force them to.’

‘...Or allies to force them for me?’

‘Or that, yes. But you’re more interested in doing the protecting than being protected, aren’t you?’

‘Well, yeah. But, uh... all this talk does make me think. I mean, even disregarding this, uh, war profiteering bullshit--how likely is it that Warrenhold will develop into that kind of... “point of interest” or whatever? It’s bound to happen sooner or later, right?’

‘Hmm. At the rate we’re collecting people, perhaps sooner.’

‘Stasya Orlov wanted Warrenhold to be a center of trade between the Undercrust and the surface,’ said Hector. ‘And... I want that, too, I think. But... if we manage to make that happen, somehow, then...’

‘Yup.’”

"1238 -- CXXXVII.

‘It’d be stupid of me to think I can protect everyone by myself,’ said Hector. ‘If our time in Sair taught me anything, it’d definitely be that.’

‘Heh. And here I thought your self-confidence was growing.’

‘I... I don’t--I mean, uh... eh... that’s a different... thing.’

‘Eloquently put.’

‘Shut up.’

Hector kept walking for quite a ways, and Garovel kept giving him sass all the while, as expected, until at long length, finally, one of his attempts to create the shield succeeded. Partially. Half of it was missing. He annihilated it, took another step forward, and tried again.

The shield materialized in full this time.

‘Welp. That confirms it.’ Garovel hovered around him, looking the shield over. ‘I’m not sure if I like this “blessing” from Rasalased.’

‘I wonder if he can hear you.’

‘I hope he can. Hey, Rasalased! Why’d you give this to Hector, huh?! Why couldn’t you just upgrade his soul power with your own or something?!’

‘Would that have been possible?’

‘No, but I didn’t think this shit was possible, either, so who the fuck knows?!’

Hector couldn’t help laughing as he started back toward the Rainlords with his second shield in hand. ‘You sound very upset.’

‘Yeah, well, I am. If we’re not super careful, this shield bullshit is gonna bite us on the ass. And I bet Rasalased knew that, too. What a fuckin’ prick.’

## Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Seven: ‘Buried in the Dark...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

There wasn’t a lot of time left until they needed to leave, but Hector spent every moment of it making as many extra shields as he could. And after seeing the kind of punishment that his work was capable of withstanding, the Rainlords were quite keen to help him out.”  
"1238 -- CXXXVII.

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‘No, but I didn’t think this shit was possible, either, so who the fuck knows?!’

Hector couldn’t help laughing as he started back toward the Rainlords with his second shield in hand. ‘You sound very upset.’

‘Yeah, well, I am. If we’re not super careful, this shield bullshit is gonna bite us on the ass. And I bet Rasalased knew that, too. What a fuckin’ prick.’

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Seven: ‘Buried in the Dark...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

There wasn’t a lot of time left until they needed to leave, but Hector spent every moment of it making as many extra shields as he could. And after seeing the kind of punishment that his work was capable of withstanding, the Rainlords were quite keen to help him out."

"1239

They formed a relay line, of sorts. Hector remained stationary so as not to exhaust himself by relying on his undead vigor any more than he already had. Instead, he simply handed his freshly made shields off to the nearest Rainlord, who then took a running start and chucked it down the line with full strength.

It certainly sped things along. He was able to pump out several shields per minute. But apparently, his ability’s maximum range had grown since he’d last tested it. The Rainlords were telling him it was around two hundred meters now.

Thinking about it now, he wondered if an increase in maximum range could even be considered a good thing. He had a hard time imagining a practical scenario in which materializing something that far away from himself would be useful.

But maybe that was his own fault. Maybe he just wasn’t thinking hard enough. Materialization was the power of creation, after all. It only made sense that using it to its fullest potential would require great creativity.

At length, Hector knew that his shield-making marathon had reached its end when a train arrived. Or at least, it seemed like a train. It didn't quite sound like any train he'd ever heard of. There was no loud hissing of steam or puffing of smoke or screeching of metal against metal. Of course, his suit was interfering with the noise, but Hector was sure that the sound he heard was more of a rumbling growl.

And in the low light, Hector hadn't previously noticed the rail lines, but they weren't just lain on the ground. They were also suspended in the air on slender pillars, allowing the wheels on the train's rooftop to connect.

Which earned a double-take from Hector as everyone was boarding."  
"1240

'Why are there wheels on top?' he said to Garovel.

'They add much needed stability,' the reaper said. 'And... well, you'll see pretty soon.'

'Hmm.' Hector thought about that answer for a bit. 'Wait a minute... You said you haven't been down here in three hundred years or something, right?'

'Yep.'

'But... you already know about this train technology?'

'Yep.'

'So you're telling me they've had trains like this for more than three hundred years?'

'Yep.' A beat passed. 'Okay, well, maybe not JUST like this. This one does look a lot spiffier than I remember. But the whole double-track thing is old tech. In fact, I don't think the trains down here ever DIDN'T have them. The one-track design was a surface-level thing.'

'Huh...'

Hector ended up taking over a couple of empty seats near the front of the train, but there wasn't a whole lot of extra space remaining, and he

felt sorry for the Rainlords who were stuck sharing a cabin with his noisy suit. He watched the train doors slide shut and felt the whole room begin rumbling gently.

Soon enough, they were underway. There weren't many windows to speak of, and the few they did have were quite small and circular, the kind Hector imagined seeing on a boat or plane. At first, he saw a few faint lights streaming by, but then there was only pitch darkness.

Their first destination was going to be a place called Babbadelo, as Hector recalled. Naturally, Garovel hadn't told him anything else about it--though that might've been because Garovel hadn't been there in so long.

In the meantime, Hector tried to occupy himself with meditation, but a sudden, rather violent shift in the train disturbed him.

'What was that?' he asked.

'Heh,' was all Garovel said. He'd latched onto Hector's shoulder while the train was in motion.

Nobody was panicking, Hector noticed, so he supposed the shift wasn't anything to be too concerned about. But something was definitely different."

"1241

Gravity had shifted, Hector realized. The train was going almost straight up, it felt like. And perhaps the only reason he hadn't begun sliding out of his seat was because of the arm rest supporting his weight. He grabbed onto it with his free hand and spread his feet apart unconsciously.

'This doesn't feel very safe...

'Well, you're supposed to have a seat belt on,' said Garovel.

'You tell me this now?'

'I'm pretty sure the seat belts won't fit around your suit.'

'You could've warned me, at least. What if I fell out?'



‘Was kinda hopin’ you would.’

‘What if I landed on someone?’

‘Eh, Dimas is right over there. I’m sure he would’ve stopped you. Or you would’ve stopped yourself. You’ve got your iron again, remember? You could’ve whipped something up.’

Hector would’ve expressed his annoyance, but the cabin shifted another time and took his mind off it. Gravity leveled out, and he supposed they were moving horizontally again. He decided to maintain his grip on the arm rest anyway.

From there, the journey began to feel rather tedious. It would take a few hours to reach Babbadelo, apparently, and Hector couldn’t sleep or meditate for fear of falling out of his seat.

That left only one thing for him to do, really.

Pester Garovel with all the things that he’d been meaning to ask for a while now.

‘Hey, Garovel, I have a question.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Have you ever gone to the moon?’

The reaper laughed. ‘I think I see where this is going. But no, I have never gone to the moon.’

‘Why not? You can fly wherever you want, right?’

‘As it so happens, no, I can’t. Reapers can’t leave the planet’s atmosphere.’

‘Hmm. So you’ve tried, then?’

"1242

‘Yeah,’ said Garovel. ‘I’ve tried a few times, actually. Everyone experiments in their youth, right?’

‘Your “youth,” huh? What were you, like, five hundred?’

‘Two hundred, the first time. Occasionally, I give it another shot, just to see if anything’s changed. I might do it again, eventually. Assuming someone doesn’t kill me first, that is.’

‘Hmm. So how does it, uh...? I mean, what happens when you go up that high, exactly?’

‘I start to lose consciousness.’

‘Ah...’

‘It might be for the best, though. Can you imagine how terrifying it would be if you flew up into space and got lost? AND you weren’t able to die? So you just... drifted? For millions of years, potentially? If not billions? In fact, who knows if you’d ever find your way back at all?’

‘Shit, when you put it like that, why would you even risk going up there?’

‘Mm, curiosity.’

‘Reapers must get REALLY bored, if that’s all it takes.’

‘That’s a bigger problem than people usually realize. I bet there are plenty of wars that were largely the result of some bored reaper.’

‘I can believe that,’ said Hector. ‘But, uh. I’m still wondering, um...’ He had to take a moment to find his wording. ‘Well. Hmm. What’s the planet’s role in all this?’

‘Heh. What do you mean?’

Hector’s brow furrowed. ‘What do you mean what do I mean? And what’re you laughing about?’

The reaper laughed outright at that. ‘I’m just getting the impression that you’re about to ask me a particular question that nobody knows the answer to. Something that a LOT of people have been trying to figure out for a very long time.’”

"1243

‘And what would that be?’ said Hector.

‘I don’t know--what WOULD it be?’

‘Argh. Just tell me.’

‘No,’ laughed Garovel, sounding almost like a stubborn child.

‘Ugh...’

‘I feel like you know the question already,’ the reaper said. ‘It seemed like you were working your way up to it. Maybe just cut to the chase and ask me, hmm?’

At first, Hector didn’t know what Garovel meant. But as he thought about it, an idea did pop into his head. It was something that had been bothering him for quite a long time now, on some level. Even before Garovel told him about this “ardor.” Perhaps even before Garovel told him about the Undercrust. There was just something about the nature of souls, about everything he’d come to learn of them during his time as a servant.

‘...Where do souls come from, exactly?’

‘That’s not the question.’

‘...Do they come from the planet?’

‘Mm. Getting warmer.’

Hector took a minute to deliberate. It was a bit of a leap, but if he supposed the answer to that last question was “yes,” then...

Hector tilted his head. ‘...Is the planet alive?’

‘There it is!’ Garovel laughed. ‘Well done, my dear boy.’

‘Nobody knows if the planet is alive?’

‘Depends on what you mean by “alive,” now doesn’t it? Certainly, if you just mean, as an ecosystem capable of supporting life, then yes, the planet is obviously alive. And the molten core is like it’s heart, and if you destroyed the core, you’d essentially be “killing” the planet, right? There’s no real debate there. But if that’s not what you mean by “alive,” then... Well. Things get a bit more difficult to figure out, to say the least.’”

"1244

‘Hmm,’ said Hector. ‘Would there even be a definitive way to determine whether the planet is alive or not?’

‘Well, again, what do you mean by “alive?” Do you mean “possessing a consciousness?” Do you mean “self-aware?” Because there are plenty of single-celled organisms that wouldn’t fit that criteria.’

‘Aw, hell, I don’t know...’

‘You don’t know what you meant by alive?’

‘I always feel so stupid when you start bringing up scientific shit.’

‘Well, good, because that’s why I bring it up. Not to help you learn anything. To make you feel stupid. It gives me great pleasure.’

‘I’m sure it does.’

‘I was being facetious.’

‘Were you, Garovel? Were you?’

‘Don’t get all pouty on me. I’m trying to help you.’

‘Okay, so is the planet alive or not?’

‘You weren’t listening to me at all, were you?’

‘I listened to you spout a bunch of vague bullshit!’

Garovel laughed. ‘Wow.’

‘Remember that conversation you had with Rasalased?! Well, that’s what talking to YOU is like!’

‘Alright, there’s no need to hurt my feelings,’ said Garovel. ‘What didn’t you understand?’

‘I don’t know! I was just wondering if there was more to the planet’s... energy or whatever. More than most people realize, I mean.’

‘The answer to that is yes.’

‘Okay... so... could you elaborate?’

‘Not really, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because, as far as I am aware, nobody really understands the planet’s “energy or whatever,” as you put it. So we’re not sure if that means it’s alive.’

‘But, uh, you said that “alive” had a weird definition and that I’m dumb.’

‘I didn’t say you were dumb.’

‘Sounded like you did.’

‘Then you misheard.’

‘Yeah, well, I bet you were thinking it.’

‘No, but I’m thinking it right now.’

It was Hector’s turn to laugh."

"1245

‘Anyway,’ said Garovel, ‘the planet’s ardor is widely theorized to be the source of all human and animal souls as we currently know them. But that’s a bit difficult to prove. It could be that souls and ardor developed independently of one another. Or from some third thing that we haven’t even discovered yet.’

‘Hmm. So, wait. Every living thing in the world has a soul?’

‘Yes.’

‘Even, like, those single-celled organisms you were talking about just now?’

‘Yep. Even them. But it must be said that their souls are extremely weak, comparatively.’

‘Huh. Does that mean...? Uh. Does that mean you could’ve taken, like--I don’t know--a hamster as your servant?’

‘I thought I did. I mean, just look at you.’

‘Fuckin’...’

‘I had to, Hector. You set it up for me so perfectly.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘But yeah, in theory, I could’ve taken a hamster for a servant. Anything with a large enough brain.’

‘A hamster has a large enough brain?’

‘Yeah. The requirements aren’t too strict. Good thing, too, otherwise you wouldn’t--’

‘Alright, shut up.’

‘Heh. Generally speaking, though, taking anything other than a human as your servant is an incredibly stupid thing to do. Not being able to communicate complex ideas to your servant is a pretty big problem.’

‘Makes sense.’

‘I’ve known a few reapers who did it, too. Haven’t known any where it worked out for ‘em, though. Shockingly, animals can be rather unpredictable.’

‘I bet someone figured it out,’ said Hector. ‘Imagine having a bear as your servant. A super old bear with soul power? That would be insane.’

‘Literally,’ said Garovel.

‘Maybe. Not something I’d wanna fight, though.’

"1246

‘Eh, I’d bet on you,’ said Garovel. ‘You’ve already faced worse, I think.’

Hector blinked at the sudden compliment. It was nice, but a part of him would’ve preferred another insult.

‘Oh, and by the way,’ the reaper went on, ‘I know we’ve been busy, but I haven’t forgotten about your birthday.’

Hector kind of had. ‘...What day is today?’

‘You don’t know?’

Hector gave a stilted shrug. ‘If I’m honest, everything’s just a blur to me right now.’

‘It’s the twenty-third. Your birthday’s in two days.’

‘Oh...’

‘Do you need me to remember how old you are, too?’

‘You’re one to talk,’ said Hector. ‘How old are you, exactly, huh?’

‘You don’t get to use that excuse until you’re at least a hundred,’ said Garovel.

‘I’m turning seventeen. Happy now?’

‘Actually, you’ll be turning eighteen.’

‘What?’

‘I’m just fucking with you.’

‘Ugh.’

‘But the fact that you seemed genuinely confused for a second is amazing.’

‘I was only confused because I trust you to tell me important shit!’

‘Oh, well, I’m flattered.’

‘I should just never trust anything you tell me.’

‘Aw, don’t say that. I got you a birthday present in order to demonstrate my affection.’

Hector’s brow lowered. ‘...How could you get me--? You don’t have a physical body, so you couldn’t have--’

‘Does that mean you don’t want it?’

Hector’s mouth flattened. ‘...Alright, where is it?’

‘It’s not a physical object, you materialistic fuck. I got you a verbal birthday card.’

‘A what?’

‘A verbal birthday card.’

‘Is that as stupid as it sounds?’

‘If by “stupid” you mean “incredibly thoughtful of me,” then yes. Don’t worry, though. I’m not expecting anything in return.’”

"1247

‘Why would I get you something for MY birthday?’ said Hector.

‘You wouldn’t,’ said Garovel. ‘I mean, I’m not upset about it.’ A beat passed. ‘Would’ve been a nice gesture, though.’

Hector opened his right hand and materialized a smaller, iron hand therein. He made sure that only its middle finger was extended. ‘Here’s your present.’

‘How crude.’

Hector annihilated his work before anyone else saw it. ‘Okay, then, let’s have it. I’m ready for this verbal birthday card of yours.’

‘It’s not your birthday yet.’

‘Wow, you’re gonna make me wait to experience something so incredible?’

‘You’re that curious, huh? I suppose that’s to be expected. Alright, fine, I’ll give it to you early. It goes like this. Ahem. “Dear Hector. You’ve been my servant for around nine months now, and so--much like a fetus maturing into a human being--you’ve made the journey from complete uselessness to NEAR complete uselessness.”

‘Well, thank you.’

‘I’m not done.’

‘Of course you aren’t.’

‘I’ll continue. Ahem. “I know I can sometimes come across as callous or ungrateful for many of the things you’ve done for me, but I just want



you to know that. Well. I am. Both of those things. Because you never do anything right, and really, I'm the amazing one for being able to put up with so much of your shit."

'Birthday cards aren't this long, Garovel.'

'Stop interrupting. Ahem... "Ahaha! But I'm merely teasing, of course. We do have fun, don't we? I only make fun of you because I know you can take it. If I'm being completely serious, though, then I do feel genuinely compelled to thank you. I know that sometimes, my cynicism gets the better of me, but even after only nine months, I can say with some confidence that it is an honor to have you as my servant.'"

"1248 -- CXXXVIII.

Hector felt himself blushing. 'Alright, thanks, you can stop now. I don't--'

'I told you to stop interrupting.'

Hector frowned.

Garovel waited a moment. 'Okay, I'm done now.'

'Agh.'

'So what'd you think? I worked hard on it.'

'I... uh...'

'Speechless, eh? That's only to be expected, I suppose. You're welcome, by the way.'

Hector was still a little flustered. So after another uncertain pause, he decided to just address the problem directly. 'Somehow, I always get a lot more uncomfortable whenever you start acting all... sincere out of nowhere like that.'

'Ah, well, sincerity is important, Hector. Sometimes, at least. I can't very well be a facetious prick all the time, now can I? I mean, I COULD, technically--don't think I couldn't. But ultimately, it would stand in the way of progress in our relationship. You can't build trust out of jokes and insults. And believe me, I've tried.'

‘Hmm...’

‘And y’know, miscommunication between reaper and servant is the primary cause of every major conflict in the world.’

Hector squinted. ‘...There’s no way that’s true.’

‘See? You understand when I’m spouting total bullshit. That means we’re communicating very well with one another. And thus, my point is proven.’

Hector kept squinting. ‘...No, it isn’t.’

‘Exactly. Good for you, understanding that, too.’

‘Shut up, Garovel.’

‘You shut up.’

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Eight: ‘The land of leviathans...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

To say the very least of things, the city of Babbadelo was not what Hector expected. There were no buildings. At least, not by conventional standards. Instead, there were only pillars, tall and broad and wreathed in streaks of amber light. It was like some gargantuan forest where the trees were hewn from rock and glowed in the dark.

But there were trees, too. Many, in fact. None were in the ground, but they were here. They stood in vats of various sizes, depending on the tree, though some of those vats were so large that they became walls unto themselves while supporting an entire row of trees. They all looked to be the same species, as well, though Hector couldn’t exactly identify them. Frankly, he was surprised any kind of plant life could survive the temperatures down here.

And then, of course, there were the people."  
"1248 -- CXXXVIII.

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"1249

Their eyes shone with white light, and if they had irises or pupils, then Hector couldn't see them. It was such a strange yet familiar sight, like something out of a cartoon. Or perhaps a horror film--he wasn't quite sure.

Everyone seemed to be completely bald, as well, even lacking eyebrows and facial hair. If not for their still very human-looking physiques, he might have thought they were from a different planet.

And boy, could he see their physiques. They barely wore any clothing at all. Occasionally, he'd spot someone entirely nude.

That much, he wished Garovel would've warned him about. Maybe it would've made him feel a modicum less uncomfortable right now. He tried not to stare.

It was difficult to discern their skin color, though. The poor lighting and the gloss on his suit's visor didn't help, but he was fairly certain that he saw slight variations in skin tone, at least.

As they proceeded on, however, Hector noticed changes among the crowd. More and more people wore clothes--or perhaps, harnesses was a better word for it, since the primary purpose of their clothing seemed to be in carrying things.

He supposed it made sense, though. Given the extreme temperatures down here, these people probably didn't ever have to worry about staying warm.

'What can you tell me about these people?' Hector asked.

'Well, there are several different races who live in the Undercrust,' said Garovel privately. 'In Mohssian, these gray folks with the glowing eyes are called the Hun'Kui--or "people of the ash." They're probably who you'll be seeing the most of out in the open like this. There aren't many other races who can withstand these temperatures as well as they can.'

Their sheer numbers made Hector curious. 'They're not all servants, are they?'

'No.'

'Then, how do they survive? Isn't it like a thousand degrees down here or something?'

"1250

((The Monday Triple: page 1 of 3))

'Not quite a thousand,' said Garovel. 'My knowledge is a bit archaic when it comes to the Undercrust, but as I recall, the average Hun'Kui can comfortably withstand temperatures of up to eight hundred degrees. In thermoregulatory terms, they're what's called eurytherms, meaning they can live in an extremely wide range of temperatures. But that's all relative to the Undercrust. If you tried to take one of them back up to the surface, they'd still freeze to death.'

'Oh.'

'In Fahrenheit, the surface has a temperature spectrum of three hundred degrees or so. One-hundred in either direction, that is. But the Undercrust has a much, much larger temperature spectrum, beginning around five hundred degrees and ending around four thousand.'

‘That... sounds unpleasant.’

‘Just a bit, yeah. For reference, any area that’s more than three thousand degrees is generally regarded as uninhabitable by the people here. They don’t even try to mess around with temperatures that high.’ The reaper paused. ‘Or at least, that’s how it was when I last visited a few hundred years ago. Maybe they’ve made some breakthroughs while I was gone. In fact, I hope they have. I love seeing new technology.’

‘So, wait. They can deal with TWO thousand degrees? That still sounds completely insane to me.’

Garovel pointed a bony finger upward. ‘Take a look up there.’

Hector wasn’t sure what Garovel was talking about. He only saw a dark and very distant cavern ceiling amid a visibly warm haze.

But no, wait. After a few moments, he began to see it, even through his visor. There was something there. His eyes needed time to distinguish the deeper blackness from the rest, to interpret the faint contours in the darkness.

‘Holes?’ thought Hector. There seemed a few of them. Maybe five or six--he couldn’t be sure. They must’ve been gigantic to be visible at this distance.

‘Yes,’ said Garovel. ‘Heat funnels, to be precise.’”  
"1251

((The Monday Triple: page 2 of 3))

‘Funnels?’ Hector vaguely recalled one of the reapers mentioning such a thing when he’d first learned of the Undercrust’s existence.

‘It’s an absolutely ancient technique. Perhaps the oldest method, even.’

He still wasn’t quite sure he understood. ‘Oldest method of what, exactly?’

‘Of creating survivable conditions here. Of colonization, that is.’

Hector blinked.

‘The invention of heat funneling--down here? Historically speaking, it’s on par with the invention of agriculture. Its importance and influence to civilization here can’t really be overstated.’

‘Wow, uh. Okay. How does it work?’

‘It’s pretty simple. Have you ever heard the phrase “heat rises?”’

‘Sure.’

‘Well, that’s a lie.’

‘What?’

‘Or at least, it’s not the whole truth. Really, heat just flows from an area of high concentration to an area of low concentration. From hot to cold. Until both areas are the same temperature. It’s part of nature’s eternal pursuit of equilibrium. We only think of heat as “rising” because heat affects the density of matter, and matter with a low density will generally get pushed up by matter with a high density. That’s why a rock sinks in water, and oil rises above it. But anyway, the point is, heat often gets conflated with the rising movement created by changes in density, even though heat itself is not prone to any particular direction.’

‘...I feel like I should’ve known this, already.’

‘Eh, you probably did, on some level. It’s fairly intuitive. And if not, well. That’s why I’m here, right? Don’t be too hard on yourself.’

‘You’re not gonna call me stupid again?’

‘Oh, yeah. You’re stupid.’

‘Ugh.’

‘Thanks for reminding me.’

‘Happy to help.’

‘Anyway, what was I talking about?’

‘Uh. Heat funneling?’

‘Right, right. So, ah, okay. Everything I just explained is an important part of how these cities down here maintain relatively safe temperatures. It’s hard for me to tell, since I can’t actually feel temperature, myself, but at a guess, I’d say that the streets of Babbadelo here are hovering around four or five hundred degrees.’”  
"1252

((The Monday Triple: page 3 of 3))

‘Okay, but how does the funneling actually work?’ said Hector. ‘I mean, where does the heat go?’

‘Oh, the heat is transferred into a “cooler,” which is an area where someone--likely a servant or team of servants--is working around the clock to maintain a low temperature. It would be a very tightly-controlled environment. They used to just be caves that had been lined with loads of heat shielding materials, but they might be different now. I’m curious to see one, but I don’t know if we’ll get the opportunity. We didn’t come down here for a tour, after all.’

‘Hmm. But, uh... so these servants who are keeping that place cold... uh... are they not in the city itself? Or...?’

‘Well, they could be, I suppose, but they’re probably not. The idea behind heat funneling was to construct a vast network that could cool many cities, without ever making it so that any one city was entirely reliant upon any one cooler--the logic being that, if, for whatever reason, a cooler failed, then the other coolers in the network would be able to pick up the slack.’

‘Smart.’

‘Before funneling was invented, it was just as you said. Very powerful servants would create “safe zones,” and everywhere else was pretty much off limits.’

That made Hector want to ask what happened so long ago to make people migrate all the way down here in the first place, but someone bumped into him before he could formulate the question.

A loud group of Hun’Kui were crowding around a young Rainlord on his right, and even though Hector couldn’t tell what they were saying,



their intentions seemed apparent enough from the way they were pushing into the comparatively small entourage of Rainlords.

The body language, the shouting, the unprovoked aggression--Hector had seen this plenty of times before in Atreya. Without even thinking, he flicked his wrist and encased every single one of them in iron."

"1253

The commotion died instantly, and the Hun'Kui looked around in apparent confusion, as Hector had left only their heads uncovered.

The young Rainlords that they'd been bothering all looked toward him at once, and Hector wasn't sure what their expressions meant. Had he made a mistake? Maybe he shouldn't have interfered. It wasn't like the Rainlords needed--

An unfamiliar sound rang out--a heavy, piping noise that simultaneously carried a whip's crack with it.

Pain came knifing through Hector's chest.

The street erupted into shrieks as the crowd around the Rainlords scattered, and Hector saw several more clusters of Hun'Kui letting everyone flee around them. One was aiming at him with a long, two-handed rifle of some strange kind. Tendrils of blue smoke--or something like it--swirled up from both the tip of its barrel and the back of its apparent loading chamber.

This time, it was the Rainlords' turn to react. Everyone bolted away from Hector, and within as much time as it took for him to turn his head, the Hun'Kui were nearly all subdued--many by crystal or metal, some by threat of a blade or gun, and the last lingering few by a hand or foot pressing them into the dirt.

Hector, however, was more concerned with the gaping hole in his chest, and thus, his suit. And despite already having the vigor required to walk in this cumbersome thing, Garovel had not been numbing his pain. And so, he felt every bit of that searing air as it rushed in and scorched his flesh, exploding up through his punctured lung and burning his throat, mouth, and nose with every breath.

His body wanted to panic, of course, but he knew it wouldn't last long.

He knew Garovel's help was imminent, and indeed, it soon arrived. All pain flew away from him as quickly as it had arrived.

But when he turned to look at Garovel, he saw that the reaper had a gaping wound, too."

"1254

((The Wednesday Triple: page 1 of 3))

'Ah--are you alright?' Hector asked.

'Dandy,' the reaper said. 'A bit surprised, though. What the hell was that weapon?'

'I was gonna ask you that.'

'Ugh,' said Garovel. 'Y'know, when I said I loved seeing new technology, this isn't what I had in mind.' Black and white smoke had begun to rise from the hole in his ethereal body--an indicator that it was very slowly repairing itself, Hector knew.

Hector, remembering that heat was leaking into his suit and cooking him alive, decided to just patch the hole in the chest with iron.

'You've got a hole in back, too,' said Garovel.

And he heard the clamor of his refrigeration unit abruptly stop.

'Oh. Good.'

'Uh... am I just fucked now?'

'Pretty fucked, yeah. But, hmm. Let's see here. Hey, Asad!'

Axiolis and Qorvass were already hovering toward them with their respective families following.

'Having trouble?' said Axiolis.

'Do we have someone who can repair this thing?' asked Garovel.

Qorvass inspected the damage. 'Ooh, I do not think so. This looks quite bad.'

‘Does it?’ said Garovel. ‘The hole’s not that big, though.’

‘Yes, but it pierced the battery.’

‘Mm. Did we bring a replacement?’

“Yes, of course,” said Asad. “I told the Duxans to load up several spares just before we left. I made sure to...” He drifted off as his expression shifted into one of recollection. “Actually, no... I never did do that, did I...?”

‘Asad, please don’t tell me you forgot,’ said Qorvass.

And to his credit, the Lord Najir didn’t tell him.

‘Argh! I asked if you’d forgotten anything important right before we left!’

“...I remembered my luggage.”

‘And, what?! You consider that progress?!’

"1255

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Asad scratched his cheek and gave Hector a stiff look. “...Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said Hector, feeling more amused pity than disappointment. He looked over the reapers. “But, uh... what now? I mean, uh, I don’t want to be a burden on you guys, so if it’s easier to just go on without me, then we should do that.”

‘Mm, yeah, maybe that’d be best,’ said Garovel. ‘I’ll just revive you from scratch when we’re back at Warrenhold.’

“No, no, no,” said Asad, “that will not be necessary. This is my doing, so I will make it up to you.”

“Uh, how?” said Hector.

“I will simply follow you around, making temperature-controlled armor for you,” said Asad. “Whenever it begins to melt, I’ll remake it.”

Hector bobbed his head. He supposed that would work, but it sounded like a lot of trouble to go through. He didn’t get a chance to voice his

concerns, however.

“Allow me to do it,” said Zeff, still carrying the wounded Ramira in one arm.

Asad blinked at him. “Why? It was my mistake.”

“There is a certain technique I am trying to develop,” said Zeff. “I think this might prove a good opportunity to practice it. And besides, I owe the both of you so very much. So, please.”

Asad could only return an admmissive nod.

Zeff looked to Hector now. “Remove the suit,” he said. “It will only get in the way.”

A bit hesitant, Hector did as he was asked, but he needed help toward the end. He couldn't feel any pain from the heat, but he could certainly feel the way it turned his muscles to jelly, even in spite of the regeneration's best efforts."

"1256

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Hector and Zeff found an empty side street and put some distance between themselves and everyone else.

Hector wasn't entirely sure why this was necessary, and moreover, he was beginning to worry that he'd been suddenly drafted as Zeff's practice dummy.

‘Would you mind explaining your work to Hector as you go?’ said Garovel, who Hector noticed was observing from a distance. ‘Truth to be told, I’ve been hoping that he would get an opportunity to learn from a fellow materializer.’

Zeff rubbed his hands together. “Very well.”

‘And don’t leave anything out,’ Garovel added. ‘Pretend he’s a total idiot who doesn’t know the most basic stuff.’

Hector frowned. He might’ve protested more, but he was starting to feel woozy and having trouble even just standing here.

Qorvass decided to chime in. ‘Alternatively, pretend he’s Asad and that he’s forgotten everything he’s ever learned.’

“Hey...”

“I understand,” said Zeff.

Hector tried simultaneously to both listen carefully and also brace himself for whatever was about to happen.

“For this to work,” Zeff began, “I cannot simply douse you in freezing waters, because the extreme heat here would cause it to flash boil and explode. Which would probably kill you.”

“Oh,” Hector mumbled exhaustedly.

“Enhancing the water with soul power is a possible solution, but if I were to make a mistake, it might still flash boil and simply create an even deadlier explosion.”

“Fantastic...”

“Instead, I will begin with a cloud of steam.”

And sure enough, steam appeared all around him.

“Next, I will add a layer of water around you.”

Hector was immediately engulfed. An unsupported batch of water suspended itself in midair all around him.

And that certainly grabbed his attention. How was Zeff holding it in place? From everything Hector knew about materialization, Zeff shouldn’t have been able to control the water once it was created, and yet here it was now, holding an impossible shape and remaining almost perfectly still.”

"1257

Hector would have liked to ask Zeff directly, but he didn’t think shouting through the water would work, so he just motioned with one hand for Zeff to stop and hoped the man would take his meaning.

Zeff seemed to.

Hector relayed his question to Garovel.

‘Hector would like to know how you’re able to hold this water in place.’

Zeff annihilated the water around Hector’s head so that the young lord could hear him. “I am applying a counter-force technique,” he said.

‘Are you talking about a velocity state?’ said Garovel.

“No, but that is the first step. I apply an upward velocity to my creation, which counters the downward effect of gravity.”

“I’ve tried doing that,” said Hector. “It never works, because gravity is a constant force, and I can only apply velocity once.”

“You are correct,” said Zeff. “That is what makes this technique more difficult. The key is to think in layers. Yes, you can only apply a velocity state once per creation, so the solution is to break your work up into many creations. Layers.”

Hector’s brow rose. “Oh...”

“With each layer, you apply a slightly stronger velocity state, because each new layer must not only counteract gravity but also support the layer on top of it, which has begun to be affected by gravity.”

Hector had very nearly forgotten to keep listening, having felt for a moment as if Zeff had just handed his brain a light bulb. Layers! Of course!

As excited as the idea’s potential made him, however, he did have concerns. “That sounds insanely hard. You’d have to constantly be applying higher and higher velocity states, or it’d completely fall apart, wouldn’t it?”

Zeff gave an affirming nod. “Applying a counter-force like this for an extended period of time is a good way of measuring a materializer’s overall skill level. Even the most powerful servants in the world will eventually have difficulty creating high enough velocity states to keep their work perfectly still.”

“I see...”

"1258

Zepp blinked as if suddenly remembering something, and then he said, "Oh, but that is merely the way that I am doing it. It is not the way that it should be done."

Hector cocked an eyebrow. "Say what?"

Zepp annihilated the water around Hector and then refreshed it. "I am purposely using the most difficult method possible, because, as I mentioned earlier, I am trying to further develop my skills. But, ah--I should explain that, when working with layers to achieve perfect stillness, it is certainly not necessary to continuously strengthen the velocity states indefinitely. I am doing that because I am adding each new layer to the bottom while removing them from the top, which makes the acceleration due to gravity endless--or at least, until terminal velocity becomes a factor, at which point, in order to maintain the training regiment, you would want to--or, ah, no, that's just going to confuse you. Um. Very well. So, as I was saying, if--ah--if you were to simply add each new layer to the top and remove from the bottom, the technique becomes much simpler to maintain."

By now, Hector was just staring with wide eyes. "Uh..."

Zepp destroyed his water again, but instead of refreshing it immediately, he rubbed his forehead. "As a means of training, my method is ideal, but for general use, ah--you should not start by learning that. Ah, perhaps, no, we should begin with the layer-less version of this technique. Yes, and then from there, we can revisit--"

Axiolis' sigh intervened as he floated up behind Zepp. 'I apologize for my boneheaded servant. Knowledgeable though he may be, Zepp is not the most experienced when it comes to teaching.'

Zepp returned a flat look.

'Hey, Asad, would you mind helping Zepp? Perhaps you could keep him from confusing poor Hector here.'

'Oh, I highly doubt that,' said Qorvass.

Asad gave his reaper a similar look as he stepped forward. "I would be happy to assist," he said.

Qorvass seemed greatly amused by this. 'Good luck, Hector!'

And Hector just kind of frowned."  
"1259

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"I do not require help in teaching Hector," said Zeff.

"So you say," said Asad, "but look at his face."

"I know that I was, perhaps, a bit unclear, but I will do better. I know exactly where to begin now."

"Why don't you just let me take over for a bit. You deserve a rest."

And for the first time that Hector had seen, Zeff actually smiled.

"Oh, shut up," said the Lord Elroy.

"I'm only thinking of your well-being," said Asad, smirking now as well.

"Why don't you stand back and observe? Perhaps you'll learn even more than Hector."

"Oho! Now THAT is an amusing thought--especially considering the fact, as I recall, our record is still 133 to 131 in my favor."

"Hmph, that means nothing. The last time we fought was four years ago."

"It hardly matters," said Asad. "There exists no universe in which your skill is superior to mine."

"Aside from this one, perhaps."

Garovel chimed in for a private word. 'I'm not sure if they actually want to teach you, or if they just enjoy competing with one another.'

Water reappeared around Hector, this time surrounded by glass, but the two men didn't stop arguing.

Well, at least it was slightly cooler now. He wondered what the other Rainlords were up to. The street had emptied of all bystanders a while ago, so he looked around for Dimas and soon saw him standing next to Horatio Blackburn and Salvador Delaguna, along with a slew of



others that Hector recognized but couldn't name. One of them might've been Zeff's sister, but he wasn't sure.

They seemed to be talking to one of the Hun'Kui that Hector had encased in iron."

"1260

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That was good. Hector hoped they were making better progress than he was. With the sudden commotion about trying to not melt to death, he hadn't even been able to think about why they'd been attacked. Perhaps it had just been a misunderstanding. Looking back, he supposed he had kinda helped escalate the situation.

He hoped they wouldn't be upset with him. Something to worry about later, he supposed.

He turned back to Zeff and Asad.

They were still bickering. Only now, both of their reapers had joined in.

"Uh, guys...?"

They didn't hear him.

"Guys..."

Still nothing.

He turned to Garovel.

'Go on. You've got this.'

'But...'

'C'mon, Hector, you can do it. Command their attention as the Lord Darksteel of Warrenhold.'

Well, shit. When Garovel put it like that, Hector didn't even want to argue.

Alright.

He took a moment to deliberate, then started decorating the two men in iron paraphernalia. Iron spectacles for Asad, a dangling pocket watch for Zeff, a waistcoat for Asad, and as soon as Zeff paused in apparent surprise, Hector popped an iron umbrella into his hand.

They both looked at him.

“Are you guys ready yet?” He added a top hat to Asad and a monocle to Zeff, making sure to hook it around the ear so it didn’t fall off.

“My apologies,” said Zeff.

“Mine as well,” said Asad.

Hector paused, then gave Asad a walking cane, and Zeff, a curly mustache with a strap around to the back of his head.

“Stop that.”

“What are you doing?” said Asad.

And at the question he’d been hoping for, Hector couldn’t help smiling just a little. “I was just trying to help you start acting like lords again.”

There came a brief silence, and Hector worried he might’ve pissed them off. Then Garovel exploded with laughter.”

"1261

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The reaper’s amusement infected a few of the others, even getting to Axiolis and Qorvass, apparently.

For their part, however, Zeff and Asad did not look altogether pleased as they began walking toward him in unison.

“The young lord wishes to learn,” said Zeff.

“Then it is our duty to teach,” said Asad.

And so they taught. For quite a long while, in fact. And arguably, at times, against Hector’s will.

First, Zeff completed the technique he’d been trying to demonstrate

earlier. It turned out much more advanced than Hector expected.

From the cloud of steam surrounding a blanket of water, Zeff clapped a full suit of solid ice armor around Hector's body. Then, he removed the cloud of steam, which made the blanket of water begin boiling--then hissing as it began turning to steam so quickly that the body of water looked as if it were melting into Hector.

When the water was almost all gone, the ice began disappearing as well. But it never quite did. Zeff had chosen to soul-strengthen vital areas of the ice armor; and moreover, to those areas, he had "bound" a self-regenerating condition. This was the technique that the Lord Elroy had been wishing to practice, apparently, and it resulted in an endless cloud of steam which followed Hector wherever he went--and without requiring Zeff to accompany him and maintain it, even.

Hector was suitably impressed, but Asad seemed upset that Zeff could pull such a thing off. Regardless, Hector all but demanded a full explanation for this "binding" thing that Zeff was using.

Asad took the liberty of explaining. "Essentially, it is a highly advanced memory technique which requires years of meditative training."

That caught Hector's attention.

"It allows the user to convert a task which normally requires active concentration into a task which does not."

Hector's brow rose as he tried to imagine that."

"1262

'Oh, hey, I'm familiar with that technique,' said Garovel. 'Even non-servants can do it, to an extent, no?'

"What?" said Hector. "Really?"

"Yes," said Asad.

'Speaking is a good example,' said Garovel. 'Normally, it requires active concentration, but it's certainly possible to hone one's ability to speak without thinking. Rote memorization is one way to accomplish it, but you can also learn to just babble words generically while thinking about completely unrelated things or nothing at all.'

"Wow," said Asad. "You explained it better than I was going to."

'Heh heh.'

"I wish you wouldn't boost his ego like that," said Hector.

'Oh, come on, I haven't gotten to explain anything this whole time.'

Beyond that, Zeff and Asad also lectured him on a few things he already knew about. Temperature manipulation, visualization, position and velocity states--the fundamentals, they called them. He didn't mind listening to their perspectives. If anything, it helped reinforce a few things in his head.

They made him practice, too. That was probably the part that he enjoyed the least, and the part that they clearly enjoyed the most. They made him try his hand at a suspended iron cube, using layers like Zeff had described, but it quickly descended into a jiggling mess that could scarcely stay afloat, let alone hold its shape.

After laughing at him vengefully, however, they were courteous enough to teach him an easier method of accomplishing a similar feat. Rather than using layers, he could simply create an object in midair, and then "grow it" straight upward at a speed equivalent to the acceleration of gravity. From there, he needed only keep annihilating it from the bottom while continuing to grow it from the top."

"1263

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Of course, it wasn't truly still, like Zeff's water had been. Hector could see the iron moving in place--and feel it, too, when he ran his finger across it--but the overall shape was almost trivial to maintain. It only took Hector a few seconds to get a feel for the acceleration of gravity, and then, like magic, he had it down.

Also like magic, he found it quite fun to stare at. He marveled at the iron cube hovering over the palm of his hand, feeling like a genuine sorcerer. But then again, he supposed he kind of was one--and had been this whole time, perhaps.

He was going to be playing around with this a lot, he felt. A perpetually

falling-yet-stationary object. He wondered if it had any practical applications. He couldn't think of any, at the moment, but... hell, even if it didn't have any, that'd be okay, he supposed. The technique just had a kind of elegant simplicity to it, and he was slightly disappointed that he hadn't thought of it himself. And a bit surprised that Garovel hadn't known of it.

There was also another technique that they had been mentioning-- something they called "mapping," which Zeff seemed to finally be getting around to explaining, but as luck would have it, an interruption arrived before he could.

The other Rainlords had grown tired of waiting around for them and wished to proceed on, and Hector couldn't really blame them. By now, they'd probably interrogated every single one of the Hun'Kui who'd assaulted them.

'Shall we continue this later?' said Garovel.

"Very well," said Zeff, as the group began walking together. "In the meantime, work on your precision-crafting."

"And temperature manipulation," Asad added.

"Ah, yes.""

"1264

((The Monday Triple: page 2 of 3))

"If you can make a falling object float in place so easily, then your ability should already be more than strong enough to manipulate temperatures. It is just a matter of raising your skill level to match your raw power."

Hector tried to take those words to heart. After so many failed attempts on his own, he'd been growing discouraged and thinking that he just wasn't strong enough to manipulate his iron's temperature yet, but clearly, they knew better than he did. He just had to keep at it.

When they finally rejoined the other Rainlords, Hector's newfound status as a walking rain cloud was enough to earn more than a few looks. But at least it was quieter than that damn refrigeration suit. The steam did cause a kind of low hissing, but it wasn't so bad,

comparatively. Hector was already getting used to it.

Either that, or perhaps Zeff had muffled the noise, somehow. The man had managed to ensure that Hector's eyes were never covered too much, so maybe that was possible, too. After everything he'd seen Zeff do and heard him say, Hector had come to have quite a lot of faith in the man's mastery over materialization.

As the Rainlords made their way through the streets of Babbadelo again, it was Mevox, reaper to Lord Salvador Delaguna, who began explaining what they'd learned from the Hun'Kui.

'So the local government here is in complete chaos,' said Mevox. 'Seems our arrival here is badly timed.' He paused for a low chortle. 'Or, AMAZINGLY timed.'

'You are beginning to sound like a lunatic again,' said Iziol, the reaper to Dimas.

'I don't need to hear that from YOU,' said Mevox. 'Anyway, like I was saying, this place is in chaos, right now, and the reason for it is dick-shittingly incredible.'"

"1265

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'Ugh,' said Iziol. 'MUST you speak that way?'

'Yes! Now quit interrupting me!'

'The reason is a treasure hunt.'

'Oh, you thunder-stealing bastard!'

"Treasure hunt?" said Asad.

'Rumors are swirling that--'

'No, shut up!' said Mevox. 'Rumors are swirling that there's a crazy treasure trove somewhere around here! Something that's been thought lost for centuries!'

'Wait a minute,' said Qorvass. 'Centuries? You're not talking about the

Hand of Arkos, are you?’

‘Actually, no, I’m not,’ said Mevox.

‘Oh,’ said Qorvass. ‘Well, forget I said anything, then.’

Axiolis chimed in now. ‘Are you talking about the Shifting Spear of Logante?’

‘Nope, not that, either.’

‘What about the Lost Library of Erudia?’ tried Garovel.

‘Are you kidding? Why would that be here?’

‘I dunno. That’s why I asked.’

‘Ooh!’ said Iziol. ‘Is it the Repeating Discs of Karugetti?’

‘Nope, that’s not--wait, what? You already know what it is!’

‘I just wanted to participate.’

Garovel tried again. ‘How about the Crown Jewels of Yena Maria?’

‘Still nope.’

‘Is it the Golden City of Arnuwe?’

‘No.’

‘The Golden City of Pomurnen?’

‘No.’

‘The Golden City of--’

‘It’s not one of the golden cities. Those probably don’t even exist.’

‘Hey, don’t be like that.’

‘I do not suppose it is the Fountain of Lhutwë, is it?’

‘Oh, wow, no. Could you imagine?’

‘I could, yes.’

‘What about the Daring Doll of Damian?’

‘That dumb shit?! Thank god it’s not that!’

‘How about the Undulating Arch-Throne?’

Mevox broke for a hearty laugh, then said, ‘Oh, I wish. That would be amazing.’

‘Could it be the Rolling Fists of Chaos?’

‘Nope.’

“Perhaps you should give them a hint,” offered Asad.

‘No!’ they said in unison.

‘Be quiet, Asad.’”

"1266

Their game continued for quite a while, and as much as he would have liked to know more about the ancient treasures of the world, Hector found it difficult to keep listening to them just endlessly naming things.

But it reminded him. Didn’t they already have some legendary treasure with them? His eyes went to the bag on Asad’s back.

He could still sense the Shards there. In fact, he’d been sensing them this whole time and just kind of gotten used to the feeling. For the most part. It was like a slow, gentle pulse that existed underneath everything. Easy to overlook when he wasn’t focused on it, but always there, like a heartbeat.

He’d yet to mention this to Garovel, as it had simply slipped his mind, but clearly, he needed to.

‘...Is it the Sosho’Diyu?’ said Axiolis.

‘Yes!’ Mevox finally said. ‘That’s it! You got it!’

‘Ha!’

‘Aww...’

“What is this Sosho’Diyu, then?” asked Zeff.



Mevox was eager to answer. 'It's supposedly the final resting place of one of the greatest thieves in history. He was so great that no one ever learned his name, in spite of the fact that he stole enough money to bankrupt five kingdoms.'

"Wow," said Zeff.

'Is that all you know of it?' said Axiolis.

'Uh,' said Mevox. 'Yeah, why?'

'Because that is not the whole story.'

'Oh? Do go on.'

'The Sosho'Diyu is a term from the Aidai language. In Mohssian, it roughly translates to "the Grave of the Underworld."'

'Oh... I'm guessing there's a reason for that, huh?'

'Yes,' said Axiolis. 'This thief, as you said, was unknown, but the story also goes on to say that he stole something so immeasurably valuable that the Gates of Hell opened, and the God of Death came to claim it from him.'

A beat passed as, apparently, no one knew what to say to that.

'Huh,' said Mevox. 'Well, that's a bit of a mood killer.'

"1267

((The Wednesday Triple: page 1 of 3))

After that, the reapers continued on discussing ancient treasures, some they'd already mentioned, some they hadn't. Regardless, Hector found it difficult to keep listening. The pulse of the Shards had his attention again.

Or, in a way, it felt almost like they wanted his attention.

Then again, maybe they did. They did have a mind of their own, after all. Maybe Rasalased wanted to talk to him or something.

Now there was a thought.

He wanted to consult Garovel about it, but the reaper was still conversing with the others.

So instead, he found himself saying, “Hey, uh, Asad...”

The Sandlord turned to look at him.

He wondered how to broach the subject without sounding like a lunatic. “Uh... I, uh... I forgot to ask you earlier. Were you and Qorvass able to talk with Rasalased?”

Hector had, of course, already told them about meeting the Dry God. As soon as he'd returned the Shards to Asad, it was the first thing that came up. And to say that Asad and Qorvass were surprised, would be an understatement. Rather, they had required about an hour to fully process that bit of information, asking disbelieving questions intermittently, not all of which Hector and Garovel were able to answer.

And so, when Asad looked at him now with an expression that was equal parts doubt and disappointment, Hector understood why. “No,” said Asad, “we haven't managed it, yet.”

That was strange. Hector thought it would be easy for Asad, now that they'd “woken” Rasalased up or whatever, but maybe it wasn't that simple. Maybe that encounter with him really had a been a freak accident, after all. He did recall Chergoa mentioning something about a “hyper anomaly,” though he was pretty sure she'd been joking.

Whatever the case, it didn't change what he wanted to ask, here and now.”

"1268

((The Wednesday Triple: page 2 of 3))

“Would you mind letting me hold one of the Shards again?” said Hector.

Asad hesitated. “Why?”

“I... I think Rasalased might be trying to talk to me.”

“...What makes you think that?”

“Uh... it might sound a bit hard to believe.”

“I’ll try to keep an open mind.”

Hector frowned. There was no dancing around it, he supposed. “I can sense the Shards. Somehow. Like... like they’re alive. And. Sort of. Calling to me? Does that make sense?”

‘Not really,’ said Qorvass, who’d apparently started listening.

The reapers had finally stopped blabbering on about treasure, Hector realized.

Asad was already digging through his bag, however. He pulled out a Shard. “Here.”

Qorvass looked noticeably more reluctant than his servant, and the pair of them paused in silence briefly, perhaps exchanging words between themselves.

Hector accepted Asad’s offer. His cloud-coated hand touched the Shard, and a shiver shot up the length of his arm and straight into his brain.

And a sense of familiarity washed over him.

But nothing else happened, seemingly.

He’d stopped walking with the group, he realized, and began to feel a bit light-headed. He needed to pay better attention to his surroundings, he told himself, rubbing his forehead. He’d been letting himself get distracted way too easily, especially in this new and dangerous place. He was supposed to be staying alert.

“Are you okay?” Asad and Qorvass had stayed back with him. The others had stopped just ahead of them, and Garovel was floating over now as well.

“Y-yeah...” He inhaled deeply, thinking. The daze in his head was clearing. He couldn’t hear Rasalased. But maybe he needed to initiate the conversation. He wasn’t sure how else to begin, so he just tried to concentrate on the Shard, to think into it. ‘...Hello?’

‘...Hector?’ came the response.

And he blinked. Multiple times. Because, somehow, he could

immediately tell who he was talking to. And it wasn't Rasalased. It was Emiliana Elroy."  
"1269 -- CXXXIX.

((The Wednesday Triple: page 3 of 3))

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Nine: 'Solicitous souls, take heart...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Emiliana couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Had that really been Hector just now? Was she hallucinating again?

The whole room trembled briefly as the storm outside raged with the strength of an earthquake for a moment, but she was growing accustomed to that by now and so didn't allow it to distract her.

'...Emiliana?'

She nearly laughed. 'Hector! It IS you!' She wasn't sure if she was happier knowing that it really was him or just knowing that she wasn't going crazy.

'How...? Uh...? What is happening, right now?'

'I have no idea,' she said, still smiling. She wasn't wearing her mask, as Gohvis had taken it from her.

'Where are you?'

'Oh, I--' And she hesitated. Impulsively, she wanted to say. Of course she did. But what logic would there be in that? So that Hector would come after her? Or, perhaps more likely, her father?

No.

She couldn't allow that. There was virtually no doubt in her mind that Gohvis would kill anyone who tried to take her away from this place.

'...I don't know where I am,' she said.

'...Are you okay?' said Hector. 'Is Chergoa?'

‘Yes, we are both fine. Gohvis has not harmed us.’ Well, technically, he had broken every bone in her body on the way here, she supposed, but he hadn’t permanently harmed her, at least.

‘So Ibai couldn’t get away, then.’

‘No. Gohvis is... inescapable, it would seem.’

‘I see...’

There came a long pause, as apparently neither of them knew what to say next.

Hector was the one to pick it up again. ‘Oh! Your father wants to talk to you. Here, I’ll put him on.’

Emiliana held her breath as she waited to hear her father’s words.

But they never came."

"1269 -- CXXXIX.

((The Wednesday Triple: page 3 of 3))

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'...I don't know where I am,' she said.

'...Are you okay?' said Hector. 'Is Chergoa?'

'Yes, we are both fine. Gohvis has not harmed us.' Well, technically, he had broken every bone in her body on the way here, she supposed, but he hadn't permanently harmed her, at least.

'So Ibai couldn't get away, then.'

'No. Gohvis is... inescapable, it would seem.'

'I see...'

There came a long pause, as apparently neither of them knew what to say next.

Hector was the one to pick it up again. 'Oh! Your father wants to talk to you. Here, I'll put him on.'

Emiliana held her breath as she waited to hear her father's words.

But they never came."

"1270

At length, she heard Hector again. '...Emiliana?'

'Yes?' she said.

‘Could you not hear him?’

‘No, I did not hear anything.’

‘Huh. He was trying to talk to you just now, though.’

‘Ah, then... perhaps this only works for the two of us.’

‘You might be right,’ said Hector. ‘You’re holding one of the Shards, right now, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘That makes sense. I mean, sort of. We both met Rasalased.’

‘And my father didn’t.’

‘Yeah...’

Another long silence.

Then Emiliana realized there was still a question that she desperately wanted an answer to. ‘How are Marcos and Ramira? Are they safe?’

‘Yeah. They’re doing just fine. They’re right here with me, too.’

Relief ran through her. ‘What about my father? How is he doing?’

‘...Well, he’s been through a lot, but... I mean, he’s handling it better than I would, I think. A lot better.’ Hector paused. ‘At the moment, though, uh... he doesn’t seem too pleased with me...’

‘Why?’

‘I think he’s mad that only I can talk to you.’

‘Oh.’ She smiled faintly at that.

And yet another intervening silence arrived.

As she thought about it, there were about a million other questions she wanted to ask--how the hell they survived their encounter with the Salesman of Death, for instance--but she was having difficulty deciding which question was most important.

Unfortunately, before she could make up her mind, the tall, forest green door on the other side of the room began opening, and she

hurriedly pocketed the Shard. 'I have to go,' she threw out to Hector, but she didn't hear an answer, presumably because she had stopped touching the Shard directly.

Maybe it would've been better to keep touching it in her pocket, but she still wasn't quite sure how this all worked, and she didn't want the distraction right now.

The one who entered was not Gohvis. Instead, it was a mostly average-looking man, save for the large, arching horn in the middle of his forehead."

"1271

Upon seeing Emiliana sitting there on the edge of her bed, the stranger stopped. He said something in a language she didn't understand. After a beat, he said something else in what sounded like another language she didn't understand.

She merely tilted her head at him.

"Mohssian, perhaps?" he said.

She perked up. "Y-yes, hello."

"Ah, there we are. My apologies, cedo. I could have sworn that this was my room."

Emiliana wasn't sure how to respond.

"Alas, I do not recognize you," he went on. "Have you been here long?"

"Only a few days." She shifted slightly as she wondered if she should even be talking to this person.

"I see. Well, it is lovely to meet you, cedo. My name is Germal. Would you grant me the honor of knowing yours?"

She hesitated but said, "Emiliana."

"Ah. A name with its roots in the old Arman language, if I am not mistaken."

Perhaps it was time to ask some questions of her own. "How many



languages do you know?"

The horned man paused pensively. "Eight, if I am trying to impress. Three and five-quarters, if I am not."

She merely tilted her head at him again.

Germal took a step farther into the room, but he left the door open. His attire looked like something a casual school teacher might wear, but the way he spoke seemed far from casual to her ears. Perhaps it was just his accent, though. She couldn't place it.

"Forgive me if I am mistaken," he said, "but you seem quite young, cedo, and those horns on your face--has anyone explained their significance to you?"

"What do you mean?"

He motioned to his own horn. "As a first experience with mutation, these are extremely common. Nearly universal, in fact. But few people know that the number of initial horns can be very enlightening.""

"1272

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The man had certainly gotten her attention. "Enlightening in what way?" she asked.

"For example, two horns are indicative of a predisposition for mammalian traits. Three horns are indicative of reptilian traits. Seven are indicative of avian. Ten, amphibian. Thirteen, I believe, are arachnid. And so on."

Emiliana noticed the most obvious omission. "What do four horns indicate?"

"I was rather hoping you would be able to tell me," said Germal. "The reason I broached the subject at all is because I have never seen four horns before."

That figured, she supposed, her expression growing briefly bitter. "What about one horn, then?"

Germal smiled. "Alas, I am also something of a curiosity."

How odd. Emiliana decided to take this man's words with a grain of salt. Primarily, she wondered what kind of mutations he had subjected himself to. Aside from that lone horn, she could see no other obvious modifications. And from what she knew of mutation, the ability would activate itself if he didn't use it for too long.

She considered asking him about it, but she wasn't sure how to phrase the question, and Germal asked something else before she could figure it out.

"Has anyone given you the grand tour, yet?" he said.

Gohvis had showed her around a little when she first arrived, but only enough to know where a few things were. She'd seen a kitchen, a handful of bathrooms, a whole lot of locked rooms, and one immense observation deck at the top of a flight of stairs.

That place had been particularly informative. The encircling view of the world's most notorious storm was something to behold. Bright as any cloud-covered day in one moment, dark as night in the next, followed by a string of lightning strikes that lit up the rocky and barren landscape like a strobe light."

"1273

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Extended tremors were frequent as well, usually following the abundant lightning but not always. Loud rain, louder hail, and ferocious blizzards were all equally common, from what she'd seen so far. It felt as if the weather in this place could change by the minute, and oftentimes, the entire building would shudder in its wake.

'Why have you brought us to Exoltha?' Chergoa had asked, much to Emiliana's surprise.

The Monster had not answered her, however. "I advise you not to set foot outside the Library," he said. "I may not stop you, but the Dáinnbolg certainly will."

And through the observation glass, Emiliana had seen it. A creature of unbelievable proportions, rising out of the ground--melting out of it, like

some kind of phantom.

Its hulking form drew nearer, and Emiliana got much too good of a look at its grotesque body of black-and-red fire. Its five arms were long, spindly things that each looked big enough to cradle an elephant like a baby, and its gaunt face seemed to be less of a face and more of a loose amalgamation of constantly moving and twisting ridges.

“What is that thing?!” said Emiliana.

“A feldeath,” said Gohvis. “One of the many inhabiting this place. They do not like it when you look at them.”

It was close enough now that it was practically breathing on the observation windows. Assuming it even did breathe, in the first place.

‘A-are we safe from it in here?’ asked Chergoa.

“Probably.”

It opened its mouth, and a blinding light poured forth. Even with the unwanted filter on her eyes, Emiliana had to squint nearly to the point of closing them. And when the light subsided, it did not altogether disappear. Rather, it was replaced by that of a roaring inferno, as the creature had engulfed the exterior of the observation chamber in fire.

Gohvis didn’t seem too concerned about it, though. They retired downstairs soon afterward, and Gohvis took Chergoa with him, leaving Emiliana to her own devices. She hadn’t seen him since, but she could still feel his weighty presence in the air.”

"1274

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Chergoa occasionally chimed in to check on Emiliana, but the reaper was apparently being held somewhere, temporarily. According to Chergoa, Gohvis claimed that he would allow the reaper to roam freely soon, because the ground of Exoltha served as a kind of natural soul net and did not allow reapers to phase through it--or at least, not safely.

Emiliana had spent the intervening time in her room, mostly, while she mulled her situation over and played with the lone Shard in her

possession. She was simply amazed that she hadn't lost the thing on the way here.

She did wonder where Ibai Blackburn had gotten off to, though. She even ventured off in search of him a couple times, but the layout of this place was beyond confounding, and she hadn't seen the man even once since they'd arrived here. She just hoped Gohvis hadn't changed his mind about killing him.

And so, at the moment, the prospect of having an actual guide for this labyrinthine building was quite appealing, even if she didn't know what to make of Germal yet.

She decided to accept his offer of a tour, and they left the room together.

As they walked down the first corridor, she thought of her first question. "Does this place have a proper name? I heard Gohvis call it 'the Library,' but I am not certain if that was a name or... um..."

"Perhaps you are confused by the noticeable lack of books around here, hmm?"

She bobbed her head. "That is one reason, yes."

"Would you like me to show you where the books are? That is undoubtedly where we will find Gohvis."

"Oh, um. Yes, please do."

"Very well."

"But... you never answered my question."

"Hmm? Oh, the name of this place. Yes, of course. This is the Library of Erudia. Or the Library of Erudition, if you prefer."

"1275

The name didn't mean much to Emiliana, but maybe Chergoa would be able to tell her more about it. She'd have to ask her later.

As they continued on, they met several other mutation users. Emiliana had seen a few of them already but hadn't gone so far as to speak with

any of them. None of them looked particularly welcoming, but Germal seemed to have no reservations about initiating a conversation with each one.

The first was an apparent beetle-man with an enormous sword on his back. Germal asked him about Vantalay, to which the beetle-man grumbled about there being a spike in terrorist activity. Germal asked if he required help, but the beetle-man said that Gohvis had already promised him reinforcements.

After the beetle-man, they encountered a gorilla-man, a hawk-man, a falcon-woman, a crocodile-man who expressed interest in following Gohvis' example, a kind of chimera-creature mixing several different animals together, and one very large dog with a cigar in its mouth.

Not a dog-man. Just a dog. Or perhaps wolf. Emiliana had never seen a wolf in real life before, but she had difficulty believing that they were supposed to be this size. On all fours, it was nearly as tall as she was and seemed closer to the weight-class of a tiger, if not beyond it.

Ironically enough, despite not being able to speak, the dog was the one they spent the most time talking to.

"This is my traveling companion," said Germal. "His name is Koh. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

A bit hesitant, Emiliana just shook her head.

"The Silver Devil of Dante?" said Germal. "The Man-Eater of Melmoore?"

Emiliana blinked, because that last one did ring a bell.

Koh growled and bumped into Germal, knocking him on his ass.

Germal chortled as he stood back up and brushed himself off. "Forgive me. Koh does not like those names."

"1276

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Emiliana took a step back unconsciously as she recalled where she had learned of "the Man-Eater of Melmoore." It was her mother's

doing. From time to time, the woman had forced her to study the names and accounts of notorious servants around the world.

As the name implied, the Man-Eater was supposed to have devoured upwards of four hundred people over the last sixty years or so. He'd become something of a Melmoorian bogeyman, and Emiliana even remembered reading one story about a village that formed a cult around his legend and conducted human sacrifices in order to appease him.

Looking at him now, Emiliana wasn't sure what to believe.

Koh puffed on his cigar and then swished it over to the other side of his mouth. He leveled his orange-eyed gaze her way.

"I think he wants you to pet him," said Germal.

Emiliana didn't think he wanted that at all.

"Go on. He will not hurt you. I give you my word."

She frowned and began moving her non-clawed hand slowly toward Koh's huge head.

For a time, Koh merely watched her hand approach, but then, apparently, he grew tired of waiting and met her halfway.

The top of his head was surprisingly fluffy. She scratched behind one of his ears, and the giant dog went abruptly limp and shut his eyes. He nestled up closer to her, and she brought her clawed hand up to use on the other ear. He seemed to appreciate that quite a lot.

After observing for a short while, Germal decided to interject. "Strange to think he used to be a grown man, eh?"

Emiliana's mouth flattened. Somehow, that idea began to spoil her enjoyment, and she pulled away.

Koh's eyes popped open, and he growled at the horned man again."  
"1277

“Oh, did I ruin it?” said Germal innocently.

In an instant, Koh torpedoed into Germal and ripped one of his arms off. Germal shrieked as blood splattered across the corridor.

“REALLY?!” the man screamed. “WAS THAT NECESSARY?!”

Koh seemed content now, however, and had lain back down to start gnawing on his prize.

Germal gave a throaty groan as he tried in vain to stifle the bleeding with one hand. “Unbelievable. You realize, now we must arrange a meeting with Nerovoy? Which will put us behind schedule.”

Koh didn’t appear to care very much.

Emiliana had a handful of fresh questions, but she decided to start with the most courteous one. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, yes,” said Germal, sounding more annoyed than pained now. He pulled off his half-shredded overshirt and began trying to tie it around the open wound. “Heightened pain tolerance was one of my earlier modifications. I would highly recommend it, as soon as you are capable.”

Emiliana helped him finish wrapping it, more or less. She did know how to dress a wound properly, and that was most definitely not proper, but she supposed it didn’t matter so much for a servant. The main concern was just to avoid getting blood everywhere.

They decided to leave Koh alone after that.

Emiliana posed her next question while they walked. “So this Nerovoy is your reaper, then?”

“Yes,” said Germal.

“Why is... he or she not with you now?”

“He and I are rarely together,” said Germal. “The nature of our job keeps us very far apart.”

“What job is that?”

“Oh, it is quite dull. I doubt you would be interested.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

"Heh. If you must know, I am but a glorified paper boy.""  
"1278

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"What do you mean, 'paper boy'?" asked Emiliana.

"A deliverer of news," said Germal. "It is as mundane as it sounds."

A rather brief and dismissive answer, Emiliana noticed. She tried a different angle. "How old are you?"

Germal found the question amusing. "A word of advice, cedo. Inquiries such as those are invitations for lies. You will have to choose your words more skillfully than that if you wish to learn anything useful from strangers."

They came to an intersection of seven different hallways, and Germal chose the far right one.

Emiliana followed. "...So you are not going to tell me how old you are?"

"Would you trust my word if I did?"

"You've yet to give me a reason not to."

"Ah. In that case, I am three years old."

"...No, you aren't."

"And now I have given you your reason."

Emiliana smacked her lips. "Very well. If you will not tell me about yourself, then what can you tell me of Gohvis?"

"Ha! He is not prone to talking about himself."

"Yeah, I guessed as much. But is he as bad as everyone says?"

Germal stopped walking to look at her. "Everyone? Who is everyone, cedo?"

She wasn't quite sure what he was asking. "Um..."



"You have not heard what everyone says, I should think. If you believe that everyone thinks him evil, then you have heard but one side of the debate."

"Tell me the other side, then."

Germal continued walking. "The Black Scourge. The Monster of the East. In this place, and many others, those names are all but heresy. Speak them aloud and you are liable to receive a lashing that you will not soon recover from."

Emiliana just listened.

"Gohvis is a hero to many--and I do not mean only our kind. There are some places where he is even revered as the greatest hope for all humanity."

"1279

Emiliana found that rather difficult to believe but didn't think being rude would prove useful, so as sincerely as she could manage, she simply asked, "Why?"

"Because, for one thing, as far as I have been able to tell, he always acts either defensively or with great precision," said Germal. "Unlike many of his contemporaries, he rarely causes collateral damage. And for all their talk, many of the Vanguard's strongest cannot truthfully make the same claim."

That was hard to argue with, she supposed. All things considered, she didn't really know as much about the Vanguard as perhaps she should have; but after hearing the Lady Stroud talk about what transpired at Rheinhal... Emiliana didn't think she would be forgetting the names Sanko, Parson Miles, and Xavier Lawrence anytime soon.

"For another thing," Germal went on, "Gohvis is not trying to annihilate humanity, as you have no doubt heard. On the contrary, he is trying to ensure its survival."

Beyond all others thus far, Emiliana found that claim to be exceptionally dubious. She decided to keep her mouth shut, however, as she began to notice tall bookcases replacing the walls of the corridor. And indeed, they soon arrived at their destination. The

hallway opened into an enormous chamber--much more enormous than she had been expecting, in fact.

It was a great stairwell, she saw, and each floor was filled with thousands of books. The wide pit in the middle of the room offered a view that went both above and below, and while she could see a distant ceiling, she couldn't see a bottom floor.

Germal led her downward, and she tried to glimpse the titles of some of the nearest books, but they were in a language she didn't recognize."

"1280

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As they continued, it was hard to not feel a bit overwhelmed by this place. Suffice to say, in her entire life, she had never seen so many books at once. Or even cumulatively, for that matter. And this scent. She had never thought of "knowledge" as a smell before, but that was what came to mind. Musty, papery, inky, dusty.

Comforting, in an odd way. Welcoming, perhaps. Intoxicating, too, somehow. As if every word on every page was simply waiting to be read.

She couldn't claim to have ever been an avid reader, really, but this place was making her wish she was otherwise. Surely, there must've been all sorts of juicy secrets hidden around here. Why else would Gohvis be interested in a library?

She stopped following Germal and, almost unconsciously, found herself drawing closer to the nearest bookcase. A quick peek wouldn't hurt. Her hand searched for a book.

Abruptly, Germal was right there next to her, holding her wrist. "I would not do that if I were you."

"Why not?" she asked.

"The Library of Erudition has three very important rules, so listen well," said Germal. "First, you can never take a book without the Keeper of the Library's permission. Second, any book you do take will return to the Library within twenty days. And finally, if you attempt to break

either of the first two rules, the Library will devour your soul and every bit of knowledge that you carry.”

Emiliana just stared at him.

He moved her hand back down to her side for her. “Perhaps I should have mentioned that before we came here,” he said.

“Yes, perhaps.”

“The Library is a great honey trap, of sorts. I have heard that it has a will of its own and that it can be rather malicious.””

"1281

((The Wednesday Triple: page 2 of 3))

Another tremor arrived, but it was more noticeable this time, because a crashing sound followed it, as well as a whole lot of rustling paper.

Emiliana and Germal both looked out over the anciently baroque handrail, searching for the source of the commotion amongst the layered sea of bookcases. They couldn't find it, but the noise never quite died down, only lessened to a background murmur.

“What do you think that was?” Emiliana asked as they continued on.

“At a guess, I would say the Library ate someone just now,” said Germal, “but... then again, perhaps not. It is not usually so aggressive.”

She squinted. “Are you saying that it normally eats people in an unaggressive manner?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. The Library usually consumes you via a kind of hypnosis. You begin reading, and then... you simply never stop. The desire to continue reading overpowers all others in your mind, even thirst and hunger and rest. And with every bit of knowledge you discover, with every new secret you unlock, a small part of your soul is overtaken by the Library. In the end, I suppose, you do learn all of the Library's secrets. The only problem is that, by that point, you've become part of the Library.”

That sounded awfully familiar, Emiliana felt. “How do you know so much about it?” she asked.

"The acquisition of delicate information is my trade," said Germal.

"...That is not an answer."

"Alright, fine, Gohvis told me."

The noise from before resurged and stole their attention again. This time, it sounded closer.

"You have heard the Library make these sounds before?" Emiliana asked.

"Yes, but only once. Gohvis had just discovered this place, and the Library was upset that it could not eat him. But that was years ago, and--"

A brown shade appeared, and then Ibai Blackburn was standing there next to her. "Hello, Em!" he said, all smiles. "Isn't this place great?!" He had a whole stack of books under one arm."

"1282

((The Wednesday Triple: page 3 of 3))

"Ibai, what are you--?" But Emiliana didn't get to finish her thought.

The bookcase next to them exploded into a flurry of pages that went straight for the middle-aged Rainlord.

But he wasn't there anymore. "Hey, this one looks interesting," came his voice from behind Emiliana and Germal, making them both turn. He pulled a book off the shelf there, and it exploded, too. But still not in time to catch him, apparently. "A History of Worms and Greatworms, by Leonardo Erickson." He was standing next to her again. "I think I've heard of him. He was a famous Vanguardian scholar, wasn't he?"

Another explosion of books arrived. It missed Ibai again, but Emiliana caught some of it instead and earned herself several enormous paper cuts extending all the way up her right arm.

"Oh!" Ibai bit his lip as he observed her from yet another new angle. "I'm terribly sorry about that. Maybe we should talk somewhere else."

“Yes, maybe we should,” she said, wincing and nursing her arm. She would’ve liked to have that heightened pain tolerance that Germal was talking about earlier.

He avoided another flurry of books and paper. “Okay!” he said. “We’ll catch up later! I’ll show you all the cool books I found!”

“Do try to be careful, please.”

“Aha! Sure thing!” He paused. “Oh, but wait, here! You might like this one!” He offered her a book titled *The Many Mysteries of Mutation*, by Agam Elroy.

And she very nearly took it from him before catching herself. “If I take that from you, the Library will come after me, too!”

“Really?”

“Yes! Didn’t you know that was why it was trying to kill you?!”

“Huh. I thought it just didn’t like me.”

“No! You need to put those books back or get permission from the Keeper of the Library!”

“Aw, do I have to?”

“Yes!”

"1283

“Fine,” Ibai pouted. “Where do I find this Keeper of the Library, then?”

“Bottom floor, most likely,” said Germal. After a beat, he seemed to remember something and added, “Oh, and the current Keeper is Gohvis, by the way. Perhaps I should have mentioned that earlier.”

Emiliana just kind of stared at him.

“Ah, Gohvis, huh? I suppose--” Ibai was interrupted by the Library again, but this time, it wasn’t an explosion.

Instead, it was only a simple rumbling. Which grew more intense. And kept growing more intense. Until Emiliana was sufficiently unsettled

and began to prefer explosions.

Every single bookcase in her line of sight was shaking, even the ones on the other side of the room's center pit.

Ibai smacked his lips. "Well, I'm going to go now." He teleported away just as the room erupted into a storm of paper.

Thousands of books and pages flew together in the center of the room, coalescing into a single, connected form, and a kind of hulking serpent was born. It spiraled in place for a moment, hovering, and then snaked up and over to the floor directly above them. A cluster of familiar crashing noises soon followed. Then there was a pause. Then more crashes.

The pattern repeated from there, and Emiliana got the feeling that it wouldn't be stopping anytime soon.

At length, Germal began leading her downward again. "...Is your friend going to be okay?" he asked.

"...I have no idea."

When they finally did reach the bottom floor, the first thing Emiliana noticed was a gargantuan pile of bones just sitting there by the stairwell.

"Are these dinosaur bones? Shouldn't they have a proper display exhibit or something?"

"Those are not dinosaur bones," said Germal. "Those are the Library's previous Keeper."

"1284

Emiliana had to stop walking and eye the bones anew. The previous Keeper? The skull did look vaguely humanoid, but it was far too large, and the cuspids were much too long and sharp. Not to mention, the cranium was wildly misshapen.

Or, wait. No.

It wasn't so much misshapen as it was smashed in, she realized. There were cracks all along the sunken cleft where the forehead

should've been, and most of the occipital bone was simply missing.

She was almost afraid to inquire any further. "...Did Gohvis do this?"

Germal gave an affirming nod. "The Keeper would not allow him to take more than one book at a time."

"So he killed it?"

"The creature had been in thrall to the Library since eons past. Letting it live would not have been a mercy."

Emiliana wondered about that. She crouched down and ran her fingers along the front, side, and upper sections of the old Keeper's skull. It was as she thought. "...And punching it so hard that its brain flew out the back of its head? You call that a mercy?"

Germal seemed confused. "How--?" He blinked a couple times. "You figured that out from touching it just now?"

She pointed to the fractured indentation above the eye sockets. "The brow bone is incredibly thick--noticeably more so than the rest of the skull. If not for that, I imagine the impact would have caused the entire head to explode."

"Impressive. I am student of anatomy, too. But then, I suppose we all are, hmm?"

"I didn't do it to impress you."

"Hmph." Germal started walking again. "The creature died so quickly that I doubt it felt any pain. So yes, I would still call it a mercy."

Emiliana gave the bones one last look and then followed.

It didn't take much longer to find Gohvis."

"1285

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The Monster stood before an immense desk loaded with stacks of books that were as tall as he was. Beyond the desk, Emiliana spotted an enormous globe. It didn't seem to be what Gohvis was interested in,

but it caught her attention nonetheless, what with the way its polished metal shimmered against the countless amber lanterns spread throughout the Library.

As they drew nearer, Emiliana heard Chergoa's soundless voice speaking continuously.

'--thus, the Primordials grew to know shame for all they had wrought, and only then did the Void deign to claim them. The land, the sea, and the sky lamented their loss, and the Heart of the World raged in molten fury. But the Void refused to return them until they learned the meaning of--' The reaper stopped reading when she noticed Emiliana.

"What are you doing?" Emiliana asked.

'Gohvis asked me to translate these ancient tablets for him,' said Chergoa.

Emiliana wasn't sure what to say to that. She wanted to ask why the reaper was helping someone like him, but she supposed refusing wouldn't have been very smart, either.

"Your timing is unfortunate," the Monster said with his two voices. "We will speak later. Leave now."

"Is something the matter?" said Germal.

Gohvis opened his lipless mouth to speak, but paused and seemed to change his mind. "Nevermind." He grabbed the black mask that he'd confiscated from Emiliana before and offered it to her. "Put it on. And remain quiet."

And Emiliana was confused but not for long, because after a few moments, she felt it. Another enormous soul had arrived. One to rival Gohvis' own, perhaps.

She did as he'd asked of her. Not that he'd needed to. If anything, she was more comfortable in the mask.

At the far end of the room, a pair of doors opened, inviting some of Exoltha's furious wind and sleet inside, along with a man in a raincoat."

"1286 -- CXL.



## Chapter One Hundred Forty: 'O, virtuous Wicked...'

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Emiliana followed Germal's ushering lead off to the side of the main path as the stranger approached.

Gohvis opened one of the drawers in his desk and retrieved a large jar from it. He circumnavigated the metal globe in the middle of the room in order to greet his visitor.

"So," came the man's two voices, "is there a reason you've been jilting my messengers, or do you just like making my life difficult?" He pulled the hood of his coat off, revealing his bronzy complexion more clearly, along with a dark, beastly mustache.

"It is not my fault if the Dáinnbolg kills them before they make it here," said Gohvis.

"You could've met them halfway. I'm sure they made it close enough for you to sense them, at least."

"I have been busy."

"And I haven't? You DO know that the Vanguard's nearly got us by the short-and-curlyes, don't you?"

"I have complete confidence in you, Jercash."

"Oh, is that right?" the man laughed. He shifted something that he was carrying beneath his raincoat. "I never thought it would be your kindness that you would kill me with."

Gohvis offered him the jar. "For all your complaining, you certainly took your time getting here."

Jercash accepted it. "Eh. I kind of didn't want him back. Guy's a real prick, y'know."

"I do know."

"Is that why you showed him who's boss?"

“He wanted to prove himself,” said Gohvis.

“Ah. Where’s Elinox?”

“Who?”

“Vanderberk’s reaper.”

“In the jar with him.”

Jercash held the jar up to his ear and shook it. “Awfully quiet in there.”

“The whining was obnoxious.”

“Agh. How bad is it?”

“The reaper should recover in a day or two.””

"1286 -- CXL.

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 2 of 3))

Chapter One Hundred Forty: ‘O, virtuous Wicked...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Emiliana followed Germal’s ushering lead off to the side of the main path as the stranger approached.

Gohvis opened one of the drawers in his desk and retrieved a large jar from it. He circumnavigated the metal globe in the middle of the room in order to greet his visitor.

“So,” came the man’s two voices, “is there a reason you’ve been jilting my messengers, or do you just like making my life difficult?” He pulled the hood of his coat off, revealing his bronzy complexion more clearly, along with a dark, beastly mustache.

“It is not my fault if the Dáinnbolg kills them before they make it here,” said Gohvis.

“You could’ve met them halfway. I’m sure they made it close enough for you to sense them, at least.”

"I have been busy."

"And I haven't? You DO know that the Vanguard's nearly got us by the short-and-curlyes, don't you?"

"I have complete confidence in you, Jercash."

"Oh, is that right?" the man laughed. He shifted something that he was carrying beneath his raincoat. "I never thought it would be your kindness that you would kill me with."

Gohvis offered him the jar. "For all your complaining, you certainly took your time getting here."

Jercash accepted it. "Eh. I kind of didn't want him back. Guy's a real prick, y'know."

"I do know."

"Is that why you showed him who's boss?"

"He wanted to prove himself," said Gohvis.

"Ah. Where's Elinox?"

"Who?"

"Vanderberk's reaper."

"In the jar with him."

Jercash held the jar up to his ear and shook it. "Awfully quiet in there."

"The whining was obnoxious."

"Agh. How bad is it?"

"The reaper should recover in a day or two."

"1287

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 3 of 3))

"Mm," Jercash hummed, eyeing the jar another time. "So how'd he do,

then?"

"I expected worse," said Gohvis.

"Oho! High praise, coming from you."

"He will still require babysitting for a while longer, I think."

"Well, yeah. Hell, with your little fire buddy running amok out there, I wouldn't mind being babysitted, myself."

"You fear Jackson that much?"

"You don't?"

"Hmph."

"That's not a no."

"Contrary to what you may have heard, I have no interest in fighting him," said Gohvis.

"That doesn't mean he isn't interested in fighting you. From what I've heard, he hates you more than anyone. Even Vanderberk. Hell, even my boss. And everybody hates that guy."

"What has that old loon been up to lately, anyway? I have not been keeping up with--"

"Whoa, whoa. No changing the subject. I want to know what you plan to do if Jackson hunts you down."

"If that happens, I will probably fight him."

Jercash's expression went flat. "That's it? You're just gonna fight him head on?"

"Probably."

"Ugh. Come on, man. I've got plans, here, and you're part of them, remember? And even if you weren't, I still wouldn't want you to die! You're the only real friend I have left!"

The Monster gave a low laugh--low enough, in fact, that Emiliana mistook it for a growl, at first, before being entirely surprised that he even could laugh. "Your concern is touching."

“You think I’m joking? Well, I’m not, goddammit. In fact, if I’m being completely honest, you’re probably the only person whose company I find even remotely enjoyable, anymore.”

Emiliana wasn’t quite sure what she was witnessing.

Gohvis still seemed amused. “I shall try not to die for your sake, then.”

“I’m not in the mood for your sarcasm, asshole. If you die, then who does that leave me with, huh?” He held up the jar again. “This shithead? Gimme a break!”

"1288

“You seem stressed,” said Gohvis.

“I am!”

“Perhaps a nice book would help you unwind.”

Jercash looked like he wanted to scream. After tapping his fingers against his forehead for a few silent moments, however, he composed himself. “...I still can’t believe that one of the most feared men in the world decided to become a librarian.”

“I think it suits me,” said Gohvis. “I only wish I had known about this place when I was younger. It would have saved me considerable grief.”

Jercash ventured over to Gohvis’ desk. “Your mutation studies are going well, then?”

"They are."

"Does that mean this dream of yours is--?" Jercash cut himself off as his gaze fell upon Germal and Emiliana. "Who're they, by the way?"

"My pets. You needn't worry."

Emiliana raised an eyebrow from behind her mask.

Jercash squinted. "Hey. We recognize you. You're Germal, aren't you?"

"I am." The one-horned man shuffled urgently forward to offer a handshake. "It is a sincere pleasure to meet you, sir. I am a great admirer of your work."

"We've met before, haven't we?"

"Yes, sir, although that was many years past. I am flattered you remember."

"You've earned yourself a few accolades since then." Jercash broke for another laugh. "The Gentleman of Palei. The Vanguard sure didn't like that nickname, did they?" He snapped his fingers a few times. "What was the one they tried to push on you, instead?"

"Ah, I am afraid I do not--"

"The Liar of Lyste. That's right. Quite catchy, in its own way."

"Perhaps a bit too catchy, where Lyste is concerned," said Germal.

"Ah, well, don't worry about it too much. What're you doing, hanging around with the likes of him? Is he keeping you here against your will?"

"Oh, you see--"

"Leave them be," Gohvis interrupted. "We still have much to discuss, do we not?"

"1289

((The Monday Triple: page 1 of 3))

"I'm just taking an interest in what my best pal--which is you, by the

way--is up to," said Jercash.

"Mm."

"You don't need to hide anything from me. I am only here to support you in whatever capacity you require. And if that means unraveling a bit of the age old mystery that is you, then so be it."

Gohvis made no response.

"Alright, fine. I'll tell you more about my plans, if you tell me more about yours."

"There is nothing more to tell."

"Bullshit! There's something way off about this library. I'm sure it's just chock full of juicy secrets."

"I am merely using it to preserve knowledge."

"Yeah, and my nineteen ex-wives all married me for love."

"I am sure it was your inability to let things go that won them over."

"C'mon, just clue me in a little bit. For old time's sake. I already know your endgame. Just tell me your next move."

"Studying is my next move."

"Ugh, alright, then what's the move after that one?"

"More studying."

"What's the move after you finish all your studying?"

"Researching."

"That's the same thing! I wanna know when you're gonna punch somebody!"

"I won't know that until I do more research."

"I will blow up this damn library."

"Jercash. I genuinely do not have any short-term plans that you would be interested in."

The man just looked at him.

"Shall I bring in the Weaver and have her read my mind for you?" said Gohvis.

"Yeah, I already know her power doesn't work on you. Nice try, though."

Gohvis gave a hulking shrug and returned to his desk. He began sifting through the books that he had stacked there."

"1290

((The Monday Triple: page 2 of 3))

"Fine, forget it," said Jercash. He pulled something out of his raincoat and placed it on the desk, knocking a number of tomes off.

Gohvis' tail caught each one.

"I brought you a gift," said Jercash.

Emiliana found herself wandering closer for a better look. It was a long, metallic object. A rifle? Her mother had taught her about a wide variety of firearms, but this one didn't look quite right to her eyes.

"Why?" was all Gohvis said.

"You can't tell?" said Jercash. "It's an ardor-fueled rifle from the Undercrust."

"Mm. How powerful is it?"

"This one? Not very. But stronger ones exist. Also, it has no fuel. I was wondering if you might be able to remedy one or both of those problems."

"Isn't this a task more suited to that lunatic of yours?"

Jercash clicked his tongue. "Morgunov was working on it for a little while, but then he got distracted. He's on some crazy feldeath kick, right now."

"That sounds rather dangerous, even for him."

"It is. But he's obsessed with finding the most efficient method for



powering up aberrations.”

“He is trying to feed feldeaths to them?”

“Yeah. And I don’t think he’s had even one success yet. They keep dying. The leap in power might just be too great for an aberration’s otherwise normal body to handle. Or maybe he’s just having trouble taking feldeaths down, in the first place. I’m not sure. I didn’t stick around to observe.”

“He didn’t order you to help him?”

“Of course he did. I told him to get bent. I’m not fightin’ one of those damn things just so he can complete another one of his insane experiments.”

“That reminds me. What ever happened to that mechanical army he was trying to build?”

“Oh, he completed it. Then he destroyed it, because he didn’t like it anymore and wanted to start over.”

“I might have guessed.””

"1291

((The Monday Triple: page 3 of 3))

“If you have any idea as to how I can get his attention back to more pragmatic weapons development projects like this one, then I’d love to hear it,” said Jercash.

A beat passed, but Gohvis didn’t answer him. Instead, the Monster picked up the weapon and inspected it more closely.

“The primary problem is fuel,” said Jercash. “Even if we can’t figure out how to build these ourselves, we could always just steal them. But not having a reliable source of ammunition can’t be so easily remedied. Peacemaker’s been helping the Hun’Kui protect their resources, and even if she wasn’t, the refining and manufacturing processes are still largely mysteries, as well.”

“You are asking quite a lot of me.”

"I know, but I would be ever so grateful. And if not you personally, then you've got a few smart gents working under you, right?"

"As do you."

"Sure, but we've got our hands full. As soon as I return to Eloa, I'm gonna have Lamont, Kane, and Grant all breathing down my neck. Possibly Carson and Graves, too, since I'm not even sure where they are. Hopefully, your old man will be keeping them busy for us along with Sanko."

"What about Jackson?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure he'll be coming after you, not me, but if worse comes to worse, then maybe I'll just feed Vanderberk to him and run."

"Without even attempting to fight?" said Gohvis. "Have a few rumors made you so cowardly?"

"Hey, I haven't survived this long by relying on just strength."

"No. You have survived this long by getting people to underestimate you."

Jercash paused at that. Then he smiled and gave a dark laugh. "Well... not all of us can be flat-out unstoppable. I suppose we just come from different schools of thought, you and I."

"I suppose we do."

"1292

Jercash's gaze drifted toward Emiliana and Germal again. "This guy talks tough, but he's actually worried sick about me. I just wish he'd come right out and say so for a change. Is that so much to ask?"

"Your assessment noticeably left out the Crystal Titan," said Germal.

"Oh, I've got something that'll keep him occupied," said Jercash. He turned back to Gohvis. "But that reminds me. You wouldn't mind lending me a hand, personally, would you?"

"I already said no."

“C’mon, it wouldn’t be for long. A few days, tops.”

“The last time you said that, I ended up following you around for seven years.”

“Yeah, but that was a complex geopolitical situation that needed navigating. This’ll just be a quick favor.”

“You said that before, as well.”

“I just want you to help me gaslight a few people.”

“No.”

“And maybe scare a few others.”

“No.”

“It’ll be easy.”

“No.”

“Agh, fine. Then how about just lending me some of your people?”

“I do not have that many.”

“But the ones you do have are absurdly valuable. So just give me, like, ten.”

“You can take one.”

“Five.”

“One.”

“Four?”

“One.”

“Three? Pretty please?”

“One.”

“I hate negotiating with you.”

“None.”

“Alright! I’ll settle for one. Damn.”

“Who do you want?”

Jercash stroked his mustache. “...Can I have the dog?”

Gohvis thought a moment. “Fine.”

“Ha! Awesome. Thanks, best pal.”

“He will not go with you if he does not want to, however. You will have to persuade him.”

“Aw, shit, really? Can’t you just order him to follow me?”

“I could. But I am not going to.”

"1293

((The Wednesday Triple: page 1 of 3))

“Ugh,” Jercash groaned. “Where’s Ivan when I need him?”

“I doubt he would be able to help you here,” said Gohvis. “Koh bit Ivan’s head off a few years ago.”

“Hoho! So much for being able to strike a deal with anyone.”

“The Man-Eater is not known for his ability to operate discreetly,” Gohvis warned. “I would exercise caution, were I you.”

“Caution is my middle name’s motto, and exercise is its ugly sister.”

“Stop trying to sound clever.”

“Stop trying to sound... not cool.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I changed my mind about insulting you halfway through that, so...”

Germal interrupted. “Would it be alright if I accompanied Jercash as well? Koh and I always travel together.” He motioned with his bloodied stump. “And I cannot ask Nerovoy to come to such a dangerous place in order to regrow this.”

Gohvis gave a silent nod.

"The more the merrier," said Jercash. "How did you lose that, anyway?"

"Koh."

"Shoulda guessed," said Jercash. "Has he maimed anyone else today?"

"Not today," said Germal.

Jercash glanced Emiliana's way. "Are you familiar with the saying, girl?"

She was a bit surprised that he could tell she was a girl with her mask on. "Ah--no. What saying?"

"Don't mess with the dog."

"Actually, Koh seems to like her," said Germal.

That gave Jercash pause. "Is that so?" He eyed Emiliana again. "And why might that be, hmm?"

"He is that way with all children," said Gohvis.

"Oh? I never knew that. So the Man-Eater has a soft spot, does he?"

"Most people do," said Germal.

"Most people are not dogs," said Jercash.

The conversation continued between the two of them, but Emiliana's attention went to Gohvis, who abruptly flew up three floors in a single leap and then returned a few moments later with a large book in hand. He offered it to Jercash.

"What's this?"

"The real reason I wanted you to come here in person."

Jercash inhaled audibly. "A gift? For me? You do care!"

"Shut up and take it."

((The Wednesday Triple: page 2 of 3))

Jercash accepted the tome and flipped it over in his hands, inspecting it up and down. He opened it and began sifting through the pages.

“Hmm. What language is this?”

“Lyzakki,” said Gohvis. “And a few others.”

Jercash gave him a look. “The Lyzakks didn’t write books.”

“No, but they did preserve knowledge in stone.”

“Ah. So these pages are transcriptions, then?”

“Yes, from an underground ruin in Vantalay that I discovered some forty years past.” He held up Chergoa. “I had forgotten all about it until I recently acquired a Lyzakki translator.”

“Huh. Well, uh, that’s great, pal, but I can’t read this.”

“Find a translator for yourself, then.”

“Can’t you just lend me yours?”

“No.”

“But what if I--?”

“No.”

He smacked his lips. “Then could you at least give me the gist of what’s written here?”

“It is a rumination on the Theory of the Hidden Third.”

Jercash’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“I also transcribed several passages from a few other sources that I found here in the Library. To my knowledge, there does not currently exist a more comprehensive pondering of the subject than the volume that you are holding right now.”

Jercash’s eyes widened even more. “Um. Wow. Just. Damn. Thank you.”

“Mm.”

And Emiliana waited, but from the way they were talking, it didn't seem like anyone was going to ask the question that she wanted answered. So she gathered her audacity and said, “What is this Theory of the Hidden Third?”

Jercash smiled at her. “That, dear girl-whose-name-I-still-don't-know, refers to a question that has been bothering us for millennia. And might you have any idea what that question is?”

She shook her head.

“Then I'll ask it to you. How many different powers does a single servant possess?””

”1295

((The Wednesday Triple: page 3 of 3))

Emiliana wasn't sure what he meant. “Um...”

“Don't follow me? Well, okay, let's count them, then, shall we? So we've got our primary power: the ability which varies between servants. That includes all our transfigurations and materializations and so on. We lump all those together as one power because every servant only gets one, right? Right. Okay.”

“The World,” said Gohvis.

Jercash threw him a confused glance but kept going with Emiliana. “So what other powers do we have?”

Emiliana thought about it. “Regeneration?”

“Ah, yes, but that is not ‘ours,’ so to speak. Regeneration, enhanced strength, and so forth--these things come from reapers, not from us. They must be actively granted to us.” He broke for a moment of deliberation. “But, I suppose it must be said that you lovable mutant freaks may be somewhat of an exception on that count, simply because of all the strange ways you've learned to manipulate your ability. But I digress. Try again, girl.”

“...Soul power?” she said.

“That’s right. So between our--”

“The Heavens,” said Gohvis.

Jercash clicked his tongue. “What’re you on about?”

“...Continue,” was all Gohvis said.

“If you’d like to take over, then go right ahead.”

The Monster didn’t respond, and instead merely returned to looking over the materials on his desk.

Jercash exhaled half a sigh before addressing Emiliana again. “So between our abilities and our souls, we have these two major powers. And together, they have created a kind of ‘great duality’ that we’ve come to know quite well over the last few thousand years.

“But the Theory of the Hidden Third suggests that something else exists, as well. A third power that we still don’t fully understand yet, perhaps because we only ever catch glimpses of it. Like with, most notably, emergence. What really causes emergence, hmm?”

"1296 -- CXLII.

Emiliana didn’t know what to think. Truth be told, she’d never really imagined that there could be some other power that even her parents hadn’t known about.

“So you see,” Jercash continued, “it’s quite the subject that my best pal over here has gifted me a few clues for. What a guy!” He turned to Gohvis and opened his arms wide. “C’mere, ya big palooka. Bring it in.”

Gohvis did not bring it in.

Jercash nodded and then went in for the hug, anyway.

The Monster only stood there, as reciprocative as a demonic statue.

Emiliana was mainly just surprised that he didn’t try to rip Jercash in half.



Jercash released him. "Did we just have a moment? I think we just had a moment."

"Do that one more time, and you will not be having moments of any kind ever again."

Jercash just laughed.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-One: 'O, perilous mediator...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

This was the third fortress he'd visited in as many weeks, and admittedly, the famed Lava Base of Dagerto was a wee bit more intimidating than the others, what with its jet black walls that rose to arching points and its many turreted lookouts that linked up with the cavern's rocky ceiling. Not to mention the various spouts and streams of actual lava running through it. The place even boasted an enormous lavafall in the middle of the compound, passing right by the central lookout's main window.

And sure, perhaps blending in among the average citizens of the Undercrust was considerably more difficult than it was on the surface. And certainly, most of the servants around here were powerful enough to pound him into an Atreyan steak sauce if they realized he wasn't supposed to be here.

But Roman hadn't let any of that stop him."  
"1296 -- CXLI.

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But Roman hadn't let any of that stop him."  
"1297

Of course, it would have been easiest if they would've just let him in as an official Atreyan ambassador in the first place. But no. Apparently, the base was on some kind of low-level lockdown and not permitting

any unexpected visitors.

Normally, Roman might have given up there and simply moved on to the next location on his list, but as it so happened, Roman knew a little something about the visitors that Lava Base was expecting. The previous fortress that he'd been to was sending a replacement janitor to fill in for one who had fallen ill. So it was just a matter of ambushing the poor guy along the way and assuming his identity.

Unfortunately, that same poor guy had been a Hun'Kui, which meant that Roman needed to disguise himself as one. Which was certainly a new experience for him. He'd used body paint before but never to this extent, and it seemed like the materials that they used here in the Undercrust were different, too. Of course, the paint did have to endure much higher temperatures, but was it supposed to be this itchy? He was beginning to think he was having an allergic reaction.

Maybe that was just from all the shaving, though. He'd never been so hairless in his entire life.

The disguise didn't end there, however. His non-glowing eyes would've been a dead giveaway, obviously, but he'd found an easy solution to that. Many of the Hun'Kui had taken to wearing goggles. At first, he'd thought they were just some kind of fashion trend, but Voreese eventually discovered that these things were infused with ardor, and when wearing them, the Hun'Kui could see reapers.

Suffice to say, Roman was surprised.

And so, here he now was, navigating through Lava Base as a mostly naked, goggle-wearing, gray-skinned janitor. He didn't think he'd be forgetting this experience for a while."

"1298

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 1 of 3))

All things considered, though, Roman wasn't too impressed with this place's security. They barely even questioned him upon his arrival; and these weird metallic credentials that he'd spent two solid days learning how to forge properly--the security guards scarcely glanced at them. Even worse than that, for the last few weeks, he'd been working hard at honing his ability to eavesdrop over greater and greater distances,

and had reached a point where he could listen through walls--a skill which he had used extensively in preparation for this infiltration. Dozens of conversations, he'd listened to, wanting to minimize the risk of being outed by any questions that the real janitor should've been able to answer.

But that was all unnecessary, it seemed. These people hardly gave him the time of day. He'd expected the Peacemaker's subordinates to be a bit more vigilant.

Maybe they just didn't see much action around here. The nearest town did seem pretty peaceful.

Come to think of it, with the way Voreese had described the Undercrust to him, he'd been expecting a hell of a lot more danger during this trip, but aside from one encounter with a feldeath, things had actually been rather nice so far. With his control over particle vibrations, the extreme heat was a complete non-issue for him, and most of the Hun'Kui that he'd encountered seemed nice enough. Sure, he couldn't understand a damn thing they said, but with Voreese as a translator, that wasn't much of a problem, either. Hell, even that encounter with the feldeath had resulted in another emergence for him.

On the other hand, all of this smooth sailing was beginning to make him wonder if he wasn't overdue for some truly terrible luck by now.

A sobering idea, to say the least.

He had to remain cautious, regardless of how lazy these people seemed, because if nothing else, he could certainly sense that someone big was here. This presence that he was feeling was not normal. Not at all."

"1299

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 2 of 3))

He supposed he should locate this heavy hitter first, and given the layout of the compound as he understood it, the central tower seemed like the best place to start.

He caught some servants littering along the tilestone pathway that led there, so he decided that he might as well do his fake job while he was

here. He tried to give the offenders the stink eye, but his goggles probably got in the way, he figured.

Either that, or these people just didn't give a shit.

Hmm. The more time he spent here, the more he noticed that no one was really looking at him. Like they were avoiding eye contact. Or simply looking through him, perhaps. He couldn't quite--

'How's it going in there?' came Voreese's concentration-ruining voice, as usual.

'Hey, these goggles aren't making me invisible, are they?'

'What? Of course not. The hell kinda dumbass question is that?'

'It just feels like no one's even noticing me.'

'What, are you lonely without me there to baby you?'

'I'm serious. This whole atmosphere is off. And I don't like it.'

'Relax,' said Voreese. 'I'm sure it's just 'cuz they think you're a Hun'Kui. I've been listening to people all over Dagerto, and it sounds like the Hun'Kui around here are being treated a little bit slavishly by Sai-hee's people.'

'...That's supposed to make me relax?'

'Sure. Nothing suspicious is going on. They're just a bunch of horrible racists.'

'How comforting.'

'Actually, though, the situation seems a little more complex than just that. From the way some of these Hun'Kui talk, they're kinda dickish, too.'

'They were nice enough to me,' said Roman.

'I think that was because they could tell you were a surface-dweller. And you were alone. A single outlier is interesting. Charming, even. A whole group of 'em, though--that can be kinda overwhelming and scary.'

'Lava Base isn't exactly new,' said Roman. 'Shouldn't these people be beyond any initial unease by now?'

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 3 of 3))

'Maybe,' said Voreese, 'but I'm also hearing talk about some kind of recent coup that has everyone on edge.'

At that information, Roman stopped walking and sized up the central tower in front of him one more time. 'Coup? What kind of coup? And where did it happen?'

'The extremely bloody kind of coup. And apparently, it happened in Acacero.'

'And how far away is that?'

'Pretty far. In the Higher West layer. It's a good two days' ride by train from here.'

'Hmm.' He entered the tower and started making his way up the eastern staircase.

'It's fairly close to Capaporo, though. Which is where the hole to Warrenhold is, as you may recall.'

'Oh. Excellent.' Roman arrived at the second floor and stopped as a thought struck him. 'Wait a minute. Did you say you were wandering around town? You're supposed to be watching the guy I kidnapped.'

'I am.'

Roman waited.

'...More or less.'

'Voreese.'

'I'm keeping a good view of the shed he's in. Besides, the fuck am I supposed to do if he escapes, anyway?'

'Uh, tell me so that I can go recapture him, maybe?'

'You can't just drop everything and leave Lava Base now that you're inside. Sai-hee's people would be suspicious as fuck.'

Roman wasn't so sure they would, but that was beside the point. 'If he gets loose, then this mission should be aborted.'

'Eh, it'll be fine. You used my godlike knot-tying techniques, remember?'

Roman could already tell that this was going to devolve into an argument of attrition, so he decided to just forego it entirely. 'Alright, shut up for a minute. I need to listen for conversations.'

'Don't tell me to shut up. I'll talk as much as I please.'

'I'm trying to not get killed here, Voreese.'

'Maybe you should try to not be such a rude prick, while you're at it.'

Mercifully, however, she did in fact go silent after that, and Roman began listening for voices beyond the wall on his right."

"1301

He found one conversation about television and another about sleeping. Strangely, that second one was so mundane that it actually held his attention for a bit before he moved on. He soon found a third one about toilet paper and then a fourth about muscle cramps.

All in all, he wasn't terribly surprised. He'd been eavesdropping on these people for the last few days, and this was about the same level of intrigue that he'd come to expect. He did manage to learn a couple more names, though, in the increasingly unlikely event that anyone ever bothered to question him.

Really, though, he was just looking for someone named "Leo." From everything he'd heard, that name belonged to the person in charge, which meant that was probably who he wanted to talk to.

But then again, he had to wonder... maybe this was just a waste of time. Even if he did convince these people to return with him to Atreya... would they even prove themselves useful? They hadn't exactly inspired much--

"YOU ARE A DISASTER!"

Roman winced. He held his forehead and waited for his right ear to stop ringing. When it did, he shook his head, blinked a couple times, and then searched for that conversation again, making sure to reduce the volume. It had come from a few floors above him, he was fairly sure.

--a mess! Honestly, Leo! What the hell have you been doing here?!"

"Just, y'know, man. Relaxin'. Takin' it one day at a time. I don't see what the big deal is, inspector-man."

"The big deal?! The lava isn't supposed to be IN the compound, you moron!"

"Yeeeaah, but it's kind of a hassle to clean up, y'know? And besides, it looks pretty gone, don't you think?"

"Pretty what?"

"Gone. Y'know, like, outta sight. Cool as ice 'n beans, man."

"Argh, it's not cool! It means the structural integrity of your perimeter is compromised! And what if you ever have guests who aren't immune to lava, huh?! I shouldn't have to explain this to you!"

"I think you just need to take a chill pill, daddy-o."

"1302

((The Monday Triple: page 1 of 3))

"And you need to get your head out of your ass!"

"Man, nobody'll care if we just take the energy down a notch or two. This place hasn't been attacked in, like, a hundred years 'r somethin'. We ain't got no worries."

"It's actually only been forty years, but that's not the point. I'm telling you, Sai-hee wants everyone on high alert. And while we're on the subject of what she wants, is there a reason you failed to show up to the meeting in Acacero? Because she was not happy that you weren't there."

"Yeah, I know, man, and I'm real sorry about that. But it was just, like, I



wasn't really feelin' it, y'know?"

"No, I don't know! What the hell are you talking about?!"

"It just, y'know--it sounded like it'd be a real drag. And I've been tryin' to eliminate as many stress-triggers from life as possible. Tryin' to live that healthier lifestyle and be one with Mother Nature, ya feel me?"

"Leo! People are depending on you! And whatever crap you just said is definitely not a good enough reason to simply stop doing your job without even telling anyone, you hippie bastard!"

"Hey, man, there's no need for name-callin'."

"Shut up! Do you even know how many problems you've been causing?! And what's all this I've been hearing about you treating the Hun'Kui around here like slaves?!"

"Yo, nobody's a slave, man. That's just them showin' their appreciation for us--same way we show our appreciation for them by keepin' 'em safe from all the bad juju down here."

"What?! That doesn't make any sense!"

"Of course it makes sense, man. Makes all the sense in the world. They volunteered to do chores 'n all sorts o' groovy things for us, man. What, you think I should've turned down their generosity?"

"Yes! You should've turned them down! It's a complete breach of protocol!"

"I don't know about that..."

"I do! And I know exactly what Sai-hee will think of it, too!"

"1303

((The Monday Triple: page 2 of 3))

"Ugh, man, why ya gotta be so uptight? We got a great thing goin' here, and you can't just show up outta the blue like this and talk all this smack like we ain't even civilized 'r nothin', man."

"Oh my goddess, Leo. Sai-hee is going to flip her shit when I tell her

what you've been doing here."

"Well, then, maybe don't tell her, man."

"What? Of course I'm going to tell her. Your actions--or the lack thereof, I suppose--have consequences, Leo. Honestly, even for you, this is a new low. You've always been a bit lazy, but I've never known you to be irresponsible. And where the hell is Ericoros, by the way? He's at fault, too, for not keeping you in check."

"Oh, y'know, he was crampin' my style, so I decided to give him a time out for a little while."

After that, there came an extended silence. Roman looked around the open-air lobby another time and decided to keep heading up stairs, stopping intermittently to check if their conversation had resumed yet.

If nothing else, Roman knew that he wouldn't be asking Leo for help, but whoever he was talking to seemed to know what they were doing. Roman just had to find the right opportunity to negotiate with them. Admittedly, he wasn't quite sure how he was going to accomplish that just yet. Maybe start with a bit of stalking while he waited for an opening, and then if worse came to worst, he could always throw money at the problem and hope for the best.

He hated doing that, though. Winning people over with devilish good looks and a can-do attitude was always preferable, he felt.

'Leo...'

Ah, there'd been a reaper present, too, Roman realized. That might've explained all the silence. His ability couldn't help him hear voices that didn't actually make sound, obviously, but now that he was on the same floor as them, he was close enough to hear everything. Conveniently enough, he spotted a janitor's closet. Less conveniently, it was locked, and he wasn't sure he had a key for it or not, so he decided to just lean against the door while he listened.

'...Are you feeling alright, Leo?'

"Never better, man.""

"1304

‘Your behavior is worrisome.’

“Nah, dude, I feel great. The whole reason I joined up with the ole’ biddy in the first place was ‘cuz I wanted to enjoy some peace ‘n quiet, y’know? I was sick ‘n tired of workin’ hard all the time just to stay alive, man. But then the ole’ biddy just kept puttin’ me to work, anyway, and nothin’ changed, really. Until I finally pulled this gig here. And, I mean, it’s a cushy job, but somebody’s gotta do it, right? I don’t see why that somebody can’t be me.”

‘Listen, Leo. What you’re experiencing is not uncommon. Some might even say this is overdue for you. It’s natural for servants to go through a period of... self-reevaluation. But it WILL pass--I promise you. And until then, you need to--’

“I get that you’re concerned about me, man, and I appreciate that. I really do. But y’know, I’m pretty happy with the way things are around here. Might not seem like it, but these are some pretty cozy digs.”

“We’re glad you’re so comfortable here, Leo, but just to be on the safe side, I think I’ll schedule a meeting for you with Amaris.”

“That’s not necessary. I just wanna be left alone, man.”

“If you’re worried about Sai-hee, don’t be. We’ll work something out with her. Right now, the priority is making sure you’re alright.”

“Nah, you’re not hearin’ me, fellas.”

“We are, Leo. Everything is going to be just fine. You’ll see. Once we tell Sai-hee about what you’re feeling, she’ll--”

There came a great splattering noise. Followed by silence.

Roman blinked and strained to listen harder. He was able to make out a dripping sound but nothing else."

"1305

‘Uh, Voreese?’ thought Roman.

‘Yeah?’ she said.

'I think the leader of Lava Base just murdered one of his own comrades. Reaper included.'

'...Fuuuck.'

Roman pulled himself away from the janitor's closet and started back the way he'd come. 'Think I'll just--'

A door opened on the other end of the hall, and a man exited. He spotted Roman immediately and called out to him.

Roman tried not to wince and turned around to face him.

Long, frayed dreadlocks. A thick scraggly beard. Tattered clothing.

Yeah. That was probably Leo, Roman figured as he approached. And when he got close enough, Roman also discovered some of the worst body odor that he had ever encountered. He had to stop breathing for a few seconds in order to process how putrid the man smelt.

Leo said something to him, but it was in Hunese, so Roman had to repeat it to Voreese for a translation.

'He wants you to clean his room,' the reaper said.

And indeed, Leo motioned him into the chamber.

Much as he didn't want to, Roman did as he was bid.

Huge swaths of blood covered the far wall, as well as the desk in the middle of the room. There was no body, from what Roman could see, but he did spot a few chunks of flesh here and there.

Roman bit his lip, gave the man a nod of acknowledgement, and then turned to leave again, hopefully convincing Leo that he would return shortly with cleaning supplies.

However, at that moment, an unfamiliar figure appeared as if from nowhere, phasing into existence right in front of Roman and Leo both.

It pulled its hood back, revealing a face wrapped entirely in dark bandages, and then offered Roman a letter and a cellphone.

'Uh, Voreese?' he said again.

'Now what?'"

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'Would you happen to know why there's some kind of horrifying mummy creature standing in front of me right now?' said Roman.

'Holy shit, that's a Courier! It's not there for you, is it?'

'What do you--?'

Leo intervened, trying to take the Courier's items for himself, but the man's hand simply phased through the letter and cellphone both. His expression turned to confusion, and then his eyes fell to Roman.

'...Yeah, I think it's here for me.'

'Well, what'd you get?'

Still hesitant and wondering if he should even accept this delivery, Roman eyed the letter more closely. That was when he noticed the words "From Hector" written in Mohssian on the envelope.

'...A letter from Hector,' he told Voreese.

'Okay, WHAT?! Hector?! How could he have--?! When did--?! What has he been DOING?! How in all of fucktitude did he get access to a motherfucking Courier before WE did?! And we're not even CLOSE to getting one, either! This is some horseshit! He and Garovel are fucking cheaters!'

Roman, realizing that he was probably fucked either way now, decided to just take the items while Voreese was busy ranting. As soon the letter left the Courier's grasp, it burst into flames, and Roman panicked as he scrambled to rescue it. He sucked all the heat out by suppressing particle vibrations around the paper, and the fire quickly died.

He added both objects to the invisible, heatproofed veil that he'd been using for his entire body, and then finally opened the singed letter to read it, glancing at Leo in the meantime.

The man was simply observing with apparent curiosity.

Roman read as fast as he could, but there was a lot written there, and he didn't quite manage to get through it all before Leo took it from him. He maintained his veil around the letter in the hope that he might be able to get it back."

"1307

((The Wednesday Triple: page 2 of 3))

'So what'd it say?' asked Voreese.

'Hector and Garovel are in the Undercrust,' he said. 'They need your help finding something. Leo took the letter from me before I could read the rest.'

'My help? Oh, are they lost? Trying to find the way back up to Warrenhold?'

'Not sure. I think there was something about Rainlords in there, too.'

'Oh, fuck, seriously? Not THEM.'

'What's wrong with Rainlords?'

'Those motherfuckers collect problems like it's a contest. Good in a fight, sure, but asking them for help is like asking a guy on fire for a hug.'

Roman watched the Courier disappear into thin air. He still had a lot of questions about that, but at the moment, he was more concerned about what Leo was going to do next.

When Leo looked up from the letter, he merely stared at Roman.

'...Hey, are you dead?' said Voreese.

'Not yet,' said Roman. 'I might be okay. He still thinks I'm just a normal Hun'Kui.'

"You ain't no normal Hun'Kui, are ya?"

'Shit.'

"You from the surface?" Leo asked.

Roman wasn't sure what to say.

"C'mon, don't be all tight-lipped."

And Roman felt a sudden pressure all around him. Against his will, his next words were pulled from his mouth. "...Y-yes, I am."

"What're ya doin' down here?"

"...Looking for military aid."

Leo tilted his head at him. "Ya don't say? Huh. Well, this is a mighty strange way to go about it, if ya ask me. Why ya spyin' on me?"

Roman grit his teeth, but it didn't help. "I didn't want to ask the w-wrong person for help."

"Ah. 'n I guess you consider me the wrong person to ask now, eh?"

"Yes."

Leo offered the letter back to Roman.

Confused beyond all reckoning, Roman accepted it.

"1308

((The Wednesday Triple: page 3 of 3))

"You know who I work for?" said Leo.

"Y-yes," said Roman. He skimmed through the letter's contents again.

Leo shook his head. "Do you honestly think she'll help you, man?"

Roman returned a steady gaze. "I have to try, right?"

"The Peacemaker. Yeah." Leo smacked his lips and stepped over the streaks of blood and meat on the floor. He made his way to the boxy-looking couch on the other side of the room and plopped down. "I don't think you'd appreciate the kind of help that she'd give."

Roman felt the pressure all around him relent a little. "Why do you say that? What kind of help would she give?"

"She's not what people say she is. Maybe she used to be, but she sure ain't that anymore, man."

"So what is she, then?"

"She's not even human." He tapped a finger to his temple. "Up here, man. Everything's just a game to her. You want her to protect you? Ain't gonna happen. She'll sacrifice you and everyone you love without a second thought. She ain't no savior, man. Folks like to give Sermung and Dozer a hard time, but they don't know. She's worse than either of 'em."

Roman frowned. He didn't have a response for that. He returned to the letter and finished reading it. There were two locations where Hector suggested meeting.

"Oh yeah, and she hates the Rainlords, by the way," Leo added, nodding at the letter in Roman's hand.

"Why?"

"Some old beef, I'm guessin'. But I'm pretty sure she would've wiped 'em out years ago if not for the Vanguard, so... I'd be worryin' about that, if I were you."

Well, that was just wonderful. But with how seemingly candid Leo was being at the moment, Roman was feeling bold enough to inquire a bit further. "...Aren't you worried that she'll come for you now?"

"1309

"Oh, I'm sure she will," said Leo. "But she won't care that I killed one of her errand boys. She'll say she cares, but she won't, really. And, y'know, even if she does care... I just don't feel like runnin', man. Too much hassle."

Roman just frowned at him.

"And my days are numbered, anyway. Ericoros will never allow me to quit my job, which means I can never trust him again. And once that crucial element between reaper and servant has been lost? Well, you can struggle all you like, but it's just a matter of time before someone gets got." He sat back and closed his eyes. "So in the meantime, I'd



like to just enjoy an easy life, for a change. Maybe try to achieve enlightenment 'r somethin'. Become one with the universe, y'know? I feel like I've earned a retirement."

Roman didn't think that justified the murder that the man had just committed, but he decided to keep that opinion to himself. "...If you don't mind my asking, how strong are you, compared to Sai-hee's other supporters?"

"Oh, I dunno. I stopped paying attention to that ages ago, man. Too much trouble and ego involved."

"Sure, but you must have some idea."

Leo let out a prolonged sigh. "...Fifth, maybe?"

Roman blinked. "You're the fifth most powerful servant among all of Sai-hee's forces?"

"Actually, no, wait, Morrison killed himself a few years ago, so I guess I'm fourth, now. Or at least, I would be, if Ericoros and I were still getting along."

Even with this oppressive aura that he was feeling, that was still quite a bit higher-ranking than Roman had expected. If nothing else, it added credibility to the man's opinion of Sai-hee. Leo must've had many interactions with her."

"1310

Silence drew out as Roman deliberated over what he should do next. It seemed like Leo was done talking and had resigned himself to just sitting there with his eyes closed. Maybe it was okay to leave now? From everything he'd just said, it didn't sound like Leo would stop him. And certainly, Roman was not interested in acquiring the assistance of an apparently callous murderer.

But then again, Leo had been awfully forthcoming with useful information. And as a few more questions began brewing in his mind, Roman wondered what else he might be able to learn. Relevant intel could end up protecting Atreya just as effectively as any great warrior. Perhaps even more so.

He'd have to tread carefully, though. Clearly, this man was in an

unpredictable state of mind, and if he came to think that Roman was trying to take advantage of him...

Well. In fairness, Roman was trying to take advantage of him.

Perhaps he would just test the waters with a bit of encouragement, first.

"...Maybe it's not too late to patch things up with Ericoros," Roman tried.

Leo didn't move or respond.

"I mean, yeah, sure, we all know how stubborn reapers can be," Roman continued. "They're so old, they think they know better than everyone, right? It's maddening. I get it. Believe me, I get it. But at the same time, that doesn't mean it's impossible to change their minds."

Still nothing.

"Just think about it for a second. The world is full of possibilities. So many things, just waiting to be discovered. Or rediscovered, even. And people! There are literally billions of people! And each one represents new potential. Potential for change. Both big and small. So is it so strange to think that one of those people might be able to help you change Ericoros' mind? Maybe the key to fixing your relationship is just... out there. Somewhere. Right now. Waiting for you to come and find it."

Leo opened his eyes. Granted, he didn't have the most optimistic expression on his face, but it was something, at least."

"1311

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 1 of 5))

"Look," said Roman, feeling the need to reign in the rhetoric a tad, "I don't know what all you've been through. You're much older and wiser than I am, so maybe this is just my youthful innocence talking, but after everything you've told me so far, it'd strike me as kind of a waste if you just gave up and waited for death."

Leo's half-drawn gaze lingered on Roman for a while before he finally spoke again. "Where're you from, big cat?"

Roman hoped that was a compliment. “Uh...” He wasn’t sure he actually wanted to tell him that information, though.

“Tell me.”

The pressure returned, and Roman no longer had a choice. “I-I’m from Atreya.”

“Atreya? Heh! Wow. I was born in Kahm.”

Roman felt the pressure go away again. “Really?”

“Yeah, man. My mama brought me into this world right near the border, too. Another fifty miles north, and I woulda been Atreyan, myself. Small world, eh?”

Roman was at a loss for words again. Impulsively, a part of him wanted to use this to convince Leo to help him, but he resisted the urge. There was just something very disarming about this guy. So laid-back. Not quite friendly, but... whatever it was, it made Roman want to like him, somehow.

Which was dangerous. He was flirting with disaster here, and he knew it. He’d gotten Leo to perk up a little, but now he needed to get to the point.

“So... if you don’t think I should go to your boss for help, then would you recommend someone else?”

Leo flicked at one of his dreadlocks as he mulled the question over. “Maybe Kane? He likes the Rainlords, I think... But nah, I doubt he’d go against the Vanguard for ‘em.” He paused for another thought. “Yeah, man, you’re screwed. Ain’t nobody gonna help you outta the goodness of their heart--‘specially not with all the baggage in that kooky letter of yours. End of the day, everybody’s just in it for them ‘n theirs, daddy-o. Risk aversion, ya feel me? ‘s in our nature.”

"1312

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 2 of 5))

“Oh, come on, there has to be someone,” said Roman. “You honestly can’t think of anyone? When was the last time you left this place,

anyway? Maybe you need to get out more.”

Leo merely looked at him--but what a look it was. The twinge of irritation in the middle of his brow. The hint of disgust in his stiffened mouth. And that glare. That sharpness in the man's black eyes had most certainly not been there a second ago.

Roman felt the air shift again, turbulent this time instead of simply oppressive.

Alright.

Perhaps he'd gotten a bit careless with his words there. He decided to shut up and concentrate on not shitting himself.

“Even you are trying to make me leave?” growled Leo.

“It was just a suggestion,” Roman said with raised hands. “A bad one, I now see. You do you, my friend. Forget I said anything.”

A tense silence arrived.

Roman waited.

At length, Roman came to the conclusion that Leo wasn't going to kill or capture him. But the man wasn't going back to his previously relaxed self, either.

It seemed like nothing was going to happen unless he did something, so Roman decided to take his chance. “Welp, uh... Guess I'll leave you to it, then...” He started backing up and gave a small wave. “Nice meeting you and everything.”

“Stop.”

Roman stopped.

“Tell me,” said Leo. “...Why am I angry, right now?”

“Uh... excuse me?”

Leo put a hand to his own forehead, and his eyes went to the charcoal floor. “I haven't gotten angry in... in years, man...” He sounded genuinely confused.

Which made Roman genuinely confused.

Leo looked up at him another time, as if seeing him in a new light.  
“...How did you make me angry?”

Roman was still lost. But he was beginning to think that this guy wasn't just being weird again."  
"1313

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 3 of 5))

"I'm angry, because... because..." Leo stood to his feet and began pacing. "Because... because I'm tired of people telling me to leave. And I thought you were different. More zen, like I wanna be. But... but..."

"I am different," said Roman. "I am so different. You wouldn't even believe how--"

"Shut up. That's not the point, man. You're not the problem."

"I'm not?"

"Nah, man. It's something else... It's me." He stopped and buried his face in his hands. "Why have I been here so long? What have I been doing?" He turned to Roman with wide eyes. "Why didn't I want to leave this place all this time?"

It looked like Leo wanted him to answer, so Roman tried his best. "I... just thought you were some kind of a shut-in by nature."

"No. No, no. This isn't right at all, man." Leo stopped to lean on his desk for support, having apparently become dizzy. "How long have I been here, man?"

That, Roman definitely didn't know the answer to.

"It's been..." Leo steadied himself and shook his head. "Years. Ever since that guy was here... I've been... completely..."

"What guy?"

"That guy," Leo repeated, more to himself than to Roman, seemingly. "Did he do somethin' to me? Yeah. Yeah! He must've. That was the last time I got angry. And ever since then, I've just been... Oh, that

bastard.”

“What bastard are you talking about?”

“He didn’t give his name. And his face--I can’t even remember it clearly... Did he do that, too?”

Roman frowned. “Hold on a second. You’re telling me, some mysterious man showed up here at a Lava Base years ago and brainwashed you?”

“Nah, man, not brainwashed... but... I dunno. He messed with my head, somehow. Made me... complacent. Lazy.”

Well, as far as excuses went, that was one Roman hadn’t heard before.”

"1314

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 4 of 5))

“I have to find this guy and make him pay,” said Leo. “Whatever power he’s using, it’s obviously too dangerous to be left alone.”

Roman nodded. “Alright, well, sounds like you’ve got your hands full. I’ll just--”

“My man! You saved me! I can’t just let you leave without repaying the favor!”

“Oh, uh, no, that--that won’t be necessary. I didn’t really do anything, so--”

“Don’t be silly, big cat. Just tell me who, and I’ll take care of it, ya dig?”

“Excuse me?”

“C’mon, no need to be coy. We’re friends now. You came here ‘cuz you want someone whacked, right?”

“That’s not exactly what I--”

“It wouldn’t happen to be the same fella who wrote ya that letter, now would it?”

“What?! No! Definitely not! He’s one of my closest allies!”

“Ya don’t say? Well, that’s a relief. But, um, I gotta be honest with ya, big cat... seein’ as this Hector guy has access to a Courier, well. That alone is reason enough for me to investigate further. In fact, protocol kinda obligates me to, see? So how’s about we go find him together?”

“How’s about we don’t do that?”

“Why not? You weren’t planning to leave him hangin’, were ya?”

“Wouldn’t you rather go find your mystery man?”

“Sure, but I don’t exactly have any leads on that, do I? I mean, the guy hasn’t been here in years, and I don’t even know what he looks like. Or his name, for that matter. Which reminds me. I still don’t know your name, big cat.”

“Ah...” Roman held back a sigh. Certainly, he wanted to believe that this could be an extremely positive development. With as much power and influence as Leo had at his fingertips, protecting Atreya would, in theory, be very easy now.

And yet, somehow, Roman was getting the distinct impression that that wasn’t going to be the case at all.”

"1315 -- CXLII.

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 5 of 5))

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Two: ‘Thine avaricious fever...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Finding a place to stay for the “night” turned out to be more difficult than expected. With so many in their party, no single location had enough space for them, and given everything the Rainlords had been through recently, Hector couldn’t really blame them for wanting to stick as close together as possible, especially with so many apparent hostiles afoot.

From everything he’d seen and heard so far, Hector didn’t think Babbadelo was giving him a very accurate first impression of what life

in the Undercrust was like. Gangs roaming the streets, citizens hiding in their homes, businesses afraid of customers, no local law enforcement in sight.

The full story that they'd gotten from the Hun'Kui that they'd subdued earlier hadn't proved very comforting, either. Apparently, there was some sort of recent political uprising in a place called Acacero, and Babbadelo just so happened to be one of the cities that it had spread to. And this business with the treasure hunt had only served to compound the problem. According to Mevox's information, all sorts of unsavory types had been flooding into the city, and now they were clashing with not only each other but also the newly-formed government.

And as one might've expected, said government wanted the treasure, too. No doubt, they were hoping it would help to consolidate their power here and stifle some of this chaos--chaos, which, Hector had already witnessed several more times.

Such a large procession of foreigners did not go unnoticed by the locals, and when the Rainlords weren't being attacked themselves, they frequently witnessed the Hun'Kui fighting amongst each other.

Hector was beginning to see differences among them now, too. Most Hun'Kui weren't wearing much, but certain bands of treasure hunters distinguished themselves with colorful scarves, hats, or sashes--the latter of which were often lined with weaponry.

Which was another issue."

"1315 -- CXLII.

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"1316

These ardent weapons had everyone on edge, Hector included. Thankfully, they didn't seem to be that common, but the mere idea that even non-servants could pose a serious threat... It was just more fuel for the Rainlords' rapidly growing distrust of everyone else.

He could see it in their ranks. The way they talked to each other. The way they stuck so close together all the time. And especially the way

they looked at other people. He supposed he should just be glad they didn't look at him that way.

'Keep a close eye on them,' Garovel told him privately. 'This kind of behavior is only natural, and it might very well save our lives, but it can be dangerous, too.'

'You've seen people act this way before, I take it?'

'More times than I can count. The power of groupthink. In the grand scheme of things, it's just an evolutionary trait. Hugely beneficial toward protecting the "tribe," as it were. But it also makes it that much easier for someone to overreact, and that's how innocent people get killed.'

'But... the Rainlords wouldn't allow that to happen... I mean, they're...'

'I know what you're trying to say, but don't be too sure of that. They're still human. Right now, they're hurt, and I'm sure they're feeling vulnerable. And in this world, there exists no better justification for doing something extreme.'

Hector tried to take those words to heart. As much as he'd grown to care for these people, as much as he understood what they were feeling, Garovel was right.

In the end, their party decided to settle on a pair of small inns they found adjacent a large, open area--a kind of rocky park, seemingly. Even with both inns together, there wasn't enough space for everyone, but that was deemed agreeable, because a large group needed to stay outside and keep watch, anyway."

"1317

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There was also the not-so-small matter of caring for all the climate-controlled pods. In fact, that was perhaps the biggest challenge of this journey so far. Almost every non-servant among the Rainlords was sleeping in one right now, the few exceptions being those like little Ramira Elroy, whom the Sandlords had given their most advanced heatproofing suits to.

That meant that more than two hundred pods needed to be lugged

around and protected. Stacking the pods on huge trolleys was the only thing that made the task feasible, but given that the total number of servants at their disposal was only around fifty or so, it still ended up requiring quite a large percentage of their total manpower.

For the most, it was Lord Diego Redwater and Lady Evangelina Stroud who oversaw the effort and gave the pods the most attention, but Hector saw everyone else either pitching in to help or glancing in their direction frequently. And it wasn't difficult to understand why. If even one of those pods was damaged, it meant someone's life. A family member's life.

No doubt, this was why the Rainlords seemed so grateful for the shields that he'd passed out earlier. He discovered that much of his work had gone toward reinforcing the pods directly. And certainly, an added layer of heavy shields made the pods even more unwieldy than they already were, but that was a sacrifice that the Rainlords did not mind making, apparently.

They unloaded some of the pods and brought them into the inns with them, but the majority remained outside with the camping group. The innkeeper on Hector's side didn't look especially pleased with so much floorspace being taken up by unconscious people in pods, but perhaps he was too afraid of the Rainlords, because Hector didn't see him challenge them on it."

"1318

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Hector spotted a much smaller Hun'Kui than he'd yet seen, presumably the innkeeper's son. Hector couldn't think of any other explanation for that body language--hiding behind the man's leg and occasionally pestering him as if asking a parent for something.

Hector wondered what the kid was saying and asked Garovel to translate for him.

'The kid's hungry,' the reaper told him privately. 'Says he hasn't eaten in... days.'

Hector blinked at that news. 'Days?'

‘Well, it must be said, Hun’Kui don’t eat nearly as much as surface dwellers do. As I understand it, they have much slower metabolisms, because they don’t need to regulate their body temperatures like we do.’ A beat passed. ‘Or like YOU do, I suppose.’

‘So... you’re saying it’s normal for people down here to go that long without eating?’

‘...No. I think that’s still kinda abnormal, even by their standards.’

‘What did the dad say?’

‘Just to hold on a while longer.’

He frowned, but not ten minutes later, the innkeeper announced to the Rainlords that dinner would be served shortly, so Hector supposed he’d been worrying for no reason.

And by the time dinner did arrive, Hector was almost as curious as he was hungry. He’d forgotten to ask Garovel about it before, so he had absolutely no idea what to expect. With environmental temperatures like this, food from the surface would’ve been cooking itself, so what the hell did people eat down here?

Some kind of stringy, reddish-brown seaweed-looking thing, apparently. And a bubbling, porridge-y substance in a wavy, bowl-like shell.

‘...What is this?’ he asked Garovel, trying his best to keep an open mind.

‘That’s a romodendra.’

‘What is? This plant thing?’

‘Yeah. There aren’t many plants that can even survive down here, let alone actually GROW.’

‘Uh-huh...’

"1319

Garovel grabbed Hector's shoulder, and Hector felt all of his lingering soreness vanish. 'Just give it a try,' the reaper said. 'I've heard it's not as bad as it looks.'

Hector was suspicious. '...Why did you just numb my pain?'

'Zeff's misty armor is protecting you on the outside, but it won't save your insides from burning like hell when you eat this stuff.'

Hector squinted. If he wasn't so famished, he might've just quit then and there. He looked around the long table to see what everyone else thought of the meal and noticed a few other hesitators, but none who were flat out refusing. He gave his food another look. 'What's this weird porridge stuff?'

'Uh...'

Hector cocked an eyebrow as he waited.

'You sure you want me to answer that?' said Garovel.

'Just tell me.'

'Alright. I'm pretty sure it's worm.'

Hector's jaw clenched inside his closed mouth, and his whole face went taut, though the constant stream of mist around him rendered it unnoticeable.

'The bowl there is made from the dried husk and is also edible, if you're interested.'

He wasn't.

'C'mon, where's your courage? I told you, so now you've gotta try it. You never know. You might like it. Certain types of worms are considered a delicacy.'

Fair was fair, Hector supposed. He gathered his composure, grabbed the boxy-spoon utensil in front of him, and tried the wormy porridge first.

Huh.

Now there was a new taste. He had a difficult time even describing it to himself. Meaty was one word for it. Sour was another. But this texture. Chewy and sludgy at the same time. If beef and chicken had been put

in a blender until they had a soupy consistency, then perhaps this would be the result.

Mainly, he was just surprised that he didn't hate it. In fact, maybe it was just because of how hungry he was, but he actually kind of enjoyed it. The same could be said of the romodendra. It was insanely tough, almost like a strip of tree bark, and yet somehow, it complemented the worm pretty well, he thought."

"1320

After a couple more bites, Hector found himself looking around the table for the innkeeper and his son. The quaint dining chamber was packed with people, but Hector only saw Rainlords, the Najirs, and a whole bunch of chattering reapers. When he looked through the open eastern doorway, however, he spotted the kid peeking out from behind the corner there, watching everyone.

Watching everyone eat. And that look on his face. A half-open mouth. Glowing eyes wide with longing.

Hector stopped. He looked at Garovel, but the reaper had gotten swept up in one of the many conversations going on. So many of them were talking at once that Hector could barely even parse out Garovel's voice in his head.

When he looked to the kid again, the innkeeper was there with him, ushering him away from the doorway.

Hector stood and left the table, bringing the meal that he'd still barely touched with him.

As he approached, the innkeeper seemed both frightened and nervous, so Hector slowed his pace a little in hopes of looking as non-threatening as possible. Perhaps Zeff's armor cloud wasn't helping in that regard--in fact, it might've even been dangerous for them if he got too close. When Hector set the meal down on the nearest table and backed away, the innkeeper appeared to relax somewhat.

After a nod from his father, the kid grabbed it, and Hector watched him wolf it down.

So it was like he'd thought, after all. Hector had been wondering if he

was simply mistaken. It did seem strange to him that the innkeeper would prioritize feeding guests over his own child. Was there some reason for that?

He got his answer when several more Hun’Kui children entered from the next room over, all looking at the innkeeper expectantly--and then at Hector, as well. Perhaps they’d been watching the whole time.

That was a lot of mouths to feed. The man probably felt like he had to prioritize customers or else it would affect his business. And in the long-term, that might very well result in even less food to go around. If any at all.

Either that, or he was simply scared of what all these foreigners would do if he didn’t feed them. Hector supposed that was just as likely.

Diego Redwater appeared suddenly in Hector’s peripheral vision and forced his porridge into the hands of another child.

Hector turned and saw several other Rainlords filing in behind the man."

"1321

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Garovel floated over to him, laughing in the echo of privacy. ‘Look what you’ve started, Hector.’

Hector mostly just wanted answers, though. ‘Why is there a food shortage?’

‘Lord Diego,’ said Garovel publicly, grabbing the man’s attention, ‘can you ask the innkeeper for more details about what’s been going on around here?’

“I don’t speak Hunese,” said Diego, looking around. “Hold on, I’ll find someone.” He disappeared into the throng of people, then returned a few moments later with Carlos Sebolt, who gave Hector a nod of acknowledgment.

Hector was happy to return one of his own, though he was surprised that Lord Carlos even recognized him. He’d only met the man a couple times, and he hadn’t really spoken to him on either occasion.

Garovel listened in on Carlos' conversation with the innkeeper. '...So, what I'm gathering is that this new government rose to power by promising to redistribute wealth to the lower classes. Ah, I see. The local militia was supposed to hand out food to everyone, but instead, they just started selling it at exorbitant prices.'

'What the fuck?' said Hector. 'They can just DO that?'

'Well, who's left to stop them? This type of thing happens all the time. People get so wrapped up in the idea of a revolution that they don't have a realistic plan for what to do afterwards. And then the few people who still have power, like the ones with guns, see an opportunity. Assuming they didn't plan to do this from the start, that is.'

'Motherfuckers...'

'If they're lucky, this'll all sort itself out within a few months or so, but there's a chance that the militia will establish a more long-term foothold in the city. And between that and this treasure-hunting fever going around, these locals are looking at some rough times ahead.'"

"1322

((The Wednesday Triple: page 2 of 3))

'Where is this militia keeping the food?' Hector asked.

Garovel paused for a look. 'Why do you want to know that?'

Hector met the reaper's hollow gaze evenly through the mist. 'Why do you think?'

'Hector. This isn't the sort of thing we should get involved with.'

'Why not?'

'Because...' Garovel broke for a curt sigh. 'We don't know how dangerous this militia is. They might have servants with them.'

'...So?'

'So the Rainlords have been through enough. They don't need to get dragged into someone else's fight right now.'



‘I was already planning to go alone, Garovel.’

The reaper hesitated and glanced around at their friends. ‘Do you really need me to say it? You’re not strong enough, Hector.’

He furrowed his brow and turned to leave. ‘We’ll see.’

Garovel floated into his path. ‘Okay, wow, holy shit. I’m glad you have so much confidence in yourself, but we don’t even know what kind of resistance we’ll encounter. These armor weapons are still a mystery, and they could also have some extremely powerful servants on their side, like I just said.’

‘Yeah. Or they could be a bunch of pushovers. I’m gonna go find out.’

‘Hector.’ Garovel didn’t sound like he was going to relent.

‘Fine,’ said Hector. ‘I’ll just do some scouting first. If they seem too strong, I won’t fight them. Does that sound fair?’

Garovel made no response.

Hector grew impatient and started toward the exit. ‘I’ll take that as a yes.’

‘Argh, you don’t even know where to go,’ said Garovel.

‘So tell me.’

‘And what if I don’t, huh?’

‘Then I guess I’ll just wander around like a jackass until I find it.’

‘Alright, alright,’ the reaper said. ‘Just hold on a second. Let me see if the innkeeper knows anything else that could help.’”

"1323

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Hector was nearly at the door already, so he said, ‘I’ll be outside.’

‘Okay,’ said Garovel.

Hector exited the inn and found a nice chunk of the building's rocky wall to lean against.

From here, he had a clear sight of the camping group. Part of the reason he'd wanted to come out here was to check how they were doing. Tall, metal walls had been erected in the middle of the park, no doubt the work of a servant, and Hector recognized several of the faces patrolling the perimeter. A few of them were even walking along the walls they'd put up.

The greater view of Babbadelo wasn't too bad, either. Gargantuan pillars bathed in dim amber. And he hadn't noticed before, but now he could see platforms extending between many of the pillars in midair. The city had multiple layers.

It reminded him of Warrenhold. And he wondered if that was a coincidence. Perhaps Stasya Orlov had taken inspiration from the Undercrust when building it.

The door to the inn opened, and Diego Redwater exited. The man looked around, then stopped when he saw Hector. "What're you doing out here?" he asked.

Diego was something of a curiosity, Hector thought. Aside from being the only red-haired Rainlord that Hector had met, he was also the only member of House Redwater present, the rest having been captured by the Vanguard at Rheinhal. Or killed, possibly. Their intel wasn't clear.

But that name. Redwater. Hector knew how famous it was. More famous than any other House among the Rainlords. It was a strange feeling, speaking so normally with someone who had a name like that. It made Hector a little uneasy, somehow, but he tried not to let it show. Seemed like that would be rude.

"What's it to you?" said Hector. Oh shit, wait, that was way ruder.

Diego answered before he could apologize, however. "I just got the feeling you might've been venturing off to go beat someone's ass, is all. And I was thinking I might like to join you."

"1324 -- CXLIII.

Hector needed a little time to consider his response to that. "...I'd

rather you guys didn't get involved."

"Guys? What guys?" Diego folded his arms. "I'm not bringing anyone else, are you?"

"I just don't want the Rainlords getting mixed up in anything that they don't need to. You've all been through so much already."

"I wasn't planning on telling anyone my name. And considering that you're practically a walking rain cloud, I'd say you look more like a Rainlord than I do."

Hector had to admit, that was a good point.

The door to the inn opened again, and Asad exited, immediately followed by Jada, Imas, and all three of their reapers.

"I hope you weren't planning on doing anything reckless without me," said Asad.

The door swung open yet again, and more familiar faces came flowing out.

Hector just kind of scratched one of his eyebrows and sighed.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Three: 'O, meddling fellowship...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Including himself, Hector's raiding party grew to be six strong, but that certainly wasn't because no one else wanted to join. In the end, he'd refused more volunteers so as not to break up any of the individual families. And thankfully, the heads of each House agreed with him on that front, so no one tried to argue with him. Everyone understood that if too many people went, then it would jeopardize the safety of their sleeping brethren.

That resulted in an entourage of Hector, Diego, Asad, Imas, Jada, and finally Evangelina Stroud.

The only reason he'd agreed to the Lady Stroud joining was because she was the head of her own House, and there was really no refusing her. Just like Diego, she was the only Stroud present, thanks to the events at Rheinhal. Unlike Diego, however, she'd actually been there when the battle against the Gargoyle of Korgum took place.

And whenever anyone brought it up, she did not hesitate to give her feelings on the subject. The Lady Stroud was certainly no fan of the Gargoyle, or the Vanguard in general. From what Hector understood, Zeff had been there as well, but he'd barely talked about it, perhaps because Evangelina seemed to have the issue so well in hand."

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"1325

As they walked, Hector had many more opportunities to witness--and indeed experience--the chaos of Babbadelo first-hand. They'd been attacked before, but now it was almost constant, probably because they didn't have intimidating numbers on their side anymore. Nearly every street had a new group of Hun'Kui bandits who seemed keen to test them. Several tried to extort a toll beforehand, but just as many attacked without warning.

It never went well for the assailants. They were rarely ever armed, and even when they were, the reapers noticed it immediately, having become hyper-aware of the threat ever since their first encounter with it.

But the fact that these people weren't armed and yet were still so bold as to attack them anyway... it spoke to Hector of desperation. And Garovel agreed. Maybe some of them were just being assholes, but a lot of them were probably trying to feed themselves or their families in whatever way they could.

It was more than enough reason to go easy on them, Hector felt. And the others seemed to agree, excepting the Lady Stroud. She didn't kill

anyone, but she dealt out plenty of broken fingers, hands, arms, and ankles. She just about pulled a guy's leg off before her reaper, Ezura, told her to stop.

Hector wondered if he should ask her to return to the inn. He doubted she would listen to him, but maybe the others would be able to convince her. Regardless, he decided to hold off and just keep an eye on her.

At length, the frequency of attacks began to die down again. Hector wasn't sure if they'd just been passing through a particularly bad area of the city or if the attackers had realized it was a lost cause.

Either way, this sudden calm, though welcome, was rather unsettling, in its own way. Hector could see the reapers constantly scanning their surroundings."

"1326

'We need to be extra careful how we resolve this situation,' Garovel was saying, not for the first time. He'd been trying to explain something, but the constant interruptions from hostile Hun'Kui had been getting in the way, and even now, he looked like he was waiting for something to cut him off again.

The reapers didn't really need to be looking around so much, Hector knew. They could sense the locations of every soul around them if they just concentrated, but after Dunehall, Hector couldn't really blame them for their paranoia here. If aberrations were able to operate undetected by reapers, then it didn't seem outside the realm of possibility that these Hun'Kui and their new technologies might have a similar surprise in store.

Thankfully, though, that didn't seem like it was going to be the case.

Garovel was taking a while to finish his thought, so Hector decided to give him a push. 'What do you mean?'

'Hmm? Oh, yeah. Um. Look, let's say we beat up these food-stealing pricks and start handing it out to everyone. Let's even say that there's plenty of food to go around and that we don't have to worry about rationing it at all. What happens after we leave Babbadelo?'

‘Uh...’

‘How do we know that someone else won’t pick up where these assholes left off?’

‘Hmm...’

‘The answer is that we don’t know,’ said Garovel. ‘That’s the problem. This place is unstable as hell, and that’s not something we can realistically fix unless we stay here indefinitely and work on keeping the peace ourselves.’

Hector frowned. ‘...Are you saying we should turn back?’

‘I’m saying there’s only so much we can hope to accomplish for the locals here. It’s not as simple a matter as you seem to have been thinking. And before you say anything else, do NOT give me any of that cavalier sass from earlier, you prick. Coming up with terrible plans is MY area of expertise, remember? And I don’t appreciate being treated like I’m some kind of lazy piece of shit who doesn’t care about helping people.’

‘That’s not what I was--’

‘Yeah, sure it wasn’t.’”

"1327

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‘I wasn’t trying to insult you, Garovel... Believe me, I know how much you want to save innocent lives. I mean, shit, without you, I wouldn’t even... uh... y’know... I just--’

‘Yeah, alright, fine, we both know what an incredible humanitarian god-being I am, but that’s only part of what I was getting at. The real point, my young friend, is that you let yourself get a bit too worked up back there. You and I are supposed to be the reasonable ones here, remember?’

‘Sure, but...’ Hector didn’t quite know how to argue that point just yet. He only knew that he wanted to. ‘Mrgh...’

‘Look, I get it. You’re feeling more confident in your abilities and want

to help as many people as possible. That's a good thing. Great, actually. Especially considering where you started. But not everything--'

'No, that's not it,' said Hector. 'That's not it at all...'

The reaper fell quiet a moment. 'What do you mean?'

'It's not... agh... it's not that I'm feeling more confident... In fact, it's the exact opposite.' Hector's gaze drifted from side to side as he eyed his companions. 'If anything, I've been... really fucking frustrated with myself.'

'...Why?' Garovel sounded genuinely incredulous, as if he'd just heard something completely nonsensical to him.

'Because! Garovel...! I've barely been able to do ANYTHING lately. Everybody's been having to protect me.' Hector could hardly believe that he was having to explain something so obvious. 'And I hate that.'

'Hector... if that's what you really think, then you're an idiot.'

'No, I'm not. YOU'RE an idiot.'

'Really? That's your comeback?'

'Shut up. When you said that these people here were in trouble, I was just... I was SO ready to help them, because it sounded like I actually COULD! For a change! And isn't that the whole point?!'

"1328

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'Of course it's the point,' said Garovel. 'But Hector. Come-the-fuck-on. I warned you back in Kuros, back when I was asking if you wanted to go meet Chergoa. I said we'd be stepping into territory that we were not ready for. And honestly, my boy, you've done far better than I ever could have hoped.'

Hector made no response.



The reaper's boney face twisted as he kept pace with Hector. 'You really don't agree? Hector. Marshrock was amazing enough, but Dunehall, too?'

'But that was... I mean... I don't know what that was. But I know that it wasn't something reliable.'

Garovel paused. 'Something reliable?'

'Like... I don't think I could do it again. It was just... It was dumb luck, is all it was.'

'Mm, I dunno about that. I think you're underestimating yourself.'

'I don't.'

'Yes, I see that now. I can't believe I ever thought you were being overconfident. Holy shit.'

'Ugh. I just... I... I mean, I'm not wrong, am I? The Rainlords are going to live with us. Under my roof. They're gonna be relying on me. So...'  
He had to consciously avoid sighing in front of everyone. 'I have to become more reliable than just dumb luck. I don't know how, but... I have to.'

'Hector. You can't protect... ah... Hmm.'

Hector threw him a glance. 'Wha?'

'Well, uh,' said Garovel, 'I was about to say that you can't protect the Rainlords from everything that's threatening them, but... frankly, I don't know what you're capable of, anymore. After Rasalased and Haqq's shield and that shit you pulled with the Salesman-of-Goddamn-Death... and now whatever-the-hell is going on with you and the Shards... I just. You... I don't know. Now that I think about it, maybe I'M the one who's underestimating you.'

‘Uh... what?’

‘Argh! Fuck you! Now you’re making ME confused! None of this means that we shouldn’t still be cautious in general! Or that you should stop listening to my sage wisdom, goddammit!’

"1329

((The Monday Triple: page 3 of 3))

‘...Okay,’ said Hector.

‘Don’t gimme that shit. My entire worldview is crumbling over here, and all you’ve got for me is “okay”? I don’t know what’s real anymore, you son of a bitch.’

‘...Then why do you sound more excited than upset?’

‘Excuse me? I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘I’m sure you do.’

‘You must be going crazy. It’s the only explanation. Crazy Hector, that’s what they’re gonna start calling you if you’re not careful.’

‘Right.’

‘Hector the Crazy. Hector “Crazy” Goffe. Crazy Hector and the Crazies.’

‘Did you just put me in a band?’

‘Oh, man, I would love to see you as the lead singer of a band.’

‘I’d sooner face Ivan again.’

‘What kind of band would it be, you think? Heavy metal?’

By the time the group’s destination came into view, Hector was more than ready for a fight to rescue him from this conversation.

It was a hulking platform suspended in midair by a host of thick cables. It wrapped all the way around one of the city’s enormous pillars and was positioned about halfway up to the next layer of streets and

buildings. The group had already traveled up two layers on the way here, and the view to either side of Hector was not something he would soon forget, he thought. Like a sea of fireflies flickering in the darkness, both above and below--some moving, some not, but all reminding him of life, of how many people were still relatively nearby, even if he couldn't see any of them.

"Hmm," said Diego Redwater, staring up at the platform above their heads. "That looks like a defensive position, if I've ever seen one. I guess they're expecting us, eh?"

"We were not exactly subtle on our way here," said Asad. "No doubt, they received plenty of warning."

"1330

"If that is the case, then there is no sense in attempting stealth," said Evangelina. Her long, raven-black skirt flowed wildly with every step she took. When they'd first set out from the inn, Hector had thought it rather impractical attire for combat, but after seeing the way the woman could move in it, he was glad he hadn't said anything.

'We should assume that they are more heavily armed than anyone we have met thus far,' said Qorvass. 'It would be best to avoid running headlong into a hail of ardor-infused bullets, no?'

The Lady Stroud's face remained stolid, but she didn't say anything.

Her reaper, however, chimed in. 'That may not be an option, either,' Ezura said, and she motioned upward.

A fleet of blinking white specks were pouring out from the platform above. Hector wasn't quite sure what they were, but apparently Asad was, because quartz raised up from below the group and started carrying them diagonally away.

Blindingly bright spotlights fell upon them, and then a storm of flaming bullets arrived, chasing after Asad's zigzagging work as it pushed the group ever higher and closer to their objective.

The shields came up, and everyone bunched together to form a protective wall around Asad and the reapers. A flurry of bullets occasionally washed over them, pinging off the shields like hail, but

Hector was not pleased to see the many dents they left behind.

Ardor-infused, indeed. If they could do that kind of damage to the metal of Haqq's shield, then he didn't want to imagine what they would do to a person. Or a reaper.

As they neared the platform, Hector caught clearer sight of the blinking specks and realized that they were a small army of hovering drones.

And they were in range.

Hector's free hand flexed, and iron clapped around every drone in his line of sight. They dropped instantly, and Hector pulled an iron bowl up from below to catch them like so much popcorn, not wanting them to fall out of sight and kill some poor bystander."

"1331

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Hector moved to eliminate the rest of the drones as well, but he found that they had already been taken care of by glass and were joining his own batch in the bowl below.

The group soon reached the platform, and briefly, Hector got a sprawling view of the military compound that sat upon it.

But only briefly.

A kind of hissing whoosh stole his attention, and he immediately saw the rocket-propelled grenade that it belonged to. Its brightly burning form left little doubt that it, too, carried the threat of ardor, and Hector was about to try to divert its path with materialized iron, but Asad's quartz beat him to it.

Rocket met glass, and the resulting explosion was so fierce that it still reached them and tore Asad's glass elevator to pieces, sending the group toppling off in all different directions.

Hector caught himself, Jada Najir, and Diego Redwater on an iron slide, which carried the three of them smoothly down to the platform full of hostiles, and they all hit the metal ground running. More blazing gunfire erupted, and there was no cover to be found--not from these bullets. The small building in front of them might as well have not been

there, and indeed, as they ran sideways, the gunfire bisected it horizontally, making the structure buckle under its own weight.

Several shots grazed Hector's head and legs, and he could feel that whole chunks of flesh were just gone, exploded apart. But he was still running, and the regeneration was doing its work, and that was all that mattered.

Shields out, they rounded the collapsed building and finally had a clear view of their attackers--a firing line of twenty or so Hun'Kui in various types of deeply green garb. When they saw Hector, Jada, and Diego all barreling toward them, they immediately stopped firing and scattered."

"1332

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Hector clapped iron around most of them before they got too far, but the now-all-too-familiar sound of a rocket-propelled grenade demanded his attention again. He flung himself and Jada out of its path with a sudden iron pillar, but the force of explosion threw them even farther than he'd wanted, and they went sailing through the wall of a small tower together.

Jada was first on her feet and helping Hector to his, and without even time to think, they were already storming up a flight of stairs while being chased by more gunfire from more yet-unseen shooters.

At the next floor, they encountered a group of four Hun'Kui who, by their expressions, had not realized they were there.

Hector added them to his collection of iron statues.

They found a balcony on the left, along with still more gunfire. This time, however, the bullets were quickly cut short, and Hector saw why. Asad and the others were pushing through the middle of the compound, drawing fire, encasing assailants in glass, and flattening everyone else.

Hector made an iron walkway from the balcony to the roof of the next building over, and Jada didn't hesitate to run across first. Hector followed, wondering if she was just reckless or if she actually trusted

his workmanship that much. As he ran, he was glad he'd thought to include tiny ridges in the iron for added grip. It was a trick he'd noticed in some of Asad's creations and had been wanting to try for himself.

He heard another RPG launch and saw it heading for Asad's group, but it never found its target or even exploded. Instead, Diego Redwater bounded up a stack of crates and snatched it out of the air mid-flight, freezing it solid in an instant--a feat which, frankly, Hector wouldn't have even thought physically possible in temperatures like these."

"1333

((The Wednesday Triple: page 3 of 3))

Diego's whole body smoldered with freezing mist as his power of nitrogen transfiguration clashed with the very atmosphere itself.

And at that moment, all gunfire ceased, and Hector was confused, because he looked around and saw the remaining Hun'Kui laying their weapons down.

He didn't quite know what to think. There were still quite a lot of them left, and they surely could've put up quite a fight, considering how heavily armed they were. And yet they were surrendering so soon?

When he observed the scene a second time, however, he thought he understood. It was Diego--the way the man was standing in the middle of the compound like that, in full view of all the Hun'Kui, having just done what he'd done, looking not entirely unlike some kind of unkillable ice god with that frozen rocket clutched in one hand, while also seemingly poised and awaiting another.

Hector and Jada made their way down from the rooftop and rejoined the others. Everyone shared a similar expression of disbelief and suspicion.

In the end, however, the battle concluded without further incident, and the rest of the Hun'Kui gathered and allowed themselves to be taken prisoner.

Hector certainly had no complaints. That fight could've easily gotten much messier. Brief as it had been, a few of the reapers had still taken a bit of a beating, even despite having positioned themselves behind

the shields for extra protection. Qorvass sported a clearly visible bullet hole right in the center of his bony forehead. It looked rather awkward to Hector, but the reaper didn't seem terribly inconvenienced by it.

With all hostiles safely subdued, the group decided to spread out and search the compound. Jada and Atalim chose to remain partnered with Hector and Garovel.

"...I am sorry I could not be of more assistance back there," said Jada."  
"1334

The words took Hector by surprise, as he wasn't even looking at her and had been eyeing a large warehouse on the other side of a line of smaller buildings.

And now that he was thinking about it, he and she had been spending a lot of time together lately, and yet he hadn't heard the young woman speak very much at all. He remembered her talking to the Elroys a fair amount during the trip to Dunehall, but he wasn't sure she'd ever uttered a single word to him directly.

Now that she definitely had, though, Hector was suddenly nervous, as it reminded him how little he actually knew of her.

"I feel I should thank you for protecting us the way you did," she said.

Oh shit, and she was really nice, too? Why the hell was this happening now? 'Garovel, help...'

'Tell her it was no big deal,' the reaper said privately. 'And sound manly.'

Hector frowned and looked at her--which turned out to be a bad idea.

This was a proper young lady that was speaking to him. A noblewoman. Those golden yellow eyes that apparently ran in her family easily made for one of the most striking gazes that Hector had ever seen, and combined with the soft contours of her nose, cheeks, and eyebrows, Jada's face created an uncommon blend of keen innocence.

Goddammit.

This was why he was in the habit of avoiding people's faces. Especially women's.

He tried to respond, but his mouth wouldn't move, perhaps because it knew something that his brain didn't. He decided to just go with a simple nod, instead. That would be enough, right?

Thankfully, it did seem to satisfy her.

Garovel picked up the slack before the silence grew too long. 'What is your ability, by the way? We've yet to see you use it.'

"1335

Jada hesitated visibly at the inquiry, then deferred to Atalim.

'I am afraid we cannot tell you,' the reaper said.

'Oh, come now,' said Garovel. 'We're all friends here. And besides, Hector and I have met the Dry God. AND he trusts us. That must lend us credibility, right?'

'Your trustworthiness is not in question,' said Atalim. 'The real problem is that one can never know who may be listening. It is for the best if--'

"Plutonium," Jada whispered, having stepped closer.

Hector's eyes widened.

"Materialization," she added.

Atalim growled lowly. 'Jada. Your father shall hear of this.'

The young woman was not deterred. "In truth, it is not as dangerous as it sounds," she went on quietly. "Even normal people would not be harmed unless they were exposed for a long period of time. Or unless I used certain isotopes. Or soul-strengthening."

'Wow,' said Garovel. 'I've never heard--'

Jada held up a finger. "It is too easy for reapers to be overheard," she whispered.

'Mm,' said Garovel. Then, privately, he relayed his thoughts to Hector.



“...Garovel has never heard of someone having a man-made element as their ability,” he said softly.

Jada paused, seemingly listening to Atalim. “...No element is truly man-made. Only discovered.”

Hector listened to Garovel again. “...Even so, they do seem to be rarer.”

“...As they are in nature.”

Hector had a question of his own now. “Ah... but if it’s not that dangerous, then why all the secrecy?”

“Because,” said Jada, “if the wrong people discovered that I can create something so valuable, they will come for me. Or simply try to kill me.”

Hector understood.

“I am very grateful that I did not need to use it today.” She glanced at Atalim. “My father will be grateful as well.”

Now Hector didn’t understand. “No offense, but... if that’s the case, then why did you come with us? You could’ve stayed at the inn with the Rainlords.”

"1336

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“Abbi worries over you,” said Jada. “He did not want any harm to come to you.”

By now, Hector was reasonably sure that abbi was a Valgan word referring to Asad. “But that... doesn’t explain why you decided to come.”

“Abbi worries over you. I worry over abbi.”

Hector supposed he couldn’t argue with that. Asad still had not fully recovered from his encounter with the Marauder of Calthos. Jada certainly had every reason to be concerned about him.

But Hector was also beginning to see how these sorts of things could

very easily spiral out of control. Various strong-headed and well-meaning people all concerned about each other, all taking steps to protect each other, only for it to escalate matters in unexpected ways.

That was the kind of thing that a lord should be mindful of, Hector supposed.

Ugh.

For now, at least, he could be glad that the situation here had gone smoothly, more or less. There was still the matter of locating all of the stolen goods and ensuring fair distribution, but Hector was feeling good about their prospects now. And he felt even better when he and Jada entered the warehouse that he'd spotted earlier and found it filled to the rafters with food.

Most of it looked just as weird as the stuff he'd tasted back at the inn. Massive slabs of blackened meat, pungent even through the heavy cloth it was wrapped in. Tubs of stringy, white noodles and darkly purple rice. Barrels full of reddish, leafy vegetables that Garovel identified as a kind of rhubarb.

Hector wasn't seeing any fruits, though, and wondered if that trend extended to the Undercrust as a whole. He was about to ask Garovel about it when a large gray box in the corner of the room caught his attention. He made his way over to it, looking for a door.

'Oh my fucking god,' said Garovel.

And Hector stopped, recognizing the reaper's tone all too well. He didn't even want to ask for elaboration."

"1337 -- CXLIV.

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Garovel floated up from behind him in order to inspect the gray box more closely. Atalim and Jada joined as well.

'...Is this what I think it is?' said Atalim.

Garovel sighed publicly. 'Yeah... yeah, I'm pretty sure it is.'

Hector found the door he'd been looking for. Its outline was so thin that

it blended in with the rest of the box and rendered itself almost invisible. The handle was barely noticeable as well--just a small indentation in the wall where it looked like he was supposed to pull.

He didn't think he wanted to open it anymore, though. Sure enough, Garovel's next words reaffirmed his bad feeling.

'Don't open this,' the reaper said. 'You understand me? No matter what. Do. Not. Open it.'

Hector let Jada be the one to ask.

"Why? Do you know what is in here?"

'I can make an educated guess,' said Garovel. But he neglected to elaborate, as if dreading to.

"...And?" pushed Jada.

'...Eggs.'

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Four: 'Thy toxic prize...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"And what is so terrible about eggs?" the young Lady Najir asked.

Hector, meanwhile, already had some idea where this was going. The discussion he'd had with Garovel on the way down to the Undercrust was still fresh in his mind.

Atalim was the one who answered her, however. 'Worm eggs,' was all he said.

Jada's expression shifted from curiosity to flat displeasure.

'This box is vacuum sealed,' said Garovel. 'And given how large it is and that it doesn't appear to be refrigerated, there's pretty much nothing else that could be inside.'

Hector figured he should take a turn asking the obvious question. "Worm eggs need to be vacuum sealed?"

'Indeed,' said Atalim. 'They secrete a kind of sludge, which gives off pheromones. And most species of worm possess a terrifyingly good

sense of smell. Greatworms in particular.”  
"1337 -- CXLIV.

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 2 of 5))

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'Indeed,' said Atalim. 'They secrete a kind of sludge, which gives off pheromones. And most species of worm possess a terrifyingly good sense of smell. Greatworms in particular.'

"1338

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'And certain morons consider that sludge a delicacy,' said Garovel. 'Though, I suppose they could also want these for scientific purposes. Regardless, I thought the practice of capturing these things was outlawed ages ago.'

'I am fairly certain that it was and still is wildly illegal,' said Atalim. 'But invariably, that never completely kills demand. In less reputable circles, such laws only serve to drive up the price.'

'Maybe that's what all this is really about. To the right buyer, these eggs could be worth more than all the food in the city.'

'Hmm. Perhaps we should inform the others of our discovery before getting lost in speculation,' said Atalim.

'Fine, if you wanna be all smart and pragmatic-like.'

They reconvened with the rest of the group and learned that they had not been alone in their findings. Two more warehouses full of rations and foodstuffs were nearby, apparently, and both contained a vacuum-sealed chamber of their own.

Asad and Imas took point on questioning the captives while everyone else discussed what to do next.

"I believe we should destroy the eggs and be done with it," the Lady Stroud was saying.

'I don't disagree,' said Garovel, 'but that would be incredibly dangerous to do in the city. If even the smallest whiff of pheromone escapes, Babbadelo will be swarmed with worms inside twenty-four hours. I think the safest thing to do is take the boxes away from civilization and THEN destroy them.'

"That sounds reasonable," said Evangelina.

"Whoa, whoa, hold up," said Diego. "I don't think we know enough to make that call yet. These things are incredibly difficult to get your hands on, right? What if... someone really needs them?"

The reapers all just looked at him."

"1339

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Diego raised both hands defensively. "Look, I'm just saying, it would be a shame if we destroyed them when someone might be needing these eggs for something important, like creating a vaccine for some terrible illness that we don't know about."

Even Yangéra, the man's own reaper, was looking dubious. 'And your concern has nothing to do with the fact that these eggs might be worth a lot of money.'

Diego smiled. "Hey, if we get rewarded for doing god's work, then so much the better, right?"

'Wow.'

Ultimately, they decided to wait until Asad and Imas finished their questioning. It didn't take much longer, as the Sandlords did not seem to be having trouble getting the captive Hun'Kui to talk.

"A deal was struck between the cities of Babbadelo and Ornamegir," Asad explained. "The eggs were to be transported from here to there

under armed escort, purportedly for some kind of pressing research by the Cadaculos, which is the largest medical facility in the Higher West layer."

"Ha!" Diego exclaimed. "See?!"

Hector heard several reapers sigh in unison.

Yangéra rubbed her skull with a bony hand. 'I can't believe he was right...'

"What else did you learn?" asked Diego.

Imas picked up where her brother left off. "The eggs were supposed to leave Babbadelo over a month ago, but the railway line that they need to use also happens to pass very close by a recently discovered worm nest."

There was more sighing.

"Both the government AND the militia around here have been trying to organize a heavier escort, but with a damned rebellion going on, they can't cooperate on anything," said Imas. "Not to mention, people aren't exactly lining up to be a part of such a dangerous mission."

"The militia has managed to enlist the help of one of the larger treasure hunting groups," Asad added. "The Akassu. That's why so many of these guys are wearing green. The hunters were much more eager to cooperate with us than the militiamen.""

"1340

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'Well, this is just wonderful,' said Garovel.

"None of this changes the fact that we should not leave the eggs here," said Evangelina.

'We could turn them over to the government,' suggested Qorvass.

'And what would stop the militia from stealing them back?' said Ezura.

'That would be up to the government to figure out,' said Qorvass. 'We

came here altruistically for the food. We do not have to make the eggs our problem, as well.'

'That's true,' said Garovel. 'And we still don't have a plan for distributing the food, either. It might be best to just turn everything over to the government and walk away.'

Ezura tilted her head. 'You surprise me, Garovel. I thought you boldest among us.'

'I just want to make sure we consider all of our options,' said Garovel. 'But thank you, I think.'

"I think we should go all in," said Diego. "Let's talk to this Akassu group. Maybe we could partner with them in moving the eggs. From the sound of things, if we don't move them, then no one will. Seems like a good opportunity for us. Throw a bit of our weight around, do some good, collect a reward, maybe partake in a bit of treasure-hunting ourselves while we're at it?" He looked around for approval. "C'mon, this is right in our wheelhouse. I can't be the only one thinking this? Am I the only Rainlord here?"

Qorvass hovered around Asad's head. 'As a matter of fact, you and the Lady Stroud ARE the only Rainlords here, yes.'

Diego scratched his head. "Huh. But hey, the reapers count, too, so that's four of... twelve. Hmm. Alright, I see your point."

'I agree with Diego,' said Ezura. 'We should not balk at this opportunity. 'The rain fears not the torch.'"

"1341

'Again, the rest of us aren't Rainlords,' said Qorvass.

'True,' Ezura admitted. 'Then shall we go see what our kin have to say about the matter?'

That made everyone go silent. She'd pretty much won the debate with that, Hector felt.

Evangelina's eyes fell upon him, however. "What does the young Lord Goffe think?"



Hector was surprised, but after a moment, he supposed he shouldn't have been. It was more or less his fault that they'd even come here in the first place, after all.

But the way she was eyeing him... Perhaps he was mistaken, but he felt like she wasn't just asking a question. He felt like she was about to pass judgment on him, like he'd made some mistake and she was waiting for him to either explain himself or apologize.

Maybe that was just how she always looked, though. He'd noticed a similar quality in some of the other Rainlord leaders, particularly Zeff.

Either way, he didn't see much point in letting it bother him. Not after all that had happened.

"...I think I would like to see things through," he said. "And... securing all this food won't be very helpful if a bunch of worms kill everyone before they can eat it."

Diego laughed, but Evangelina's expression did not change, and her gaze lingered on Hector for a bit longer before Asad spoke up again.

"Well, whatever the case, someone needs to go tell Zeff and everyone else what we have found."

A bout of volunteering and counter-volunteering intervened, until at length, the group was satisfied that Diego and Imas would go together while Asad, Hector, Jada, and Evangelina would remain here to watch over the captured Hun'Kui. The pair soon departed, and Hector and the others found a place to sit while they waited."

"1342

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Hector had the distinct feeling that things were going to start moving very quickly very soon, so he wanted to make use of this downtime while it lasted. He tried contacting Emiliana again with the Shard in his pocket, but when he received no response, he decided to work on his materialization skills.

He wanted to attempt the "binding" technique that Zeff and Asad had shown him earlier. He figured that would be more useful than simply meditating. And besides, he couldn't very well close his eyes when he

was supposed to be watching the captives.

First, however, he had to think of how to attempt the technique. The whole idea behind binding--as he recalled Asad and Garovel explaining it--was to convert a task that required active concentration into a task that did not.

That was about all the information he had to go on, though. He considered asking Garovel for more details, but the reaper was in the middle of a conversation with Atalim and Ezura.

Hmm.

Something that required active concentration...

What about making his iron move through the air? It was one thing to add velocity to a created object and be done with it, but could he possibly make that object fly according to his will? Against gravity, even?

No, strictly speaking. From everything he'd been told, as well as his own experimentation, such a feat was flatly impossible.

But Hector wondered if he could at least make it look like it was happening.

Certainly, he couldn't control his iron once it was created. That seemed to be the First Law of Materialization, if such labels existed. But even so, he could always grow more iron out of his already-created pieces. And growth was a kind of movement, wasn't it? And that other technique that Zeff and Asad had taught him earlier... the perpetually falling object...

Ideas swirled through his head, even though he couldn't quite imagine any practical applications just yet.

Maybe, instead of keeping the falling object perfectly still, he could add on to it in a different direction while also annihilating it from the opposite direction. Wouldn't that give the object the appearance of movement?"

"1343

Hector gave it a shot. He began with an iron cube hovering over the palm of his hand, just as before. It still fascinated him, simply looking at it, falling eternally in place without ever changing shape. He concentrated and started adding on to it from the right while simultaneously annihilating from the left. And of course, he also had to make sure that he didn't stop adding to it from the top while still annihilating it from the bottom, too.

It actually worked. The cube floated to the right, out of his hand, and he couldn't help smiling to himself.

It became unsteadier as it drew farther away from him, however, and then its shape distorted.

He frowned and started over.

Maintaining that level of concentration was difficult enough, but he also had to keep in mind that the angles of both creation and annihilation were constantly changing as well. And worse still, the distance from himself--slight though it was--also seemed to impact his level of precision just enough to mess him up.

For such a simple trick, it sure demanded a lot of concentration. He was starting to understand why he hadn't seen anyone else doing this so far. It probably wasn't worth all the effort. He was probably just wasting his time.

But still, he didn't want to give up. Because, somehow, it felt more personal than usual. Like he was inventing something. Even though he was sure someone else had figured this all out ages ago, he wanted to keep puzzling it out for himself, wanted to uncover all the little secrets that he could without relying on anyone else for help.

And, hmm. Maybe there was a simple solution to the distance problem. Maybe he could make the cube orbit around him in a perfect circle. Then the concentration requirements would never change.

He blinked at himself, mulling it over in his head a couple more times.

But what would it need to orbit, exactly? His body? Or his brain?

Hmm."

"1344

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He supposed it might prove easier to have it orbit around his brain, so that was where he started. He created the cube directly in front of his face, made sure it was hovering and stationary, then began moving it. He kept his head still as he concentrated, visualizing his work as it curved around to the right and beyond his peripheral vision.

Adding the curve felt a bit tricky, but he wasn't having any trouble picturing its movement in his mind. He just needed to maintain its course until it curved all the way back around from the left.

He waited, trying not to get so eager to see it reentering his view that he ended up breaking his own concentration. It was on its way. Hopefully. He just needed to focus. It should've been getting close. Any second now, and it would--

There it was. It worked. But the sight of it floating there was enough of a relief that it pulled a small laugh from his lips, which did break his concentration. The cube distorted and then plummeted. Rather than destroying it, he let it clatter to the ground and then picked it up.

It was very hot to the touch, he found, and then realized that it would've been much more so if not for Zeff's misty armor drenching and cooling it for him. The constant, low hiss of the armor was somehow easy to forget about, at times. But he knew that if he ever left Zeff's range, the Undercrust's searing heat would be sure to remind him. He was just glad that the Lord Elroy's range was so enormous.

He tossed the lump of iron into the air and annihilated it again.

Alright, well, he'd come up with something that required active concentration. Now, this "binding" technique could convert it into something that didn't require concentration...

...How the hell was he supposed to pull this off, exactly? Purely through memorization? Really? What was the best way to commit something like this to memory?

Shit. Maybe this technique was too advanced for him, right now. Come to think of it, the way they'd talked about it kinda suggested as much...

Eh, whatever. He wasn't afraid of failing. He'd already failed harder at

so many other things. Important things. This was kiddie shit."  
"1345

Hector took a deep breath, found his focus, and put a new cube into orbit.

When it came down to it, it was just a pattern. A fairly complex pattern, sure, but a pattern nonetheless. And if he thought about it like that, then it didn't seem so difficult to memorize.

Two instances of creation, two instances of annihilation. Top and right, bottom and left. These were the constants. The easiest parts. The real difficulty of it stemmed from the shifting angles at which he had to maintain said constants.

But maybe he could think of the two instances of creation as just one. Two instances of adding to his iron. If he applied the same force to both of them, then...

The cube swung past his vision sooner than he'd expected, then swirled around again, quick as a curving arrow shot, and then again, so fast that it cut audibly through the air, and then several more times at such a speed that he wasn't sure he was even doing it himself anymore.

Then it flew completely off course and punched a hole through the wall next to him.

Hector stared with an open mouth, not quite sure what had just happened.

He looked around, wondering if someone had taken control of his iron or something, but no one was paying any attention to him--well, aside from a few of the captive Hun'Kui, who were looking worriedly in his direction.

Hmm.

Whatever just happened, he needed to replicate it.

He started over, taking the same steps, trying to repeat his same thought process, and then--

Yep. The second cube did the same thing, making a new hole only a half-meter or so away from the first one.

Oh, wait.

That constant rate of growth he'd applied on the right side... that was equivalent to gravity, wasn't it? And gravity was accelerative. As in, increasing. So... since there was no counter-force being applied by actual gravity like there was on the top side of the cube... then he'd essentially made the cube grow faster and faster... until his concentration could not keep up and he simply lost control of it.

Huh.

He scratched his head.

That was... almost worryingly easy, Hector felt. He would've thought that he'd have more trouble making the annihilation on the left and bottom keep pace with the accelerated growth on the right, but apparently not. It was like he'd barely even needed to think about it."  
"1346

((The Wednesday Triple: page 1 of 3))

For a time, Hector merely sat there, mulling over what he'd just done. He supposed the only explanation was that his degree of control over iron was simply higher than he'd realized. Granted, he had lost control there at the end, but the point of interest was how fast the cubes had gotten before escaping him, not to mention how many revolutions around him that they had made.

It was true that he hadn't tested the limits of his materialization in a while. And had he achieved emergence recently? He didn't think so, but as he thought about it, he realized that he wasn't actually sure--a thought which he found slightly worrisome. Shouldn't that have been something he could be certain about? Maybe this was all just the result of meditation. Or Rasalased's "tempering," perhaps.

Or both?

Agh. He couldn't help feeling like he was losing himself, somehow. He wished he had more time to practice, to fully understand his current limits. He hated this feeling of unpreparedness. And he'd been feeling

it all too often, lately.

He stood. If nothing else, he wanted to use what time he did have as efficiently as possible, and it occurred to him that he should perhaps locate the iron cubes and see what kind of state they were in before trying to draw any further conclusions.

It took a bit of searching, but he found them on the ground in front of an apparent sleeping quarters, having penetrated a second wall beyond the first and left a pair of cracked dents in a third.

He was surprised, however, to find that the cubes were no longer cubes at all. But after thinking about it more, he supposed that only made sense. When he'd lost control, they'd become distorted, because his control was the only thing making them hold their shape.

...And perhaps that was important to know. He squinted as he eyed the dents in the wall before him another time."

"1347

((The Wednesday Triple: page 2 of 3))

Another question was forming in Hector's head, but he wasn't quite able to articulate it to himself yet.

He decided to do one more test. He formed another hovering cube, but this time, he purposely made it float into the wall.

Nothing happened. But perhaps that wasn't strange. Perhaps it needed to float faster. He swung the cube around and increased the speed.

Again, nothing happened. He tried one more time, increasing the speed even further, and sure enough, nothing happened. Not even a sound.

Which seemed strange to him. At that speed, the cube definitely should have made a noise when it collided with the wall. Moreover, the previous two cubes certainly had made noises.

So what was going on here?

Well, there was only one discernible difference that he could see. The

first two cubes were distorted, while the third was not. They'd both changed into long, vaguely conical shapes--not identical to each other but still similar enough that it didn't seem coincidental.

Hector blinked as he realized what had been bothering him. Yes. The reason that third cube hadn't made a noise when it collided with the wall was because it hadn't actually collided with it.

That was the way that "growing" his iron was supposed to work. Materialization could not occur within a solid object. He'd learned that very early on. So the cubes shouldn't have been able to grow into a wall and thereby pierce it, because he had been using this growing technique in order to make them move. Regardless of their speed, they should have simply reached the wall and stopped, not even colliding with it or making any noise, which was what the third cube did.

And yet they had.

Because their shape had changed. Because he'd lost control over their growth. The part of the distorted cubes which ended up colliding with the walls must have not been "growing" anymore. They must've simply been regular iron at that point."

"1348

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That might've also explained why the cubes flew so wildly off course. The non-growing sections of the cube would have gained their own, genuine momentum while being pushed along at such a speed by the still-growing sections. Not to mention, they would have begun to bear the effects of gravity--and possibly other environmental conditions? He wasn't sure.

Hmm.

This was not a minor discovery, Hector felt. Clearly. With it, he would be able to, in effect, manipulate his iron after its initial creation--even to attack. Sure, it wouldn't be easy and would probably require shitloads more practice, but...

With this, he could evolve his entire fighting style.



He wondered if Zeff and Asad had been intending to teach him this soon. Maybe they didn't think he would've been able to do it. He wouldn't have thought he could do it, either.

Heh. He wanted see their faces when he showed it to them later. Garovel's, too, of course.

But first, it needed refinement. He had to practice more.

Abruptly, however, it occurred to him that he'd stopped keeping an eye on the captives. He annihilated his work and then briskly returned where he'd been sitting before. Thankfully, no one seemed to have noticed. He counted the number of captives, just to be sure none were missing.

Rather than sitting back down, though, he remained standing as he set to work again. Now that he knew not to add an accelerative force to the cube's orbit, he found that it was almost trivial to sustain, almost as if he were keeping it to its path with one of his hands.

He tried out different centers of orbit, around his torso, around his arm, his hand, his leg. They were more difficult but not terribly so. He tried out different angles as well, and found a similar result. Then he tried walking while trying to maintain the diagonal orbit around his torso, and he began struggling again, but not for long. After pacing back and forth a few times, he was starting to get the hang of it."

"1349

Hector found that the initial difficulty with walking had come from trying to maintain the orbit independently around him, but when he visualized all of the motions and shifting angles of creation and destruction as relative to himself--as an extension of himself, even--it became much easier.

But it did require active concentration, still, and that was the real hump that he wanted to overcome. As enjoyable as it was to have a tiny satellite floating around him, he wasn't really any closer to figuring out this "binding" memory technique.

He supposed the only way forward was to simply continue maintaining its orbit as much as possible, and then eventually, it would become second nature to him. Like riding a bike. Probably.

At length, Garovel finally looked over in his direction again.

‘Hector, what the fuck?!’ the reaper shouted, still with the echo of privacy.

Hector had expected Garovel to be surprised, but even so, he was a bit taken aback by that reaction. He wasn’t sure whether he should laugh or ask if he’d screwed something up.

Garovel pointed at the cube as it moved. ‘What the hell is this shit?! Are you really doing that?!’

‘Uh... yeah?’

The reaper just gave him a look that Hector didn’t recognize.

Hector added a second cube, this time orbiting it along the opposite diagonal path over his other shoulder. ‘I was just, uh... I was just testing some stuff out. Why do you sound so upset?’

Garovel took his time answering. ‘...Are you repeatedly creating and destroying new cubes so quickly that they look like one object in continuous motion?’

‘Wha? No, I--that’s... hmm.’ Hector hadn’t even thought to try doing that. And why the hell hadn’t he? It sounded way simpler than the method he’d come up with. Maybe not easier, but definitely simpler.”  
"1350 -- CXLV.

“‘Hmm?’” said Garovel. ‘What do you mean, “hmm”?’

Hector explained himself. It took some time. He had to go over his experimentation and thought process.

When he was done, Garovel just stared at him for a while.

‘Hector...’

‘...Yeah?’

‘I’ve never seen anyone do such a thing with materialization before,’ the reaper finally said.

And Hector was confused, because Garovel didn't sound like he was joking or trying to trick him. But then, maybe that was part of the trick.

Garovel turned and floated quickly back toward the others. 'I need to hear what Asad thinks of this immediately.'

For a brief time, Hector merely stood there, watching him go.

Huh.

Okay, well, maybe it wasn't a trick.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Five: 'The intervening calm...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The next four days passed with a degree of peace--and indeed, even enjoyment--that Hector had not been expecting. The Rainlords met with both the local government and the Akassu treasure hunters several times to negotiate terms, but despite wishing to attend these meetings, Hector had other things to do.

Most importantly, perhaps, he and Garovel needed to wait for Roman and Voreese at the location that they'd specified in their letter. Garovel said that Roman must have received it by now and could therefore show up at anytime, but unfortunately, even though they turned it into a new camping venture of their own, along with Asad's family and several Rainlords, Roman and Voreese never appeared.

But that was fine, according to Garovel. There was still the meeting place in Capaporo, and perhaps Roman and Voreese were already there. He instructed Hector to leave an iron message behind in case they appeared here later.

Beyond simply waiting for Roman, however, Hector also spent the four days practicing materialization with Asad and frequently Zeff, who came and went from the meetings, keeping them apprised of all new developments."

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"1351

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 1 of 5))

To put it mildly, Asad and Zeff had shown a keen interest in learning how Hector was keeping his iron in orbit. They had insisted on repeated explanations and varied types of demonstrations.

At first, they seemed to be having trouble wrapping their heads around the concept, and after a few hours, Hector had begun wondering if there was something else going on with this technique that he didn't quite comprehend himself yet.

But no. That wasn't the problem, he came to realize. The real reason they were having a hard time learning it was simply because he was so bad at explaining it. Ultimately, Asad and Zeff both figured it out and were soon making material orbit around themselves, as well--and

much more impressively, too. Zeff managed to make an entire chair for Ramira to sit on and float around him--a feat which she seemed to enjoy greatly, even if it did begin melting rather quickly. Asad, meanwhile, put a dozen different glass swords into orbit, all of varying shapes and sizes.

Needless to say, seeing all of that took a bit of the wind out of Hector's sails.

Still, Hector didn't think he would be forgetting their initial reactions anytime soon. The looks of utter confusion and disbelief on their faces--a part of Hector was still reeling from those looks. He wasn't at all sure what to think.

These were two men whose skill with materialization he revered completely--and not just because of their reputations, but because he had personally witnessed what kind of incredible things they could do. And the idea that he could have anything to teach them? That he could've thought of anything that they didn't already know? Or been taught by someone else who was even more knowledgeable?

Hector was having a hard time accepting this as possible. As were several of the reapers, by the looks of it."

"1352

((The Saturday donation bonus: page 2 of 5))

With the way everyone was talking about it, Hector wondered if this discovery had truly been his own. Sure, it had felt like it was, but as more time passed, that feeling faded, and his mind searched for other possible explanations.

One in particular popped into his head, and it had bothered him enough that he decided to consult Garovel about it. '...I can't be the first person to have ever thought of this,' he'd said.

'Why not?' was all Garovel said.

'Wh--? What do you mean?! Because I can't! There's just no way! I mean, fuckin'... We're talking about everyone who's ever lived! It's just impossible that no one else has thought of this before.'

'Is that because you think you're not smart enough?'

'I... no, well... I mean. Kinda. Yeah. Pretty much. I mean, how many materializers have there been? Like, total? It must be, fuckin'... billions or something, right? '

'All throughout human history? Mm, probably not billions. Maybe millions. Maybe. Hard to say. Remember that the number of materialization users is a subset of the number of reapers. And there haven't been THAT many of us, comparatively. If we're including all reapers who've ever existed, I'd only estimate that number to be around fifty million, at most. And even that might be wildly optimistic.'

'Fifty million is a shitload.'

'Not really. Fifty million is one twentieth of one billion. And how many humans have ever lived? That number is in the neighborhood of a hundred billion. At least. So the overall pool of materialization "inventors" is probably a lot smaller than you've been thinking.'

Hector wasn't buying it. 'I still don't think it's possible.'

'Well, whether or not you think it's possible doesn't change the fact that it happened. Maybe you should stop being so hard on yourself.'

'...Or maybe I didn't really do anything.'

'Excuse me?'

'Maybe it was Rasalased who thought of it. Maybe he just planted the knowledge into my head or something.'

'Ugh, god, don't even start with that. Just take the fucking credit, please.'"

"1353

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Hector didn't know how to respond to that.

'Alright, fine, let's suppose for a minute that Rasalased DID give that knowledge to you somehow. What difference would it make? Would it change what you've accomplished?'

‘That’s... that’s not the point, Garovel. It’s not about getting the credit. It’s about... agh, it’s about understanding what the fuck is happening. With my own limitations. And--and with... just... the world itself. I mean, shit, Garovel. Trying to understand the world around us doesn’t suddenly stop being important just because it might be... inconvenient. Or unpleasant.’

‘Oho.’

‘What, am I wrong?’

‘Heh. Well, when you put it like that, it’s hard to argue with you.’ The reaper paused, perhaps thinking. ‘But no, I still think you came up with it yourself. True, the timing is a bit suspicious. We only met Rasalased a little while ago, and now you’re doing this. But you know who ELSE we only met a little while ago? Asad and Zeff. And THEY were the ones who actually bothered to teach you about materialization. Therefore, I submit to the committee of your pedantic brain that it was NOT a magical sand god granting you heretofore lost knowledge, and that instead, it was simply inspiration from your new teachers.

‘Also, if we approach the subject from a completely different angle, then perhaps someone in the past DID think of your idea and just didn’t tell very many people about it. Hell, perhaps someone out there right now already knows about this technique, but they’re keeping that information to themselves, because... well, that’s a smart thing to do. Knowledge like this could be very dangerous, and generally speaking, a wise teacher avoids teaching his enemies how to kill him.’

He had to admit that the reaper had made a few good points, but Hector remained dubious nonetheless.

For the most part, though, he tried to focus on his training for now. All other concerns could wait until they had made it safely to Warrenhold."  
"1354

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When it came to instructing Hector, the Lords Elroy and Najir seemed somehow even more motivated than before. Hector found them sometimes competing to answer his questions first--which, frankly, wasn’t the most helpful thing in the world. He soon got into the habit of



pointing at the one he wanted to explain whenever they started trying to talk over each other.

Importantly, he finally managed to get a full explanation of this “mapping” technique that he’d been curious about.

“Mapping is very valuable for accomplishing feats with your power which might otherwise be too difficult or sophisticated to perform at your current skill level,” said Zeff.

Needless to say, Hector was most certainly listening.

“The core idea,” Zeff went on, “is that we are able to ease the overall burden of concentration on ourselves by making use of simple, physical triggers.”

“We often do it unconsciously, to a limited extent,” added Asad. “I’m sure I have seen you do it already, as well.”

Hector squinted, trying to think back.

“Hand motions are the most common example,” said Zeff. “Strictly speaking, it is not necessary for us to move our hands at all when performing materialization.”

“Which is not to say that our bodies are not necessary,” said Asad. “Our bodies operate as conduits for the power from our brains, but movement itself is not required. It is, however, helpful for concentration. And mapping is simply a more advanced form of this.”

Zeff held up a fist and half-extended his middle and index fingers. “I, for example, have mapped my ability to create highly pressurized water drills to this hand sign.” And sure enough, a small water drill appeared above the knuckles on his fingers. “This particular skill requires constant creation and destruction, as well as a very strong velocity state. When I originally mapped it, it was quite difficult for me to perform. Now it is trivial and made even more so by the mapping.””  
"1355

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“Hand signals are the most common in practice,” said Asad, “but you could conceivably use any manipulable part of your body to achieve

the same result.”

“Words, as well,” said Zeff.

Hector cocked an eyebrow. “Words?”

The Lord Elroy nodded. “Yes, you assign your skill to a certain word. You name it, essentially. It can work very well.”

“However,” said Asad, “it must be said that in the heat of combat, speaking the name of your attacks before you do them can certainly give your opponent an edge, especially if they have good intel on you.”

“Yes, but it must also be said that such tactics can serve to intimidate or confuse them,” said Zeff. “There are pros and cons to it.”

‘Do you have any personal examples of named attacks?’ said Garovel, sounding somewhat amused.

“Not currently,” said Zeff, “but I have been trying to assign my newest skill to a name. I’ve found that it helps if the name itself is befitting, but that can also be... difficult.”

‘I think “Water Bomb Drill” sounds just fine,’ said Axiolis.

“I think it sounds a bit long and silly,” said Zeff.

“Just stick with movements,” Asad advised Hector. “Save yourself the trouble.”

Hector’s mind was sufficiently blown by all of these revelations. Immediately, new ideas began to stir in his head, and he wanted to spend every waking moment trying to completely revamp his skill set.

It seemed like Zeff and Asad felt similarly with their own powers, along with several other Rainlords who joined them later on, most notably Joana Elroy, and very briefly, Horatio Blackburn.

Hector had been concerned about House Blackburn and would have liked to know more about how they were doing, but Lord Horatio was not particularly talkative, and Hector didn’t want to pry. So again, he decided that could wait until Warrenhold.”

"1356

As for local politics, the Rainlords managed to negotiate an uneasy truce among the warring factions by using the food they'd captured as leverage. Zeff and Axiolis did not seem confident that the peace would last once the Rainlords left Babbadelo, but there was nothing for it, they said. There was only so much they could do for the people here, they said.

And Hector would have liked to say that they were wrong, but he couldn't. He was far from an expert on political matters. If Garovel agreed with them, then so did Hector, even if he didn't want to.

That being said, Hector certainly didn't believe the Rainlords were being negligent or lazy. They were even going so far as to take custody of several important political prisoners who--according to varied accounts by the government, militia, treasure-hunters, and citizenry--posed the greatest threat to a continued peace. The Rainlords would be bringing these prisoners with them to Capaporo, where more secure facilities awaited them.

And since Capaporo was also their own destination, that was as far as they intended to take the worm eggs as well. Custody of the eggs would transfer to the local government there, who would then deliver them to Ornamegir.

Hector hoped that would be enough for things to remain settled, but he was already thinking of when he might be able to return and check up on the state of things in Babbadelo. Probably not for quite a long while, he figured.

And of course, there was still the matter of the treasure, the Sosho'Diyu.

He would have been lying if he said he wasn't interested in finding it. It was hard not to be, what with how the reapers talked about it, about the potential it held. Moreover, he kept thinking about how useful it might be for revitalizing Warrenhold. Assuming it was money. The reapers seemed to think it was something else, though they didn't know what."

"1357

Diego Redwater, Carlos Sebolt, and a few others had been meeting with the Akassu hunters in order to keep everyone abreast of any and all developments on that front, but the news hadn't been encouraging. According to Diego, treasure hunters all over the city had been growing increasingly demoralized in their efforts, which was one of the reasons why the Akassu had sided with the militia in the first place. More and more, they were trying to find alternate means of making their fortunes, as most people now believed that either the treasure did not exist or that it was nowhere near Babbadelo.

It didn't help that there were conflicting accounts of how this treasure-hunting fever even got started in the first place. Diego said that they'd heard three separate tales now, the only shared trait among them being that it all began about a year ago when a foreigner came to town.

In the first tale, the foreigner boasted loudly to all who would listen that he had lain eyes and even his hands on the great treasure, Sosh'o'Diyu. As evidence, he flaunted a small cache that was full of precious gems, which he had supposedly plundered from it. Furthermore, he claimed that he intended to return for the remainder of the treasure soon, and no one had seen him since.

In the second tale, the foreigner was not alone. He had some sort of terrible partner, and the whole reason they were able to boast of their wealth was because they ran rampant through the city, stealing it from everyone. They pillaged whatever they pleased and even abducted women and children. Nevermind that no one seemed able to identify any of these abducted people. Diego and Carlos believed this story had the least credibility."

"1358

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In the final tale, the foreigner was actually a revolutionary from Acacero who'd abandoned the cause. He claimed to have stumbled upon the treasure after fleeing a great battle, but he never provided any kind of proof. The only reason the fever took hold in the city was because so many fools and desperate losers were eager to believe him.

And perhaps even more worrisome than any of these stories was the fact nobody knew what this foreigner looked like. According to Diego and Carlos, many people claimed to have met and even spoken to the foreigner, yet none could describe him or provide any physical evidence of his existence. No videos. No pictures. Not even a name.

All in all, it didn't bode well for the treasure's existence, and it was no small wonder why the hunters grew more discouraged by the day. With no solid leads to go on and so much danger afoot, the hunters had begun transforming into little more than territorial gangs whom civilians hired for protection.

The few true hopefuls who remained would be traveling with the Rainlords. The prevailing thought among them seemed to be that the only place left to look was in the tunnel where only a handful had dared go before. The tunnel near a worm nest. The only tunnel that led to Capaporo.

Naturally.

And now, at the end of four quiet days of training and relative relaxation, Hector found himself waiting to board another train, this one more than twice the size of the last as it had to carry Rainlords, hunters, militiamen, prisoners, and three very large, very dangerous boxes full of eggs.

Twenty-six cubes orbited around Hector as he observed the efficient packaging line of Rainlords carefully loading up the many pods full of non-servants. He'd gotten into the habit of maintaining objects in orbit wherever he went, thinking of it as a kind of background practice. This many still required considerable concentration, though.

His gaze fell upon an approaching man whose face he recognized but only vaguely. When the name hit him, however, Hector's eyes widened, and he shifted uncomfortably.

That was Melchor Blackburn coming toward him. The one they called Darktide."

"1359

The man had been unconscious since Dunehall--and prior to that, he'd been unconscious since Luzo. Hector had never met him properly, let alone spoken to him.

Judging from the way Melchor was moving, the man was still coping with considerable soreness, though he didn't look terribly exhausted.

But maybe that was just because Hector was comparing him to Zeff.

"Hello," said Melchor. The man's reaper hovered silently behind him, but Hector couldn't recall his name.

Hector lowered the number of cubes around him down to eight. He tried not to let himself feel intimidated by one of his allies, but this man was the oldest Rainlord here by a good margin. "Hi..."

"I hear I have you to thank for my life."

Hector wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he decided to change the subject. "...I'm glad to see you on your feet again."

Silence arrived.

Maybe that was the wrong thing to say. Shit. Maybe he'd sounded too stiff or distant when he'd said it. Double shit.

Garovel came to his rescue. 'How's your family doing? We haven't heard much from them, and we've been worried.'

"Ah... I'm afraid I am not as knowledgeable on that subject as I would like to be."

'Oh,' said Garovel. 'Of course. You've been asleep. I apologize if I overreached.'

'Don't be silly,' said Melchor's reaper. 'What is your name, by the way? I never did learn it.'

'Garovel. And yours?'

'Orric. Pleased to meet you.'

'Likewise.'

Hector saw the expression on Melchor's face, the flat and hollow gaze at the ground. "...How are you doing?" he asked. "It must be a lot to take in."

Melchor exhaled a heavy breath. "Yes. Quite a lot."

Hector wanted to say something more, ask him... something, but he couldn't think of anything.

After a short while, however, Melchor turned to look at him. "How old are you, Lord Goffe?"

This question again. Somehow, he felt less prepared to answer it every time he heard it. "Uh..."

"1360

Garovel intervened again. 'Why so curious?'

Melchor's face became abruptly apologetic. "Oh. Forgive me. I merely wished to know if Hector is old enough to remember the Jungle Wars. I sometimes forget that age can be a sensitive subject where security and morale are of concern. If you would prefer not to tell me, I understand."

'Why do you bring up the Jungle Wars?' said Garovel.

Melchor eyed the young Atreyan lord. "The way they talk about you... There is a mythos growing around you."

Hector just returned the man's stare, waiting for elaboration.

"I know what that is like," said Melchor. "The Jungle Wars were when they first began to call me Darktide. It is a strange thing, is it not? Or am I mistaken in assuming that this is a new development for you?"

Hector needed a moment to consider those questions. He hadn't been expecting them, certainly. "Ah... yeah. I'm not, um... I don't know if..." He shut his mouth and clenched his jaw, wanting very much to not fumble over his own tongue right now.

Melchor seemed to take that as a hint. "Nevermind. It is none of my business." He didn't move, but he looked like he was ready to turn and walk away now.

And a surge of silent panic gripped Hector's chest. This wasn't what he'd wanted at all. "No," he said almost involuntarily as his mind

grasped for a way to follow it up.

Something. Anything. Maybe it would be easier if he didn't talk about himself.

"...Tell me about yourself," Hector ended up saying. And after hearing his own words, he wanted to bury his face in his hands. That was way too broad of a thing to say, and it hadn't answered either of the man's questions."

"1361

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Melchor looked about as off kilter as Hector felt now. "Um... okay. What would you like to know?"

Oh shit. Hector racked his brain. 'What the hell do I say?'

'I don't know, but I can't wait to hear what you come up with.'

'Garovel, c'mon!'

'You can do it, buddy. I've got faith in you.'

It didn't sound like faith to Hector. The first thing that popped into his head was to ask about the Jungle Wars. But wait, no, he should ask about Melchor himself, shouldn't he?

Oh shit.

Oh fuck.

Oh no.

Now nothing was coming to him at all. This was torture. Why couldn't his concentration help him with this shit, too? He was still able to keep his eight cubes in orbit just fine, so what the hell?

Garovel finally deigned to intervene publicly. 'Did you ever work in the Vanguard?'

Goddammit, that was such a great question. Fuck.

"I did, yes," said Melchor. "Many years ago."



‘What is your opinion of it now?’ asked Garovel.

The man’s green eyes lingered on Garovel a moment before he answered. “Honestly? I have heard many people say otherwise, but personally, I do not think it has changed much.”

‘Oh?’

“The Vanguard has always been extremely interventionist. That is its entire purpose. Aggressive and preventative measures. Yes, certain things might be different, certain policies, certain kinds of mistakes, perhaps. But as a whole? I would say the Vanguard is essentially the same.”

‘That’s interesting,’ said Garovel. ‘I’ve not heard anyone else say that. But I feel similarly. I think the primary reason why it seems like so many people have begun to change their opinion of the Vanguard is actually just because of technology.’”

"1362

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‘I agree,’ said Orric. ‘Everyone wants to blame aberrations for everything, but I would say their presence has only caused the Vanguard to grow--and not necessarily anything beyond that. It’s the ease with which information is spread nowadays that lets everyone learn about all of the mistakes that the Vanguard is making.’

Garovel nodded. ‘You’re absolutely right. In the olden days, it was so much easier to cover things up. Frankly, I’m surprised the Vanguard is doing as well as it is on that front. Did you know that there are still entire countries that barely know about the existence of servants?’

‘Ah, yes. There are quite a lot of them in Qenghis and Luugh, aren’t there?’

‘Even here in Eloa, there are a few.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘Oh, no, I’m not. Hector’s home country of Atreya is one of them.’

Orric's empty eye sockets fell upon him. 'Is that really true?'

"Ah... yeah."

'I can hardly believe it. Granted, I've never been there, but even so...' Orric looked at Melchor. 'Did you know that?'

Melchor shook his head.

'All of the countries in that region are the same way,' said Garovel. 'Kahm, Rendon, Lorent, Mara, Ajax, Dante. Even parts of Intar, I think.'

'How have they remained so ignorant all this time?' said Orric. 'Is it really just the Vanguard's doing?'

'I'm not entirely sure, myself. I assume the Vanguard has been a big part of it, but in Atreya at least, the public DOES know that people with superhuman abilities exist elsewhere in the world. They just don't know where the power comes from. And they're afraid of it. Which is understandable.'

'So they only don't know about reapers, then?'"

"1363

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'Yes and no,' said Garovel. 'From what I've seen, they do have a concept of us, at least. In their mythologies, religion, and entertainment, that is. But they don't think we're real or that we're connected to the superhumans that they've heard about. To them, we're these kind of phantom-creatures who exist in nightmares or some sort of imaginary hell-dimension, perhaps. Which isn't THAT far off, I suppose.'

'I see. That's very different from Sair, where we're seen as entirely one with nature.'

"I wouldn't say entirely one with nature," added Melchor. He turned to Hector. "But that makes me curious. What do you see reapers as?"

It took Hector a second to understand what he meant. "Oh. Ah... I see them as... scythe-wielding skeletons. And wearing a kind of... black shroud, I guess." He'd never told that to anyone but Garovel before.

Somehow, it felt a little embarrassing to admit, like telling someone his middle name or some other mild secret.

“That sounds very strange to me,” said Melchor. “Is it not unsettling to see such a thing all the time?”

Hector gave a small shrug. “I hadn’t really thought about it. Always seemed about right to me.”

“Hmm.”

“What about you? What do you see them as?”

“Blue jays,” said Melchor.

Hector’s brow furrowed in disbelief. “Birds? Really?”

Melchor chortled faintly. “Is that so strange to you?”

“Uh... kinda, yeah. I mean, that’s just so... normal. They really just look like birds to you?”

“Their eyes glow.”

“Huh. Do they flap their wings?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do their beaks move when they talk?”

“No.”

“Do they, like... perch on top of things?”

“Occasionally, but not often.”

Hector had to stop himself from asking if Melchor had ever confused them with real blue jays. After a few beats of silence, he instead said, “I have a lot more questions.”

That made Melchor laugh, a bit harder this time."

"1364

‘As much as I would like to hear more about your blue jays,’ said

Garovel, 'I'm interested to know what your thoughts on the Jungle Wars are. Since you brought it up earlier, that is.'

Melchor's amusement diminished somewhat. "Terrible business. Are you sure you want to listen to the ravings of an old man?"

'I'm sure.'

But Melchor was looking at Hector now, as if he'd really been asking him.

Hector wondered if it was something that Melchor didn't really want to talk about, but he also didn't want to pretend that he wasn't interested, either. So he just nodded.

"Very well..." Melchor scratched his chin with his thumb. "The Jungle Wars, as a whole, in my view, were inevitable. The diamond mines that everyone was fighting over, they were just an excuse. In truth, I would argue that those wars were cultural conflicts even more than they were economic ones. The Melmoorians were never going to live peacefully with the Cannites. Their belief systems were simply incompatible."

'You might be right, but what makes you say that?' said Garovel.

"The Cannites worshiped rocks and animals. As if that was all the world was. And they thought themselves inherently superior because of this. Closer to nature."

'Would I be correct in assuming that you fought on the side of Melmoore?'

"You would, but I lived among the Cannites for several years and knew many good people among them. I bore them no ill will. They were simply wrong. They should never have tried to invade Melmoore. Their government, if you could even call it that, had no respect for their fellow human being. Do I think they deserved to be wiped out for it? Of course not. But it was like one of their very own proverbs: you cannot throw stones at a wolf and then be surprised when it does not flee like a rabbit."

"1365

'You are just full of dissenting opinions, aren't you?' laughed Garovel. 'Usually, when I hear people talk about the Jungle Wars, it's about how

the big, bad Melmoorians annihilated the peaceful, nature-loving Cannites and eventually consumed most of the region with their industrialist greed.'

'Yes, we have heard that many times as well,' said Orric. 'It really gets on Melchor's nerves.'

"Only when people who did not live through it speak as if they did," said Melchor.

Garovel laughed again. 'I know the feeling.'

"Many reapers seem to," said Melchor. "As I grow older, I find myself appreciating the work that the Archivers do more and more. If Orric decided to become one tomorrow, I would not be terribly upset."

'Maybe one day,' said Orric, 'when there is not quite so much work yet to be done.'

"I have my doubts that such a day will ever occur."

'If that is true, then perhaps my life as a glorified bookkeeper was simply not meant to be. What a terrible shame.'

Melchor gave the reaper a dry look.

Hector was curious now. "Archivers?"

"Have you not heard of them before?" The man seemed surprised.

Hector just shook his head.

'The grand historians of all humanity,' said Garovel. 'Paragons of impartiality, with integrity that is beyond reproach.'

"Yes," said Melchor. "In truth, I am not sure Orric would qualify."

'Hey.'

'No offense, but he probably wouldn't,' said Garovel. 'Anyone can start archiving independently, of course, but to receive recognition from the Prime Archivers as one of their own? I wouldn't get your hopes up, if I were you.'

"Yes, I have heard that they are notoriously reclusive," said Melchor.

'That is an understatement,' said Garovel. 'The Prime Archivers are all

very old, very paranoid reapers. And unless something's changed with them recently, then it has been about fourteen hundred years since they allowed anyone to officially join their ranks."

"1366

Melchor turned his head slightly but didn't take his eyes off Garovel. "I have never heard that."

'Well, it's not something they like to advertise,' said Garovel. 'And there are a lot of "unofficial" Archivers out there who muddy the waters a bit. Which isn't to say that the unofficial guys are doing a bad job, necessarily. I just mean that there's some confusion involved, as well as some ego and obsession.'

"How do you know so much about it?" said Melchor.

Garovel paused. He glanced at Hector. 'Because I used to be one of the Prime Archivers.'

And if he was being completely honest, Hector still didn't quite follow all this talk about official and unofficial Archivers, but even so, that particular revelation was surprising enough to make him stare.

Melchor and Orric were briefly silent as well, until Orric asked, 'How long ago was this?'

'...About fourteen hundred years,' said Garovel.

'And are we to assume that number is a coincidence?'

'No. I had a falling out with them over their increasing sense of elitism and, in my view, cruelty. But I think if you asked them about it, they would argue that I simply lacked their vision and/or practicality.'

'And you are saying that they have not allowed any new members since you left their ranks?'

'Yeah. But it wasn't just me. My sister and two others were part of the exodus as well.'

"Was there a particular event that caused you all to leave?" said Melchor.

‘Yes. The rift between us and them had been building for a long time, but the straw that broke the camel’s back was a new set of rules regarding the treatment of our servants. You see, in order to actually write anything down and keep records, we of course required servants for that physical labor. But keeping servants also meant that our neutrality was not protected under the Old Law. And that was a problem.’”

"1367

((The belated Monday Triple catch-up: page 1 of 3))

‘Ah,’ said Orric. ‘And therefore, you held divided opinions regarding how best to protect said neutrality, yes?’

‘Exactly,’ said Garovel. ‘Our opponents believed that we should be as non-threatening as possible. They thought that we would be able to operate unmolested as long as we mostly remained below everyone’s radar and didn’t accrue too much military power. Which wasn’t entirely insensible, in my opinion. On the grand stage, possessing enough power inevitably invites recruitment or conflict with others who have it. And on top of that, they also had guarantees from the world leaders at the time that our neutrality would be respected under those conditions.

‘But for one thing, we weren’t sure we believed those guarantees, and for another, there was still the matter of the servants themselves. In actual practice, our opponents were advocating for the early termination of servant lives. The new set of rules that we did not want to abide by were essentially designed to prevent any “inappropriate conduct”--or in other words, friendship. The logic being that if we grow attached to our servants, then we will be less inclined to release them when the time limit expires--which, by the way, was only five years.’

‘Wow,’ said Orric. ‘I knew Archivists had a rigid organizational structure, but I have never heard the details.’

‘Well, I don’t know if they still abide by those rules,’ said Garovel, ‘but yeah. I didn’t want to treat my servant like a slave--or worse than a slave, really. A disposable tool. And just so I could manage some books in peace? A peace which I didn’t even have faith in? It was moronic. But that being said, the fact that Archivists are still around after all this time suggests that they’ve been doing SOMETHING right. I just can’t imagine that it’s because of those rules. Or at least, I don’t

WANT to imagine that it's because of them. Ugh."

"1368 -- CXLVI.

((The belated Monday Triple catch-up: page 2 of 3))

'I must say, that is all very disappointing to hear,' said Orric. 'It sounds like they would not even accept a servant as old as Melchor, much less let me keep him.'

"You make it sound like I am your pet."

Orric ignored the comment. 'Perhaps it would be better to work independently as Archivers, then.'

'Or start your own group,' Garovel suggested. 'I've considered doing that a few times, myself.' He threw another look Hector's way. 'Only problem is that I would need a very large and very secure place to keep everything.'

Hector's expression flattened inside of his misty armor.

'And a bunch of like-minded friends wouldn't hurt, either,' Garovel went on. 'Maybe a servant I really trusted, too. Especially one who had demonstrated an interest in knowledge and learning and protecting things.'

Hector had a few different responses to that in mind, but he chose to let the awkward silence arrive instead.

Garovel shrugged. 'Oh well. I guess it's hopeless.'

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Six: 'Into the writhing den...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

To put it mildly, Hector had a multitude of new questions for Garovel, but he decided that they could wait. It wasn't much longer before the Rainlords finished loading up the train and were ready to move out. He and Garovel said their goodbyes to Melchor and Orric, who ventured off to rejoin the rest of House Blackburn.



The atmosphere on the train was palpably tense, so even though he and Garovel had plenty more opportunity to talk, it just didn't feel like the time for it. Hector wanted to be ready in case anything happened, so instead, he decided to patrol up and down the train cars, getting a good idea of where all of the different factions were located on board."

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((The belated Monday Triple catch-up: page 2 of 3))

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"1369

((The belated Monday Triple catch-up: page 3 of 3))

The Rainlords were dispersed at both the front and back of the train, while the Hun'Kui militiamen and hunters shared the middle.

However, Hector was quite surprised to find a small group of non-Hun'Kui among the hunters. At first, he'd thought they were Rainlords due to the climate suits they were wearing, but then he realized that the suits themselves were not identical, being slightly off-color and bulkier.

'Who the hell are they?' said Hector.

'Oh, those must be the guys from Boland,' said Garovel. 'I heard Diego talking about them a couple days ago.'

'They're really from the surface?'

'Yup.'

'What are they doing down here?'

'Hunting for treasure, what else? Though, from the way Diego talked about them, it sounded like they cared more about adventure than they did about money.'

Hector shook his head with disbelief. 'What a bunch of lunatics...'

'Hey, we're on this train, too.'

'Yeah, but... I mean, holy shit.'

They numbered only four, but at the very least, they did look prepared. He had never seen anyone carrying so many guns. Each man must have had six or seven different pieces of varying sizes, some of which were definitely ardor-fueled.

The subject of the ardor weapons had come up a number of times during negotiations between the Rainlords and the locals, and Hector knew that several of the Rainlords had been studying the weapons that they had confiscated very closely. In terms of design, the firearms themselves were not overly complex or otherwise difficult for the Rainlords to understand, but they had no idea how to get their hands on more ammunition--a problem with which the militia and government had agreed to assist.

Now, most of the Rainlords were carrying at least one ardor weapon of their own."

"1370

Hector had been able to try one out for himself--a compact handgun-version--but not having any prior experience or training with firearms, he didn't trust himself with it, even after being instructed in its general usage by Zeff, Asad, Jada, and even briefly Marcos and Ramira.

That left a lasting impression on him. The fact that such young children were already so disciplined with guns was certainly strange, but with everything else he'd come to know of Rainlords, he supposed he shouldn't have been that surprised.

All these firearms made his thoughts drift to Colt, as well. He felt mild regret that he'd never asked the man to teach him of weaponry during their training sessions. And he wondered how Thomas and Stephanie were doing, too. Better, he hoped. Everyone deserved to grow up safe and healthy.

Agh. There were so many things he wanted to check up on once he'd made it back to Warrenhold. For now, though, he had to focus on getting there.

The initial unease in the air began to lighten somewhat as the hours passed, but it never quite went away. Having walked the full length of the train multiple times, from engineer to engineer, Hector eventually found himself taking a seat with the Elroys again.

Zeff was looking slightly more rested than when they'd first arrived in the Undercrust. Hector had been surprised to learn that this mist armor maintained itself even while Zeff slept.

Asad was surprised by this as well. The Sandlord had been waiting for the mist armor to dissipate so that he could test his own hand at making a self-sustaining, temperature-controlled suit for Hector with quartz, and so when Zeff's work didn't go away, the tattooed man's face became filled with more disappointment and jealousy than Hector had yet seen from him.

Instead, Asad set about practicing on himself, with not-so-wonderful results. Now, the Lord Najir was looking almost as persistently dour as Zeff was.

And there could be no mistake--more rested though he was, Zeff's overall mood had not really improved. In fact, toward Hector in particular, it had most definitely worsened."

"1371

((The Wednesday Triple: page 1 of 3))

Hector knew why, of course. Zeff was not pleased that he was the only one who could use the Shards to talk to Emiliana. Even more than that, however, was the fact that Emiliana had simply not been talking very much. Not only could she not tell them where she was, but she was also apparently quite busy doing... something.

And as uncomfortable as it was, Hector couldn't entirely blame Zeff for being upset. That moment when they'd first discovered that they could talk to one of the missing Elroys--the man's face had lit up with shock and hope. But to then realize that it didn't matter? Zeff had been desperate for any kind of lead, and this was supposed to be it.

But it wasn't. Not yet, anyway. And after four days, Hector was beginning to think that it wouldn't be.

It did seem strange, though, that she would have no actionable information whatsoever. If she were stuck in a dark cell with no means of learning anything about her surroundings at all, then that might explain it, but if that were truly the case, then why hadn't she said so?

And more importantly, why didn't she have more opportunity to talk? What, exactly, was keeping her so busy?

The simplest explanation that Hector could think of was that she didn't want to tell them. Because of Gohvis, probably. She was afraid that her father would come for her and that Gohvis would kill him.

And seeing Zeff now, Hector wasn't sure that Zeff wouldn't do that. Sure, it seemed like certain death to Hector, but would Zeff and Axiolis see it that way? Were they even thinking clearly when it came to Emiliana? It was hard to tell, and Hector didn't want to broach the subject and make things even worse.

But shit. Maybe it didn't matter. With the way Zeff kept staring at him, maybe that conversation was inevitable. More and more, Hector found himself not wanting to avert his gaze when it happened. It was getting to the point where he'd just stare right back at the man, waiting for him to say something."

"1372

((The belated Wednesday Triple catch-up: page 2 of 3))

'Let's take another walk around the train,' Garovel suggested privately.

Hector supposed that was a good idea and got up to leave again. He'd been actively trying not to get lost in conversation with Garovel so that he could remain vigilant and keep an eye on everyone, and now here he was, letting himself get distracted by Zeff.

He had to remain focused. Even if nothing happened during this trip, that would be fine. He just had to think of it as an exercise in self-discipline. A learning experience.

Something was probably going to happen, though. Any minute now, he figured.

--+-+--+--

As he sat in his cell, listening to his chains clink in rhythm with every bump and jostle of the train, Royo Raju tried to keep his head clear and his wits about him. His stomach ached with greater ferocity than at any point since his capture two weeks ago, though it was not due to the fact that they had not been feeding him. In fact, even if they had

offered him food, he would have refused it.

He was no stranger to not eating. Every penniless, parentless brat in the Higher West Layer knew what that was like and knew it well. That was why he had spent years of his life in the iron mines of Acacero, working himself to the bone so that he would never have to experience that kind of misery again.

Yet here he sat.

He'd earned enough money to not only pay for his education, but for several others as well. He'd gained enough wealth to start his own business without having to take a loan from one of those murderous banks and end up saddled with debt for the rest of his life. He'd been building his reputation as a consultant in socioeconomics, as someone who knew not just what the public wanted and needed, but what they thought they wanted and needed.

Yet here he sat."

"1373

((The belated Wednesday Triple catch-up: page 3 of 3))

He'd suppressed violent rebellions without firing a shot. He'd not only turned his enemies from their cause, but won their loyalty, their respect.

He'd done all of that, yet here he sat. A prisoner. A failed revolutionary. On his way to Akagokai, the Red Cage, one of the most infamous prisons in the Higher West Layer. A miserable hole where they meant to keep him for the remainder of his life.

The fools. They knew not whom they had crossed.

But they would. One day, they would. Every betrayal, every suffered indignity, and every fallen comrade--Royo would not forget a single one.

But how had it all gone so wrong so quickly? He knew the answer to that, of course. He had scarcely thought of anything else during his confinement.

It was that stranger's doing. The Foreigner. Everything had been

proceeding in lockstep with the revolts in Acacero and Poppeyo until this treasure-hunting hysteria arrived. After that, it was like everyone had lost their minds. All sense of caution vanished in pursuit of some unknown fortune, and chaos upended the entire city.

And he had not been immune to it, either. Royo remembered winding his own men up over a few baseless rumors and leading them to their doom. His goals, forgotten. His small group of loyalists, captured or killed.

It made no sense at all. How could he have been so blind? So lacking in forethought?

In retrospect, he couldn't have. Not without some kind of fell sorcery distorting his mind. The Foreigner had twisted his thoughts, somehow, along with all the rest of Babbadelo.

Yes, it sounded like a far-fetched and desperate excuse, but it was also the only explanation for something that was otherwise inexplicable. Why else could he not remember the Foreigner's face? Royo was absolutely certain that he had spoken directly to him."  
"1374

He scowled. The more he thought about it, the more his chest bristled with rage.

He shut his eyes and controlled his breath. He had to remain calm. Rage's only purpose was as a motivator, and he did not require more motivation right now.

The Foreigner was never going to do that to him again. Royo would not allow it. The one thing that he had always been able to trust was himself, his own mind. It was the only difference between him and all of the other wretches in the dirt. Sorcery or not, there was no excuse for befalling such base trickery.

As much as he did not want to accept it, there was no sense in ignoring the truth of the matter. A man of genuine fortitude and guile could never be manipulated. His mind had simply not been strong enough to resist the Foreigner.

But it would be. No matter what it took, it would be.

Because he aimed to rule the Higher West Layer--and rule it well. The rest of the world just hadn't accepted it yet.

Nothing in all of creation would prevent Royo Raju's ambition. Certainly not these militiamen.

They didn't seem to like it when he stared at them through the vertical bars. One of them was even bothered enough to open his cell and gut-punch him until he stopped. That one's name was Dorgot.

Dorgot was going to be the first to die.

Royo knew that he had to be patient, though. If he didn't wait until the train was sufficiently far enough from Babbadelo, then everything would be for naught.

Oddly enough, despite his current circumstances, Royo had hardly been able to believe his luck when he'd heard that he was being transferred to Capaporo. And the fool guards should certainly have not told him that he might be eaten alive by a worm along the way. But then again, they couldn't have known that they were practically sealing their own death warrants."

"1375

The only caveat was all of these superpowered interlopers aboard. He'd caught glimpses of them, most notably that one who had been wandering around, the one the militiamen had dubbed the Senmurai--or "Knight of the Mist" in Hunese.

It was going to be a very delicate balance, getting out of this alive, but not only was it his best means of escape, but there was the Soshō'Diyu to think of, as well.

Therein lay his path to greatness. It was clear to him now. Foreigner be damned. Royo would find that treasure. Even if it wasn't real, he would find it anyway. Because this was the Hand of Shukumei, of Destiny, reaching out to him. He had to but grasp it and pull himself up.

...What? No. Royo's glowing eyes squinted, and he shook his head. Had those really been his own thoughts just now? Or were they what the Foreigner wanted him to think? The Soshō'Diyu... did he truly care about finding it? Did it even exist?



He rubbed his forehead with both of his chained hands. He could feel the fury rising in his chest again, but he didn't have a direction for it and so decided to just push it back down. Fortunately, it was soon overshadowed by another bout of stomach pain anyway.

Enough time had passed, he decided. The train must have traveled far enough into the tunnel by now. He had endured this humiliation long enough.

His ash-gray skin tingled with both anticipation and dread. He clenched his jaw as he began to regulate his breathing even more heavily than before. Deliberately slow and long inhales. Then he forced his abdominal muscles to contract and release, contract and release--hold--contract and release. And repeat. And distort the pattern to further upset his stomach. And concentrate. On his goal. Provoking disgust in himself. Mind over matter."

"1376

He had performed this technique many times. It wasn't easy and had required months of regular practice to learn, but this variation eliminated the need for his hands. True, the militiamen had not completely removed his ability to use said hands, but Royo had always preferred to be overprepared.

At length, his stomach responded. A small, metal jar lurched upward through his throat, and he vomited it into his waiting palms.

"Hey!" someone said in Hunese. One of the militiamen had taken notice. It was Dorgot. Of course it was. "What are you doing in there?!" The oaf banged on the bars of Royo's cell with his blackjack.

Hunched forward as the post-nausea relief washed through his body, Royo just stared at him with glowing eyes that had grown slightly bloodshot.

"Answer me!" said Dorgot. "You think I won't come in there and make you tell me what you're doing?!"

At this point, it didn't really matter whether Dorgot opened the cell for him or not, but Royo hoped he would. He gripped the jar more tightly, preparing to unscrew the top.

Even now, though, a part of him was hesitant. And for good reason, he knew. The moment that the sludge inside this container made contact with the air, the accompanying pheromones would escape, and then it would only be a matter of time until all hell broke loose.

There was a very real chance that he would die along with the rest of these simpletons.

A risk worthy of himself, Royo Raju decided.

He twisted the cap free and heard the vacuum seal pop.

“What was that?!” said Dorgot, banging on the bars still.

Royo did not answer him.

The big militiaman growled as he moved toward the door and fiddled with the keyring on his belt.”

"1377

((The belated Monday Triple catch-up: page 1 of 3))

Royo glanced at the six other militiamen in the room, then at the prisoner in the cell across from him. The militiamen were all seated at a table together, looking confused or annoyed by their loud-mouthed comrade, but the prisoner was clearly paying close attention.

Good.

When Dorgot opened the door, Royo stood, raising his hands in front of him.

“Sit back down, you--!” Sludge from the jar splattered onto Dorgot’s face, and the man began screaming as its flesh-eating properties went aggressively to work.

Royo caught Dorgot’s holstered sidearm as the man stumbled back. His fingers unbuttoned the strap and pulled the weapon free in less than a second. He flicked the safety off and fired right into Dorgot’s neck, putting an end to his insufferable howling and his life.

The other militiamen were scrambling now, and Royo just kept pulling the trigger until it was out of ammunition. Four of them dropped

instantly, stone dead before they even hit the floor, and the remaining two militiamen were wounded in multiple places.

Royo tossed his spent weapon aside, found the keyring on Dorgot's body, and unlocked the chains around his ankles. Then he stepped over to the nearest dead man, looted a replacement firearm, and finished off the remaining militiamen with one shot each to back of the head. There was no sense in leaving any loose ends.

Time was not on his side, Royo knew. The noise of the train should have muffled the sound of gunfire, but anyone could still walk in at any moment.

The first thing he had to do was become a militiaman himself. Green hat, green scarf, green belt and trousers.

Ah, and some black-rimmed goggles, too.

Excellent.

He had never personally seen one before, but he had heard the rumors. The ghosts of the supermen. Invisible scouts and spies. If they really did exist, then these goggles would be invaluable."

"1378 -- CXLVII.

((The belated Monday Triple catch-up: page 2 of 3))

The next thing he had to do was free the other prisoner.

And so he did.

No words were exchanged, partly because none were needed and partly because Royo could only see the potential for conflict if the wrong thing was said. And right now, nothing else mattered. Royo didn't even know the other man's name, much less why he was here, but in this moment, the two of them were the closest of comrades.

Anything else could wait until after they escaped.

The other prisoner moved to disguise himself as a militiaman as well, but he had a difficult time with it, since Royo had already taken most of the clothes that didn't have blood on them. Combined with the fact that Hun'Kui generally didn't wear much in the first place, and the nameless

man ended up with only a green sash and a pair of goggles to help conceal himself.

It would have to do.

Now they just had to move the bodies. Hiding them was out of the question, but putting them into the prison cells was just as good, if not better. With any luck, it would look like the two of them had been killed, and they would be able to avoid a manhunt. Well, a manhunt specifically for them, at least.

After that was done, it was time to leave the cabin and put as much space between them and the crime scene as possible--and hopefully, also find a safe place to brace themselves for the storm that was coming.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Seven: 'O, colossal tyrant...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

As they were making their way toward the back of the train, passing through another cabin full of comatose Rainlords, Hector felt Garovel shift abruptly on his back. The reaper had of course attached himself to Hector while the train was in motion."

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"1379

((The very belated Monday Triple catch-up: page 3 of 3))

Hector stopped walking. "Something wrong?" he said aloud, since there was no one conscious around to hear.

'...Not sure. I thought I sensed the aura of death just now.'

Hector's brow lowered. "Where?"

'Back the way we came, on the other side of the train. But it's not there

anymore.'

"Hmm." He turned around and started walking again, this time at a brisker pace. "Is it where the Blackburns are?"

'Not quite that far, but close. At this distance, I almost missed it, but their reapers would've noticed it for sure, especially with how alert everyone is right now.'

Hector quickened his pace even more. First, he had to pass back through three more cabins full of sleeping Rainlords, but before he even made it to the end of the third one, Garovel spoke up again.

'Hold up.'

He stopped. "What?"

'Hector. Right now, everyone in these pods has the aura of death around them.'

Hector looked around with wide eyes. Each and every pod was already covered in the shields he'd made earlier. "What--? Why?!"

'I don't know, but--' There arrived a pause, and Hector waited without breathing for Garovel to continue. 'I sense a worm. About half a kilometer to your right and closing.'

Hector's expression turned grim.

He knew the plan. The militiamen and Rainlords had made sure that everyone did. Each cabin had a compartment where the train's defenses could be accessed. Hector was not trained in their uses, of course, but he knew that people who were would be arriving momentarily. His job would be to protect them.

Hector searched for the emergency lever in the floor and soon found it in the center of the cabin. He removed the metal screen in his way and yanked the lever in a hard clockwise motion."

"1380

A heavy thunk and metallic shifting noise followed, and two doors slid open, one on each wall of the cabin, both situated within a quite small space between all of the podded Rainlords that lined the entire cabin.

Hector entered the door to his left and found a very slender chamber therein. In size, it was little more than a narrow hallway, but it had windows and guns mounted into the wall.

Militiamen and Rainlords began to arrive and crammed into the chamber with him. Every gun found a gunner, and Hector was relegated to a far corner, standing in a space that was probably not meant to be stood in, judging by his uneven footing.

He had a view through a window, though, and that was the most important thing, he supposed. The gunner in front of him probably did not appreciate his presence very much, as he was practically hugging her.

Unlike most of the others, however, this gunner was not Hunese, probably because no Hun'Kui wanted to be so close to his misty armor. Hector had not had occasion to confirm it, but he was virtually certain that Zeff's handiwork would hurt any Hun'Kui who touched it.

Instead, this gunner was a Rainlord, and one he could recognize without even seeing her face, too, because she was wearing one of the sleek, climate-controlled suits. There weren't many Rainlords who'd been given one of those.

Sure enough, when she turned and looked at him through her illuminated visor, Hector saw the face of one Selena Elroy.

Or, wait, no. Zeff's sister wasn't an Elroy, was she? Her name was Joana Cortes. And that meant that her daughter here was Selena Cortes. Not an Elroy, but kind of.

He needed some kind of pamphlet to keep track of all these people."  
"1381

"Hello, Lord Darksteel," the young woman said with a smile. She seemed to be about his age, maybe even a bit younger, but she did have a reaper clinging to her shoulder.

Hector frowned, however. "Why aren't you with your family?"

"Oh, you know who I am?" said Selena. "I am flattered, Lord."

Hector only looked at her.

"If I stayed with my mother, I would never see any action," she said. "And besides, you will protect me, will you not?"

Hector was not amused. Now was not the time for this. And indeed, a sudden bout of turbulence reaffirmed him of that notion.

'It's close,' said Garovel publicly. 'No more than a hundred meters. Can you see it through the window yet?'

Selena flipped a switch on her right, and a floodlight above the window knifed through the darkness outside. The Hun'Kui militiamen followed suit, as did everyone else along the full length of the train, and they soon saw more light than darkness outside.

Only a distant wall of solid rock was revealed, however.

Selena pivoted with her mounted gun, and her floodlight pivoted with her. Every light searched up and down, left and right.

And through the weighted silence, Hector felt something. An increased pressure in the air. All too familiar.

More shaking arrived, stronger this time.

'It's here,' said Garovel.

And he was not wrong.

A hulking figure exploded out of the rock wall, and every floodlight went to it at once. Sludge and shattered earth flew toward the train, and every gun opened fire at once. It was the loudest thing Hector had ever heard as a wall of flaming bullets shredded the debris into gravel and convened on the monster."

"1382

The creature squirmed through the cloud of dust and smoke, still scarcely visible even as it kept pace with the train.

Then it leapt up and over the mayhem, followed by some of the floodlights but not all, and for a second, Hector got his first clear look at the worm.



It was spinning like a drill, and smoldering sludge splattered in all directions around it. Its gaping mouth was full of debris and crackling electricity as the giant worm dove headfirst toward the train, a few cabins behind Hector's own.

But Hector was ready, and so must have many of the Rainlords been, because it was far more than just his iron that arose to counter the beast. He'd used the same flying technique that he'd developed a few days ago and attributed to an iron boulder, as large as he could make it--which admittedly, was not that large. It hit, to little effect, but combined with all of the many explosions, a moving wall of glass, and yes, a tidal wave, the worm was completely prevented from ramming the train.

That did not, however, stop it from reaching the train.

At first, it looked like the flurry of attacks cut deeply into the worm with deadly impact, but that was not the case, Hector realized. Instead, the worm simply split. Dozens of times. And suddenly, there was not one large worm, but a hundred smaller ones, and they all came spiraling toward the train like missiles, landing with an audible thud and splat. Gunfire managed to keep a few of them off, but once they were on the train, they were beyond the range of the guns.

One of the worms slammed into the side of their cabin, right against one of the gun windows, and Hector saw the metal and glass of the train begin to distort."

"1383

They all filed out of the narrow gunner hall, and Hector was the last to exit, so he got a good look at the worm's acidic sludge eating through the train.

That was going to be a problem, he knew. But on the bright side, at least it wasn't anywhere near as potent as, say, the Seadevil's acid had been.

Tremors ran through the length of the train. He heard the screech of metal-on-metal and felt the train beginning to slow.

'They're gumming up the tracks,' said Garovel. 'If we don't stop them--'

The whole train lurched downward briefly, as if an enormous mass had just fallen on top of it, but the train kept going.

‘What’s happening?’ he asked.

‘It reassembled itself,’ said Garovel.

Hector didn’t understand. ‘Wha--?’

‘It’s all one worm again,’ the reaper said.

Hector was still confused. Just like that? It was already--?

The cabin train heaved again, this time to the side and more violently than ever. Hector had a split second to brace not only himself but also all of the militiamen in the cabin.

They were the priority, obviously.

A network of iron harnesses materialized in an instant around every Hun’Kui in the room.

The cabin rolled, and Hector and Selena both went sailing into the wall, then back into the opposite one, then up into the ceiling, the floor, the wall again, over and over, until the train finally eased to a stop again.

A stop, he realized. The train was no longer moving.

That was extremely bad.

His arm, leg, and spine all needed time to realign, but he forced himself to sit up anyway. Things were only going to get worse if he didn’t move his ass, he knew."

"1384

The cabin was on its side, Hector realized, and the wall of podded Rainlords was above them, threatening to fall and crush all of the militiamen in the room if not for his complex array of iron keeping everyone and everything in place. He reinforced his work along the top with thick iron pillars and freed the militiamen as well. They were slow, but Hector was glad to see that they were moving. He helped Selena onto her feet and hurried out of the cabin with the Hun’Kui militiamen

following.

With the vigor from Garovel pumping through his veins and muscles, Hector jumped up onto the side of the fallen train in order to get a better view of things.

A literal train wreck. Many of the floodlights were still working, at least, and they offered limited illumination of the surrounding environment. More people were appearing from the wreckage, but he didn't see the worm. Not yet, anyway. He doubted that it had left them alone.

Someone was already trying to turn one of the cabins over, he noticed, and someone else was yelling. Oh, at him, apparently. And it was Asad, too.

"Hector!" the Sandlord was saying, while pointing with both arms. He was saying more than that, but Hector could barely make him out over the defeated train's metallic groans. And the growing rumbling.

Rumbling?

Yeah.

There it was. That gargantuan silhouette, slightly lighter than the rest of the darkness in the distance.

Hector jumped down and tried to prepare himself. To concentrate. Against an enemy like this, it was difficult to imagine what he should do, what he could do. If there was anything at all, it had to be related to the recent breakthrough he'd made. That was the only thing going through his head."

"1385

He concentrated. The largest flying object that he'd made was a modestly-sized boulder, no bigger than himself, and throughout his testing over the last few days, he hadn't been able to supersede that limit. But here and now? When it really mattered? Could he demand more of himself?

The answer was no, he discovered. As much as he focused, he couldn't make the boulder larger. And he couldn't make two boulders, either--not without decreasing the size.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting, really. That would have certainly been too easy.

As soon as the worm became more than a silhouette, Hector pitched his boulder forward at cannon speed, along with a host of other projectiles from the other Rainlords.

The beast leapt up and over the assault, spinning through the air again and flinging sludge in all directions.

The Lord Dimas Sebolt was there to meet it, and the air in front of the man distorted it visibly as a gravity well caught the worm in midair, halting even its centripetal motion and suspending its acidic sludge as well.

Wide-eyed and mouth open, Hector just stared at the scene before him.

Electricity stirred in the beast's mouth, crackling and bristling with power before it spewed out at Dimas, but the man avoided it easily enough.

Or seemed to.

The lightning arced around in a flash and caught Dimas in the shoulder, causing him to falter but not release his hold. Smote and smoking, Dimas circled around to the worm's side, farther away from its mouth. It spewed more lightning, but it was entirely ineffectual this time.

Hector breathed again. For a moment, he even allowed himself to wonder if the threat had been neutralized.

Then the worm split apart."

"1386

The sheer force of it was enough to knock Dimas back, a shock wave that sent the man toppling through the air, and a hundred smaller worms spiraled after him like heat-seeking rockets.

Hector and the others intervened, and a storm of projectiles came to the man's rescue. A cluster of explosions was the result, and smoke clouded the aftermath.

Worms began dropping like rain, splattering on the ground in blackened piles.

More and more fighters were coming out of the wreckage of the train now, and Hector could hear Asad shouting again.

“Hurry!” the Sandlord was saying, as entire cabins were being lifted up and realigned via platforms of quartz or other material that Hector didn’t immediately recognize. “To the tracks! Keep everyone in the train!”

And Hector saw what the man was doing, what he had pointed at before. The train tracks that they’d strayed so very far away from. Asad meant to get them back there, to get the train moving again.

Hector didn’t know how feasible that plan really was. The train was in pretty bad shape. But for the moment, he was more concerned with making sure that the worm really was dead. He rushed closer, only to see Dimas smashing the many worm husks into dust with gravitic pulses.

Yeah, they looked pretty dead, Hector decided. They? It? He still wasn’t sure what to think of everything he’d just witnessed, but he figured he should worry about it later and go help everyone with the train.

“Dimas!” Hector shouted over the noise of the man’s work.

And Dimas apparently heard him, because he stopped.

Hector was about to tell him that he should help with the train, too, since his power would potentially be more helpful than anyone else’s in that regard, but he didn’t get to. Because even though Dimas wasn’t stomping the worms into paste anymore, the accompanying tremors had not ceased.”

"1387

‘I sense two more worms approaching,’ said Garovel.

‘As do I,’ said IzioI, who was attached to Dimas’ back. ‘Straight ahead. They’ll be here in under a minute.’

Hector might have complained if there was time for it. Instead, he and Dimas rushed back to regroup with everyone else.

Zeff had joined Asad in shouting out orders for everyone. When he noticed Dimas and Hector, he had a few words for them as well. "Dimas, focus on restoring the train. We will provide cover."

"I should be defending," said Dimas.

"No, our priority is getting out of here. Even after we kill these next two, more could show up. Understand?"

Dimas gave a nod of affirmation and flew off again.

"And you," Zeff went on to Hector, "help with the train, too."

'Nonsense,' came Qorvass' voice. 'The boy is one of the best distractions I have ever seen. Stay close to us, Hector.'

Hector supposed that was a compliment, but he honestly wasn't sure how to feel about it.

Zeff looked as if he wanted to argue, but the increasingly violent earthquakes deterred him.

'They're here,' said Garovel.

Hector saw someone launching attacks before he even saw the worms. It was Darktide, he realized, already using pan-rozum to propel mercurial javelins off into the darkness. They exploded on impact, illuminating both beasts momentarily.

They were bigger than the first one, Hector noticed, and different in skin texture as well. Where the first had been a bundle of wrinkles, these looked smoother, and he even thought he saw teeth this time as well.

The explosions kept coming as Darktide maintained his attack, apparently keeping the monsters stunned, and everyone else took the opportunity to hurl some of their own projectiles as they all moved up together, wanting to put more distance between themselves and the train but also not wanting to get too close."

"1388 -- CXLVIII.

Both worms erupted with bellowing roars, and all attacks against them ceased when the force of the shock wave knocked almost everyone off their feet.

Hector hit the ground and skid for a while before catching himself with an iron dagger in the rocky dirt. He'd nearly lost his grip on his shield and so was not surprised to see that many others around him had lost their grips on theirs.

As a result, he was one of the first to get back up, but what he saw next was not something he felt very privileged to witness.

Instead of two giant worms, now there was one, twice as large. Still in the midst of amassing, its skin crawled and writhed over itself, like a million glistening snakes all squirming in a pool of black tar.

His eyes widened as he began to comprehend the new creature's size. 'Garovel, you said they could only get as big as a blue whale.'

'Well, to be fair, that's two worms in one,' the reaper said privately.

'Garovel.'

'Look, I didn't know they had goddamn fusion powers. I've never actually hunted worms before.' After a beat of silence, he added, 'I'm sure we'll do great, though.'

That did not fill Hector with confidence.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Eight: 'The Battle with a Behemoth of Old...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector learned very quickly about how important distance was when fighting a building-sized opponent--and not just from the worm, but from one another, as well. As soon as he saw that first group of Rainlords get alternately flattened into the ground or swallowed by the ensuing avalanche of sludge, Hector started moving, not needing to hear the shouts from the others, ordering everyone to spread out before reengaging.

As his legs carried him and his full suit of endlessly misting armor around to the monster's flank, he tried to think. Certainly, this was an

enemy unlike any he had ever faced previously. He couldn't just let his instincts take over. If he wanted to be of any use here, he needed to take a measured approach.

And given how much mass and apparent speed the beast had at its disposal, the sheer amount of momentum that it could generate was unreal. Trying to stop or even just deflect its smothering body seemed completely out of the question, as Melchor Blackburn was currently demonstrating. Even a controlled explosion from Darktide himself couldn't throw the worm's enormous bulk off course.

Not in a direct collision, at least, but maybe--

The thought went unfinished as Hector was fortunate enough to be the next one to acquire the worm's attention. With scarcely more than a twitch of its head as a warning, it lurched suddenly in his direction and became briefly airborne in a flying leap.

Hector reacted with the only thing that he could think of and used an iron platform to launch himself sidelong and out of the way. The monster came crashing down with the force of a hundred thousand bricks."

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iron platform to launch himself sidelong and out of the way. The monster came crashing down with the force of a hundred thousand bricks."

"1389

When Hector's feet caught the ground again, he found it cracked and shifting up and down, making him struggle for his balance. Worse still, he discovered sludge all over his right arm and leg, hissing nastily against his armor.

He didn't have time to worry about any of that, however, as he noticed the worm was still in pursuit, snaking toward him this time and tearing up the earth in all directions.

There wasn't much choice but to keep launching himself away, he felt. His trajectory wasn't the best, what with everything shaking nonstop, but he at least managed to stay narrowly ahead of the beast--so narrowly, in fact, that he got an all too clear view of an electrical storm brewing in its huge maw.

That wasn't going to be good.

He tried making larger and larger platforms each time he launched himself, but as expected, the worm just barreled through them without the slightest show of concern.

Thankfully, however, help arrived in the form of a giant, bladed pendulum. It swung down from the cavernous darkness and caught the monster just behind the head, cutting close to halfway through its body before getting stuck.

The worm seized up, and its bulk shuddered visibly. It roared again, and the pendulum snapped in half, letting the embedded chunk be absorbed deeper into it.

Hector took the opportunity to gain some distance again. He watched Melchor leaping in overhead as he was falling back. The man was dragging another pendulum along with his bare hands. The thing must have been four times the size of his own body, and yet he swung it upward with the ease of a simple fire axe.

The blow landed cleanly, catching the worm right in the mouth and

cleaving diagonally up through its head and eyespots. The severed chunk of meat and sludge flew off, and the worm abruptly stopped its rampage in order to convulse and shiver.

Then the electricity from earlier surged out of its torn mouth in blindingly bright arcs, making the previously dim cavern suddenly light up in its entirety. Hector had to shield his eyes as his feet finally found stable ground again and returned to running.

Through the brilliant flashes, Hector saw the discarded hunk of the worm's head still moving, and indeed, squirming its way back toward the main body. He also saw Melchor get sent flying by a rogue spark that was the size of a bus, leaving only a trail of smoke behind.

The other combatants seemed to take that as their cue to provide relief, and a storm of gunfire and servant-made projectiles exploded toward the beast all at once. They must've been holding back until now for fear of hitting Melchor. Or himself, Hector figured.

However, instead of contributing what would probably be a minuscule amount to the collective assault, Hector decided to turn around and check on the train while he could.

The first thing he noticed was that it was not there anymore. Then he saw that it was high above his head, floating slowly upward, the front tip of it having already reached the edge of the gaping hole in the tracks where it had fallen."

"1390

It was Dimas' handiwork, Hector knew, though it looked like a few others were helping him support the train's weight, too. Hector decided to add a few quick pillars of his own while he was here.

Abruptly, the sound of a maniac laughing in his ear drew Hector's attention, and when he looked over, he saw one of the treasure hunters from earlier standing there, draped in a multitude of firearms and apparently having the time of his life.

This was one of those non-servants from the surface. Apart from the helmet, his climate-controlled suit was mostly hidden beneath all the ardor-fueled weaponry and ammunition the man was carrying.

All in all, Hector supposed he shouldn't have been surprised by this scene.

The man stopped firing to reload, then seemed to change his mind and holstered his weapon in order to exchange it for another, much bulkier one. He pulled what looked like a giant egg out of the ammo bag at his feet and slipped it into the loading chamber. Then he smiled and yelled, "Try this on for size, you overgrown shitpile!"

He pulled the trigger, and there came a deep shunk as the now-flaming egg launched out of the barrel.

When it hit the worm, the entire cave shook as an explosion ripped into the monster's side. The resulting fireball was so bright that Hector had to shield his eyes again, but he was still able to see several defensive walls go up simultaneously as everyone tried to brace themselves against the impact.

But it wasn't just one impact, Hector discovered. It was a chain of explosions, and each one only made the resultant earthquake even worse, until rocks began falling from the distant ceiling.

The beast was down for the count, though. The explosions had torn it in two, and both gigantic pieces were struggling to find each other again.

The crazy guy just laughed even louder than before.

The Rainlords closed in on the worm, no doubt hoping to finish it off, but they also had to worry about the falling rocks, which didn't seem to be letting up. Hector rushed forward to help them out with that, adding a thick layer of iron to the dome that they were building.

As he worked, he spotted Selena Cortes a few yards away, only then realizing that he'd kinda just left her behind.

She didn't look like she was doing so well, either. Her reaper floated over her, seemingly trying to talk to her while she sat there on her knees, eyes shut, hands over her ears. After another moment, Hector also noticed tears streaming down her face.

He wanted to go help her somehow, but he was still trying to be mindful of everything else going on.

Then Garovel, perhaps sensing Hector's hesitation, said, 'The worm's not dead.'

Another roar arrived, as if to prove the reaper's point, and the beast lunged back up, fully reformed. It rammed headlong into the dome that the Rainlords had been making and clobbered it, sending car-sized chunks of metal or mineral toppling overhead. Hector and every other builder scrambled to dematerialize their work before someone ended up flattened."

"1391

Through the ensuing chaos, the worm didn't let up. And since the Rainlords had unfortunately gathered a bit closer together while the worm had been downed, the beast now had the opportunity to come bulldozing through the loose crowd that they had formed.

And Selena Cortes was still not moving, Hector noticed, even as the worm turned in his and her general direction.

No time to deliberate.

Hector materialized a sloped platform on the other side of Selena and used it to launch her into his waiting arms. "Grab on!" he shouted to her unnamed reaper, who made no argument.

With the worm bearing down on them and everyone around scattering like startled birds, Hector decided to go upward. Iron materialized below his feet and flung the four of them into the air, high enough so that the worm would be able to pass harmlessly below.

Or at least, that had been the plan.

Instead, the worm decided to chase after them specifically and arched up to meet Hector in the air, and suddenly, its slobbering, sludging jaws were closer than ever.

Well, shit.

Even less time to deliberate.

Had to be simple. No thought required. Something he could make in an instant.

A giant iron bowl, of all things, materialized right in front of him in midair. He'd pointed the concave side at the worm's face.

Its huge mouth fit almost too perfectly into it, and--for a few vital seconds--the bowl became a kind of muzzle. So instead of Hector, Garovel, Selena, and her reaper all being swallowed, they slammed against an iron wall with Hector's shield.

Not that much of an improvement, but an improvement nonetheless.

The impact was enough to punt the four of them all the way across the cavern and into a far wall, cracking it and loosening a few stalactites from the ceiling.

Hector wondered how many bones in his body had just broken, but his armor and regenerative vigor were doing their jobs, and he managed to create another iron platform to catch everyone before they peeled off the wall and fell.

Rather than lowering them all back down to the ground, however, he looked for the train and tracks, which he discovered were not quite as far away now as he might've expected. He started growing his platform in its direction, adding tall support pillars as needed.

Selena sounded like she was trying to say something, but Hector couldn't make it out. A part of him wanted to ask what was wrong, but something told him that was a question for later. Or possibly never.

Right now, with everything still as confusing as it was, he should probably just try to say something comforting, right? Something like...? Uh...

Well, maybe saying nothing at all was okay, too.

'God, you're so useless!' the girl's reaper said aloud. 'I can't believe I ended up with such a--!' But the reaper cut herself off, leaving the thought unfinished.

The following silence became suddenly uncomfortable.

Hector found himself blinking as he worked on his mobile staircase. He had to consult Garovel. 'What the hell was she saying just now?'

"1392

Garovel took a few moments to respond. 'Unfortunately, we don't have

time to worry about that right now,' he said privately. 'I'll look into it later. You just stay focused.'

Hector couldn't argue with that, though he wanted to. When he neared the train, a group of Hun'Kui militiamen slid a door open for him and helped Selena inside.

"I'm sorry!" she was saying through choked breaths. "I just wanted to--! I couldn't--! I'm sorry--!"

Hector was at a loss for what to say, not even really understanding why she was apologizing.

'It's okay,' Garovel told her. 'This sort of reaction to worms is actually quite common. Don't be too hard on yourself. We have to go now, but we'll talk to you later, Selena.'

She looked at Hector with tear-filled eyes for some reason.

Still, he didn't know what to do. So he just gave a kind half-nod and then pulled away on his bridge of iron.

As he headed back toward the fighting, he couldn't get what just happened out of his head. 'Garovel...'

'Not everyone adjusts to combat as easily as you do, Hector. But I won't forget about her, so for now, just put it out of your mind and concentrate.'

Really, Hector wanted to ask about Selena's reaper, but he knew Garovel was right. There would be time for that later. Assuming they lived through this battle, that was. He did have confidence in the Rainlords' ability to take the monster down, but as he got closer to the mayhem again, it did not look like much progress had been made.

The worm still thrashed wildly around, occasionally catching servants out and sending them flying or just chomping them down. Perhaps most incredibly of all, Hector saw Darktide and Zeff come bursting out of the worm's backside in a maelstrom of mercury and ice. Apparently, they'd gotten eaten during Hector's absence.

One might have expected such a gaping back wound to slow the beast down, but it paused for hardly more than a shiver before continuing its rampage.

From his midair vantage point on his bridge, Hector tried to find an

opportunity to reenter the fight, but seeing so many familiar faces charge in and get swatted away or be forced to dodge... well, it was a little disheartening.

Evangelina Stroud and Diego Redwater attacking in unison. Then a group of Blackburns, led by Horatio. A group of Delagunas, led by Salvador. A group of Sebolts, led by Carlos. And even the Najirs.

Everyone was struggling to do any kind of real damage. So what the hell did he think he was going to accomplish?

He knew that he was better suited to taking defensive action, but that didn't seem to be the problem now. The remaining fighters looked like they were avoiding major hits well enough. But any time someone appeared to land a solid blow, the worm either brushed it off or its wounds simply reformed.

It wasn't long before Hector was beginning to feel everyone's frustration. 'Garovel, how do we kill this fuckin' thing?'"

"1393

'Uh...'

'Really, Garovel? Nothing?'

'Hector, honestly, buying time might be the best we can do here. I mean, if the Rainlords can't kill it, then...'

Not exactly the keen insight that Hector had been hoping for, but he supposed he couldn't really blame Garovel.

'...That is, unless those non-servants from the surface have something else up their sleeves,' said Garovel. 'Which it seems like they might.'

'How can you tell?'

'Their souls are all gathered together, right now. Seems like they're working on something. They're to your right. Do you see them?'

He did. And just as the reaper said, they were huddled up in a circle. 'Ah. They're standing over a pile of guns.' He squinted. 'And it looks like they're taking them apart.'



‘Well, let’s go talk to--’

An interruption arrived in the form of yet another earthquake, and Hector found his bridge crumbling beneath him. He caught himself with an iron slide and curved it toward the group of gunmen. A few sideways tumbles and unintended front flips later, and he managed to find his balance and stick the landing right next to them.

They all turned to give him startled looks before relaxing again.

‘Ask them what they’re doing,’ said Garovel.

Before Hector got the chance, however, the quaking returned and so did the worm, thrashing its way alarmingly close.

Hector raised his hand flatly upward in front of his chest, and with it, iron appeared below the gunmen and their work, boxing them in instantly. Then Hector grew the whole box in his direction at launching speed, carrying the gunmen and himself out of the worm’s path.

The sudden motion knocked everyone over, apart from Hector, who kept his attention locked firmly on the sludge monster. Thankfully, it did not seem to have taken an interest in him for a third time. Yet.

“Thanks a bundle, Senmurai,” came a familiar voice, belonging to one of the gunmen. It was the crazy-sounding guy from earlier, Hector realized.

Senmurai? Hector wanted to ask what that meant, but there were more pressing matters. “Do you guys have a plan?” he asked instead.

“Oh, wow, you sound so young!” the man said with a laugh. “Couldn’t tell in all that crazy armor!”

“A plan,” repeated Hector. “Do you have one?”

“Son, don’t you worry. Good old-fashioned human ingenuity is here to save the day again.”

“Excuse me?” Hector could see the gunmen piecing something together from all the disassembled parts. Something quite large.

The guy gave another hearty laugh from inside his helmet. “There was never any problem so tough that it couldn’t be solved by a big enough gun!”

Hector’s eyes widened as he watched them continue working. At

length, he couldn't stop himself and just had to ask, "Who are you guys?"

"We're with the West Intar Company. Search & Discovery Division. I'd shake your hand if mine weren't so busy right now."

"1394

Hector recognized the name. The West Intar Company. Or just WIC. It had something to do with international trade, as he recalled.

That was about the extent of his knowledge, but by now, Hector had come to realize that the mere fact that he had heard of it before was also somewhat informative. Because if he didn't need Garovel to tell him what it was, then this company was probably pretty damn famous already.

He was still going to ask Garovel about it later, though.

Hector observed the group in silence for a bit longer, not really knowing if he should ask them anything else. If they truly did have a way of killing the worm, then he didn't want to distract them with questions.

The same guy from before reengaged the conversation on his own, however. "The name's Robert Sheridan, by the by. What's yours, son?"

"Hector Goffe."

"Good to meetcha, Hector Goffe. Is this your first time down in the Undercrust?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Pretty wild, eh?" Another short quake punctuated his sentence as the worm slapped its tail down in the distance. Each of the WIC men had to pause before they could resume building.

The giant gun was nearing completion, from what Hector could tell. It must have been almost twice as big as he was. Certainly not something a non-servant could wield unaided.

'Oh god,' said Garovel. 'I'm sensing a lot more worms all of a sudden.'

‘Where?’ said Hector.

‘Everywhere. If we stay here, we’ll be overrun in a few minutes. Everyone needs to get back to the train right now.’

Already, Hector could see some of the other Rainlords pulling back from the fight with the worm, no doubt on the orders of their reapers.

Hector started moving the iron box again. “Hold on, everyone. We’re going back to the train.”

A few huffs of vague disapproval arose, but no one argued.

Then there came still another earthquake. But this one was different. Instead of going away after a moment, it persisted, and the ground began to shift and sink more violently than any time previously.

And then the ground was suddenly gone. The cavern floor splintered and heaved up all at once, becoming a hundred thousand tiny rocks suspended in midair, and Hector had nothing beneath his feet, save his own iron.

The box was falling, and he had to react. He grew iron hooks out of the box’s side and dug them into the nearest wall--which, unfortunately, was not as near as he would have liked. The box tipped over as it caught in the air and swung down, and Hector had to complete a barricade before anyone fell out. Now it really was an entire box of solid iron, with everyone inside thrown upside down with gun parts clattering around.

And if that wasn’t enough, there was no light inside, either.

So Hector breathed deep and visualized the outside of the box. The side was scraping against a cliff of unstable rock--the same unstable rock from which the box was also suspended, by way of the ten hooked spears he’d materialized."

"1395 -- CXLIX.

Hmm.

Now this was a problem.

He had to be careful here. He couldn't just add iron to the box in a blind panic. If he did, then its weight would also increase, making it more likely to lose its already tenuous grip on the wall.

But he couldn't very well just not do anything, either. There was a good chance the box was going to fall on its own soon, anyway. And of course, the worm was still stomping around up there.

'Where is the worm?' he asked Garovel.

'At your ten o'clock, roughly.'

'How far? Can you tell?'

'Only about six or seven meters,' said Garovel.

Agh, that was too close. He didn't want to just launch everyone up and out of the hole at once, not when the worm could turn on a moment's notice and snatch someone out of the air.

So he went to work on a trio of iron ladders, instead, hooking them over the top of the hole in order to avoid adding any unnecessary weight to the box. Then he motioned through the dimness and said, "Up we go. Hurry."

Hesitant, the company men did as they were told. Robert Sheridan waited with Hector while his three companions went first.

A man's poorly lit face appeared over the edge of the cliff above. "Need some help down there?!" said the voice of Horatio Blackburn, who didn't bother waiting for a reply as he helped the three climbers up, carrying them with an apparent materialization ability.

"Thanks!" Hector shouted up at him, then motioned for Mr. Sheridan to follow.

But before the man could reach a ladder, the worm came crashing down in quaking fury. The impact sundered the hole, and the iron box snapped off the crumbling wall and started to fall.

Hector spiked his iron out in all directions, hoping in blind desperation that it would catch onto something--anything. The box's descent slowed but didn't stop, until it abruptly caught on something. In the increasing darkness, Hector couldn't tell what, but for an instant, when he looked up, he saw another silhouette at the top of the hole and thought he heard Zeff's voice shouting something.

Then the rocks gave way all around them, and the iron box started plummeting again.

## Chapter One Hundred Forty-Nine: 'O, gathering Deep...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

He had to slow them down. Whatever it took. More iron. Everywhere. If he projected it far enough, it would find something to latch onto. More. Farther. Nothing else mattered. This guy next to him was going to fall to his death if he didn't do this. Right now.

The box shifted and shook, then began to slow. Gradually. But it didn't stop, even as Hector kept envisioning and adding to the gigantic network of iron spikes and hooks and spears and nets that must have been surrounding the box by now.

The bumpiness came and went as the descent continued for quite a while. Robert Sheridan tried to speak, but with the grinding and groaning of metal in all directions, Hector couldn't hear him--nor did he try to, until finally, after what felt like an hour, the box came to a stop." "1395 -- CXLIX.

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"1396

Hector allowed himself to stop concentrating on his iron and relax somewhat.

'Hector,' came Garovel's voice through the pitch darkness. The reaper sounded rather annoyed.

'W-what?'

'Oh, did you finally hear me? I've been trying to talk to you for a while, you know.'

He, in fact, did not know that, but Mr. Sheridan interrupted before Hector could answer.

"Thanks for saving my bacon there, son." A rustling noise was also coming from his direction, as the man was perhaps trying to stand up. Then a small lamp flicked on in the palm of Mr. Sheridan's glove.

At last, Hector could see again. He started annihilating some of his iron so that they could get a look outside. The meager lamplight didn't extend very far, though.

'Hector, I can sense Zeff and Axiolis down here, along with a few other people.'

That was a surprise. 'You mean they fell down the hole after us?'

'No, I think there were more holes than just ours. From what I was able to tell, things got pretty crazy up there.'

'Where's Zeff?'

The reaper detached himself from Hector's arm and pointed in the direction opposite to the one that Hector had been looking. 'About two hundred meters that way. Seems like they're already headed toward us. I suggest we go meet them halfway.'

'No argument here.' Hector made a doorway in the box.

"H-heh, uh, son," said Mr. Sheridan, causing Hector to pause and look back. "Would you mind helping me carry some of this?" He eyed the many, many gun parts strewn all over the box's floor.

Oh right. Hector supposed all that stuff was pretty damn valuable. Not to mention, the big gun that they had been building was still there, too.

Hector stepped out of the box and motioned for the man to follow. When they were both clear, Hector annihilated all of the haphazard iron that he had created earlier while also remaking the box. Then he materialized an iron track for it and grew the box slowly along it.

"Hey, that's pretty convenient," said Mr. Sheridan as they started walking. "You interested in a job?"

Hector was hardly listening, however, as he had a more pressing question for Garovel. 'Where are the worms?'

'All over the place.'

Not what he wanted to hear. 'Should we be running?'

'Not as of yet. Fortunately for us, the worms seem to be going after the train.'

'Oh, so the train got away?'

'Yeah. It started moving a while ago, and now I can't sense it anymore. All these worms must still be able to, though.'

At that news, Hector allowed himself to relax a little more.

"--chances are, huh?"

Hector realized that Mr. Sheridan had still been talking. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked what you thought our chances are," the man said, less jovial than before. "Of getting out of this alive, I mean. You've got one of them reaper phantoms, right? And they can sense stuff, right?"



“Uh...”

"1397

‘He doesn’t seem like he’ll panic,’ said Garovel. ‘Just answer him honestly.’

“Well, ah,” said Hector, “we’re safe for now.”

“That so?”

“But there are still worms everywhere.”

“Figures.” The man frowned and smacked his lips together. “Guess I have to ask you to look after me for a bit longer, then. Sorry for the trouble.”

Impulsively, Hector almost said that it was no trouble, but he stopped himself. Because, well... honestly? It was. It really was. And Mr. Sheridan would probably know he was just saying that to be polite or whatever.

Hector didn’t actually mind, of course. This was the kinda shit he lived for. But it was definitely trouble. In fact, that was kinda the point.

But then again, maybe he should’ve said it anyway, even if it was just to be polite. Being polite was a good thing, after all, wasn’t it?

Shit, he was putting way too much thought into this.

And perhaps Mr. Sheridan had grown uncomfortable by Hector’s deliberating silence, because then the man said, “I promise I’ll make this up to you.”

Crap, he was being rude, wasn’t he? He hadn’t been talking nearly enough. Thinking back, he’d kinda been ignoring or otherwise not responding to a lot of the things that this guy had been saying so far. Sure, he’d been preoccupied with bigger concerns, but still...

And now he really didn’t know what to say. How was he supposed to respond to a promise like that? Just say “cool”? No, that would be stupid. He didn’t give a shit if this guy ever paid him back or not. That wasn’t important at all. So maybe he should just say “okay”? Eh, it was

more neutral, but not much better, really...

Argh, why was this so difficult? Where'd all the worms go? Wasn't there at least one who wanted to come fight him, right now? He wouldn't mind.

A faint, red-orange light caught his attention. With only the tiny lamp in Mr. Sheridan's hand, they'd been walking through an all-encompassing wall of darkness up to now, so he had to wonder where this new light was coming from. It seemed to be emanating from around a corner.

'Is that Zeff and the others?' he asked Garovel.

'No, they're still a ways away. I think that's probably just lava.'

Hector's brow lowered from behind his misty helm. 'JUST lava?'

'You've never seen lava before?'

'Not up close, no. Not sure I want to, either.'

Sure enough, when they were close enough, a rocky corner revealed itself to their lamplight, and they peeked around it to find a rushing river of lava in their way. It burned so intensely bright and was such a harsh contrast to the darkness everywhere else that Hector couldn't look directly at it without his eyes beginning to hurt.

'Hmm,' hummed Garovel. 'We'll wait for Zeff here.'

'You sure? I could build a bridge over it, no problem.'

'Big problem, actually. Heat convection is a bitch, Hector. And you still haven't mastered temperature manipulation with your iron yet, have you?'

'Ah...''

"1398

'You're free to give it a go, if you want,' said Garovel, 'but let's not gamble with this poor guy's life, eh? Because even with how advanced that suit he's wearing is, I highly doubt it will protect him from the heat rising off that lava over there.'

Hector's mind went to his studies. He'd been meaning to work on temperature manipulation, and Asad and Zeff had even told him to do so on his own as homework, but he'd been neglecting it in favor of practicing other things--other, purportedly more difficult and, in theory, more valuable things.

But now he felt like he'd been slacking.

So while they waited for Zeff to show up, Hector took the opportunity to get in some extra practice.

--++--++--

Zeff was in no mood for any of this, right now. It was all he could do to keep himself from lashing out at any of these people tagging along with him and Axiolis. A handful of Hun'Kui militiamen, along with Diego Redwater, Manuel Delaguna, and one of the non-servant Garza girls whose face he recognized but name escaped him.

He knew they didn't deserve his ire. He knew that. But he was so frustrated that he could hardly think straight.

Because he'd allowed himself to get separated from his children again. Again.

It just kept happening. In spite of his best efforts, it just kept happening.

After everything... what would Mariana think? She would chastise him, surely. That woman never held back her criticism. And she'd be right, too.

First his parents. Then his cousins. Aunts and uncles. Grandparents and great grandparents. Then Gema. Then Mariana. Then Francisco. Then Emiliana.

And now, even Marcos and Ramira.

It just kept happening.

He couldn't stop it. No matter what he did.

What a fool and a failure he was. In every way that mattered. A terrible excuse for a father and a husband.

Perhaps this was just meaningless. This struggle. Endless. Fruitless. Doomed to be repeated as he inevitably proved too weak or too stupid

in the future, as well. What if this path just kept going and never got any better, regardless of his every effort? Even regardless of how he tried to change or improve?

Was this what going mad felt like?

He wondered if that wouldn't be for the best. If he went mad, would that not make things easier? He could just let go. Stop caring so much.

Could he choose that? Could he choose to go insane? Because he wanted to. In this moment, he couldn't imagine a more appealing idea.

Except.

That other thought was still there. The one that wouldn't stop bothering him no matter what. That one that kept telling him it wasn't about him anymore. It didn't matter what he wanted. It didn't matter what would make him happy or sad or anything else.

And choosing to go mad, if such a thing were even possible, would be exactly that. Selfish. It wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't make up for anything. And it certainly wouldn't help his children.

So, no.

There was no easy way out. Not now. Not ever.

He'd known that all along, really. It was no great epiphany.

Mariana would have been disgusted with him if she knew that he had even been humoring such thoughts.

God, he missed her."

"1399

Zeff tried to steady his thoughts, knowing he shouldn't allow himself to get too distracted. Axiolis was here to warn him of any incoming danger, of course, but even so, it never hurt to be vigilant. And besides, there were few things more terrifying than being lost in the deep darkness of the Undercrust. Any of these people following him were liable to start panicking if he didn't fulfill his role as the apparent leader.

Even Diego, potentially.

It wasn't likely, sure, but Zeff had known even more brazenly confident men than him who had broken down in similar circumstances. There was perhaps no clearer example than in Lyste, some twenty years prior, during what would later be known in that country as the Great Right Turn.

It had been a quiet war for public opinion, until the very end, when all hell broke loose. They had faced overwhelming odds for five days straight, fighting such famous names as the Bloodeye, the Man of Crows, the Raider, the Liar, the Silver Devil, and even the Mad Demon himself.

That was the battle in which Field Marshal Kent and many other Vanguardians lost their minds and began attacking their own allies, including one another.

It was also the battle in which Field Marshal Lamont earned the name Iceheart, for killing Kent, his closest friend, in addition to every other broken traitor.

Zeff might not have believed that story if he hadn't been there to witness it with his own eyes, if he hadn't gotten to know Kent a little beforehand and seen the man acting seemingly normal up until then... and if Kent hadn't been mere seconds away from killing him and Axiolis both.

It was doubtless to Zeff's mind that in those few short days of fighting, the entirety of Lyste would have been consumed by Abolish were it not for Lamont. The man's reputation had suffered from it, as he'd previously been more widely known as the Judge of Intar, but having been there himself, Zeff could never truly fault the man for what he had done.

And now it was strange, because as much as he hated the Vanguard, there were still those within it whose strength, both of body and of mind, he aspired to.

In a way, though, that made him even angrier. At the Vanguard and himself.

'Zeff,' came Axiolis' echoing voice. 'We're almost there.'

As they walked, the increasing incandescence all around their small party was a welcome change, even though the magma from which it

came was less so. He could finally make out the rough silhouette of the cavernous passage that they were using, as well as various branching paths along the way.

When the young Lord Goffe came into view, Zeff stopped. The boy was apparently practicing his materialization over a broad river of magma. And not doing very well, it seemed, as parts of his iron bridge were already white hot and beginning to bend downward.

What a ridiculous sight. With everything he'd seen the boy do, this should have been child's play by now. Had he not been doing as Zeff and Asad had instructed?

How irritating. Zeff really did not need anything else to be annoyed by, right now."  
"1400

Much as he would've liked to scold the boy and maybe smack him until he started doing it correctly, this wasn't the time or place for that.

Zeff flicked his wrist and set about the task of cooling the molten river safely. If he simply materialized an iceberg on top of it, the extreme temperature difference would cause the ice to explode and probably kill someone--if not everyone. A suitable application of soul-strengthening, however, prevented that problem, and then Zeff was able to quickly blacken and settle the magma flow as his continual supply of ice melted harmlessly over it.

He noticed the Hun'Kui behind him take a few steps back, perhaps able to feel an uncomfortable gust of cooler air wash over them. He knew he had to be mindful of their presence, too. If he put too much oomph into his ice and turned this place into a little winter wonderland, the Hun'Kui would almost certainly freeze to death within seconds.

It required a strange and delicate balance, this little entourage. Ice was as deadly to the Hun'Kui as magma was to the non-servants from the surface.

Garovel was the first to venture over the calmed river and strike up a conversation. 'Glad to see you all in one piece.'

'Likewise,' said Ax. 'So where to next? Time is short, and every

direction but southwest will likely lead us into a fight with more worms.'

Diego stepped forward. "If that's the case, then what's there to think about? Southwest it is."

His reaper, Yangéra, floated by his side. 'The train went northeast,' she said.

"Oh."

'There's also the concern of WHY southwest is so empty,' said Garovel. 'Call me suspicious, but it seems a little too good to be true.'

'Perhaps, but do you see any other options?' said Ax. 'Because I am struggling to.'

'Unfortunately, no, I don't.'

'The longer we stand here, the more likely the worms will notice us,' added Yangéra. 'I suggest we at least START going southwest, for now.'

'Agreed,' said Ax.

'I, as well,' said Lorios, the reaper to Manuel Delaguna.

'Guess I do, too,' said Garovel.

The group began walking again, Axiolis and Garovel leading the way. Zeff noticed the large iron box that Hector was having follow them, and when asked, the boy stiltedly explained that it contained valuable firearms.

Hector opened the top of it, allowing his companion, Mr. Sheridan access while they were moving. Diego, Manuel, and a couple of the Hun'Kui gave it a look as well, and it wasn't long before Hector was dragging half the party along in his iron box while they toiled away with guns.

Yet another ridiculous sight. Had the boy become a pack mule, now?

Zeff adjusted his pace in order to walk next to Hector. "You should be practicing your temperature manipulation," he said, still trying to keep a lid on his annoyance level.

"Ah, oh yeah," said Hector. And then he started doing exactly that. While still pulling the others along, the boy began making spheres

appear and disappear repeatedly in front of himself.

Somehow, that was even more irritating."

"1401 -- CL.

Zeff could hear a few of the others chatting, including the reapers, but he wasn't done with Hector. An important question had occurred to him. "Do you still have the Shard that Asad gave you?"

Hector threw Zeff a look, paused from his practice, and reached through the misty armor's gap in the armpit to whip out the Shard. He held it out for Zeff, but the Rainlord didn't take it.

"As long as it is safe," said Zeff.

Hector said nothing, only recoiled his hand.

And maybe this wasn't the appropriate time, but Zeff still felt compelled to ask, "Can you contact her now?"

The young lord's expression was unreadable beneath his helmet. "I'll try." Hector closed his eyes and fell silent again.

Zeff waited. Impatiently, perhaps, but he waited.

When Hector opened his eyes again, he said, "S-sorry, it's... it's still not working."

"Why?" growled Zeff, more at the universe than at Hector specifically.

Hector didn't seem to interpret it that way, though. "I don't know..."

It probably wasn't the boy's fault. Zeff knew that. Hector had no reason to lie that Zeff could think of.

Unless Emiliana was telling him not to say anything, of course. That was certainly possible. And it wasn't difficult to imagine what her reason would be.

The Black Scourge. That bastard. What did he want with her? If he was hurting her in any way... it didn't matter how powerful he was. Zeff would find a way to kill him.



If all of that was true, however, then Hector would be at fault. For listening to Emiliana over Zeff. For thinking that Zeff wouldn't do what was best for his own child.

That was what was bothering him. That possibility.

But it was only that, he knew. A possibility. And an unlikely one. The boy was probably telling the truth. Probably.

Probably...

He scowled and heightened his pace in order to put some distance between Hector and himself.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty: 'O, hidden Liege...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Royo Raju listened silently. The surface-dwellers seemed to be under the reasonable impression that none of the Hun'Kui here knew Mohssian, and he didn't see much point in correcting them.

Certainly, his life was currently depending on these people--and in fact, the one apparently named Manuel had already saved him from falling to his death--but Royo didn't think that reason enough to give up a potential advantage.

Primarily, though, that was not his motivation. It was not the superhumans that he was truly concerned about. They seemed like they could be effectively lied to and/or reasoned with. It was the other Hun'Kui he needed to be careful of. If they realized that he was not, in fact, a real militiaman, then they would either tell the supermen or try to kill him themselves.

And those were far from desirable outcomes.

So he decided to stay quiet, to not draw any unnecessary attention to himself."

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So he decided to stay quiet, to not draw any unnecessary attention to himself."

"1402

"How did you manage to get your hands on this kind of firepower, anyway?" the one called Manuel was saying.

"Oh, it's all about makin' the right friends," said the one called Robert Sheridan.

Royo observed from a distance as they armed themselves to the teeth. He'd been tempted to join them in their work, but they'd even been kind enough to toss an extra weapon his way. He'd already had one, of

course, and this new piece required some reassembly, but he appreciated the gesture.

What he did not appreciate was the way that the one called Diego was looking at him. Pointed and semi-frequent stares. A suspicious man, it seemed. Perhaps he suspected. More likely, he was just being cautious around an abundance of firearms and strangers.

The reapers were doing the same thing. Looking around constantly. Surveying both their surroundings and themselves. He supposed the rumor that they made for excellent scouts was true, after all.

But what an unsettling sight, they were. Without his ardor-infused goggles, he would not have been able to see them, and he was considering taking them off for that very reason.

To his eyes, they were himself. They each had his own face, save the eyes, which cried blood, and the mouth, which dripped it as well. Their bodies, too, were mangled and twisted, at times ghostly and ethereal, and at others, slashed to ribbons and full of holes.

Horrific as it all was, and even though he wasn't at all accustomed to it, it did make him wonder. Surely, everyone could not see them as such. The other Hun'Kui were wearing goggles, too. Perhaps they were hiding it like he was, but they did not look nearly as disturbed as he felt.

No, their appearance had to have been specialized in some way. Otherwise, it made no sense how they could all have his face without anyone else noticing.

Two of the other Hun'Kui were speaking to each other now, he noticed. But he couldn't hear them, because they were speaking too lowly. He did, however, catch sight of them glancing in his direction.

That could prove problematic.

The only other Hun'Kui present was walking right next to him. This one, at least, was his ally--the still-nameless prisoner with whom Royo had escaped.

Ideally, this was a good thing. Ideally, the man would be helpful to their shared cause rather than a burden to it.

He was still waiting on proof of that.

And perhaps the man had read his mind, because his ally chose that moment to speak to him for the very first time. “How is your shoulder, Eleyo?” the man said in Hunese.

His shoulder? Eleyo?

Ah.

Royo understood. The man was pretending they already knew each other and had made up a name for him. Likely, he was worried that the two of them were the only ones not talking at all. And if they acted familiar with one another, their facade as militiamen would appear more credible to the others.

Smart."

"1403

If nothing else, Royo could at least be relieved that he hadn't allied himself with a slack-jawed idiot.

"It's a little sore, still," Royo answered, also in Hunese, "but don't worry, Lenos. I'm fine."

"Glad to hear it. We might make it out of this after all."

"We might. But don't relax just yet."

A lull in their intentionally bland conversation arrived, and Royo was more concerned with hearing what the others were saying than in keeping it alive.

The lone woman of their group was talking to the one called Manuel. "I am sorry for causing you so much trouble." She was wearing a suit similar to the one called Robert Sheridan, which told Royo that those two were different from the other surface-dwellers, more fragile perhaps.

"It is not your fault," said the one called Manuel. "I am just glad you are not hurt. My brother would have never forgiven me."

"I..."

"Ah--apologies. I didn't mean to bring up--please forgive me."

"You need not apologize," she said. "You were as close to him as I was. If not more so."

What was going on there, Royo wondered? Though it piqued his curiosity, it didn't sound immediately relevant to his current predicament, so he tried to focus his attention elsewhere.

The Senmurai had been largely quiet so far, but it looked like the one called Diego had struck up a conversation with him.

"--don't think so? Well, I do. In fact, I think we're closer to it now than anyone has ever gotten. I mean, it would make sense, wouldn't it? All these worms in the way? It's no wonder no one else has ever returned. The slimy bastards are guarding it."

"...I guess," was all the Senmurai said.

"You're telling me you're not curious? Just think about the possibilities. The potential. This could be our big chance. Yangéra thinks so, too."

There came a noticeable pause.

"...She's just saying that because she's embarrassed. She doesn't like people to know how much she loves and agrees with me."

"I'm sure that's it," said the Senmurai.

"And I'M sure that I'm right about this. You guys should listen to me. I have great instincts when it comes to finding treasure. That train wreck was a blessing in disguise. You'll see."

Another pause.

"Lhutowë, of course. His will be done."

Still another pause.

"That's not true at all. I've always believed in Him when it benefits me."

The more he listened, the more Royo thought the one called Diego sounded like a buffoon. But he could see the man still throwing glances back in his direction fairly regularly. Regardless of how he talked, that man hadn't stopped being vigilant.

Royo had known a few men like that in his time. Men who acted one way while thinking another. They were often the most dangerous

people he'd ever met."  
"1404

Lenos spoke up again, interrupting Royo's silent ruminations. "Thank you for saving my ass back there, by the way," he said, again in Hunese. "I doubt I would have made it if not for you."

Royo gave him a look. "Yes, well, if you get the opportunity to return the favor--and it seems like you might--then I hope you do."

"Of course."

Now that he was thinking about it, there was a good chance that Royo could recognize or otherwise identify this man. There had been no lack of prisoners back in Babbadelo, yet Royo had only seen a handful aboard the train. Logic would dictate, therefore, that the local government had chosen the prisoners that they found the most problematic. A few possible candidates came to mind. He'd always tried to be aware of notable individuals whenever he traveled, and Babbadelo had been no different.

He needed more information, though. He couldn't ask for Lenos' real name, obviously, but maybe he could get a hint. "Do you have any hidden talents that might come in handy? Anything that you've been keeping from me, perhaps?"

"Ah..." Lenos rubbed his neck with his hand as he took a moment to think. "Not especially..."

No good. Lenos couldn't tell what he'd been getting at? Or perhaps he was just reluctant to say. Royo tried again. "That reminds me. What was keeping you so busy back in Babbadelo? I didn't see you around very much."

"Oh, you know. The usual..."

Ugh. Come on. "So you were causing problems, then?"

Lenos squinted at him briefly, then smirked. "You know me. Just can't keep my hands to myself, sometimes."

Was that a clue? The look on Lenos' face suggested as much, but Royo didn't understand what he was getting at. "I hope you weren't

doing anything unwelcome or otherwise disrespectful. It would reflect poorly on the rest of us, you know.”

“Never. I am always the perfect gentleman. Though, I admit, this time I could have been more discreet. But what can I say? I was enraptured. Not feeling myself.”

Royo’s expression flickered. Was he describing the same thing that had happened to himself?

“Normally, I never get caught,” Lenos went on. “I consider it a matter of professional dignity.”

Professional? That one had to be a clue.

The man made it sound as if he were talking about a habit of promiscuity, but as far as Royo was aware, there were no laws in Babbadelo that would have imprisoned him for such behavior. Lenos had to be talking about something else.

Thievery? If he considered it a matter of professionalism, that made the most sense to Royo. And a thief who took pride in not getting caught must have also been a thief who had been doing it for a while. One who would have earned a name for himself.

And Royo had recently heard such a name. That of Kogibur, or the Roach.

A particularly unflattering name in the Undercrust, because as far as benign pests went, cockroaches were arguably the most reviled. But that was also because they were so resilient and difficult to get rid of. So in a way, perhaps it was a kind of compliment.”

"1405

Royo figured he should reciprocate and give Lenos a hint toward his own identity. “When will you learn? I’ve always tried my hardest to set a good example for you. And everyone else, too. That’s why, unlike you, when I speak, people listen.”

“Don’t lecture me, Eleyo. I know all about your reputation.”

Ah. So he’d already known. Royo was flattered but not terribly surprised.



Royo observed a change in the way the superhumans were carrying themselves, and the reapers all appeared to close ranks. Rumbling beneath his feet confirmed his fears, and moments later, a worm tunneled out of the ground ahead of them.

It was comparatively small, however, and did not prove to be nearly so grave a threat as their previous encounter. As quickly as it had appeared, the one called Zeff slew the beast whilst shouting at the top of his lungs. A single, glistening spear skewered it through the mouth, and a tower of ice erupted up out of the worm's body, exploding it into frozen pieces.

The Senmurai raised a metal wall in defense of the Hun'Kui, but Royo still ended up taking a bead of ice on the arm.

It burned unlike anything he'd ever felt. Royo howled in agony and dropped to the ground.

Fortunately, the pain soon abated. Lenos helped him to his feet.

The bead of ice was gone, but his arm was numb, and Royo could see it twitching. As he steadied his haggard breath, he was made to wonder how something so small could have felt so torturous and debilitating. Ice truly was as terrifying as the rumors said it was.

There was little time to recuperate, however. The superhumans were ushering the group onward at an increased pace.

As they ran, the one called Zeff ventured closer and gestured with his hands. He even made a poor attempt to apologize in Hunese. He was not very familiar with the language, apparently. No surprise. Perhaps his reaper was feeding him words to say.

Royo accepted it as silently and as graciously as he could manage. As humiliating as it was, Royo understood that it had not been intentional. There would be no need to seek retribution from the one called Zeff. Royo knew the damage was most likely not permanent, and an accident was an accident, after all.

The cavernous passage they were using opened up as completely as Royo's vision would allow, and suddenly there were no more walls, only pitch darkness.

Pitch darkness and a kind of... mist. Faint, but there. Squinting, he removed his goggles, and the mist vanished completely. He put them

on, and the mist returned. Which told him that the mist was infused with ardor, if not entirely constituted from it.

The group slowed their run to a walk, then stopped altogether. He searched the superhumans' faces for answers, but they were looking as confused as he was.

He rummaged through a rucksack that he'd procured back on the train, and he was pleased to find a directional lamplight. He pointed it ahead and switched it on.

A cone of light cut through the murky blackness, revealing large shapes in the distance.

Buildings, he soon realized. In quite poor condition. Crumbling, many of them. Very old architecture, as well.

As he moved his light to and fro horizontally, and as the others joined him in switching on their own lights, more and more structures came into view, and their discovery became more and more apparent.

They had found a city in ruins."

"1406 -- CLI.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-One: 'What remains of a Falling...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

'So the worms have given up?' Hector asked, still not entirely clear on what seemed like an ever-changing situation.

'Uh, I'm not sure,' said Garovel privately. 'They've slowed down or stopped chasing us, but I don't know if that means they've genuinely given up. My knowledge of worms is a bit spotty, in case that wasn't already obvious.'

'Then ask one of the others about it,' said Hector.

'Aww, but--ugh, fine.' He switched over to a public voice. 'So do you think they've left us alone or what?'

'No,' said Axiolis. 'Judging from the movement patterns, they still seem

agitated to me.'

'Why are they keeping their distance, then?' asked Yangéra.

'Probably because they are hesitant to enter this area for some reason,' said Axiolis. 'It would make sense if this area was the territory of a rock golem. In which case, we have lucked out.'

Hector's pessimism was doubting that.

'Have we, though?' said Garovel, perhaps feeling similarly. 'We're still both surrounded AND stranded. Doesn't seem like the greatest luck to me, even if the worms have given up. Which, by the way, you're also saying they might not have?'

'Mm, indeed,' said Axiolis. 'They may just need to cluster up in order to overcome their anxiety. They are not exactly the brightest creatures in the world, so that may take them a while.'

'Then let's make use of that time,' said Yangéra. 'We should put some more distance between us and them while we can.'

'Agreed.'

'Yeah.'

'Alright.'

And the group began walking again, though at a more cautious pace than even before they were being chased.

Hector had the opportunity to observe the various crumbling structures all around them. He'd never seen the like before. Most windows were longer horizontally than they were vertically, and whatever the faintly foggy material was that occupied them couldn't have been simple glass, as it would have surely melted at this temperature.

He tried to recall if he'd seen material like this in Babbadelo, but if he had, it was escaping him. He thought about asking Garovel if he remembered, but the reaper had never seemed to give too much of a crap about architecture, so he probably wouldn't. That, and he didn't want to distract Garovel from his observational duties, right now.

Regardless, he wished they had more light. Even with all of their lamps probing around, the thick darkness still made it difficult to see very much at one time. And of course, pretty much every building was in

shambles, too. That made it considerably harder to spot the architectural differences between here and the surface.

What a shame. He would've liked to get a look at an intact roof, but he couldn't find one.

Still, it was interesting to him that this place even had buildings to begin with--or at least this many. Babbadelo had so few by comparison. Everything there had been carved out of the natural rock formations."

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They found an apparent road, inlaid with long and flat stones, some of which reflected the light of the party's lamps, illuminating pieces of the dark path and thereby making it mildly more clear where they were going. It was only so useful, however, as the path was regularly interrupted by large piles of rubble that needed to be cleared. Diego and Manuel made short work of such tasks while Zeff and Hector kept watch over the party's front and rear, respectively.

And maybe it was just Hector's mind playing tricks on him, but as they continued slowly onward, he could feel a heavy silence among the group, a kind of unspoken discomfort. But then, perhaps that was just because of the reapers. If recent experiences were anything to go by, having so many reapers in close proximity to one another without any of them speaking very much... that just didn't bode very well, Hector felt. Like a bad omen, of sorts.

At length, the Lord Elroy was the one to break the atmosphere. "What is this strange aura?" he asked.

'Ah,' said Garovel. 'You can sense that, too, can you?'

Hector didn't know what they were talking about.

"I can," said Zeff. "But only just. What is it? Do any of you know?"

'It is ardor,' said Axiolis. 'It covers this entire area like a blanket, so dense that it's become a kind of mist.'

"Is that bad?" said Diego, while Manuel Delaguna was busy explaining the half-silent conversation to the non-servants in the group. "Because it doesn't sound so great."

'It is hard to tell,' said Axiolis. 'It could be nothing, but regardless, let us not disturb the mist if we can help it.'

Somehow, Hector doubted that it was nothing and so had to speak up, "Supposing it's not nothing, uh... then what would it be? Hypothetically, I mean."

The reapers hesitated visibly.

'Hypothetically,' said Axiolis slowly, 'it could mean that a rock golem is slumbering here. Which would be wonderful. Golems are quite docile

and friendly toward humans.'

'It might even help us fight the worms, if they decide to follow us into this area,' added Garovel.

'Indeed.'

Diego had the same question that was occurring to Hector. "If it's so wonderful, then why should we avoid disturbing the mist?"

'Because,' said Axiolis, again slowly, 'it could also be a feldeath.'

No one said anything. Even Manuel stopped translating for the non-servants.

Manuel's reaper picked up the slack. 'We should clarify that, while it is yet unclear at this point, a golem is the more likely case,' said Lorios.

'Of course,' said Axiolis. 'I have been able to sense particularly strong ardor from much of the rubble around here. And rubble is made from rocks. Which is what golems are.' The reaper didn't sound as confident as Hector would've liked.

Garovel helped him out. 'Or it could be nothing, like Axiolis first said. In fact, I know of a fascinating theory regarding the seemingly pointless accumulation of ardor.'

"1408

Hector tried to intervene privately. 'Garovel, is this really the time?'

'I'm just trying to keep everyone from freaking out,' the reaper said, also privately.

Diego grew impatient as the group kept walking. "Well, go on, then. Tell us your magnificent theory."

'Oh, well, it's not MY theory, per se. Just one I've heard, like I said.' Garovel allowed a beat to pass. 'But anyway, yes, it has to do with golems, too, actually. And how they're created.'

'Oh?' said Axiolis. 'I've not heard this before.'

'Neither have I,' said Lorios.

Before continuing, Garovel looked to Yangéra, doubtless wondering if she knew what he was talking about. When she shook her head, Garovel's next words sounded positively delighted. 'Well, the idea is simple enough. Whenever ardor accumulates in one place like this, it begins to bleed into the environment, and then, over a period of decades or possibly centuries, sentience is achieved, and the very land itself comes to life in the form of a golem.'

As he listened, Hector laughed through his nose, quietly enough that it must have blended into the muted hiss of his armor. He couldn't help thinking about how much Garovel must have been enjoying himself.

'Or in other words,' Garovel went on, 'all of this mist that we're sensing here could, in truth, be nothing, for now. But ten years from now? Or a hundred? Perhaps a golem will arise.'

'Interesting,' said Axiolis. 'But what causes the ardor to accumulate in one place like this?'

'That's not, um, well--that's not entirely clear. It just seems to occur naturally. But I know some have argued that this gap in our understanding of how or why it happens makes for a compelling case that the planet is indeed sentient, and that it decides such things according to its whims or what have you.'

'Mm, I see.' Axiolis did not sound terribly convinced.

"That's great 'n all," said Diego, "and, uh, I'm glad we're safe from the worms 'n everything, so I don't want this to sound like I don't appreciate what a spectacular job you reapers are doing, but, um... Do we know where we're going, right now?"

Hector appreciated that question.

'...Not entirely,' admitted Axiolis.

"Not entirely," echoed Diego, nodding with feigned understanding.

"How 'bout partially, then? If we don't entirely know, then what are the parts that we do know? Could we focus on those, maybe?"

'Could you please not sound so condescending?' said Yangéra.

"Oh, this isn't condescension. I assure you, my tone is one of humbleness and admiration."



Impressively, Diego earned a snicker from Yangéra with that one.

‘We do sense something else,’ said Garovel, ‘which is what we’re heading toward, currently. But unless I’m mistaken, I think we’re all a bit confused about what it actually is.’

“Bein’ pretty vague,” said Diego.

Garovel sighed publicly. ‘Alright, well, below us and still quite a ways ahead, it seems like there are a lot of plants there. That’s what I’m sensing, anyway.’”

"1409

‘I sense them as well,’ said Lorios.

‘As do I,’ said Axiolis.

‘Same here,’ said Yangéra.

“Okay,” said Diego, who’d apparently become the spokesperson for every non-reaper in the group. “So what’s the big deal? I mean, I know plants are fairly uncommon in the Undercrust, but is that all we’re going off of?”

‘No, the thing is,’ said Garovel, ‘these are plants that we recognize. By their “soul-signature,” if you will. And I don’t think any of us have ever sensed these types of plants anywhere but the surface.’

Another chorus of agreement arose from the other reapers.

“What in the world?” said Diego. “You’re saying that there are plants down here that shouldn’t be able to survive in this environment? How is that possible?”

‘That is a very good question,’ said Garovel. ‘And it is why we are going to investigate.’

A few more beats of silence passed.

Then Diego, as if realizing something, said, “So we have no idea how we’re going to reach Capaporo and reunite with everyone.”

‘Correct.’

“Meanwhile, they’re probably freaking out, worrying that we’re all dead.”

‘Probably.’

“And without you there to guide them, they won’t know where to go, so they’ll be stuck in Capaporo.”

‘Mhmm.’

“This plan bites,” said Diego.

‘Never said it didn’t,’ said Garovel.

“Ugh...”

Hector didn’t disagree with the man. He wondered how the other Rainlords would react to this development. Things must’ve looked really bad from their end, but would they simply give up on them? Hector hoped they would. With the way the reapers had been describing the sheer volume of worms here, trying to fight their way here... even with as much strength as Asad, Dimas, Salvador, Darktide, and all the others had at their disposal...

It seemed like a terrible idea. One of the worst Hector could imagine, in these circumstances.

But then again...

These were Rainlords.

Hector honestly didn’t know what they would do. And he wanted to pose the question aloud, but he caught a glimpse of Diego’s face. And Zeff’s.

They were probably even more worried about it than he was. Bringing it up now wouldn’t change that, nor would it improve their own predicament.

‘On the bright side,’ said Garovel, making everyone perk up ever so slightly, ‘our companions, Roman and Voreese, the ones you haven’t met yet, should also be in Capaporo. So if they all meet up together, then even without us there, there’s a good chance that they will make it to Warrenhold safely.’

True enough, Hector supposed. He found it difficult to imagine Roman and Voreese hitting it off with the Rainlords and everything going as smoothly as Garovel was suggesting, but again, he kept that to himself. If nothing else, he could appreciate Garovel’s attempt to maintain morale.

As they continued on, Hector tried to think of a new topic of conversation, preferably something that wouldn't instigate the same feeling of helplessness as the last subject.

The ruined buildings gave him an idea, at least. "...Does anyone know what this city was called?"

"1410

~~Thanksgiving Special (Page 1 of 4)~~

No one answered him.

Well, that was a bust. It surprised him, though. He thought for sure that at least one of the reapers would've had some idea what this place was. It made him further wonder precisely how old this city was. If it were relatively new, then it would make sense that these reapers from the surface didn't know about it at all, but as he stared at the crumbling infrastructure all around him, that didn't seem particularly likely.

They arrived at a monument of some sort, and the first thing Hector noticed about it was that it seemed to be perfectly intact, unlike every building he'd seen so far.

It was an enormous flame, as big as a house and eternally still, being carved from pale gray stone. Around it flowed multiple streams of lava, all of which appeared to be factored into the design of the foundation.

'Oh my god,' came Axiolis' voice, and everyone who could hear him turned to look.

Yangéra was the one to ask it. 'What's the matter?'

'Do you not recognize this flame?' he said, looking over his fellow reapers. 'This is Enkir, also known as Rathmore's Flame. It was a famous marker of Hun'Sho royalty.'

Hector had multiple questions all of a sudden.

'Wow, so this was a Hun'Sho city?' said Garovel. 'I suppose that would explain why it's in ruins.'

Hector had to ask a private question. 'Who're the Hun'Sho?'

Garovel floated closer but didn't have the opportunity to answer him.

'Uh-oh,' said Lorios aloud. 'I'm not the only one sensing that, am I?'

'No,' said Axiolis. 'It seems the worms have decided to come in here after us.'

'Time to start run--'

A tremor cut Garovel off, and it was strong enough that Hector and everyone else had to fight to maintain their footing. The tremor did not dissipate, either, and indeed, seemed to only grow stronger with each passing second.

Hector reached out for an explanation. 'Garovel, what's happening?!'

'Remember how we said not to disturb the mist?!' said Garovel privately. 'Well, the worms are disturbing the mist!'

And then Hector saw the monument from earlier come alive with molten light. Lava flowed up from the base of the stone and through the curves of the flame, igniting it in its entirety and glowing with such increasing intensity that Hector had to shield his eyes.

Magma gushed forth like a geyser, and crystalline ice materialized over the party, protecting everyone but the cluster of Hun'Kui, who did not look terribly fazed by the sudden bath of lava.

The pool of liquid hot rock kept growing, and the group began to slowly move out of its path while they were either shielded from it or swimming through it.

That was when Hector saw something that he would not soon be forgetting.

The magma began to move against its own flow. It began to grow upward. And it began to take form. Two broad pillars connecting at the top--legs to a torso. Bulky and hunchbacked. Then came the arms. Then the head."

"1411

At such close range, the sheer amount of light coming off the creature was blinding. Once the group was clear of the amassing lava, they started running again. Hector was surprised to find his iron box unharmed, save only a melted corner. He increased its pace as well but honestly didn't have high hopes that any of the weapons therein would survive whatever the hell was going to happen next.

'A molten rock golem,' marveled Garovel privately as they ran. 'Never seen one of those before.'

Was that what that was? Hector hadn't made that connection, but he supposed it made sense. 'Does that mean it's on our side?' he asked.

'In theory, yeah.'

Hector looked back and saw the whole city being illuminated. The previously black expanse of cavern above them was suddenly alive with the burning reds and oranges of the golem's molten glow. And maybe it was the light playing tricks on him, but Hector thought he saw something else there, too, moving among the giant stalactites above.

'Wait!' came Axiolis' voice. 'Everyone, stop!'

Hesitant, they all still did as he said.

Axiolis explained himself. 'The worms surround this entire city, directly ahead of us as well. We should not venture too far away from the golem, else the worms will swarm.'

'True enough, but we shouldn't stay too CLOSE to the golem, either,' said Garovel.

'Then we may already be at the optimal distance from it,' said Yangéra.

And no one looked pleased, but no one argued, either.

With that, the party stayed put, torn between bad and worse circumstances.

The reapers kept talking to one another, trying to brainstorm seemingly, but it didn't sound like they were making much progress to Hector.

As he listened, his gaze returned to where it had been before, to the stalactites far above the golem's still-expanding bulk.

And that was when Hector saw a second thing that he would not soon be forgetting.

At first, it was just a kind of murky darkness hanging high in the air, noticeable because of how undeterred by the golem's light it was, unlike the rest of the fleeing shadows around it.

Until it took form.

It became a skeleton--not terribly unlike every reaper he'd ever seen. But it was so much larger. Impossibly gigantic. The equal of the molten golem. It had flames of its own, as well, but these were black as night and grew to cover its skeletal body in a way similar to a reaper's shroud.

'Oh hey,' laughed Garovel, though he sounded rather nervous to Hector, 'I guess we were wrong. The mist wasn't for a golem OR a feldeath. It was for both. How wonderful.'

That was one explanation that Hector had not needed. He'd certainly never seen a feldeath before, but he'd still been able to recognize what it was almost immediately.

The feldeath began to descend, and four colossal scythes materialized into its skeletal hands--of which there were somehow now four as well."

"1412

~~Thanksgiving Special (Page 3 of 4)~~

The golem met the feldeath's four blades with two fists, and the impact was so immense that Hector saw the air distort around them before realizing a shock wave was imminent.

He raised a defensive iron wall for their group, and Zeff's ice joined it.

The force pushed the paired walls back, pressing right up against the group, so Hector kept adding iron to the front and sides, hoping to distribute more of the blow. Debris flew by in elephant-sized chunks, several of which slammed into their barrier, denting and cracking it in multiple places.

But it held. And when they annihilated their wall so they could see the

continuing battle, Hector was relieved that the subsequent blows were not nearly as devastating as that first one. They only made the ground tremble and waves of briefly hotter air wash over them.

Hector could only wonder how hot that air really was if he was able to feel it even through his cooling armor.

The two giants did not battle on their own for much longer, however, because the worms arrived in force and swarmed them both.

What followed was probably the biggest clusterfuck of pure chaos that Hector had ever witnessed, and he was only too grateful to be standing at a relatively safe distance away from it.

Fire, lightning, and darkness all collided amid hulking figures.

A scythe wreathed in black cut right through the golem's torso, bisecting it horizontally along with a dozen worms--and none on the receiving end of that blow so much as flinched. All body parts, including the golem's, reattached within moments, so quick that Hector questioned whether anything had even happened.

The golem punched a hole right through the feldeath's midsection, and the skeletal monster's whole body lost its form, only to turn into black goo and fly around the golem's extended arm, reconstituting itself at the golem's exposed backside.

And the worms. They dropped like flies, but they didn't stay down. They kept swarming back up, almost always bigger than before, not that it seemed to matter as they were sliced and smashed and roasted and--Hector couldn't even tell what else.

He had to wonder if such a fight would ever actually end.

Unfortunately, the worms did not focus solely on the giants, and boy, were there plenty more to go around. Soon enough, there were worms bearing down on them from every direction.

Before they were completely swarmed the servants all formed a square around the non-servants. Zeff, Diego, Manuel, and Hector each took one side while most of the non-servants laid down covering fire as they saw fit.

These worms were much smaller than what he'd seen previously, which made it a simple enough task to swat them away and keep his side clear, but there were just so many. It was a writhing sea before



him, angry and seemingly endless. There was scarcely time to think or even breathe.

And worse still, he knew from experience that, at any moment, all these worms could fuse into one enormous monstrosity and become a very big problem.

Which they did."

"1413

~~Thanksgiving Special (Page 4 of 4)~~

In a blink, the worms were amassing, already the size of a school bus and still growing.

No swatting that one away.

He needed to think bigger. In fact, what was he doing? He should've already been thinking bigger to begin with. He dropped to one knee and slammed his palm against the ground.

An iron plateau filled the entire road before him. He'd given it a slope, too, so it sent every single worm in his line of sight flying away from him, even the big one.

Yeah. That was more like it. There was no need to feel intimidated, he realized. Even if he couldn't put them down for good, he didn't have to.

They were still coming, of course, slithering over the top of his iron, but that wasn't a problem. Rinse and repeat. He annihilated his work, letting the worms drop, and then remade it, launching them even farther into the distance. When they came still another time, they had combined to about the size of the one that had brought down the train.

So what? Hector sent that one flying, too.

That bought him a significant amount of time to breathe, and he looked over to see how the others were doing. Zeff and Diego were doing just fine, unsurprisingly, but Manuel seemed to be having a rough time, so Hector helped him out and flung a few clusters of worms away for him. The man spared him a nod.

Hector saw his own worm returning, again bigger than before and this

time barreling toward the group at the speed of a freight train.

All that momentum could prove difficult to simply launch backward, he felt. He was considering creating a ramp for it instead when Robert Sheridan stepped into his line of vision.

Apparently, the man had finally finished building his gun. And the thing was massive. More like a cannon than anything, Mr. Sheridan had it mounted on his shoulder as he took aim. The man pulled the trigger, and a volley of projectiles launched in rapid succession, leaving a visibly hot trail in their wake.

The first projectiles didn't explode--at least not immediately; instead, they dug into the beast's bulk. Then the rest of the projectiles hit, and triggered a chain of explosions--but not through combustion, as Hector had expected. Instead, the explosions were all lasers, and for a couple seconds, the worm looked like it was at the center of some kind of deadly disco ball, getting diced into thousands of tiny pieces.

And then Mr. Sheridan shot a volley of more conventional explosives, too. In the end, the beast was reduced to a smear on the road.

A bit awestruck, Hector heard the man laughing that same crazed laugh again. But when he saw Mr. Sheridan reload the cannon and point it at the feldeath, Hector coated the trigger in iron and grabbed his arm.

"Do NOT shoot the feldeath!" Hector shouted over the noise of the swarm around them."

"1414 -- CLII.

Mr. Sheridan looked confused for a moment, but then seemed to realize. "Ah! Yeah, probably wouldn't even hit at this range, eh?! I'll get closer!"

"No, just--!" There wasn't time to explain properly. "Just focus on the worms! Don't attack the feldeath, no matter what!"

"Roger that!"

More worms arrived, and Hector resumed his defensive duties. Thankfully, the others seemed to be making genuine progress. Zeff in particular was dealing with thinner and thinner crowds of worms each

time Hector looked over in his direction.

At length, however, their battle was interrupted. A strange sound rang out, like one long musical note, the likes of which Hector had never heard before. It made every worm in sight shudder and curl up into a ball.

The group stopped and exchanged confused looks with one another. After a second, though, Zeff began skewering dozens of worms at a time with icy stalagmites.

‘Someone’s there,’ said Axiolis, pointing toward Zeff’s side of the street, which made the man stop again.

Sure enough, a figure appeared, carefully stepping around or over the balls of worms. The same sound continued to ring intermittently, and Hector became fairly certain that it was coming from whatever was in the figure’s left hand.

As the figure drew closer to Zeff, it became clear that it was a man in a climate-controlled suit.

The Lord Elroy spoke first. “Hello...”

“Ah, you speak Mohssian!” the stranger said. “How unexpected! Greetings!”

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” asked Zeff.

“Perhaps the explanation should wait,” the man said, motioning to the battle between the molten golem and the feldeath still raging in the background. “I have a place where we can talk at our leisure. It is not far from here.”

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Two: ‘To thine scorching heart...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It hadn’t taken much more convincing to get the group to agree to follow the stranger, who soon identified himself as a biologist, anthropologist, historian, and “generally curious individual” by the name of Carver.

“How did you end up here?” Diego asked as the man led them to wherever they were going.

“Oh, it’s a rather long story, but the unfortunate point of it is that my companions and I were separated during an exploratory venture. Not to worry, though. My companions and I were eventually reunited. But at that time, I decided to stay, as I had grown quite fond of this place.”

Hector, and perhaps everyone else present, found that difficult to comprehend.

Zeff posed the next question. “How long have you been down here?”

“Ah, I would wager that it is going on five years or so now,” said Carver. “It has been quite the educational adventure. Full of more thrills than I care to remember. But from the looks of your lot, I somehow begin to think that my own tales would fail to impress.””  
"1414 -- CLII.

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somehow begin to think that my own tales would fail to impress.'"

"1415

They arrived at a ruined structure that looked like it might've once been something quite spectacular, judging from the long, flat steps leading up to it and the empty grounds all around it, perhaps where one or more courtyards had been.

Had it been a castle of some kind, Hector wondered? Axiolis had mentioned something about royalty, hadn't he? Maybe this was some sort of palace.

A sobering thought, he felt. He could hardly imagine how much time, effort, and resources would have gone into construction. And to think that it could be reduced to a state such as this? Little more than knee-high walls and a pile of rocks?

As if he needed any more reason to feel small and powerless in the grand scheme of things.

Carver led them up the steps and through the vibrating rubble. The distant battle between the two giants had not ceased or even shown any signs of doing so. Hector was not the only one who was still trying to keep an eye on it, partially out of wariness and partially out of simple awe. When would they ever get another chance to see something like this?

The feldeath loosed a burning beam of black light that cut through the golem and tore into the cavern ceiling. A half-dozen building-sized stalactites crashed down on a section of the city that was much too close for Hector's liking. Dust and wind rushed past the group, disturbing the broken castle grounds and unsettling more debris.

After that, everyone's pace quickened noticeably, and they soon arrived at a large door in the floor of a blown-out chamber. Carver set to work opening it--a process which apparently involved inserting a key into a hole beneath a hatch in the floor, then flipping a series of adjacent switches.

It took several attempts. Carver threw the group a few embarrassed looks and apologized after finally getting it open. "I have not done this in quite a while," he said. "The mechanism is rather old and could do

with a bit of maintenance, it seems.”

At last, he led them down a short ladder and then a spiraling staircase. A very long, spiraling staircase, Hector discovered. He had fun changing his iron box into appropriate shapes so that it could continue following the group--so much fun, in fact, that he would've left the damn thing behind if not for Mr. Sheridan's pleading.

He did finally manage it after reassessing the problem and treating it like a new form of training. Making the iron box grow and shrink as necessary, becoming less like an iron box and more like an iron caterpillar. Or worm, perhaps. Squirming its way down the hole, the ladder, the narrow and curving steps.

Garovel seemed to get a kick out of the whole ordeal.

Hector was the last to reach the bottom of the staircase, and they'd apparently been asking Carver more questions while they waited for Hector to catch up.

“You’ve really been down here for five years all by your lonesome?” Mr. Sheridan was saying.”

"1416

“Yes and no,” said Carver. “It has been years since I have seen another ‘normal’ person like myself--if these servants and Hun’Kui gentlemen will excuse the term. Yet I have not been alone. But rather than telling you, would it not be better to show you?”

The group exchanged uncertain looks as they started walking again, this time down a long corridor with the only light being at the end of it.

‘He’s not lying,’ said Garovel privately. ‘I’m sensing a lot of... souls on the other side of this tunnel.’

Hector noticed the reaper’s hesitation. ‘Why the pause?’

‘I just... well, they’re not quite “souls” in the traditional sense.’

‘There are traditional souls now?’ said Hector. ‘How complicated does this shit get, Garovel?’

‘That’s not what I mean. Just... geez, I can hardly believe what I’m

sensing, right now. Maybe it really would be better to just to wait until he shows us.

‘Shows us what?’

‘Exactly.’

Hector had lost his ability to be surprised by Garovel’s intentional crypticity. He hadn’t lost his ability to be annoyed by it, though.

They soon reached the end of the corridor, but none of them were prepared for the view that awaited them.

Carver kept walking while everyone else stopped to gawk. Then he turned and gestured widely with both hands. “Welcome to Himmekel, the Paradise Vault.”

The very first thing that drew Hector’s eye was the sky-high lavafall. It wasn’t particularly wide, but it was so tall and so intensely bright that it became the main source of light for the area.

But not the only source of light. And that was the second thing Hector noticed: how many other, smaller lights there were. And what they were.

They were people.

The lights were people.

They glowed. Red and orange and yellow. Molten beings. Not unlike the golem he’d just seen.

Or, wait a minute, were these golems, too? They were the size of regular humans, but maybe that didn’t matter?

He needed some answers and so reached for the only question he could think of. ‘Garovel, what the fuck am I looking at?’

The reaper was slow to answer. ‘Hector,’ he said privately. ‘Meet the Hun’Sho. A branch of humanity that I thought went extinct a thousand years ago.’

Hector’s eyes widened. He had no idea what to say to that.

The group started inching forward with Zeff in the lead, and Hector just kind of mindlessly followed, still too dumbstruck to do much besides listen and observe.



"Now, I'm sure you all have many questions," said Carver, "but first, let me assure you that, whatever you've heard about their kind, these Hun'Sho here are very gracious, magnanimous, and welcoming. So long as you do no violence upon them, none will be done upon you. Trust me. I have been studying their ways for five years." Then he turned to the Hun'Kui specifically and began speaking Hunese, perhaps repeating himself in order to make sure they understood."

"1417

Hector couldn't take his eyes off the Hun'Sho. There must have been fifty of them, at least, all looking down at the group from various interconnected bridges above.

'Lava people,' he thought, still incredulous. 'There are fucking lava people...'

'Yup,' was all Garovel said.

'How do--?' He struggled for an appropriate question. 'I mean... how can they even EXIST? How can you have a body made out of fucking lava?!'

'Well, technically, their body isn't made of lava. The lava is a coating which they naturally secrete. Like clothes are to you. If your clothes were made out of your own sweat, drool, piss, and shit.'

'What.'

'It's much more hygienic when they do it, though. I know the thought is tempting, Hector, but don't cover yourself in your own excrement. You'll get someone sick.'

He was genuinely lost for words now.

Carver started talking to the group again. "Now, if you would please continue following me, I will show you to a place where you can all get some rest. I doubt I am the only one who is tired, yes?"

A few grumbles of acknowledgment was all he got in response, and they began walking again.

Carver led them down the central path, right into a waiting crowd of

Hun'Sho, which parted for them as they got closer. Carver began speaking to them, perhaps trying to allay their concerns. The Hun'Sho were not shy about answering the man, but Hector had no idea what any of them were saying.

'Do you know their language, too?' Hector asked.

'Sure do,' said Garovel. 'Ancient Hunese. Quite a bit different from the Modern Hunese that I've been hearing the Hun'Kui speak.'

'What are they saying?'

'Well, they are expressing their confusion, for obvious reasons. There are a few comments about how weird you all look. Especially you. Wow, they're really curious about you in particular. Your armor has them a bit spooked, I think.'

Not too surprising, he supposed. 'They're not gonna attack us or anything, right?'

'Doesn't seem like it.'

As they continued, the street grew noticeably more polished and reflective, and so did their black-and-gray buildings, which Hector couldn't help ogling somewhat. What were they made of, he wondered? Obsidian, maybe? He didn't know much about volcanic rocks, but he was growing more interested in the subject by the second.

And that architecture. He recognized the horizontal window shapes from the ruined city they'd just come from. The doorways were different from what he was accustomed to seeing, as well. Double doors were everywhere, but instead of being rectangular, they formed elegant, half-moon shapes.

In fact, he didn't see any sharp edges, whatsoever. Every structure had a smoothed or rounded look to it, and combined with that omnipresent, marble-like polish, the entire settlement managed to achieve a kind of gentle glistening effect.

'Alright, Garovel, I'm ready for my next history lesson.'

The reaper laughed. 'Okay, um. Gee. Where do I begin?'

Hector had a notion. 'How about the names? Hun'Sho and Hun'Kui? It's not a coincidence that they sound similar, is it?'

'Ah. Yes, well. You are not wrong. Where the name Hun'Kui literally translates to "people of the ash," the name Hun'Sho literally translates to "people of the fire." And there is considerable history there.' The reaper spared a glance at the Hun'Kui in their party. 'Rather gruesome history, unfortunately.'

Hector caught the implication. 'Is that... going to a problem here?'

'Well, it was a thousand years ago, so I'd like to say no, but...'

'I should keep it in mind?'

'Wouldn't hurt.'

'What happened, exactly?'

'In short? The Hun'Kui were slaves. And the Hun'Sho were their masters.'

'Oh.'

'And the reason I thought the Hun'Sho had gone extinct, was because I thought the Hun'Kui had killed them all.'

'Oh...'

'The Hun'Sho did some pretty monstrous things. But they did some pretty incredible things, too. During their peak, they were the brains behind almost every major technological advancement in the Undercrust--and a few on the surface, as well.'

'Really? Like what?'

'Metallurgy was probably the biggest thing. The most famous blacksmiths on the surface only became such because of Hun'Sho knowledge.'

'Huh.'

'It was a bit unfair, really. If you had access to the Undercrust, you could probably gain a significant technological advantage over your adversaries. It might be the primary reason why holes that lead to the

Undercrust are still largely kept a secret, even today. Historically speaking, they were priceless.'

Hector's mind went to the ardor-fueled weaponry that he'd seen so much of during his time in the Undercrust. Garovel's explanation was sounding pretty spot-on.

Carver stopped in front of a tall structure, one that looked somewhat dilapidated by comparison to those around it. Then he turned to the Hun'Kui and began speaking to them while motioning toward it.

'What's he saying?' Hector asked.

'...“I believe you will be most comfortable here. Apologies for its current state. It has been abandoned for a few years now, but there should be ample room for the four of you. Let me know if there is anything else you need.” Hmm.'

After that, the Hun'Kui and surface dwellers split up, and Hector wasn't sure why, until Carver led the rest of their group around a corner and down another street, where they arrived at a decidedly unique building. A dome.

Carver brought them inside, sealed the heavy door behind them, and began removing his climate suit.

The other two who were wearing suits looked rather reluctant to do the same, but Hector could feel the difference right away. He was suddenly freezing his ass off. The misty armor was doing far too good of a job in this place.

He had to tap the Lord Elroy on the shoulder. “Hey, Zeff, uh, you're turning me into a popsicle now...”

For a time, the Lord Elroy just looked at him."

"1419

“...Z-Zeff?” said Hector. His teeth had started chattering.

The man folded his arms and kept staring. “Warm yourself.”

Hector was confused. “What?”

“Warm yourself,” Zeff repeated. “Use temperature manipulation and warm yourself.”

Aw, shit. He had an inkling where this was going, but it was difficult to even think straight, and talking was even harder than usual. “But, uh-- your armor is way too s-strong. I c-can't--”

“Fine,” said Zeff, and he raised his arm.

The misty armor became suddenly lighter but didn't go away. Hector could still feel himself getting colder and number by the second.

“I've weakened it for you,” said Zeff. “Try now.”

Hector dropped to his knees, finding it difficult to maintain his balance.

He could hear people saying things. He could hear them in his head, too. Reaper's words. Shouted, maybe. But he couldn't actually listen to them, anymore. It was all just background noise.

Whole thoughts were escaping him now. What was happening? Freezing. Right. A way to neutralize servants. Probably gotten to his brain, then. That was why it was difficult to. To. To...?

Whatever.

Had to materialize. Not even sure why. Just had to be done. Something. Anything. For the head.

A helmet.

Hey, he could feel it. Warm metal. What a familiar sensation. Probably just room temperature, though. Warm only by comparison to how insanely cold he was.

Good but not good enough.

Annihilate and try again. Make it warm. How, though? Didn't matter. Couldn't think. Just make it warm. No, make it burn. Make it hurt.

Holy shit, pain. Something was definitely hurting. All around his... head? Yeah. His head.

But pain was good. Pain was not numb. Numb was bad.

Story of life, eh, Garovel?

Garovel?

Oh shit. Needed more pain. To bring everything back.

And there it was. More pain. More burning. More heat.

Hey, what was that? Hissing? Oh, the sound of steam. He could hear again. It was working. It was working so well that he could smell burning flesh.

Oh, wait.

Hector spasmed back into control of his faculties. He was on the floor, and his face was melting.

Wow, this was painful. Not so much because it hurt any worse than the sort of pain that he'd felt previously and often. Rather, it was extra painful just because it was sustained. It hurt sharply and kept hurting sharply. No diminishing so that he could catch his breath or rethink his life choices.

Just a continual, searing pain.

He was still thinking, though, he realized. Despite being able to feel it. What was this, anyway?

It was like he had a spare compartment in his mind, just for appreciating how awful things were, right now.

Shouldn't he be doing something with this knowledge?

Oh, good, he was already screaming in agony. How long had that been going on for? He should probably do something else now.

Hector dematerialized the red hot iron from around his head. Cool relief immediately washed over his face--so immediately, in fact, that it hurt in its own, new way, and he couldn't stop his whole body from shaking.

'--ector?! Hector!'

'Ah, hey, Garovel,' said Hector, perhaps calmer than he should've."  
"1420

‘Are--are you okay?’ said Garovel, sounding surprised. The reaper was on the other side of an icy dome.

‘Of course I’m okay,’ said Hector. ‘I’m undead.’ He said that, but the right side of his face still felt like it was on fire. Not quite as on fire as it had been a moment ago, but still on fire nonetheless.

‘I--well, I know that, Hector. I just meant...’ The reaper growled and looked at Zeff. ‘Would you please get rid of this ice, now?’

The icy dome vanished into nothingness, and Garovel reached for Hector’s shoulder.

The young man recoiled away from the reaper’s grasp. “I’m fine,” he said.

‘Are you serious? That looks like it hurts A LOT.’

It did. Sweet goddess, it did. But that was kinda the point.

“I’ve had worse,” said Hector. He looked over at Zeff, who seemed to be in the middle of a silent argument with Axiolis.

‘Hector, c’mon. Let me numb the pain for you. That burn looks awful.’

“Just the regen, then. Don’t numb the pain.”

‘Hector...’

“It’s fine, Garovel. The pain will just come back later, anyway. I can deal with it right now.”

The reaper still looked reluctant but said, ‘If you say so.’

He was still shaking, Hector realized. His head was fine, more or less, but the rest of his body was still pretty damn cold, even with the misty armor gone.

He could probably fix that now.

Hector clapped a fresh suit of iron armor around himself. Sure enough, it was as warm as he’d intended it to be.

Well, maybe this was a little warmer than he’d wanted. Okay, it was kinda too hot, actually.

He nailed it on the second try.

That was better. Nice and toasty. Like a cozy metal blanket. That didn't make much sense, he supposed. Iron was not at all soft, much less cozy. Yet that was still an accurate representation of how he felt. Somehow, his iron seemed more like his than ever before.

It was a familiar and altogether welcome sensation, wearing his own armor again. He planned to leave it on, even after his body warmed up completely.

Zeff finally looked over at him, and Hector was ready to meet the Lord Elroy's stern gaze through the visor of his iron helmet.

"I will not make that armor for you again," said Zeff. "From now on, protect yourself from the heat of the Undercrust."

'Are you fucking kidding?' said Garovel. 'You're really not going to apologize for what you just did?'

"He doesn't need to," said Hector. "Zeff was just trying to give me the push I needed. And it worked, didn't it?"

'Bullshit. That was way out of line.'

Zeff snorted. "You expect your enemies to be more considerate than I?" He glared at the young man harder than he ever had before. "Do you even realize how many people look up to you now? All of my kin. They don't see your weakness. They think they can depend on you."

Hector just listened."

"1421

"What a joke," Zeff went on. "My kin all look at you and think that you can handle the same level of responsibility as I. Or Asad. Or Dimas or Salvador or Melchor. They look at you and see our equal. Hell, they may even see our superior!"

Hector frowned but kept his expression otherwise steady. Zeff was just spouting nonsense now, Hector felt. Surely, none of the other Rainlords actually believed that.

The Lord Elroy turned and began walking away. "Grow or die, Hector."



Axiolis lingered.

Hector thought the reaper might apologize on the servant's behalf, as he'd seen other reapers do several times in the past, but Axiolis surprised him.

The reaper only observed him in silence for a moment longer before following Zeff.

Well, that was fine. Hector didn't really think Zeff had done anything to apologize for, anyway.

Garovel seemed to feel differently, however. 'What an ungrateful piece of shit,' he said in the echo of privacy.

'Garovel...'

'What? You're gonna defend that guy's behavior?'

Hector sighed. Right now, he really just wanted to go catch up to everyone else. He was still standing here in the entryway like a jackass while they were all off exploring the facilities and probably asking Carver all sorts of interesting questions.

As he finally started to progress deeper into the building, he found himself wondering if any of the others had witnessed any part of that incident just now. He hoped not. That would be pretty humiliating.

'But y'know,' said Garovel, 'the more I think about it, the more I find that man's behavior hilarious.'

'What?'

'Weren't you listening to what he said? He feels THREATENED by you, Hector. Maybe even jealous.'

'THAT was your interpretation? Garovel, you couldn't be more wrong.'

'Psh. Of course you'd say that. Let me guess. You think he's just trying to be a good teacher or whatever.'

'...Yeah, maybe I do think that.'

'You're too nice for your own good, Hector.'

'And you're too patronizing for everyone else's good.'

‘Really? You’re gonna insult ME now? I’m on your side, you prick.’

‘So is Zeff. We’d both be worm food by now if it wasn’t for him.’

‘Ugh.’ The reaper sounded genuinely disgusted.

The next room over had multiple new doors to try, and Hector decided to go through the one on his right before Garovel had a chance to continue that conversation.

Now there was a sight he hadn’t seen in a while.

Plants. A whole lot of them, too. The chamber extended much farther than he’d expected, and the entire thing was filled.

Hector blinked when he realized. ‘These are the plants from the surface that you were sensing earlier.’

Garovel floated among two rows of fully grown apple trees. ‘Yeah,’ was all he said.

Hector was more than ready for the new subject, however. ‘How do they grow so far underground like this?’

The reaper pointed at the lamps in the rather low ceiling. ‘Artificial sunlight. It’s impressive technology. I’ve never seen results as good as this.’”

"1422

Hector struggled for another plant-related question, wanting to keep up the conversational momentum, but no further ideas were coming to him besides just being amazed by all the fruits and vegetables.

Dammit, weren’t there a bunch of other questions that he’d wanted to ask Garovel just a little while ago? There absolutely were. What the hell were they?

Hold on.

Garovel was being suspiciously quiet all of a sudden, Hector felt.

“...Something wrong?” Hector asked aloud since it was just the two of

them.

The reaper did not answer him, only floated slowly through a cluster of green corn stalks.

“Garovel? Are you... are you sulking over what happened? I thought you’d just keep complaining, not get all weird on me.”

‘What? Oh, no, that’s not it. Sure, Zeff acted like a horse’s ass, but if you don’t care, then I don’t care. I’m over that already.’

“Oh,” said Hector, a bit taken aback, because it didn’t sound like the reaper was being sarcastic. “Well, uh... Really? I mean, I wouldn’t mind if you were still a little not over it.”

Garovel floated closer and kept his voice private. ‘Hector, um. Before we rejoin the others, there’s something we should discuss. And I’m sorry if this seems like it’s coming out of nowhere.’

Hector took the hint to stop talking aloud. ‘...What is it?’

‘Remember the Sosho’Diyu? That treasure everyone was going on about back in Babbadelo?’

‘Of course.’

‘There is an almost one hundred percent chance that it is somewhere here in Himmekel.’

Hector paused to acknowledge that thought. ‘That... would make sense, I guess.’

‘And also... I need to tell you about one of the oldest mysteries in the history of the planet.’

Hector blinked. ‘Uh. Okay?’

‘It’s most commonly referred to as Rathmore’s Materials.’

‘Oh, yeah. I wanted to ask about that before, but there wasn’t time. Why does the name “Rathmore” sound so familiar?’

‘Do you remember Rathmore’s Gate?’

‘Uh...’

‘Where you, Roman, Harper, and the Queen fought Abolish back in

Atreya?’

‘Oh! Yeah, it was a rock formation! Rathmore’s Gate.’ Hector tilted his head as he tried to remember in greater detail. ‘Come to think of it... YOU were the one who first mentioned it, weren’t you? You asked if Voreese knew of it so that we could regroup there.’

‘Good memory. Do you happen to remember anything else about that particular rock formation?’

‘Um... no, should I?’

‘I suppose not. Curious as you are, I remember waiting for you to ask me more about it, but you never did.’

‘Why would I have asked you more about some seemingly random rock formation?’

‘You didn’t notice? Ah, I guess you were pretty busy at the time, weren’t you?’

‘Notice what?’

‘That, despite how brutal and devastating to the local environment that battle was, Rathmore’s Gate was still standing after it was over.’”  
"1423

Hector’s brow lowered as he tried to recall what Garovel was talking about. The only other thing he remembered about Rathmore’s Gate was smashing into it after taking a hit from Harper.

But Garovel was right. That was strange, wasn’t it? With as hard as he’d hit the damn thing, it hadn’t so much as cracked.

‘So what are you saying?’ said Hector. ‘I mean, it’s weird ‘n all, but what’s the big mystery about, exactly?’

‘You see, Rathmore was one of the most famous integrators in history. Or infamous, depending on who you talk to. And one of the reasons he became so well-known was because of his “Materials.” Which was actually a bit of a con job on his part.’

‘Con job?’

‘Rathmore’s Gate. Rathmore’s Flame. Rathmore’s Looking Glass. Rathmore’s Knife. Rathmore’s Light. And so on and so forth. He named all of these monuments after himself because of all the weird shit he did to them--like infusing a molten rock golem into one of them, apparently. But the fact of the matter was, all of those monuments existed BEFORE him. He just modified them.’

‘So... they used to just be normal monuments?’

‘No, see, that’s the point. They weren’t normal at all. Rathmore was only able to modify them the way he did because they were already abnormal.’

‘Abnormal in what way?’

‘They were indestructible by any known method.’

Hector cocked an eyebrow beneath his helmet. ‘If they were indestructible, then how was he able to modify them at all?’

The reaper shrugged. ‘I didn’t say it wasn’t impressive, what he did. I just wanted to make it clear that his so-called Materials were never really HIS to begin with. That was the con job, in my opinion.’

‘Hmm. So where’d all these indestructible monuments come from, then?’

‘That’s the big mystery. Nobody is quite sure.’

‘Seriously? Does that mean they’re even older than you are?’

‘As far as I am aware, they pre-date the existence of reapers entirely.’

‘Whoa. By how much, exactly?’

‘Dunno.’

Hector’s eyes widened as he thought more about it. So that was why Garovel had called it one of the oldest mysteries in the history of Eleg. ‘Why didn’t you ever tell me about this before?’

‘Didn’t come up.’

‘We were literally AT Rathmore’s Gate! You didn’t think I’d be interested in its history?!’

‘Well... okay, I’m sort of... lying a little bit, actually.’

Hector’s brow lowered again. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Sorry. It’s a force of habit when it comes to this subject, I suppose. See, this mystery... Rathmore’s Materials... well, it’s something that I’ve been keeping to myself for a very long time now.’

‘What do you mean? Keeping it to yourself? You just said it’s one of the oldest mysteries in the world.’

‘Yeah...’

‘What, were you lying about that, too?’

‘No, no. That was the truth. What I’m saying is... despite its incredible age, there are very few people who know of it. And I kinda prefer it that way, Hector.’

‘Oh...’

"1424

‘This is what I need you to understand,’ said Garovel. ‘This mystery... this is something that I have discreetly been trying to solve for around two millennia now. So it’s rather important to me that you not tell anyone else about it.’

‘O-okay...’

‘I’m serious, Hector. Not anyone. Not Roman. Not Lynn. Not the Queen. Not even Ramira giving you puppy dog eyes.’

‘Aha... yeah, I get it. I won’t mention Rathmore to anyone. But, uh... you still haven’t explained WHY you want to keep it a secret. Is this knowledge somehow dangerous?’

‘Of course it is. Rathmore’s Materials have all sorts of absurd powers that even I still don’t know about. If other people start studying them or otherwise trying to unlock their secrets... well, that’s the sort of thing that entire nations go to war over.’

‘I see...’

‘But it’s not just about preventing war for me, either. I’ll admit that a part of me is still hoping to harness their power for myself, one day. Or for yourself, that is.’

Hector wasn’t sure how to respond to that. As ridiculous as it sounded, he could still understand the basic sentiment. The desire for power. For strength. He’d been feeling it more and more, lately, for obvious reasons.

He did come up with a question, though. ‘You say you want to keep all this stuff a secret, but wasn’t Axiolis the one who recognized Rathmore’s Flame? And doesn’t that mean he already knows about it?’

‘Not necessarily. Lots of people know the name Rathmore and nothing else. The name has become famous even among non-servants. All the monuments saw to that.’ Garovel allowed a beat to pass. ‘But yeah, it’s totally possible that Axiolis knows more about it than he let on. We should be careful around him.’

‘Garovel, you’re starting to sound really paranoid. I thought you liked Axiolis.’

‘I do. He’s great. But hiding beneath that greatness could be the cold, black heart of a treacherous bastard.’

‘Wow.’

‘I’m not kidding, Hector. That’s how reapers are. We’re lying, power hungry, duplicitous sons of bitches. And we’re good at hiding it, too.’

‘...I’ll have to take your word on that one.’ Hector scratched his head and looked over all the plants another time. ‘Can we rejoin the others now? I want to see the rest of this place.’

‘There’s still more I should tell you, but fine. That was all of the most important stuff, I think.’

They left the verdure behind, and Hector let Garovel lead the way back to everyone. En route, however, another question occurred to Hector and began getting the better of him.

‘...Hey, what about Rathmore? If he was such a big deal, then what happened to him?’

‘The Vanguard happened to him.’

‘They killed him?’

‘Yeah. He was a nice enough guy when he was younger, but he became more and more of an asshole as he got older. Provoked a few wars. Ethnic cleansings. Human experimentation.’

‘Wait, did you... know him personally?’

"1425

‘...As a matter of fact, I did,’ said Garovel.

Hector waited for Garovel to elaborate, but when it seemed like that wasn’t going to happen, he decided to ask the pressing question.

‘...Was he your servant?’

‘No. But he was the servant of a good friend of mine. A good friend who also went mad and died with him.’

‘Holy shit, Garovel. I’m so sorry that, uh... I mean, I’m sorry that you went through that.’

‘Yeah...’

And Hector was abruptly reminded of just how old Garovel really was, how much the reaper must have seen and experienced and endured. It was sometimes all too easy to forget that. Hector got the sense that Garovel preferred it that way, even now, with how little emotion the reaper was showing.

‘Sometimes, people just go crazy, Hector. Even normal, everyday people. And in our line of work? Reapers and servants? All the madness that we see? It’s more common than most of us care to think about.’

Was it really that simple, Hector wondered? Could people really just snap? For no reason at all? Hector wasn’t sure he believed that. But Garovel was speaking from experience, and Hector didn’t have much cause to challenge him on it. Not right now, anyway. Maybe some other time, he would.

At length, they encountered Carver again, sitting alone in some sort of small drawing room. He stood when he noticed them.



“Ah, I was worried you might have gotten lost.” He craned his neck as if confused. “You are the same armored gentleman from earlier, no?”

Oh, right. He must have looked completely different in his iron armor now. “Yes.”

“I have already showed the others to their rooms. Please allow me to do the same for you.”

“Thank you...”

Carver took two big steps to his right and motioned toward the door there. “Aaand I’m done! Your room’s right here! Aha! Hope that walk wasn’t too exhausting for you!”

The man seemed to be fishing for a laugh, so Hector tried to give him one.

Carver cleared his throat. “Sorry. That was funnier in my head.”

Hector followed him through the door, still dragging his iron box of gun parts along. Thankfully, there was just enough space for it in the corner by the bed. He finally sat down with a sigh of relief and wondered what kind of material this weird, rubbery mattress was made from. The clamor of his armor was also rather loud in this confined space, but he didn’t quite feel like removing it yet.

Then he noticed that Carver was lingering in the open doorway, observing him.

Hector racked his brain, worrying that he’d forgotten some sort of important courtesy. “...I appreciate your hospitality,” he tried.

“Oh, think nothing of it,” said Carver.

And that was all he said.

And he still did not leave.

And everything became abruptly awkward.

“...Was there something else?” said Hector.”

"1426

Carver chewed on his upper lip for a second. "Look, um... Lord Darksteel, was it? That's, ah, what the others said your name was when I asked."

"You can just call me Hector."

"Ah. Okay. Splendid. But, ah, as I was saying... um..."

This guy was suddenly almost as bad with words as he was, Hector felt. "...Y-yes?"

"L-look, I'm just gonna level with you, Hector. I've been starved for normal human interaction for YEARS now. S-so, I'd like to go ahead and apologize ahead of time, in case anything I say or do comes across as really weird or... o-or... perhaps... clingy."

'Garovel, what is happening right now?'

'I don't know, but I'm enjoying it.'

Carver wasn't done. "The thing is, with the rest of your group, um... I think I've already poisoned the well in that regard, if you know what I mean."

Hector did not.

Carver sighed. "I'm sure they think I'm super weird now..."

'Hector...'

'What?'

'Console him or something!'

'How?!'

'Tell him he's wrong!'

"I, uh... I'm sure they don't think you're that weird, Mr. Carver."

"Thanks, but you weren't there. You didn't see what I did."

"...What did you do?"

Carver hesitated. He glanced back through the doorway, as if to check if anyone else was listening. Either that, or he was considering running

away. "I told everyone... um... you see, I told them... that... I... loved... them."

Hector took a breath in order to respond, but his brain didn't have anything for him. And neither did Garovel, it seemed.

"Look, it just kinda slipped out, okay?! I used to think I was a loner-type, but my god! This is just ridiculous! I haven't seen another normal human being in I-don't-know-how-long! This place is a barren wasteland when it comes to satisfying social interaction!"

"I thought you said you liked it here," said Hector. "Educational or whatever."

"I do like it here! And the Hun'Sho are fascinating! But--! They're also just--! Agh...!"

"...Are they not very good company?"

"No! I mean, they're great! They're wonderful! So kind and considerate! You won't find anyone more courteous and polite!"

Hector heard a "but" coming and waited.

"...But they're so stuffy! Ugh! You have no idea! And they're kinda weirdly arrogant, too. They're not really human as you and I understand the term. Half the time, they treat me like I'm some kind of pet. They've taken such good care of me that I don't wish to complain, but... agh..."

Hector felt bad for the guy, but this was also new information. He couldn't help being curious. "Uh... what else can you tell me about the Hun'Sho here?"

Carver perked up a little. "Well. Just about anything you want me to tell you, I suppose. What would you like to know?"

Hector glanced at Garovel. 'Ideas?'

'Ask him how long they've been down here.'

Hector did so.

"About twelve hundred years, if what they've told me is true," said Carver."

"1427

‘Sounds about right, I guess,’ said Garovel. ‘Ask him if any of them ever leave this settlement.’

“Do any of the Hun’Sho ever leave this place?” said Hector.

“No, they do not,” said Carver. “They are generally quite fearful of venturing outside the Vault. As am I, of course, but that is mainly because of the feldeath and the golem. And all those worms, too, I suppose. And the possibility of earthquakes and falling rocks. And the notion that my lamp might die on me, stranding me in the darkness with basically no hope of making it back here safely.”

“...And the Hun’Sho aren’t afraid of those things?”

“Not all of those things, no. And certainly not as much as me. Because, well, they are somewhat immortal.”

That was news to Hector. “Excuse me? What does that mean?”

“They do not age.”

“...Huh.” Hector glanced at Garovel, who gave an affirming nod.

Carver raised an eyebrow. “You seem far less surprised than I was when I first found that out. In fact, I am still not quite sure that I believe it. It is true that I have not seen any Hun’Sho show signs of aging, but I have only been here for five years, and perhaps that is simply not long enough.”

Hector supposed he didn’t have much room to be too shocked by that particular revelation, given his own status as a servant.

It still felt really weird when he thought about it like that. Immortality.

Better to just not think about it that way then, he decided.

‘Ask him how the hell he ended up in this place to begin with.’

‘Didn’t he say he was part of an exploration team or something?’

‘Yeah, but ask for details.’

“...So, uh. How did you end up down here all by yourself, again?”

"I was part of an expedition that went horribly awry, essentially. Not so unlike you and your friends, actually. Diego described some of the details of your misfortune for me. What charisma, that guy. I have to admit, I'm envious of him. I really hope I can be friends with him. He was so nice, even after I made a fool of myself and started acting like a blustering idiot. If I had those kinds of social skills, why, my whole life would have gone so much more smoothly. Maybe I could have even convinced Janice Greenwood to go out on a date with me back when we were--"

Hector kind of stopped listening. 'Garovel, this guy is all over the place...'

'Can you blame him? Think about it. Sure, he said all that stuff earlier about scholarly work and studying the Hun'Sho, but you have to remember, he's also been stuck in a hole of molten death with a bunch of fiery weirdos for the past five years.'

Not an inaccurate summation, Hector supposed.

'Honestly, I feel bad for the guy,' said Garovel. 'And I'd find it suspicious if he didn't seem at least a little crazy by now.'  
"1428 -- CLIII.

Carver was still going. "--and then, we could go to an amusement park and get ice cream and go on a roller coaster ride. I'd probably vomit, but it'd be okay, because of the recently-eaten ice cream, see? That's a trick my uncle taught me when I was a kid. Good god of fire, I miss processed sweets like that. I wonder if there've been any big technological breakthroughs with sweets and other foods from the surface. I feel like there must have been. The world is so full of--"

"I'm sorry." Hector held up a gauntleted hand. "Could you, ah, go back to telling me about your expedition?"

"Oh, um. Certainly. What would you like to know about it?"

"Mainly... I'm curious about your companions. They must have been strong to make it all the way here, right?"

Carver's expression tightened somewhat. "Yes, I suppose they were."

Hector merely waited for elaboration, which was slow to arrive.

“...They were like yourself. Servants of reapers. Very reliable as bodyguards, certainly, but I’ve known them since I was just a sprightly Melmoorian lad. Ettol, in particular, has always been like an uncle to me. So strong, yet so persuasive, too. I swear, he could convince a pack of hungry wolves to play fetch with him, if he wanted. Why, there was this one time when I was twelve--”

‘Ettol?’ said Garovel.

‘You know of him?’

‘No. But that name is peculiar.’

‘How so?’

‘In Ancient Melmoorian folklore, Ettol is a kind of trickster deity. The God of Impulse. It’s not a normal name that someone would give their kid--or even a name that many people would recognize in this day and age.’

‘...So you’re saying this guy’s uncle is some kind of ancient god?’

‘No, Hector,’ the reaper laughed. ‘I’m saying it’s probably an alias. Or Carver is lying to us. That’s always a possibility.’

‘Or it’s an ancient god.’

‘I highly doubt that.’

‘Look, Garovel, I just found out that lava people exist. I’m open to the possibility of ancient gods existing, and I think you should be, too.’

‘Okay, Hector. Whatever you say.’

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Three: ‘Countenance in greed and fury...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Two days transpired as the group tried in vain to work out their next move. According to the reapers, the titanic battle above Himmekel had not ceased, and according to the various Hun’Sho they spoke to, it would not be ceasing any time soon, either.

“Enkir and Dunikei have been locked in a stalemate for generations,” a Hun’Sho by the name of Torveis had told them.

Hector had been surprised that any of the Hun’Sho could speak Mohssian at all, much less modern Mohssian, but all was explained when Carver revealed that he had taught them several of the surface world’s languages.

“It may be many years before they decide to take another break,” Torveis had said. “The worms are a more recent threat, though I imagine they may prove an even bigger obstacle if you all wish to leave Himmekel soon.””

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"1429

Without any clear objective or direction, everyone in the group spent most of their time mingling among the Hun'Sho. The four reapers practically insisted on it, though their servants didn't require much convincing, save perhaps Zeff.

Unsurprisingly, the Lord Elroy seemed the most anxious to leave and expressed little interest in the Hun'Sho or Himmekel or even the Sosho'Diyu.

That last one was almost certainly what was on everyone else's mind the most, Hector felt. They all seemed convinced that it was here, somewhere, which made him rather dubious about the sincerity of their attempts to "learn about Hun'Sho culture," as Diego Redwater had put it. Without a doubt, that man seemed the most determined to stay, though Hector did notice the Hun'Kui behaving somewhat similarly. In particular, it was in the way they followed Diego around. They probably figured that if anyone was going to find it, it would be him.

But still. As unsavory as Hector found their behavior, he knew that he was not so different himself. When he thought about what he might be able to do with such an apparently valuable treasure... When he thought about Warrenhold and all the money it would need... not to mention all the people who would be staying there...

Assuming it really was money. He'd been starting to wonder what really qualified as treasure. There were certainly other things in this world that could be considered far more valuable than gold or gems or whatever. He was carrying one such item already, he knew. And he hadn't forgotten all those weird names that reapers had rattled off not so long ago.

Garovel, at least, seemed certain that the treasure was something along those lines.

'Do you have any specific theories about what it could be?' Hector had asked him.

'One or two, maybe,' Garovel had said. 'But I'm not prepared to share

them yet.'

'Why not? You're always trying to tell me about your dumb theories.'

'Hey. You're hurting my feelings.'

'If I apologize, will you tell me?'

'Maybe.'

'Then maybe I'm sorry.'

'Sheesh. I'm thinking that the treasure might have something to do with Rathmore. Since his Flame is so near, then it would stand to reason.'

'That doesn't tell me much, Garovel. Or anything, really.'

'Yeah, well, I don't want to make a specific prediction and then turn out to be completely wrong later.'

'Oh, come on. I don't care if you're wrong.'

'Yeah, but I do. I hate being wrong.'

'Believe me, I've noticed.'

'Oh, shut up and go back to your meditation or practice or whatever you're doing over there by yourself.'

With everyone else on the job, Hector didn't feel the need to socialize with the Hun'Sho as much. He did, however, feel the need to keep up with his training, especially now that he could use temperature manipulation."

"s and Whatnot

Couple important announcements for you.

First, I've been posting two new pages to my Patreon page every day for the last few weeks. And because of that, I've been able to build up a very helpful backlog of new pages compared to the main site here. Currently, that backlog consists of 23 extra pages, and it will continue to grow. If you'd like to get these pages early, the price is one dollar per month. If not, however, I completely understand. I don't like to

spend money, either. Which brings me to my second announcement.

Here on the main site, I'm going to post an extra page every Monday. One at midnight and one at noon. I figured that everyone seems to dislike Mondays, so I should do something to make them better, if possible. I'll call them Double Mondays, 'cuz that sounds catchy. In time, as I continue to build up my backlog, I plan to start throwing out more free extra pages, but we'll see.

Oh, and super secret third announcement: expect some extra pages on Christmas Day.

Anyway, thanks for not giving up on me, everyone. Your support means the world to me. In fact, if I had a choice between the world or your support, I'd choose your support. Yeah, that's right. I'd blow up the Earth. For the sake of my readers or something. I'd like to see some other writers compete with that shit."

"1430

Just being outside of Carver's biosphere afforded Hector ample opportunity for practice. Zeff had not been kidding when he said that he wouldn't be making armor for him anymore, so that was what Hector had been doing for himself: creating freezing cold iron armor.

Over and over and over again.

It tended to heat up pretty damn quickly, so he constantly had to annihilate and remake it. At first, he struggled just to make it not crack and shatter immediately. That was a thing, apparently. These sorts of extreme temperature differences caused instantaneous and even explosive structural damage to his iron.

Garovel had been more than happy to explain that lovely little aspect of thermodynamics after Hector nearly tore his own head off.

In time, though, he managed to stabilize his work. Adding his soul to his iron helped, though not by much. Really, his most significant breakthrough was simply deciding to give his armor layers. The outermost layer was the hottest and therefore least likely to crack or break under the Undercrust's heat, while the inner layers were

progressively colder, providing degrees of both insulation and structural support.

It worked surprisingly well, even if it was a bit bulky. Whenever he started feeling too warm, he simply annihilated the outermost layer and then added a new innermost layer. This way, he could maintain a relatively cool temperature around himself at all times, rather than having to deal with sudden flashes of flesh-melting heat and bone-chilling cold like he'd been doing in the beginning.

He ended up quite pleased with the result, but his new armor also had a secondary effect which he did not expect.

It made him more approachable.

He still had streaks of steam rising off of his armor--a fact which he found quite interesting--but it was nothing like it was before. To the Hun'Kui, Zeff's misting armor must have made him look like a walking cloud of freezing death, whereas this armor looked much more solid and humanoid.

Eventually, one of the Hun'Kui decided to come talk to him while he was trying to meditate in front of Himmekel's massive lavafall.

Unfortunately, the Hun'Kui man was speaking Hunese, and Garovel was off somewhere with Diego.

He thought he heard the word "Senmurai" again, but that was about all he caught. He tried to explain that he didn't understand, and eventually, it seemed to sink in. The Hun'Kui nodded furiously and left him alone again, but he occasionally still spotted one or two of them watching him from afar.

It was a bit unsettling, but he figured they didn't mean any harm.

He tried to focus on his meditation. It was more difficult than it had ever been, since he had to constantly maintain his armor, but he enjoyed the added challenge, even if he didn't see much in the way of success. It was like trying to achieve a new level of concentration. Clearing his mind of all obfuscating thoughts, while at the same time materializing new layers of his armor at regular intervals.

He felt like it was possible. He just had to keep trying."

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

Toward the end of the first day of training, however, there had been another important interruption. He hadn't recognized what it was, at first, as he'd nearly forgotten what this strange, pulsing sensation meant. As soon as he remembered that it was the Shard calling out to him, he scrambled to find it among his scant belongings.

He'd decided to stow it among the spare clothes that he was borrowing from Carver, since the climate-controlled environment of the dome was probably safer than carrying it around everywhere. On the one hand, he didn't really think that the Undercrust's heat would melt one of the Shards created by Rasalased, but on the other, he doubted the heat would be good for it, either. And he did recall Qorvass mentioning that there used to be a lot more Shards, suggesting that they were, in fact, not indestructible.

As soon as he had the Shard in hand again, he reached out with his mind. 'Emiliana?'

'...Yes, I am here.'

He had about a thousand questions for sure, but just hearing her response was a relief in itself. At least now he'd be able to tell Zeff something about how she was doing. Maybe that would be enough to make the man stop looking at him like he wanted to choke him.

'Hector, before I say anything further... please, you mustn't tell my father that I am contacting you.'

Well, shit.

'It is not that I want him to worry. It is just that... I...'

Hector more or less got the picture. 'You're worried FOR him.'

'Yes...'

He rubbed his forehead as he sat down on the edge of his bed. 'Look, uh... I have to tell him that you're okay, at least. Whatever else is going on with you right now, he deserves to know that much, doesn't he?'

'...He deserves much more than that. But he... well, you...' She paused for a sigh. 'You are still with him, are you not?'

'Yeah.'

'How is he?'

'...Better than I would be, if I were in his shoes.'

'...A non-answer.'

Hector took a curt breath. 'He's... persevering.'

'So, then... you think that if you were to tell him that I do not wish him to know where I am, he would take that news well?'

Abso-fucking-lutely not. But from her tone, the question sounded rhetorical, so Hector decided not to answer it directly. Instead, he chose to take a different approach. 'However he takes it, it's not really your problem, is it?'

'...Excuse me?'

'I mean... even if he gets super pissed off, his reaction will be MY problem to deal with, not yours. Because he won't know where to find you unless you tell us.'

There came a rather long pause. 'I suppose you have a point. I had not thought of it that way.'

'So you don't mind if I tell him you're okay?'

More silence."

"1432

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A terrible thought occurred to Hector. 'You ARE okay, aren't you?'

'Yes, I am fine. Gohvis is not mistreating me, if that is what you are implying.'

'You're sure? You can tell me. I won't...' He won't what? He won't tell Zeff? Ugh. This whole situation was quickly becoming a conversational nightmare, Hector felt.

‘I am sure,’ said Emiliana. ‘Gohvis may not be... well, I do not know what to think of him. He has not harmed me nor Chergoa, however, nor do I get the impression that he intends to.’

Good news, certainly, but it still left Hector with the million tra question. ‘Why did he kidnap you, then? He even went against his own allies.’

‘He wants to study my mutation ability. Even I do not quite understand. He has yet to fully explain himself. I’m not sure he ever will, either.’

‘Huh...’

‘But none of this is why I wished to talk to you right now.’

He took a long breath, as if to prepare himself for whatever crazy new shit she was about to tell him. ‘O-okay. I’m listening.’

‘I want you to... ask me questions about various subjects.’

Not nearly as crazy as he’d been expecting. Way more confusing, though. ‘I don’t follow.’

‘Agh...’ She broke for another small sigh. ‘How do I explain without giving too much away...?’

Hector was lost as he waited in silence.

‘Let’s just say... that for the foreseeable future, it appears as though I will have considerable free time on my hands. Free time which I will be using... in order to conduct various types of research.’

‘Uh...?’

‘So... I was thinking that I would prefer to focus my research into things which might be beneficial to you and my father and everyone else.’

Hector’s brow lowered as he processed what she had told him.

‘Do you understand?’ she asked.

‘I... think so.’ So in other words, Hector gathered, wherever she was, she had easy access to a large amount of information. Like some kind of Abolish database? He supposed that would make a certain degree of sense, given Gohvis’ status.

‘So ask me something,’ she said. ‘It does not matter how old the

information you're looking for is. There is a good chance I'll be able to find something about it.'

'H-hold on,' said Hector. 'Isn't this incredibly dangerous? What if someone catches you?'

'Oh. No. It's not like that. I do not have to hide my research. In fact, Gohvis is... encouraging me to pursue whatever interests me.'

What the hell? Hector would've liked to ask more about that, but he felt as though she would recoil from the conversation entirely if he started trying to figure out what she was clearly intending to keep secret from him and her father.

That didn't mean he wouldn't still try, though. It just meant that he didn't want her to realize he was doing that."

"1433

But trying to suss out her secret could wait, he supposed. Right now, it sounded like she was just trying to be helpful however she could, and considering his own circumstances, he could probably use a little help. 'Uh... okay, but I'm still not sure what sort of questions you want me to ask,' he said.

'Just. Anything that you think might be useful. About science. Or history. It could be almost any subject, I think.'

Hector wondered if Zeff would approve of this, but he also didn't see any point in turning the offer down. And hell, maybe she would be able to find something that would help them get out of this place. Or... find the treasure?

Wouldn't that be nice. And way too good to be true.

Regardless, he tried to think of a question that would be relevant to their most immediate problems.

'...I don't suppose you could tell me anything about worms, could you?'

'Worms?' said Emiliana.

Oh right, she probably thought he was talking about normal, tiny worms on the surface.



‘Do you mean worms from the Undercrust?’

Or maybe not. ‘You know about them?’ he said.

‘It just so happens that I recently heard quite a lot about them. From Ibai, actually.’

Hector blinked. Somehow, he’d forgotten about Ibai Blackburn. ‘So Ibai is with you, then.’

‘Ah. Yes, he is. There have been a few times when I thought Gohvis would kill him for sure, but they seem to be getting along now. Somewhat.’

Hector still wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about that guy, but after working together with him at Dunehall, he found it hard to think badly of him. If not for Ibai’s actions, Hector was sure that the Rainlords would have suffered far more casualties than they did--or simply been wiped out completely.

Which put a very difficult question in Hector’s mind. The few times that he’d managed to actually talk to Emiliana for any real length of time, that topic had yet to come up. The casualties at Dunehall.

Should he tell her, he wondered? She had a right to know, certainly. Ibai, as well. But would they be better off not knowing? They were in a precarious position, no doubt. Perhaps telling them about their murdered kin would only make things worse.

He rubbed his forehead again. Between this and trying to figure out what he was going to tell Zeff later, Hector felt like he was seeing a sudden spike in impossible decisions.

Emiliana wasn’t done talking, however, and Hector tried not to become so distracted that he stopped listening. ‘Ibai wouldn’t stop going on about worms and greatworms the other day. He spoke with such enthusiasm that I probably absorbed more of it than I intended to. Is there anything in particular that you would like to know about them?’

‘...Their weaknesses, if they have any.’

There came a pause. ‘Why do you want to know that, might I ask?’”

He grit his teeth at that question and hesitated. He felt like he should just come right out and tell her. He felt like she'd probably figured it out already, anyway. But still, he hesitated.

'Hector, just tell me. And please... please don't lie. Because, right now, it's just... Chergoa, Ibai... and you. You're the only ones I can trust, so... please, just...'

Hector had no defense against her words or her pleading tone. 'Okay,' he finally said. 'The truth is... we're in the Undercrust right now, trying to avoid the Vanguard. We're on our way back to Warrenhold, and yeah... we've been fighting a lot. Worms are really... annoying and hard to kill.'

She paused again. 'Has anyone gotten hurt? Or...?'

He knew what she was really wanting to ask, but he didn't actually know if the worms had killed anyone.

But he did know about Dunehall. And if there was ever a time to bring it up, now was it. He had to make a decision, he knew. Putting it off wouldn't be avoiding anything. That would be a decision, too. And his gut was telling him that he shouldn't keep it from them. They deserved to know. Especially Ibai. The man's father had been killed, after all.

He took a deliberate breath.

'...It's been pretty chaotic, so I'm not sure if the worms have killed any of us. However... I should tell you that... back at Dunehall, after you left... there were many casualties.' He allowed a beat to pass, in case she wanted to say anything, but when she didn't, he kept going. 'Ismael Blackburn was among them. He and his reaper... were murdered by Ivan.'

'How horrible...'

'I'm sorry. I didn't want to bring it up, but... I thought Ibai should know.'

'I-I understand. Thank you for telling me. I will relay it to him.' She paused another time, perhaps considering her next words. 'Who... who else was killed? And, and how many casualties were there, exactly?'

Both of those were questions he had trouble answering--partly because he simply didn't want to and partly because he wasn't sure he

could remember everyone. He didn't want to suddenly reach out to Garovel with such awful questions, but in the end, that was exactly what he did. The reaper handled it with more grace than surprise, and Emiliana mostly just waited and listened quietly.

It took a while.

'...Thank you for telling me,' she eventually said, once Hector and Garovel had finished going down the list. She remained quiet for a while longer after that, perhaps talking to Ibai, perhaps just processing everything.

Hector didn't know how to revive the conversation. Or even if he should.

But he could tell that she was still there. It was more obvious than ever. He could feel something from the Shard that he never had previously. Some sort of... intensity in his head and in his heart. A heaviness that seemed not to be his own, somehow.

It was her sorrow, he eventually realized. He could actually feel her sorrow."

"1435

This was a first.

He'd never been able to actually sense her emotions before. Why was that, he wondered? Why now? It wasn't like she didn't have emotions any of the other times they'd communicated via the Shard like this.

Perhaps it was simply because of how strong this particular emotion was. Perhaps normal feelings couldn't make the telepathic trip or whatever. He might've asked Garovel about it, but the reaper had made it abundantly clear that he didn't understand how the Shards worked, so he didn't see much point.

A sudden wetness around his eyes made Hector squint and blink, and he found himself wiping tears away.

'Holy shit,' he thought explicitly.

'What's the matter?' said Garovel.

‘What is it?’ said Emiliana.

‘Uh, ah, n-nothing,’ Hector floundered. He’d accidentally talked to both at once when he hadn’t meant to say anything to either of them.

‘Just tell me,’ said Emiliana.

‘Didn’t sound like nothing,’ said Garovel.

They couldn’t hear each other, Hector knew, and he didn’t want to try to explain whatever the hell was happening, right now. So he spoke to Garovel first. ‘Sorry, I meant to say that to Emiliana, and I, uh... got my wires crossed, I guess.’

‘Ah,’ was all the reaper said, seemingly satisfied.

Then he tried to give the reverse excuse to Emiliana. ‘Sorry, I meant to say that to Garovel and just accidentally said it to you...’

‘Is something happening over there?’ she asked.

That was not the response he’d been hoping for. ‘N-no.’ How was he supposed to explain this? Tell her that she’d made him cry? Somehow, that seemed like the worst thing he could say to her right now.

‘...Are you lying to me?’ She sounded a little annoyed. ‘Didn’t I just ask you not to lie to me?’

He could feel himself losing composure. Anxiety welling up. He thought he’d been getting better about this, yet here it was again, strong as ever, paralyzing his thoughts, squeezing breath out of his lungs.

He had to tell her something. It was just going to get worse, if he didn’t. And if he told her the wrong thing, the conversation would spiral out of control, and she would start to hate him or perhaps just begin to realize how pathetic he really was beneath this desperate facade that he’d been trying so hard to--

‘Are you alright?’ she asked.

He couldn’t answer that.

‘Hector?’

His eyes widened with horror.

She’d felt his anxiety just now, hadn’t she?

Fuck fuck fuck fuck--

‘Hect--?’

He let go of the Shard.

This was not okay.

He held his hand tightly over his mouth and shut his eyes, trying to steady his breathing and hopefully his mind.

Letting someone hear his intentional thoughts was one thing. That was fine. He could control that. More or less. But letting someone sense whatever stupid, panicky, humiliating feelings he was having?

No. That was a bridge too far."

"1436

It wasn't like he even knew this girl all that well, either. He was supposed to just show her all the worst parts of himself, now? Parts that he didn't even want himself to see?

That was just impossible.

But...

His conversation with Emiliana was not yet done, he knew. She hadn't gotten around to telling him what she knew about worms.

And that was important, goddammit. Certainly more important than all his stupid insecurities.

He opened his eyes, grit his teeth, growled to himself, and then scratched his brow hard enough to leave marks. He stared at that damn red crystal lying there on his bed, able to sense its calling pulse again.

He sighed angrily and picked it back up.

‘--there?’ came her voice again. ‘Ah! You're back! What happened? Where did you go?’

He figured he should apologize first, even though a rather large part of

him didn't want to. 'S-sorry, I, uh... I dropped the Shard accidentally.'

She took a while to respond. '...Is that really true?' she said, taking that irritated tone with him again, this time more strongly. 'Hector, I just--I feel like you're not telling me something, and I don't appreciate--'

'Stop,' he said, perhaps more firmly than he'd intended. 'Just. Stop.'

And she did.

His anxiety from earlier was still there, though it had been significantly lessened by his mounting frustration. And he figured out what he wanted to say to her now. 'If you want to keep your location and circumstances a secret... and if you want me to lie to your father about you... then fine. I get it. But you don't get to do all that and then chastise ME for keeping a few things to myself. Okay? You just--' He sighed through his nostrils. 'You don't get to do that.'

Emiliana made no response.

As the silence drew out, he began to worry that he'd upset her. But he didn't regret what he'd said. He tried to sense what she was feeling again, but there was nothing. He supposed it didn't work like that. He decided that his theory from earlier was probably correct after all. Her feelings must have needed to be extraordinarily strong in order for him to sense them, and right now, they simply weren't.

Perhaps he needed to say more.

'Look,' he tried, 'I... I don't mean to be rude. And you CAN trust me. I want to help your family however I can. Okay? I really do.'

Still, she remained quiet.

He wasn't sure what else he could say without backpedaling completely. And he refused to do that.

Eventually, however, she finally said, '...Okay.'

And then he sensed her let go of her Shard. He waited to see if she would come back right away like he had. He tried calling out to her through the Shard, wanting her to at least come back and finish whatever she was going to say about worms.

But she didn't.

"Shit..." He was beginning to see a family resemblance."

## Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Four: 'Hark! And unravel...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

At first, Royo Raju had spent the majority of his time following the one called Diego, but when it did not prove nearly as fruitful as he had hoped, he began wandering about on his own more. It certainly would've made things easier if he could speak or at least understand Ancient Hunese, but even with as prepared as he always liked to be, he'd never thought he would have much use for a dead language, especially when there were still so many other, living ones to spend his time on.

An oversight, apparently. And an extremely annoying one.

Now, he only knew what the superhumans deigned to tell him, which was not very much.

Of course, it was also quite possible, and indeed likely, that these Hun'Sho were simply not revealing very much. They had every reason not to want their treasure discovered.

Royo wondered what the one called Diego would do if he actually found it. Would he take it from the Hun'Sho by force? He doubted that the man had such conviction. Perhaps his curiosity was purely that. Curiosity.

Then again, he supposed that it would also depend on what the treasure turned out to actually be.

Ah, but he was twisting himself into knots over this blasted treasure again. Yes, it would be nice to get his hands on, but he couldn't let it distract him from everything else. That was a good way to end up dead, he knew.

The more pressing matter, of course, was dealing with the worms. Potentially, the golem and feldeath could be snuck past--at great risk, of course, but it was an option. Instead, however, Royo had hoped to learn more about how the one called Carver had apparently been able

to subdue all of the worms just prior to their encounter with him. The man was obviously not a superhuman like the others, given his need to wear one of those suits, so there must have been some other reason for it.

And eventually, he did learn that reason, though it was not nearly as helpful as he'd wanted it to be.

"Oh, that was because of this," the one called Carver had explained, presenting a small, mechanical box in the palm of his hand. "It is what we call an EWE, or Enhanced Wave Emitter. You see, worms have a particular frequency at which they are vulnerable, and if you are able to strike that frequency with perfect precision, you can effectively put them to sleep."

"Fantastic," said the one called Zeff. "Then let's use that to get out of here right now."

"Uh, it would still be quite a hike to Capaporo," said the one called Diego.

"Indeed," said the one called Carver, "but there is a bigger problem to address, first. As I'm sure you are aware, worms are highly resilient, and perhaps the primary reason for that is their adaptable anatomy and biochemical makeup. You mentioned seeing them fuse and split apart multiple times, yes?"

"1437 -- CLIV.

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"1438

"Yeah," said the one called Diego. "Oh! Are you saying they'll adapt to your little whatchamacallit, too?"

"That is exactly what I am saying. In order for this EWE to work a second time, it must be retuned."

"Hmph. How do we retune it, then?"

"...Trial and error, unfortunately," said the one called Carver. "On the bright side, it can be done from a... relatively safe distance away, provided you can see them in the dark. Which I have another device for. But, um, ah--I was hoping one of you fine gentleman would do it for me, this time. I must admit, it has always terrified me beyond measure."

"Fine." The one called Zeff took the box from him. "I'll do it."

"Oh, thank god!" The one called Carver suddenly hugged the other man. "You have no idea how happy it makes me to have such a dependable companion! Please never leave me!"

Everyone involved in the conversation just kind of stared, and the one called Zeff slowly peeled the man off of him.

The one called Carver was red in the face, though Royo did not understand what that meant. "I, uh--please, I apologize--ah, it was just a joke, you see--aha--um--"

The one called Zeff kept holding him at arm's length. "How long will this take?"

"Oh, um, well..." The one called Carver bit his lip. "A few days, most likely. Perhaps shorter. Perhaps... longer. It sort of depends on your luck, I suppose. Just cycling through all of the potential frequencies. In theory, you could nail it perfectly on the first try. That would be

amazing! But then again, you ARE amazing, aren't you?! Aha!"

No one else laughed with him.

Royo had only pity for the poor bastard.

In the end, the one called Zeff did not nail it on the first try, as Royo had not even seen the man since. Though that was no great loss, to Royo's mind. He did not much care for that man's presence. He seemed perpetually on edge. And irritable, to boot. And with as much power as that superhuman had at his fingertips, Royo could all too easily imagine him simply snapping and going on a killing spree after someone said the wrong thing to him.

Given a choice, Royo much preferred the company of the other superhumans, and so he'd decided to use this downtime in order to learn more about them.

The most problematic on that front proved to be the Senmurai, who quite easily spoke the least and frequently went off on his own. He'd changed his armor, too, as if to compound the mystery further.

Difficult as he was, though, Royo had to admit, the Senmurai was the one who most intrigued him. More so than the Hun'Sho, even. Though, perhaps that was not saying much. What Royo had thus far learned of them, he did not like."

"1439

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

They had resided here in Himmekel for over a thousand years, according to the one called Diego. And yet, these "people of the fire" showed no sign of wanting to escape this place. None of the Hun'Sho they spoke with seemed interested in leaving... or even just wanting to know about the outside world all that much.

These people demonstrated a lack of curiosity. Of ambition.

The one called Diego seemed to think it was due to their inability to age, that the Hun'Sho lacked any sense of urgency in their desires because they had all the time in the world to pursue them. Perhaps one day, they would leave and explore the world, but for now, they were content to remain here, where time was all but standing still.

Royo could see the logic in that interpretation.

But he did not trust it.

An entire society which lacked curiosity? Or the pursuit of betterment?

That was disturbingly unnatural. It was hardly even human, to his mind.

The only way Royo could rationalize the existence of a culture of such willful ignorance was by means of some coping mechanism. Perhaps the Hun'Sho had been prisoners in this place for so long that they had grown to love their imprisonment.

They had given up, in other words.

But that made sense. The Hun'Sho were a defeated people. Maybe not quite extinct as had been believed, but certainly broken in spirit.

In the ancient tales passed down by his Hun'Kui ancestors, the Hun'Sho were portrayed as a wicked and terrifying people, monstrously cruel and intelligent. Something to be feared and hated. Yet as he observed them now, beings that should have been legends brought to life, Royo found himself not only disappointed but also hating them for an entirely different reason.

They were pathetic. Shameful.

These people were blessed with immortality, yet what were they doing with it? Nothing. They whiled away the days down here as if time was of no value or consequence to anyone.

He could not imagine a greater insult to mortals like himself.

The superhumans at least seemed to understand that much. While Royo did not necessarily like them much more than the Hun'Sho, he did still have respect for them. They clearly possessed values. Principles. Dreams. Goals of their own. There was sentiment to be admired there.

The most maddening thing, however, was certainly the way that the Hun'Sho did not speak directly to him or any of the other Hun'Kui present.

At first, Royo had thought that they simply did not understand Modern Hunese in the same way that he did not understand their Ancient

Hunese.

But then he remembered that the one called Carver was fluent in Modern Hunese. And the man had mentioned teaching several languages to the Hun'Sho over the course of his last five years here.

"Did you not teach them our language as well?" Royo had asked him.

"Ah--I did, yes."

"Then why do they not answer when we speak to them?"

"Ah, yes... that is rather strange, isn't it?"

"1440

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However, even after watching the one called Carver confront multiple Hun'Sho with that same question in Ancient Hunese, a definitive answer was never achieved.

But that was informative enough, in its own way.

His ancestors had driven their brethren to the brink of extinction, after all. And given their agelessness, it was highly likely that many of these Hun'Sho, if not all, had actually lived through it. When he realized that, Royo was no longer surprised by their behavior. Only annoyed.

Pure petulance. Refusing to speak to them would resolve nothing.

And so it was that, eventually, Royo ceased his futile and irritating attempts to cultivate a relationship with the Hun'Sho, instead deciding to focus on the Senmurai.

He was not the only Hun'Kui to want to do so, however. He observed one of the others attempt to make contact with him, but the Senmurai apparently did not speak Hunese. Royo wondered if his ghost could not translate for him, or if perhaps said ghost was simply preoccupied at the time. Unlike the other superhumans, the Senmurai spent more time on his own, away from his ghost, leaving Royo to wonder why. And at length, his curiosity could bear it no longer.

Standing in the middle of Himmekel, before its towering lavafall and

beneath an archway of glimmering black rock, Royo Raju approached the Senmurai.

“Hello,” said Royo in Mohssian.

The Senmurai was expectedly surprised, judging from his delayed response. “...Hello.”

Royo waited for the obvious question to arrive.

“...You speak Mohssian?”

“Yes,” said Royo. “I apologize for keeping it a secret. I was not certain I could trust any of you.”

“That’s... understandable.”

“I am glad you think so.”

Silence arrived.

This, too, was as expected.

“...If I might ask,” said Royo, “why do you keep coming here alone?”

The Senmurai’s armor shifted visibly and sizzled. “This is a good place to train. The extra heat makes it more difficult.”

Training? Truth be told, Royo did not know much about the powers that the superhumans possessed. For some reason, the thought had never entered his mind that they, too, should have to hone their abilities.

How curious.

“If that is the case,” said Royo, “then why do the others not train with you?”

“...They don’t really need to. Not as much as I do, anyway.”

“They are more concerned about finding the Sosho’Diyu than you are, it would seem.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“Oh? You are interested in it as well?”

"Of course. Kinda hard not to be."

"Heh. I was beginning to think that the Senmurai was immune to such worldly desires."

The Senmurai paused. "I keep hearing that word. S-Senmurai? What does that mean?"

"Ah..." Royo had to stop and think about it. The meaning of the name had always been clear to him, but trying to impart that meaning into a different language was not so easy. "In Mohssian... it would roughly mean Knight of the Mist."

"1441

The Senmurai made no response.

"Do you dislike the name?" asked Royo.

"...I'd rather you just call me Hector."

Hector? What an odd name. Royo had never heard the like before. But then, he did not know very many names from the surface. "Very well, Hector."

"What should I call you?"

The prideful part of him wanted to say Royo Raju, but he needed to keep his story straight. "You can call me Eleyo. It is a pleasure to make your formal acquaintance, finally."

"Ah, likewise."

More silence arrived.

Royo had another question prepared, but then Hector surprised him with one of his own first.

"Do you believe in a god?"

Royo blinked. That question had certainly come out of nowhere.

"I mean, uh, Hun'Kui in general," Hector clarified. "Do you guys have... some kind of religion? I'm just... curious about Hun'Kui culture."

“Yes, we have a few religions. There is Cushin’Sekai, the religion of the Heart of the World. There is Avarita, the religion of Avar, the God of Fire. And there is Secho’ta, the religion of Secho, the God of Growth. And probably others of which I am not familiar.”

“Hmm... Do you believe in any of them, yourself?”

“Not as such, no,” said Royo. And when Hector didn’t say anything, Royo decided to add, “But if I were religious, I think I would be most partial to Secho’ta.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of the story behind Secho. He was not always a god, you see. He was a mere mortal who ascended after a long and perilous journey.”

“Oh. I guess that’s why they call him the God of Growth.”

“Indeed.”

“How did he actually ascend to godhood, exactly?”

“That is the part I like best. In the story, he embarks on a quest to save his beloved wife, who has fallen ill. Along the way, he endures many dangerous trials and tests of both honor and morality. At the end of it, he encounters Avar.”

“The same God of Fire?”

“Yes. When Secho and Avar meet, Avar claims that Secho has failed one of his tests and so refuses him entry into the Sanctum of the Heart of the World, where the secret to curing his wife awaits.”

“Are all religions in the Undercrust linked like this?”

“No, it is only the biggest three. For those who are devout in them, it is less a matter of what they believe to be true and more a matter of who they believe to be correct. But not just according to this tale of Secho’s ascension, of course. There are many other stories, and they usually include a moral dilemma or diverging sense of ‘wisdom’ between the three religions.”

“Huh... But, anyway, uh... what did Secho do next?””

"1442



“He flew into a rage and attacked Avar. Yet, Avar was the God of Fire, and Secho was only mortal. Avar subdued him without difficulty and spared his life, believing Secho to be of no threat. However, instead of quitting himself of his quest as Avar told him to do, Secho waited four days, until Avar fell asleep, and then snuck into the Sanctum without waking him.”

“Gods need sleep?” Hector asked.

Royo smirked. “So it would seem.”

“Hmm. What happened next?”

“Secho met with the Heart of the World, who--”

“Ah--sorry to keep interrupting, but... what is the Heart of the World, exactly?”

“The answer to that would depend on whom you ask. In this particular story, it is depicted as a sentient presence encased in a giant orb.”

“That’s... strange.”

“Mm. Shall I continue?”

“Please.”

“Secho met with the Heart of the World, who already knew that Secho had entered the Sanctum when he was not supposed to. Rather than killing or banishing him, however, the Heart of the World gave him a choice. Secho was presented with two goblets. If he drank from the left goblet, his wife would be cured. If he drank from the right goblet, he would be granted godlike powers, but his wife would die.”

“How would him drinking from the goblet cure someone else?”

Royo snickered. “You are a stickler for details, I see.”

“I’m just... trying to understand.”

“The veracity of these tales is not why they have survived for millennia, I feel. They were meant to impart wisdom via the means of a constructed narrative. It may be better to think of them as a manner of... primitive thought experiment. An early mechanism of

hypotheticality by which the illiterate masses might be taught a sense of morality or wisdom--and hopefully, improve civilization as a whole thereby."

"Ah... Okay, sure, that's... that's a really good point. But, I mean... if the writers wanted me to believe this stuff, then they should've worked harder to make it more believable, don't you think?"

"Perhaps you are being a bit too hard on said writers. They did not have the benefit of a thousand extra years of accumulated knowledge as you and I do."

"...A likely excuse."

That earned a laugh from Royo. "Would you like me to continue with the story? Or have you grown too weary of it?"

"...Sorry, go on."

"Very well. Where was I?"

"The Heart of the World gave Secho a choice between godlike power or his wife."

"Ah. This is the part of the story I find most appealing. The decision. Secho was an ambitious man. And indeed, it was that very ambition which had caused him to 'fail' one of his tests, according to Avar. But after his encounter with Avar, Secho realized this about himself. And perhaps even more importantly, he had heard over the course of his journey about the capriciousness of the Heart of the World. Therefore, he did not trust this choice as it was presented to him and believed it to be some form of trickery.""

"1443

"So what did he do, then?" said Hector.

"Secho worried that the Heart of the World had lied to him about the placement of the goblets, but he did not know for sure. So before he decided, he asked the Heart of the World a question: 'Why have you presented me with such a terrible choice?' 'To show you your truest self,' the Heart of the World told him. And based on that answer, Secho decided to drink from both goblets at the same time."

Hector breathed half a laugh. “And that actually worked?”

“His wife was cured, yes, but the Heart of the World explained that there had been no goblet which would grant him the power of a god. That had been a lie, as Secho expected. Instead, that goblet had been simple poison.”

“Oh.”

“As Secho lay dying, the Heart of the World chastised him for his greed, telling him he was fool for thinking he could have both his wife and power. Rather than despairing, however, Secho laughed in the god’s face and said that he’d known all along he couldn’t trust the Heart of the World’s words, so drinking from both goblets was the only way to ensure that he drank from the one which would cure his wife.”

“Hmm.”

“Then a miracle occurred, and Secho ascended to godhood truly.”

“Wha? How?”

“It is explained thus: Secho, due to both his intention and ultimate decision, had effectively rendered the Heart of the World’s entire ‘game of choice’ meaningless. He completely avoided making the difficult decision between love and power, which was what the Heart of the World was trying to force him to do. Or in other words, he had ‘defeated’ a god. And in doing so, he became a god himself.”

“That’s... convenient.”

“I enjoy this story, because while it at first appears as though Secho will be granted the power of a god by another, that does not happen. Ultimately, he ascends to godhood independently, as a result of his own actions.”

“What difference does that make?”

“The entire ending of the story is about the temptation and promise of power. It is about how these things can be illusions and dangerous. The ‘goblet of power,’ for instance, was never even real. It was poison all along. And yet, the story does not wholly dismiss the notion of obtaining power, either. It simply provides an alternate explanation for it.”

“Eh... was it really explained, though? Seemed like it kinda just came

out of nowhere, to me.”

Royo bobbed his head. “It certainly depends on one’s perspective. For me, I find the explanation to be not only interesting but also an important lesson--relevant even to this day.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. A lesson in the natures of power, greed, and heroism. I should admit, however, that my opinion is generally considered to be one of dissension.”

“Why’s that?”

"1444

“Many people,” said Royo, “when they hear the tale of Secho’s origins, view Secho as a martyr. They see his decision as an act of self-sacrifice for his wife, and they opine that it is this sacrifice which ‘earns’ his ascension to godhood.”

“But you don’t think that?”

“Of course not. How could it possibly be considered an act of self-sacrifice when, at the time of drinking, Secho does not know that one of the goblets is poisoned? The parable even describes his thoughts on the matter. He is concerned that the goblets have been swapped, perhaps in some manner of cruel irony, but never does he worry that he may die as a result of drinking from them.”

“Hmm. You have a point. What do you think the lesson of the story is, then?”

“As I said, it is about the natures of power, greed, and heroism--specifically, in regard to how they can be linked. Secho is a heroic figure. There is no doubt of that. He saves his wife, along with various others whom he encounters during his journey to the Sanctum. But he is also portrayed as ambitious, perhaps even greedy. We can infer that he did want to become a god. He simply did not want it more than he wanted his wife to live.”

“Okay...?”

“If all of that is the case, then Secho’s heroism is not truly ‘pure,’ which

further demonstrates that it is not some vague notion of 'moral worthiness' that allows him to ascend to godhood. Rather, it is simply his ability to defeat a god. His ability, as an individual."

"But he still would've died, if not for that last minute miracle, right? Which, uh... I mean, where did that come from? A different god? Or just nowhere? I don't really..."

"It came from himself," said Royo. "That is the ultimate lesson of the story, in my view. Simply put, power cannot be granted to you. True power cannot. Certainly, lesser power can be bestowed upon you, as by that of a king, but in such cases, you will always remain beholden to the granter's will, which makes the granter inherently more powerful than you. True power, as that of a god, must be seized for oneself. And perhaps most frighteningly of all, true power does not discriminate based on any sense of morality. Whosoever has the ability--the will--can achieve it, be they for good or evil."

Hector fell quiet.

Royo wondered if he had perhaps said too much. It had been some time since he had last engaged in a conversation so passionately. He had grown so accustomed to never truly speaking his mind to anyone that he now felt somewhat embarrassed, as if he'd revealed a part of himself that he had not meant to. "I must apologize," he said. "I did not mean to rant at you."

"Ah," said Hector, "don't worry about it. I was... I was the one who kept asking you questions."

"1445

Rather than responding, Royo merely looked at the armored young man and listened to the ambient noise of Himmekel around them--the thick sloshing of falling magma, the slight and ever-present trembling of earth, and of course the muted hissing of Hector's visibly shifting armor.

Royo felt as though he should bring up a new topic, keep the conversation alive, but something made him hold his tongue. Something about this person standing next to him.

Certainly, when he had first heard how young the Senmurai sounded,

Royo had been surprised, but he had also heard tales of how the immortal supermen could appear deceptively young. Yet now, after listening to all of his questions and his manner of speaking, Royo had the distinct impression that Hector was indeed as young as he sounded.

Young. And perhaps... impressionable?

Mm, perhaps not. After having actually listened to what Hector had been saying, the young man did seem to be amusingly stubborn in his way of thinking. And sure, Royo had molded more difficult personalities to his will, but there was also the ghost to consider.

Best not to wade into that territory, he decided. A valuable ally or friend was likely the most he could hope for here, despite how much he would have loved to have a loyal superhuman at his beck and call. And even that might be overreaching, if he didn't watch his words.

At length, Hector was the one to speak again. "...I can't say I disagree with your view of power."

"Is that so?" said Royo.

"I've... I've seen a lot of power, lately. And... it's exactly like you said. Power doesn't discriminate against good or evil. Power is just power. Whoever has it, has it."

"Indeed." Royo couldn't help smiling a little, feeling as if the young man wished him to continue his rant after all. "And I believe that is also why evil--or what we perceive as evil, at least--seems so prone to obtaining power."

Hector turned his gaze away from the lavafall to look at Royo. He didn't say anything, but that strange, sunken gaze beneath his armor told Royo that he was waiting to hear more.

"Imagine it," Royo went on. "When an opportunity arises for an individual to seize power of any sort, what will that person do? A good man will hesitate. A good man will think, 'Is this wrong? Am I being greedy? Will this power hurt someone?' But an evil man will not think such things. An evil man will not hesitate. He will take that power as soon as he is able."

Hector looked away again, perhaps thinking on those words.

Royo still had more to say. "What, then, are we to make of a

circumstance in which a good man has an opportunity to seize power before an evil man does? If that good man hesitates in his goodness, and in so doing, allows the evil man to take that power from him?"

"1446 -- CLV.

"I don't think people can be broken up into such easy categories as good and evil," Hector finally said. "If they could, the world would be a lot simpler."

"And that is exactly the point," said Royo. "Actions are good or evil, not men. And yet, perhaps some acts that many would consider evil are not truly so--the seizure of power, being the relevant example to this conversation."

"Hmm..."

"I think, therefore, that more good people should realize: if you have the opportunity to seize greater power without incurring too great a cost, then you should take it. Because certainly, if you do not, then someone else will."

"...I suppose I agree," said Hector, "but it's the 'without incurring too great a cost' bit that worries me. Who's to say what too great a cost is, really?"

"Who's to say, you ask? Why, the only ones who can say, obviously! The fortunate or unfortunate ones who find themselves confronted with the choice! They are the ones to say. And do not fool yourself--they will have their say. They will make that decision. To the boon or cost of everyone around them. Such is the way of the world."

Hector fell quiet again.

Royo felt as if he could go on, perhaps more specifically about the virtue of ambition and the far-reaching benefits to be gained from a culture which fosters it in their youth, but in the end, he reminded himself of his concerns about overreach and decided to hold his tongue.

Then he noticed the ghost wander up behind the young man. That ghastly visage still turned his stomach, but he tried to not let it show on his face. The ardor-infused goggles hopefully helped with that.

"I shall take my leave," said Royo. "It was a pleasure speaking with you."

"Ah--same here."

And he walked away. A part of him had wanted to ask about the ghost, among other things, but Royo thought it was too early to probe for that sort of information. Moreover, he worried what the ghost would think of him, what the ghost would tell Hector of him.

They unsettled him, those intangible phantoms. He almost didn't want to know more about them, and instead wondered if it wouldn't be better to simply avoid them as much as possible.

Probably not, he eventually figured. Remaining comfortable in ignorance was not how he preferred to live his life.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Five: 'O, attentive Hunter...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Boy, these Hun'Sho were an odd bunch. The more he talked to them, the more perplexed Diego Redwater became. Even Yangéra could agree with him on that count.

"Could you perhaps show us a dance from your homeland?" asked a very slender Hun'Sho woman by the name of Hirkosa. Her Mohssian was quite good--but then, such seemed to be the case with every Hun'Sho to whom Diego had spoken. "We would be more than happy to do the same in return."

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"1447

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 1 of 14))~~

It wasn't the first time that Diego had heard the Hun'Sho talk to him about dancing. It seemed to be a big thing with them. "Sure," he said. "Not to toot my own horn 'r anything, but back in Agquarey, I was known as the Red Typhoon in all the night clubs."

Hirkosa's molten face looked more confused than impressed. "A typhoon is a type of surface world storm, no?"

"Yeah."

"What does a storm have to do with dancing?"

"I could tell you," said Diego, "but wouldn't it be better if I showed you?"

Another Hun'Sho woman by the name of Lerinki leaned over the table. "Please do!" She touched his hand with her magma-covered one.

In his head, Diego screamed in agony. Even through his passive soul-defense, it felt like he'd just spilled boiling coffee on himself. But he didn't let it show on his face at all. He was a transfiguration user. Pain was second nature to him.

He still found it difficult to respond immediately, however.

To her credit, Lerinki realized her mistake after a second and recoiled. "Oh! I am so sorry! I forgot myself for a moment! Did that hurt?!"

He laughed it off. "Don't worry! I'm fine! Though I appreciate the concern!"

Both of the Hun'Sho women were staring at his charred and half-melted lump of a hand.

Yangéra invoked the regeneration for him. 'Diego is fine, but you should be more careful around regular surface-dwellers,' she said. 'You could very easily kill one of them. They're quite fragile.'

When Diego and the others had first discovered that the Hun'Sho could both see and hear reapers, it had come as quite the surprise. None of them were servants, as far as he knew, but apparently that didn't matter. The explanation that the reapers had provided was that the Hun'Sho were a race of people who had ardor fused into their very beings. And as such, a Hun'Sho's "soul" was considered quite different to that of other races. Somehow.

Diego hadn't gotten much clarification on that point. Not that he'd cared all that much in the first place. Their culture interested him more than their biology or whatever it was.

"I am so, so sorry!" said Lerinki. "I will be sure to be careful in the future!"

"Lerinki, you fool!" said Hirkosa. "Why did you not remove your coat first?!"

Diego cocked an eyebrow at that.

"Oh, you are right!" said Lerinki, and she continued to apologize, even as her molten hands began to peel back. The magma, that had thus far maintained the impossibly smooth contours around her hands without dripping at all, suddenly flowed back up her arm to reveal the much more familiar gray skin beneath.

She touched Diego's hand again, and this time it felt quite cool--cooler, even, than the Hun'Kui women he had met back in Babbadelo. "Wow," he marveled, "I didn't know you could do that."

"I am so sorry," Lerinki was still saying. "I hope you will still show us the dances of your people."

"Oh, why, I'd be--"

'I am afraid that Diego and I have other matters we must attend to now,' said Yangéra. 'Perhaps he can show you his dance moves another time.'

"Aww!"

"Please come see us later!"

"I will, of course," said Diego. He had no idea what "matters" Yangéra was talking about, but he figured he should go along with it and NOT try to make her look like a jackass, for the time being.

They exited the small... hangout? He wasn't sure what the structure was, because even though it looked like a place where people would normally gather to enjoy a meal, he had yet to see any of the Hun'Sho actually eat anything.

Regardless, on the open street again, Diego was feeling quite pleased with himself. 'I think they liked me,' he thought with a smile.

'Um,' said Yangéra privately, 'just so you know, those women were not flirting with you. I'm pretty sure they don't understand the concept of flirting to begin with.'

'Wasn't the vibe I was getting.'

'Diego. The Hun'Sho reproduce asexually. And very rarely.'

He thought about that for second. 'So in other words... those two back there were probably virgins?'

'Ugh! That is the worst thing you've ever said!'

'What?! It was a joke!'

'I thought you were hunting for treasure, not pussy!'

'Whoa, hey! Don't make me out to be some kind of sleazy piece of shit!'

I never said anything about having sex with them!

‘Oh, yeah, I’m sure your intentions back there were entirely pure.’

Diego took a breath. ‘I’m just trying to get to know the local color so that, yes, I might discover some treasure. But there is more than one kind of treasure in this world, Yangéra.’

‘Oh, here we go...’

‘An encounter with a lovely lady of refinement and virtue, for example. That is one the most precious treasures I can imagine.’

‘Sure it is, you horndog. Aren’t you at all worried that one of these women would burn your dick off?’

‘Hold on. Where the hell is this coming from? You should know better than anyone that I’m not some manwhore.’

‘Of course you aren’t.’

Diego didn’t much care for her tone. ‘You really see me that way?’

‘You’re really trying to tell me that you don’t jump into bed with any woman who will let you?’

He furrowed his brow at her. ‘As a matter of fact, yes. I’ve never slept with a woman I wasn’t in love with, thank you very much.’

‘Is that right?’

‘It is!’

‘What about Erica Torres, then?’

‘Okay, that did get intense pretty quickly, but it was just heavy petting.’

Yangéra gave him a look.

‘VERY heavy petting, I’ll grant you. But never actual sex.’”

"1449

‘Uh-huh,’ said Yangéra. ‘How about Anna Casal, then?’

‘I never had sex with Anna,’ said Diego. ‘We were just very close, for a while.’

‘I literally found you in the same bed together.’

‘Yes! We slept in it! As in, actual sleep! No sex! She was going through a rough time, needed a shoulder to cry on, and then fell asleep in my arms!’

‘You were both naked.’

‘The rain soaked through our clothes! And we didn’t have any others to change into that night! AND we kept our underwear on, by the way!’

‘Mhmm. Hey, do you hear that? It’s the sound of me not believing you.’

‘Look, I don’t need to explain my relationship with Anna to you. She is a special woman, but she and I were simply not meant to be. Someone with a filthy mind like you wouldn’t understand the platonic bond we shared.’

‘Right. What about that one chick I saw all over you a few months ago? Did you ever even learn her name?’

‘That was Bernice, and yes, while she was very forward, she was a foreigner who was only in town for the weekend, so the relationship didn’t last beyond that.’

‘But you did have sex with her, is my point.’

‘No, I didn’t.’ Diego hesitated, not entirely certain he wanted to elaborate. ‘In fact... things got a little awkward when I told her that I didn’t want to take things that far. I instead suggested trying a long-distance relationship first and seeing how things went. Her response was to kick me in the balls.’

That information seemed to give Yangéra pause, perhaps because of how tragically believable it was. ‘...What about that bimbo supermodel you were with just a few weeks back?’

‘She was NOT a bimbo! Her name was Marissa, and she was very nice! I only went to a couple ritzy parties with her as a favor. She was worried her friends would give her a hard time for showing up alone, so

I played the role of studly arm candy. And maybe... sorta-kinda pretended to be her boyfriend a little.'

'...You did all of that for her, yet never slept with her?'

'She was just coming off of a bad break up and was obviously feeling very vulnerable. I didn't want to take advantage of her.'

Yangéra allowed a few beats to pass. 'Nah, I still think you're full of crap. What about Elena Salamanca?'

At that name, Diego stopped walking and looked at Yangéra.

The reaper stopped as well. And perhaps she realized what she'd done, because she floated closer. 'Ah--uh--I'm sorry, sweetie. I didn't mean to bring her up. I wasn't--'

Diego's expressionless face scanned his surroundings. There was a narrow alley to to his right.

He went for it.

As soon as he was out of public view, he found a wall, and he leaned against it while hanging his head forward.

He wasn't gonna cry. He wasn't. He definitely was not."

"1450

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 4 of 14))~~

Dammit, he could already hear the tears hissing as they evaporated in the heat of the Undercrust. Now he needed to focus on not devolving into a blubbering mess like last time.

'Ooh, I really wasn't thinking,' tried Yangéra, still wrapped in the echo of privacy. 'That was very low of me. I'm sorr--'

'Why didn't she love me back?!' said Diego.

'Well, it probably had something to do with the fact that she was a gold digging whore and an all-around ungrateful bitch,' said Yangéra.

Even through his extremely manly weeping, Diego had to breathe a

short laugh. 'No!' he said, though only halfheartedly. 'She wasn't like that!'

'She was, Diego. She absolutely was.'

He sniffled and rubbed his eyes.

'There, there. It wasn't your fault, sweetie. She betrayed your trust. I'm very sorry for bringing her up, okay? And you know what? I think it's great that you're still putting yourself out there like you have been. Sure, sometimes it rubs me the wrong way a little bit and makes me want to give you a hard time, but ultimately, I think it's healthy.'

'...Really? You don't think I'm a stupid asshole who'll never find a woman who loves me?'

'Of course I don't think that. If anything, I'm just preemptively jealous of whoever that woman turns out to be. Because I just love you so much myself. Alright?'

'Alright...'

'There we go. Now straighten yourself up. We can't have other people seeing the big, bad Lord Redwater like this.'

He started slowly shuffling his way back out into the street. 'But what's a lord without a lady...?'

'Oh, god...'

'We were gonna get married...'

'I know, sweetie. But she didn't deserve you.'

He stopped walking again. 'Wait a minute. Did she...? Did she think the same thing that you were thinking just now? That I'm some sort of disgusting playboy?'

'Ah. Well... um...'

His eyes widened. 'Oh my god...!'

'Mm,' was all Yangéra had for him.

He just stared at the reaper with his mouth slightly open.

'...So you genuinely didn't sleep with any of those women?' said



Yangéra.

‘NO!’

‘Okay! I’m sorry! I--it--you...’ She seemed to be lost for words.

And so was he.

‘But if that’s the case, then you’ve seriously gotta stop being so friendly with strange women. I’m pretty sure that most of the family thinks that you’re a huge slut, too.’

‘What?! Since when?!’

‘Since, oh, maybe... you were about twenty-two, twenty-three?’

‘That was fifteen fucking years ago!’

‘Yeeeeeaaahhh...’

‘Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?!’

‘I... I mean, I made jokes about it pretty regularly. And so did other people.’

‘I thought those were just jokes!’

‘Well, they were. Mostly. I-I didn’t want to criticize you for your lifestyle, sweetie.’

‘That wasn’t my lifestyle!’

‘I am now realizing that, yes.’

‘AGH!’”

"1451

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 5 of 14))~~

Yangéra tilted her avian head at him. ‘You’re surprisingly oblivious when it comes to this sort of thing, aren’t you?’

‘Oh, shut up!’

‘If it makes you feel any better, Elena Salamanca really was not good enough. Especially after what I’ve just learned.’

Diego just palmed his forehead.

‘Think about it. If she thought you wouldn’t be loyal and yet still went as far as becoming your fiancée, then she was obviously just after your money in the first place.’

Another horrible thought occurred to him, and he looked up at Yangéra. ‘Did you have something to do with her leaving me?’

‘Of course not.’

He didn’t stop staring, however. To his eyes, the reaper was a deceptively sweet-looking dove, glowing with a gentle white light, save her eyes, which smoldered with tiny black flames.

‘Diego, I would never do that to you.’

Still, he kept looking at her.

‘She couldn’t even see me. How would I have possibly been able to sabotage your relationship?’

His gaze narrowed. ‘By convincing someone else to do it for you.’

‘Diego, sweetie. You’re talking crazy. Your happiness is too important to me.’

That statement could be taken two different ways, he felt. ‘Yangéra,’ he told her. ‘I am going to look into this later. And you know me. I will find the truth, one way or another. So if you did do something, I’ll be much less upset with you if you tell me right now.’

Her beak twisted as if it were human lips being pursed together.

He tried one more push. ‘Yangéra?’

‘...Okay, it was me.’

‘I FUCKING KNEW IT!’

‘You were too smitten to see what a mistake marrying that woman would’ve been! I had to do something!’

‘You insane asshole!’

‘She didn’t even know how to cook!’

‘Lots of women don’t know how to cook, Yangéra!’

‘Yeah, well, not in MY day! It’s shameful and unbecoming of a proper wife! And she wasn’t even willing to learn, either!’

His anger was only matched by his utter disbelief. ‘That’s it?! Is that the only reason?! Because she couldn’t cook?!’

'Of course not! That was just the example that epitomized the greater problem!'

'Which was?!'

'She treated you like shit! She had no respect for you as a boyfriend or potential husband!'

'What?! YOU have way less respect for me than she ever did!'

'Yeah, but the difference is, deep down, I still love you! She was just an ungrateful harlot!'

"Um, excuse me," came a new voice, and Diego turned to see a Hun'Sho gentleman standing there.

"Yes?" he said almost too calmly, though he shot one last glare at Yangéra. 'This conversation is NOT over.'

'Oh, believe me, I can't wait to continue it!'

"You are the one they call Diego Redwater, no?"

"That's me. And to whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

"My name is Jasirok."

"What can I help you with, Jasirok?"

"Forgive me if you have no idea what I am talking about, but I was wondering if you would like to discuss something called the Sosho'Diyu with me."

Diego's brow rose."

"1452

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The Hun'Sho man looked at the ground. "Or... what would it be called in your language? The... 'Grave of the Underworld?' Yes, I think that is it."

Diego was glad that the man seemed not to notice his surprise,

because he was very much reluctant to just come right out and admit that he definitely wanted to discuss that subject. Thus far, he had not mentioned that name a single time to any of the Hun'Sho, nor had he heard it mentioned by anyone else. In the likely event that the Hun'Sho wanted to keep the treasure to themselves, Diego had felt it would be beyond imprudent to simply ask about it directly like some simpleton.

Yet here this man now was, this Jasirok, ready to offer him information out of nowhere.

Diego didn't trust the coincidence.

But it wasn't like he could just flatly refuse the guy, either. This was the first lead he'd found. Of course he had to learn more.

He needed to measure his next words carefully.

"I would be happy to talk about any subject you please," said Diego. "But why is it that this Sosho'Diyu seems to interest you so?"

'Good,' said Yangéra privately.

"Ah, it is just--you see, the last group of outsiders to visit us were very keen on the subject, so I thought you might be as well."

A rational explanation for the coincidence, Diego supposed. He allowed himself to relax, somewhat. But it did bring up another string of questions. "When did this last group of outsiders visit you, exactly?"

"Oh, it must have been a couple years ago now."

"Hmm. You're sure about that? You don't have trouble keeping track of the days down here? On the surface, we've got the sun to go by."

"The sun?" said Jasirok, almost laughing. "Ah, yes, I seem to recall reading about that method of timekeeping. Very quaint, but not at all necessary when one can feel the rotation of Eleg in one's chest."

Diego blinked. "Your brethren kept telling me about how 'close' they were to the planet, but I didn't think it extended that far."

"Indeed. It is about midday now, if you were wondering."

"Heh, I guess I'll have to take your word for it."

Yangéra decided to interject. "This previous group of outsiders--are these the same people whom Carver arrived here with?"

“Yes, they are. Why do you ask?”

‘It’s just, didn’t Carver come here five years ago? Not two?’

“He did, yes. But his companions returned for him two years ago. I was surprised when he did not leave with them. I suppose he simply found the Vault of Paradise to be exactly that, hmm?”

“Why is it called the Paradise Vault, by the way?” said Diego. “Not that this place isn’t wonderful, of course. I just find the name curious.”

Jasirok opened his mouth to answer but stopped himself before glancing around and trying again. “Ah... I sense that this conversation may become quite long. Would you like to come with me to my home? I feel we would be able to speak more comfortably there.”

"1453

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 7 of 14))~~

Diego gave the man a smile. “How could I possibly turn down such a generous invitation?”

Jasirok nodded and took the lead.

They followed him down the next side street and came to a towering, pitch black staircase that spiraled both up AND down, Diego noticed. This rocky ground that he’d been walking on was the same level on which they’d first arrived in Himmekel, so he’d been thinking that the town didn’t go any lower. Apparently, that was not the case.

He and Yangéra followed Jasirok downward, through the narrow hole that soon branched out into a multitude of hallways, several of which they simply passed by as they continued their descent. Jasirok exited at what Diego counted to be the eighth floor below Himmekel’s ground level.

The corridor was much larger than he expected as well, gradually widening out enough so that four or five people could have walked abreast in relative comfort. But he couldn’t tell how far it extended, because only darkness lay ahead.

In fact, there was no light anywhere down here, save that which

Jasirok and the other Hun'Sho emitted. Diego supposed that made sense. These people probably didn't have much need for light sources of any kind, and if they were really as 'close to the planet' as they'd been saying, then Diego further suspected that they might also have something akin to a reaper's extra senses.

He decided to ask about it. "Hey, Jasirok, can you sense where this hallway ends?"

"Of course," the molten man said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. He looked like he wanted to ask a question of his own, perhaps wondering why Diego had asked such a thing, but Jasirok held his tongue.

'If you don't mind my asking, how old are you?' said Yangéra.

"I am only seven hundred and twenty-one," said Jasirok.

'Ha. You say "only," but you are even older than I am.'

"Truly?"

'Yes.'

"Oh my. But then, I am almost certainly not older than you in terms of genuine life experience, I should think."

"Does that mean you were born here in Himmekel?" said Diego.

"Yes, and I have never yet left it."

Diego exhaled silently through his mouth as he tried to imagine that. Growing up here of all places? In such confinement? He decided to ask a question that he'd asked of almost every other Hun'Sho he'd met. "Do you wish to leave this place?"

"Eventually, yes. I must admit, your presence here has sparked my curiosity a bit."

"But you don't intend to leave anytime soon," Diego surmised.

"Certainly not."

It was an easy conclusion to reach, considering every other Hun'Sho had told him much the same thing. "Why not?"

"The time is not yet right."

That, too, was the answer he'd been expecting. Despite how many times he'd brought the subject up previously, he had yet to receive any real elaboration on that point. He decided to give it another try, though. Perhaps Jasirok would be more forthcoming than the others. "How will you know when the time is right?"

"1454

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 8 of 14))~~

"I will know," said Jasirok.

"Y-yeah, but how?" said Diego.

"I simply will."

Diego frowned but was not surprised. Was this just another one of their "close to the planet" things? Perhaps the Heart of the World or the God of Fire would tell them when the time was right. He'd heard those two mentioned frequently enough when asking the Hun'Sho about their beliefs.

But if that's all it was, then why didn't they just say so?

As they walked, Diego saw several other Hun'Sho coming and going, some of whom he even thought he recognized. It was hard to tell, though. He hadn't gotten to the point where he could suss out the subtle distinguishing features between different Hun'Sho faces yet, and he was starting to worry that he never would. At most, he was beginning to see slight differences in the overall brightness with which some of the Hun'Sho glowed, but that was about it. Not to mention, looking directly into their faces for too long could be a bit hard on the eyes, like staring into a dim flashlight.

At length, they finally reached their destination when Jasirok stopped in front of a door and opened it for them. It had not been locked, Diego noticed, nor did it appear to have any sort of locking mechanism. It simply slid open with nothing more than a push.

Curious, Diego felt. "This is your home?" he asked.

"Indeed," said Jasirok. "Please make yourselves comfortable."



Diego wondered if he should add 'privacy' to the growing list of things that the Hun'Sho seemingly did not care about.

And perhaps 'spaciousness' also deserved to be on there.

The whole apartment, if it could even be called that, was little more than two rooms. Diego spotted a small shelf full of knickknacks, a tall stone cabinet, a few chairs, a large mirror, and a bed--which, after everything else he'd learned, he found somewhat surprising. So they really did need sleep.

Noticeably missing was a bathroom. He wondered if there was a communal one elsewhere in this apparent dormitory. Certainly, running water wasn't really an option down here, so he was curious about what sort of facilities they did use. Carver's biosphere had proved surprisingly well-equipped and even surface-like, sporting a functional sink and bathtub, though the water had been quite limited until Zeff intervened.

Diego had yet to broach that particular subject with anyone else, and by now, his curiosity was just about boiling over. He decided to just go ahead and ask the question that he most wanted an answer to. "Hey, do you poop?"

"Poop?"

'Diego!' said Yangéra privately.

"I am unfamiliar with that word," said Jasirok. "What is poop?"

"Uh... like... excrete waste?"

Jasirok merely returned a quizzical look.

'Why did you ask him that?'

'I wanted to know!'

Diego scratched his head. "Heh, ah... well, it doesn't matter. If you don't know what I'm talking about, then I guess that answers my question."

"1455

Jasirok seemed to not know what to say.

“Ah, um, anyway.” Diego decided to take the seat nearest the door. “You wanted to discuss the Sosho’Diyu with me, didn’t you?”

Yangéra perched herself on his shoulder. ‘And you were going to tell us why this place is called the Paradise Vault.’

“Yes, of course.” Jasirok took a seat by the mirror on the other side of the room, which was still well within leisurely speaking distance. “I know only of the story, as I had not been born yet, but my elders have told it to me many times. It begins with Guong Seyos of Himmestat.”

‘Oh,’ said Yangéra, ‘is Himmestat the name of that city we found on the way here, then?’

“Yes,” said Jasirok. “The City of Paradise.”

Diego was still a bit lost. “Ah--sorry. Guong Seyos? What does that mean?”

‘Guong is the Ancient Hunese title for a king,’ said Yangéra. ‘Or at least, a certain type of king. One of divine appointment, as I recall. A normal king would’ve just been called a Guo. And “Seyos” was the name of that king, yes?’

“You are very knowledgeable,” said Jasirok.

‘I try my best.’

“Don’t compliment her too much,” said Diego. “That’s pretty much the only thing she’s good for.”

‘I’m also good for preventing my loved ones from making life-ruining mistakes.’

Diego shot her a look. Oh, how he wanted to dive back into that argument. But for now, there was something else he wanted to know. “So... this guy called Seyos was some sort of ancient king of the Hun’Sho?”

“Correct.”

The reason Diego found that interesting was because of something he’d previously learned about the Hun’Sho here in Himmekel. One of

the very first things he had asked about was who their leader was. But all of the Hun'Sho had said that no one was. They had said that Himmekel was a "community of equals." A few of the Hun'Sho hardly even seemed to understand what he was talking about, as if the entire concept of leadership was foreign to them, somehow.

Yet now Jasirok was saying that they previously had a king.

Of course, a thousand or so years left a lot of opportunity for a regime change, but he still found the discrepancy interesting. He wondered now if some of the Hun'Sho who'd acted the most ignorant had just been playing dumb with him. If Jasirok had heard this story many times, then surely, the other Hun'Sho would have as well, right?

Jasirok continued. "Seyos was a powerful Guong, supposedly the most powerful of his time. He had accumulated such vast wealth that even other Guong came to him, asking to share his fortune with them. Which he did. And he used that fortune as leverage over them, growing his influence even more. But the other Guong did not like this, as they were full of pride; and so, over many years, resentment slowly built between Seyos and the other Guong.

"Eventually, this resentment led to Seyos demanding all of his treasure back. But of course, the other Guong refused and even claimed that they would take everything else he had, too. So Guong Seyos built a grand vault to keep his remaining treasure safe. He made it much larger than necessary, because he planned to attack the other Guong and retrieve his borrowed wealth, but alas, this never came to pass.""  
"1456

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 10 of 14))~~

Diego waited for Jasirok to elaborate, but when it seemed like he wasn't going to, he asked, "Why not? What stopped him from getting his treasure back?"

Jasirok opened his mouth, then shut it again.

'Is that when the Hun'Kui rose up?' said Yangéra.

Jasirok looked at her. After a moment, he gave a solemn nod.

'So the Paradise Vault, which was meant to save mere treasure,

ended up saving hundreds of lives, instead.'

"Yes. In here, I am told, the Surajj'Byok could not reach us."

That caught Diego's attention. "The what could not reach you?"

"Ah..." Jasirok looked up at the ceiling, then at Yangéra. "I do not know how to translate that word."

She seemed at something of a loss as well. 'Uh... some sort of sickness? Byok means sickness, doesn't it?'

"Yes," said Jasirok. "That is right. The great blight could not reach us in here."

Diego tilted his head. "This is the first I'm hearing of any illness."

"It was the wicked tool of our ashen thralls," said Jasirok lowly. "In their madness, they unleashed it upon us and brought ruin to the world."

Diego wanted to ask more about it, but a specific question was eluding him. And moreover, Jasirok did not look especially receptive at the moment. This was the first time Diego had seen what looked like anger on a Hun'Sho's face. The molten man's glow had noticeably intensified, illuminating almost every corner of the apartment now.

Yangéra came up with a question, instead. 'What became of Guong Seyos and his treasure?'

Diego blinked. He definitely should've thought of that.

Jasirok's glow settled, though it took a minute. "...Guong Seyos survived, though he was Guong no longer. His treasure, however--I do not know what became of it, though I believe it may be the Sosho'Diyu that Carver and his companions were searching for."

Diego's heart sank. "Do you mean to say that the treasure never even made it to the Vault in the first place?"

Jasirok bobbed his head to the side. "Perhaps, but..."

Diego perked back up a little.

"Others may disagree with me," said Jasirok, "but I am of the opinion that the treasure is here. Somewhere."

'You sound confident,' said Yangéra.

“Would it not make the most sense?” the molten man said. “If Guong Seyos built the Vault of Paradise to protect his remaining wealth, then the very first thing he would have done upon completing it is move that wealth into it, no?”

Diego liked his logic. “Makes sense to me.”

‘You don’t think he might have removed the treasure afterward in order to make more room for your people?’

“That would... also be a possibility, yes.”

Yangéra allowed that stinging bit of rationality to sink in.

“But if it were here,” said Diego, “where do you think it might be?”

“I can hardly hazard a guess,” said Jasirok, “but I do think that there may still exist areas of the Vault that remain unexplored, even to this day.”

Yangéra gave a huff of obvious disbelief. ‘Really? Your people have been down here for a thousand years. How could you have not found every little nook and cranny by now?’

"1457

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 11 of 14))~~

At that question, Jasirok hesitated.

Uh-oh. Diego knew he had to help him out, lest this venture find itself dead in the water already. “...Maybe they just haven’t been looking hard enough,” Diego tried.

Yangéra’s beady, smoldering eyes squinted at him. ‘Even you can’t really believe that, can you?’

He really couldn’t. But that was beside the point. “I’m just saying, it wouldn’t hurt to take another look around. Or two or three more looks, maybe.”

‘Whatever. As long as it doesn’t delay us in reuniting with everyone.’

“No argument here.” By now, Diego could only imagine how worried Dimas and the others must have been. Two whole days without any contact? If he were in their shoes, he would be thinking the worst.

And certainly, Zeff Elroy was not going to let up, either. Diego doubted he would be able to convince that man to stay even a second longer than they absolutely needed to. As soon as that device of Carver’s was ready again, Zeff would probably show up like a tornado and try to sweep everyone out of here.

Diego didn’t entirely disagree with that sentiment, either. At this point, with how unlikely finding the treasure was beginning to seem, Diego mostly just wished that they had some way of getting around that feldeath more easily. He remembered it all too clearly, that giant beam of dark energy that it had shot out. Another one of those, at just the wrong moment, could probably obliterate their whole party in the blink of an eye, Diego felt.

“There is a reason,” came Jasirok’s voice.

Diego had lost track of the conversation. “Reason for what?”

Jasirok still looked reluctant to say more, but after a moment, he said, “There is a reason why I think there may be areas of Himmekel that even we do not know about.”

Diego’s expression brightened. He’d already given up on that argument.

The molten man seemed to need another push to get his explanation out, however, and Yangéra was the one to provide it. ‘Go on.’

“Before I do,” said Jasirok, “I feel I must confess something. This reason... is also why I wished to speak with you in the first place.”

“What?”

“The Sosho'Diyu does interest me, of course, but it is of secondary importance to what I am about to tell you.”

“Why all the build up, then?” said Diego. “If it’s the most important thing, why not tell it to us first?”

“Because...” Jasirok’s voice lowered to a whisper. “I was ordered not to speak of it.”

Diego's gaze flickered. "Ordered? By who?" And he stopped himself from saying anything further, but he wondered how the hell that coincided with Himmekel being a "community of equals," like he'd been told.

"By... my father," said Jasirok.

Ah. If it was a familial hierarchy rather than a broader societal one, then Diego could see how the discrepancy might be explained. But still, "ordered" had been an odd choice of word on Jasirok's part. Perhaps it could be chalked up to Mohssian not being the man's native language."

"1458

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 12 of 14))~~

Diego supposed they should just get to the heart of the matter already. "So what is it that he told you not to talk about, then?"

"Our missing brethren."

"Missing?" said Diego. "Your people have been going missing?"

"Yes. Ever since Carver's arrival five years ago, certain members of our community have begun to vanish without explanation."

Diego didn't understand. "Why would you guys want to keep something like that a secret from us?"

"...I do not know," said Jasirok. "On this matter, I find the others' behavior extremely irrational and worrisome."

"Hence why you're coming to me, I guess."

"Indeed."

Diego took a deep breath and scratched his neck, realizing where the conversation was headed. This was turning into a lot more than he had bargained for. "So you want us to help you find them, then?"

"Very much so, yes."

'Shit,' said Yangéra privately.

‘You want me to refuse?’ he asked her.

‘Oh, please. We both know you’re not going to refuse, no matter what I say.’

‘That’s because we both also know you don’t really WANT me to refuse.’

She just grumbled at him.

“In the beginning,” Jasirok went on, “I believed that they were merely leaving Himmekel entirely, perhaps having decided to venture out on their own for some reason I did not comprehend. However, I then decided to wait at the entrance and watch for anyone else leaving. I wanted to ask them why they were doing so, but I never found the opportunity, because I saw no one leave. And yet, during this same period, another person vanished.”

“Hmm,” Diego hummed.

‘You said it only started happening after Carver’s group appeared five years ago?’

Jasirok nodded. “I thought Carver might know something of the cause, but I have asked him many times, and he says he does not understand it, either.”

‘Could he be lying?’

“I suppose, but I do not think so. If he were truly behind the disappearances, then I imagine he would have left Himmekel with his companions when they visited two years ago.”

“What else can you tell us about these companions of his?” asked Diego.

“Oh, they were very charming,” said Jasirok. “Especially Ettol and his reaper. Those two befriended almost everyone in Himmekel.”

So there were servants among them. Diego supposed he should’ve expected as much. “What did this Ettol person look like?”

“Ah... I recall him having a distinct face, though I do not remember in what way.” Jasirok’s expression struggled. “I am sorry. Truthfully, you all look rather alike to me.”



How annoying. But then, Diego couldn't fault the guy much, either--not when he could barely tell the Hun'Sho apart, himself.

'What about his other companions?' said Yangéra. 'It was not just Ettol and his reaper, was it?'

"No, there were others," said Jasirok. He paused to think about it. "However... I am sorry. I cannot seem to remember much about them..."

Diego's brow twitched. This was beginning to sound familiar."  
"1459

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 13 of 14))~~

'You don't seem particularly concerned about these strange people,' said Yangéra.

Jasirok merely tilted his head at her.

She exchanged glances with Diego. 'Are you not worried that they are behind the disappearances, somehow? I thought that was why you mentioned that the disappearances only started happening after they first arrived here.'

"No, no," said Jasirok. "That was only to give you a sense of chronology. I do not think Ettol and his comrades are to blame."

'Why not?'

"Because the disappearances began while they were away. Only Carver has been here all along, and... I mean no offense to him, but he is rather weak--in both body and spirit. I have no reason to believe that he could harm any of us by himself."

'Harsh,' said Yangéra privately.

'But not inaccurate,' thought Diego.

Yangéra returned to her public voice. 'Well, if you don't think Carver and his friends are responsible, then do you have some other theory?'

"I... do not," Jasirok admitted. Then he stood up from his chair.

“However, I did find this.” He moved toward his cabinet and opened it to retrieve a small object.

It was a pyramid, pitch black and perfectly shaped--apart from three stubby protrusions, one on each of the top sides.

Diego just waited for Jasirok to explain, but Yangéra got there first.

‘This is a Kag, isn’t it?’

“You recognize this object?” said Jasirok.

‘It’s a kind of ancient key. Do you know what it unlocks?’

Jasirok seemed confused. “Key? What does that word mean?”

The reaper struggled for an explanation. ‘It’s something that allows you to open something else.’

“I see...”

‘If you didn’t know what it was, then why were you showing it to us?’

“I found it in the residence of the first one who went missing. I had not seen the like before, so I decided to take it with me for study. I had yet to learn anything of it until just now.”

‘Hmm. Well, my question remains the same. Do you know what it unlocks?’

“I... I am still not quite certain I understand,” said Jasirok. “Unlocks?”

The reaper sighed. ‘Like a door? Or a box? This key should have an accompanying lock, somewhere.’

“I do not--”

“There are no locks in Himmekel,” said Diego.

They both looked at him.

He eyed Jasirok. “It was something I noticed earlier. You guys don’t have locks on any of your doors, windows, cabinets--anything. Pretty strange for a place that’s supposed to be a vault.”

“I... do not know what you mean.”

“Exactly,” said Diego. “You hardly even understand the concept of locking things up. In fact, privacy in general isn’t a very big concern among your people, is it?”

“I suppose not...”

“The only lock I’ve seen since coming here was at the very front entrance that Carver led us through, the one up in the ruins of Himmestat.”

‘Hmm.’”

"1460

~~((The 12 Pages of Christmas + Double Monday = Page 14 of 14))~~

Diego took the Kag from Jasirok in order to inspect it more closely. “So of course you can’t tell us what this key unlocks. You wouldn’t recognize the lock that it belongs to even if you saw it every single day for the last seven hundred years.”

“I...” Jasirok’s shoulders slumped a little, and he returned to his seat by the large mirror.

“Ah--I didn’t mean that as an insult,” said Diego. “It was just an observation. I wasn’t blaming you or anything.”

Still, the Hun’Sho man looked rather disheartened.

‘Nice going,’ said Yangéra privately.

‘Agh.’ Diego didn’t know what to say to him. ‘Could you help me out here?’

‘Uh, so this Ettol guy,’ said Yangéra publicly, ‘he wanted to know about the Soshō’Diyu, too, right? But do you know if he actually learned anything? Do you remember any of the specific questions that he was asking about it?’

Jasirok was quiet for a bit longer. “I... recall him asking about Guong Seyos quite a few times. He expressed an interest in meeting him.”

‘Oh, that’s right,’ she said, apparently trying to sound more optimistic, ‘you guys are all immortal, aren’t you? So if Seyos survived like you

said, then he could still be alive! And if anyone knows where the treasure is, it would be him!’

“Indeed,” said Jasirok. “However, I do not know if Guong Seyos was a real person.”

“What?” said Diego.

“The elders appear to believe he was, and they lived through those events, so I do not wish to doubt them, but I have lived in Himmekel for my entire life, and I have never met anyone named Seyos, Guong or not.”

‘Hmm. Perhaps he changed his name.’

“If that is true, then I do not know how we will find him,” said Jasirok.

“We could ask one of your elders,” said Diego. “It sounds like they would know everything we need.”

Jasirok’s expression soured. “You will not find them cooperative. As I said before, I was ordered not to speak to you of this matter.”

“Maybe we can convince them. I can be pretty persuasive, when I want.”

The molten man shook his head. “You will fail. I assure you. Even Ettol could not sway them, as I recall, and they all seemed rather fond of him.”

Diego frowned.

“Additionally,” Jasirok continued, “when you do not succeed, the elders will know that someone spoke to you against their wishes. And they will likely realize that it was I, as they have heard me voice my dissent before.”

“Ah...”

The conversation all but died there. Jasirok was already looking defeated.

Diego couldn’t see a reason why the Hun’Sho would want to keep such a secret. But then, he still didn’t really understand the Hun’Sho themselves. Perhaps this was some sort of cultural thing. Pride or embarrassment, maybe.

Whatever it was, it was obnoxious.

‘C’mon, Diego,’ said Yangéra privately.

‘What?’

‘You’re weirdly good at figuring this sort of stuff out,’ she said. ‘Can’t you think of something?’

He actually could.

“...Who was the first person to go missing?” said Diego.

“Oh, that--”

Without warning, an enormous red-and-orange hand lunged out of the mirror on the wall. It grabbed Jasirok by the torso, yanked him out of his seat, and pulled him back through the mirror before Diego could so much as blink.

The mirror shattered, and Diego and Yangéra were left staring."  
"1461 -- CLVI.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Six: ‘O, banneret of the Underworld...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

“You see,” said the Hun’Sho man named Torveis with a hand over his open chest cavity, “as long as we have this, we do not require sustenance as you do.”

Hector stared with wide eyes as he listened. The man’s chest was largely hollow, apart from two dark, pulsing lungs and a small, glowing sphere suspended where the heart should have been. There were no bones or muscles. There wasn’t even any blood, unless a few streaks of dripping lava counted.

“And if I do this--” Torveis breathed in deeply, visibly inflating his lungs. The magma coating the outside of his body suddenly retracted inward, filling his open chest so completely that he had to close it again before it started leaking out of the front hole he’d made earlier. “--Well, you can see the result.”

Hector didn't know what to say. On the outside, at least, the man no longer looked like a being of molten rock. Torveis looked far more normal--relatively speaking, at least.

In fact, he looked uncannily similar to the Hun'Kui. The ashy gray skin tone, the glowing eyes. The only real differences that Hector could spot were that the glow was more orange than white and that it wasn't just the eyes glowing but also the mouth and several other porous marks all along the man's arms, legs, and chest.

He didn't think he should bring up the Hun'Kui, though.

"So that little round thing in there makes it so you don't ever need food?" Hector decided to ask instead.

"Yes," said Torveis. "As a matter of fact, I imagine that most of us here in Himmekel did not even understand the concept of food until Carver first appeared."

"That just seems crazy to me..."

"At times, however, we may choose to absorb extra rock in order to replenish any core magma that we may have lost. So perhaps you may find that similar."

"Hmm. How would you lose your, uh... core magma?"

"Overexertion or being wounded, perhaps."

"Huh..." Hector wondered what qualified as a wound, then. He noticed that the big hole that Torveis' had made in his chest had sealed back up already. And the man hadn't seemed particularly concerned about ripping his own skin open, either.

'This is the first time I have ever seen a Hun'Sho's core in person,' said Garovel, who had been hovering by Hector's side. 'It was quite bold of you to show us, was it not? And awfully trusting, too.'

"Trusting?" Magma began gradually accumulating all over Torveis' body again, oozing out of the holes in his skin--thankfully not through the eyes or mouth, though. "Ah, do you mean in the event that you decided to attack me?"

'Pretty much, yeah,' said Garovel. 'Not that we would do such a thing, of course.'

Torveis tilted his head. "I had not considered that, but I suppose you are right. All of the surface-dwellers whom I have met have struck me as quite trustworthy, and you are no different, I feel.""

"1461 -- CLVI.

## Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Six: 'O, banneret of the Underworld...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"You see," said the Hun'Sho man named Torveis with a hand over his open chest cavity, "as long as we have this, we do not require sustenance as you do."

Hector stared with wide eyes as he listened. The man's chest was largely hollow, apart from two dark, pulsing lungs and a small, glowing sphere suspended where the heart should have been. There were no bones or muscles. There wasn't even any blood, unless a few streaks of dripping lava counted.

"And if I do this--" Torveis breathed in deeply, visibly inflating his lungs. The magma coating the outside of his body suddenly retracted inward, filling his open chest so completely that he had to close it again before it started leaking out of the front hole he'd made earlier. "--Well, you can see the result."

Hector didn't know what to say. On the outside, at least, the man no longer looked like a being of molten rock. Torveis looked far more normal--relatively speaking, at least.

In fact, he looked uncannily similar to the Hun'Kui. The ashy gray skin tone, the glowing eyes. The only real differences that Hector could spot were that the glow was more orange than white and that it wasn't just the eyes glowing but also the mouth and several other porous marks all along the man's arms, legs, and chest.

He didn't think he should bring up the Hun'Kui, though.

"So that little round thing in there makes it so you don't ever need food?" Hector decided to ask instead.

"Yes," said Torveis. "As a matter of fact, I imagine that most of us here in Himmekel did not even understand the concept of food until Carver

first appeared.”

“That just seems crazy to me...”

“At times, however, we may choose to absorb extra rock in order to replenish any core magma that we may have lost. So perhaps you may find that similar.”

“Hmm. How would you lose your, uh... core magma?”

“Overexertion or being wounded, perhaps.”

“Huh...” Hector wondered what qualified as a wound, then. He noticed that the big hole that Torveis’ had made in his chest had sealed back up already. And the man hadn’t seemed particularly concerned about ripping his own skin open, either.

‘This is the first time I have ever seen a Hun’Sho’s core in person,’ said Garovel, who had been hovering by Hector’s side. ‘It was quite bold of you to show us, was it not? And awfully trusting, too.’

“Trusting?” Magma began gradually accumulating all over Torveis’ body again, oozing out of the holes in his skin--thankfully not through the eyes or mouth, though. “Ah, do you mean in the event that you decided to attack me?”

‘Pretty much, yeah,’ said Garovel. ‘Not that we would do such a thing, of course.’

Torveis tilted his head. “I had not considered that, but I suppose you are right. All of the surface-dwellers whom I have met have struck me as quite trustworthy, and you are no different, I feel.”

"1462

‘Kind words, thank you,’ said Garovel. ‘But I would still prefer you to exercise more caution in the future. Even if it is rather durable on its own, your core is still your greatest vulnerability. And let me assure you, there are plenty of surface-dwellers who are most definitely NOT deserving of your trust.’

Torveis laughed lightly. “My brethren have often berated me for my carelessness as well, but I shall try to take your words into consideration.”



Hector had a question now. "What is that thing, exactly? Y-your core, I mean. Like, what's it made out of?"

'Rock and ardor, no?' said Garovel.

"That is correct," said Torveis. "It is said that Avar himself bestowed it upon us, giving birth to the first of our people."

"Avar?" said Hector. "Not the Heart of the World? I mean, it's just--I would've guessed, ah... er... considering it's like your actual heart and everything..."

"Ah. Yes, I suppose now that you mention it, there are those who believe it was the work of the Heart of the World, instead."

"But you believe it was Avar?"

"I do," said Torveis.

"Why?"

Torveis laughed again. "Well, there are many reasons. For one, Avar is far more benevolent and righteous than the Heart of the World. Much more deserving of my belief, I feel. And for another, I have seen Avar in my dreams. I have even spoken to him there."

Hector didn't have a response for that.

Garovel did, though. 'Are you sure those weren't just, y'know, dreams?'

"Aha, perhaps they were," said Torveis. "But I see that it is as I have heard, regarding the cynicism of your kind."

'Sorry if that was rude,' said Garovel. 'But I won't deny that I'm very doubtful of religion in general. It's nothing personal, if that makes you feel any better.'

"It does not," said Torveis, though he was laughing again.

'Ah.' Garovel looked at Hector briefly before returning to Torveis. 'I've heard that your core is also how you keep track of time. Is that true?'

"Ah, indeed, it is," said Torveis. "I am sure it was simply moving too slowly for you notice when you were looking at it a moment ago, but my core spins in synchronicity with the planet."

‘Yeah, I’ve heard that as well. Glad to know I wasn’t lied to.’

Hector was having a hard time wrapping his head around that one. “How does it--? Ah... I mean, how does your core sync with the whole planet? That’s, uh...? I don’t understand...”

“We are close to the planet,” said Torveis.

That didn’t really help, Hector felt.

“I would tell you that this, too, is Avar’s blessing, but I fear that Garovel here would challenge me.”

That made the reaper chuckle. ‘So what does the God of Fire tell you in these dreams of yours, then?’

Torveis folded his arms. “I am not certain I wish to tell you.”

‘Oh, come on, I’m genuinely curious. And I may not believe you, but I’m sure Hector does. He’s super gullible.’

“Wow, Garovel, really?” said Hector.”

"1463

Torveis looked at Hector. “Jests aside, is that true? Do you believe me?”

Hector tried not to look like a deer in the headlights. “Uh, I... I don’t know yet. But, ah... I’m trying to keep an open mind, I guess.”

“And you would be convinced if you heard what Avar said to me?”

Hector bobbed his head to the side. “Depends on what he said. I shouldn’t promise to be convinced before I even hear it, should I?”

“Aha, I suppose not. Very well, I shall tell you.”

Truthfully, Hector was still mainly hung up on the whole “core of life that spins with the planet” thing, but it didn’t seem like Torveis was the one who would be able to explain that to him--at least, not in a way that he understood. Maybe it was something he would ask Emiliana about later. Assuming she ever intended to speak to him again.

“Avar’s message was one of great hope,” Torveis went on. “He said unto me that my people should take heart, for though we have struggled and been hurt for many long years now, He will return for us when the time is right.”

Not the most persuasive, Hector felt, especially that bit at the end. He could only imagine how Garovel’s doubt was growing.

Torveis had more. “He also said that the time is near, as He has already reawakened into this world.”

‘Mm,’ said Garovel. ‘How long ago did he tell you this?’

Torveis’ molten lips pressed together briefly. “...About three hundred years ago, I suppose.”

Garovel was at least considerate enough to keep his roaring laughter private.

“If I am to be completely honest,” said Torveis, “it has been almost as many years since Avar last spoke to me. Which, I admit, is somewhat disheartening, but I believe it may be caused by his reawakening. Perhaps the reason he no longer appears in my dreams is because he is himself no longer slumbering.”

That... kind of made sense, if Hector wanted to be generous. And maybe it was just the result of Garovel’s sustained and echoing guffaw, but Hector was starting to feel bad for Torveis. “Ah... d-do you know what Avar looks like? Or maybe what he will look like when he returns for you?”

“I do not know if He will retain the same form when he arrives, but in my dreams, he appeared before me as a great and majestic bird.”

Garovel’s laughter abruptly cut off. ‘You know what birds look like?’ he said publicly.

“...Ah, yes, one of the surface-dwellers described them to me. I am afraid I cannot recall which, but I remember them speaking of many of your animals from the surface.”

And Hector noticed Garovel’s brief silence.

‘But Carver only arrived here five years ago,’ the reaper said, ‘and you said the last time Avar spoke to you was around three hundred years ago.’

"Yes. I was only able to recognize His form in retrospect."

"1464

'I see,' said Garovel. 'Pretty strange how Avar would choose to appear to you in the form of an animal you'd never seen before.'

"Such is His vast knowledge and power," said Torveis. "Perhaps He thought I would be less moved by His presence if He took the form of an animal I had previously seen."

'That would make sense. But I was beginning to wonder--or dare I say, HOPE--that you had been to the surface, yourself. I would have been extremely interested to hear what your opinion of the surface world was after having seen it with your own eyes.'

For a moment, Torveis just looked at him. "I should like to go there, one day, but as yet, I am afraid I have not."

'Pity.'

And a suddenly heavy silence drew out.

'He's probably lying,' said Garovel privately. 'This man has been to the surface before.'

Hector had about a dozen questions, the first of which was, 'Hun'Sho can survive on the surface?'

'Yeah. Their magma lets them regulate their body temperature pretty efficiently.'

'Why would he lie about that?'

'I don't know, and that's what's bothering me.'

'Maybe Avar really did take the form of a bird in his dreams.'

'Yeah, sure.'

Torveis revived the conversation. "Perhaps you could tell me of more animals from the surface. I have heard that you have quite a large variety, compared to the Undercrust."

‘Heh, he’s a really good liar,’ said Garovel, still privately. Then he switched over to public voice. ‘That’s true. The environment on the surface is a bit more forgiving, though it can be dangerous in many other ways.’

“I am intrigued. Please do tell me more.”

And Hector just listened as Garovel did so. The reaper spoke of many different animals, some of which Hector didn’t know much about himself and therefore was almost as interested to learn of as Torveis appeared to be.

But all the while, Hector couldn’t help feeling as if a shadow had been cast over the conversation, as if it were mostly just an act now.

He wondered if Garovel was right, and Torveis really had been lying; or if that was just Garovel’s cynical bias, and Torveis really had seen the God of Fire in his dreams before ever knowing what a bird looked like. Of course, he was much more inclined to believe Garovel, if only because he barely even knew Torveis, but still, it was pretty obvious now that Garovel didn’t know everything. Even if the reaper liked to say otherwise.

At length, a new voice arrived.

“Lord Darksteel.” It was Manuel Delaguna and his reaper, Lorios. They were also accompanied by the non-servant woman from before, whose name Hector had since learned was Elise Garza.

Hector noticed the look on Manuel’s face first. “Is something wrong?”

Lorios floated forward and addressed Torveis. ‘We apologize for interrupting, but might we borrow these two from you for a minute?’

“But of course,” said Torveis, gesturing with one hand. “I feel I should apologize for monopolizing them to myself for quite some time now.””

"1465

Hector and Garovel excused themselves and followed Manuel out of the building.

Hector got to wondering about Torveis as they walked. Certainly, the man was not lacking in politeness. Most of the Hun’Sho were like that,

it seemed, but Torveis in particular had struck Hector as even more so. Somehow, it made Hector not want to even humor the idea that the man had been lying to them.

But then, wouldn't that be what a liar wanted? Wouldn't that be a compelling reason for a liar to go out of their way to be polite in the first place?

Then again, Hector knew that he wasn't exactly a paragon of honesty, himself. He'd told plenty of his own lies, hadn't he? Some quite recently.

Whatever the case, Hector figured he shouldn't jump to any conclusions or rush to any judgments.

Manuel's group remained mostly quiet en route to Carver's biosphere.

'So why did you come to get us?' asked Garovel along the way.

"It was at Lord Diego's behest," said Manuel. "He also said to not go near any mirrors."

'...What?'

"I can't say I fully understand, either," said Manuel. "But he didn't seem like he was joking. He has gone to retrieve the Water Dragon. He said he will explain further once we have all gathered."

Hector needed a moment to remember who "the Water Dragon" referred to. The last time he heard someone call Zeff that was at Dunehall when Ivan, of all people, said it.

When they made it back to the biosphere, Diego was not there, so they decided to take a seat in the main room and wait for him.

Hector reworked his armor for the cooler environment instead of simply removing it. Heavy though it was, he was beginning to feel more comfortable with it on than with it off, perhaps because he had spent so much time learning to materialize it perfectly around his body. No longer did it feel too bulky around his torso, too tight around his neck, or too loose around his feet. Best of all, though, he had finally managed to curve and interweave the joints just right so that they stopped pinching him when they touched. Even with a thick layer of cloth for added protection, that had occasionally been a nuisance.

He still wanted to try out some different styles of visors for his helmet,

though. Perhaps he could still improve his visibility in some way.

“Lord Darksteel?” came a feminine voice. It of course belonged to Elise Garza, who was staring at him. “Why do you keep your armor on? Are you afraid we will attack you?”

Oh shit. He hadn’t even considered what they might be thinking. What was he supposed to say here? ‘Garovel, help...’

‘Of course we aren’t worried about that,’ said Garovel. ‘But my “Lord Darksteel” here is ever vigilant, you see. We have had some rather nasty surprises in the past, and perhaps as a result of that, he has developed a habit of keeping his guard up even when things seem peaceful.’

She couldn’t hear any of that, of course, as she was not a servant, but Manuel was kind enough to relay it to her.

Hector breathed silently in relief."

"1466

‘You like that bullshit I came up with?’ said Garovel privately. ‘Pretty impressive, huh?’

Hector had to admit, the speed at which the reaper had answered her was surprising. ‘Am I crazy, or did you seem... prepared for that question?’

‘Heh. You’re really keeping that armor on because it gives you something to hide in, no?’

Hector wanted to deny it, but he couldn’t.

‘That’s what I thought.’ The reaper floated over to Hector’s other shoulder. ‘Don’t mind me. I’ll just continue being incredible over here, if you need anything else.’

“Lord Darksteel.” This time it was Manuel again. “Might I ask what you think of these Hun’Sho people so far?”

Okay, this “Lord Darksteel” business was getting a little out of hand, Hector felt. As awkwardly flattering as it was, he figured he should tell them--

'I would be interested to hear your opinion as well, Lord Darksteel,' said Lorios.

'Yeah, Lord Darksteel,' said Garovel, though he was still keeping his voice private. 'Go on. Tell them what you think. And don't tell them to call you Hector, either. I've had enough of that shit.'

'What? Why not?'

'They're showing you respect. Just accept it gracefully like a proper lord would.'

'But--'

'Better hurry and answer 'em. They're waiting patiently.'

Hector had to force himself not to groan in exasperation. "Ah..."

Manuel, Elise, and Lorios were all looking at him.

Slow and deliberate speech, Hector reminded himself. Careful, measured words. He'd done it before in front of total assholes. He could do it again in front of these nice people. Probably.

Oh god.

"I think," he heard himself say, "that... the Hun'Sho... are very polite." Why the hell was that simple-ass sentence so difficult to get out? Agh. He had to give them more of his thoughts than just that, he knew. "Almost... too polite, actually."

Manuel nodded. "I understand what you mean. I, too, have thought that they might be concealing something from us. Which is their right, I suppose, but given Lord Diego's behavior... I am growing more concerned about them."

"I have to agree," said Elise. "And their treatment of the Hun'Kui is troubling, as well. It's like the Hun'Sho are pretending they do not even exist."

'Sadly, I doubt there is much we can do to help them reconcile,' said Lorios. 'We should probably just be glad that they aren't trying to kill each other.'

Hector was more than happy to just listen. He hadn't gotten to know these three very well at all, which might have been why he found it



more difficult to speak to them, compared to Zeff or Diego.

And after that conversation with Emiliana earlier, he supposed he was feeling even more self-conscious than usual. He really didn't want to fuck things up with these people, too.

Though, a strong part of him still didn't feel like he'd fucked up with Emiliana, either. He'd said what he'd wanted to say--and meant it. If she'd gotten mad at that, then, well...

Ugh.

There was one thing he knew for sure, at least. All this time, he'd been absolutely right to be terrified of social interaction."

"1467

~~((The 6 Pages of New Year's + Double Monday = Page 1 of 8))~~

"I am also concerned about what our kin in Capaporo are doing now," said Manuel. "While a part of me is glad that they have not come for us in some haphazard fashion, I am also... surprised that they haven't."

'What do you mean?' said Garovel.

"Think of it," said Manuel. "We are talking about the likes of Darktide, Grayguard, the Yellow Tempest, the Blue Bull, the Lord of the Drowning Sky, and the Lion of the Desert. Knowing what we know of these people, I find it difficult to believe that, even if they did believe us dead, they would not at least come searching for our corpses."

Hector was beginning to notice a pattern with this Manuel fellow.

However, he had not heard a few of those names before. He didn't know who Grayguard or the Yellow Tempest referred to, but the Blue Bull? Given what Hector remembered of the siege of Marshrock, that name could have only belonged to Salvador Delaguna. The man's size alone accounted for the animal, and his cobalt transfiguration power accounted for the color. And the Lord of the Drowning Sky? That was a strange name, but he couldn't imagine that it belonged to anyone other than Dimas Sebolt. That man's aerial mobility was unmatched by any other Rainlord whom Hector had met--arguably any other servant he had met.

“So what are you saying?” said Elise. “Do you believe something is preventing them from coming after us?”

“Possibly,” said Manuel. “It has been nearly three days, yet none of the reapers have sensed them.”

‘I think you are worrying too much,’ said Lorios. ‘They could be searching for us right now and simply having trouble finding us. We fell a long way, remember? Not to mention all the monsters above us right now, making it more difficult to sense anything or anyone specific.’

“That is true,” Manuel admitted. “But even so, I imagine Bloodhound would have been able to locate us by now.”

Okay, who the hell was Bloodhound? Hector wondered if Manuel was just making some of these names up himself.

He did find himself agreeing with Manuel, though. Especially with regard to Asad. After witnessing the lengths that the man had gone to for Zeff back in Sair, Hector doubted that even a nest of giant worms would prevent Asad from coming to help him again.

Oh, hey, maybe that was a way he could contribute to this conversation. He gathered his composure, waited for an opening, and said, “...I don’t think Asad would ever leave Zeff behind.”

“Yes,” said Manuel. “If recent events have proven anything, it is that the Lion and the Dragon care even more for one another than most of us realized.”

Hector couldn’t help smiling meekly beneath his helmet. Social interaction certainly was terrifying, but it wasn’t all bad, either.

He probably shouldn’t have been getting such a strong feeling of accomplishment for making such a minor contribution to the conversation, though, he figured.”

"1468

~~((The 6 Pages of New Year's + Double Monday = Page 2 of 8))~~

Maybe he was just in a weird mood. Somehow, he felt like he was back in school again, attempting the impossible task of making friends with normal people.

After that, Hector wasn't able to speak up much more, but that may have also been the result of the conversation simply not going anywhere else. It was mainly just the Rainlords expressing their worries more, and Hector didn't feel terribly compelled to say anything else, not when it might just further increase that worry.

Unsurprisingly, Garovel did a much better job of trying to comfort them than he could have.

At length, Diego finally arrived, though the Lord Elroy was not with him.

'Where's Zeff?' asked Garovel.

"I explained the situation to him, but he didn't want to stop his work," said Diego. "He's determined to get us out of here as soon as possible and doesn't seem to care about much else, right now."

Hector couldn't say he was surprised.

"Will you explain the situation to us now?" said Elise. "We have been wondering what is going on for some time."

"Of course." Diego took a seat next to Hector. He explained about his encounter with the Hun'Sho named Jasirok and presented the pyramidal key known as a Kag for the group to examine. Then he told them about what he had witnessed.

A period of incredulity passed as the group asked for clarification, of which Diego and Yangéra could unfortunately provide little.

A giant hand appearing from a mirror.

A mirror?

Apparently, Hector wasn't the only one to pick up on that coincidence, because Garovel was the first to ask, 'Was there anything strange about the mirror?'

"Not that we noticed," said Diego. "I didn't think to examine the mirror too closely when I first saw it, but it seemed normal enough. After it happened, though, the mirror shattered instantly. I brought one of the pieces, if you want to see it for yourself." He rifled through his pockets and retrieved a jagged mirror shard.

They passed it around, though Elise was kept away from it, in case it decided to do anything else unexpected. When Hector and Garovel got

their chances to examine it, they didn't see anything particularly notable about it. It certainly didn't have the odd, foggy look to it that Hector recalled the Courier's mirror having.

But maybe that didn't matter. Maybe its power had left it after breaking.

Afterward, the group struggled to figure out their next move.

"It seems obvious enough that we should try to locate whatever lock this Kag goes to," said Diego, "but we have no idea where to start looking. And from the way Jasirok was talking, it sounded like asking the other Hun'Sho for help might be a bad idea."

"I agree," said Elise. "As nice as they have been to us, I simply don't trust them very much. They could decide to hinder our investigation rather than help it."

The three reapers all seemed to concur."

"1469 -- CLVII.

~~((The 6 Pages of New Year's + Double Monday = Page 3 of 8))~~

"What about the Hun'Kui, then?" said Manuel. "They might be able to help us."

"Ah, and I highly doubt they will tell the Hun'Sho of what we are doing," added Elise.

On that point, Hector could agree. And those four Hun'Kui had been through hell with them, so there was at least a modicum of camaraderie to be had. His talk with Eleyo earlier had affirmed him of that much.

Still, he noticed Diego hesitating. And he wasn't the only one who did.

"...Do you not trust the Hun'Kui, Lord Diego?" said Manuel.

"I don't know," the man said. "But I suppose asking for their help would allow us keep an eye on them."

'That's true,' said Yangéra. 'Just don't turn your back on them, everyone. Remember that they're still strangers to us.'

## Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Seven: 'A glimpse of Madness...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Francisco Elroy had to admit, the view from his room was stunning. The Omarest Mountain Range of Dante was known for its skiing even as far away as Sair, and now he could see why. The snow outside his window was unlike anything he'd seen in Agquarey.

Under different circumstances, he might have been able to enjoy visiting this luxurious, mansion-sized cabin in the middle of nowhere.

The question of why the hell he was here in the first place had still not been answered to his satisfaction. He understood that the crazy old guy named Damian Rofal was responsible, but beyond that, not much was clear.

The last thing he remembered before waking up here was fighting a group of Vanguardian jackasses in his school. And now he'd come to find that one of those very jackasses was here with him, not much more aware of what was going on than he was, apparently.

His reaper, Dennex, had advised him not to ask too many questions, however, and Cisco could see the wisdom in that, especially after what Dunstan Rofal, the Vanguardian jackass in question, had told him.

"My family is a bunch of criminals," he'd said. "I suggest you not trust any of them. And my grandfather in particular is... well, he's a lot more dangerous than I ever realized, it would seem."

They'd been here for a couple weeks now, so naturally, Cisco had been trying to find a means of escape--with Dunstan's help, surprisingly. But this place was much more of a prison than it looked. The building's three floors may have had an open-air layout to them, and the furniture may have been as ritzy as Cisco had ever seen, and the food may have even been pretty damn good, but there was some sort of high-level soul net preventing not just the reapers from leaving, but people, too.

From what Cisco had thus far gathered, it had something to do with the tall, rocky spires that stood all around the structure. They looked normal enough at a glance and as of now, were half-buried in snow,

but when he'd touched them a few days ago, he could feel them humming in a way that was most certainly unnatural."

"1469 -- CLVII.

~~((The 6 Pages of New Year's + Double Monday = Page 3 of 8))~~

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"1470

~~((The 6 Pages of New Year's + Double Monday = Page 4 of 8))~~

He'd never even heard of a soul net that could do something like this, but Damian Rofal had been full of such surprises. The old man's pet worms were probably the most notable in that regard. Even the other members of the Rofal family seemed to be uncomfortable around those things.

"Don't worry," Damian had told everyone gathered in the main room, "they don't bite. They will give you a nasty shock, but it probably won't

be enough to kill you. And as long as you stay within the barrier, they'll leave you alone. So just relax, everyone! Everything will be just fine! You'll see!"

The listeners hadn't looked pleased, but none of them had voiced any objections, either--apart from Damian's apparent wife, whose loud and frequent questions the old man never bothered to answer. Instead, Damian would just sidle up to her, give her a quick kiss on the nose or the cheek, and then run away again.

And even knowing what Dunstan had told him, Cisco found it difficult to not feel pity for these people. None of them were servants, as far as Cisco could tell. Criminals or not, they were still normal human beings, trapped here along with him and Dunstan by their insane patriarch.

And no one seemed to know what Damian's plan was, either. Dennex and Rezamaar were going around, eavesdropping on everyone's conversations, but that critical question had remained unanswered.

Damian himself had also been curiously absent, much of the time. Cisco thought the old man might have been going out in order to find and retrieve more family members, but by all accounts, there were none. Dunstan had been the last family member to arrive.

Ultimately, Cisco found himself with an abundance of downtime on his hands. He tried to make use of it as best he could by meditating and practicing with his ability, but he found it difficult to concentrate on such things with so much uncertainty hanging around him. There wasn't any internet or even electricity for that matter, so catching up on the news was also impossible.

And that was perhaps the most worrisome thing.

Whenever he thought about his family, his imagination was left to run wild. From what little Dunstan had been able to tell him, the Vanguard had failed to capture his father or any of his other family members, but the Rainlords as a whole had still been dealt a massive blow.

Cisco wondered when he would see home again. Or if he ever would.

"Up for another game?" came Dunstan's voice.

Cisco turned from the window and saw him standing there, chessboard in hand. Honestly, he wasn't up for it, but there wasn't much else to do, so Cisco just nodded and followed him down the stairs and onto the main floor by one of the cabin's three fireplaces.



At least the extra warmth was nice.

A few of the other Rofals were enjoying it as well. As Cisco recalled, their names were Lucia, Jonah, and Elwood.

Dunstan didn't seem to appreciate their company very much, nor they his."

"1471

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No words were exchanged, but everyone kept throwing glances and glares in Dunstan's direction, and he wasn't shy in returning them, either. Perhaps they were trying to tell him to leave without actually having to tell him, and perhaps he was doing the same.

All in all, it made for an intensely uncomfortable atmosphere.

But not an unfamiliar one.

In fact, after two weeks in this place, Cisco had long since grown weary of this. Maybe Dennex was right and staying totally quiet was the wisest course of action here, but frankly, it was obnoxious. And besides, Cisco had always hated this sort of passive aggression. He much preferred proper confrontation.

"So I hear you're all a bunch of a criminals," said Cisco.

Dunstan just about drowned in the glass of water he was drinking from.

Cisco didn't avert his gaze from the other Rofals, though. He wanted to see their faces, their reactions.

Lucia laughed. Jonah glared. Elwood scowled.

"Is that what Dunc over there told you?" said Elwood. He was a tall man with a gravelly voice and a strong, clean shaven jawline. He was wearing silky red-and-gold pajamas, but that didn't inform Cisco of much, because everyone else was doing the same. There wasn't a whole lot of motivation to get properly dressed when everyone knew they weren't going anywhere. Not to mention, there wasn't much variety of clothing available here, either.

"You shouldn't put too much credence in what that loser says," said Jonah. Compared to Elwood, this guy looked pretty small, though he was probably around average weight and height.

And they all had the same dark hair and thick, arched eyebrows.

"Okay," said Cisco flatly. "So tell me what the truth is, then."

And perhaps they hadn't expected him to say that, because both men paused.

"Elwood here is an illegal arms dealer," said Dunstan, having found his composure again. "And Jonah--well, he's just a loan shark, but he gets his jollies from smacking kids around, probably to vent his frustration over how pathetic he is."

Jonah shot up out of his seat and stomped toward them. "You fuckin' little--!" He backhanded Dunstan hard enough to knock him out of his chair. "Cecilia shoulda taught you some fuckin' manners!"

'Kick his ass, Dunstan!' said Rezamaar, grabbing his shoulder to invoke the servant's vigor.

"That wasn't necessary, Reza," said Dunstan.

"What're you talkin' about, huh, bitch?!" said Jonah. "Get up so I can put your ass down again!"

And Dunstan did get back up.

Having fought Dunstan himself, Cisco knew this wasn't going to be pretty. But at the same time, Dunstan didn't look out of control. He seemed entirely calm. Cisco might have decided to step in, otherwise.

Jonah swung, and Dunstan caught his fist with one hand as if it were a tennis ball. Jonah barely got the chance to look surprised before Dunstan swept one of his legs, shoved him to the floor, and sat on him. He kept Jonah's hand, though, and twisted the wrist a little.

"You little fucker--agh!"

"1472

Dunstan grabbed the man's throat. "Not so tough now, eh, Jonah?" He squeezed. "Remember when you did this exact same thing to one of my friends? Hmm? Made him cry out for his mother, remember? Should I make you do that, too? Your mother's actually in the building, so maybe she'll show up."

Cisco noticed more Rofals coming out of their rooms on the second and third floors in order to see what the commotion was. Lucia had not moved from her curled up position on the couch, and Elwood was on his feet but not moving to help, perhaps because Dunstan was staring right at him while talking to Jonah.

'Nice going,' said Dennex privately.

The reaper had a point, Cisco knew, but he didn't mind this so much. At least it was more interesting than playing another board game.

"Oh, but wait a minute," said Dunstan. "You didn't twist my friend's wrist like this, did you, Jonah? That's my mistake." He let go of Jonah's hand. Then he further tightened his grip on the man's throat. "No, you just put a gun to his head, instead."

Cisco could hear Jonah struggling to breathe.

'You're killing him,' said Dennex publicly.

'Maybe that'd be for the best,' said Rezamaar. She didn't sound like she was joking.

Cisco felt he might need to intervene now and stood. "Stop," he said firmly.

But when Dunstan turned to look over at him, Cisco barely recognized him. The expression on the other young man's face was unlike anything Cisco had yet seen from him during these past two weeks.

Dunstan was smiling. He was enjoying himself.

"Let him go," said Cisco. "Didn't you tell me you weren't like them?"

Dunstan stared back at Cisco for a moment longer before his smile vanished. Then he released Jonah and walked away.

Rezamaar followed after him.

Cisco sat back down and breathed a silent sigh of relief. Maybe he regretted starting that whole thing, after all. Gathering information and amusement was one thing, but almost getting a man killed was quite another.

Not long after that incident, the front door flew open, and Damian Rofal came waltzing into the main room with a number of large shopping bags--several of which, he was not actually carrying. Instead, they hovered in midair around him, not terribly unlike his reaper, Feromas.

"Don't worry, everyone!" the old man said loudly for the whole cabin to hear. "Pappy's back, and he's brought gifts for all his good little boys and girls!"

The table in front of Cisco flew up suddenly and shook the chessboard off of itself, sending its marble pieces clattering across the hardwood floor in dozens of different directions. Then it slammed back down with a wooden thud that made Cisco's chair jump a little.

Damian began setting his many bags down on top of it.

'Was that really necessary?' said Feromas. 'There's a counter right over there, you know.'

"1473

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"Yeah, but how often do you get a chance to flip a table with a game board on it?!" said Damian. "It's a rare and precious opportunity that should be taken advantage of!" He threw Cisco a less-than-apologetic look. "You weren't still playing that were you, Mr. Ellis?"

"I guess not," said Cisco dryly. 'Ellis' had been Dennex's concoction, apparently considering it best not to chance anyone here recognizing the name 'Elroy.'

"I got you a present, too," said Damian. "I figured Dunstan's best friend could be an honorary member of our family, especially since you don't have one of your own."

'Agh, try to have a little more tact,' said Feromas. He turned his skeletal wolf's head toward Cisco. 'Sorry about him.'

"It's fine," said Cisco.

That, too, had been Dennex's doing, the logic being that they didn't want this Damian fellow to go check up on the non-existent Ellis family in an attempt to corroborate their story.

By the time Damian started pulling presents out, the Rofals had all gathered in the main room, even Dunstan and Rezamaar.

"Now, first, we of course have our snow globes," said Damian. He held out one in each hand, shaking them both to make the white flakes in the water begin floating. "When I saw these, I obviously had to buy all of them, so don't be shy now! I have enough for everyone! Go on, everybody take one!"

Despite saying that, Cisco somehow ended up with three globes in his hands. One was of a snowman and a candlestick-man punching each other. Another was of a dragon burning down a snowy village. And the third was of a lion roaring on a snow-capped mountain.

Cisco had no idea where he was supposed to put these.

Then Damian started pulling out firearms. He handed them out like they were candy.

"I was only able to get pistols, but that should be fine for now," said Damian. "They're not loaded, of course, but I'll show you all how to use them later."

"I think most of us here already know how, Father," said a middle-aged woman, who Cisco recalled as being Dunstan's mother, Cecilia.

"Oh, of course you do, sweetheart, but it never hurts to brush up on the basics. Wouldn't want any of you accidentally hurting yourselves. You, especially, Cecilia. I bet you haven't fired one of these since you were little."

"You might be surprised," said Cecilia darkly. "I wanted to be ready, in case you ever visited me again."

Damian gave her an unconcerned look. "And how well did that work out for you?" he said, wide-eyed and smiling.

She just scowled.

"If you're a good girl, maybe I'll tell you how you can actually kill me,

one day!"

'Don't do that,' said Feromas. 'Oh god, please don't do that.'

Cecilia smacked her lips as she inspected her new pistol.

Cisco was surprised to receive a firearm, too. He checked to see if it really wasn't loaded, and indeed, the detachable magazine was empty."

"1474

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"Oh, and I also got some coloring books," said Damian. "I remember how a lot of you guys liked those."

"When we were six, maybe," someone said.

Damian glanced over his audience again. "Okay, maybe I got those for me. I'm just saying--feel free to take advantage of them, if you want. I won't be upset."

Cisco heard Feromas sighing.

"Ooh! And here's the best part!" Damian rummaged through the last few bags and pulled out two armfuls of red leather with black stripes. "Matching jackets! Now we can be like a proper gang! Or a team! Yeah! Team Rofal!"

Cisco had to set his other gifts down in order to receive this one. The back had an elaborate and admittedly impressive design on it--silvery wings burning with red-and-black flames, all placed in front of two giant, menacing eyes, which also carried flames in their pupils.

It also had "C. Ellis" emblazoned on the front. It was even the right size.

And as much as he didn't want to admit it, Cisco actually kind of liked it.

The other Rofals gave various--though not necessarily unreceptive--grumbles as they examined their own jackets.

After that, Damian sat everyone down to explain a few things. Namely, he told them about the existence of reapers and servants. He informed them of the existence of the Vanguard and Abolish, as well as Sai-hee.

Cisco knew all of this already, of course, as did Dunstan, but most of the audience looked like they didn't believe him at all. Until he ripped off his own hand and grew it back right in front of them. Dunstan even spoke up at one point to say that Damian was, in fact, not just being his usual crazy self.

Once the pieces finally started to fall into place for everyone, perhaps realizing previous mysteries in their own lives were suddenly being solved, they began asking questions, chief among them coming from the eldest woman of the group, Damian's wife, a woman that Cisco had yet to get an actual name for, as everyone had just been calling her "Mother" or "Grandma."

"Why in the world have you waited so long to tell us all of this?!" she said, sounding equal parts furious and confused.

"Yeah, sorry about that," said Damian. "I didn't want you guys spreading all this information around and causing a stir. The whole reason I wanted to start this family was to lay low for a while, not draw attention. And let me tell you, it would've been very bad if either the King of the Fairies or the King of the Demons found out about us!"

'Aaand he's gone again,' said Rezamaar, though the Rofals didn't seem to know what to make of it.

Damian looked at the reaper. "I didn't go anywhere. And the Demon King is totally real. He's the Great Deceiver! The Stealer of Hopes and Dreams!"

'Oh, well, excuse me for doubting you,' said Reza. 'And the Fairy King? He's real, too, I take it?'

"Of course! He's the Goody Guardian! The Wings of Judgment!"  
"1475

'I see,' said Rezamaar. 'And are you a king, too?'

Damian paused at that. "No, but perhaps I should be. I've never had a kingdom before, but that was the whole point to all this, wasn't it?

Because now I do!”

Feromas sighed. ‘Please don’t encourage him.’

‘But it’s so much fun,’ said Reza, laughing. ‘I would’ve thought that by now, you’d just roll with it like I am.’

‘Believe me, sometimes I wish I could,’ said Feromas.

“The King of the Humans!” said Damian. “That’s who I’ll be!”

‘That name doesn’t suit you in the slightest,’ said Feromas.

“The Trouble Master! The Builder of Bridges! Aha! That’s me!”

This old guy might have been even crazier than he had realized, Cisco felt.

Dunstan decided to speak up now. “Are you talking about Dozer and Morgunov, Grandpa?”

Cisco blinked, not having made that connection but suddenly seeing how it could make a certain degree of sense out of Damian’s ravings.

“Those two clods? Nah. They’re always a step or two behind. Though, yeah, it definitely would’ve been annoying if they found out I was still alive, too.”

Cisco observed Dunstan’s disappointed face. That had almost been clever. Cisco would’ve believed it.

“Well, anyway,” said Dunstan, “isn’t it about time you explained why the hell you’ve gone so far out of your way to gather us all together like this?”

“It’s a team building exercise!” said Damian. “I thought that would be obvious by now, given the jackets!”

Dunstan eyed his own again. “Yeah, but to what end? Why do you want us to be a team so badly? Hell, I still don’t know how you were even able to find me the way you did.”

“Heh, I have my ways,” said Damian.

‘And by “ways,” he means “associates who can handle all the hard stuff for him,”’ said Feromas.



“Hey, don’t give away my ways!”

Feromas ignored him. ‘Dunstan, the goal here is simple. We’re building a fourth servant empire.’

“No, a kingdom! Not an empire! Weren’t you listening?! I’m a king, not an emperor!”

‘Whatever.’

“You want to build an organization that can take on the Vanguard?” said Dunstan, almost laughing. “That’s great and all, but I think we might need a few thousand more servants on our side.”

“Silly Dunstan. It’s about quality, not quantity. Like my wife here. Sure, I could have like ten more, but even all put together, they wouldn’t be as good as her!”

Cisco and everyone else looked to Grandma, who oddly enough, did swoon a little bit as Damian kissed her on the cheek.

Well. Alright, then.

Cisco supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised. While it was true that she’d been acting normally enough up until now, she had been married to this lunatic for a very long time, presumably. She probably wasn’t a normal person at all, servant or not.

And the same could likely be said of all of these Rofals, Cisco figured.”  
"1476

‘That’s a lovely sentiment,’ said Rezamaar, ‘but we don’t really have quality, either. Aside from yourself, our strongest fighter is my sweet baby Dunstan here. And he still needs time to grow.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Feromas. ‘We’ve got recruitment plans in the works. And we’re also going to do a bit of aberration harvesting. Which reminds me. Damian, why don’t you give everyone their final gift?’

“Right!” said Damian, rummaging through his pockets. He retrieved a fistful of pearly white rings--identical to one he was already wearing, Cisco noticed. “Now, these are only rings, so they’re not as strong as they might otherwise be, but they’ll help keep you safe. And choose

your finger wisely, because once you put it on, it's not coming off unless the finger comes with it. Everybody take one. Come on. Don't be shy now. I made sure there were enough for all of you."

When Cisco received his, he examined it more closely. It had a polished sheen to it on the outside rim, but the inside was much plainer. 'Is that... bone?' thought Cisco.

'I believe so,' said Dennex privately. 'This ring is the remains of an aberration. I can sense its sinister power.'

Cisco watched as everyone else was putting theirs on. 'Should I really wear this?'

'I don't think you have much choice, right now.'

'Ugh...' Cisco frowned as he stared at it. He'd wanted to become an aberration hunter, but was this the end result of that? Or was it just some twisted approximation? Would the Vanguard have made him wear this thing, too?

Maybe so. The Vanguard had certainly demonstrated that it wasn't nearly so noble as he'd hoped it was.

'You can cut your finger off later, if you really hate it that much,' said Dennex.

Cisco took a slow breath and put it on, choosing his middle finger on his right hand. It felt like any other ring would, at first. Then a sharp pain bit into his finger, and he could feel it go all the way to his bone, like it was attaching itself to him.

But there was no blood. And it didn't look like his skin had actually been broken. It just felt like he'd been cut into. But that, too, was fleeting. After a few more moments of agony, the pain was entirely gone.

The others were already manifesting shadows around themselves. A deep and dark red, each one was, which suggested to Cisco that all of these bone rings had come from the same aberration. Though, perhaps not. Surely, there were repeated colors among aberrations. Perhaps they'd all just come from the same type of aberration, assuming there were such classifications.

Regardless, as he began to see the red shadow melt out of his flesh and take form, began to feel its presence in his mind, began to control

and mold it as he wished, Cisco couldn't help feeling entirely disgusted."

"1477 -- CLVIII.

Elwood looked pleased with his new shadowy toy. "So does this mean we'll finally get to leave this place?" he said.

"Hmm," was all Damian said.

"Some of us do have lives of our own, you know," said Lucia.

"Oh, yeah, about that." Damian gave her a toothy smile. "You actually don't, anymore."

Everyone just looked at him.

Lucia was the one to ask, "What does that mean?"

"I've had you all declared dead!"

Cisco heard a few groans.

"Plane crash is the official story," said Damian. "So don't worry. Your friends and associates won't miss you. Well, okay, poor choice of words. They won't be wondering where you are, is what I meant."

"What about the family business?!"

"It's alright," said Damian. "I liquidated all of your assets. Almost all, anyway. A good forty percent or so."

"That is NOT almost all!"

"Eh, it's just money, and we've got more than enough of that already. What's important is that we have each other!"

More groans.

"You've just gotta look on the bright side!" said Damian. "Now you're all free to do as you please! Nothing tying you down!"

"Aside from you, you mean," said Elwood.

"Yes, aside from me. But I know what's best, so that's no big deal,

right? Come on, everybody! Don't look so down! This is the start of a new chapter in all of your lives! The funnest chapter! I'm gonna show you guys all sorts of neat stuff!"

"So does that mean you're going to let us leave after all?" said Elwood.

"Of course I will! Eventually. Maybe a few months from now."

That sparked the loudest chorus of groans yet.

"Just think of it as your important 'bonding time' with one another."

Damian let a beat pass, then set his gaze on Dunstan specifically.

"And if, for whatever reason, you guys don't start bonding soon, then that's fine, too. Rest assured! I won't give up on you! I'll keep you here for however long it takes! Years! Decades, even! I'm very patient!"

Cisco watched Dunstan's expression transform into one of exhaustion.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Eight: 'A search in spirit...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

There were more places to look than Hector realized. While he didn't mind the opportunity to explore Himmekel more, it soon began to feel a bit hopeless, trying to find a keyhole in this giant place. That, of course, was why they had decided to split up during their search, but even still, Hector was left to wonder if they would really be able to find anything like this.

It seemed like the reapers should have been able to locate a hidden room behind a false wall or whatever, but that was not the case, apparently. If there was no soul for them to sense on the other side of said false wall, then the reapers had no way of knowing there was a hidden room there."

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"1478

What was worse, from what Garovel was telling him, there was plenty of ardor in the rocks all over Himmekel, blocking his sight.

And all of that was assuming that the trick of it would be something as simple as a hidden room. Hector wasn’t so sure it would be, not after hearing about someone being pulled into a mirror. It seemed plausible to him that the only way to get wherever they were trying to go was through another mirror.

But what was the Kag for, in that case?

He tried to focus on his task, though. Diego had gone to inspect any other mirrors he could find, which meant entering more Hun’Sho

quarters without alerting any of the other Hun'Sho. And Hector didn't envy that job. He'd never really been one for stealth. Maybe he could ask Roman to give him a few pointers, if they ever actually managed to meet up with the guy again.

And so, as they conducted their meandering search, Hector decided to make use of the downtime as he often did.

'Hey, Garovel.'

'What?' the reaper said privately.

'Is there anything else about the Undercrust you haven't told me?'

'Oh yeah. Tons.'

'No, I mean, like, any really important stuff that you've maybe not mentioned yet? Of the same caliber as lava people existing, for example?'

'Hey, I already told you that I thought they'd gone extinct.'

'Yeah, but even if you'd known they hadn't, would you have told me about them?'

'Of course.'

'You wouldn't have tried to keep it as another one of your surprises?'

Garovel paused. 'Well, who can really say for sure?'

'Garovel.'

'What?!'

'Are there any other big things left to tell me like that?!'

'Probably! The Undercrust has a lot of stuff in it, okay?!'

'Okay, so tell me some of them!'

'Agh! Don't just put it all on me! How about you ask a more specific question instead of making me think of everything, huh?!'

'Just fuckin'... tell me something, Garovel. I don't care what it is.'

'Oh, no, we're not doing that. I see that trap for what it is. I come up

with something I think is super neat and cool. You end up incredibly bored and unimpressed. I end up feeling like a complete tool.'

'I wouldn't--'

'Uh-huh, sure. Now you listen here, Hector. You're my servant, alright? And this an order. Exercise those critical thinking skills of yours and come up with something good.'

'What the hell? You NEVER give me orders. You give instructions and advice, not orders.'

'Yeah, because I'm such a nice guy. You're welcome, by the way. But this time, it's an order. Go on. Consider it a new type of mental training. Critical thinking is hugely important, y'know.'

'Ugh, fine. Where do you think the Hun'Sho came from?'

'Well, I--hey, you came up with that way too quickly.'

'Well, I already had it in mind.'

'You were supposed to think long and hard before asking something. That's why it's called critical thinking. You're supposed to think about it as if your life depends on it.'

'But my life DOESN'T depend on it.'

'That's beside the point.'

'Would you please just answer the question, already? You're being even more obnoxious than usual.'"

"1479

'Where do I think the Hun'Sho came from?' said Garovel. 'What do you even mean by that? Be more specific, dammit.'

Hector stopped to rethink his question. 'I mean, like... well, okay, uh... Are they even considered human?'

'Ah. That's a question of some historical significance, actually. While I personally consider them to be human, I've known quite a number of people who would say otherwise.'



‘But... like... biologically, I mean. They’re so different from us. And, just... I mean, how did they become like that? They used to be normal, didn’t they? Or were WE the ones that changed?’

‘No, no, the Hun’Sho were definitely the ones who changed. It was just a very, VERY early instance of a successful mutation user. So early, in fact, that when it happened, most of us had no idea what it was. So you see, it’s not all that surprising that it came to be interpreted as the work of a god. Because at the time... it kinda was. In a sense.’

‘...How do you know all that, though? I mean, did you know the original Hun’Sho mutant yourself? And like, how were they able to use mutation in order to fuse ardor into their body like that?’

‘Alright, ease up with the interrogation, Detective Goffe. I can’t claim to have all the answers when it comes to this stuff. No, I did not personally know the mutation user who gave rise to the Hun’Sho, but it is widely known about in the reaper community.’

‘But doesn’t that mean it really could’ve been Avar or whoever?’

‘Oh, don’t start with that. The reaper community used to be very close with the Hun’Sho, because they could see and even talk to us, unlike basically every other race in the world.’

‘Wait. “Basically” every other race? Does that mean there ARE others?’

‘Well, there are the forest people of Jaskadan. They’re pretty friggin’ weird, too.’

‘Forest people?’ said Hector. ‘Like with plants growing out of their bodies or something?’

‘More or less, yeah.’

‘...And you think those people were the result of some ancient mutation user, too?’

‘Sure do.’

‘...Even though our understanding of mutation back then was really shitty?’

‘You’re not wrong about that, but the thing is, historically speaking, wildly exceptional servants have always existed. People who were so

far ahead of their time that it almost defies belief. The builder of Warrenhold was one such example, you may recall.'

Hector did recall. 'Stasya.'

'That's right. Is it so unthinkable that someone managed to wield mutation as skillfully as she wielded integration? Someone who figured it out long before the rest of us did?'

'Why wouldn't they have shared that knowledge, then?'

'Any number of reasons. Maybe they thought it would be dangerous. Maybe they were just greedy. Hell, maybe no one wanted to listen. You have to remember that mutation users were often treated like they were either diseased or just monsters.'

'Hmm.'"

"1480

'Alternatively, it's possible that even the successful mutation users themselves didn't understand their own power well enough to be able to explain to anyone else. I've heard about that happening among their kind. Accidental breakthroughs and such.'

'...Then, isn't it possible that Avar himself was just a really powerful servant?'

'Of course.'

'So you agree that Avar could've actually existed, then?'

'In some form, sure. But not as a true god.'

Hector was abruptly reminded of his conversation with Eleyo. 'What would you consider to be a "true god," in that case?'

'As in, an otherworldly being with untold knowledge and power. Descended from a higher plane of existence, perhaps.'

'So you don't think Rasalased is a true god?'

'No. Powerful as he was--or IS, I guess--he still has pretty obvious limitations. Otherwise, he would've put a stop to that fight at Dunehall

himself, don't you think?'

That was a pretty good point, Hector felt. But still, he wanted to keep prodding. 'So... a god can't have limitations?'

'Mm,' said Garovel. 'That's pretty much my whole problem with the term "god" in a nutshell right there. It's unscientific and not well-defined. By certain standards, I'm sure Sermung could be considered a god. But so what? What does labeling him tell us? That he's just really powerful? We already know that. If anything, all it would do is build up a weird, cult-like mystique around the guy--which is something I would find extremely dangerous and intensely creepy.'

'Hmm...' Hector was running out of arguments. 'I guess you're right...'

Garovel laughed. 'You sound so disappointed. Do you really want true gods to exist that badly?'

'Ah... I don't know if I'd say that I WANT them to. But I'm just... trying to keep an open mind, I guess.'

'Given the many, many fables I've heard about all these gods over the years, I'm quite glad that they don't exist, myself.'

'Really? There's not even ONE god you like?'

'Oh, sure. There are several I "like," as fictional characters. But I certainly wouldn't "like" it if they were running around out there, doing all sorts of crazy shit all the time.'

'Hmm. Who's your favorite god, then?'

Garovel hesitated. 'From a purely fictional standpoint, you mean?'

'Of course.'

'...Well, I'm quite partial to Cocora, I suppose.'

Hector blinked inside his helmet. 'Really? I... I wouldn't have guessed that.'

'Why not?'

'I... I don't know. I mean, why is she your favorite?'

'Mm, I guess I just find the whole "purity" and "goodness" shtick to be pretty appealing. In her stories, she's always very compassionate and

so forth.'

'Huh.'

'Why do you keep sounding so surprised?'

'I just... I didn't picture you as a fanboy for the Goddess of Light.'

"'Fanboy?'" Really, Hector?'

'It's okay, Garovel. I understand.'

'Oh, you do, huh?'

'Hey, is that the real reason why you decided to go to Atreya originally? So you could hang out with all the other Cocora lovers?'"  
"1481

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'Atreya isn't the only place where people worship her, y'know,' said Garovel. 'She's been popular all over Eloa for thousands of years, especially during the peak of the Mohssian Empire. In fact, I'd say that was one of the major reasons why the Rainlords never really got along with the rest of the Empire very much. They refused to let go of Lhutwë and accept Cocora into their hearts like everybody else was doing.'

'Yeah, that sounds like the Rainlords alright.'

'Hector, why are you so interested in gods all of a sudden?'

'N-no reason.'

'You hesitated. That means you're lying.'

'N-no, it doesn't. I do that shit all the time. I can't help it.'

'Yeah, I don't believe you,' said Garovel. 'And if you're lying to me, then I'm guessing that it's because you're planning to do something that you know I won't like.'

'I... ah...'

'Something to do with gods, obviously.'

‘Now who’s the detective? Sheesh.’

‘Just tell me what it is and save me the trouble of guessing.’

Hector considered it briefly. ‘I thought you liked guessing games.’

‘You’re gonna be like that, are you? Alright, fine, I’ll play.’

‘You get three guesses,’ said Hector.

‘Oh, you’re giving me a hard limit? Seems a bit unfair.’

‘Wouldn’t be much of a game if I didn’t. If I let you have all the guesses you want, then you can’t lose. There would be no stakes.’

‘Heh, stakes, huh? This is getting serious, now. What do I get if I win, then?’

‘Hmm. What do you want?’

Garovel fell silent as he mulled it over. ‘I want you to ask Lynn out on a date the next time you see her.’

Hector stopped walking for a second to look at Garovel. ‘Well, so much for that game, then. You’re right, Garovel. We should just concentrate on finding that keyhole.’

‘Okay, okay, just hold on,’ the reaper said in hurry. ‘That was too much. Fine. I don’t want you to ask her out on a date. Instead, I just want you to give her a compliment.’ After a beat, he added, ‘Intentionally, that is. Accidental compliments don’t count.’

Hector took some time to deliberate, frowning inside his helmet as he tried to imagine it. ‘How...? I... agh, so I’m supposed to just shoehorn a random compliment into a conversation with her out of nowhere?’

‘Doesn’t have to be out of nowhere,’ said Garovel. ‘I’m sure you could figure out a sneaky way to work up to it. I’ve got faith in you, buddy.’

Hector grumbled to himself, wanting to call the game off again but not seeing much justification for it this time.

‘C’mon,’ said Garovel. ‘If you can talk Ivan down from killing everyone, then I’m pretty sure you can at least pay Lynn a compliment.’

Hector scowled. ‘Only if you win. You’ve gotta guess right, first.’

‘Of course. And for my first guess--’

‘Hold on. What do I get if I win?’”

"1482

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That gave the reaper pause. ‘What do you want?’

Hector already had something in mind. ‘I want... you to tell me more about your past.’

Garovel met his gaze evenly for a moment. ‘My past, huh?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Could you narrow it down a little? I’ve got more than three thousand years’ worth, remember?’

‘Hmm.’ Hector folded his armored arms. ‘Alright. Then I want you to tell me something that you’ve never told any of your previous servants before.’

Garovel was quiet again.

‘And it has to be something significant, too,’ Hector added. ‘Not like... just a story about how you once ate a nice meal and went to sleep or some bullshit like that.’

‘...Alright,’ said Garovel. ‘I can agree to that.’

‘Okay, then.’

‘It looks like we’ve got ourselves a game.’

‘Yeah, it does.’

A briefly heavy intermission passed as they stared at one another, letting the ambient hissing and rumbling of Himmekel fill the air.

Hector had to break the silence for a confession, however. ‘...With all this build up, though, I’ve kinda forgotten what the game was even about.’

‘I have to guess what it is that you’re obviously trying to hide from me.’

‘...I’m trying to hide something from you?’

‘Yes! Something to do with your sudden interest in gods! Don’t try to act all innocent now, Hector! It won’t work!’

‘Oh, right, yeah. I remember what it was now. Sorry.’

‘Yeah, right. You’re a sneaky little bastard, you know that?’

‘Shut up and take your three guesses already.’

‘Alright, I will! For my first guess... I’m gonna say that you’re thinking of converting to a religion. And the reason you’ve been keeping it from me is because you think I’ll disapprove. Which I probably will, but that’s beside the point.’

‘Wrong.’

‘What?! Bullshit! You know this game doesn’t work if you lie, right?!’

‘I’m not lying, Garovel. I haven’t been thinking about converting to any religion.’

‘Then what the--? Gah... Fine. Hmm. For my second guess... I’ll say... you’re planning some sort of religious surprise party.’

Hector squinted. ‘...What the hell is a “religious surprise party?”’

‘Like a... celebration of something religious, I guess?’ said Garovel.

‘Isn’t that a little vague? I mean, it’s still wrong as fuck, but shouldn’t these guesses be more specific? I feel like it’s cheating if you can just say shit that’s too generalized or whatever.’

‘Oh, shut up. I’m on my last guess here.’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘Ugh...’

‘Don’t cheat now,’ said Hector.

‘Fuck yourself.’

Hector just laughed.

‘Alright, then,’ said Garovel. ‘Final guess. Hmm... What would you be trying to hide from me? Agh... shit. I’ll be honest. I really thought it was that first thing. Goddammit, Hector.’

‘Don’t look at me like that. You’re not getting any sympathy from me. There is some real shit on the line here.’

‘You’re a dick.’

‘And you’re a jackass.’”

"1483

‘Fine,’ said Garovel. ‘For my third guess... I’m gonna say that... uh... you... you plan on starting your own religion.’

Hector snorted into a full laugh. ‘Holy crap, no. Wow, Garovel...’

‘You’re gonna call it Hectorism. And you’re gonna use it to teach people all about the many types of dicketry that you’ve become a master of.’

‘This means I win the game.’

‘People will come from all over the world to learn about what a complete dick you are. I imagine you’ll have many followers, all trying to achieve the same pinnacle of dickness that you have.’

‘Are you done?’

‘I dunno. Are you sure you weren’t spouting a bunch of bullshit?’

‘What?’

‘I’ll concede my loss here, but now you’ve gotta prove that I really did lose. You have to tell me the truth about what you’re trying to keep from me.’

‘Oh. Hmm. Alright.’

‘Heh. You’re gonna tell me just like that? I thought you’d be more reluctant, considering what a big deal you made out of this whole thing.’



Hector saw his chance for a killing blow and decided to take it. 'It's fine. I kinda hate keeping secrets from you, anyway.'

Garovel fell quiet again.

Hector just waited, not sure what to think now.

'Hector, that was... That was sudden. And unfair. Right in my nonexistent heart.'

'You do that shit to me all the time,' said Hector. 'We'll be talking all normal or whatever, then you'll get super sincere and nice on me out of nowhere. And I'll get self-conscious and feel weird.'

'Yeah, but I'm allowed to do that to you, because I'm such a sincere and wonderful guy in general. I'm just being my natural, charismatic self. You can't take such a pure thing and... and weaponize it against me like that.'

"Weaponize it?" laughed Hector. 'Wow.'

'It's like a friendliness bomb. Which is too much power for one man, clearly.'

'Alright, whatever. We're getting sidetracked.'

'So tell me your secret already, then. I'm waiting.'

'It's nothing major,' said Hector. 'I was just planning on building some religious shrines once we get back to Warrenhold.'

'Wait a minute, what?' said Garovel. 'Religious shrines?'

Hector heard the surprise in Garovel's voice and hesitated somewhat. 'Yeah?'

'...What for? You said you weren't planning to convert to any religion, right?'

'They wouldn't be for me,' said Hector. 'They'd be for the Rainlords, mainly. But I'd also like to include some shrines for other religions as well.'

'Hold on. So you're telling me... you're gonna build these shrines as a gift to the Rainlords, and what? Keep the shrines a secret so that you can reveal them with one big celebration?'

‘Uh... maybe. I don’t know how I want to do it yet. Why do you ask?’

‘Because! Don’t you see?! That means my second guess was actually right! You ARE planning a religious surprise party!’

‘What?!’

"1484

‘You made me feel like an asshole for saying that, too! And I was right the whole time! You’re a cheater, y’know that?!’

‘A religious surprise party is not a real thing, Garovel! And a shrine is not a party!’

‘It could be! Depends on how you spin it!’

Hector was lost for words.

‘The nerve of this guy,’ huffed Garovel. ‘And to think, you even tried to make me feel like I was cheating, didn’t you? Was that because you knew that you were the one who was cheating all along?’

‘I wasn’t cheating.’

‘Seriously, how could you do such a thing?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Hector, this is a betrayal of the highest order.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘I’m speechless.’

‘Oh, I wish you were.’

‘Y’know what? I take back all the nice things I said about you just now.’

‘You didn’t say any nice things about me.’

‘Well, maybe I was thinking them, then. I take back those thoughts.’

‘Okay? Ouch, I guess.’

'I'm glad you understand.' The reaper drifted over to the side of Hector's field of view. 'By the way, what made you want to build a bunch of religious shrines in Warrenhold?'

'Oh, uh... well, I've kinda been thinking about it for a while, really. Pretty much since we first got there, actually.'

'Why?'

'It was just, uh... Some of those rooms that we saw. They were in total ruins, but they looked like they used to be really pretty. The rainbow shrines in particular. I guess, ah... I guess ever since I saw those, I've been wondering what those shrines were actually used for. Because, I mean, all eight of Warrenhold's towers have one, so they were probably pretty important to someone, right?'

'Rainbow shrines...?'

Hector blinked. 'Do you not remember them?'

'Um. Sure I do. They were--ah--very colorful, weren't they?'

Hector laughed. 'You really don't remember?'

'Kind of? Not really.'

'Wow. This is the first time I've remembered something that you didn't.'

'Alright, don't get all cocky. Your little shrines probably just didn't impress me enough to make me remember them, is all.'

'I see.'

'Anyway, I don't think a shrine of the Rainlords' water god is typically supposed to be rainbow-colored. So are you gonna completely tear the shrines down and rebuild them?'

'Might have to, considering how destroyed they were. I'd kinda like to preserve the rainbow coloring, though, if I can. It seems like it could have some historical significance or something.'

'Hmm, maybe.'

'Do you know of any religion that used rainbow-colored shrines?'

'Can't say that I do. But that coloration might be all the clue we need. Perhaps Stasya built those shrines as a tribute to ALL religions, not

just one.'

'I was thinking that, too, actually. It would make sense with what Voreese said about Stasya wanting Warrenhold to become a center of trade between the surface and the Undercrust. She could've wanted those shrines to be welcoming of all different faiths.'

'Well. The ones that can get along with one another, at least.'"  
"1485

'Yeah, I suppose that could be a problem,' said Hector. 'And that reminds me, um... Well, maybe I should've asked this a long time ago, but does Abolish have, like, an official religion?'

'They have at least two, actually.'

'...What do you mean "at least?"'

'Well, the essential split is between the Morgunov faction and the Dozer faction, as you would expect. But each side also has its own degrees of extremism. So extreme, in fact, that they become almost unrecognizable from one another.'

'I don't, uh...? Give me an example.'

'Okay. On Dozer's side of things, the religion is called "Nualism"--or "the Way of None." It's rather grim, from what I've been hearing, but the variation in it comes from differing interpretations of "the Void's will."'

'The Void is like their god?'

'More or less. I think they'd tell you that the Void is actually not a god and instead just a silent, collective consciousness inside all of us, but I'm digressing again. Point is, the followers of Nualism are disagreeing about what they think the Void wants them to do.'

'In what way, though? Can I get some specifics?'

'Specifically... in regard to the killing of children.'

Hector stopped walking in order to look at Garovel. 'Oh...'

'I did say it was grim.'

'Yes, you did.' He looked out over the stone railing of the bridge he was on and absorbed the glimmering view of Himmekel for a moment. So far, this hunt for a keyhole hadn't been turning up much, and as he observed the branching pathway ahead of him, as well as the half-dozen bridges both above and below, he couldn't help feeling like it was pointless to keep searching.

But oh well. He decided to pick the center path and kept walking, trying to make sure that he was still paying attention to everything he was seeing while talking to Garovel.

'So,' Hector went on, 'does that mean that some of the... Nualists or whatever are actually against killing kids?'

'Yeah.'

'That's... good, isn't it?'

'Sure. Y'know, apart from all the ones who AREN'T against it, that is.'

'Ah--but they're fighting each other over it, right?'

'Mm, I dunno if they're actually "fighting." I just know they're disagreeing enough to consider themselves not part of the same religion.'

'Huh...'

'Degrees of extremism, like I said.'

'Right...'

'There are a lot more deviations like that, supposedly. More than I previously thought there were, even. I've been learning quite a lot about Abolish recently, thanks in no small part to all of the reapers I've been able to talk to during our travels.'

'Oh yeah. I always see you guys grouping up and talking to each other.'

'You make it sound like we don't want you involved in our conversations. You're always welcome to come listen, y'know.'

'I try to. It's just, I mean--you guys go on forever. It's hard to pay attention for that long.'"

'Ah,' said Garovel. 'What can I say? Talking is kind of all we've got goin' for us, so yeah, reapers tend to "overdevelop" our conversational skills a bit. It's one of the reasons why I said we're good liars. We get a lot of practice in.'

'Hmm.'

'In fact, that's a good rule of thumb for you: whenever you meet new reapers, expect them to talk a lot, and be wary of those who don't. There are really only three types of reapers who don't talk much. The young, the crazy, and the ones with a lot to hide.'

'Huh...'

'At our age, if you don't talk, the inevitable boredom will drive you crazy. And that may sound like an exaggeration, but it's not. Talking is an important coping mechanism for us.'

'That... explains a few things, I guess.'

'Someone like Tenebrach, though--he's an example of the third type. Of course, I only met him the one time, but he didn't talk much. As expected. A guy like that SHOULD have a lot to hide. It'd be weird if he didn't.'

'Wait, who are you talking about?'

'Tenebrach. Sermung's reaper.'

'Oh. Right.'

'But anyway, I've digressed from what I was talking about before.'

'Abolish's religions.'

'Right. The variation in Abolish's beliefs has been growing rather rapidly in recent years. According to the Rainlords, it's even gotten to the point where Abolish has become this weird melting pot of personality cults.'

'You mean for more than just Morgunov and Dozer?'

‘Yes. Apparently, there’s also been some very divisive rhetoric going around within their ranks. There’ve even been rumblings about a secret group of Abolish reformists. Though, maybe they’re not so secret anymore, if we’re hearing about them now.’

‘Is that... good? Because it sounds kinda good.’

‘Possibly. I mean, it sure would be nice if Abolish stopped going around trying to kill as many people as they can. But I don’t have confirmation that this reformist faction is actually trying to achieve that. And honestly, I doubt it is. More than likely, all this reformist stuff is just the result of a simple power struggle.’

‘Hmm. Politics isn’t exactly my strong suit...’

‘Well, you’re a lord now, so you better learn quickly.’

‘Ugh...’

‘A power struggle would also be pretty insane, though--especially now. Maybe not as ""simple"" a matter as I just suggested, now that I think about it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Morgunov and Dozer have been in power for close to three hundred years. And it’s not like no one’s been trying to take it from them. The gap in strength between them and everyone else is gigantic. So how would you go about trying to bridge that gap?’

‘Uh...’

‘At this point, if you’re a member of Abolish, and you want to seize control of it for yourself, the most obvious plan is to just wait for the Vanguard to kill one of them for you.’

‘I guess so. But if your plan is obvious, then it probably sucks.’

‘Exactly.’”

"1487

Hector wasn’t quite sure what the reaper meant. ‘So, what? You’re

saying... someone in Abolish actually has a smart plan for overthrowing their own boss?’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that,’ said Garovel. ‘Maybe it’s a good plan. Maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s not a plan at all, and I’m completely misreading everything. All I’m really saying is that I think something big is happening within Abolish right now. Something that could threaten the status quo--or dare I say, even destroy it.’

‘You sound surprisingly optimistic.’

‘Is it so surprising, though? Abolish has been getting its ass handed to it, lately. You heard the news about Jackson taking down not just one, but TWO of Abolish’s biggest threats, didn’t you?’

Hector certainly did. He recalled Asad’s sister going around and telling everyone. ‘The Star of the West. Wonder what he’s like.’

‘I’ve heard nothing but good things about him. And now it sounds like he’s the de facto second-in-command for the Vanguard.’

‘I wonder what he would think of this whole Rainlord situation.’

‘Assuming he knew the whole story? Tough to say. But even then, I doubt he would side against the Vanguard.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Whatever the case, Abolish is gonna have a hard time dealing with him.’ Garovel broke for a laugh. ‘And YOU, apparently. Lest we forget how you made Abolish eat shit AGAIN when you took down Ivan.’

‘I definitely did NOT take him down.’

‘Completely on your own. No help needed. Made him look like a punk bitch.’

Hector sighed but couldn’t help laughing just a little.

‘At least, that’s what I’ve been telling everyone,’ said Garovel.

Hector’s eyes widened at the mere thought of that. ‘You’re just joking, right?!’

‘I am. Calm down. Hilarious as that would be, I don’t think I’d be laughing when Morgunov himself showed up to take revenge on you.’



‘Ugh...’

Hector turned a corner and found himself in an apparent park. It was small, but there was a walled off pool of lava in the middle with a tall, sharp monument rising out of it like a rocky needle. The area also boasted a cliffside view of Himmekel to Hector’s right, along with a few stone benches where a handful of Hun’Sho were seated.

Someone else was with them, Hector noticed as he got closer. Someone in a climate-controlled suit.

“--like you wouldn’t believe!” came a familiarly deep voice. “Why, in six months’ time, I could have quarterly shipments arriving here all the way from Boregard! There would be no need to leave! I could bring the wonders of the surface world directly to you! Convenience at its finest!”

“Boregard is the name of your homeland?” said one of the Hun’Sho.

“My hometown, actually,” said Mr. Robert Sheridan. “My homeland is a place called Intar. Quite lovely this time of year, if you can get used to the clamor. It’s the center of the world, you know! Busiest country on the planet! And the most productive, when accounting for quality.”

"1488

“Do you have many books in Intar?” said another of the Hun’Sho.

“Of course!” said Mr. Sheridan. “Though, ours are typically quite fragile--and flammable, specifically--so it would be quite the trick to transport them safely here to you, but for the right price, I think we can--ah! Hector! My young friend! What are you doing standing over there all by yourself?” Mr. Sheridan smiled wide and waved him over as he looked across his audience again. “Have I told any of you fine folks yet about how this young man saved my bacon?”

“Bacon?”

“What is bacon?”

“My life!” the man clarified. “He saved my life!”

“Ah, so bacon is life.”

“Yet another strange new Mohssian word. How interesting.”

"No, I didn't mean--! Ah--shoot! Uh--!"

Hector listened as Mr. Sheridan tried to clarify even further, but it didn't seem to go very well for him, and at length, the man gave up and addressed Hector again.

"How are you finding Himmekel? It is a majestic place, no?"

"Uh--yeah." Hector decided against telling him about the current quest to find a keyhole. Even assuming Mr. Sheridan could be trusted, there were too many Hun'Sho around who would overhear. "What are you doing here, by the way?"

"Oh, just enjoying some of the finest company that Himmekel has to offer!"

Hector would've given the man a dubious look if his helmet wasn't in the way. "Are you really trying to sell stuff to the Hun'Sho?"

"Aha. You overheard that, did you? Well, what can I say? I am an enterprising man. I hope you will not think less of me for it, because I do not plan to change any time soon!"

The man's sheer enthusiasm took Hector by surprise and pulled a small laugh out of him. "S-sure," said Hector, "but, uh--I mean, do these guys even have anything to pay you with?" He threw a quick look over the Hun'Sho listeners. "Um, no offense."

They merely returned curious expressions.

"Oh, don't be silly," said Mr. Sheridan. "Wealth is relative, and payment does not require currency. I'm sure these fine gentleman and I can reach an accord with just a bit of amicable appraisal and negotiation. Why, just a couple years ago, I made an arrangement to have fresh fish shipped all the way to a tiny little village that had nothing to its name but dirt. Dirt, I tell you! But am I sore about how that deal ended up? No sirree Bob! In fact, I'm more than pleased! And this other time, I arranged to have--"

'He's definitely planning to rip them off,' said Garovel privately.

Hector was getting that impression, too. 'Wouldn't that mean he's already got his eye on something?'

'It sure would. We need to talk to him alone. See if we can get any

useful info out of him.'

'Okay.'

And it took a while, but at length, Hector managed to wrest the man away from the Hun'Sho--or free them from him. Hector wasn't quite sure which."

"1489

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They moved to the edge of the park, where they could speak in private while overlooking much of Himmekel. There was a decent view of the lavafall here, blocked only by a couple of the Vault's many black bridges.

"Hoo boy, these Hun'Sho are somethin' else," said Mr. Sheridan. "When I tell the folks back home about these people, they'll flip. Or call me crazy. Probably the latter, actually, unless I'm able to bring proof with me."

Hector wasn't terribly interested in that subject, but he did see a way for it to lead into the subject which did interest him. "...Do you have some kind of proof in mind?"

"One of the Hun'Sho themselves would be best, obviously, but they don't seem too interested in leaving. Real shame. So I was thinking maybe that monument over there would be a good substitute. Only problem is how I would transport it all the way back up to the surface." He motioned toward the pointy stone that Hector had seen earlier.

"Why?" said Hector. "What would a rock prove?"

Mr. Sheridan gave him a smirk. "That ain't no normal rock, son. I don't rightly know what it is, but I know a shot from my lovely little .38 right here didn't leave so much as a scratch on it." He produced a handgun from the pouch on the side of his hip and gave it a showy twirl. "And this baby packs quite the extra kick, if you know what I'm sayin'."

Hector did. But he had a different question. "...Why were you shooting the monument?"

"Oh, it wasn't me. It was Hermeios. Those nice fellas were all curious

about my weaponry, and I always love opening new minds to the wonderful world of advanced personal protection technology.”

“Right...”

“And credit where credit is due--the guy hit that monument dead on. Seemed like a real natural. Maybe a bit too eager, but I made sure to impart the importance of good trigger discipline.”

“...You weren’t concerned about letting a stranger hold your gun?”

“Not as long as I got my back up.” He returned the gun to his pouch and pulled out a second, slightly larger one. “Though, I wouldn’t call them strangers, exactly, either. I’ve gotten to know Hermeios pretty well, these past couple days. Swell guy. Real understandin’ and SO polite.”

Hector saw Garovel drifting toward the monument and decided to follow.

The reaper inspected it up and down. He pressed a skeletal hand against it. ‘I can’t phase through it.’

Hector was inspecting it now, too--though he had to keep a greater distance because of the pool of lava in the way. He scanned the rock for some sort of hole or indentation--anything that seemed like it might be related to the Kag--but he saw nothing. Just flat, smooth stone.

Well. Actually, no. Not perfectly smooth, Hector eventually noticed.”

"1490 -- CLIX.

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There was a maze-like etching all over the body of the monument. The marks were so faint that even with the light being emitted by the pool of lava directly below, they were still almost invisible to the naked eye.

Mr. Sheridan was talking again, but Hector wasn’t listening.

‘What are these marks?’ he asked Garovel.

‘...They’re a signature,’ the reaper said privately. ‘Rathmore put them

on all of his works.'

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Nine: 'Pursue thine bounty...'

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Their inspection continued for a while longer, but they had nothing to show for it. Despite Garovel's assessment, they found no apparent means of doing anything with the monument. No keyhole. No mechanism of any kind.

And though the reaper clearly did not wish to, they eventually decided to go meet up with Diego and tell him what they had discovered. He was the one in possession of the Kag, after all.

However, Garovel decided not to bring up Rathmore's name. As far as everyone else was concerned, it was just a strange monument of entirely unknown origin.

And indeed, it really was almost everyone else. They ended up bringing more than just Diego back to the park with them. Manuel, Lorios, Elise, Carver, Mr. Sheridan, and all four of the Hun'Kui came along as well. Only Zeff and Axiolis were left out, which seemed a bit of a shame, but the consensus in the group was that Zeff wouldn't come with them even if they went to go ask him.

Diego walked around the monument several times, rolling the Kag between his hands all the while, breaking only to scratch his chin or his temple intermittently.

'So?' said Yangéra. 'What're you thinking?'

Diego crouched down in front of the molten pool, then looked over at the reapers. "You guys really can't tell me anything else about this thing?"

The reapers all shook their heads.

Hector wondered if Garovel's choice of secrecy was truly the right one, but he figured he would just trust his judgment for now.

"Hmm." Diego smacked his lips. "Hey, Hector. C'mere for a sec."

A bit confused and curious, Hector ventured over and crouched down beside the man, in front of the pool.

“...Think you can safely move all this lava for me?” said Diego quietly.

Hector blinked. “Hmm...”

“I’d do it myself, but it’d probably be easier for a materializer,” said Diego.

“Ah... alright.” Hector rubbed his gauntleted hands together, gathering his concentration.

He’d never tried to materialize anything inside lava before, but as he feared, it proved impossible. It was still too close to a solid, it seemed, and therefore too dense for his iron molecules to accumulate. Pushing all the lava out on a simple platform would not work. He would have to be a bit more creative.

He started by adding iron to the stone wall that already existed around the pool, and from there, he began growing his material downward and into the lava.”

"1490 -- CLIX.

((Double Monday -- Page 2 of 2))

There was a maze-like etching all over the body of the monument. The marks were so faint that even with the light being emitted by the pool of lava directly below, they were still almost invisible to the naked eye.

Mr. Sheridan was talking again, but Hector wasn’t listening.

‘What are these marks?’ he asked Garovel.

‘...They’re a signature,’ the reaper said privately. ‘Rathmore put them on all of his works.’

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Nine: ‘Pursue thine bounty...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Their inspection continued for a while longer, but they had nothing to show for it. Despite Garovel’s assessment, they found no apparent means of doing anything with the monument. No keyhole. No

mechanism of any kind.

And though the reaper clearly did not wish to, they eventually decided to go meet up with Diego and tell him what they had discovered. He was the one in possession of the Kag, after all.

However, Garovel decided not to bring up Rathmore's name. As far as everyone else was concerned, it was just a strange monument of entirely unknown origin.

And indeed, it really was almost everyone else. They ended up bringing more than just Diego back to the park with them. Manuel, Lorios, Elise, Carver, Mr. Sheridan, and all four of the Hun'Kui came along as well. Only Zeff and Axiolis were left out, which seemed a bit of a shame, but the consensus in the group was that Zeff wouldn't come with them even if they went to go ask him.

Diego walked around the monument several times, rolling the Kag between his hands all the while, breaking only to scratch his chin or his temple intermittently.

'So?' said Yangéra. 'What're you thinking?'

Diego crouched down in front of the molten pool, then looked over at the reapers. "You guys really can't tell me anything else about this thing?"

The reapers all shook their heads.

Hector wondered if Garovel's choice of secrecy was truly the right one, but he figured he would just trust his judgment for now.

"Hmm." Diego smacked his lips. "Hey, Hector. C'mere for a sec."

A bit confused and curious, Hector ventured over and crouched down beside the man, in front of the pool.

"...Think you can safely move all this lava for me?" said Diego quietly.

Hector blinked. "Hmm..."

"I'd do it myself, but it'd probably be easier for a materializer," said Diego.

"Ah... alright." Hector rubbed his gauntleted hands together, gathering his concentration.

He'd never tried to materialize anything inside lava before, but as he feared, it proved impossible. It was still too close to a solid, it seemed, and therefore too dense for his iron molecules to accumulate. Pushing all the lava out on a simple platform would not work. He would have to be a bit more creative.

He started by adding iron to the stone wall that already existed around the pool, and from there, he began growing his material downward and into the lava."

"1491

Fortunately, Hector knew from the research he did all the way back in Atreya that the melting point of iron was around fifteen hundred degrees Celsius, and this magma didn't seem to be quite that hot. Less fortunately, it was still hot enough to make control of his iron more difficult, causing it to weaken and bend against Hector's wishes. Temperature manipulation helped, as expected, but he had to work quickly, because as per the First Law of Materialization, once his iron was created, he could no longer affect its temperature.

He grew his iron all the way to the bottom of the pool and then began making his platform in order to lift it all out. He created a funnel for it so that the magma could safely spill over to exactly where he wanted it to, and soon enough, he'd moved the entire pool into a large iron tub.

There'd been more magma there than perhaps anyone had expected, and once Hector annihilated all of his excess iron, he and Diego were both able to jump down into the now-empty moat around the monument.

"Hah!" came the exultation from Diego, and Hector looked over to see the man crouched down again, examining the bottom of the moat with a lamp in hand. "I do believe we've found our keyhole, boys and girls."

Even now, Hector almost couldn't see what the man was talking about. The keyhole in question blended into the dark rock so well as to be nearly invisible.

Diego readied the Kag with his right hand, then threw one last look up at all the faces staring down at the two of them. "I hope you won't think less of me, but if it turns out that this Kag actually doesn't fit in this little hole here, then I may need one of you to hold me while I have myself a



good cry.”

‘Just hurry up and get on with it,’ said Yangéra.

Diego exhaled audibly. “Okay, here goes.”

He slid the Kag into place, and it appeared to fit.

But nothing happened.

‘Try turning it counterclockwise,’ said Garovel.

With noticeable strain and using both hands, Diego did so.

A deep shunk rang out, and Hector felt a sudden vibration in his feet.

But after a moment, it went away.

There was only silence as everyone waited, holding their expectations in check while they looked around, wondering if anything was going to happen.

Then the world bent in half.

Hector’s vision distorted like a smeared painting, and he lost all sense of direction or balance or footing. For a brief time, he felt as though he was floating through empty space.

A familiar feeling.

And for an even briefer time, he could see. Everything. Ethereal lights. In all directions.

As soon as he grasped what he was looking at, it was gone, and he was standing on his own two feet again, senses gradually returning to him.

He shook his head, as if to shake away the disorientation itself, and his hand searched for the wall of the moat, but it wasn't there."

"1492

((Double Wednesday -- Page 1 of 2))

When he regained enough of himself to actually observe his surroundings, Hector realized that they were completely different. The others were standing beside him instead of above him, and it was pitch dark in all directions.

Save one.

Straight ahead.

A mountain of apparent jewels lay there, glowing and sparkling softly in the darkness.

'Holy lakefire!' said Lorios.

"That's it, isn't it?!" said Manuel. "The Sosho'Diyu?! It must be!" The man took a couple steps forward, but Diego extended a hand in front of him.

"Everyone," said the Lord Redwater, no longer even remotely jovial, "be exceptionally cautious. We currently have no idea where we are, what just happened, what we're looking at--or even whether any of this is real."

Manuel fell silent at that, as did everyone else, even the reapers.

Oddly enough, though, Hector did have an idea of what had just happened. Vaguely, at least. True, that briefest glimpse of so many ethereal lights suspended in space hadn't been much to go on--but it was enough.

“Just now,” said Hector, “I’m pretty sure that was teleportation. It was more disorienting this time, but I’ve seen it before.”

Diego looked at him. “That was--?” He stopped himself, gears turning in his head.

Garovel had some private words for him. ‘That’s what it was like when you were teleporting all over the place with Ibai?’

‘Yeah. Wait, you weren’t with me?’

‘No, I was quite busy cowering underground, remember?’

Hector did not. Large parts of that whole experience were simply a blur in his memory, especially the period immediately after their encounter with Rasalased.

“So what’s the plan, then?” asked Mr. Sheridan. Rather than looking at the apparent treasure, he was facing the opposite direction, using his small lamplight to cut through the murky blackness all around them.

The others seemed to realize in unison that the man had the right idea and so decided to join him in trying to illuminate their surroundings. Working in tandem, they were marginally successful.

It was a tremendous cavern, seemingly. The rock walls in each direction were so distant that everyone’s lamps were barely strong enough to reveal them.

Next, they followed Diego’s lead in illuminating the path to the treasure, and eventually, after they’d worked up enough nerve, they began inching toward it as a group.

It was farther away than it first appeared to be. A trick of depth perception. The vast majority of the jewels were much larger than they’d seemed. Where they’d previously looked pea-sized, now they were looking more like golf balls. And their individual glows began to reveal distinct colors as well--blue or white or yellow, mainly.

There was a whole lot more than just jewels, as well. As they grew nearer, a kind of cove in the side of the glimmering mound revealed itself, and within it, Hector spotted a number of golden chests and shelves with all manner of unfamiliar objects on them."

"1493 -- CLX.

((Double Wednesday -- Page 2 of 2))

Hector still wasn't quite sure what to think. Even as he stared directly at that gargantuan pile of treasure before him, he didn't feel much amazement. It just didn't feel real--not yet, anyway--and he was wary of allowing it to.

Diego raised a hand for everyone to stop again.

They were close now--close enough to make out several of the items in the cove in more detail. A globe. A pair of gloves. A bejeweled sword. A doll posing mid-twirl. A painting of a temple or something. A statue of a man in a chair.

Wait. No.

That was an actual man, actually sitting there.

Hector blinked behind his visor. Were his eyes playing tricks on him? Hadn't he been gray as stone a second ago? Perhaps he was still a little disoriented from that weird teleport. Now the man looked as normal as normal could be, though maybe a bit strange in attire. He wore a white tunic, tied together with strings near the collar, and brown pants and shoes. And his chair--tall and featureless stone.

But he really was a normal man. Not a Hun'Sho or a Hun'Kui. Not wearing a climate suit, either. Blonde hair, average height, pale skin, mid-forties by appearance, maybe.

And he was staring right at them, too, while he rested his cheek on his right fist. He had something in his lap as well, with his left hand draped over it. Some kind of jar? Hector couldn't really tell.

"So you've come," the stranger said. He sounded profoundly uninterested in what he was saying, as if he were making a passing note to himself rather than actually speaking to someone.

Diego was bold enough to speak the question on everyone's mind. "Who are you?"

"I thought I sensed three of you," the man said. "Yet I only see two."

"...What are you talking about?" said Diego. And he tried again. "Who are you?"

"Oh well. Frankly, I'm surprised Ettol managed to get even one of you here, let alone two."

Diego turned to the person next to him for help, who just so happened to be Hector. "Am I talkin' to myself here?" said the Lord Redwater.

Hector just returned an armored shrug.

Diego turned back to the stranger. "Hey, you in the chair! Who the hell are you?!"

"Be silent," the stranger said with sudden weight in his voice.

And Diego tried to respond, but he couldn't. Hector saw him open his mouth as if speaking, but no words came out. Diego's expression turned to confusion, then to shock.

"You there," the stranger said, sounding wholly apathetic again. "Iron One."

Hector twitched, realizing whom he meant. "Y-yeah?"

"How would you like to become a god?"

Chapter One Hundred Sixty: 'He Who Sits...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"...Excuse me?" said Hector.

"Are you hard of hearing?" the unnamed man said. "I asked if you would like to become a god."

"...I don't know what that means. And what did you do to my friend?"

"I ordered him to be silent."

"Y-yeah, but how did you do it?"

The stranger gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean? I ordered him."

"1493 -- CLX.

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"1494

Now Hector was confused. And more than a little unsettled. “Who are you, exactly?”

The stranger sighed. “Fine, I’ll ask the other one. You there.” He removed his right hand from his cheek in order to point. “The one in hiding. How about it? Would you like to become a god?”

“...Sure,” came Eleyo’s voice, “but not by any measure other than my own. What is a god to you?”

“To me?” the stranger said. “Nothing. A friend. A companion. It is you who have revered us as such.”

Having apparently heard enough now, Garovel decided to chime in. ‘Are you telling us that you’re a god?’

“Eh.”

What the hell kind of answer was that? Hector couldn’t decide if this man was terrifying or just kind of a weirdo. And he really hoped it didn’t turn out to be a combination of the two, because that would basically make him Ivan 2.0, and Hector was definitely not looking for a repeat of that encounter.

‘You’re a servant,’ said Garovel. ‘Where’s your reaper? I’d like to talk to them.’

The man gave a dull laugh. “I suppose it only makes sense that you would assume that. You are seeds, looking up and admiring the great trees that you wish to become. But I am no tree, little ones. I am a gardener.”

That gave everyone noticeable pause.

The stranger scratched his brow. “At least, I would be, if I cared a little more. Or at all, really. But I don’t, so... I suppose I’m more like the guy taking a nap under the trees while they flourish and grow wild all around him.”

‘Mm,’ said Garovel, his tone still thick with doubt. ‘Well, do you have a name, at least?’

“...Malast,” the man finally said.

‘Malast,’ echoed Garovel. ‘As in, “the Idle God,” Malast?’



“An unflattering name. Never cared for it much. I prefer the God of Boredom. Or the God of the Underworld, even if it is less appropriate-- and certainly too grandiose for my tastes.”

‘So you ARE claiming to be a god,’ said Garovel.

Malast gave another sigh. “I guess.”

‘Well, in that case, would you mind giving a little demonstration of your godly powers for the cynics among us?’

“Nah, I don’t really feel like it.”

‘Then I’m afraid I don’t believe you’re a god.’

“Okay.”

And that was it. Malast just sat there, not saying anything else.

Hector looked from Garovel to Malast, then back again, but neither budged, though Garovel looked much more annoyed.

Hector felt a push on his shoulder and turned to see Diego there, trying to get his attention. The man was still unable to talk, apparently.

“Oh, hey, uh, could you undo whatever you did to my friend here?” said Hector.

Malast looked over at him with flat eyes. “Nah.”

Hector didn’t know what to say to that.

“But, hey, wait a second,” said Malast, “doesn’t that count as a demonstration of my power?”

‘Pfft, no,’ said Garovel. ‘I know a guy who could do that, easy, and he’s not a god.’

“Oh,” said Malast. And he gave a yawn. “Oh well.””

"1495

‘Is that really all you have to say?’ said Garovel, able to sound less annoyed than Hector figured he was probably feeling.

And apparently, that was all Malast had to say, because he did not respond, instead choosing to simply close his eyes.

Hector thought the strange man might genuinely fall asleep until Eleyo stepped forward in the sparse light.

“Pardon me, but what did you mean when you said that I could become a god?”

Malast sighed another time but still didn’t open his eyes. “This is why I could never take interest in you like the others could. You always need everything explained to you. It’s exhausting, you know that?”

“What ‘others’ are you talking about?” said Eleyo.

“See? It’s always more questions with you people. I’d feel bad for you, if I could bring myself to care a little more.”

That response seemed to give Eleyo pause, and Hector couldn’t blame him. What the hell were you supposed to say to something like that?

Eleyo managed to find something, though. “Perhaps you would like to ask us some questions, instead.”

That got the eyes open. “Hmm.” Malast looked them over. “Normally, I would say that you have no answers that would interest me, but alright. You. Iron One.”

That was him, Hector knew. “Y-yeah?”

“Have you met a god before?” said Malast.

Oh, boy. Hector considered how to answer that. He eyed Garovel.

‘Say whatever you like,’ the reaper said privately.

“...Sort of,” Hector decided to say. “It’s, ah... tough to say without knowing exactly what you consider to be a god.”

“And did you receive a blessing from this sort-of-god?”

“Ah-ah,” intervened Eleyo again, “he answered one question of yours, so now you must answer one of ours. I believe that is only fair.”

Yet another sigh from the God of Boredom. “Fine, go ahead.”

Eleyo didn’t wait to consult anyone else about what they should ask.

"Why are you here?" he said.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You cannot answer a question with another question," said Eleyo.

"I'm pretty sure I can," said Malast.

"Then we will do the same for yours," Eleyo countered. "Is that what you want?"

"No, it isn't. There. I have answered one of your questions properly. Now I can ask a second."

Hector heard Eleyo growl, but Malast had won that round, it seemed.

"Iron One," said Malast. "Did you receive a blessing from this god of yours?"

"...What does 'blessing' mean?"

"You are not allowed to answer with a question," said Malast, eyeing Eleyo. "Answer to the best of your understanding."

Hector exhaled. "Right... uh." He supposed he had some idea of what Malast meant. "I believe he did bless me, yeah. I mean, he even said as much, so..."

"What is this 'blessing' you speak of?" reiterated Eleyo, having apparently decided that Hector's question was worth asking next."  
"1496

((Double Saturday -- Page 1 of 2))

"A blessing is a gift granted upon one's very soul," said Malast. "Although, it may not always be quite as pleasant as it sounds, depending on who the gift-giver is and why they are giving it."

Malast allowed a beat of silence to pass, even though it was now his turn again. Hector wondered why. Maybe he wanted someone to ask another question so that he could proactively ignore them.

"My turn," said Malast. "Iron One."

Agh. Why was he getting all the questions? It was like being called on by a school teacher who was trying to humiliate him in front of the whole class.

“What was the name of this sort-of-god you met?”

Well, at least that question had an easy answer. “Rasalased.”

“Hmm,” was all Malast said.

And Hector very nearly asked if Malast recognized the name before stopping himself. He didn't want to waste their next question--especially when he didn't know how much longer this would go on for. He was getting the impression that once Malast ran out of his own questions to ask, they wouldn't be able to get anything more out of him.

But dammit, if he still didn't want to know the answer to that.

Eleyo posed the next question. “Who are these ‘others’ you mentioned before?”

“My peers,” was all Malast said.

“That is not descriptive enough,” said Eleyo.

“I believe you have made up enough rules for this game already,” said Malast. “It is my turn again. Iron One.”

Hector had been waiting to hear that.

“Where is this Rasalased now?” said Malast.

Oh shit. There were a couple of different ways he could answer that, but Hector didn't know if he even should. And somehow, it seemed like an especially bad idea to tell this guy that Rasalased was right there with them, sleeping in the Shard beneath his armor.

He'd made a special trip to go back for it, not wanting to leave it there, just in case something crazy happened while they were hunting for the treasure. The concept of being teleported to an unknown location hadn't entered his mind, but he was glad he'd decided to bring it, nonetheless.

But perhaps it would've been better to leave it in Carver's biosphere after all. He had no idea what would happen if he allowed this guy to take the Shard from him, and he wasn't too keen to find out, either.

He had to answer the question somehow, though. And he didn't want to lie unless he had to. He decided to just leave a few things out.

"Rasalased is not in one place," said Hector. "He was split apart and fell dormant."

"Hmm."

Hector held his breath while he waited to see if that was a good enough answer.

Apparently, it was.

'Well done,' said Garovel privately.

'Garovel, who the fuck is this guy?'

'I don't know. I'm not sensing anything special from him. And that worries me.'

"1497

((Double Saturday -- Page 2 of 2))

Now that he was thinking about it, Hector wasn't feeling any kind of oppressive presence, either. This Malast guy didn't seem to have that insane level of field density to his soul like Ivan and Gohvis. Or even Darktide, Xuan, or Abbas, for that matter. Did that mean he wasn't as strong as them? Or did it simply mean that one's field density was adjustable? Hector recalled Ivan implying as much, actually.

As much as he would've liked to ask about it, he didn't think it was the most pressing question.

And the others were hesitating now as well, even Eleyo. They were probably all mulling over what to ask, if not simply waiting for someone else to take the initiative.

Hector's gaze fell to Carver. The poor lighting made it too difficult to decipher the expression on the man's face, but Hector did find himself wondering: had Carver known about this Malast guy all along?

Through all the confusion and disorientation, it had nearly escaped

Hector's notice when Malast mentioned the name Ettol, which meant there was only one degree of separation between Carver and Malast.

Hector was gathering questions by the second, but he was having trouble solidifying them in his mind, let alone actually choosing which to ask Carver about.

Then Elise Garza broke the silence and stepped boldly into the conversation. "Excuse me, but can we--?" She stopped. "...I would like to know more about the enormous amount of treasure around you."

Good point, Hector felt. And no doubt, Malast would've counted that as their next question if she hadn't caught herself.

"Then ask me about it," said Malast.

At that, Elise lost a bit of her fervor, and looked around for help. Her eyes fell to Manuel who, in turn, looked to Hector.

Aw, shit.

'Help?' he asked Garovel.

'Eh, I'm sure you've got this,' the reaper said privately.

'Garovel, is this really the time to be--?'

'Whining? Why, no, it isn't. So just hurry up and ask this "god" whatever you want.'

Everyone was looking at him now, Hector realized.

He really wished Diego could still talk.

Okay.

He could do this. There were only about six billion questions to choose from. He just had to pick one that wasn't completely fucking stupid.

"...Will you try to kill us if we take some of this treasure?" he heard himself say.

Well, that was either the stupidest possible question or the most important one. He wasn't quite sure which.

"Nah," said Malast. "Take what you like." Then he seemed to think about it a bit more. "But you should probably be wary of Seyos. I'm

sure he wants to kill you, right about now.”

‘Seyos?’ said Yangéra. ‘The same Seyos who had Himmekel built?’

“It’s not your turn,” Malast reminded her.

‘Ugh.’

Hector braced himself.

“Iron One.”

There it was.

“How might I be able to contact this Rasalased?”

Yikes.”

"1498

Impulsively, Hector wanted to ask why Malast wanted to contact him, but he knew that wasn’t going to get answered. Then Hector started trying to work out the best lie he could tell here.

But wait a minute.

How could Malast contact Rasalased? Hector didn’t actually know the answer to that. What, would the two gods be able to start chatting away as soon as Malast touched the Shard? Probably not, considering Asad hadn’t been able to talk to Rasalased yet.

Though, maybe Malast had some weird power that would make it work.

But Hector didn’t want to assume that.

And more importantly, he didn’t want to throw away his excuse for being able to honestly say, “...I don’t really know. The circumstances that led me to meeting Rasalased were, uh... kind of an accident.”

“Mm,” said Malast. “That is disappointing. But if you are unable to answer the question, then I should get another one, no?” He looked over his audience for approval.

Hector would’ve liked to refuse him, but as he thought about it, he

realized that Malast would be able to just say “I don’t know” to all of their next questions if they didn’t follow this new rule.

And perhaps Eleyo came to the same conclusion, because Hector heard him say, “Very well. Ask again.”

“What was this Rasalased like?” said Malast.

All these questions about the Dry God were beginning to form a rather obvious pattern. Clearly, Malast was interested in meeting Rasalased, but this question in particular was surprisingly... mundane, Hector felt.

“Well, he was, uh... he was very...” Shit. Not easy to describe was what he was, but Hector tried his best. “Rasalased was very... wise. And thoughtful. And considerate. And maybe a little scatterbrained. And kinda scary. Uh...”

“I see,” was all Malast said.

‘So this Seyos, then--’ tried Yangéra, but Eleyo interrupted her, doubtless because he couldn’t hear her.

“Why does this Seyos person want to kill us?” the Hun’Kui man said.

“Because he has long wanted to become a god, though he is an unsuitable vessel,” said Malast. “He would therefore see the two of you as a threat.”

‘What the hell?’ said Garovel. ‘So these two here are “suitable” vessels? Why? What makes them more suitable than anyone else?’

“It’s not your turn.”

‘Fuck this guy,’ said Garovel privately.

That nearly made Hector laugh openly. If he was pissing Garovel off so much, maybe Malast really was a god--or at least as much of a god as Rasalased had been.

Malast took his time asking his next question. “What will you do with this treasure, Iron One?”

And Hector was surprised, because that had nothing to do with Rasalased. He looked around and found everyone watching and waiting on him again.

Great.



At least he more or less knew what he wanted to say, this time.

"I will try to... build a strong link between the surface and the Undercrust. And then... use that link... to help and protect as many people as I possibly can."

Holy crap, it was embarrassing to admit all of that. He felt like everyone had just seen him naked. He was again glad to have his armor to hide behind."

"1499

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

There was a long bout of silence as everyone waited for Malast to respond in some way, but the self-proclaimed God of Boredom merely continued to appear exactly so. Bored.

Malast's expression didn't change at all. He didn't shift in his seat. He didn't stop resting his cheek on his hand. He hardly even looked like he was paying attention.

But at length, he finally deigned to say, "...That's nice."

'We're losing him,' said Garovel privately. 'This might be our last question, unless we can regain his interest somehow. Ask him if--'

Eleyo wasn't waiting for anyone's permission, though. "Would you like it if I became a god?"

Malast looked at him. "I would. What would you do if you became a god?"

"I don't know," said Eleyo. "It would depend on the exact nature of my godliness, I suppose. The precise limits of it."

Malast narrowed his gaze at him. "That's a lie. You already have a very good idea of what you would do, don't you? Your answer doesn't count if you lie, you know."

"I am not lying," said Eleyo.

"Even if that's true, then you still have not answered my question," said

Malast. "Which means I get to ask a different one."

Eleyo took a step forward. "Go on and ask, then."

"Are you reconsidering my offer?"

"I never turned you down." Eleyo took another step. "What must I do?"

Malast grabbed the jar in his lap with both hands. "You need merely to accept this of your own free will." He held the jar up, grasping the lid but not opening it. "Do you understand that you will cease to be yourself, by doing so?"

'Hector,' said Garovel, suddenly urgent.

'Somebody stop him,' said Yangéra.

But Eleyo stopped himself. "No, I do not understand that. What do you mean? I will cease to be myself?"

Malast sighed again and brought the jar back down to his lap. "You will be a vessel, like I said--a conduit through which an otherworldly being may experience this one."

Eleyo took a step back now. "No. You said I would become a god. Not be replaced by one. Those are two very different things."

"He will not replace you," said Malast. "He will transform you, and you will transform him. Together, a new being will emerge. A new god, as some would describe it."

But Eleyo was still taking steps back.

Malast smacked his lips and gave still another sigh. "Yeah, that's about what I figured..." He slumped down in his stone chair. "I knew that Ettol was just getting my hopes up again. The wily bastard."

As Eleyo shrunk back toward the group, Carver stepped up to replace him.

"How do you know Ettol?" said Carver.

Malast eyed him a moment and sniffed absent-mindedly. "It's not your turn."

Carver was undeterred, however. "Ettol is my uncle. I have known him my whole life, but I must confess that he has always been something

of an enigma to me.””

”1500

((Double Monday -- Page 2 of 2))

“You believe you are related to him?” laughed Malast, which was perhaps the most emotion he had yet shown. “As in, by blood?”

“That’s right,” said Carver. “And that was your question, so now you must answer mine. How do you know Ettol?”

Malast blinked a couple times, then gave another laugh. “Your ‘uncle,’ you said? That is frankly impossible, I regret to inform you. Ettol has no siblings. At least, not in the traditional sense. If you believe he is your uncle by blood, then you are mistaken.”

“That does not answer my question,” Carver insisted. “How do you know Ettol?”

“Hmm. If he never told you, then I imagine he would be upset if I did.” Malast allowed a beat to pass. “But he’s kind of a dick, so I don’t care. He and I are very old comrades. One might even call us the oldest of comrades.”

Carver, along with everyone else, waited for more. In vain, apparently. “And?” said Carver. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Sure I did.”

“No, you didn’t! How do you know my uncle?!”

“Excuse me, but it’s my turn again.”

“No, it isn’t! You’re breaking the rules of the game! You have to--”

“Be silent,” said Malast, invoking the same heaviness that he had used on Diego.

And sure enough, Hector observed Carver’s mouth moving in his climate suit without any words escaping.

“I do not care for people,” said Malast, “but I especially do not care for noisy people.”

That was enough to render everyone else silent of their own volition again.

‘Garovel, what the hell is that ability?’ thought Hector.

‘Not something I’ve seen before,’ said Garovel in the echo of privacy. ‘The closest thing I can think of is the oppressive soul power of someone incredibly strong. I’ve heard rumors that it’s possible to bend people to your will, if your soul power is sufficiently stronger than theirs, but this--I don’t know. If he were doing something like that, you’d think I’d be able to sense the enormous strength of his soul, but I can’t.’

‘Maybe he’s suppressing his soul.’

‘Even WHILE using his power? That’s pretty much impossible.’

‘...Not if he really is a god.’

‘Ugh.’

“Anyway,” Malast finally said, “it’s my turn again.” His eyes went to Eleyo. “Hidden One.”

Eleyo just waited.

“Are you afraid of me?” was all Malast asked.

Eleyo shifted his feet. “No.”

“You’re not lying again, are you?”

“I wasn’t before, and I am not now.”

“Hmm.” Malast’s eyes seemed to glaze over. “Alright, then. Final question. Ask away.”

And again, everyone fell quiet.

The threat of this being the final question made even Eleyo reluctant to say anything, it seemed.

‘...What do we ask?’ thought Hector.

‘Fuckin’... I don’t know! Ask him why he’s such an asshole.’

‘Real helpful, Garovel.’

‘Oh, who cares? Not HIM, apparently. Rasalased was way cooler than this douche.’”

"1501

Hector didn't necessarily disagree, but that hardly seemed like the most beneficial attitude to have, given the circumstances. ‘What can you tell me about Malast? Or at least, the folklore around him. You called him the Idle God before, didn't you?’

‘Yeah,’ said Garovel. ‘Ancient stories, those. Malast was a god who never took an interest in humanity, no matter how much they pleaded for him to. He had all sorts of names. The Idle God. The Worthless God. He Who Sits. He Who Does Nothing. The God of Despair. The God of Boredom. But I didn't know he was called the God of the Underworld, too.’

‘Hmm. What do the stories say about him?’

‘Not much, really. His whole deal was that he simply didn't engage with us lowly humans. Some stories portrayed him as outright hating us, but even in those, he never actually takes action against humans. He usually just lets us fend for ourselves and occasionally die in some horrible manner that he presumably could have prevented.’

‘That's it? The stories are just about him doing nothing the whole time?’

‘Basically, yeah. But the stories weren't about him. He was usually just in the background, being super unhelpful. I don't know if he even has a definitive origin story.’

‘That... all kinda lines up with this guy's general attitude and weirdness, right now, doesn't it?’

‘Oh, believe me, I've noticed. It's been annoying the ever-living crap out of me.’

He supposed that explained why the reaper seemed even more irritated than he might have expected.

Still, the more Hector thought about what their final question should be,

the more he supposed they already knew the most immediately relevant things. Malast was not hostile. Malast was not going to prevent them from taking the treasure. Certainly, there were still many things he would've liked to know, but he couldn't tell if any single question was more important than any of the others.

That was, until Manuel Delaguna decided to speak up for the first time since they'd arrived. "How do we get out of here?"

The group looked at him.

Yeah. That was a pretty good way to spend their last question, Hector felt.

Malast, however, just shrugged. "I don't know."

What?

How could he not know?

Did that mean they were all trapped here now?

Hector had to stop himself blurting any or all of those questions out, and judging from the distorted expressions on the reapers faces, they were doing the same.

Eleyo spoke next. "How funny that a 'god' could end up trapped in a place like this."

The man had been careful to avoid framing his words as a question, Hector noticed.

Hector wondered if that actually would work, though.

Apparently not, judging from Malast's complete lack of a reaction. "It's still your turn."

Hector tried to think everything through rationally. If this Ettol guy had come and gone, then they probably weren't trapped here. It was just a matter of figuring out how to leave."

"1502 -- CLXI.

Of course, that didn't explain why Malast didn't know how to get out of here, but there were a lot of things about Malast that were not making much sense, so Hector just added it to the list and tried not to worry about it for the moment.

A different question occurred to him, one of similarly pressing relevance, and Hector felt suddenly as if he should ask it quickly before anyone else used up their last question.

"This person who wants to kill us," said Hector, "this Seyos--where is he, right now?" He figured that if there was someone who wanted them dead, as Malast had said, then that was a problem which should probably take precedence over all others.

Malast shrugged again, however. "I don't know. He was here earlier, but he didn't tell me where he was going."

Hector frowned.

"Then we get another question," said Eleyo.

"Boy, you're really milking this, aren't you? Fine. But this next one is the true final question, even if I don't know the answer to it."

Once again, Eleyo seized the initiative. "Why do you want to make one of us a god?"

Malast leveled a dull stare at the Hun'Kui man and made everyone wait a bit more for an answer. "...A very long time ago, I had a friend. He was--and still is, I suppose--the only thing in all of Creation that I can confidently say I liked." He ran his hand along the top of the jar in his lap. "His name was Secho, and this here is all that remains of him."

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-One: 'A trial of gods...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector blinked a couple times.

Malast wasn't yet done talking, however. "I would like for Secho to be reborn in a new vessel, even if it means he won't quite be the same as I remember him. He deserves that much."

Hector detected a softness in the man's voice that hadn't been there

before.

‘Secho, huh?’ said Garovel privately. ‘That’s another god, by the way.’

‘The God of Growth,’ said Hector.

‘The--yeah. Hey, how do you know that?’

‘Eleyo over there told me all about him.’ Hector noticed the Hun’Kui man looking back at him.

It was difficult to tell in the poor light and the goggles on Eleyo’s face, but Hector abruptly felt as though he could read the man’s face-- maybe even his mind. There was just something in that look. The timing of it. The lingering of it.

Hector knew at once what Eleyo was about to do.

Eleyo was going to accept Malast’s offer.

That one name, Secho, had just changed Eleyo’s mind completely.

It was madness. Hector knew that. To just suddenly agree to be transformed into a “god” when there was still so much left unexplained. But everything that he recalled from their conversation earlier was informing him of Eleyo’s state of mind, right now.”

"1502 -- CLXI.

((Double Wednesday -- Page 1 of 2))

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"1503

((Double Wednesday -- Page 2 of 2))

Hector also felt in that moment as if Eleyo knew that he knew. How could the man not? It hadn't even been half a day since Hector had listened to him go on about how much he admired Secho. Eleyo had to know what Hector was thinking, right now, too.

And indeed, when Eleyo took a step toward Malast, and Hector raised an iron wall in front of the man, Eleyo did not look surprised.

"What are you doing, Senmurai?" said Eleyo.

"Didn't I tell you to stop calling me that?" said Hector.

"I will do as I please, Senmurai."

Somehow, it didn't sound like a term of reverence or respect anymore. "You don't know what you're doing. We don't know anything about this Malast guy." He shot a glance at Malast. "No offense."

The Idle God gave a shrug.

"I understand the risk involved," said Eleyo. "Now let me pass. It is my choice."

Hector clenched his jaw as he deliberated. Honestly, he had no idea what to do now. This was all too sudden and crazy. Should he stop this guy? His gut was telling him that he absolutely should, but what actual justification was there? If Eleyo wanted to gamble with his own life like

this, shouldn't he have been free to do so?

There was just something wrong. Something about Eleyo that was bothering him right now. Something in that conversation they'd had. Something in the way the man was now acting in front of Malast. Almost like a different person. Suddenly fearless, where before the man had been so cautious that he waited two entire days to reveal he spoke Mohssian.

And there was that thing Malast had called him. Hidden One? What the hell was that about?

Not to mention, what even made Hector and Eleyo "suitable" as a god's vessel in the first place? That was arguably the most important question of all, and it had still not been answered.

There were just so many unsettling things, all coming together as one formless, unspecified concern in the pit of Hector's stomach. He didn't have the luxury to think about each one of them, much less the time to do so, and he certainly didn't know how to put any of that into words, but right now, that uneasy feeling remained strong enough that he wanted to listen to it, no matter what.

Before the tense silence could draw out for too long, however, Malast intervened. "You wish to become Secho's vessel, after all, Hidden One?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why do you call him that?" said Hector. "Hidden One? And why do you call me Iron One? How did you know that I can use iron, huh?"

"You only get one question at a time," said Malast.

"If you really want one of us to be Secho's vessel," said Hector, having had just about enough of their game, "then you should be willing to answer all of our questions. Unless there's something you're hiding from us, of course. Something that might make us refuse.""

"1504

"Always so suspicious," said Malast. "Another reason I've always avoided you. So bothersome to deal with."

Eleyo started walking around the iron wall in front of him, so Hector made it wider.

Malast sighed again. "You have no reason to stop him, Iron One. It is his choice to make. That is, unless you wish to become a god, yourself. In which case, I suppose you have every reason to stop him."

Hector was at a loss. 'Garovel, what do I do?'

'Oh, uh--well, I agree with you. But I don't think you should piss off Malast. If worse comes to worst, just give in and let Eleyo have it.'

"Well, Iron One?" said Malast, holding up the jar in Hector's direction. "Do you wish to become a god? If not, then the choice here is simple."

Hector grit his teeth. "...What will you do if I say yes?" he said, mostly just trying to buy more time to think.

"Ah. In that case, I would have to hold--"

A clinking and shifting sound cut him off, and Hector saw the mountain of treasure begin to move slightly. There were several slow and mild avalanches in the glowing jewels, clattering all the way down to the stony floor around Malast, who was looking around with the same level of disinterest as he always seemed to have.

Then a cluster of giant, red-orange hands exploded out of the treasure pile. Jewels went flying everywhere as the hands stretched and grew and bent aggressively toward the group.

Hector reacted with a wall for everyone. The collective impact from all the hands nearly toppled it immediately, but Hector added foundational support in time to stabilize it, so instead of it merely falling on top of them, it started slowly pushing everyone back. Within seconds, Hector could see the red-hot, hand-shaped spots in his wall, where they were doubtlessly trying to push through.

Hector had something for that, though. He materialized freezing cold spikes of solid iron on the other side of the wall, skewering as many hands as he could at once.

The pushing stopped. The glowing spots on the wall began to diminish.

Hector was wary of annihilating his work, however. Manuel and the still-silent Diego each moved to opposite ends of the wall in order to peek around the corner. When they both gave him a nod, Hector

destroyed his iron.

As they closed the distance back toward Malast, Hector didn't see any traces of the hands that had presumably just tried to kill or capture everyone, but he did notice something different about the mountain of treasure in each of the spots where the hands had originated from.

There were mirrors. They must have been buried beneath the jewels before, but now they were mostly visible.

Before anyone could ask Malast about what the hell had just happened, however, a booming voice arrived.

"Invaders, begone from this place! You are not worthy to be in the presence of the God of the Underworld!"

"1505

Hector didn't recognize the voice, but fortunately, he didn't have to.

"Seyos!" yelled Malast. "I have not finished speaking with these people! Cease this foolishness and reveal yourself!"

There came a pause as everyone waited.

Then the treasure pile shifted again, and a molten light emerged from one of the mirrors nearest Malast. First a hand, then a shoulder, head, torso, and so on. A Hun'Sho man, quite clearly, climbed out of the mirror as if it were a window, pushing jewels out of his way as he arrived and finally stood before them.

He looked radically unlike the other Hun'Sho Hector had met, primarily because he was wearing clothes. The billowing black cloak was the most noticeable addition, as it did not stop moving even when Seyos did. The tall staff in his hands was perhaps the next most obvious thing, adorned at its tip with a spinning and glowing jewel.

Then there were the gloves--assuming that was what they were.

Unlike the other Hun'Sho, Seyos' forearms were the only things covered in magma, while the rest of him appeared more or less Hun'Kui-like, but those forearms were much larger than the other Hun'Sho's had been. And they were lined with something, too, as if to help hold all that extra magma in place. Ultimately, they had the effect

of making the man look like he had the hands of a giant--perhaps even that molten golem that they'd seen a couple days ago.

There were a few other oddities on the man's body as well, but Hector only had enough time to take in those few large things before Seyos started talking.

"Do you wretches even comprehend the sheer magnitude of greatness sitting before you?" said Seyos. "This is a being as old as humanity itself! Yet you speak to Him with the irreverence of a common dreg!"

Eleyo took the opening. "You seem knowledgeable. What else can you tell us about Malast?"

Seyos regarded the Hun'Kui man with obvious disgust. "Ashen dross. How dare you speak to me."

Eleyo threw up his hands and looked toward the surface-dwellers. "One of you try."

Carver seemed to volunteer, until he remembered that he couldn't speak. Then he turned to Hector, along with just about everyone else.

'Go get 'em, champ,' said Garovel privately.

Hector was more than a little sick of all this attention by now, but he didn't see any recourse. "Why do you sound so convinced that this guy here really is a god? I mean, all he does is sit there." He again threw another glance Malast's way. "No offense."

Malast returned another shrug. "It's kinda my thing."

"Oh, but of course you do not know," said Seyos. "Malast has never intervened in human affairs. That is the reason why he alone remained, while the others became little more than stories we tell one another."

Everyone looked to Malast, who had nothing to say--and had even shut his eyes. It was again questionable as to whether or not he was even paying attention."

"1506

"What 'others' are you referring to?" said Hector.

"The Choro'Tachi, of course," said Seyos.

'The Primordials,' translated Garovel privately. 'Or simply Elders. It's an umbrella term that refers to pretty much all the gods you've already heard of--and probably a few others.'

'Uh, ah--what should I ask him next?' said Hector.

'Ask him what happened to the others.'

Hector much preferred this calmer, less annoyed-sounding Garovel backing him up. "...What exactly happened to the other, uh, Ch-Choro'Tachi?"

"They were taken by the God of All That Is Not, so that humanity might be allowed to flourish."

This Seyos guy was a hell of a lot more forthcoming than Malast, at least. Hector did have to grant him that, even if he had been trying to kill them a moment ago--and probably would again anytime now, Hector felt.

Perhaps Hector was misreading the situation, but he was getting the impression that the only thing stopping Seyos from attacking them with whatever other crazy shit he had at his disposal was that "god" sitting over there with his eyes still closed.

"Do you understand?" said Seyos, perhaps having grown tired of Hector's uncertain silence. "You stand in the presence of unimaginable power. You would do well to show respect."

That made Malast open his eyes, though he still didn't say anything.

Hector took the opportunity to address the Idle God directly. "Is any of that true?"

Malast didn't answer him.

Seyos did, however. "Of course it is true! How dare you question me!" His staff began to glow, as did a pendant around his neck that Hector hadn't noticed before.

He braced himself for whatever the hell was about to happen, but Malast held up a hand.

“What did I just say about foolishness and ceasing, huh?”

Seyos growled. “Let their deaths finally prove to you that I am worthy of your gift!”

“Killing them seems a little excessive,” said Malast.

“You deem them worthy, yes?” said Seyos. “Then by defeating them, I too shall become worthy!”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

Seyos struggled for words for a second. “Y-yes, it does!”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Malast.

“N-no, listen, I have been researching this subject,” said Seyos. “It is a matter of the Saiko’Ishiryoku, no?”

Malast didn’t answer him.

‘Garovel?’ said Hector.

‘Oh, ah--something like “Supreme Will,” I guess?’ the reaper said privately.

Seyos continued anyway. “That is what makes a vessel suitable, is it not? It must have a soul which can withstand the given power. And the Saiko’Ishiryoku is achievable by all! Even the unworthy, such as I!”

Malast sighed. “That’s technically true, yes, but how is killing them going to help you achieve it?”

“There is no better proving ground than that of mortal peril! But perhaps it is impossible for a god to understand such things. You do not have to worry about struggling to change or improve yourself.”  
"1507 -- CLXII.

((Double Saturday -- Page 2 of 2))

Malast didn’t respond. He looked down at the jar in his lap, running his hand along the lid.



Seyos turned back toward Hector and the others, and the jewel on his staff began to glow again.

"You may be right," the Idle God said. "Perhaps you will surprise me."

"Excellent!" said Seyos.

"To me," said Malast with that sudden weight behind his words again.

The staff flew from Seyos' hand and into Malast's waiting one. It stopped glowing, as did the pendant around Seyos' neck.

"What are you--?!"

"Any among you could surprise me, I suppose," said Malast. "I should not dismiss your potential so easily. Very well. I shall give you all an opportunity to achieve beyond yourselves, as the Hidden One and the Iron One have."

Hector didn't quite follow most of that, but the time for questions was past, it seemed.

The staff in Malast's hands lit up with renewed vigor, far brighter than before--so much so, in fact, that after a few moments, it sparked to life with glaring electricity. Light filled the whole chamber in intensifying waves, and Hector had to shield his eyes so as not to be blinded.

The prior darkness all around melted away, revealing the distant rock walls that they had only been able to glimpse previously with their meager lamplights.

Jagged blue bolts erupted from Malast's staff and leapt out across the chamber, arcing toward four separate corners, where Hector noticed familiar stone monuments waiting to receive them. They had blended in so seamlessly with the rock behind them that only now could Hector tell they were there, somehow coated with a visible electric charge.

"We shall have a tournament," announced Malast in a voice that boomed even over the crackling lightning. "The winner, if they be suitable by the end of it, shall be Secho's vessel."

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Two: 'Embrace thy turmoil and observe...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

To say that Diego did not appreciate being unable to speak was an understatement, but it currently made no difference, as he was genuinely speechless.

"There is only one rule," Malast continued, still not even standing up from his stone seat. "You win when your opponent either dies or admits defeat. All else is acceptable on the path to victory."

They were not given an opportunity to respond.

Light distorted and consumed Diego's vision, and he felt Yangéra grab his shoulder to make sure they didn't get separated.

It was the same sensation he'd felt during their previous teleport, so it wasn't as disorienting this time, but it still wasn't exactly a joy ride, either. When his vision steadied itself again, he discovered a sight which he was not at all expecting.

Gold. Piles and piles of it. Chests spilling over with gems and gold and artifacts of presumably tremendous value, judging by everything around them.

This was a completely different room, Diego realized, which meant this treasure was also completely different from that which had surrounded Malast."

"1507 -- CLXII.

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"1508

The treasure was arguably not what surprised him most, however. The sunlight was. And the grass. The temperature, too. Wherever this room was, Diego knew that he was suddenly much closer to the surface than he had been a second ago.

He searched the ceiling for the source of the sunlight and found many small ones. The rock above his head was porous, and he considered trying to break through it in order to get a better idea of his location, but the sight of Elise Garza standing there, looking confounded beyond belief, changed his mind.

"Diego!" she said upon noticing him as well. "What in the world is happening?!"

He scratched his brow, wondering how to--or even if he could--explain.

The room was clearly smaller than the last one, though it was still plenty large enough for a fight, which he supposed was the point, unless he'd misunderstood what Malast was saying.

Should he tell her that, though?

Eh, she could probably handle it. Servant or not, she was a Rainlord, same as him.

"I think we're supposed to fight now," he told her.

“Excuse me?!” She looked horrified.

“Didn’t you hear what Malast said? We’ve been drafted into a tournament.”

“Why?!”

“He wants us to compete for godhood, I guess. And that means fighting.”

“I can’t fight you!” she said. “You’re a monster!”

“A monster with feelings, thank you.”

“You know what I mean! I can’t possibly defeat you!”

“Ah, hmm.” He tilted his head at her. “Well, you could just surrender without actually fighting, I think.”

“Okay! I surrender! Now leave me alone and go fight somebody else!” She looked up at the ceiling. “You hear that?! I said I surrender!”

And it took a moment, but the distortion did indeed arrive another time, and Diego’s vision melted in on itself.

When it returned to him, he discovered another chamber, similar to the previous one but not identical, as the treasure here was different, and the temperature had risen again.

When he looked around for his new opponent, his eyes settled on the Hun’Sho man from earlier.

Seyos.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to surrender without a fight, are you?” said Diego.

Seyos had his swirling cloak drawn in front of his body.

There was no telling what other ridiculous artifacts of a magical nature the guy had at his disposal. And of course, Diego had never fought a Hun’Sho before. He had no idea what to expect, and neither did Yangéra, whom he couldn’t see but could sense clinging to his back, still.

“Before we get into this, I have an important question for you.” Diego’s mouth twisted, and he couldn’t stop his next words from becoming a

snarl. "What did you do with Jasirok?"

Seyos didn't answer him.

"It was you who took him, wasn't it? Deny it, if you like, though I don't think I'll believe you."

"Your concern for him surprises me," said Seyos. "Is this, too, another one of your deceptions?"

"1509

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

"Deceptions?" said Diego. "What deceptions? You're the one who's been hiding out and snatching people through mirrors."

"Proper guidance sometimes requires extreme methods," said Seyos. "You would know that if you were ever called upon to protect your loved ones from a threat which was far beyond your own meager power to stop."

That was a lot of words--and passionately spoken, as well--but Diego couldn't say he understood where any of it was coming from. He wanted to keep Seyos talking, though. "That still doesn't explain what deceptions you were referring to. I haven't lied to you or done anything to harm you, have I?"

"Do not play at innocence!" shouted Seyos, his tone suddenly manic. After a breath, however, he settled himself. "The others all trusted him, but I knew. I knew Ettol would bring more of you here to claim my treasure. To take my place as a new god. You are all deceivers, every one."

"Hold on a second here. We aren't with this Ettol person. I've never even met the guy. In fact, I have a lot of questions about who the hell he is, myself. From the way Malast talked about him, it sounds like Ettol is a god, too, no?"

"Hah! Ettol is no god! A pretender is all he is! A manipulator of emotion and a thief of reason and faculty!"

"Alright, well, that's a start. Can you tell me what Ettol looks like, maybe?"

Seyos merely stared back at him.

Diego smacked his lips. "Why does nobody remember what this jackass looks like, huh? I find that extremely suspicious."

Seyos shifted behind his cloak. "...You are truly not Ettol's kinsmen?"

"Kinsmen? Of course not! I'm a damn Rainlord--and proud of it!"

"Rainlord?"

For a second, Diego thought he saw the light of recognition in the Hun'Sho man's eyes. And it made no sense to Diego's mind, but still, he had to ask, "Do you know of us?"

"A proud and ancient group of surface-dwellers," said Seyos. "Renowned for bringing trouble wherever they go."

Diego nodded his head admissively. "Not inaccurate, I suppose, but now you've made me curious--where in the world did you hear all of that?"

Again, Seyos did not answer him.

Yangéra chimed in from over Diego's shoulder, having still not let go of him. 'You've been to the surface before, haven't you, Seyos?'

"I have observed outsiders as a preventative measure for many years," said Seyos. "I recently increased my efforts, though it appears to have been in vain."

That made Diego squint. "Increased how?"

Seyos scowled. "Enough of your questions. You obviously have nothing of value to say."

"I have plenty of value, if you would just listen!"

But unsurprisingly, he wouldn't just listen, and Diego was prepared when he saw the rifle appear out from behind Seyos' swirling cloak.

Diego didn't doubt that it was ardor-infused, and so he dove to his right. 'Pan-forma now,' he told Yangéra as a flaming bullet sliced through his left arm like it was wet paper."

((Double Monday -- Page 2 of 2))

He felt her initiate the merge. It was like a somehow familiar moment of realization, a forced epiphany, prying his mind open and expanding it into her own. Not particularly pleasant, but not as bad as it used to be, either.

And the power. The surge of not only strength but thinking capacity. That was most welcome.

He didn't have to care about dodging bullets now. The immediate and complete regeneration of pan-forma rendered Seyos' weapon as deadly as a water pistol, ardor or not.

The only pressing concern in Diego and Yangéra's collective consciousness now was whether or not they would be able take Seyos alive. Certainly, Diego's nitrogen transfiguration ability did not lend itself well to restraint. They closed the distance at full sprint, aiming for a quick submission hold.

But then everything was wrong.

Diego lost all sense of himself, and he felt abruptly as if half his mind had been torn out of his head.

Because it had, he soon realized. He and Yangéra were separated again. Just like that, she was there on the ground in front of him, and he was struggling even to crawl. This was post-hyper-state exhaustion, he was fairly sure, but why? What the hell just happened?

Seyos had something in his other hand. Some kind of orb? It was so hard to tell. And Diego became immediately more concerned with the gun being pointed directly at Yangéra.

None of it made sense. There was no time. His reaper was about to die if he didn't do something, and there was only one thing to do, as far he could tell.

"I surrender!" Diego yelled, as loud as he could muster.

It wasn't fast enough to stop Seyos from getting another shot off. A bullet pierced Yangéra's avian chest.



‘Agh!’ she cried out, shivering.

Diego grabbed her and wrapped himself around her. “Malast! I said I--!”

Seyos blinked out of existence and was gone.

Diego could see the ethereal smoke rising out of his reaper, the familiar indicator of a significant wound. “Are you alright?” he asked.

‘Yeah, I think so...’

He exhaled and rolled over, not intending to let go of her anytime soon.

--++--++--

Royo Raju understood the circumstances before the one called Manuel Delaguna did. He couldn’t tell what the man’s reaper was thinking, but it seemed apparent enough that his opponent didn’t realize that they were supposed to fight.

Royo could hardly fault him for that, though. Everything had happened so quickly. And Royo wasn’t eager to be aggressive, either. At the moment, this curious and confused camaraderie was certainly preferable to fighting a superhuman whose powers Royo didn’t fully grasp.

So he took his time and looked the new chamber over, paying especially close attention to the treasure here and encouraging the one called Manuel to do the same, ostensibly in hopes of finding a way out of here.

That might not have worked if the one called Manuel wasn’t so agreeable. Or confident, maybe. Too early to tell."

"1511

But the treasure helped. It was certainly captivating enough to keep them distracted--so captivating, in fact, that Royo had to be careful not to get too lost in it himself. He did still have a weapon on him, if worse came to worst, but he hoped to find something else that would be useful. Even if he did manage to get past the one called Manuel, there were still subsequent opponents to think of.

Fortunately, he had some idea of what to look for--or hoped he did, at least. He had held a passing interest in ancient artifacts a few years ago, toward the end of his formal education. At the time, he hadn't actually put much stake in such things. It was more of a guilty pleasure than anything, but needless to say, the very recent past had altered his opinion. Having encountered so many superhumans and ghosts--and now even a "god," supposedly?

He would be rather disappointed if none of the items around here were even a little bit magical.

The temptation, he knew, was to gravitate toward any object that was glowing, but according to an essay of dubious origin he recalled reading, that would be a rookie mistake.

While it was true that the emission of light could indeed be indicative of some manner of "power" stored therein, it was very unwise on the treasure seeker's part to touch such objects without reserve. Even discounting the still-quite-credible threat of deadly radiation, there was another potential problem, according to the essay. Oftentimes, these "forces beyond mortal reckoning," as the essay had dubbed them, would use the human body as a conduit--not unlike that of electricity, though potentially even more dangerous.

Now, perhaps that was all nonsense, but Royo was of a mind to exercise caution, nonetheless. He knew, at least, that those glowing jewels which had surrounded Malast were safe to the touch, as those were simply akaridaiya, or light diamonds.

Well. Calling them "simply" akaridaiya was perhaps doing them a disservice. Akaridaiya had been tremendously valuable in the Undercrust since ancient times and had never ceased being so. Perhaps it was only natural they should treasure objects which could emit sustained, unfueled, harmless light.

The Hun'Kui weren't particularly bothered by the darkness, of course, but other races could be, and Royo knew for a fact that surface-dwellers would pay absolutely absurd prices for those diamonds, if he could find the right buyer. Why, the volume that had surrounded Malast would be worth the GDP of a small kingdom. Possibly even a not-so-small one.

All of that was potentially wonderful news, to be sure, but it was far from his mind, presently.

Royo's goggled and glowing eyes scanned his options, eventually

catching upon a notably non-metallic object. A glove. It did have a silver metal lining, but the rest of it was some kind of cloth. He had to believe that if anything here would be safe to the touch, it would be a glove."  
"1512

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He slid his hand into the cloth and let his fingers stretch through it and get comfortable. It was rather loose, unfortunately, but he supposed--

He felt it move on its own, writhe against his flesh.

His impulse was to panic and tear it off, but he resisted. It wasn't painful. If anything, it was more comfortable now.

Yes, he realized. It had tightened around his hand. Fitted itself to him, perhaps.

After a moment, he decided to remove it anyway, just to ensure that he actually could, and indeed, it slipped off his hand again without fighting him.

Curious.

He put it back on and waited.

It didn't readjust to his form again. It didn't need to. It still fit perfectly. The first adjustment had remained, even after removal.

Unless he was hallucinating, this object was clearly special in some way. He had to wonder about its origins, as well as what else it might be capable of. Convenient as it was, he didn't see a whole lot of utility in it, so far.

Still, just having some level of protection for his hand made him feel immediately safer in handling these other objects. His eyes went to a shelf he'd seen earlier and stopped on a small metal container, the kind that might be used to house particularly precious stones.

He grabbed the container, and it crumpled under his grip. Whatever was inside, he heard it shatter and saw glassy dust trickle out onto the ground.

Royo pursed his lips to one side, set the container down, and observed his glove anew.

Hmm.

He deliberated for a second, then grabbed the ruined container again, this time employing strength deliberately, as much as he could muster.

He felt almost no resistance, hearing more crunching and seeing more dust. When he opened his hand again, the container was unrecognizable. The metal had not only lost its shape, but it had also taken new shape around his fingers. The force applied had been so great that the metal now looked like soft clay that had just been squeezed.

He hoped whatever he'd just destroyed inside that container wasn't too valuable, but considering everything he was currently looking at, it probably was.

Oh well, though. No helping it now.

He wanted to try his glove out on another object before drawing conclusions, however. For all he knew, it could have been the case that the metal of the container was the abnormal thing, not his glove. So he picked up a gold coin next and pressed it between his thumb and index finger. It folded like rubber and stayed that way.

Interesting.

Just to be sure, he tried again on a couple of other objects of comparatively lesser value, and the results remained consistent.

This couldn't rightly be called super strength, in Royo's estimation--not like that of the superhumans, at least. No, this was limited to his fingers and wrist only. It would be immensely useful for gripping, twisting, and crushing; but it was not going to let him punch like the superhumans could or lift tremendous weight like they could.

A very good find nonetheless, Royo felt."

"1513

As he searched for something else of use, he practiced lifting other objects with the glove on. It was simple enough to avoid crushing something. He just had to be extra gentle. He could see this glove being a double-edged sword, potentially. A mad part of him wanted to test it on himself--to see if he would have to worry about unconsciously grabbing his own arm or hand, perhaps--but he decided to forego that experiment, at least for now.

His gaze eventually stopped on a pair of boots and a sword with a sequined hilt.

Now why did this sight look so familiar? He shut his eyes and tried to recall.

Yes, he'd seen a drawing of these items--or ones like them, at least. Those long, curving boot buckles with straps that went all the way around--that was a distinctive design. If the book he was thinking of was correct, then these were the Boots of Karugetti, and they supposedly had the power to "defy the heavens"--whatever that meant.

And the sword. That thin and faintly curved blade. That was the Sword of Hamenszoon, and it supposedly had the power to cast illusions. He remembered thinking how ugly it was and how unpleasant those sequins on the hilt would make it to wield.

Indeed, he was unfortunately proved right. It felt like reptilian scales against his flesh. He considered using his gloved hand, but it seemed a waste to occupy it with a weapon when it was probably more threatening without one. He instead decided to remove his green scarf and wrap it around the grip.

That was better.

He still had no idea how to wield it, though. He'd never trained in any manner of swordsmanship, nor did he know how to draw out its power. Assuming it truly had any.

But he knew something of ardor. The force and fuel of the planet. He knew of its debatably magical properties, and he knew of its extraction, refinement, and infusion processes as well.

Most importantly, though, he knew that to manipulate ardor required concentration in one's very soul. It required a degree of focus and "oneness" with the planet itself. A sense for the world's "pulse," as some described it.

It required training, in other words--training which he had undergone many years ago, though he had not understood its significance until much more recently. Back then, it was still an experimental thing, one of many "cutting edge" forms of training which he had been forced to undertake, lest he lose his job as an iron miner.

There had been a span of nearly five years straight where it seemed like he had to go through some new type of training every week, and the vast majority of them were a complete waste of time--if not physically painful.

But that one. That one had been something. He still remembered that initial feeling, the first time he'd ever truly sensed ardor."

"1514

It was so unbelievably overwhelming and terrifying. Like suddenly finding oneself in the ocean that he'd read so much about. Not being able to swim or move, for that matter. Just being completely smothered from all directions at once. That experience alone had nearly converted him into a follower of the Heart of the World.

After that first time, it was much more manageable, though not particularly helpful in day-to-day life. While the sensing of ardor required training one's mind and soul, the actual manipulation of ardor still required enormous industrial tools built by the hands of the supermen.

Sadly, even as revelatory as it was, there simply wasn't much literal value in that training for the average Hun'Kui outside of the mining industry.

But he was not average, Royo knew, nor were these circumstances.

If anything was going to help him activate this sword's power, it would be this training.

He concentrated on his breathing. On regulating it. And unifying his mind with it.

It was comfortable like an old set of clothes. Familiar, though perhaps not as easy to slide back into as he would have liked. But he managed.

His mind became his breathing. He moved with it. In and out of his own lungs. An extension of his very soul, his life force. And with that ebb and flow, he could begin to feel the rhythm of the world around him, seeing the heretofore invisible movement in perceived stillness.

It was the pulse of life itself. Asynchronous and all-encompassing.

Holy fire, there was way more ardor around him than he had realized.

True, it had been quite a while since he had performed this sensory technique, thus making it only natural that he would feel a bit overwhelmed by it all again, but even so--this level of power was ridiculous. Not just from the sword, either. It was everywhere. The sword, the boots, his glove, all of the ridiculous treasure--even the floor and walls were practically bursting with ardor, as if threatening to erupt at any moment.

His old bosses would have loved this place, iron or not.

He gathered himself and tried to focus. On the sword. That was all that mattered now.

Indeed, he could sense the ardor flowing through it. Burning through it. He couldn't help feeling like it would scorch his flesh and swallow him whole. But he knew that wasn't possible. Or he mostly knew it, anyway.

But now what?

He didn't really know. There weren't any industrial tools handy, and even if there were, how would he use them on a sword, of all things?

This ardor was unlike that which he had worked with, as well. It didn't need to be extracted or molded in any way. It was simply there. Waiting.

On him?

Perhaps so.

Perhaps he needed only reach out with his own soul. He could do that much, he was fairly sure.

The Sword of Hamenszoon responded with a burst of ardor that knocked him clear out of himself, shattering his concentration and forcing him back a few steps.

He waited for his disorientation to go away again, but his vision didn't quite realign properly. Or didn't seem to.

Because he suddenly had four left hands, each holding an identical sword."

"1515

Royo moved his hand up and down, to and fro, marveling at the sight before him.

The duplicates faded after a moment, however.

He did it again. He bumped his soul against the ardor sword, and he was prepared this time, so he was able to sense the ardor resonate briefly, like a kind of invisible flash.

The duplicate arms and swords returned, but Royo wasn't satisfied. It had to be capable of more than just this, he felt. He bumped his soul into it again and held it there, trying get a more complete feel of both the ardor and the blade itself.

He needed to know the sword, to see it completely and understand all of its components. Examining its ardor could help with that, potentially. Ardor adapted itself to whatever structure it dwelled within. More specifically, it was the "flow" of ardor which adapted itself, and to a trained mind like Royo's, that flow was discernible.

It was a shame that ardor wasn't more common in the Undercrust, Royo had always felt. This training would have been far more versatile and valuable, if that were the case.

He found it. The flow of ardor. He had to concentrate harder to see patterns in it, as if holding up an imaginary magnifying glass to reveal its secrets.

The smaller, jagged distortions in the flow indicated the material of the sword. Gold and silver made up most of it, along with several trace elements he wasn't trained to recognize. There was, however, one long, thin vein of either iron or nickel running right down the middle.

Not terribly surprising. Ardor famously flowed through iron and nickel so smoothly and cleanly that the two elements were indistinguishable from one another, when judging solely from their flow patterns. No



other elements acted as such perfect conduits, as far as Royo knew.

But that wasn't all he was interested in, here and now. He wanted to know where the ardor's "pressure points" were.

Any object crafted by human hands would have structural weaknesses. That was one reason why it was so desirable to place ardor into it--because the ardor would compensate for those flaws. But to do so, the flow of the ardor would have to be disrupted, which often left detectable "whirlpools," as it were.

As far as the physical structure was concerned, these whirlpools balanced everything out, eliminating weaknesses entirely, but that was fine, because Royo didn't want to destroy the sword. Far from it. He only wanted to know where it would be best to apply pressure from his own soul. And he immediately found one whirlpool in the hilt.

Sensible.

The designer had probably intended for it to be there. But Royo also sensed eleven more along the length of the blade, the last one sitting just below the tip.

He bumped his soul into the hilt a little stronger, and when it appeared to do nothing, he realized that it was the same whirlpool that he'd been using all along. It wasn't that it did nothing. It was simply already in use, maintaining the duplicate images that Royo was currently seeing."

"1516

((Double Saturday -- Page 1 of 2))

Royo used his gloved hand, careful to be extra gentle, and bumped his soul against the first whirlpool up from the hilt.

He sensed the sword respond again, and suddenly, he saw duplicates of not just his arm, but his entire body.

There were now three Royo Rajus, one standing on either side of him.

And they were convincing, too. He had to phase his hand through one of them to make sure they really were just illusions.

They were. The projection flickered for a few seconds before

correcting itself.

That was a relief. As much as he might have been able to accomplish with full, thinking clones of himself moving and acting in the world, he didn't think he would like that very much, primarily because he wasn't sure they wouldn't try to kill him and take his place.

It was a thought he'd had before, though never quite this seriously.

Regardless, he had a fairly good grasp of the sword's power, now. The other whirlpools in the ardor flow simply adjusted the placement of the illusions, relative to where Royo was standing. Useful for masking his position from opponents who would otherwise know to attack the center image, he decided.

The final whirlpool, however, the one near the tip of the blade, was different, and as much as Royo tried, he couldn't quite understand what it did.

It seemed to transform the whole world around him, making everything come alive in a kind of ethereal fire--a visual representation of all the ardor around him, he was pretty sure. But what did that mean? What actual purpose did it serve? Was it really just to help him detect the presence of ardor?

If so, then that ability was sadly redundant for someone with his training. But it would make a certain degree of sense, he supposed. If the sword was designed for use by someone who couldn't sense ardor on their own, then that pressure point would likely be very helpful.

At least, this was what he was thinking until he heard the one called Manuel's voice again.

"Eleyo?" the man said. "Where did you go?"

Royo was looking right at him, and the one called Manuel should have been able to see him. Granted, the lighting was a bit poor, and these surface-dwellers seemed to have rather bad eyesight, but still. This was abnormal.

Royo supposed he should answer. "I am here," he said.

The one called Manuel looked around, still apparently not seeing him. "Where? Even my reaper can't sense you."

Royo understood and smiled to himself. The Sword of Hamenszoon's

final illusion was to render its wielder invisible.

It did make him wonder, however, what the designer had been thinking. Why would he ever not use the invisibility? It was clearly superior to all the others in just about every way imaginable.

Almost as soon as he had the thought, he got an answer. The ethereal world all around him diminished, and the one called Manuel spotted him.

Royo bumped the final pressure point again, but it wasn't doing anything now.

It had some sort of hard time limit, he realized.

How unfortunate."

"1517

((Double Saturday -- Page 2 of 2))

"Where did you go, just now?" said the one called Manuel.

"I am not certain," said Royo, which was technically true. He didn't wish to explain his still-increasing understanding of the Sword, but neither did he wish to lie to this person.

The one called Manuel appeared to be conversing with his ghost.

Which was dangerous, Royo felt. If they finally realized that they were supposed to be fighting, they might begin to see Royo as a threat.

The Sword's invisibility would have been extremely helpful here and now, if only he hadn't just wasted it all. He could sneak up and subdue them before they knew what was happening.

He wondered if the invisibility would "recharge" on its own. He knew that ardor was similar to electricity insofar as being able to accumulate as a "charge," but unlike electricity, ardor had the potential to generate its own charges, without outside input. And indeed, he could sense that the ardor within the Sword itself had not diminished in any way, so it clearly didn't need to be "refueled" with fresh ardor like the modern firearms of the Hun'Kui did.

It was far from guaranteed, but Royo had an inkling that he only had to wait.

Time was precious, in that case. He turned and picked up the Boots of Karugetti in order to examine them more closely while he still could.

The one called Manuel spoke up again before Royo could detect anything new. "Do you have any idea how to get out of here yet?"

Well, there was fighting one another, but Royo didn't want to mention that. He did have an alternative in mind, though he'd barely given it a moment's thought so far. He pointed across the room to a tall pile of treasure. "There is a monument under there similar to the one we used earlier." He didn't know for sure, of course, as he hadn't seen it, but he'd noticed its larger, ardor-laden presence amidst all the other, smaller ones.

That seemed to distract the one called Manuel and his ghost, as Royo hoped, and they wandered toward the buried object.

"Another one?" said the one called Manuel. "Now that you mention it, I thought I saw more of them back in that room where we found Malast."

Royo knew what he was referring to. Most likely, they were all part of some sort of network which allowed travel between many different treasure chambers. He might have bothered to mention all of that, if it wasn't more desirable to keep the two of them occupied with figuring it out for themselves.

It wasn't proving all that helpful, however. He'd slipped the Boots of Karugetti on and begun testing their pressure points, but if they truly did harbor some kind of magical ability, it wasn't nearly as obvious as the Sword's was.

But even if he disregarded their apparent fame, Royo did think there was something special about them. The pressure points were in the soles of the boots, right below his toes, which struck him as very deliberate placement."

"1518

Still, he wasn't making any progress, so he decided to just keep the Boots on and move toward the one called Manuel. If he was going to

land a decisive surprise attack, his odds would be better at close range.

He kept bumping the final pressure point of the Sword, hoping for the invisibility to reactivate, but as of yet, he was having no such luck.

"I hope the others are okay," the one called Manuel was saying. "I can only imagine what the Water Dragon must be thinking, after we all disappeared like that. Lorios can't even sense him, anymore."

As Royo drew nearer, the one called Manuel turned to face him, as did his ghost.

Heh.

Trusting, but not too trusting, eh?

Royo could appreciate that.

Truthfully, he liked the one called Manuel. Quite a lot.

The fact of the matter was that this man had done nothing to deserve Royo's ire--and indeed, the exact opposite was the case. Immediately following the fight with the greatworm by the train, when the ground had collapsed beneath everyone's feet, it was the one called Manuel who had saved Royo from falling to his death.

And that was no trivial deed.

While Royo did not believe that it made the one called Manuel trustworthy in all regards, Royo would not be forgetting it any time soon, either. He fully intended to repay this man tenfold, one day--perhaps one day soon, if he really did manage to become a god.

It was rather unfortunate that the one called Manuel was Royo's first opponent in this tournament, but such were the idiosyncrasies of life, he supposed.

Nothing in all of creation would prevent Royo Raju's ambition.

So when he again bumped the final pressure point of the Sword of Hamenszoon, and it actually responded this time by cloaking the world in ethereal fire once more, Royo did not hesitate.

He didn't know how long the invisibility would last this time, so he went for the ghost first, needing to test the most crucial thing to his mind.

Could he touch the ghost?

He knew of their ability to phase through physical objects. He had seen it with his own eyes, thanks to these goggles, but he had also seen them avoiding the worms earlier, too, which suggested to him that ardor was the key factor. And he had a glove with ardor in it.

He grasped the ghost and held on. Yes. It worked exactly as expected.

The one called Manuel was clearly startled by his disappearance, and now even more so, as the ghost was probably yelling.

Royo slipped the Sword of Hamenszoon back into its sheath on his waist. The invisibility dispersed the second the hilt left his grasp, but Royo was already drawing his pistol instead.

He didn't know much of the superhumans' powers, but he knew of their immortality, and he knew that even this would not be enough to truly kill them.

Royo locked eyes with the one called Manuel just before pulling the trigger and said, "Forgive me."

The man's head exploded as the flaming bullet tore through it."

"1519 -- CLXIII

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

Royo holstered his weapon as the "dead" superman's body hit the ground, blood splattering and sizzling against the uneven stone.

The ghost squirmed in his grip, but the glove allowed him to maintain his hold. Its horrific face almost made him want to destroy it, but he knew that to be his own, unjustifiable impulse. As he understood it, the reason the supermen existed in the first place was because these ghosts retained no powers or potency of their own.

"Lorios, was it?" said Royo, and the ghost stopped moving. "I cannot hear anything you are saying, but you needn't worry. I will not hurt you. You may not believe me, but I hold great affection for your Manuel. I promise to reward him for his heroism as soon as it is within my power to do so."

The reaper could not respond, of course, but Royo allowed a moment for it anyway, just in case some new revelation occurred. He took the opportunity to look over the treasure on this side of the room, and though there was certainly plenty to admire, nothing in particular caught his eye or sparked a sense of recognition. He wished he had devoted more time to studying such artifacts.

“However,” Royo eventually continued, “I do not know if this qualifies as a victory in this tournament, so I would like you to voice your surrender to Malast, if possible. I believe he can hear you, no?”

More silence as he waited.

He decided to release the ghost, if only to build back a modicum of trust. He still kept his eye on it, though. He’d only heard that they were powerless. He still wanted to be prepared for any unpleasant surprises.

But when his vision began to distort in that familiar way, Royo knew that he had indeed made it through the first round.

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Three: ‘O, deadliest Knife...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Jercash’s thick boots crunched over the gravelly, smoldering earth as he entered what was left of the town of Orobell. Vanderberk, Germal, Koh, and several others came crunching up behind him as Jercash caressed the left tip of his mustache, taking in the scenery.

Barely any buildings still stood, and those that did looked like they’d been blasted out by mortar shells, the smoke from their ruins rising all the way up to the evening clouds. Automobiles were everywhere, though not as they should have been. Instead, they were overturned or on fire or buried in rubble or crumpled up like an old newspaper.

“Huh,” said Jercash in two voices. “Ya know, last I checked, this place was being protected by the Vannies. I’m not goin’ senile, am I?”

A small red-haired woman shuffled up next to him. Her thin-rimmed glasses didn’t do much to conceal the diagonal scar down the middle of her face. “No, sir,” she said, rifling through a briefcase. “Our latest intelligence placed thirteen mid-level threats in this town only five days

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Royo holstered his weapon as the “dead” superman’s body hit the ground, blood splattering and sizzling against the uneven stone.

The ghost squirmed in his grip, but the glove allowed him to maintain his hold. Its horrific face almost made him want to destroy it, but he knew that to be his own, unjustifiable impulse. As he understood it, the reason the supermen existed in the first place was because these ghosts retained no powers or potency of their own.

“Lorios, was it?” said Royo, and the ghost stopped moving. “I cannot hear anything you are saying, but you needn’t worry. I will not hurt you. You may not believe me, but I hold great affection for your Manuel. I promise to reward him for his heroism as soon as it is within my power to do so.”

The reaper could not respond, of course, but Royo allowed a moment for it anyway, just in case some new revelation occurred. He took the opportunity to look over the treasure on this side of the room, and though there was certainly plenty to admire, nothing in particular caught his eye or sparked a sense of recognition. He wished he had devoted more time to studying such artifacts.

“However,” Royo eventually continued, “I do not know if this qualifies as a victory in this tournament, so I would like you to voice your surrender to Malast, if possible. I believe he can hear you, no?”

More silence as he waited.

He decided to release the ghost, if only to build back a modicum of trust. He still kept his eye on it, though. He’d only heard that they were powerless. He still wanted to be prepared for any unpleasant surprises.

But when his vision began to distort in that familiar way, Royo knew that he had indeed made it through the first round.



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"1520

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Jercash exhaled through his mouth. "Well, this is inconvenient." He half-turned toward everyone. "Spread out and see what you can make of this mess," he said more loudly. "Groups of three. Zenia, Liar--you're with me."

They all dispersed, leaving only the red-haired woman with the briefcase, Germal, and Germal's reaper, Nerovoy.

To Jercash's eyes, the reaper was a simple plastic bag, fluttering noiselessly through the air. It was a far cry from the skeletal phantasms that he perceived them as in his youth.

They made their way toward the carved-out heart of the town, not particularly bothered by all the bodies around. Jercash could sense that they were certainly not pretending to be dead, as none of them

had souls--nor were there any souls lingering around, waiting to be ferried.

"It looks like the aftermath of a hurricane," said Germal, "but Kavia doesn't get such weather."

"Yeah, it was probably one or more of our eager young guns," said Jercash. "Kids these days."

'Perhaps it was the work of Hada,' said Nerovoy.

Jercash knew the reaper was probably joking, but he didn't see much point in gracing that with a response. The God of Storms was not likely to have suddenly started existing. More plausibly, it was someone trying to feed an aberration, though he kept that guess to himself, in case it proved wrong later.

"You never told us what you planned to do here," said Germal.

"Yes, and there was a reason for that," said Jercash plainly. "I don't know you, and they call you the Liar of Lyste. When I combine those two facts, I've got myself a paranoia sandwich."

"I see," said Germal. "I thought I would have your trust implicitly, as I have Gohvis'."

Jercash snickered. "Gohvis doesn't trust you. And if you think he does, you're a fool." He stopped walking in order to spin around and put his face right up to Germal's. "Which begs the question. Are you a fool? Or are you lying to me?"

Germal met his gaze steadily, not balking, but not saying anything, either.

Jercash merely waited. He deliberately chose not to pressure him with his soul. He wanted Germal's response to be of the man's own choosing. In a way, that would be more informative than trying to coerce the truth out of him.

That, and he wasn't entirely sure that such a tactic would work on this person. There was just something about him that gave Jercash that impression. Maybe it was the horn. Right in the middle of the guy's forehead? And the way it curved ever so slightly to the left?

So weird.

Jercash didn't like it much, and he normally enjoyed creepy things.

"...You are right, sir," said Germal. "I was lying."

Jercash laughed and turned away again. "There, you see? You really do deserve that name."

"I do apologize, sir," said Germal, sounding genuinely ashamed now. "I wasn't thinking."

Jercash didn't really care, either way. It wasn't the first time he'd been lied to by a supposed ally, and it wouldn't be the last.

'He meant no disrespect,' said Nerovoy. 'It's a compulsion of his. Sometimes, he simply can't help himself.' He shot a glance at Germal. 'It can be a real problem, when he's not careful.'"

"1521

"That sounds pretty annoying," said Jercash, hardly even listening to the words coming out of his own mouth. "You must have lived a difficult life, eh?" He was more concerned with the environment. The town of Orobell had held a special place in his heart, once upon a time. To see it reduced to rubble was leaving him with mixed feelings. Partly solemn, for that angelic woman who had lived here a hundred years past; and partly ecstatic, for all the insects who would no longer be a drain on the planet's resources.

"I have had my share of sorrows, yes," said Germal, "but now I find the future looking rather bright."

"That so?"

"Yes," said Germal. "A-and please allow me to apologize again for my indiscretion. I hope I have not soured you to me as an ally. I have nothing but admiration for you and the work you've done, ledo."

"Oh, don't worry about it so much." Jercash waved his hand. "I'm a very forgiving person by nature." He wasn't.

'In that case, would you mind telling us why you wanted to come to this place?' said Nerovoy.

"Eh, I suppose there's no harm in it at this point," said Jercash. "See,

the idea was to infiltrate this group, not exterminate it. I had reason to believe that they had ties to the Hammer, so it would've been nice if we could've used these poor dead folks here in order to get a leg up on him."

"Are you saying that this was Kane's hometown?" said Germal.

"That, or something similar. Supposedly."

"Wouldn't that mean he could be on his way here, at this very moment?"

"Heh. Wouldn't that be something?"

Germal's expression suggested that he did not agree.

'If you truly had credible intelligence,' said Nerovoy, 'then why did you not spread this information far and wide?'

Jercash snorted. "'Credible' might've been a strong word for it. And who would you suggest I tell, exactly?" He spared the reaper a brief glare. "I am Abolish."

That gave Nerovoy pause, perhaps only then realizing precisely how true that statement was. 'Y-you could've told Dozer, surely.'

"I did. But he's got plenty of other concerns. And he never listens to me, anyway."

Jercash knew that he mostly had Jackson to thank for his recent "promotion," such as it was, but that was only insofar as appearances were concerned.

The truth of the matter was that Jercash had been the tip of the spear for quite a few years now. Decades, arguably--though he knew many who would indeed argue that.

Sure, the names Dozer and Morgunov still struck far more fear than his own, and they likely would continue to do so for many more years--which was fine with him. Preferable, actually. But the reality, at least from his perspective, was that those two barely ever did anything anymore."

"1522

Morgunov had descended so far into his own madness now that he hadn't left his laboratory more than a handful of times in the last thirty years. The lunatic might of course still show up one day and surprise everyone, but he certainly couldn't be relied upon to do that.

And Dozer? Jercash couldn't say he fully understood what he was planning, but the old bastard seemed to have grown so paranoid that his actions had become indistinguishable from cowardice.

And sure, Gunther and Dunhouser had been much more reliable--each one a powerhouse in his own right, with plenty of strong and loyal followers. But that was about all they'd been. Men of action. Not men of forethought.

Certainly, losing both of them at once had been a major blow to Abolish's military strength, but it was for the best. Weapons you couldn't control were never truly part of your arsenal, anyway.

Jercash felt quite good about his decision to delay his own men from answering Dunhouser's request for reinforcements. He couldn't imagine a better outcome, unless Jackson had died along with them. At least now, some genuine direction might be able to take hold.

It was still a bit crazy to him, though, the fact that Gohvis hadn't shown any interest in picking up the pieces left by their deaths.

Had he known that this was what Jercash wanted? It seemed like he had, but how could that be? Did Gohvis simply know him that well? Pretty unfair, if so.

Even if the Monster didn't make for a very reliable or even consistent ally, the sheer enigma of that man had never ceased to pique Jercash's interest.

Then, of course, there was Ivan. For the time being, rescuing that stupid asshole was probably more trouble than it was worth, what with Iceheart being the one guarding his frozen head.

Ideally, Jercash would be able to raise someone up to take Ivan's place as head of all the intelligence divisions--a few someones, actually. Rather than putting all of their eggs in one basket, as Ivan had done, it would be much more effective to share the highest levels of intelligence-gathering between multiple heads. Voss, Xen, and

Caster had already taken to their new positions pretty well, but it was still early days, and Jercash had several backup candidates in mind.

Still, he'd probably want to go retrieve Ivan, eventually. That was going to be a pain in the ass.

Oh, and he supposed there was Vanderberk to consider, too, but fuck that guy. At least he might be useful if Kane really did show up.

Jercash doubted that would happen, though, and even if it did, he'd taken precautions. Teams of scouts had been patrolling the area forty miles out for the past few days. There would be plenty of warning, in the event that Kane decided to show his fat face here.

And besides, Jercash had a couple new toys in the bag over his shoulder that he wouldn't mind testing on a truly worthy adversary. He'd never been the most bloodthirsty--compared to his comrades, at least--but it wouldn't do to shy away from conflict too much. That was how wolves became sheep."

"1523

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Jercash stopped in front of the largest remaining structure in town, seemingly. A clock tower. It looked like it had been struck by lightning a few dozen times, and its bottom floor was completely filled with rubble. The actual clock face was on the ground, charred black and bent, and Jercash prodded it with the toe of his boot.

That was a couple hundred years of history down the drain, some of which had been his own. He recalled stealing a kiss while standing in this very spot.

He felt empty.

A very familiar feeling.

"Are you alright, sir?" came Zenia's voice.

Jercash looked at her. She seemed concerned about him. Of course she did. She was still young. And as far as secretaries went, she was probably the most doting one he'd ever had.

She was attractive, to his eyes, despite the scar. Perhaps even because of it. She was wounded, both inside and out. It complemented her, as a person, he felt.

All things considered, he might've married her by now, if he didn't like her so much.

He patted her gently on the head. "I'm fine," he said.

That seemed to appease her, and she relaxed.

What expression had been on his face to cause her to worry about him, he wondered? It wasn't the first time she'd noticed something like that.

He'd have to be more conscious of such things in the future. It wouldn't do to cause his cute little Zenia to be any more concerned about him than necessary. She already had plenty of reason to be worried that the Vanguard would kill him next.

He noticed Koh approaching from the right, and he had someone on his back. A little girl with frayed pigtails and ashes all over her. She was clinging to the Man-Eater's silvery fur as if her life depended on it, and the look on her tiny, tear-stricken face was one Jercash had seen many times before.

Abject horror.

It was no surprise. The safe assumption was that she'd grown up in this town and seen it torn to pieces, perhaps even seen her own family slaughtered in front of her.

Jercash had no sympathy for her, old and callous as he knew himself to be, but he did understand what she was going through, at least.

She'd seen Hell. The Hell that humanity makes for itself. And in all likelihood, Abolish had shown it to her. Perhaps now, her eyes could be opened to the truth. Or maybe she'd simply direct all her hate at Abolish and grow up to take revenge on them one day.

It could go either way, at this point.

Heh, or she could alternatively take comfort in some pacifistic mindset. That was technically possible, though Jercash had yet to witness such a transformation with his own eyes. Pacifists had always interested him. They were like alien lifeforms--all but impossible for him to

understand, but fascinating nonetheless."  
"1524

As Koh neared their group, Jercash offered to take the girl from him, but the dog only growled at him, his jaw already visibly slick with blood. Instead, Koh carried her over to Germal, who leaned in, as if to examine her.

"I wasn't going to hurt her," Jercash felt compelled to say.

Koh just stared back at him.

A sudden question occurred to him. "Where are Vanderberk and Rita? Didn't they go with you?"

Koh spat out half of a human skull.

Jercash's expression flattened as he looked at it. "You killed both of them?"

Koh let out a beastly snort that somehow still managed to sound smug.

Jercash eyed the Man-Eater again. He'd known that Koh was powerful. Of course he had. But to eat Vanderberk, just like that? A guy who'd recently gotten Gohvis' vague approval?

Come to think of it, Gohvis had mentioned something about Koh biting Ivan's head off, too.

Just how strong was this dog, anyway?

It almost made Jercash want to test him and find out. Without the ability to speak, Koh would never be able to occupy a leadership position and be regarded as Jercash's equal in terms of rank, unless his reaper could fill that gap for him. Jercash had yet to meet whoever that was, which only left Jercash with even more questions.

Gohvis' men truly were ridiculous.

"...Tell me you didn't kill their reapers, too," said Jercash.

And Koh did nothing.



Jercash glowered. "You've been a very good dog so far," he said with a darkness that didn't match the words. "Do you want me to start treating you like a bad dog?"

A tense moment transpired.

Then Koh's torso contracted and flexed, and the dog coughed up two reapers as if he were suddenly a cat and they were hairballs.

They barely retained their form, having both been rendered into unconsciousness while covered in soul-empowered drool and bile.

Jercash grimaced and picked them both up. He wiped them against his coat.

"You will be alright now, cedo," Germal was saying softly as he brushed the tears from the little girl's face with his thumb. He'd been whispering to her for a while, and even now, Jercash could barely hear him. "Don't you worry. We will take care of you. There is no safer place in this world than by our side."

And to the horned man's credit, she actually did look better. Her eyes were still puffy and red, but her posture and breathing had relaxed.

Germal's next words were loud enough that he must have meant for Jercash to hear them. "Do you think you can tell us who did this to your town, cedo? Do you remember them?"

She didn't answer.

Germal patted her head. "It's okay if you don't, cedo. We won't be angry. But I want you to try and think back, just in case."

Jercash didn't think that was going to work. Not yet anyway. The girl was obviously traumatized beyond words. Perhaps in time--

"I remember," she said in a voice that was even smaller than her."

"1525

"Good," said Germal. "That's very good." He kept one hand on her forehead, as if checking her temperature, and with his other hand, he dug into his travel bag and produced a syringe with a detached and still-wrapped hyopdermic needle.

Jercash cocked an eyebrow. "What are you giving her?"

"Nothing yet," said Germal. "This is only a precaution. Go on, cedo. Tell us what you remember."

"It was the Flying Man," she said, sounding surprisingly calm. Almost eerily so. "He killed all the grownups. Boom. Flash. I heard their screams. Boom. Flash. It was so loud. It hurt my ears. Boom. Flash. He killed mommy and daddy. Boom. Flash. Then the others showed up. The Flying Man's friends. The Smiling Man. The Green Man. They argued. The Green Man saw me. He tried to get me. He said he wanted to eat me. But the Flying Man stopped him. Boom. Flash. The Green Man's arm came off." She started shaking. "The Flying Man. The Flying Man said. He said--he said I--he told me--" Spittle began to form on her lips, and her eyes started rolling back into her head.

"Tch!" Germal tore the wrapping off the hypodermic needle with his teeth as he dug into his bag again for one rubber glove and snapped it on. He screwed the needle onto the syringe, then tapped the side of the tube with one hand while grabbing a swab from his bag with his other. He sterilized a small area on her arm and finally plunged the needle into it, pressing down steadily with his thumb.

Jercash observed in silence. He'd seen more than his share of medical emergencies and had therefore picked up a modest degree of knowledge on the subject. He understood the procedure of what had just happened, but not why. She'd obviously just had some kind of seizure or similar neurological problem, but what in the world had caused it?

"She has a condition," said Germal, having apparently predicated what Jercash was thinking.

"Epilepsy?" guessed Jercash, not really convinced he was right. His medical "expertise"--if it could even be called that--had more to do with gaping wounds, severed limbs, and so forth.

"Something like that," was all Germal told him. He felt her forehead again.

Her eyes returned to normal, but only for a second before easing shut. She went limp, and Germal scooped her up before she could fall off of Koh. Germal put his ear up to her face, probably to make sure she was still breathing, and then checked her pulse.

After a few moments, Germal appeared to relax. Zenia helped him return his tools to his bag for him while he shifted the girl's weight into a more comfortable carrying posture. Koh nuzzled up to the one-horned man, perhaps offering to carry her again, but Germal just shook his head.

Nerovoy floated closer to Jercash. "You don't mind if we take her with us, do you?"

"1526

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"I intended to, anyway," said Jercash, eyeing Germal. Zenia spoke the words that were on his mind.

"I didn't know you had medical training, Mr. Germal," she said. "Oh, or should I call you Dr. Germal?"

"Just Germal is fine," he said.

"Do you have any other hidden skills?" said Jercash.

"Oh, a few. As I'm sure you do."

Jercash thought he sensed reluctance. "You don't wish to tell me about them?"

"This hardly seems like the time or the place, wouldn't you agree?"

Jercash wasn't so sure that he did. "As your superior, it would be quite helpful if I knew the full extent of your capabilities."

Germal bobbed his head to the side a little. "That is understandable. Very understandable, indeed. But I am not sure Gohvis would appreciate me saying too much."

"Oh, well, if he gets mad, you can just tell him I forced it out of you."

Germal paused, that blank-yet-friendly expression still perfectly guarding his thoughts, as usual.

Jercash wondered if he was privately consulting Nerovoy.

“Hmm,” Germal eventually said. “If you insist, sir, then I suppose I cannot refuse. My fields of expertise are psychology, neurology, and medicine.”

“Mm. Anything else?”

“Oh, I’m also an expert deliveryman, if that counts.”

“Quite the curious skill set you’ve got.”

“Perhaps. But such is life, no? We go through the doors that open, wherever opportunity takes us.”

Jercash wanted to keep prodding, but he couldn’t think of any other relevant questions.

‘Would you mind if Germal and I took the girl somewhere to rest?’ said Nerovoy.

“You’re that concerned about her?” said Jercash.

‘A bit, yes. But I was also thinking Germal wouldn’t be much use to you here with his hands full.’

Jercash wanted to refuse for some reason he couldn’t articulate, but he caught himself and decided to cool it with all this irrational suspicion, for now. He knew only too well about the dangers of paranoia for servants his age. He wasn’t going to end up like his mentor. “Alright. Report back to me by midnight.”

‘Yes, sir.’

He watched them go.

When Koh turned to join them, however, it tickled his distrust again.

“You,” said Jercash with force. “You stay with me, Koh. I’d still like to get to know you better.”

The dog looked at him, then at Germal’s shrinking back, then at him again. For a second, Jercash thought the dog might disobey him. But he stayed.

“Good boy,” said Jercash.

Koh had no reaction to that.

Jercash tilted his head at him. "Do you like being treated like a dog? Or does it annoy you?"

Koh just snorted.

"I don't know what that means. Seriously, tell me if you don't like it right now, or I'm just gonna keep doing it. I'm very much a dog person, you see." His own words made him crack up. "I mean, not as much as you, obviously! But you get my point, right?"

"1527

((Double Saturday -- Page 2 of 2))

Still, Koh made no response.

"...Alright, then," said Jercash, immediately wanting to test the limits. He pointed at Koh authoritatively. "Sit."

And to both his and Zenia's utter shock, Koh sat.

Jercash stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "Uh... roll over?"

Koh rolled over.

Jercash squealed with delight and ran over to the giant dog. "Oh, you're such a good boy! Yes, you are!" He rubbed behind Koh's ears with both hands. "And you're so fluffy! How did you get so fluffy, huh?! Just a big softie, is what you are! Yeah!"

"Sir, this is making me a little uncomfortable..."

"Shut up, Zenia! Don't ruin this for me! Do you know long I've been wanting to get a dog?! Ever since Thrasher died!"

"I don't know who that is, sir."

"Oh, right, that was before your time. Well, it was about forty years ago. Thrasher was this big, beastly pit bull, you see. Not anywhere near as big as Koh here, of course--nor as well-behaved, for that matter. In fact, now that I'm thinking about it, he was a real asshole. Always trying to bite people, including me. He ended up getting mauled by a mountain lion, but in all honesty, he probably provoked it. Still miss him, though." Jercash allowed a beat to pass. "Hey, why

don't you come over here and pet Koh with me? You won't believe how soft his fur is!"

"I'll pass on that, sir."

"What, are you worried he'll bite you?" He turned to look directly at Koh's huge face. "You wouldn't do that, would you? Because you know that Zenia's not a servant, and that roughhousing wouldn't be a good idea, right? And you know that if you harmed her in any way, I would go tear the head off of that little girl you just saved and smile to myself afterwards. You know all that, don't you? Because you're such a good boy!"

Koh met his gaze evenly, but that was the extent of his reaction.

Jercash waved Zenia over. "C'mon."

She remained where she was. "I'd still rather not..."

Jercash smacked his lips and went back to petting Koh. "Your loss."

"Sir," said Zenia, taking that stern tone that Jercash so rarely got to hear from her, "you still have considerable work left to get done today, do you not?"

Of course he did. He had a crapload of reports waiting for him back at camp, and most of his men were going to need new marching orders after the dead end that Orobell turned out to be. He was still holding onto hope that there might be something helpful to be found in the ruins of this town, but he wasn't going to be surprised if it didn't turn out that way.

That girl's testimony had certainly been interesting, though. He fully intended to look into who else was stationed here in Kavia, right now, because even with access to Izalog's impeccable memory, he wasn't recalling any Abolishers who had the kind of power that would be required to level this town full of Vanguardians."

"1528

That meant only one of two things, really. Either there was a third power at play here, aggressive toward the Vanguard and therefore a potential new ally; or one of his lovely subordinates had recently acquired a substantial power boost.

He hoped it was the latter. Abolish always had a use for new rising stars, and it had been a while since he'd gotten to promote someone. It was always a nice feeling, getting to see dramatic growth in the youngsters.

Except when it went to their heads, of course.

Jercash sensed Horace's rapid approach with fifteen or so seconds to spare.

Horace was one of his stronger subordinates. He'd mastered pan-rozum almost completely, which was quite the threatening boost for his manganese transfiguration ability.

Jercash sensed the man's pan-rozum merge from more than fifty meters away, which was more than enough warning, really, even if the man had been one of those ever-annoying light wielders. So Jercash had plenty of time to react. He even had time to realize that it wasn't himself who was being attacked but Vanderberk's reaper, the unconscious Elinox.

Trying to create yet another opening in upper management, most likely.

Sadly, as much as Jercash might have liked to let Vanderberk eat shit here and die permanently, that would ultimately be counterproductive. So he raised Elinox out of the way of a sudden bed of manganese spikes and batted away the incoming javelins as well.

To his credit, Horace seemed to realize his failure immediately, but even by then, it was too late. Jercash was already on him, having found the man's neck with his free hand.

Both of Jercash's hands were full now--Horace's neck in his right, and Elinox in his left. But that wasn't a problem, because he just grew a third hand out of his chest. This one was made mostly out of beryllium, as per his transfiguration ability, but it functioned just as well.

He used it to rip the reaper right out of Horace's body, along with a few ribs, muscles, and organs. Horace collapsed immediately, and Jercash set to work freezing his head, though he deliberately took his time with it.

"Horace, Horace, Horace," said Jercash, shaking his head. "What am I going to do with you?"

Horace couldn't answer, partly because his lungs needed time to regrow and partly because of the lingering disorientation that came with leaving a hyper-state.

The man's reaper was still conscious enough to talk, however. 'F-forgive us, Hahth Jercash! I don't know what came over us! It was madness! We would never dream of standing against--!'

"Shh-shh-shhh," hushed Jercash, squeezing the reaper enough to cause concern but not to kill. "As the saying goes, I'm not angry with you. I'm just disappointed."

The reaper was apparently too afraid to respond now.

"A blind frontal assault from fifty meters away?" said Jercash. "Really? Did you learn nothing from me? It would've been so much smarter to act casual, get up close, and then try to kill Elinox." He indulged in a pause for timing. "It still wouldn't have worked on me, but it definitely would've been smarter, is all I'm saying."

"1529 -- CLXIV.

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'Please!' the reaper tried. 'I-it all happened so quickly! I don't understand what came over us! One minute we were talking--'

"Calm yourself," commanded Jercash. "I'm not going to kill you. For now. Later? Maybe. But you'll have plenty of time to work on your excuses until then, so try not to lose your head, hmm? You'll need it."

The reaper fell silent at that, which was probably wise.

He made a small, round cage for Horace's frozen head and his reaper.

Jercash didn't like killing his own men, and he especially didn't like killing their reapers. Servants could be released if they got too far out of line, but reapers were a precious commodity. Very difficult to replace and always risky to do so.

Still, he could hardly believe that Horace had tried to do something so stupid. Sure, it wasn't terribly surprising that one of his subordinates would let their ambition get to them during these times of



organizational turmoil, but it certainly was surprising how incompetently Horace had gone about it.

Jercash had only been half-joking when he'd chastised the reaper about their plan of attack. Horace didn't have the most impressive mental fortitude, but the man should have known better than to attack Vanderberk's reaper while Jercash was standing right there. He definitely should have known.

...What if he had?

Jercash stopped. He looked up and around, surveying the ruins of Orobell another time.

What if Horace had known better? What would that mean? Would that mean his goal hadn't truly been to kill Vanderberk? What would it have been, then? To test Jercash? To get a glimpse of his power?

It was true that not many people knew what Jercash was capable of in combat. He much preferred it that way.

Ah.

There was that paranoia again.

It wasn't going to let up anytime soon, was it?

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Four: 'Assess and have forethought...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector never managed to learn his name, as apparently this Hun'Kui didn't speak Mohssian like Eleyo did, and Hector had to struggle through trying to speak Hunese at Garovel's instruction.

Eventually, the Hun'Kui man appeared to understand what was going on, at which point, Hector was more than prepared to be attacked, but the man surrendered immediately, instead.

That was how Hector passed the first round.

In the second chamber, he found Mr. Sheridan, already rifling through the treasure scattered around it. The man didn't seem to have any idea what was going on, and Hector ended up explaining the situation to him, too.

"Fighting?" said Mr. Sheridan. "You fought someone before coming here?"

"Well, not technically, but sort of." That brought a question to Hector's mind. "But wait. Does that mean you didn't fight someone?"

"Sure didn't. Just been siftin' through the goods here, tryin' not to worry too much about how the hell I'm gonna get outta this place."

Hector didn't want to doubt the man, but he hadn't known him very long at all and so had to wonder if that was really true. 'Think he's lying?' he asked Garovel."

"1529 -- CLXIV.

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

'Please!' the reaper tried. 'I-it all happened so quickly! I don't understand what came over us! One minute we were talking--'

"Calm yourself," commanded Jercash. "I'm not going to kill you. For now. Later? Maybe. But you'll have plenty of time to work on your excuses until then, so try not to lose your head, hmm? You'll need it."

The reaper fell silent at that, which was probably wise.

He made a small, round cage for Horace's frozen head and his reaper.

Jercash didn't like killing his own men, and he especially didn't like killing their reapers. Servants could be released if they got too far out of line, but reapers were a precious commodity. Very difficult to replace and always risky to do so.

Still, he could hardly believe that Horace had tried to do something so stupid. Sure, it wasn't terribly surprising that one of his subordinates would let their ambition get to them during these times of organizational turmoil, but it certainly was surprising how incompetently Horace had gone about it.

Jercash had only been half-joking when he'd chastised the reaper about their plan of attack. Horace didn't have the most impressive mental fortitude, but the man should have known better than to attack Vanderberk's reaper while Jercash was standing right there. He

definitely should have known.

...What if he had?

Jercash stopped. He looked up and around, surveying the ruins of Orobell another time.

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"1530

((Double Monday -- Page 2 of 2))

‘If he IS lying, he’s doing it pretty well,’ said Garovel. ‘If we assume that Malast forced everyone else into this tournament along with us, then that means there are eleven combatants total--unless Malast himself is participating, which would be weird. And since eleven is an uneven number, it’s very possible that Mr. Sheridan here was the odd man out and got a free pass for the first round.’

‘Hmm.’

Mr. Sheridan seemed to be having a hard time pulling his eyes away from the treasure. “Agh, if only this damn suit had more than one pocket! Talk about a design flaw!”

Hector could hardly blame him for being so preoccupied with it. As far as distractions went, it was maybe the best Hector had ever seen. He’d wanted to examine the hoard in the last room, but he’d been too concerned about a fight breaking out. He hadn’t wanted to underestimate any of the Hun’Kui, not while they had weapons that could hurt Garovel.

‘Well, you just keep an eye on him,’ said Garovel, ‘and I’ll look over the treasure! Man, what a great plan!’

Hector frowned but didn’t look away from Mr. Sheridan. It was unfair but also probably the most sensible thing to do. He wouldn’t even know what he was looking at, really, aside from just a bunch of really expensive shit.

That golden glimmer was really itching at his peripheral vision, though.

Dammit.

Mr. Sheridan was digging through another pile, scooping coins and

gems out of his way as if they were dirt.

Hector persevered. He spared a few quick glances around the chamber as well, wanting to make sure treasure wasn't distracting them from anything else that might've otherwise been obvious.

But no. It was just more rocks and lava.

Garovel was being suspiciously quiet, so Hector decided to prod him for some answers.

'Where do you think all this treasure came from?' said Hector.

'Seyos, presumably.'

'Okay, but I mean, where did he get it all?'

'Good question, especially because a lot of this stuff does not appear to be from the Undercrust.'

Hector's gaze hardened. 'Are you serious?'

'Sure am. Which means Seyos, or someone else, has been to the surface. And fairly recently, too, from the looks of it. This thing here is the Egg of Prosperity.'

Hector chanced a look at where the reaper was pointing and, indeed, saw a gold-and-silver egg inlaid with red gemstones.

'This friggin' thing is probably worth a cool mil all by itself,' said Garovel. 'Maybe more.'

'Holy shit. In troas?'

'Mmhmm. But yeah, I heard about it going missing from Yena Maria around two hundred years ago, which is not nearly as long as the Hun'Sho have been in Himmekel.'

'Hmm.'

'And I'd just like to point out that this almost certainly means I'm right about Torveis having been to the surface, too. God of Fire, my ass.'

"1531

'Why would Torveis lie about all that?' said Hector.

'Maybe because the Hun'Sho have been stealing our shit,' said Garovel. 'Look at this fucking place. There's probably enough treasure in all these rooms to buy a country.'

'They didn't seem like they cared much about money.'

'They didn't seem like they cared much about ANYTHING. Which makes me think they were hiding what they cared about.'

'Hmm, but what would they even need all this treasure for? They've just been sitting in Himmekel for a thousand years, right?'

'Well, if I had to guess, I'd say they're hoarding treasure in order to fund some sort of great revival of their people. In that sense, maybe Torveis wasn't lying. Maybe "Avar's return" is to be interpreted more metaphorically.'

'Didn't sound like he was being metaphorical...'

'Maybe he believes in it literally, despite it nonetheless being intended to be taken metaphorically.'

'Wouldn't that mean he wasn't lying to us?'

'Not about Avar, maybe, but still about how he was able to recognize a bird. That was horseshit, for sure.'

'You seem really determined to not like the Hun'Sho.'

'I'm an untrusting bastard like that.'

Hector had to bob his head a little at that. 'Maybe we both are.'

'Good, then. So you agree that the Hun'Sho are suspicious as hell.'

'I don't know. I still want to like the Hun'Sho, kinda. I mean, they can't all be bad, right? They're still individuals, same as us.'

'Yeah, yeah, fine. If you wanna be all non-racist about it.'

Hector just breathed a quiet laugh.

'Holy crappity!' the reaper suddenly exclaimed, making Hector turn briefly to look at him. 'I do believe I'm looking at the Shifting Spear of Logante! Hector, come pick this thing up!'

He hesitated but kept Mr. Sheridan within line of sight as he moved toward Garovel.

The Intarian man seemed to be preoccupied with coins now, despite having disregarded them earlier. He was holding them directly up to the visor of his suit and squinting, probably trying to read whatever was engraved on them.

Hector saw the “spear” that Garovel was pointing at. He plucked it out of a silvery pile and discovered it to be far shorter than he’d expected. It was barely bigger than a flashlight, though the blade had an admirable golden sheen to it.

‘It’s, uh... kinda small, isn’t it?’ said Hector.

‘Say, “Grokoh.”’

‘Excuse me?’

“Grokoh.” Say it aloud. Right now.’

“Uh... G-Grokoh.”

The spear immediately extended to five times its size, though Hector noticed its weight had barely changed at all.

“...Huh,” was all he had to say.

‘Now say, “Sworok,”’ said Garovel.

“Sworok.”

The spear changed shape entirely, and in the blink of an eye, Hector was holding a sword instead.

‘Pretty neat, eh?’

‘Yeah, sure, but... ah... Garovel, this seems kinda useless.’

‘What? It’s not--’ The reaper paused. ‘It’s, uh...’

‘...Can it do anything else?’

‘Sure. It can transform into all sorts of different melee weapons.’

‘...That’s great, Garovel. Real helpful.’

‘Shut up, it’s cool! I’m sure the designer just didn’t intend for it to be wielded by a materialization user!’”

"1532

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 1 of 16))

‘Is it, like, super durable or something like Haqq’s shield?’ said Hector.

‘...Not particularly, no,’ said Garovel. ‘But when it breaks, it, uh... it reforms to its... original shape...’

Hector felt a little bad, but he couldn’t say he was impressed. ‘Hmm.’

‘It has ardor in it, though. So that could be helpful, right?’

‘...Helpful, how exactly?’

‘Well, that means it can be used to hit reapers ‘n stuff.’

‘I can just use my soul for that, Garovel.’

‘Ah. Well. Maybe it would make a good gift for Lynnette.’

Hector’s expression soured somewhat from behind his helmet. There the reaper went again, trying to play the Lynn card. ‘I’m pretty sure that shadow already allows her to do all this shit, too, more or less.’

‘Yeah, okay, but. Maybe she’d just... like it? As a present?’

Somehow, Hector kinda doubted that. ‘...Can we sell it?’

‘Hector, this thing was a national treasure of Calthos, once upon a time.’

‘So... their government would pay a lot for it, then?’

‘No! It needs to be either used by someone or put in a museum!’

‘That’s pretty lame...’

‘Agh.’

‘I feel like I’m in a video game,’ said Hector.



‘What?’

‘I feel like I just opened a treasure chest or something and found a really cool weapon that I’m completely the wrong class for.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about, right now,’ said Garovel.

‘Really? None?’

‘I’m three thousand years old, and I have no hands! Why the hell would I know anything about video games?!’

‘Alright, geez. You sound pretty upset about it.’

‘Maybe I am. Maybe ever since I first learned about them, I’ve thought video games sounded like they could be really goddamn fun. And maybe I’m a little bitter about that.’

‘Eh... it’s probably for the best,’ said Hector. ‘For some reason, I feel like if reapers could play video games, you’d all get addicted and then just never stop.’

‘Oh, you mean because we exist in a state of purgatorial hell, and because video games might provide us a blissful escape from it?’

‘Uh... I meant more because you never sleep and because you’re always complaining about boredom, but, ah, that answer works, too, I guess...’

‘I’ve given the matter some thought before.’

'I can tell. And it kinda sounds like you DO know a lot about video games, actually.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Mm.'

'But I do know what we're going to be doing as soon as you and I are able to use pan-forma without killing ourselves.'

'That sounds... agh, alright, whatever. Can we focus on what's important right now? Find us something really good in all of this, Garovel.'

'I haven't stopped looking. But man, I can't believe you don't like the Shifting Spear of Logante.'

'Why does that name sound familiar, by the way?'

'Oh, maybe because we were just talking about it back in Babbadelo.'

'We were?'

'Well, us reapers were.'

Hector tried to recall but was struggling to."

"1533

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 2 of 16))

'It's a famous weapon,' said Garovel. 'Once wielded by the great hero, Logante.'

Hector was unfamiliar with the name. 'What made him a hero?'

'He prevented a civil war and brought peace to Calthos some 1300 years ago.'

'Okay, well, that's pretty cool. What happened to him?'

'Last I heard, this spear was in the belly of a particularly nasty worm, so...'

‘Logante got eaten?’

‘Probably, yeah.’

‘Wow... what a happy ending...’

‘It’s probably not the most fucked up piece of history lying around down here.’

‘Great...’

‘Oh hey. Speaking of...’ Garovel motioned to a small piece of black cloth poking out of a closed trunk. ‘I wonder if that’s... hmm.’

Hector didn’t bother asking for clarification and decided to just open the trunk straight away. It stuck on something, but with a bit more effort, he yanked the lid free.

Something long and metal came flipping out and smacked against his chest hard enough to embed itself in his breastplate.

Surprised but unharmed, Hector grabbed the apparent handle and pulled the object out to examine it.

It was a flanged mace, he realized. He recognized the design, more or less, from his research. It was fairly small and certainly shinier than the pictures he’d seen on the internet, but it felt pretty hefty in his hand, and the bulbous head looked like it would hurt to get hit with. The head had four vertical rivets, each one perpendicular to the next, and the thick spike at the tip had no doubt been what caused it to get stuck in his armor the way it had.

Hector wanted to ask Garovel about it, but the reaper was quite obviously more interested in the black cloth from before.

‘Oh my goodness,’ said Garovel slowly. ‘I was right. It’s the Scarf of Amordiin.’

“Amoor-deen?”

‘Haven’t heard of him before?’

Hector shook his head.

‘Hooboy, well. Where to begin...?’ Garovel fell quiet, perhaps gathering his thoughts.

Hector removed the Scarf and closed the trunk again in order to sit on the lid. He was abruptly feeling as though he should get comfortable for what he suspected was going to be yet another history lesson. His hands were already quite full of items to examine, anyway, between the spear, scarf, and mace.

‘Okay, well, it’s not exactly a happy tale,’ said Garovel.

‘I figured as much.’

‘You want the full version or just the highlights?’

‘Highlights, please.’

‘Full version, it is, then.’

‘Fuck you,’ said Hector, though he did laugh.

‘So Amordiin was this young guy who really wanted to make a name for himself, okay? And he got it into his head that he could accomplish this by rescuing a princess. Problem was, he couldn’t actually find any princesses who were in need of rescuing.’

‘That WOULD make the plan more difficult...’

‘Yeah, so, can you guess what he did?’

‘Uh... come up with a new plan?’

‘Aha. No. He kidnapped the crown princess of Vantalay.’

‘Oh. That’s, um... hmm.’

‘Yeah.’”

"1534

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 3 of 16))

‘I’m guessing that didn’t work out too well for him,’ said Hector.

‘Actually, it worked out incredibly well,’ said Garovel.

‘Are you serious?’

‘Yep. Amordiin was able to successfully disguise himself as his own “villain.” And then he staged a “rescue” of the princess while she was nearby, so she was able to hear but not see what was going on. So he saved her from himself and became a hero, praised by all.’

‘...I don’t know if I believe you, Garovel.’

‘I’m telling you, it’s true. It was a whole big thing among us reapers for a while, because there weren’t many servants around in Vantalay at the time. Certainly not any interventionist types. We were just there, exercising our neutrality, ferrying souls, and watching this horse’s ass take over the kingdom. It was amazing to witness. Like a soap opera long before television was invented.’

‘Wait, he TOOK OVER the kingdom?’

‘Oh yeah. You didn’t think the story was done, did you? Once he became a hero, that was just the first step. He steadily increased his fame, doing all kinds of ridiculous and unsavory shit, until eventually, he ascended to the throne himself and became its new king.’

Hector eyed the black cloth in his hand. ‘How does the scarf fit into all this?’

‘He was always wearing that, no matter what he was doing. Even in the bath, he didn’t take it off.’

Hector wasn’t sure he wanted to keep holding it all of a sudden. ‘Ew.’

‘Oh, it’s fine. This was seven hundred years ago. Or eight. Or five. I’m fuzzy on the timeline, but the point is, he considered this scarf to be very valuable. And who knows? Maybe it’ll help us mimic his success.’

‘I don’t know if I want be like that guy, Garovel...’

‘Oh, don’t get me wrong. He was a piece of shit. I’m not saying you should consider him a role model.’

‘Hmm. Was he a bad king?’

‘That’s debatable. As with pretty much any ruler, he did some good things and some bad things. And during his reign of thirty or so years, Vantalay was peaceful.’

‘I’m sensing a “but” on the way...’

‘But... as he got older, he became rather ruthless and enacted a few policies that his subjects didn’t agree with. He was ultimately overthrown and beheaded in front of his family.’

‘Holy fuck.’

‘Yeah, it was pretty awful.’

‘Do you know any stories that DON’T end in gruesome death?’

Garovel tilted his head upward as he thought about it. And kept thinking about it.

‘Garovel?’

‘Yeah, no, they pretty much all end in gruesome death. The only ones that don’t--well. They haven’t finished yet.’

‘Wow, that’s... great, Garovel. Real comforting.’

‘What do you want from me? I’m a reaper of death, not a children’s author.’

Hector decided to try and get the conversation back on track. ‘You still haven’t explained what makes the scarf so special.’

‘Oh, that? I dunno.’

‘Are you fucking kidding me, Garovel? What was the point of telling me that whole story, then?’

‘There needed to be a point?’

‘Agh...’

"1535

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 4 of 16))

‘Learning about history is a point unto itself,’ said Garovel.

‘Learning about history? Or explaining about history?’

‘What’re you tryin’ to say?’

Hector exhaled and shook his head. They were getting sidetracked again. ‘You really can’t tell me anything useful about this scarf?’

‘Well, okay, so Amordiin had a lot of “interesting” items like this--items which I suspect gave him extraordinary aid in various ways. He seemed to acquire more as he gained fame, supposedly from a “witch” or “coven of witches,” depending on who you ask. As far as I know, he also had a mask, a dagger, a hat, and a couple rings, but--’

‘You’re still not telling me anything about the scarf, Garovel.’

‘Would you quit being so impatient?! Just let me finish!’

Hector wanted to talk back some more, but he held his tongue.

‘Amordiin had his scarf and mask from the beginning, meaning they were likely the most instrumental in his rise to power. So while we may not know what this item is capable of specifically, we know that it helped him sneak into a castle full of soldiers and kidnap the most well-protected woman in the land.’

‘Hmm.’ Hector wished he could touch the scarf with his bare hands, but his armor was in the way. It did seem incredibly light, though, even for a piece of cloth. Almost like a feather, fluttering and trying to catch the breeze at even the slightest of Hector’s movements.

‘Why don’t you try putting it on?’ said Garovel.

‘You sure it’s safe?’

‘Absolutely not, but when has that ever stopped us?’

A horrifically good point, Hector supposed. He set his two weapons down and stood up.

He’d never actually worn a scarf before, though. He decided to just open up a hole in his armor and wrap it around his torso like a stomach warmer, trying not to cringe too badly at the searing pain of the Undercrust’s heat before closing the hole back up.

He waited, focusing his mind away from the pain and more or less succeeding, though maybe not as well as he would’ve liked.

He kept waiting.

And kept waiting.

'...I'm not feeling anything special,' said Hector.

'Is it touching your skin?'

'Yeah.' He had made sure to tuck a bit of it up and under his shirt.

'Well, shit. Maybe you're wearing it wrong?'

He definitely was, but he didn't see what difference it made.

'Try wearing it over your armor, instead,' said Garovel.

Hector's mouth flattened in his helmet. 'Wouldn't that be bad in a fight? My opponent could just yank it and throw me off balance or something.'

'Look, I dunno, just try it, okay? You don't have to wear it that way forever. And besides, it'll look cooler.'

Hector sighed but did as he was bid, enduring more pain in order to remove the scarf and subsequently wrap it around his neck. It was quite long, probably meant to be worn by someone taller, and he didn't want too much bulk around his neck, so he forewent any extra loops and let it drape over his back instead."

"1536

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 4 of 16))

Still, Hector didn't feel any different, until he remembered to make sure the scarf was touching his skin. He nestled it in between his helmet and his breastplate, wincing against more burning pain from the heated iron around his own fingers.

But even that didn't--

Wait.

No.

Something was different. Very different. But he couldn't quite tell how



just yet because of the pain still being there. It was making it much more difficult to focus, and he still had to keep renewing his armor, as well.

That was three things, all wanting attention from him simultaneously. The armor, the pain, and this still undefined sensation.

Stubbornly, perhaps, he didn't want to ask Garovel to numb his pain. He wanted to compartmentalize it in his own head, cordon it off with nothing but his own ability to concentrate. He'd already been treating his armor this way while he'd been carrying on conversations with Garovel and everyone else, so why couldn't he extend it a step further?

It was difficult. He felt his armor waver as his concentration did, and traces of heat started leaking in, adding a fresh dose of pain to the still lingering quantity.

He just had to think about three things at once. Or rather, he had to not think about them. That seemed to be the real trick of it, he'd come to realize back in Himmekel. It wasn't about trying to divide his attention between them. It was about treating each thing as if it didn't necessarily need his attention. Just letting it exist there in his head. Like a growing plant. It didn't require constant attention. Just every now and then. Attention was like water. The idea could take root in the soil of his mind on its own, if he would just allow it to.

That was his theory, at least.

It wasn't panning out very well for him, though. Physical pain was a different kind of demanding, as far as attention was concerned, and Hector couldn't figure out how to just let it sit there in his head like the other two things--not before all of his concentration began crumbling around him.

He staggered forward a couple steps and hunched over.

Time to admit failure, he knew.

"Okay," he muttered between groans and strained breaths, "please numb my pain, Garovel."

'You have to make an opening in your armor for me.'

He growled and annihilated one of his pauldrons. Relief arrived a second later, spreading instantly from the reaper's grip on his

shoulder.

Hector took a haggard breath and sat back down on the trunk. "I guess three is too many..." He wondered if that number was a hard limit, or if he might be able to eventually overcome it with more training.

'Three?' said Garovel.

'Oh, uh. It's just, ah... well, I'll tell you later.' He hadn't really been explaining the details of his training to Garovel, lately. The reaper probably thought he'd just been meditating normally and working on materialization. This probably wasn't the time or the place to go into it, though, he felt."

"1537

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 5 of 16))

'Are you okay?' said Garovel. 'Did the scarf do something?'

'Yeah, I'm fine,' said Hector. 'But I don't know if it--ah. Just. Gimme a second. I have to concentrate.'

'Alright...'

Hector refocused. He fixed his armor first, then tried to understand what this new sensation was. Whatever it was, it made everything around him feel different. It was almost like being underwater. Or in a windstorm, maybe.

Yeah. That was it.

Air.

He could feel air breaking against him, almost as if he were standing at the top of a skyscraper, being buffeted by wind. Or maybe... maybe it was more like he was the skyscraper. Because the wind, even as strongly as he could feel it, didn't cause him to flinch or move at all.

Where was it coming from, this wind? It wasn't making any sound.

He stood up again to look around.

Whoa.

He felt the entire chamber shift. Like a somehow stationary earthquake.

But no. That wasn't right, he realized. The room hadn't shifted. It had just become clear to him. The room itself had. He could practically see it now, the entire space that filled the room.

It was the air again. Specifically, the air's movement. He could sense it, the flowing lines of it.

What a strange room. Entirely encapsulated in rock and a couple pools of magma. There was nowhere for the air to escape to, but it was still being slowly and perpetually pushed upward, probably by heat. And when it reached the ceiling, it had to stop and be pushed aside by the air below it, which created a new kind of air current around the walls of the chamber. A cyclical flow.

Hector took a step, and the air became even clearer to him. Crisper in his mind.

The scarf. It was behind him, but he could see its movements because of the air, too. In fact, that was where the movement was clearest, he realized.

He was beginning to get the picture.

'I think... ah...' How to explain? Hector took a deep breath and noticed that he could sense that, too, escaping through the crevices in his helmet.

Holy crap, this was all a little overwhelming.

'You think what?' said Garovel.

'Ah... I think this scarf is like a... a kind of "air pressure sensor" or something.'

'Air pressure sensor?' the reaper echoed. 'You can sense air pressure now?'

'I... guess so? Or, uh... maybe that's not quite right. I can sense "airflow," I think.'

'Hmm. Interesting.'

Hector tried taking another step, and indeed, his sense of the whole room became clearer again.

Oh, wait, but it was also getting slowly duller again, too. Each passing second, his sense of the air in the room weakened slightly.

Why? Because of his own movement?

He lifted a hand.

Yep. Mystery solved.

‘Seems like I can sense the movement of the air best when I myself am moving,’ said Hector. ‘It’s like a... a domino effect or something.’

‘Domino effect?’

"1538

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 6 of 16))

‘Yeah,’ said Hector. ‘Like, um... when I move, it makes the air move a little, which then makes it even easier for me to sense it, I guess?’

‘Oh, I get what you mean. You make the air move, and then that air pushes against more air--to a lesser degree, of course--but you’re saying you can still sense it, even at that lesser degree? Like air dominoes, is what you were trying to say?’

‘Er, yeah... I think.’

‘That was a weird analogy, Hector.’

‘Wha--how would you describe it, then?’

‘Oh, as “waves,” maybe? Y’know, the way a normal person would conceptualize it?’

‘I... ah... hmm.’

‘Your movement causes air to move away from you in waves, and the scarf allows you to sense those waves, no?’

As Hector thought about that, it did seem to make more sense than

dominoes.

Well, shit.

‘It’s okay,’ said Garovel. ‘I’m beginning to see a pattern with you and weird descriptions of things, though.’

Hector tilted his head. ‘What’re you talking about? I don’t, ah... do I?’

The reaper chortled. ‘Do you remember that time you described Lynn’s purple shadow as “death-taffy?”’

He did. ‘Hey. That was... that was accurate, wasn’t it?’

‘I never said your descriptions were inaccurate. Just weird.’

‘Hmph.’

‘Anyway, what else is the movement of the air telling you?’ said Garovel.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well. I guess what I’m really wondering is if the airflow is allowing you to sense the locations of objects around you.’

‘Oh. Yeah, it is. Like, uh... I can see where Mr. Sheridan is right now, even though I’m not looking at him.’

‘Aha, excellent. Alright, I’m watching him. Tell me what he’s doing.’

Hector focused on what the lines were telling him. ‘He’s crouched down and examining something.’

‘Good. Maybe with this--’

‘It’s a box in his hands. He’s struggling to open it. Doesn’t seem like he’s having much luck. It needs a key. There’s some kind of cut stone inside, standing on a little tripod or something.’

‘Whoa, whoa. You can sense THAT much detail?’

‘Er, yeah...’

‘You can even sense what’s INSIDE the box?’

‘Yeah. Because it’s not, uh... vacuum sealed or whatever? I can sense

air flowing through it.'

The reaper paused, perhaps thinking. 'How quickly is the air in the box moving? Can you tell?'

'Uh... seems pretty slow, I guess. The air around the ceiling and walls is a lot faster, by comparison.'

'Holy shit, Hector. Do you have any idea how useful this could be?'

He was beginning to.

'Well, that clinches it. You have to keep that scarf on forever now. It'll be your new fashion statement from now on.'

Hector exhaled a laugh and walked the few short steps back to the trunk in order to pick up the other two items he'd put down earlier."

"1539

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 7 of 16))

'This certainly explains how Amordiin was able to kidnap the princess of Vantalay without being detected,' said Garovel. 'He could sense where all the guards were and stay out of their line of sight.'

'If he'd had a reaper looking out for him, he could've done that without the scarf.'

'Heh. True. But still, the Scarf of Amordiin is perfect for you. In fact, I'd even go so far as to say it's an ideal tool for any materialization user.'

Hector could see what he meant. This thing increased his spatial awareness by leaps and bounds. He was already getting a few ideas about how he might be able to put that to use. He eyed the Shifting Spear of Logante another time, still in its sword form. 'Well, one out of two isn't bad, I guess. How do I make this thing small again?'

'Say "Shrokoh."'

"Shrokoh."

The sword compressed in an instant and became a quaint little spear

again. Hector pressed it against his breastplate and remolded his armor around it, creating an inner pocket for it to comfortably nestle within.

‘Oh, so you’re gonna take the Spear, after all, eh?’

‘Might as well,’ said Hector. ‘It’s pretty light. And I was thinking Mr. Easton might be able to get some good use out of it. Maybe. He seemed like more of a gun guy, though, so I don’t know.’

‘What’s that other item you’ve got there?’ said Garovel. ‘Another weapon? Let me have a closer look.’

Hector held the flanged mace up for the reaper’s inspection. ‘Well?’

‘Curious... I don’t sense any ardor in it. It doesn’t seem particularly special. But at the same time... I don’t know. It’s almost like it’s too normal.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It’s hard to describe. It feels like... there’s nothing special about it but maybe there’s supposed to be. Like it’s empty, somehow. Is it hollow inside?’

Hector raised it up and down, checking its weight again. ‘No way. If anything, it’s heavier than it looks.’

‘I’m not sure how else to explain it, then.’

‘Hmm. You sure you don’t recognize it?’

‘Nope.’

‘So it doesn’t have a cool name or anything, then?’

‘Maybe it does, but I don’t know it. We could name it ourselves, if you like.’

Hector’s shoulders slumped a little. ‘Eh, it’s not the same...’

Abruptly, Hector sensed Mr. Sheridan approaching but didn’t turn to face the man.

‘Heads up,’ said Garovel.

‘I know,’ said Hector, keeping his eyes forward.

Mr. Sheridan's steps were abnormally slow. Measured. Careful. As if he didn't want Hector to hear him coming, perhaps.

Hector didn't want to believe that. He wanted to believe Mr. Sheridan was every bit as friendly and trustworthy as he'd thus far acted. But Hector also wanted to get a measure of the man's true character. So he didn't turn around.

And then he sensed Mr. Sheridan reach for one of the guns in his bag.

'Hector,' said Garovel.

'I know,' he repeated."

"1540 -- CLXV.

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 8 of 16))

There seemed to be a pile of coins and stones in Mr. Sheridan's bag now, but the man's hand indeed wrapped around the grip of a pistol. He didn't pull it out yet, though.

Still, Hector wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the man was worried that Hector would betray him for the sake of the tournament and was therefore preparing to defend himself at a moment's notice.

But after a couple more steps, when Mr. Sheridan began lifting the weapon up to point it at Hector's back, that was as far as the young Lord Goffe's courtesy extended.

Hector bricked the pistol in iron, encasing Mr. Sheridan's hand along with it.

"Oh--what?! Ah--hey!"

Hector finally turned to look at him.

Mr. Sheridan stopped flailing when he noticed Hector's stare. "Aha... I, ah..."

Hector didn't say anything. He wanted to hear what the man was going



to say for himself.

“Ah... eh... I’m sorry, Lord Darksteel. Please don’t kill me.”

Hector sighed. “Why were you about to attack me?”

“Oh, um, well, y’know, you guys’re pretty hardy, ‘n I knew you wouldn’t actually die, so I just thought, maybe, ah... ooh, I’m really very sorry.”

“You want to win this tournament and become a god?” said Hector.

“I... I thought it might be nice, yes. But I see now the error of--”

“You weren’t worried that your next opponent might just kill you in an instant?”

“Oh, well, I-I suppose I figured that if I could eliminate you, then the others would be smooth sailing by comparison.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“Heh, please don’t kill me.”

“I’m not gonna--” Hector stopped himself. Obviously, he wasn’t going to kill him. But it could be a problem if Mr. Sheridan became genuinely convinced of that. He recalled the only rule of this tournament as Malast had described it. Victory was achieved when the opponent died or surrendered. “Mr. Sheridan... do you admit defeat?”

“Oh! Yes, of course! I happily surrender!”

Well, that was one less thing to worry about, at least. When the distortion in his vision began to arrive, he made sure to annihilate the iron around Mr. Sheridan’s hand and weapon.

The next room was noticeably larger than the last two, almost on par with the one that they’d found Malast in.

That was not Malast standing in front of him now, though.

That was Seyos.

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Five: ‘O, disgruntled lord...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The Hun'Sho didn't seem to appreciate him stomping through Himmekel, but Zeff was far beyond the point of catering to their sensitivities.

When Axiolis had told him that everyone else's souls had simply vanished into thin air, the Lord Elroy had not been pleased. His time spent trying to get Carver's damn EWE to work had been frustrating enough, but now this?

He honestly wasn't sure what he would do if he discovered that these molten bastards had done something to Hector and the others."  
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"1541

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 9 of 16))

Zeff and Axiolis visited the last place where Axiolis had sensed them, which turned out to be some kind of empty moat around a stone monument. But without any idea of what to look for or visible traces of where they might have gone, Zeff soon started consulting the Hun'Sho for information.

At first, he'd been polite. Then he'd gotten steadily more assertive.

Now he was angry and looking for Torveis, the Hun'Sho who had spoken to the group the most during their first day in Himmekel.

A different Hun'Sho approached him first, however. It was a physically brighter and larger man, hands held out in front of him as an apparent sign of peaceable intention.

"Please," the molten man said, "you are scaring my people, Kare'Hyomen."

Zeff's expression twitched. 'What did he just call me?'

'It's not an insult,' said Ax. 'It's their name for those from the surface. The same way that Hun'Sho is our name for them.'

And it took concentrated effort, but Zeff tried to steady himself. He had no proof of their guilt. And he knew that treating them like criminals would not aid him in acquiring their assistance.

Willingly, anyway.

"I apologize if I have been causing you alarm," said Zeff with a stiff jaw, noticing that more Hun'Sho were gathering around them. "But my kin are missing, and I must find them as soon as possible. Can you help me?"

"I will do all I can. My name is Lemoros. Might I ask yours?"

"Zeff."

"Then, Zeff, let us go somewhere more private and speak there."

"Let us not. Let us speak right here, right now."

That was obviously not what Lemoros wanted to hear, and the Hun'Sho man looked around at the open street and increasing amount of onlookers.

Zeff just tried not to feel like they were gathering around to lynch him. "If you have any idea where they might have gone, please stop wasting my time and tell me." Then, more loudly, he addressed the crowd "That goes for all of you. If you have anything to tell me, anything that might help me find my kin, then do so now, and I will leave you alone."

'Please,' Ax added, 'we are very worried about them. They are as precious to us as I am sure all of you are to one another.'

Someone laughed.

Zeff's attention was drawn instantly. "Who was that?" he said. The voice had come from his left. He knew that much and took a step toward it. "Who laughed just now?"

Dead silence.

"Who laughed?!" he growled, no longer in control of his anger.

"Please, Mr. Zeff--" tried Lemoros.

"Step forward now or be hunted down!" said Zeff, taking another step.

The crowd was perfectly still now. Beings of magma, frozen. Not even daring to look at one another, apparently. And why weren't they? Weren't they confused? He couldn't read Hun'Sho expressions and so didn't know if they were frightened, but surely, they should have looking around at one another in confusion, no?

Was it because none of them were confused? Was it because they all knew exactly what was happening here?"

"1542

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 10 of 16))

One of the Hun'Sho to Zeff's right stepped forward. "Please calm yourself, Mr. Zeff."

Zeff recognized the voice but not the face, as they all looked more or less the same to him. "Torveis?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what is happening here," said Zeff, able to steady his voice somewhat. "Where are my people, Torveis?"

"Mr. Zeff, you ask more than you realize..."

Zeff didn't know what that meant, and he didn't care, either. "I ask only what is necessary. If you cannot help me, then stand aside."

Torveis stepped closer and reached out to him.

A wall of soul-strengthened ice shot up between them. "BACK. AWAY."

Torveis did. A chorus of mumbles and whispers rose from the onlookers.

Zeff refocused on the direction that the laugh had originated from. "One of you will answer my questions."

And again, there was silence.

Fine, then.

'Hold on, Ax," said Zeff.

The reaper latched onto his back without hesitating.

Zeff picked the first Hun'Sho in front of him and walked forward. He coated his own hand in a gauntlet of ice and grabbed the man by the

molten neck. "Allow me to ask again. Where are my--?"

Someone in the back row started running away.

Zeff released his chosen Hun'Sho and launched himself over the crowd on a platform of hissing ice. The runner didn't get far. Zeff landed on him and pinned him to the ground with both bare hands and ice alike.

"Where were you going?" he said, much calmer now that he had his target within his grasp.

The other Hun'Sho were yelling something now, but Zeff wasn't listening. He materialized a dome around himself and his captive.

"S-stop!" the Hun'Sho man said. "I know nothing!"

"Tell me what you do know, then. Why did you laugh at us?"

"I--! I wasn't--! I know nothing!"

Zeff tightened his grip on the back of the man's neck.

'You should dig into his chest and go for his core,' advised Ax privately. 'His heart, in other words.'

Zeff paused at that. 'He won't be useful if he is dead, Ax.'

'He will not die unless you destroy his core. These people are very durable.'

That was good enough for Zeff. He ripped into the Hun'Sho man's back with a blade of ice and started rifling around.

"Ah! Stop! Don't do that! I know nothing that you--!"

Zeff's hand found a very warm sphere, and he knew it was what was he looking for when the Hun'Sho man released an inhuman scream as soon as Zeff had touched it.

"Answer my questions."

"The elders! They have been lying to the rest of us! That is all I know!"

Well, that was new, at least. "Who are these elders?"

"Ah--oh! Lemoros and Torveis are elders! And Arsok! And Meigast!"

Hermeios! And--!"

"That is good enough." Zeff stood and released him."

"1543

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 11 of 16))

The Hun'Sho outside the dome were just standing there, watching. Not trying to break in and rescue their friend, as Zeff might have assumed. They started backing away when they saw Zeff looking over them again.

He annihilated the dome and watched the majority of them scatter.

'Which one's Torveis?' he asked.

'Straight ahead of you, not moving,' said Ax privately.

Zeff saw him. He appreciated that the man wasn't making him chase him down, at least. "Explain yourself, 'Elder' Torveis."

Torveis sighed but stood his ground as Zeff approached. "We are a peaceful people. Why must you resort to violence?"

"Why must you lie to my face?"

"You do not understand."

"I know. That is what I am trying to correct."

Torveis shut his eyes, though the glow still shown through a little. "We would have been happy to explain, if you had simply allowed us privacy, first. This is a sensitive matter, one we wish the children not to overhear."

And in spite of his bristling emotions, Zeff could understand that much, at least. "You have my apologies, then." He could only manage to sound half-sincere, though.

Torveis sighed again. "We are prisoners in this place. And our keeper, Seyos, is ever watchful. Even now, he may be listening. However, as I am still standing here, perhaps he is not."



Zeff just kept listening.

“Seyos wields tremendous power, and we are at his mercy. But that is not enough for him. He often gives us tasks to complete for him. He transports us to distant locations--sometimes with him, sometimes not--and forces us to aid him in collecting valuables. By now, it must be an absurd volume, but I do not know where he keeps it all or to what end he means to utilize it. I imagine, however, that wherever it is, you will find your kin there.”

Zeff was silent as he processed all of this information.

‘You have no idea how we can get there?’ said Ax, still attached to Zeff’s back.

“I know that Seyos can see and travel through every mirror in Himmekel, but I do not think he is limited to that. I think it is merely the most convenient for him.”

“None of this explains why that Hun’Sho man laughed at us,” said Zeff.

Torveis hesitated and looked around. The black street had emptied, and only the tall Lemoros had remained by Torveis’ side. The two elder Hun’Sho exchanged nods.

“The children do not know of Seyos,” said Torveis. “And in recent years... Seyos has stopped giving tasks to the elders. He has been giving them to the children. And... they have not been returning.”

Zeff’s eyes widened.

‘Your children have been disappearing?’ said Ax.

Lemoros interjected. “We do not truly know that he has been giving them the same manner of tasks that he had been giving us. We have only been assuming that, as it seemed the most obvious explanation. But... as not even one of them has returned, I have begun to suspect that Seyos is doing something else with them.””

”1544

"We tried to tell the children that those who have disappeared simply chose to leave Himmekel on their own," said Torveis, "but it seems they have stopped believing us. Assuming they ever did."

"They are far smarter than we have ever given them credit for," said Lemoros. "It was a mistake to lie to them."

Torveis shook his head. "It was undesirable and even heart-wrenching, but it was not a mistake. If Seyos discovered that we had told them about him--"

"He would do, what?" said Lemoros, sounding more frustrated than Zeff had yet heard from any Hun'Sho. "Abduct them? As he is doing now? We should have done more to prepare them. Our inaction is to blame."

'You've been Seyos' prisoners here for a thousand years, no?' said Ax.

"Roughly, yes," said Torveis.

'Yet you said that these abductions started only recently. What prompted them?'

The Hun'Sho exchanged glances again.

"The arrival of Ettol and Carver, no doubt," said Lemoros. "Seyos has always been rather forceful and demanding, but he never harmed any of us, as he appears to be doing now. I do not know what has come over him or why."

"I do," said Torveis, causing everyone to look at him. "Or at the very least, I can guess. I believe Seyos may be trying to instigate the return of Avar in some way."

"What makes you think that?" said Lemoros.

"Avar heralds our return to prominence," said Torveis. "And Himmekel is not the only enclave of the Hun'Sho in the world. We know that Seyos has been in contact with others. It would make sense if that--or something similar--was their goal."

So there were more Hun'Sho hiding elsewhere. That was news to Zeff. They had gotten away from the topic he actually cared about, however. "I need to know how to find this Seyos."

Torveis sighed. "I am sorry, but I do not know. Seyos comes to us at

his leisure.”

“You said he uses mirrors to travel,” said Zeff.

“Yes, but we have tried many times to discern the method of their function,” said Lemoros. “To no avail.”

“Truly, we would help you in this if we could,” said Torveis. “It would very much be in our interest if you were to bring Seyos’ reign here to an end. His power is beyond us, but perhaps it is not beyond you.”

‘Then take us to the rest of the elders,’ said Ax. ‘Perhaps one of them will know something that can help us.’

The Hun’Sho exchanged looks another time.

“Very well,” said Torveis. “But we must be exceptionally cautious. There is no telling when Seyos might be observing us.”

Zeff scowled and rubbed his knuckles. “It would be more convenient if he attacked us first.”

“I am glad you are confident in your abilities,” said Torveis, “but please, do be careful. Seyos likely wields power that is stranger than anything you have ever seen.”

Zeff returned a flat stare. “I wouldn’t bet on that, if I were you.””  
"1545 -- CLXVI.

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 13 of 16))

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Six: ‘The Unworthy...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The booming, disembodied voice of Malast arrived before the fighting had a chance to begin.

“This will be a three way battle,” said the Idle God. “The third combatant is still being decided, so the two of you may prefer to wait for him to arrive in the interest of fairness. Or you can simply get

started without him. It is your choice.”

A third combatant?

Ah. That would explain why Malast had chosen the Chamber of Grand Desire as their battlefield. It was much larger than most of the Vault’s other treasure rooms. Even after all this time, Seyos was still nowhere near filling it. He had hoped to remedy that during his next venture to Qenghis, but that was before Ettol had arrived and thrown everything out of balance.

For a time, Seyos and Hector merely looked at one another, not saying or doing anything.

Seyos knew more than the surface-dweller probably realized. He had been observing the invaders since their arrival in Himmekel. It had been his hope that they would simply leave without incident, but that was not to be, it seemed. Foolishness on his part, he now realized. He should have known that their claims of arriving here accidentally were lies. Of course they were here for his treasure.

This, too, was Ettol’s doing, he knew. That insufferable wretch. No doubt, this was the man’s true goal all along--to bring outsiders here, attempting to stir the Idle God to action.

It wasn’t going to work. Seyos wouldn’t allow it. Supreme Will or not, these meddlers were not going to simply show up and take that which rightfully belonged to him.

Especially not that ashen filth.

How could Malast possibly consider one of them to be a suitable vessel for Secho? It beggared belief. Surely, Malast had not forgotten what they had done, the misery that they were responsible for.

At length, Seyos could endure the tense silence no longer. “You should never have come here,” he said.

“...I don’t want to fight you,” said Hector.

“Hah!” He pointed at the mace in the young man’s hand. “And yet you steal the Moon’s Wrath from me!”

Hector glanced at the weapon a moment. “...Aren’t you the one who’s been stealing?”

Seyos scowled. "All such technology is derived from the knowledge pioneered by my brethren. That you would not understand this, is sadly to be expected."

"...Okay, so if I give you this thing right now, you'll stop trying to kill me and my friends?"

Those words took Seyos by surprise, but they sounded genuine. But no. It was just another trick, of course. Seyos knew better. "I did not expect you to say something so cowardly, but you are right to fear me."

Hector made no response.

Seyos found that irritating. "If you surrender now and return the Moon's Wrath, I will show you mercy. I promise to spare the lives of both you and your reaper.""

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"1546

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 14 of 16))

"...And what about everyone who was with me?" said Hector.

"They must prostrate themselves likewise," said Seyos. "Mercy must be earned."

"I don't think they'd agree to that," said Hector.

"Neither do I," said Seyos.

And there was silence again.

Seyos readied himself beneath the Deceiver's Cloak. Within its billowing and distorted visage, he was able to hold many more items than he would have otherwise been able to carry. He reached first for the item which had subdued Diego, the Orb of Tranquility.

There existed no better tool for dealing with servants. Ever confident in their power, they never saw it coming, this item which could suppress the synchronicity of their soul with that of their reaper. As soon as a servant laid eyes on it, the Orb rendered them no better than the corpse that they truly were.

And so would it be here. As soon as this Hector looked at the Orb...

As soon as he looked at it...

Hector would be...

What?

Seyos didn't understand. He'd presented the Orb. Hector was staring right at it, and yet he was still standing there, unfazed.

How could--?

Agh...

The Supreme Will.

It played a role here, too?

How intolerably obnoxious.

"What's that?" said Hector plainly, as if trying to kill Seyos with irritation alone.

"Nothing," growled Seyos. He returned the Orb to the Cloak and began deliberating.

The Fists of Enkir. The Shield of Hamenszoon. The Twin Blades of Boros. The Mask of Amordiin. The Deceiver's Dagger. The Deceiver's Eye. The Black Spindle. The Box of Perdition.

Ugh...

The Orb of Tranquility had been ideal precisely because of how innocuous it appeared. The other items he had to choose from were not nearly so. As soon as he pulled one of them out and began using it, Hector would realize something was wrong and no doubt mount some sort of counteroffensive.

And that would be most undesirable.

Seyos had not survived all this time by actually bothering to fight servants. They were far too troublesome for that.

But Seyos did have something else up his sleeve--or rather, around his neck.

The Pendant of Unso, though it was meant to be used in conjunction with the Staff of Unso, was still far from useless on its own. And Malast did say that there were no other rules to this tournament, so there was no reason he couldn't use it.

Very well.

"Pardon me for one moment," said Seyos. He gripped the Pendant with one hand and focused on the desired room. "I will return shortly with a gift."



“Wha--?”

Distorted space enveloped him, and Seyos closed his eyes to mitigate the disorientation.

In an instant, he arrived precisely where he meant to.

His home for the last millennia.

It was far from the life of luxury that he had enjoyed during his time as Guong before the Great Fall, but he had come to hold affection for this place, in a strange way. The feeling of safety was comforting enough.

And the mirrors. The many, many mirrors."  
"1547

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 15 of 16))

Of course, they weren't truly mirrors. Rather, they were spatial windows, connected to every mirror in Himmekel. They allowed him to observe the daily lives of his subjects, to understand their struggles, their needs and desires--as well as their lies and their treason, unintentional though it may have been.

Seyos' eyes fell upon his stone desk in the middle of the chamber, upon the bodiless core currently sitting upon it.

A terrible shame. One day, such intelligent and probing minds would be of tremendous value to the Hun'Sho again, but right now, they were only a nuisance. Too much so, sadly. Seyos hated having to do this to his own kin, but he knew all too well that they simply would not understand what needed to be done for the continued survival and resurgence of the Hun'Sho.

He picked up the core of young Jasirok and gripped it in the palm of his molten hand. "With this sacrifice," he whispered, "you will do unto our enemies as they once did unto us."

Seyos took a few moments to simply breathe, long and deeply, feeling the weight of the deed that he was about to do. He had done it far too many times, these past few years. It was all for the preservation of his people. Even if they eventually discovered what he was doing and

hated him for it.

It was all for their sake.

Seyos circumnavigated the desk and retrieved the Wand of Conduction from the top right drawer, as well as one of the many small metal containers from the bottom left drawer. Next, he moved toward the mirrors and tapped the Wand against each one as he passed, activating them just long enough for a brief look on the other side.

Hmm.

Not many of his people were in their homes. Strange, for this time of day. Perhaps they knew more of what was happening than Seyos had previously realized. He knew they wouldn't dare set foot outside Himmekel, of course, not with Enkir and Dunikei wreaking their eternal havoc, but still, it troubled him.

He would look into it later. Seyos crammed the Wand into the Deceiver's Cloak. There wasn't a proper space for it, but it would do, for now.

He readied himself to teleport again. He knew that he wouldn't have much time once he returned to the Chamber of Grand Desire. He held Jasirok's core in one hand and the small metal container in the other. With effort, he twisted the cap off the container and heard it pop.

He dumped its murky contents onto the core. Almost immediately, he felt it pulse in response.

No time now. He tossed the container aside, gripped the Pendant of Unso, and jumped back to the Chamber of Grand Desire.

As expected, Hector was still there, though he had moved closer to the small pile of treasure by the far wall, no doubt looking for more valuables to pillage."

"1548

((The 14 pages of Valentine's Day + Double Wednesday -- Page 16 of 16))

Before Seyos could move, however, metal appeared all around him, fixing him in place with one hand still around the Pendant and the other

still around the trembling core.

“Where did you go?” said Hector, only then turning to face him.

Seyos saw no reason to answer that. The magma of his body was already beginning to change the metal’s color, so it wasn’t unthinkable that he would be able to break out of this encasing--or even absorb it into him, perhaps. But the surface-dweller would probably just make more.

No, the only real solution here was to use the Pendant again and teleport away. He had to be careful, though, to make sure that he didn’t bring the core with him. And since he couldn’t physically drop it from his hand, due to the metal encasing, it required deliberate mental effort to leave the core behind, to ensure that it didn’t become enveloped in the Pendant’s power along with him.

But he managed it, just as the core was growing too violent in his hand. And in a blink, he was gone from the Chamber of Grand Desire once again.

Seyos didn’t know if he would’ve been able to defeat the one the others had been calling Darksteel in single combat, but he certainly knew that the “gift” he had just left behind would crush anyone. One day, all the world would know both the folly and wrath of the Hun’Sho as that foolish young invader was about to.

Seyos, in the meantime, intended to get a head start on killing the other remaining combatants.

--++--++--

‘Garovel, what the hell am I looking at?’

‘Ah--isn’t that a Hun’Sho core?’

Hector supposed it did look similar to the one he’d seen in Torveis’ chest, but what the hell was wrong with it? It was vibrating like crazy now, and just a moment ago, it had a ripped a hole through the empty iron shell that he’d made for Seyos.

He didn’t know where the guy had gone, but it was more than enough to put him on edge. For all he knew, Seyos could pop in at any moment and try to take his head off. That was why he’d made sure that Garovel was tucked away in the safest possible combat position--around the wrist of his shield hand.

‘Careful, Hector,’ the reaper said. ‘Something is very wrong with that thing. What I’m sensing is--I can’t explain. The ardor within it is spiking in a way I wouldn’t have thought possible. I don’t know--’

The core expanded visibly, ballooning up to the size of a basketball, and dark goo started oozing out of it. The white-hot exterior cracked, releasing more. And then it simply broke apart entirely, replaced by a shooting column of murky slime.

Of sludge.

The mass grew all too quickly, and it wasn’t much longer before Hector began to realize what he was looking at.

He was watching a worm being born. And a very large one, at that."  
"1549

Instinctively, he tried coating the mass in iron, but he was not surprised when it did absolutely nothing to stem the growing tide of sludge. The iron simply expanded out and broke until it, too, was swallowed by slimy darkness.

“G-Garovel...”

‘Wow, this is even worse than I was expecting.’

“What the fuck do I do?!” Hector was finding it abruptly difficult to remain as calm as the reaper sounded.

‘Hmm, good question.’

“Garovel!”

The worm was already as big as a house.

‘Okay, well, let’s look at this logically. We already know you can’t kill it. And we’re trapped in here, so we can’t run from it, either.’

“That’s not helpful.”

‘The treasure. Maybe there’s some more treasure around that will help you take it down.’

Well, it was a plan, at least. Unfortunately, despite the size of the room, there wasn't nearly as much treasure in it compared to the previous ones Hector had been in. And he knew that with absolute certainty, thanks to the Scarf of Amordiin. Apart from the relatively modest pile currently at his back, there were two other, even smaller ones on the second and third floors of the chamber, respectively.

There was no point in complaining, though. It would have to do.

Still keenly aware of the bubbling mass in the center of the room, Hector set to work, looking over the nearest treasure pile. He and Garovel had already gotten a brief opportunity to examine this one earlier when Seyos disappeared, but the only thing that caught the reaper's attention had been a glittery orb that was apparently called the Hypnosphere.

Hector went for it immediately, because he didn't know what else to do, freeing one of his hands by hanging his mace on a materialized hook.

'What're you gonna do with that?'

"I don't fucking know! You tell me!"

'Uh... just chuck it at it.'

"Really?!"

'Yeah!'

"Okay!"

He spun around, gathered his strength in his throwing arm as he reeled back, and launched the Hypnosphere straight into the worm's body.

Nothing happened.

"Garovel, that didn't do shit!"

'Well, there goes five million troa down the toilet.'

"Why'd you tell me to throw it, then?!"

'Eh, it was a calculated risk. And that thing was ugly, anyway.'

The worm was as big as two houses, now, and it had an obvious

mouth and eyes, which were pointed in his direction.

‘Hey, that item over there could be the Bell of Calming.’

It took a second, but Hector saw what he was referring to. A silvery bell with geometric engravings. He grabbed it without hesitation.

‘Try ringing it.’

He did so. Hard. The sound was sharp and clear, certainly loud enough to carry across the whole room.

And he waited for some noticeable change to occur.

But it didn’t.

‘...Huh. I guess it’s not the Bell of Calming, after all.’

“Garovel, that thing is gonna fuckin’ kill us!”

‘Yeah, I’m starting to get a little worried, actually.’”

"1550

Hector didn’t think this was the time for banter. “What’s the next item?!”

‘Ah, I don’t think there is one in this pile. Just a bunch of coins and jewelry.’

“Agh!”

But Hector did know what to do next, at least. He had to get to the second floor.

He launched himself up with a materialized platform and landed with a heavy thud. From there, the treasure was straight ahead, so he bolted for it, able to maintain a full sprint with the vigor that he now felt flowing all throughout his body.

Still, this new level of awareness was difficult to get used to. In a good way, perhaps, but difficult nonetheless. He kept his attention focused firmly on the growing worm even while it was completely out of his line of sight beneath the rock under his feet. He barely even looked at the treasure and just let Garovel go over it for him.

“Anything?!”

‘Mm, nope, sorry.’

Hector wanted to scream.

‘Hey, you could always try that mace you picked up. Didn’t seem all that special to me, but Seyos called it the Moon’s Wrath, so it must have something to it, right?’

Hector hadn’t forgotten. “I’d have to get in close to attack it with this thing,” he said, trying to be calmer, “and I don’t think we want to do that.”

‘Oh yeah. If you get caught in that slime, you might not be able to get out, huh?’

That was his exact concern, yes. He still remembered some of the Rainlords getting swallowed up at the battle by the train. They’d managed to free themselves with an incredibly impressive attack from inside its gut, but Hector doubted that he would be able to pull off the same trick. Or maybe he could. But he didn’t want to put himself in a situation where he had to find out.

Nonetheless, he did take the Moon’s Wrath in hand once again. If he wasn’t able keep the beast away from him, then the mace would be a good option--if not the only option.

The worm was beginning to move now, Hector sensed. Its growth had finally slowed but still not quite stopped, and it was now the size of an office building. He could see a bit of it peeking over the second floor and squirming its way in his direction over the rock.

Time for the third floor, he decided. It was a good thirty or so meters above him, but he appreciated the extra distance between himself and the worm. He could sense it beginning to thrash around down there and climb up.

He went for the treasure pile.

‘Ooh! Grab that thing right there that looks like an orb on a tuning fork!’

He saw it and did so. “Okay, what does it do?”

‘It’s, ah, difficult to explain, but we’ll be able to find some really cool shit with it. It’s like a special kind of metal detector.’

Hector needed a second to find his words. "How will that help me kill the worm?"

'Oh, it won't. It's useless for that.'

Hector sighed angrily."  
"1551 -- CLXVII.

((Double Saturday -- Page 1 of 2))

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Seven: 'Bolster thine insight...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

After the one called Manuel, his next opponent was his own companion through all of this, Lenos.

Royo did not know whether that was a relief or not, but he tried to take advantage of the opportunity.

And even now, he was reluctant to simply swap intel with Lenos in an entirely candid manner. He knew that Malast was listening, at least, and while Royo didn't think that the so-called Idle God would care about anything surreptitious they might say, he didn't know who else might be listening. He could quite easily imagine a scenario in which Malast was allowing the defeated combatants to observe the proceedings with him.

Somehow.

Without any clear definitions regarding the extent of Malast's power, Royo could only rely on his imagination to protect him from making any missteps in these delicate circumstances. Hopefully, it would suffice.

So he and Lenos attempted to communicate in code, as they had done two days ago and all during their time in Himmekel. They had never quite been sure that someone wasn't just around the corner, listening. The ghosts had been of particular concern there. The goggles allowed Royo to see them, sure, but he didn't know the extent of their capabilities or how easy it was for them to eavesdrop over large distances.



As soon as he made it out of this place, he fully intended to learn everything he could about those troublesome beings. He had a feeling that his next encounter with them wouldn't be nearly so amicable as this one had thus far been.

"Do you really think you can become a god?" said Lenos in Hunese.

Royo paused at that question. "To be honest... no, I do not. But if there is even the slightest possibility that Malast is telling the truth, then I believe the risk is worth it."

"What if you become someone else, like he said?"

"That would be--" Royo stopped himself and squinted at Lenos. "You understood what Malast was saying? You speak--?" And he stopped himself again, because he'd been about to say "Mohssian," but as he thought about it, that wasn't quite right, was it?

"What are you talking about?" said Lenos. "Of course I understood him. He spoke perfect Hunese."

Royo met the other man's gaze evenly. "...Did he, though?"

"Yeah, I..." Lenos seemed to be realizing what Royo just had.

At first, it had been exactly as Lenos had just said. Royo remembered getting the impression that Malast had been speaking Hunese. But when the others started talking to him as well and listening to everything he was saying, Royo somehow began thinking that he was speaking Mohssian.

But Malast hadn't been. The Idle God hadn't spoken either language.

Yet they had all understood him without even noticing it.

Was it some sort of telepathy? Royo didn't think so. He distinctly recalled seeing the man's mouth move when he spoke. But the words. What were the exact words that Malast spoke? What were the sounds that they made?

Royo genuinely didn't know. He recalled the meaning of Malast's words just fine, but the words themselves? They were a blur."

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"1552

((Double Saturday -- Page 2 of 2))

“He really is a god,” said Lenos. The man sounded convinced now.

Royo remained skeptical, however. Just because he did not have an immediate explanation did not mean there wasn’t one.

But he couldn’t deny that, more than ever now, he wanted to believe. If Malast truly was a god, then that might truly have been Secho’s remains in his hands. And Royo might truly be able to...

He shook his head. He needed to focus. The tournament was not yet done, and his most difficult opponents were no doubt still ahead.

"I will support you however I can," said Lenos.

Royo blinked.

"I don't intend to gamble with my own life any more than I have to," said Lenos. "And I don't have aspirations to godhood, so you go right ahead with all of this, if that's what you want. I--"

Royo clasped his hand over the other man's mouth. "Do not say that you surrender. Not just yet, anyway. Help me to examine the treasure in this room, first." He pulled his hand away.

"...Alright." Lenos eyed the glowing pile to Royo's right, then straightened his back and sauntered over to it. "How much do you know about treasure hunting, by the way?"

Royo followed his lead. "A fair amount--though not as much as someone like Kogibur would, I suspect."

"Heh." Lenos didn't remove his eyes from the treasure.

That meager reaction was more than enough of an affirmation for Royo's suspicions. He had been wanting to confirm Lenos' true identity as the infamous thief, Kogibur, and he was glad to have finally found the opportunity.

Royo looked over the treasure himself, but nothing here sparked immediate recognition. He'd gotten very lucky in the first round, he knew.

"I wish we could take everything here," said Lenos.

"We will," said Royo, and he heard Lenos snicker. "But for now, find me something that would assist me in a fight."

"Hmm. In that case, you have your pick of this, this, and this."

Royo examined each item that he'd pointed at but didn't dare touch any of them yet.

The first was a small orb, translucent and very fragile-looking, though if it had survived all this time, then it was probably more durable than it appeared. When he focused, Royo could indeed sense ardor in it,

bearing a decidedly unique flow. Swirling like a tiny, contained sulfur storm.

“That one, I believe, is the Sasume.”

The Piercing Eye? The name sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. “What can it do?”

“According to my information, it will either reveal the innate secrets of the world around you... or drive you mad.” A beat passed. “Or possibly both.”

Royo gave him a look.

“Hey, I wouldn't touch it, but you? I figured, you're already trying to fuse yourself with a god, so maybe you're crazy enough to choose this, too.”

"1553

Royo wanted to argue, but the man had a point. And he actually wasn't ruling out the Piercing Eye yet, either, even as he moved on to the other two. One of them was a metal rack with a pendulum in the center, and the other was a simple blue crystal. “What are these two, then?”

“The Daichigeki and the Tokets'Jigok.”

The Earthshock and the Frozen Hell. Intrigued as he was by those names, Royo didn't like what they implied.

“The Daichigeki is said to be able to rend the ground beneath one's feet and even cause earthquakes powerful enough to bring down buildings. And the Tokets'Jigoku is said to be capable of freezing anything it touches.”

Royo didn't normally hate being right. “...So they would both kill me, is what you are saying.”

“Mm, well, presumably, there is a safe way of using them, but... yeah, they do seem pretty dangerous.”

More than just seemed, Royo felt. In the Undercrust, an earthquake was one of the most deadly and unpredictable events imaginable. An

item which could instigate them would certainly be powerful, but to Royo's mind, there existed no conceivable method by which an earthquake could be controlled. Not down here. And he didn't intend to die to falling rocks that he had caused to fall. A more idiotic end, Royo could hardly imagine.

As for the blue crystal, a Hun'Kui trying to harness the power of ice was not much more appealing. Theoretically, of course, it could be very strong, but one misstep while attempting to acquaint himself with the crystal's exact functionality, and that would spell the end for him. It was akin to an insect trying to figure how to properly use pesticide. He had no real knowledge base from which to operate or available safety precautions to take.

"These are both worthless," Royo decided.

"I suppose if they weren't, they wouldn't just be sitting here," said Lenos. "That caped Hun'Sho bastard would probably be using them himself, hmm?"

"Indeed."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more assistance." Lenos started grabbing light diamonds in order to stuff them into his unfortunately small pockets.

Royo, however, had not given up. His gaze fell upon the Piercing Eye once again.

The secrets of the world against the threat of going mad? Compared to the other two items, the Eye's risk was at least somewhat appealing.

And the more he thought about it, the more he began to wonder, was that truly the gamble? Could any object really cause someone to go mad? Just like that?

And even if it could do that, would it?

Would it be possible to resist its influence? With a strong enough mind, perhaps? A strong enough will?

Royo saw sense in that logic--and more frighteningly even to himself, he saw potential in it.

It was a risk, of course. There was no doubt about that. But was it a risk worthy of himself? Of his ambition?"

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

Royo hesitated. He hesitated as he had done only a handful of times in his entire life.

This feeling. Terror and uncertainty mixed together. He'd felt it before. Like teetering on the brink of both life and sanity.

He had no way of truly knowing what would happen if he grabbed the Piercing Eye, right now. No way of knowing what would become of him. Of his own mind.

And yet, he was genuinely considering doing it, anyway.

Because he had to. He needed to take a risk here. If his next opponent was one of the supermen, or Seyos perhaps, then what would he do? He had managed to take the one called Manuel by surprise, but he doubted it would be so easy with the Senmurai and the one called Diego. The Senmurai in particular had seemed determined to stop him earlier and would no doubt be on his guard.

And somehow, Royo did not think that his current three artifacts would be enough. The Sword of Hamenszoon and this unnamed glove of strength were both useful enough, but they certainly didn't make him invincible; and he still did not know what power dwelled within the Boots of Karugetti, despite having examined them with his ardor sense.

If he wanted the power of a god, he first required the power to win this tournament.

Yes.

That was the dreadful truth of it, Royo felt. He would be both a coward and a fool not to acknowledge his own weakness when the potential to do something about it was sitting right in front of him.

He grit his teeth and took a deep breath.

He grabbed the Piercing Eye with his bare hand.

The effect was immediate. Not quite pain but something like it. Extreme displeasure. Invasive unsettlement. All throughout his mind. Consuming his world, his thoughts, his memories, his everything. He could feel himself panicking, and involuntarily, he let go of the Eye.

He rushed back into himself all at once, wide-eyed and struggling for breath. On his hands and knees now, he needed time. Time to realize that he was still there. Still present. Still sane.

Well, as much as he had been before, at least.

Lenos was saying something, and Royo tried to say something reassuring, but he wasn't really listening to himself. He was still focused on the Eye. That ordeal had been torture of a manner he had never before experienced.

But he'd seen something in it. The barest glimpse. As if the whole world were a blanket, and for but a moment, he had been granted a look at what was beneath it.

He was going to do it again.

"Step back," said Royo, removing Lenos' hand from his shoulder.

Lenos did not give up, however. "What do you think you're doing?! You can't--!"

Royo shoved him away and grabbed the Eye again."  
"1555

((Double Monday -- Page 2 of 2))

His brain was marginally more prepared this time. The battering of sensations hit him like a wave, and again, he felt the same panic from before. But he retained enough of presence of mind now to stop his hand from letting go, to override bodily instinct with force of will.

It got worse.

He lost space. He lost time. He was losing himself. But he saw it again. The blanket. The veil. He put his hand forward--or some crackling, imagined representation of his hand, at least--and tried to grasp the veil. It was already partly peeled back. He just had to pull it the rest of



the way.

And so he did.

He regained space. He regained time. He regained himself.

But the storm all around him did not cease. Still, it pummeled him, his mind, with so many sensations and emotions and distractions that he couldn't even distinguish them from one another before they were replaced by something else, something newer, better, terrifying, worrying, encouraging, mortifying, ecstatic, dull, soul-crushing--

Endless.

It was folly to engage with it. He had to keep himself. Himself. His own mind. His own focus. These emotions were not his own. They were external. They were sorcery. Witchcraft. Whatever. It didn't matter what they were. They didn't matter. Only he mattered.

Him and the world around him. The real world.

And through it all, the swirling and somehow visible mayhem of emotions, he could see what he wanted to see.

Lenos, standing right next to him.

But of course, his name was not truly Lenos. And it was not Kogibur, either. The man didn't have a name. At least, not one that was given to him by his mother. Because the man had never known his mother. Or his father, for that matter. He'd been an orphan of the Higher West Layer, as Royo himself had been. He had been treated with contempt in the community home in which he had grown up. He had been lastingly scarred by that experience, to the point of trusting none but himself. And a woman. In his adolescence. A woman who then betrayed him for money.

It could be no surprise, then, that Lenos did not fully trust Royo now. And that was not mere suspicion on Royo's part. He knew that Lenos had reservations about him. He could see it, as clearly as he could see the man's face.

But he could also see that Lenos did trust him a little. Which was more than Royo would have expected, quite frankly.

And it didn't stop. Royo could see still more. Wavering and fleeting feelings, hovering around Lenos, whispering about his soul and his

past. A job he'd taken. A mentor he'd had. Threads of his life woven together into a grand web that was as easy to navigate as it was to think. Royo had only to look where he wanted, consider what he wanted, and Lenos' knowledge was Royo's knowledge."

"1556

"Are you sure you're okay?" said Lenos through the howling storm. His voice sounded perfectly calm, apparently not bothered to be standing in the midst of a hellish vortex.

Royo was very much not sure that he was okay, however. He was beginning to feel a kind of exhaustion he had never felt before. His head was tired, though the rest of his body was not. It wasn't quite dizziness or light-headedness, exactly.

He decided to put the Eye back down again.

The storm dissipated almost immediately, as did the web of knowledge around Lenos.

Royo was beginning to understand how it worked. "I am fine," he finally said, trying not to sound haggard. "Can you find something for me to carry this item in?"

"Ah, okay, let me have a look around."

Royo tried wrapping his green scarf around the Eye before picking it up again, but as he expected, it did nothing to prevent the object's power from activating.

Royo let Lenos search in silence. He focused on controlling his breathing as he tried to take mental stock of himself.

He was fairly certain that he was still sane. And his memories--there were no notable gaps, as far as he could tell. Childhood, adolescence, adulthood. All there.

And perhaps most importantly, he still felt the same. Confidence bordering on arrogance? Check. Ambition that approached delusional psychosis? Yeah, that was there, too.

He supposed his gamble had paid off, after all.

It had been a while since he'd felt such a strong sense of relief.

Now all that was left to do was begin testing the limits of the Eye. Its usage obviously took an exhaustive toll, so it would be best if he could somehow determine the most efficient duration to keep it active, he felt. And of course, he still wanted to know exactly how informative the Eye could be. Was it only personal histories? Or was there--?

"Eleyo!"

A gunshot rang out, and Royo turned to see Seyos there, already attacking the both of them with giant red hands.

Royo swiped the Eye and dove out of the way, only for the hand to follow him and clobber him square in the chest. The impact added to his momentum and sent him toppling over himself through the air until he hit the ground and skidded up against a wall.

The wind was knocked out of him, and possibly a rib was broken, but there was no time to worry about that, he knew. The hand was still pursuing him.

He activated the Sword of Hamenszoon and rolled out of the way.

The hand stopped in midair, suddenly not knowing where to go.

This invisible respite wouldn't last long, though. He had to make the most of it. The Piercing Eye was already active, and though the combination of the Sword's visual effects added to the Eye's created just about the most confusing thing Royo had ever looked at, his only concern right now was Seyos. And in that regard, the Eye was not letting him down."

"1557

((Double Wednesday -- Page 1 of 2))

Former royalty among the Hun'Sho. Scarred eternally by what the Hun'Kui had done to his people. Transformed them. Into worms? The Sludge Sickness.

Royo was able to perceive that much in an instant, but there was much more there--darker thoughts, dwelling more deeply within. But Royo didn't need to know the man's life story, right now. He needed to know

how to kill him.

And so the Eye revealed it to him.

A core in his chest. Seyos' heart.

Royo didn't wait. He pulled his pistol, aimed for it, and fired.

He was off the target, though. At this distance, the core was too small of an object to hit, and the flaming bullet instead pierced Seyos' right lung.

And Royo knew that, somehow. The Eye was telling him.

He didn't have time to be impressed, though. He'd given away his position with that gunshot. He bolted left as a giant hand crashed down on the spot where he'd just been standing.

The hand. Royo's gaze lingered on it long enough for the Eye to reveal its nature to him.

One of the Fists of Enkir. A gloved artifact imbued with the properties of a magma golem. It could stretch and even grow far beyond its perceived physical size. It also burned to the touch--and would have to Royo, if Hun'Kui weren't so resilient to heat. Crafted 1,527 years ago by Arigas, whoever that was.

Interesting, Royo thought as he ran.

But if it worked on the Fists, then wait. Could it also...?

He looked at his own boots. The Boots of Karugetti.

They maintained their momentum in accordance with the wearer's will. Crafted 363 years ago by Arkos.

A much shorter and simpler description than the Fists, and in the heat of the moment, Royo was having trouble conceptualizing what it meant.

One of the hands had Lenos in its grip now, he noticed, and the other was pursuing him again. The Sword's invisibility had faded.

Royo activated its illusion power. Three copies of himself shot off in separate directions, mimicking his same running posture. He made sure to zigzag to add to the confusion, then aimed his gun again and fired. This time, it hit exactly where he wanted to, as the target was

nearer and larger.

The hand that had Lenos exploded at the wrist when the bullet cut through it, and Lenos was free again. The man fell to the ground in a crumpled heap, however, not moving.

Royo pulled the trigger two more times, aiming for Seyos himself again, but there was some sort of shield there, now. The Shield of Hamenszoon, the Piercing Eye told him.

An artifact capable of absorbing any projectile under a weight of seventy grams. Crafted 792 years ago by Hamenszoon.

Royo growled to himself as the Sword's copies faded. He would have to reload soon, and he didn't have that many bullets left.

He needed to get in close. If he could do that, he could end this in an instant."

"1558

((Double Wednesday -- Page 2 of 2))

Royo activated the Sword again and tried to circle around to Seyos' backside.

Seyos pulled out a pair of artifacts, and Royo identified them immediately.

The Twin Blades of Boros. Small swords which were capable of guiding even an amateur swordsman's hand toward the vital points of his desired opponent. Exceptionally deadly at close range. Crafted 33 years ago by Luann.

With that knowledge, Royo backed off again and sent out an extra wave of copies.

Where was he keeping all these damn things?

The Deceiver's Cloak. An artifact which allowed access to several small pocket dimensions. Crafted 4,612 years ago by Skapa.

Ah.

He didn't want to fire his pistol again and give away his position. At the moment, the best course of action to his mind was to wait for the Sword's invisibility to recharge. It would only take a few minutes, if he could hold out that long.

He seemed to be relatively safe as long as he kept multiple copies afoot. Running around the room in circles was especially helpful in that regard, because all of his copies mimicked his behavior, and by choosing the correct pressure point on the Sword, Royo was able to have as many as eight of himself all running counterclockwise around Seyos.

It was clearly pissing Seyos off as well, which was a nice bonus.

Royo took the opportunity to examine the Sword. While he already had a working knowledge of it, he wanted to be sure he hadn't missed anything.

The Sword of Hamenszoon. An artifact capable of producing illusions based on the wielder. Crafted 794 years ago by Hamenszoon.

Huh. Surprisingly uninformative.

Royo tried looking harder, wanting the Eye to provide him more detail.

The Eye did so, spelling out the exact function of each one of the Sword's pressure points, as well as informing him that they required manipulable soul power to do so. And as Royo had already discovered, seven copies was indeed the maximum number of illusions that the Sword could produce at one time.

The Piercing Eye was even so generous as to tell him the precise amount of time remaining before the invisibility was fully recharged. One minute, forty-eight seconds, and counting.

That was better. Royo was satisfied.

Movement from Seyos drew Royo's attention again, and he was ready to identify the next artifact.

It was a small cube, small enough to fit in Seyos' molten palm.

The Box of Perdition, the Eye told him. An artifact capable of producing explosions with a range of up to 750 meters. Crafted--

What?

Royo skipped the last part and instead pushed for more detail.

The Box had to be set on a timer with as little as fifteen seconds or as long as fifteen minutes. The blast would not harm the box itself but could still produce a force of up to five tons.

This was a very large problem.

Royo knew he couldn't wait any longer and went on the offensive. All seven clones of himself followed suit, converging on Seyos simultaneously."

"1559

One of the illusions disappeared to a pointless attack from Seyos, and Royo caught a glimpse of the jewel around Seyos' neck.

The Pendant of Unso. An artifact capable of teleporting the wearer to a set of predetermined locations. Crafted 1,341 years ago by Unso.

Royo understood as well as he could in the split second he had to perceive it. Seyos meant to activate the Box and teleport to safety.

That wasn't going to happen.

Royo went for the Pendant first but found the Shield of Hamenszoon in the way. That was fine. Royo let go of his pistol, knowing it would be unnecessary at this range, and grabbed the Shield with his gloved hand. He had still yet to examine that glove, but he knew its power well enough.

He put all his strength into his grip, and his fingers dug into the Shield like teeth into flesh. The Shield cracked and snapped in two.

Seyos looked surprised, and Royo took the opening to go straight for the man's heart. Seyos jolted away from him, though, and then they were struggling at such close range that they were nearly wrestling.

One of the Twin Blades of Boros arose with Seyos' left hand, and Royo only just managed to twist himself out its path before it could plunge into his own heart. He still received a long gash across his chest, which was most certainly painful but not enough so to make him lose focus.

The Deceiver's Cloak swirled as Seyos did, obscuring Royo's vision. Royo sent out another fresh wave of the Sword's copies and dove to the side. A slash from another Twin Blade vanished one of the illusions, and Royo saw another opening. His glove found Seyos' left arm and crushed it. One of the Twin Blades dropped from his grip, but the Hun'Sho did not so much as flinch. The other Twin Blade came straight for Royo's neck and narrowly broke upon the Sword of Hamenszoon--so narrowly, in fact, that Royo felt a shallow cut below his left ear.

Royo shoved himself forward and slammed his body into Seyos, knocking him off balance. The Cloak swirled again, but Royo still roughly knew where the man's neck was and went for it. Pressing through the Cloak, he found it with his glove.

He crushed it without hesitation.

Seyos staggered back but didn't fall. He was still moving, though not normally. The one remaining Twin Blade swung vainly at thin air, and Seyos' molten head sagged grotesquely to one side, apparently too heavy for his broken neck.

The fight was more or less over now, it seemed. There was no point in prolonging things, Royo felt.

He sent one more wave of illusions from the Sword and approached Seyos from the side. He stabbed the man through the chest and then wrenched it open in order to dig into Seyos' body with his glove.

There it was. The core.

Seyos said something incomprehensible, more wheezing than words.

Royo barely noticed. He crushed the core, too."

"1560 -- CLXVIII.

Immediately, the entire world around him shifted.

At first, he thought it was Malast teleporting him again, but when he saw the raw vortex around Seyos suddenly grow to ten times its previous intensity, Royo realized this was the work of the Piercing Eye.



## Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Eight: 'Look erstwhile and take heed...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Seyos' body barely had the opportunity to go limp before time itself seemed to slow. The body caught in midair, scarcely falling at all, and Royo simply watched.

His own movements were slowed as well, apparently, though his mind was not.

What was the Eye doing? He'd tucked it into the belt around his waist earlier and now would've liked to remove it, but at the speed his hand was going, it seemed like it would take a good ten minutes to make the journey.

Was it trying to show him something? To help him understand something?

He had just killed a man. It was not likely that the timing of this was coincidental.

He tried to observe Seyos more closely. The dying Hun'Sho man was like a volcano. And not because of his magma body. Rather, because of the enormous output of raw emotion and information. There was so much of it there now, shooting out of his body in all directions.

Perhaps the Piercing Eye was trying to give him time to observe it all.

Yes, that must have been it, Royo figured. The Eye hadn't actually slowed time itself, merely his perception of it.

Wonderful. Now he was going to be stuck here, watching this bastard die in slow motion while he waited for his own hand to remove the Piercing Eye and free himself.

Royo didn't care about anything he was seeing. He didn't want to know more about Seyos.

But there wasn't much else to do.

Ah. The glove. The object that was responsible for killing Seyos. Royo still didn't even know if it had a name, as he had yet to examine it with the Eye.

The Demon's Grip, the Eye told him. A gloved artifact capable of increasing the wearer's strength by a factor of up to one hundred thousand. Crafted 122 years ago by Morgunov.

Royo's eyes might have widened if he could move them that quickly. He pressed the Eye for greater detail.

An object which requires precision training in order to bring out its full potential.

That was all the information the Eye had for him. He would've liked to know more about Morgunov, as he certainly recognized the name, but the Piercing Eye didn't work that way, it seemed.

So he'd finally begun to discover its limitations. He had started to wonder if the Eye simply didn't have any.

Royo observed the progress of his hand toward the Eye.

Still about nine-tenths of the way to go.

He wanted to sigh.

He also wanted to look around and check up on the Box of Perdition, but that would've required turning his head.

Fine.

He observed the still-falling Seyos."

"1560 -- CLXVIII.

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"1561

((Double Saturday -- Page 1 of 2))

There was so much information there that Royo wasn't even sure where to begin.

He supposed that it did make him curious, though. What was all of this information, exactly? Just the man's emotions? No, it couldn't be. Dying wasn't that complex, was it?

Perhaps it was. Especially for an immortal Hun'Sho.

Royo wanted to smile.

He chose the first "thing" that his eyes stopped on and tried to unpack it.

A memory, it seemed to be. Of what? What was this color? Green? It was so bright. Royo hadn't seen much of it in his lifetime, certainly not

in shades like this. Plants, he supposed they were.

It must have been the surface. He'd read enough about it. So Seyos had been to the surface, had he? Bastard. A part of Royo had always wanted to go there, ever since he was a child, but he knew it was all but impossible for a Hun'Kui. The environment there was deadly.

Maybe it wouldn't be impossible for a god, though. Now there was a thought.

Royo moved on to the next memory without even delving further into that one. There were so many. He just wanted to find something interesting. Maybe even something informative. With as long as this asshole had been alive, he must have known all sorts of useful things, right? It only made sense.

He wondered if there was some easier way to navigate through everything than just picking whatever caught his eye. He tried to press the Eye for something more. Something clearer.

The Eye provided.

The memories became more distinct to him. Not visually, perhaps, but still distinct nonetheless. Only so much of the Eye's perception was visible. All of this information streaming into his mind was not like text popping up in midair waiting for him to read it. Rather, it simply appeared in his head, describing itself to him in a manner similar to--but thankfully still distinguishable from--his very own thoughts.

And all of these memories became linked to one another along an apparent timeline. Royo was able to navigate his way back all the way to the beginning.

It took a while.

There were noticeable gaps as well, which Royo supposed made sense. Memories became clouded and lost over time. It was only human to forget things. He had begun thinking that Hun'Sho simply weren't human, but perhaps they were, after all.

There it was. The oldest memory.

It was a face. And not that of a Hun'Sho or a Hun'Kui, but of a surface-dweller.

They all looked more or less alike to Royo, but he could at least tell

that this one was male and elderly. The old man was saying something, but Seyos apparently couldn't understand him, so neither could Royo.

Royo demanded more detail.

The Eye provided.

The old man in the memory was Seyos' father, Avaross. An incarnation of Avar.

The linked memories were beginning to make more sense to Royo, arriving in his perception as a merged group of information rather than separate pieces.

This man was the father of the first generation of Hun'Sho. A generation of which Seyos had been a member."

"1562

((Double Saturday -- Page 2 of 2))

Avaross gave everything to his children. He spent a century raising them, teaching them, placing all of his hopes upon them.

And Royo began to see...

A fledgling Hun'Sho. A boy by any standard. But with an unparalleled father.

Avaross inspires them all. He instills in them principles of morality. Of goodness. Hope. Prosperity. And of course, peace. He teaches them of an ideal world. One which He wants their help in building. That is why He has made them the way they are. That is why He granted them immortality.

The boy can only admire Him. Avaross is greatness personified, loving them all in equal measure, giving them all equal attention.

Under His guidance, the Hun'Sho flourish. Their numbers grow quickly at first, as Avaross instructs them in how to have children. New incarnations of themselves. Identical in every physical aspect, yet still

carrying a new soul and new ardor. Male or female, every Hun'Sho is able to bring life into the world.

In time, this strikes the boy as strange. He comes to learn of the surface world and the people there. Of the men and women there. He decides to ask his father about why He decided to give the Hun'Sho two genders.

"With you, my beloved children, I have done my best to replicate the civilizational successes of humanity as I have witnessed them--and likewise, to avoid the failures. I do not believe that either gender is one of those failures."

The boy is not sure he understands, but it matters little. There is much yet to learn, and he has eternity to do so.

They work hard, all of his brethren. They build. They follow Avaross' every command, listen to His every word and desire. They become His ideal people. And the world they create for themselves is good.

For a time.

Father begins to change. His behavior. His actions. He grows impatient with them, at times. Not as kind as He once was. More and more, He seems weary, yet when they ask, He says nothing is wrong. He says the world is wonderful. He says they have nearly achieved His ideal.

Nearly achieved. Nearly. Ever nearly.

The boy and his kin continue onward, undeterred. One day, that ideal WILL be achieved. They are immortal. It is inevitable. One day. And then Father will smile again. Father will be happy again.

But that is not what happens.

Instead, Father creates the Hun'Kui.

They are different. So very different. Each of them is distinguishable in their physicality. None can reproduce independently. They are much more like the poor wretches of the surface than the Hun'Sho are.

The boy pities the Hun'Kui. But he understands them, as do the other Hun'Sho. He understands that Father has created these ashen beings so that the Hun'Sho can guide them to their own level of greatness--and in so doing, perhaps even achieve still higher greatness as well.

Then the Hun'Sho will be more like Father than ever before."  
"1563

The boy does as much as he can. He befriends as many Hun'Kui as he can. Many of them are pleasant. Many of them are amusing.

But they have so little potential. They are so primitive. It is difficult to connect with them on anything other than the most superficial of subject matter.

They are wild. They are impulsive. They are little better than animals, driven almost entirely by their instincts. Civilizing them will take many, many years, the boy feels.

But that, too, is fine. For the Hun'Sho are blessed with immortality. However long is required, the deed will be done.

And yet...

Father spends so much time with the Hun'Kui. They are constantly demanding his attention, constantly in desperate need of it. Of course they are. They cannot help themselves. They are as pitiful as newborn babies and even slower to learn. Entire generations of Hun'Kui come and go, making the same essential mistakes their entire lives.

So why does Father seem to enjoy their company so much more? Why does He forgive and forget their transgressions so easily? This was not how He raised the Hun'Sho. He was strict. He was instructive. He was attentive. Yet now He is none of those things. Now He spends almost all of His time with the Hun'Kui, not even bothering to teach them anything. He simply idles among them, which surely only serves to reinforce the Hun'Kui's own problem of idleness, no?

Slowly, it is all falling apart. The boy sees it, day by day. The world that he and his brethren have built under Father's guidance--it is beginning to rot. Progress is being lost. Potential is being lost.

The boy does not know what to do. This is when Father would normally encourage him or teach him something new, something useful and helpful to everyone. But Father is not doing that. Father is too busy attending to the Hun'Kui.



Their work is failing. They cannot seem to help the Hun'Kui. They are outnumbered so greatly. The Hun'Kui multiply at such a rate that the Hun'Sho cannot keep up. It is too much work, trying to help all of them.

The boy tells Father of these concerns.

But Father does nothing. He says only to keep trying.

It makes so little sense. Did He not design the Hun'Sho to achieve His ideal? Why, then, does the good behavior of the Hun'Sho go unrewarded? Why does the bad behavior of the Hun'Kui always seem to earn Father's attention? His affection, even?

The boy does not understand. Were the Hun'Sho not Father's favorite? How could that be? They work so much harder than the Hun'Kui. They try every day to better themselves, to follow Father's teachings.

Why must this feel so painful? Even the Hun'Kui, with all of Father's attention, seem to be largely miserable. There are so many of them in need, and they cannot all bask in the glory of Father's presence simultaneously.

The boy is not sure for how much longer he can withstand it. And his peers, the other Guong, are all expressing similar sentiments.

But what can be done? This is Father's will, no?"  
"1564

((Double Monday -- Page 1 of 2))

Their world is becoming a terrible place. Full of stagnation and sickness and suffering. This cannot be the ideal which Father desired.

Then, one day, when the boy's hope is just about at its end, another among the Hun'Sho takes decisive action.

His name is Torosh. He is the boy's peer, one of the original generation, though some are now considering him their leader, the greatest among the Guong.

Torosh begins imprisoning Hun'Kui. He is even talking of executing some of them, though only those who have been found guilty of

particularly heinous crimes.

Where before, the Hun'Sho had always deferred to Father's ever-forgiving judgment, Torosh is going against Him. Torosh speaks at length to the rest of them about his decision.

"If we are to help the Hun'Kui, truly help them, then we cannot continue as we have been. While we may have all the time we desire to achieve our goals, the Hun'Kui do not. It is not a mercy or a kindness to take a gentle approach. Order must be reestablished if we are to have any hope of making progress again."

The boy agrees, for the most part, but he fears going against Father. He does not think it wise. And so he does not join Torosh in making this decision. The boy buries such thoughts and does as he has always done. He follows Father's orders.

As do most of the Hun'Sho. Torosh's actions have divided them.

When Father learns of what Torosh and the others are doing, He is not angry. But he is not pleased, either. He is eerily calm.

"Freedom is integral to the goal of an ideal world," Father tells them. "That you do not understand this after all this time, is my failing, I suppose. Forgive me, my children."

Father frees their prisoners. And then He imprisons Torosh and his followers, instead.

The boy is more fearful than ever now. But he is glad that he did not disobey Father.

As time goes on, the boy becomes increasingly convinced that Torosh was right. The suffering of the Hun'Kui continues, unabated. And their suffering becomes the Hun'Sho's suffering. Even if the ashen wretches bring most of it upon themselves, it is painful to observe it every day like this.

Senseless. Senseless and horrific.

The boy gives up. There is no point to this struggle. He decides to stop worrying and simply do as he is told. It is better this way. It is better to not care. Caring only brings disappointment and sorrow and pain. Allowing himself to become numb to it all is the only real solution, he realizes.

Perhaps this is Father's true lesson. That suffering is endless and hoping for anything better is an exercise in futility.

Then, a man arrives.

No.

Not just a man. Something more. Father's equal.

The way they speak to one another. The way they pay each other respect. And most of all, the way they quarrel. Rarely, has the boy ever seen Father get so angry as when He speaks to this man."

"1565

((Double Monday -- Page 2 of 2))

The boy is curious for the first time in a long time. He wishes to know more of this person. He decides to ask.

"I have no name, little one. For I am He Who Is Not."

"Why have you come here?" the boy asks.

"I have always been here. I know your struggle, young Seyos. I know you feel lost. Tell me. Do you believe Avaross is to blame for your misery and that of your kin?"

The boy does not know what to say. He does not wish to lie. But he does not truly know if he blames Father. Perhaps a part of him does, even if he had not allowed himself to acknowledge it all this time.

"...You love Avaross, even now?"

That, at least, the boy can answer. "Yes, of course I do. He is my father."

"You are a good son."

The boy does not know what to think or feel. Somehow, this man reminds him of how Father used to be. There is... a warmth there that the boy has not felt in a very long time.

"I will try to help you if I can."

But just as quickly as the man had arrived, He Who Is Not is gone again.

The boy is more conflicted than ever. More confused than ever. He wants to leave, to travel and learn more of He Who Is Not, but the boy is scared.

So he stays.

And things continue to worsen. The Hun'Kui do not organize. Or rather, they cannot. Whenever they try, others among them arrive to rob and murder them, to take from those who have worked hard for what they have. It is not just.

Yet Father continues trying to change the Hun'Kui's very nature with words alone. Even though He was the one who made them that way. He wants them to choose to do the right thing on their own. He wants them to be moral, as the Hun'Sho are moral.

Or does He? The boy does not truly know anymore. Avaross is a mystery to him now.

But it does not matter. The boy is powerless to do anything. This is the domain of Avaross and none may go against His will.

And then it happens.

Avaross disappears.

There was no warning. No trace left behind. He is simply gone.

And no one knows what to do.

The Hun'Kui panic. And so do the Hun'Sho, though in a more reserved manner. Without guidance or protection, the world is suddenly much more terrifying.

Soon, however, a man wrapped entirely in bandages arrives. He does not speak, but he carries a message for the Hun'Sho and Hun'Kui.

A message from He Who Is Not.

"You are now free," it reads. "Do as you will, and have will as you do it. All that I can do for you, I have now done. Goodbye."

"1566

Many more years pass. Torosh and his followers are freed during this time. They are as confused as everyone else when they learn what has happened, but Torosh is able to galvanize the Hun'Sho and help guide the Hun'Kui toward order. It is difficult, because the ashen wretches have much to learn and are often unwilling and even violent.

A firmer hand is required. The Hun'Sho are in agreement. It may have been against the wishes of the Avaross whom they most recently remember, but they do not believe it would be against those of the Avaross whom they remember raising them.

So they subjugate the Hun'Kui by force. It is a miserable process. Grueling and often bloody. But the boy does not see hope in the alternative. Letting the Hun'Kui remain free to bring ruin upon themselves does not strike him as wise.

The boy cannot hold slaves himself, however. He finds it too distasteful, even if he understands his kin's logic and does not think any less of them. He cannot wholly disregard the shadow of Avaross, as the others seem to.

Instead, after a semblance of structure and hope for peace has been achieved, the boy decides to travel. He believes there is much to be learned, elsewhere in the world.

And indeed, there is.

He learns of other gods. He learns of their sudden absence.

And perhaps most importantly, he learns the tales of He Who Is Not. The God of All That Is Not. The Void. And the many other names. It is confusing, because each culture calls Him something else. It seems as though He never identified Himself properly.

From all the tales of different gods that the boy hears, the God of All That Is Not seems to be the most mischievous among them. They always tell of how He interferes in the other gods' plans, disrupting their efforts, playing pranks on them. Some even describe Him as evil-- or as Evil itself.

But the boy does not think so. He wishes that he could meet the God of All That is Not again, but the one thing he learns definitively from all

of these tales is that He is gone.

All of the gods, the Primordials, have left. The God of All That Is Not has removed them from this world, save one.

Malast. The Idle God. The God of the Underworld.

The boy seeks Him out, this remaining god.

It takes a very, very long time. Thousands of years, even.

The boy becomes a thief along the way, because from all the tales he has heard, there is only one method for acquiring Malast's attention. Stealing--or at least, attempting to steal--the Urn of Growth.

The boy worries. It is terribly dangerous, of course. No one in the tales survives Malast's wrath. They all die in the attempt. But the boy has confidence in his skill. He has acquired several useful artifacts during his journey, artifacts which he has stolen from the irresponsible and undeserving. The Staff and Pendant of Unso, in particular."

"1567

((Double Wednesday -- Page 1 of 2))

He succeeds. He gets away with the Urn. But he dares not open it. He learned much of the fearsome power that magical artifacts such as this can hold. And of course, this was never his objective, either. His wish was to speak with Malast without being instantly turned to dust by a god's wrath.

So the boy begins planning.

After all these years, he returns to his kin, to his home. And he is welcomed into a land of tremendous prosperity. He is not surprised. He has heard the whispers of the Hun'Sho all over the world, the hushed tales of their magnificence and power, both feared and desired.

The boy could not be prouder. He has never felt such unity with his kin as he does now. It is entirely wonderful. And he is all the more pleased when they welcome him home--as they should, for he has brought many, many gifts with him.

He becomes a Guong once more and strives to help the Hun'Sho reach still greater heights of prosperity.

There are so many Hun'Sho now. And so many more Hun'Kui. But these are not problems, as they once would have been. Infrastructure and order have turned these into blessings. Into potential.

He takes his subjects and builds a city. Himmestat. It is an enormous undertaking, and he has more work than he knows what to do with, more problems than he knows how to fix, but he never forgets his plan. He never forgets his objective to one day meet the only remaining god in the world.

The other Guong are now being difficult. The love he once felt for them has faded rather quickly. They are jealous of all that he has. Even with as much as he has shared, they still desire more. They seem to think him undeserving of his riches--and of his followers, too. The other Guong attribute Himmestat's success not to his actions but to those of his immediate subordinates.

This bothers him. Because he knows that there is more truth in it than he would care to admit. Torveis, in particular, is very competent and personable. Even the Hun'Kui seem to show genuine affection for him. And the boy hears the whispers, the surreptitious talk of wanting Torveis to become Himmestat's new Guong.

They don't understand. But he will show them.

He builds a vault. The greatest vault in all the world. Himmekel. Here, he will finally be able to set the stage for his meeting with Malast. And protect that which is his, as well.

It takes many years, but he manages it. He uses a few of Rathmore's Tools to help get the job done and even builds a network, connecting Himmekel with distant treasure troves that he had created or found during his travels.

So much work. All culminating to this. The Vault of Paradise.

And finally, after all is prepared, he spreads the rumor. The rumor that the Urn of Growth is hidden away in Himmekel.

Sure enough, Malast arrives, looking for it."

((Double Wednesday -- Page 2 of 2))

At first, the boy is careful not to present himself directly before the god. In time, however, he sees that Malast is not at all what he had expected.

Malast does not wish to kill him. Malast merely wants the Urn back. The boy does not seem to concern or interest him in the slightest.

Yet the Idle God does not leave. He merely sits there, in a chair of stone. The boy has never seen him get up from it. Even when Malast first appeared, He had already been sitting in it. The boy does not understand. But then, such is the mysterious power of a god, he supposes.

He asks Malast many questions, wanting to get to know the God of the Underworld better, but it is a difficult process. Malast hardly engages with him at all. The only subject that is able to spark any continual semblance of interest is that of the other gods. The Primordials.

The boy is immensely curious as to where they have all gone and why, exactly. In the end, however, Malast says that He does not know, but the boy is not sure he believes that. Malast seems to know many things that He should not, yet He never explains how. It is quite frustrating, but what is to be done about it? The man is a god, and the boy is not.

The Urn of Growth, he eventually learns, could change that. He begs Malast to grant it to him, but the Idle God refuses.

"It would turn you to dust," He says.

The boy is increasingly infuriated by this. If he could only become a god, he thinks, then it would prove his greatness beyond doubt to the other Guong. To Torosh, especially. But no matter what the boy tries or does, Malast continues to refuse him.

And then the Surajj'Byok arrives. The Sludge Sickness.

The Hun'Kui have discovered a terrible weapon to use against the Hun'Sho and are wielding it with malevolent abandon. So many of the boy's kin are transformed into abominations of nature. Reckless killing



machines. Chaos and evil made flesh.

He watches some of the Hun'Kui laugh with demonic madness as the world crumbles around them.

There is nothing worse imaginable, to his mind. He begs Malast for help. He begs Malast for the power of a god, the power to perhaps save his people.

But the Idle God remains exactly so.

This is the Apocalypse of the Hun'Sho.

Himmekel is their only salvation. Without it, everyone in Himmestat would have surely perished. Instead, a few hundred are able to survive.

But the world is forever changed now. The Hun'Sho are on the brink of extinction.

Everything else is meaningless. His squabbles with the other Guong. His treasure. His jealousy. They are all petty nonsense. Only the survival of his kin matters now.

So they hide. They remain quiet. And do nothing. They are immortal, after all. They can be as patient as they like. A time of revival will surely come, if they can simply endure."

"1569

The boy takes advantage of the many tools at his disposal to go out and search for other Hun'Sho in secret. Surely, he is not the only Guong who has survived. Indeed, there are others, though they are few, as expected.

And they are broken. They are terrified, just as he is. Some refuse even to speak to him, having grown so paranoid. They do not seem to understand the cause of the Sludge Sickness and think it may be some sort of divine punishment for betraying Avaross' wishes all those years ago.

Hope is thinner than ever. Even Torosh is wallowing in his failure.

The boy does not know what to do. When he returns to Himmekel, he finds that his subjects do not believe in him any longer. They refuse to acknowledge him as Guong.

Fine.

He does not need them to love him back. He does not need them to cooperate willingly. So the boy disappears from their lives and hides himself away. He uses his tools to watch them, to protect them, to guide them, and yes, to occasionally coerce them. There is too much for him to do alone. His people require more power. More treasure. More magic. And they must help him acquire it.

A delicate balance is achieved in Himmekel. He is all but forgotten there. Only the oldest Hun'Sho remember him now. Only they know of his protection and intention. But that is enough. He is not interested in being Guong again. He is not sure he could even do the job.

Malast has deemed him unsuitable, and perhaps there is truth in that. The boy has been thinking so for quite a while. He wants to do something. He wants to revitalize his people. But how can he? When he has already failed them so thoroughly and repeatedly? What can he do on his own? Gather treasure? To what end? What hope is left, truly?

He does not know the answers to these questions. He does not know how or why he continues on in this way.

He visits the Prime Archivers in Luugh. They are surprised to encounter a living Hun'Sho and are accommodating to him. He uses their resources to conduct his own research into the Primordials and into godhood.

It is a very slow process. He has difficulty with their written languages. The Prime Archivers allow him to come and go as he pleases. He makes sure to reward them for their help.

And then, Ettol appears in Himmekel.

The boy is terrified. Everything will begin to change now. He knows that Ettol's arrival will bring more outsiders to them. His kin are in danger again. He must take drastic action. Because...

Because he knew that...

He knew...

He knew...?

He...?

The vision faltered. Royo found himself standing exactly where he had been previously, observing the slowed demise of Seyos.

He had so many questions--chief among them being, what in the world had just happened?

He had gotten a broad view of Seyos' entire life, of course. That much was obvious. What was less apparent, however, was why it had ended so abruptly. It hadn't felt finished. It felt like it just broke down.

And right after Ettol's introduction."

"1570

Everything was beginning to feel strange now. Royo could sense a shivering change in his slowed perception. And it was slight, but he thought he could see a difference in the speed of everything. His hand was moving more quickly than it had been before. Seyos was falling faster. The information was spilling out of him more rapidly.

It was all still incredibly slow, just not as slow as it was.

And that suggested to Royo that this little slowdown event was going to end soon. Maybe he wouldn't even need to wait for his hand to reach the Piercing Eye. The whole ordeal could break down at any moment.

Before the vision he'd just had, he would've considered that a good thing, but now he wasn't so sure. Seyos was a wellspring of knowledge. There was still so much that Royo could see and learn here.

And perhaps, in spite of himself, he hated Seyos a little bit less now. Not enough to regret killing him, certainly, but Royo found it difficult not to pity him at all.

It was strange.

This was a level of understanding beyond simply knowing what Seyos had been through. Royo felt almost as if he had lived Seyos' life himself. And this degree of emotional connection...

It was uncomfortable. He didn't need it clouding his thoughts, right now. He needed to maintain his focus.

Thankfully, that was simple enough. He just had to remind himself that Seyos had tried to kill him, that he would have killed him if Royo hadn't killed him first.

No amount of emotional thinking could counter that, as far as Royo was concerned.

Still, he didn't want this to end just yet. He wanted to know more. He needed to.

About Ettol. Maybe the Piercing Eye could tell him something. Even if Seyos' memories had been tampered with, even if they were in the midst of breaking down during this elongated moment, perhaps there was something to be gained here.

Royo had to try. He demanded more from the Eye. More detail. More anything.

The Eye provided.

Seyos' knowledge was a mess. It was spreading out everywhere and vanishing into nothingness. So much information, bleeding out in all directions. None of it was coherent enough to formulate a vision like it had before, but Royo could still catch bits and pieces. And then he caught a glimpse of what he wanted.

A meeting between Ettol and Malast.

Words were being spoken in it, but they were incomprehensible. Silhouettes and even faces were being shown in it, but they were distorted and crumbling. Everything was off, like looking through some kind of swirling and cracked window, where even the light on the other side of it was fading away.

But even so, Royo was able to distinguish three things.

The first was that Ettol was not alone. He had a companion with him. A large, monstrous companion. The second, was that Ettol, judging from his skin tone, seemed to be a surface-dweller. But the third and final

thing was, by far, what Royo found the most strange.

Ettol had a single horn on his head."

"1571 -- CLXIX.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Nine: 'Think not, worry not...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Durendia awoke to the sound of the one-horned man's voice.

--yeah. He's certainly a strong candidate. But who would he match with? I would be most concerned about--ah. You are awake. How are you feeling, cedo?"

Her little head pulsed. Not with pain, exactly, but a close approximation of it. She wanted to move, to get up, but she was still so dizzy and exhausted that she ended up just shifting in place a bit before giving up. It was pretty cozy right where she was, anyway.

Then she realized why.

The big gray dog had wrapped himself around her. His tail alone was enough of a blanket that she didn't feel cold, despite being able to see her breath.

Germal crouched over her and felt her forehead. "Cedo, can you hear me?"

"Y-yes," she finally managed to say.

"Good. That's very good."

She had never heard such a soothing voice. Not even from her own mother.

Her mother...

Durendia's eyes widened and her face went pale. The memories. The images. The carnage. It was all rushing back to her, and she didn't know what to do about it. She didn't know what was real and what was

imaginary.

So much blood. And the stench. She couldn't get it out of her head. Or her nostrils. She could still smell it. Everything was--

"Shh," came Germal's voice again, which seemed to soften her entire world, somehow. "It's okay, cedo. You're okay."

And she was.

As simply as that.

She felt... normal. She felt like herself again.

In fact, what had she just been worrying about? She couldn't remember.

"I know," said Germal. "I'm being careful."

She didn't know what that meant. Was he talking to her? She couldn't tell.

She felt Koh's giant nose next to her ear and heard it sniffing. Then he licked her cheek, and she couldn't help giggling at the tickling sensation. He smelled like tobacco, but she didn't mind it so much.

Germal removed his hand from her head and stood up.

She was still confused beyond all reckoning, though. She asked the first thing that popped into her head. "Who are you?"

He regarded her with a smile. "I'm your uncle. And don't you worry. I'm going to take good care of you from now on."

She believed him wholeheartedly. "Why do you have a horn on your head?"

He laughed mildly. "Someone gave it to me. Why? Do you like it?"

She shrugged.

"Hmm. It doesn't frighten you, does it?"

She shook her head.

"Good. That's very good."

Comfortable as she was, she still wanted to stand now. Her whole body felt stiff as she wriggled her way out from the wall of canine around her and tried to find her footing. She stumbled forward.

Germal caught her. "Careful now, cedo."

She looked around. "Where are we?"

"A little town called Orobell. Have you heard of it?"

"1571 -- CLXIX.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

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Germal caught her. “Careful now, cedo.”

She looked around. “Where are we?”

“A little town called Orobell. Have you heard of it?”

"1572

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

Durendia paused to think. The name sounded familiar, somehow, but that was the extent of it. She shook her head. “What happened to this place?”

“Some very bad people came and destroyed it,” said Germal.

The smoldering ruin had dozens of columns of smoke, all illuminated in the moonlight and bending in the wind.

“Why did they do that?” she asked.

“It’s a game they play.”

That piqued her curiosity even more. “A game?” She liked games.

“Oh, indeed. They try to destroy all of each others’ things.”

She didn’t much like the sound of that game, though. “That sounds scary...”

“It can be. They take it very seriously. Perhaps because they play for such high stakes.” He patted her head. “But there’s nothing to worry about, cedo. There are other games we can play.”

Koh came up beside her, dragging a heavy cloth in his mouth. He nudged it against her, obviously wanting her to take it.

She was beginning to shiver, so she did so. She scratched behind his ears for him while she tried to warm up again.

A speck of white fell across her vision, and she looked up at the sky another time to discover that it was beginning to snow. It made her smile. She'd always liked the snow.

"Master Germal, sir!" The distant voice grew quickly closer as a man she didn't recognize ran up to the three of them. "We may have found a lead on the attackers!"

"Oh?" said Germal. "Do tell me more."

"Ah, well, there appears to be a trail through the forest, but we're not entirely sure yet, sir. I would've reported this to the Knife directly, but I don't want to trouble him if it turns out we were wrong. He might, um... well..."

"Wise of you," said Germal, chortling. "Allow me to guess. You previously worked under Dunhouser?"

"I--yes. That I did, sir. How...?"

"The fact that you are worried about bursts of violent outrage from your superior is rather telling, I'm afraid. But I don't think you need to worry about such things with Jercash. From my understanding, he's not one given to crushing his subordinates."

The man looked surprised. "O-oh... uh... really, sir? But, ah, didn't he just take out Horace a little while ago?"

"Oh, indeed he did. But I believe it was Horace who started that, not Jercash."

"What? Why would anyone ever--? You'd have to be an idiot to attack the Knife first! But then again, I guess Horace was kind of stupid..."

"Who knows what came over him?" said Germal.

"Ah. Anyway, sir. I apologize for getting sidetracked. There was another reason why I came to you for help, actually. I've heard that you were in the 11th Ranging Division, which would make you an expert tracker, no?"

"Well, not so much me as him." Germal motioned toward Koh.

The man's eyes went hesitantly to the giant dog."  
"1573

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

"While, yes, I was technically a Ranger, too," said Germal, "it was really Koh who did all the heavy lifting. I mostly just provided operational support for him."

"I... see." The man seemed like he was trying to suck his own lips into his face as he deliberated on his next words. "Then, ah... w-would it be too much to ask for his help here?"

"Oh, I'm sure he'd love to. Right, Koh?"

Koh snorted strongly enough to kick up a cloud of dust in front of him.

"Don't be a surly bore," said Germal. "The man is asking nicely for your help."

Koh glanced between the two men, then at Durendia, then back at Germal.

"Of course, we'll take her with us," said Germal.

Koh stood up.

Germal looked back at the unnamed man. "Lead the way."

"Oh, thank you so much, Master Koh."

The dog returned a calm, low woof, and they all began walking.

Germal and the stranger kept talking, but Durendia wasn't really paying attention anymore. They were mentioning a lot of names and places that she didn't recognize, and she soon found herself much more interested in the snow. It was picking up. She wondered if there would be enough to build a snowman soon. Or a snowdog, maybe. It would be fun to make a second Koh, she thought.

When they arrived at their apparent destination, her attention returned to the situation at hand.

The enormous hole in the forest was difficult to miss. Felled and splintered trees littered the path forward, so Germal helped Durendia onto Koh's back in order to protect her feet. It was fun. Koh moved so smoothly over the rough terrain that she had no trouble keeping her balance. She remembered trying to ride a horse once before and finding it not nearly this easy.

"Here's where we ran into trouble, Master Koh."

The sundered pathway split into several narrower ones. Some of them even looked blocked by more fallen trees ahead, but it was difficult to tell with only the moon and a few flashlights in the darkness.

"Some of our men have gone ahead, but from what we can tell so far, it's all a mess. We suspect there was some sort of battle in this particular area."

Koh lifted his nose and sniffed audibly.

"That is probably a safe bet," said Germal. "Some of these trees aren't just knocked down but also pitch black as well. That would suggest fire or lightning, which matches what happened to the town. And the direction that they fell also suggests that the fight was moving away from Orobell. Good work, soldier."

"Th-thank you, sir."

Koh ambled forward, not choosing from any of the branching paths and instead simply going straight ahead into the line of trees that were still standing. It grew pitch dark under the canopy of leaves overhead, and Durendia could hear the others following behind."

"1574

She'd always been scared of the dark, but she wasn't now. The flashlights helped, but it was mainly because Koh was here. She felt like the bravest little girl in the whole world with him around. Maybe that wasn't how bravery worked, but it was what she felt--along with a tinge of anticipation, wondering where Koh was leading everyone.

In time, they reached another clearing, and the moonlight returned. A new set of branching pathways lay before them, and this time, Koh chose the leftmost one.

Snow was everywhere now, filling her vision so much that it was getting difficult to see ahead.

As they continued on, Germal approached her from the side. "Do you know the story of Hada, cedo?"

She shook her head.

"The God of Storms? The God of Wrath? You've never heard of him?"

She shook her head again.

"Would you like me to tell his tale?" said Germal. "I think you might enjoy it."

She nodded.

The one-horned man smiled that smile that made her feel safe. "Well, it all began long ago. Before even humanity as we know it existed. Hada was born deep beneath the earth, but he hated it there, because he loved the sky. Even before he had ever seen it, he knew that he loved it. He believed that it was his destiny to be one with the sky, and so he became desperate to reach the surface. He searched every day for a means of getting there.

"Eventually, he encountered someone named Ettol, who said that he knew the way to the surface and would show him--on one condition. Ettol didn't want anyone else to know the way, so he said that Hada had to seal himself and all of his power into a bottle, and then Ettol would carry Hada to the surface. Hada, eager to achieve his destiny at any cost, agreed to this demand, and sealed himself away.

"And indeed, Ettol did exactly as he had promised to do. He carried Hada through a secret passage to the surface. However, once they were there, Ettol did not unseal the bottle. He placed Hada on a rock and left him there. Hada was wrath. He was closer to his goal than ever before and yet powerless to take that final step.

"So passed many, many years until someone discovered Hada there. The poor man who released him was consumed in Hada's fury, as was much of humanity, for Hada brought forth storms unlike any the world had ever seen. Hada quickly grew to hate mankind, as he was jealous of them. They had been living on the surface for so many years before him that they had already claimed much of it for themselves. So he tried to wipe humanity out in its entirety.

"But with the aid of other gods, they resisted him, which of course served only to make him angrier. And that is why the world still has terrible storms even to this day. It is a lingering effect of Hada's never-ending bitterness and hatred towards humanity."

Durendia frowned. "I didn't like that story at all."

"No?" said Germal. "My apologies then, cedo."  
"1575 -- CLXX."

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

The group stopped when they came upon another wide clearing. This one was fully enclosed, however. There were no more branching paths to pursue, and Koh had stopped as well.

There was, however, someone lying there. They were not moving.

Durendia was uncomfortable again. Still not frightened exactly, but very unhappy nonetheless. She had a dreadful feeling that it was a dead person. Something in the way the body was positioned. Very unnaturally contorted.

Koh started toward it. Durendia didn't want to get any closer, but she didn't know how to say so. Perhaps the dog guessed as much, because he stopped again and let Germal and the others examine it.

They took their time.

Durendia tried to just think about the snow, but she couldn't help staring. Unpleasant as it made her feel, she couldn't fully stifle her curiosity.

"I recognize this man," someone eventually said. "Isn't this Akio, the Spear of Kavia?"

"Wow, yeah, I think you're right. Heh. So I guess someone axed Akio, eh?"

"Ha. Nice."

"This is pretty impressive work. I heard this guy was a real pain in the ass, over in Hoss."

“He was one of the Kane’s strongest lackeys, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah. Guess that confirms that this town really was important to Kane, eh?”

“Most likely.”

“Who the hell took this guy out, though? We don’t have anyone strong enough around here, do we?”

Germal stepped into the two men’s conversation. “The body is still mostly intact, including the head, which would suggest that the killer got to his reaper first. Perhaps all this destruction we’ve seen here in the forest was the killer struggling against Akio’s mindless corpse.”

“Ah, that’d make sense. Still pretty impressive, though, don’t you think? Catching a famous guy like this off guard?”

“Eh, maybe he had one of our ‘invisi-bros’ with him.”

“Maybe. But I don’t know, man. After Ivan cocked everything up in Sair, the whole Vanguard probably knows that we can be invisible now. And this guy was high up on the food chain, right? So he should’ve already had some countermeasures ready for that sort of thing.”

“You’re giving the Vannies too much credit, dude. They’re not that smart.”

Germal interjected again. “Perhaps this really was the work of Hada,” he laughed. “And if not, then perhaps it will be.”

“...Sir, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. Let’s get this body to Jercash, shall we? I’m sure he’d like to see it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter One Hundred Seventy: ‘Hold, and achieve beyond thyself...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Things were not going well for Hector. The treasure in this room had



not helped. Even after having Garovel examine it all, Hector was no better off than before.

And the worm didn't stop. It came crashing after him like a tidal wave of sludge at every opportunity. It was all Hector could do to just stay ahead of the damn thing.

Problem was, there was nowhere to go."  
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((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

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"1576

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

Up and around and back down again, iron platform after iron platform, the whole process had quickly become cyclical while Hector tried to buy himself the time to come up with a new plan. A plan that didn't involve fighting it at close range, preferably.

But more and more, that didn't seem like it was going to happen. Sooner or later, he would have to take that risk. Whether it was because he actively chose to do so or because he screwed up somehow and let the worm catch up to him--it was going to happen, he felt. And he was beginning to think that, of those two possibilities, the prior would be better. If nothing else, attacking the worm head on at least sounded more attractive than falling on his ass and getting smothered.

How to approach it, though? It would be best if he could create an opening for himself, somehow. If he could distract the beast for even just a split second, then he could test out the Moon's Wrath on it without risking being eaten.

An ideally placed iron platform at just the right moment could throw the worm off balance. In theory.

It would have to be precise, though. If it didn't have enough mass to it or if it struck at the wrong angle or the wrong moment... that would get ugly. That might even be the end for him and Garovel both, right then and there.

Great.

He needed to consult Garovel before committing to something so stupid.

‘Garovel, should I just charge in and attack this fuckin’ thing?’

‘Ah... aha... hmm.’

‘Garovel, that’s not helpful.’

‘I’d rather you didn’t do that, I think.’

‘Then what DO I do? This is getting us nowhere.’ He launched up and away on yet another iron platform, annihilating his earlier one in the meantime.

‘Well, I think the safest course of action is to just keep on going exactly as you are and wait for either Diego or Zeff to rescue us.’

Hector could see logic in that plan. But he could see flaws in it, too. ‘We don’t know that they WILL rescue us, Garovel. For all we know, they could be in even worse trouble than we are, right now.’

The worm splattered against the ceiling like a bubbling geyser, and sludge shot out in all directions.

Hector was ready, though. He could sense every gelatinous chunk flying his way and bounded out of their path while simultaneously raising iron walls behind him for added protection. The sludge knocked against each one with enough force to knock them all over, but that was fine. As long as none of it touched him, he didn’t--

There was some on his arm.

He tried to materialize it away from himself, to fling it off of him with rapid iron spikes, but the iron wouldn’t grow. The field density of the worm’s soul or ardor or whatever the hell the thing had--it was too strong, Hector concluded.

So he took the opposite approach and did a swirling, haphazard somersault through the air while annihilating the iron around his arm."  
"1577

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

It worked as Hector had hoped it would. The sludge went flying. And

so did he, over the edge of the chamber's third floor.

The Scarf of Amordiin was helpful here. He caught himself with a tall spiral of iron and slid all the way down to the bottom. It was a technique he'd used before--one that he was beginning to think he should give a name to.

The cacophonous splash of more sludge erased that thought from his head, however, and he had to launch himself away again.

'In fairness,' said Garovel, 'I really doubt they're in more trouble than we are, right now. I'm not sure ANYONE is, quite frankly.'

'Still doesn't mean they're going to show up and save us,' said Hector, remaking his missing chunk of armor. 'We need a better plan than that.'

'Hector, there may not BE one. Not to be negative, but we're pretty fucked.'

Hector might've sighed, if he could've spared the breath for it.

'Really, though, you're doin' a great job, buddy. I'm plenty impressed, already. You just focus on keeping us alive for as long as you possibly can, alright?'

And Hector wanted to argue, but he stopped himself, because he noticed something different in Garovel's soundless voice. Something off. A slight tremble. And a bit too much of a lilt, maybe, almost as if...

As if Garovel were trying not to sound frightened.

The worm arrived again with a boom and interrupted his train of thought, but Hector never lost track of it. After he managed to create some more distance, he found his mind lingering on that notion.

Garovel was scared.

That wasn't so surprising, really. They were in a terrifying situation with no escape. But it WAS surprising that Garovel was apparently scared enough to be having trouble concealing it.

That was what Hector found concerning.

And though it hardly seemed possible at this point, Hector was beginning to get the impression that these circumstances were somehow even more dire than he had realized.

Wonderful. Just what he wanted. Even more pressure to not fuck up horribly.

He knew he had to keep his calm, though. His focus.

‘Just think of this as a new form of training,’ Garovel was saying, sounding more self-assured again.

‘How the hell would this qualify as training?’

‘You’re honing your agility. With the help of a pet.’

‘A pet,’ he echoed dubiously.

‘A very large, slimy, man-eating pet, yes.’

Well, at least the reaper wasn’t too scared to distract his servant with stupid bullshit.

A genuine distraction did arrive, however, in the form of a new presence in the chamber. Thanks to the Scarf of Amordiin, Hector sensed the person there immediately, standing at the bottom of the chamber and looking around in probable confusion. Unfortunately for whoever it was, Hector and worm were above them.

Hector knew his task at once. He had to get there before the worm did."

"1578

Hector bolted over the side of the third floor again, armor scraping against rock, and knocked himself straight downward with a velocity state in an iron boulder. He went to work on an iron web in order to slow himself once he was close enough, but it was going to be a very tight window, he knew. He was prepared to launch them on a platform of their own, if necessary.

And he caught a glimpse of the person.

It was a Hun’Kui. Eleyo, almost certainly. But he was wearing Seyos’ cloak.

In that same moment, Eleyo looked up and no doubt perceived his

imminent demise. Hector falling toward him, chased by a giant mass of sludge and ardor.

Eleyo gripped a pendant around his neck, just as Seyos had done previously, and vanished into thin air.

And Hector was alone with the worm again--only now, he'd compromised his positioning, and the worm was nearly on top of him.

Not much choice now.

He ignored the immediate confusion and shot himself sideways with a horizontal pillar. When he was close enough to the wall, he followed up with a vertical pillar, adding extra mass to it as well as a slight curve to the tip, trying to help with the adjustment in his trajectory. He still ended up scraping the wall with his shield and armor, but it mostly worked, and he went flying upward again, feeling rather like a pinball.

The hope was to slip by the worm entirely, but the Scarf of Amordiin was telling him now that that wasn't going to happen. The only consolation was that the concentration of sludge here was thinner than the main body.

He readied his grip on the Moon's Wrath, then swung with all his strength as soon as he made contact.

Sludge splattered everywhere, but he made it up and over to the second floor.

He allowed himself to stop and check if he had any sludge on him. The Scarf informed him that, other than a few specks here and there, he didn't.

He indulged a breath of relief, and then rumbling reminded him that he was still being chased, and he propelled himself away on still another iron platform.

'Something's different with that mace now,' said Garovel. 'It doesn't feel quite so "empty" anymore. It has ardor in it.'

Hector wasn't sure what to do with that information.

'Hit the worm again,' the reaper said.

'Uh--are you sure? Didn't you want me to--?'

'I know what I said. But now we're conducting research, and science is

important enough to risk our lives for, right?’

Hector didn’t wholly agree with that sentiment, but he didn’t argue, because the result was what he’d wanted earlier.

The worm was climbing again, sloshing over rock and tossing bits of treasure around.

Hector took his chance and slammed a giant iron cube into it just as it was reaching the second floor.

The worm didn’t seem particularly bothered by the impact and kept on after him like so much flowing water, entirely undeterred."

"1579

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

Not quite the distraction he’d hoped for. Hector launched himself away without enough time even to choose his direction or stabilize himself. He and his armor went flipping through the air.

But the Scarf. Again, it was helping him. With it, he didn’t become disoriented. He didn’t lose track of where he was or where the worm was or even where the wall that he was flipping toward was. Being able to sense the space immediately around himself proved to be a stabilizing effect for his mind, and this wasn’t the first time he’d noticed it in this fight, either.

He was able to materialize an iron curve against the wall just before he hit it. So rather than slamming against it and losing all momentum, his armor scraped against the curve and then slid safely off to the side. He was even able to reorient himself into an upright position and land easily on both feet, still on the second floor.

‘Holy crap, Hector.’

‘Think I’m getting the hang of this Scarf.’ He watched the iron curve he’d made a moment ago fall off the wall and annihilated it before it hit the ground.

The worm was getting close again, and Hector bounded up and over it, deciding this time not to flee. He wanted the edge of the worm. His most recent test had revealed that he couldn’t distract it, but maybe he



could still navigate around its huge bulk nimbly enough to avoid immediate death.

The sludge pulsed and stretched, reaching out for him a little--but only a little. Not like the worm's mouth could. This section here was the tail, Hector was pretty sure, and while it was obviously still dangerous, it didn't seem nearly as aggressive in its efforts to absorb or devour him.

It did seem more aggressive in its efforts to slam him into the wall, though.

And since he wasn't confident that a blow from the Moon's Wrath would counter something with enough force to derail a train, he decided to leap over the tail instead of taking it head on. When the tail smacked into the wall and splattered everywhere, Hector rushed in to attack. He held the mace low, letting it drag behind him a little, and then brought full force to bear with vigor-enhanced strength.

The mace struck true and the already-thinned tail exploded into even more chunks.

That was all the opening he was going to get, though, as he could already sense the mouth twisting around to catch him from behind. He launched himself out of its path, and the worm's mouth bent upward after him, snapping and drooling at him but still out of reach.

He landed on the other side while it rumbled and writhed, eagerly trying to reposition itself so that it could chase him again.

Hector put some distance between himself and the worm again, waiting for Garovel's assessment.

'That was a solid hit,' the reaper said. 'Seems like the the mace is "full" now.'

"1580

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

'Full?' said Hector.

'Of ardor,' said Garovel.

'Yeah, but what does that actually mean?'

‘Dunno. Try to do something with it.’

‘Like what?’

‘Uh. Hmm. Maybe it’s got a secret button on the bottom of the handle.’

Hector checked. ‘It doesn’t.’

‘Well, shit, I’m out of ideas. You think of something.’

Not knowing what else he could do, he tried swinging the mace at thin air.

It didn’t do anything.

The worm was gaining on him again, so he had to stop fiddling with the mace and concentrate on keeping his distance. The beast didn’t seem fazed by the loss of its tail. Perhaps because its tail wasn’t even missing, anymore. The splattered sludge had already reaccumulated.

He waited for his next opening, which arrived when he got the worm to slam dumbly into the wall again.

This time, he tried just pointing the mace straight at the worm. He knew that he would probably have to get close and attack it directly again, but he really didn’t want to do that and was therefore trying to exhaust all other options that he could think of, even if they were stupid and pointless like--

The spike at the tip of the mace turned suddenly white hot, burning and glowing with enough intensity to make Hector squint inside his helmet.

Then a thick beam shot out, appearing all at once, a bar of bright, solid white light.

And it cleaved a chunk out of the worm like a knife. Black sludge went flying in the familiar way.

‘Holy fuck!’ said Garovel.

‘This fuckin’ thing can shoot lasers?!’ said Hector, wide-eyed.

‘Oh, it’s empty again. I guess that used up all the ardor.’

‘Aw, shit.’

‘Recharge it! I wanna see more lasers!’

‘Garovel, I’m trying not to get us killed here.’

‘Oh, I know! And you’re doing a great job of that, by the way! Really, just stellar work! Keep it up, buddy!’

‘Thanks...’

‘Now go recharge that laser.’

Hector intended to, but he wasn’t nearly as thrilled about it as the reaper seemed to be. Getting in close enough to hit the worm with the Moon’s Wrath again would be flirting with death, he knew. And Hector wanted to keep his relationship with death purely platonic, if at all possible.

Nonetheless, he dove in and got his hits. It took a while. Where before it had taken only two swings, this time it took four, perhaps because the hits themselves weren’t quite as “solid” as that one from earlier had been.

But the Moon’s Wrath was finally recharged, and Hector found an opening to use it.

Just as before, the beam shot out, illuminating the chamber and carving a hole into the worm.

A hole which was refilled all too soon, just like the last one had been.

‘Hmm.’

‘Garovel, this laser’s not doin’ shit to that thing.’

‘Yeah. That kinda bites. You’d think something that cool would be the solution to all our problems.’”

"1581

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Hector started running again. ‘Now what do we do?’

‘Good question,’ said Garovel. ‘Back to plan A, I guess. Stay alive until

someone saves our sorry asses.'

'Agh... I really hate plan A...'

'Well, I'm open to hearing a plan C, if you've got one.'

'Er...'

'Plan A, it is.'

'No, hold on! I can think of something!' He racked his brain, feeling like he really could think of something, for some reason. Like he was forgetting something, maybe. Something important. 'Uh...! Hmm...!'

Shit. Why wasn't it coming to him? It was almost like there was a giant, man-eating sludge monster distracting him.

'Don't strain yourself,' said Garovel as Hector launched himself over the large gap in the second floor and ran briefly along the wall before landing on the other side, still running. 'Okay, are you just trying to show off, now? Because I was already impressed.'

Hector was hardly listening, though, too caught up in his multiple focuses. While it was true that the Scarf of Amordiin was helping him to understand where he could move and how precise that movement needed to be, he was beginning to realize that there was another aspect at play here, too.

His own armor was helping, in a weird way. Even though it was bulky and heavy as shit, it was also adding a ton of momentum. His undead strength had made it easy not to notice, because it made the armor not actually feel all that heavy, but he was sensing it more and more now. It was almost like he could relax his whole body and just let the armor keep carrying him forward.

He wasn't actually going to do that, of course, but it was an interesting feeling nonetheless. And it required a light touch, too. A very precise use of his own strength. Too much, and he would overcome the momentum and simply move normally, but with a deliberately weak application, that momentum could be preserved--and even harnessed, as he had just proved to himself by running along the wall.

But all of that was quite a lot to process and think about while still conversing with Garovel, keeping track of where the worm was, maintaining the cooling effect of his armor, AND trying to remember whatever it was that he felt like he was forgetting.

So it was no surprise, really, that he was not entirely succeeding at a couple of those things, at the moment.

He was letting his focus drift into too many things simultaneously again. Hector didn't need a repeat of what had happened in that previous treasure room in order to realize that he was on the verge of fucking himself over.

Focus. Prioritize.

He knew where the worm was. Because he had to. That was the top priority. And he knew where he needed to go in order to keep ahead of it. That was pretty much the same priority. He could lump those two thoughts together."

"1582

The cooling effect on the armor could take a little bit of a back seat, he felt. While helpful, it wasn't strictly necessary--nor was talking to Garovel. Maybe he could lump those together, too, in a less effective capacity.

'Sorry, Garovel,' he said. 'I might not hear what you're saying for a little while.'

'What're you--?' Even before that, the reaper had already been saying something, but Hector needed his focus now.

He needed to remember.

A fresh distraction arrived first, however.

The worm was doing something different. Its movements had changed. Its mouth was wriggling and twitching, and its bulk was starting to twist and bubble. It even stopped chasing him.

Hector stopped running in order to stand and observe it with his actual eyes this time.

'Oh, what now?' said Garovel.

Hector saw a crackle of blue light within of the monster's cavernous mouth and heard the bristling static of electricity.

That was all the warning he got. A flashing bolt of electricity arced out in an instant and crashed upon a freshly materialized lightning rod. The iron exploded on impact, taking a chunk of the second floor with it and knocking Hector into the wall.

‘Oh god, I forgot they could do that!’

Hector steadied himself and started running again, ignoring his ruptured ear drums and stinging eyes. ‘You’re a reaper. How did you forget?’

‘Well, okay, I didn’t technically forget. I was just hoping this one didn’t have that power!’

That certainly would’ve been nice.

He started materializing lightning rods behind him as he moved. He wasn’t sure if he and Garovel could survive a direct hit from one of those bolts, and he didn’t intend to find out.

‘Heh,’ said Garovel. ‘I guess it’s a good thing you have experience fighting against lightning.’

That reminded Hector that he’d found out from Ivan that Desmond Grantier was still alive. And if Desmond was alive, Hector had a feeling that Karkash was, too. Or at least, it wouldn’t surprise him.

Hector tried to refocus. The crashing boom of ardor-infused electricity was making it difficult to concentrate, though. The bolts weren’t frequent, but the fact that one of them had destroyed part of the second floor was very troubling to Hector.

This whole chamber was infused with ardor, which made the rock far more durable than normal. All the times that he’d slammed into it--either just by landing in full or getting thrown into the wall--Hector hadn’t left a single scratch. Nor had the worm, until now.

Which was another question.

‘Why did the worm only just now start using its electricity?’ said Hector. ‘We’ve been fighting for a while.’

‘Well, it WAS just born. Maybe it’s still getting used to its own power. Maturing, if you will.’

His eyes widened at that notion. ‘So it’s getting stronger as the fight

draws out.'

'I don't know about THAT, exactly... but kinda, yeah.' The reaper broke for a laugh, though it sounded somewhat nervous to Hector. 'It's not like its power will just keep growing indefinitely.'"

"1583

Hector sensed another lightning bolt coming. That was expected, of course. But the worm's mouth wasn't pointed at him. It was pointed ahead of him, where he was about to be and where his most recent lightning rod wasn't.

He barely changed course in time and raised a simple iron wall to mitigate the impact. The wall exploded toward him, and he had to annihilate its sundered pieces before they pummeled him. He still ended up blocking a few lumps of ardor-infused rock with his shield, however.

And yet again, the worm was closing in, and Hector was forced to run.

'Did you see that?!' said Hector.

'Yeah,' said Garovel slowly.

'It just changed tactics on me! It's not just "maturing" or whatever! This fuckin' thing is problem solving!'

'But. Um. Hmm. Really, though, isn't learning just another aspect of maturing? I mean, when you think about it--'

'I thought it was just a mindless monster!'

'Aha... Mm, so did I, honestly.'

He needed to calm down, Hector knew. Panicking wasn't going to do him any favors. And Garovel wasn't quite sounding as calm as usual, either.

He had to get a hold of himself. He had to protect Garovel. No matter what.

And he had to think of something.

That thing from before. Whatever he was forgetting. What the hell was it?!

Then it finally hit him.

The Shard. His line to Emiliana. Maybe she could tell him something about worms, something that could help him kill this damn thing. Or at least not get eaten by it.

He couldn't stop, though. As he kept on running and jumping and materializing, he made an opening in his armor and found the Shard there. He let the Moon's Wrath take its place and gripped it with his bare hand. The mace was much larger and stuck out of his breastplate, giving the appearance of a small spear through his chest, but Hector wasn't concerned with fashion, at the moment. He reached out with his mind.

'Emiliana,' he thought.

There was no immediate response, but that was not surprising. He kept at it, figuring that she would answer eventually.

Thankfully, it only took a couple minutes instead of hours.

'Hector?' came her soundless voice. 'What is the matter?'

'Giant worm,' he said, trying not to sound like he was freaking out. 'Fighting one. Right now. Information, please.'

'Oh! Right! O-okay, o-one second! I made some notes! Allow me to find them!'

'Please hurry.'

Silence returned as she was presumably searching, and in the meantime, the Scarf of Amordiin was informing him that the worm was about to puke up more lightning.

This time, though, he could sense the beast's mouth swaying back and forth as the electricity built up and was held there for longer than previously.

It was trying to juke him, the wormy bastard.

Hector decided to just materialize a whole fleet of lighting rods around him. Wherever it wanted to shoot, the area would be covered."



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His plan worked, though maybe a little too well. Lightning leapt from rod to rod, destroying each one as it went and sending so many iron chunks flying at once they created a kind of electrical storm all around him.

‘Okay,’ came Emiliana’s voice again. ‘Are you still there?’

Hector was busy annihilating all of his shredded iron so as to rob the electricity in the air of its prime conductor, but he still managed to say, ‘Yeah.’ It calmed the crackling storm almost instantly, but now his armor was the prime conductor, and a bolt from the thin air struck him, though it was weak enough that it only knocked him back a couple steps instead of sending him flying.

He launched himself away just as the worm’s gaping jaw crashed down.

That was much closer than he wanted it to be. He could sense sludge all over his armor and started trying to remove it with more acrobatic movements, as he did earlier.

‘You okay in there?’ he asked, consciously directing the thought at Garovel alone.

‘Yeah, I’m good.’

Emiliana was saying something again. ‘--was hoping to corroborate more of this so that I did not tell you something that was false. The list is quite long, so--’

‘Just give me whatever you’ve got,’ he told her.

‘Um--very well. Their slimy bodies have strange electromagnetic properties, which allows many of the larger ones to accumulate a very strong charge and expel it from--’

‘Yep. Know that. What else?’

‘Um. Ah--do you know that their sludge can be a powerful acid?’

'Yeah.' He neglected mentioning that it was one of the things about worms that he was LEAST afraid of, having already seen much more powerful acid elsewhere. No sense in derailing the conversation.

'Okay. Did you know that they can increase their mass by breaking down rock and absorbing it into their bodies?'

Oh.

Oh shit.

'No, I didn't,' said Hector. But that did explain why the worm seemed to be a little larger, all of a sudden. And a lot of those rocks that the worm's lightning had torn out of the floor and walls were missing now, according to the Scarf.

'They can also divide themselves and reassemble as they please.'

'Yeah. Seen that firsthand.' Granted, this particular worm hadn't done so yet, but he didn't doubt that it could. Though, given the circumstances, he might've preferred a bunch of little worms to the one big one. They might be more difficult to keep away from, sure, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about getting pancaked into the wall or swallowed whole.

'I have also read that worms can absorb the abilities of servants that they have eaten. I have seen conflicting information with regard to this one, however. Do you know if it is true?'

'No, sorry. Haven't seen that one yet, thankfully.'  
"1585

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And as Hector sensed more lightning inbound, he was beginning to feel as though this conversation was not the tide-turner that he needed it to be.

'What about weaknesses?' said Hector as he dove out of the way of more exploding lightning rods.

'Oh, yes, of course. In order to kill them, you must destroy somewhere around ninety percent of their body. I have read numbers as low as

eighty percent but also as high as ninety-seven percent, so make of that what you will, I suppose.'

Hector's brow furrowed, and he scrambled back to his feet, armor scraping against rock. 'That's...! That's not really a "weakness," Emiliana...'

'I, ah... I realize that, yes...'

And there was silence as Hector merely continued fleeing.

At length, he had to break it. 'Are you telling me that worms don't have any weaknesses?'

'I'm afraid so. At least, none that Ibai and I were able to discover in so short a time.'

That was probably the very last thing that Hector had wanted to hear, right now.

But wait. Maybe she was just joking around. Maybe Chergoa was putting her up to this. 'Really?' was all he managed to say.

'Yes. I'm sorry.'

'You didn't even find anything about a "wave" that can put them to sleep?'

'What? A wave? What kind of wave?'

'That's what I'm asking you!'

'Ah! Oh! I'm sorry! I don't know anything about a wave that affects worms!'

'Well, shit!'

'Wait a minute, are you okay?! How much danger are you in, right now, precisely?!'

'A lot!' He knew that he probably should've kept trying to play it cool so as not to worry her... but fuck it. Everything was terrible, and despite his better judgment, he really wanted to just say so. 'Oh, but it's just me, though! Zeff's not here!'

'I wasn't going to ask--'

'I wish he WAS here! He could probably kill this fuckin' thing!'

And there was a pause, then Emiliana laughed.

Hector didn't know how to respond to that. 'What the--?! Why are you laughing?!'

'Ah, I'm so sorry! I just--! I didn't expect you say something like that all of a sudden! I'm not happy you're having a hard time or anything like that! I swear!'

But he could still hear her snickering a little.

'I'm so sorry! That just took me by surprise! Really! You just always seemed so stoic and in control that I--! I just never thought you would say anything like that!'

'I hope Gohvis eats you.'

That made her laugh even harder than before, though she continued trying to apologize.

'It's fine,' he said. 'But now you're really distracting me, so I have to go. I'll talk to you later, if I'm not dead.'

'Okay! Um! Do your best! Again, I'm so--'

He refitted the Shard into his armor, having had his fill of that conversation."

"1586

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

Garovel must have taken notice of Hector releasing the Shard, because he said, 'Done talking to Emiliana?'

'Yeah.'

'Learn anything useful?'

'I learned that the only way to kill this thing is to destroy ninety percent of its body mass.'

'So... no, then.'

‘Pretty much,’ said Hector. ‘I can’t even destroy one percent of it, let alone ninety.’

‘Mhmm. Even after poking holes in it with the Moon’s Wrath, the worm doesn’t seem to have gotten any smaller.’

‘Yeah, I think it’s growing, actually, by absorbing the broken rocks around here.’

‘Oh. Lovely. Back to plan A, then?’

Hector exhaled a growl and tried to think of something else.

And he did.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ he told Garovel.

‘Oh? What’re the odds it’ll get us eaten?’

‘Uh. Pretty low, I guess.’

‘Tell me more, then.’

Hector sensed more lightning on the way and knew that he shouldn’t let the opportunity pass while he explained. ‘I’ll just show you.’

‘Alright. Dazzle me.’

The worm was trying to fake him out again with its head movement, but that was fine. Hector materialized an army of conducting rods, just as he had done before, but this time, he kept making them taller and taller; and then at the last instant, right when he felt like the worm was finally going to let the lightning rip, Hector added a second growth out of the side of every rod simultaneously, making each one rush straight toward the worm, which Hector had allowed to get quite close.

The lightning hit just as the wall of angled conductors completed the circuit with the worm’s body. Iron exploded all around him, as expected, but it didn’t result in an electrical storm this time. The vast majority of the lightning went straight back into the monster, zapping it with its own ridiculous power.

It was enough to make the worm seize up and stop in place. Sludge rippled visibly across its body, distorting its shape somewhat in apparent displeasure.

But that was it. After a couple seconds, the beast recovered and let out a roar, perhaps wanting Hector to know that he'd pissed it off.

Hector didn't waste the opening, though. He leapt up, Moon's Wrath held tight, and smashed in its left eyespot. The hit was hard enough to send sludge splattering all the way out the back of its head.

He landed on its contorted back, materializing a falling iron plate for himself so that he didn't immediately sink into the worm's body, and then launched himself off of it before the beast could turn around and devour him.

He hit the ground rolling and scraping on rock, but he quickly found his footing and started running again.

'Okay,' said Garovel. 'I'll admit. I'm reasonably dazzled.'

Hector wasn't. 'That still didn't do anything, though! Agh!' He could already sense that the "damage" he had done to the worm's head was entirely recovered."

"1587

'Yeah. That does suck. But hey, on the bright side, the Moon's Wrath is fully charged again, and it was practically empty before. That was a really good hit you just landed.'

'That stupid laser isn't gonna help, either, Garovel!'

'Mm, maybe not, but it's important to stay positive, Hector.'

'Since when?!'

'Since now! I've been trying really hard not to panic during all of this, okay?!'

'I've noticed!'

'What?! What do you mean, you've noticed?! Why didn't you say anything, then?!'

'Because I've been busy trying to keep us alive!'

'Well, now I feel like a jackass!'

‘Good!’

‘Fuck you! Hurry up and beat this worm already!’

‘How, goddammit?!’

‘I don’t know! Use the Scarf or something! Do more cool flips! I’m sure that’ll help!’

‘Give me some real advice, asshole!’

‘Have you tried talking it into submission?!’

‘What?!’

‘Well, it worked against the Salesman, didn’t it?!’

‘Agh! I should just let it kill us!’

‘C’mon, Hector, buddy! Don’t give up yet! You can save us, probably! I believe in you, kind of!’

More iron and rock exploded as lightning crashed above his head, forcing Hector to make a hard right turn mid-gallop. He launched himself up and away again, trying to build more distance so that he had time to think.

‘Do you need more positive thinking?’ said Garovel, calmer again. ‘Because if so, I’ve got you covered. Let’s see, um--Oh. With all this ardor-lightning destroying everything, it’s way more spacious in here now. Isn’t that great?’

Hector didn’t answer him.

‘It’s more room for you to maneuver,’ the reaper continued, undeterred. ‘That’s good, right? Especially with the Scarf of Amordiin? I mean, shit. I thought improved spatial awareness would just enhance your materialization. I didn’t think it would turn you into some kind of iron ninja.’

Still, Hector was more concerned with trying to come up with a new plan.

‘Hey, maybe we’ll get lucky and the worm will blast us a tunnel out of here.’

That was an interesting idea. But it was still pretty useless, he figured after a moment. Trying to direct the worm to dig in a particular spot might have been possible, but there was no way to know WHICH spot to choose. It all looked the same, and Garovel couldn't help with that, either, because his reaper's sense was blocked by all the ardor in the rock.

Ugh.

Failed plan after failed plan. And even though there was definitely more space to run around in now, all the debris was slowly adding to the worm's bulk.

And that was going to become a real problem sooner or later, Hector felt. The larger the worm grew, the more difficult it would become to avoid.

So maybe that was what he should have been focusing on. Preventing its growth.

In fact... maybe he could even take that a step further. Maybe he could whittle the worm down, bit by bit.

Hmm.

Well, it was a new plan, at least."  
"1588

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

The worm chose that moment to roar more loudly and piercingly than it ever had previously, making the whole enormous chamber tremble.

Hector was far enough away that the sheer force of it didn't knock him back, but he could see rubble around the beast being blown away, and even at this distance, he still had to stop running so that he didn't trip and fall on his face.

The worm wasn't moving while roaring, though. So Hector figured it was as good a time as any to go in.

He charged toward it, mace held straight ahead of him, and loosed another beam of radiant white. He intentionally aimed to only graze the



beast, and indeed, that was what he achieved. The light sliced into the right side of worm's head, and a sliver of dark sludge went flying away from it.

Hector pursued that sliver like it was a wild animal. And it basically was. It splattered against the ground but didn't stop moving for an instant. Its many black droplets quickly reformed into one and started squirming its way back to the rest of the worm.

Hector trapped it in a box of iron from ten meters away, but he didn't have the luxury of getting to see how well the iron held, because the worm was again way too close to ignore. He used a haphazard platform to flip himself out of the beast's quaking path. He was about to return his attention to his iron box, believing that he had bought himself a few precious seconds while the worm was busy trying to turn itself around again, but he was forced to reassess the situation entirely when he sensed the giant worm split itself apart instead.

Thirty or so horse-sized worms were suddenly swarming him.

There wasn't time to react with anything that required actual thought. It was gut impulse only.

And his gut came up with the good old spike defense. Tried and true and stronger than ever before. Iron exploded out from his armor in every conceivable direction at once, skewering some of the worms and displacing others, filling so much of the chamber that he couldn't even see or sense anything with the Scarf of Amordiin anymore.

The Scarf required the free movement of air to work, he knew, and the spikes were so numerous and densely packed that he'd completely encased himself and the Scarf in iron.

And perhaps even more unsettling, it grew immediately quiet, as well. No more rumbling. No more crashing. No more sloshing--or at least, not as much. After a moment, he realized that he could still hear some sludgy movement on the other side of his wall of spikes. He could feel the vibrations in his iron, too.

The worm definitely wasn't dead yet. Not that he'd really expected it to be.

He didn't want to undo his work yet, however. Not if it meant he'd just get swarmed again.

'Can you tell what's going on out there?' he asked Garovel."

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

'Hmm,' said Garovel. 'It seems to be trying to reassemble itself.'

'Only "trying?" What's stopping it?'

'All the iron in the way, presumably.'

'Really? I didn't think it would be that effective.'

'Ah. Well. It's not. They're starting to mass successfully now. I'd suggest getting us out of here.'

Indeed, Hector could feel the growing vibrations through the metal and knew the reaper wasn't joking. He dematerialized some of the extra iron around his armor in order to free up some space for himself, but even with just that small volume removed, he was already seeing sludge oozing through the cracks, squirming and wriggling angrily.

The Scarf was providing a little more information now, telling him that sludge was creeping throughout the entire network of spikes around him and even above his head. But there was still far too much iron blocking everything for the Scarf to give him a complete picture of the worm's progress.

He readied his grip on the Moon's Wrath.

Hector annihilated a huge swath of the iron all at once, freeing both himself and a tidal wave of slime, which was already falling toward him like a dark blanket. He launched himself up to meet it head on and bashed open a hole for himself with the mace. He flew out and over and landed on a sliding platform of iron to help him ease to a stop.

He'd gotten away with less sludge on him than he'd expected, but still more than could be ignored. Rather than trying to fling it off of him, however, he boxed it up, each bit. Four boxes in total, one on his arm, leg, back, and foot. Then he separated the boxes from his armor and set them down on the ground.

He didn't have time to do much more than that. The hundred other parts of the worm had reconnected, though not into one gigantic beast

again. Instead, they'd formed into three, which were certainly smaller but still way too big to deal with directly.

And this was far worse, he soon discovered.

With three of them chasing him, running was harder and more chaotic than ever. They tried to surround him, to cut him off, to lead him into one another, to break apart into little ones again and confuse him while the other two tried to take advantage of the opening.

There was barely time to think.

In fact, there wasn't time to think, really. Not as a single, coherent train of thought, at least.

Again, he found his thoughts divided into separate tasks, though all of those tasks were now devoted toward the same overall purpose of saving his own ass. He had to think while also sensing openings and reacting to incoming attacks.

It was a mad and clumsy dance. He would get hit, half-covered in slime, and just keep going. For as long as his body would allow him to keep moving. His mind would reassess. He would create more iron. Flip and clean himself off. Smash a way through with the Moon's Wrath. Get hit again. Knocked on his ass. But never would he stop moving. Back on his feet. Running again. Through a cloud of slime, through the gaps that he could sense in the sludge."

"1590

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

It only kept getting more ridiculous. The worms would change their pattern, and so would Hector. They would try to trick him, and he would find the escape route or make one.

But most importantly, he kept to the plan. To isolate little bits of sludge whenever he could, to prevent them from making it back to their three big brothers.

Hector had come to realize the key factor, though only in the back of his mind.

It was the size of the worms.

When they were too big, his iron couldn't do anything to them. They would have enough mass to break or otherwise overwhelm it. But when they were small--the size of a dog, maybe--he could successfully box them in.

He could only spare enough time and mental capacity to sense them in fleeting moments, but they were there, more and more as the madness continued. His iron boxes. Littering the battlefield.

Yes. He was beginning to think that this plan could actually work. The little worms weren't able to break free. If he could just--

He sensed one of the big worms slam down and smash a dozen iron boxes, undoing half his work in an instant. And the other half? Those boxes were vibrating on their own now.

The little worms tore their way through his iron like corkscrews. Come to think of it, he'd seen worms move like that before, back when the train was first attacked. It was how they were able to tunnel through solid rock.

The worm was still learning. Still discovering its own abilities.

Insanity.

Hector was just about at the end of his rope.

What the fuck was he supposed to do here? Was this just impossible?

Well.

Of course it was.

It had been impossible from the beginning. He'd been an idiot to ever think otherwise, really. To ever have hope that he could actually win a fight like this, against a literal monster, the kind that he would've thought only existed in legends and nightmares.

He and Garovel were going to die here.

A part of him had felt that way the whole time, if he was being completely honest with himself.

But then again, a part of him always felt that way. In fact, at this point, he would've felt weirder without that feeling constantly there in the back of his mind. The only difference now was that the feeling was in

the front of his mind, instead, demanding his attention.

And that was no excuse to give up.

That was no excuse for anything.

As his feet struggled to keep their balance, as his senses became crowded with waves of hungry sludge in all directions, as his hand gripped the Moon's Wrath, as he tried to brace himself with his shield, and as he angrily thought that, actually, there were still a couple things left that he wanted to try on this giant pile of sentient shit--that was when he finally felt it there in his mind.

The response."

"1591 -- CLXXI.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-One: 'The Lord of Darksteel...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The overwhelming sensation of emergence in that particular moment was not immediately helpful. If anything, it made matters worse, because the feeling took him by surprise while he was mid-swing with the Moon's Wrath.

Which threw Hector off balance.

Instead of smashing cleanly through the wall of sludge in front of him, the mace stopped halfway and got stuck there. It had still managed to make an opening for him to launch himself through, which he did, but in doing so, the Moon's Wrath slipped from his grasp and was swallowed by the amassing sludge.

Hector flew farther than he expected to, as well. His iron had launched him with much more strength than he'd intended it to, and he ended up hitting the wall on the far end of the chamber, though he did at least manage to catch himself on it instead of slamming into it face first.

He slid back down to the ground, armor scraping against rock, and turned around to observe the worm.

It had stopped chasing him, for the moment. It was perhaps impossible

to know what the beast was thinking or feeling--assuming it could do either of those things--but Hector got the impression from the way it was sloshing up and down that it was quite pleased with itself.

Pleased with its prize.

'It's okay,' Garovel was saying. 'Don't panic.'

Hector wasn't. As much as he might've liked to hold onto the Moon's Wrath, losing it didn't bother him terribly. Not now, at least.

Instead, he was already thinking about what he was going to do next. What he could do next.

Just before the emergence, there had been something he had wanted to try, something he had done a while ago but had yet to properly integrate into his fighting style. And now, well...

He was certain that he could get it to work.

A single iron cube appeared in orbit around him.

He added to it, doubling its mass. Tripling it. Quadrupling it. Increasing it still further, larger than anything he had yet tried to put in orbit. It became so big that he had to raise himself up on a platform so that the cube didn't scrape against the ground.

Soon enough, it was the size of a car.

The worm, having concluded its little celebration, finally noticed him again and started sloshing toward him.

Hector ramped up the speed of the cube's orbit. Faster. Faster. Still faster.

He added his soul to the boulder, though of course he knew that he couldn't compete when it came to soul-strengthening. It was just for that little bit of extra oomph. Because really, he intended to make up for that difference in power with sheer physical force.

So he didn't stop increasing its speed, even when the giant cube began whipping up a whirlwind around him, even when he could feel himself beginning to lose control of it. That was the ultimate goal, after all. He just had to focus and allow himself to lose control of it at just the right moment.

And he did."

## Chapter One Hundred Seventy-One: 'The Lord of Darksteel...'

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"1592

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

The iron boulder shot forward with a thick gust of wind that was strong enough to knock him clean off his platform. Its shape distorted in midair, and it hit the worm dead on, causing as much of an explosion as the beast's own lightning had earlier.

'Hector, what the fuck was that?! How did you just--?!'



He was only half-listening to the reaper. He was still a little disoriented from the blowback. Even though he'd tried to brace himself, he hadn't expected it to be quite that powerful.

Garovel was still talking, saying something about wind speed, but Hector needed to maintain his focus.

The worm needed time to recover, too, which was already more of an effect than a simple impact from his iron had previously had, but there was no doubt in Hector's mind that it would recover--and soon.

That was a good test run. A good foundation from which to build. Now he needed to refine and improve it.

Two more cubes appeared in orbit around him. And this time, he changed their shapes preemptively as he grew them. He knew they would begin to distort as they left his control, but he still wanted them to be less boxy.

He wanted them to be blades.

From everything he'd come to know of worms in his multiple encounters with them, he knew that the bigger they were, the more they could withstand blunt force and explosive impacts. He needed to cut it down to size.

And fortunately enough, the worm had already split itself up into three again. No doubt, it wanted to replicate its previous success with that strategy, but it was going to be sorely disappointed.

He started bounding away on rising platforms and waited for them to try to surround him.

It didn't take long.

He made it up to the second floor, which was now mostly gone, and sure enough, one of the worms rose up right in front of him while the other two chased from behind. Its mouth was already wide open as it lunged at him.

He loosed one of the blades--a circular disc with a saw-tooth edge--and cleaved the worm in two from mouth to tail. He chased the half that splattered off to the right and loosed the second disc, bisecting it again.

Those two chunks splattered against the wall, and Hector immediately boxed them in with iron while also readying more discs for the worms at his heels.

His strategy didn't end there, however. He knew from earlier that just boxing the little ones in wouldn't be enough, not when the big ones could free them.

So he brought them with him.

The two boxes full of sludge--he launched them toward himself and put them into orbit along with the still-growing discs.

The boxes were unfortunately still rather cumbersome. He could see them shaking as the sludge tried to free itself, which it probably soon would, Hector figured. But he would be ready."

"1594

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

There were so many moving parts. The shifting armor with its cooling effect. Twenty-four boxes in orbit. And five more discs, orbiting at a much higher speed, ready to be let loose.

Yet he wasn't struggling to maintain it all. He felt as if he could handle much more than this, even. But he did want to organize it a bit more. So he started allowing the twenty-four boxes to collide and attach themselves to one another. The walls of each of the cubes were maintained, however. He only wanted to group them together, like miniature hotels, perhaps. Each piece of sludge stayed where it was, in its own room, but now the rooms were grouped together horizontally.

He found it even easier to keep track of, and perhaps most importantly, it freed extra space in orbit around him. He was going to be needing that soon, he felt.

The worm below had amassed itself back into a single beast again. It appeared to be biding its time, searching for debris to devour and absorb while it waited for Hector to come for it.

Somehow, he didn't much care for that. At this point, he almost would've preferred it to keep acting like a rabid animal.

And perhaps that was why it wasn't doing that.

The thing wasn't nearly as stupid as he might have hoped, Hector knew. If it wanted him to attack first, it was probably going to try something sneaky. And it hadn't used its lightning in a while, either, as it had been divided.

That was going to be a problem, with all this iron swirling around him. He'd have to be even more mindful of it.

'Hector, wait a minute,' said Garovel.

'What?' He'd been just about to leap down there.

'The treasure pile over there. There are a few mirrors in it. I want you to grab one. The largest you can carry unhindered.'

Hector saw the pile he was referring to and started making his way over. It was a bit scattered compared to when they'd first arrived but still mostly intact. He still had to ask, though, 'Why a mirror?'

'Just a precaution,' the reaper said. 'The worm ate the Moon's Wrath, remember? And there are rumors that these bastards can absorb powers.'

Hector understood. It would be like the time he fought Harper, in other words. Thinking back on that experience, he very much hoped it didn't come to that.

He found a mirror that seemed suitable, if maybe a bit expensive-looking with its bejeweled and golden paneling. According to the Scarf of Amordiin, it was the largest one here, being slightly taller and wider than Haqq's shield. He decided not to carry it, though, wanting to keep his right hand free, and instead chose to encase it in iron and add it to his orbital collection.

Garovel chuckled. 'That's pretty handy.'

Hector could only agree.

He started back toward the worm, going over his next plan in his head."

"1593

Moving with his iron was easier than ever. He hardly even had to think about it. He only had to know where he wanted to go and how he wanted to get there, and his iron carried him as if on the nose of a train--or in the mouth of a snake, perhaps, considering how trivial it was to weave in between piles of rock and eager slime. And the Scarf of Amordiin was certainly helping in that regard, too. Being able to sense the worms attacking before Garovel even had a chance to warn him was immensely valuable.

Another of the worms dove in mouth-first, and Hector slid out of its path on a suspended railway of iron. The opening was clear, and he took full advantage, loosing another sawblade. He had tried to evolve it another step, though, and added a second, perpendicular disc to it. So instead of splitting the worm in two, it split in four.

He didn't let up on the pressure, either. His next work was three sawblades melded into one, and he loosed it on one of the four sections he'd just made, dicing it up even more.

Those looked small enough. He boxed all the little sludgy chunks in iron and added them to his orbital collection as he readied still more discs.

These six new boxes were clearly much more stable than the first two, Hector sensed. They weren't shaking nearly as much and--

Yeah, the sludge was already breaking through the larger two, drilling holes into them and trying to goop its way out.

He could've just added more iron to the boxes to try and keep the troublemakers where they were, but he didn't want to do that. Instead, he saw an opportunity with the next worm lunging after him.

Hector annihilated the first two boxes and allowed the sludge therein a blissful moment of freedom right as the nearest worm dove in and missed. Then a multi-sawblade sliced through all of them at once, creating a fresh new batch of collectible sludge.

That was twelve more little boxes in orbit. And after another two discs for the worm that had so graciously offered itself up to him, Hector had another batch of six on top of that, bringing him to a grand total of twenty-four boxes so far, all orbiting around him as he eased himself

onto the third floor.

Even with all of that work, there was still plenty more slime sloshing around below. Math wasn't really his forte, but from his estimation, it looked like he'd reduced its overall mass by maybe a third or so.

However, the sludge that remained seemed to be thinking twice about chasing him now.

'Sweet Cocora,' said Garovel. 'Hector, that was... I'm not even sure what to...'

Hector didn't want to be too pleased with himself. 'It's not over yet.' He double-checked the boxes in orbit around him. They were trembling a little but holding, nonetheless."

"1595

He didn't want to rush in and attack the worm directly. He had a feeling that that would be playing into its slimy, nonexistent hands and would probably get himself counterattacked in some way. And at this distance, simply launching more discs probably wouldn't do much. They were fast, sure, but the worm's reactions were pretty fast, too, from what he could tell, and he wanted to save the discs anyway for an opportune moment. Right now, they were probably his best means of getting out of a very bad situation.

So he decided to go for something different--something that would allow him to easily harass the beast from afar and hopefully piss it off.

He'd been wanting to try using temperature manipulation offensively since the beginning of the fight, but he knew that it was still unstable here in the Undercrust. The moment he materialized any freezing iron, the ambient heat would cause it to weaken or even explode. Not particularly useful for caging a worm--and having endured one of those explosions himself, he was pretty sure they wouldn't have enough force behind them to actually damage this monster.

It might be enough to annoy it, though. And he wanted to see if he could make the explosions any more powerful now, too.

He materialized a frozen boulder of iron, as big as the worm itself, and let it drop on the beast's head.

It didn't do much. It certainly didn't explode. It must've had too much mass for the heat to compromise its structure that quickly. The worm didn't seem particularly bothered by it, either, and just oozed out from below it and continued on its merry way, gobbling up debris.

Dammit. He annihilated the boulder.

Maybe this wouldn't even work. He was going to have to figure out the optimal mass for these particular atmospheric conditions, and how many guesses would that require?

Or maybe...? Maybe he could keep the mass the same and just keep decreasing the temperature?

Hmm.

Surely, the lower the temperature of his iron, the more intensely the heat of the Undercrust would clash with it.

Worth a shot, he supposed. He had no idea how low he could push the temperature now. Hell, he didn't even know that before the emergence. He hadn't had the occasion or the notion to find the exact limitations of his ability to manipulate temperature.

But now was as good a time as any to find out.

Temperature manipulation was a funny thing. He'd come to realize that it wasn't like other techniques. He couldn't achieve it by just visualizing it in his mind the way he did when he was creating shapes or adding iron to things. With temperature, it was more like a command, as if he were giving his iron an order that it had no choice but to follow.

Velocity states were similar in that regard, but still not quite the same. With velocity, spatial awareness was as equally important as the command was, but with temperature, it was more... emotional.

Yeah. That was exactly what it was, Hector was beginning to realize."  
"1596

The command had to be impassioned when it came to temperature. Not angry or anything like that. Just emotionally stronger in relation to the degree of desired change.

At least, that was the easiest way for him to conceptualize it.

The next boulder that he dropped on the worm was well below freezing, but it was still only enough to make it crack audibly. It did seem to annoy the worm a little more, though, so that was something.

The beast reared its head back and vomited lightning all the way up toward him.

Hector was already dodging. The explosion rocked the third floor, but he was well out of its blast radius and only had to endure a few pebbles bouncing off his armor.

Third time was the charm, he felt. The next boulder was even colder still, and it did explode as it materialized above the worm's body.

The blast splattered the worm across the bottom floor, and he could see the sludge bubbling with what he thought might be irritation.

So he annihilated the scattered chunks of iron and did it again right as the worm was reforming.

After that, the worm didn't even bother fully reforming before it started sloshing its way upward like a vertical tidal wave.

Yeah, he was pretty sure he'd pissed it off now.

He leapt up, above the enormous chasm in the third floor, and loosed another disc at max speed. The knockback from the sonic boom was enough to send him up higher through the air and touch the ceiling briefly as he watched the disc cut through the sludge like a knife through warm butter.

He took advantage of his position and bounced off the ceiling in order to shoot himself straight downward, eager to pick up more boxes of sludge for his collection.

The glaring crackle of lightning got in his way, however, and he only had a split second's warning to materialize a lightning rod for himself there in midair. He only just managed to ground it against the rock wall before it exploded right in front of him.

Haqq's shield took the brunt of the impact for him, and he continued through, smote black and covered in iron dust but no worse for wear.

Then he saw the laser.

It was too fast to react to, appearing all at once, as lasers do. He only knew that it originated from straight ahead.

The shield took the brunt of it. But not all of it. The beam was just a little too broad, and everything immediately around the shield got hit with the beam as well.

Hector's body was split in two. The beam cut through his armor like it was nothing, making his shield-arm separate from the rest of him.

The same arm that was holding Garovel.

And it was falling into an ocean of sludge.

Hector reacted without even thinking, loosing every disc he'd had in waiting while simultaneously growing a half-dozen more.

And the ocean parted."

"1597

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 20))

Hector went to work while he could, boxing up every bit of isolated sludge that he could sense. It was everywhere, but so was his spatial awareness, and iron clapped together in rapid succession. He pulled them all toward him. More for the collection. So much more. It was almost complete now.

He hit the ground floor just after his arm did.

'You alright?' he asked.

'Yeah,' said Garovel, though he sounded a little shaken and followed it up with a sigh.

Only a few puddles of sludge were left after all that, and Hector could sense exactly where they were while he retrieved his shield and reaper. His arm was still regrowing, so Hector took his time but never stopped keeping track of his opponent, even in its weakened state.

Hector felt like Garovel could use some encouragement. Without a doubt, that had been one of their closest brushes with death, just now. 'Ah... you were right about the worm absorbing the power of the



Moon's Wrath.'

'Mm. Looks like you didn't need that mirror, though.'

Hector eyed the iron-encased mirror as it orbited past his field of view. 'It'll make a good souvenir. Or maybe we can sell it. It looked expensive.'

'Would you mind just finishing the fight, already? You're making me nervous.'

His arm still had a bit more to go, but maybe he didn't need it.

The last bit of sludge had managed to reaccumulate into a cow-sized lump, and it was hiding behind a pile of debris on the other side of the room.

That was too big to add to his collection, so he'd have to break it up.

With a wave of his hand, Hector dropped a cluster of deeply frozen javelins on it. They exploded and blew the worm to pieces.

He boxed the final remnants up and started gathering them. Little iron boxes, sliding across the uneven ground toward him, pushing themselves along a track in the same way that he had made his iron do many times before.

And he completed his worm collection.

He exhaled a ragged breath. Dozens upon dozens of iron boxes floated around him in synchronous orbit, crowding up the space around him with so much mass that it completely blocked his normal vision, at times.

And they were all clear to him, in his mind. There were seventy-two of them there, including the larger, hotel-like one that he'd made earlier. And a couple discs, as well, which he now decided to dematerialize.

'Well done, my friend.'

Relieved as he felt, Hector was also a little confused now. Was the fight over? He was pretty sure he'd won. The worm couldn't break free of its many tiny cages, even if it wasn't technically dead.

'Uh... so now what, Garovel?'

'Good question. I figured Malast would've teleported us by now.'

‘Hmm.’

‘Do you think you can destroy the little chunks of the worm, one at a time?’

‘Uh... yeah, probably.’

‘Try that, then. It might take a while, but you’ll work your way up to destroying ninety percent of its body mass eventually, right?’

‘Alright.’ He set to work."

"1598 -- CLXXII.

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 20))

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Two: ‘Thine ambition, grasp firmly...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Royo Raju frowned tiredly. He didn’t know what to do now.

Frankly, when he’d been teleported into that chamber with Hector and a giant worm, seeing them both seconds away from crushing him like an insect, Royo had not wanted any part of it. Fighting human opponents was one thing. Even superhumans, he could deal with. But a damn worm, too?

He had lived in the Undercrust all his life. He knew only too well what those abominations were capable of.

So he had fled. He had used the Pendant of Unso and gotten the hell out of there. It was one of the wiser decisions he’d made lately, Royo felt. He had hoped that the worm would eliminate the Senmurui for him, especially considering the worm wasn’t an actual competitor in the tournament, meaning that Royo would win by default as the last man standing. In theory, anyway. He wasn’t sure if Malast would have made him fight the worm anyway, but presumably not, if the Idle God genuinely did want a successor for Secho.

Not that it mattered now, of course.

He and everyone else had witnessed Hector's battle, thanks to Malast--or rather, thanks to the Staff of Unso.

An artifact, according to the Piercing Eye, which was capable of creating traversable rifts in space when used in conjunction with Heartstone. Created 1,348 years ago by Unso.

What Heartstone was, Royo had yet to work out, nor did it seem as though he would know anytime soon.

Fatigue had reared its ugly head after that reading. Certainly, the battle with Seyos had been exhausting, but this was beyond merely that. It was a side effect of using the Piercing Eye so much, he was convinced.

So he had stopped using it, despite very much wanting to. He had managed to catch a glimpse of the absolute abyss of information that was sitting right there in front of him, in the form of the Idle God.

Royo didn't know what would happen if he tried to wade into that territory. If he didn't already feel on the verge of passing out, he might have been more tempted to try it.

And so, here he now was, sitting on the ground and trying to recuperate--or at least think of some sort of plan, maybe--while he observed the Senmurai finishing off that monster.

He could hear the one called Zeff laughing faintly. "Impossible," the man was saying, sounding equal parts amused and incredulous.

Only minutes ago, the man had been shouting at Malast--and even threatening and grabbing him by the neck. He didn't seem to understand or perhaps even care that he was speaking to a god.

Malast had only sat there, however, telling him that it wouldn't be fair to let him join the tournament this late, even though he would make a suitable vessel for Secho.

The one called Zeff had seemed as though he were about to become violent, until suddenly, the Senmurai started winning.

It was so profoundly unfair.

Confident as he was in himself, Royo didn't think he was a match for the Senmurai. Certainly not now. Not after what he'd just seen."  
"1598 -- CLXXII.

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 20))

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"1599

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 20))

Such was the essence of life. Unfairness. That was a lesson he had somehow refused to learn as a child, despite being confronted with all the evidence in the world.

Even now, a part of him still wanted to refuse. It didn't care how impossible the feat was or how drained he felt or even how close to dying he'd come on several occasions now.

That part of him was telling him that, sure, maybe he couldn't beat the Senmurai, but maybe he could still outwit him. Maybe the Senmurai didn't have what it took to be truly merciless in this tournament. Maybe he could just refuse to surrender, to force the Senmurai to make a choice of either killing him in cold blood or losing the tournament.

That was the one rule that Malast had specified, after all. Victory was achieved when one's opponent either died or surrendered.

It was a foolish plan, to be sure, but that part of him was telling Royo to try it, anyway. To be bold and unrelenting. To be himself.

But there were at least two major problems with that plan that Royo could think of. The first was, of course, what if Hector really did just kill him? While it was true that Royo's instinct was telling him that the young surface-dweller wouldn't be able to do it, he also didn't really know him well enough to gamble with his own life so confidently.

The second problem was that--even if Royo's instinct was correct and Hector couldn't bring himself to kill him--the choice was a false dichotomy. Hector wouldn't actually HAVE to surrender to Royo. The fight could simply become an indefinite stalemate.

And the Senmurai was immortal, while Royo was not.

If Hector really wanted to, he could just wait Royo out, even if it took years. More likely, though, it would only take until Royo starved to death in this godforsaken place.

So, yes. Royo could no longer see a realistic path to victory in this game they were playing.

"Well?" came the voice of the Idle God. "Hidden One? Are you going to fight the Iron One or not? I may be the most patient being in all of Creation, but if you plan on surrendering, then there's no need to draw things out."

Royo was having a hard time just keeping his eyes open. Every muscle in his body ached. The cut on his chest that he'd received from Seyos was just an extra helping of pain, as was the freezing burn that he'd received accidentally from the one called Zeff a couple days ago. And really, he just wanted to go to sleep. To let his weary mind rest.

He had about a thousand reasons to surrender, right now. It would've been so easy.

And yet, he couldn't bring himself to say the words.

Instead, he was thinking that this game was all wrong. Surely, if there was no means by which a player could achieve the proposed objective, then that was no game at all, was it? It was a foregone conclusion. Rigged."

"1600

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 4 of 20))

He'd encountered games like this before. Hell, he'd helped make a few of them. So he knew that there was really only one thing, besides surrendering, that players could do when they found themselves besieged from all angles like this.

Change the game.

Everyone was staring at Royo now, waiting for his response.

Royo kept his gaze locked on Malast as he chose his next words very carefully. "...What will you do if the Iron One, as you call him, actually wins this tournament?"

"What do you mean?" said Malast. "I'll give him Secho's remains, as I said I would."

"...And what if he accepts Secho's remains, but decides not to use them?" said Royo.

Malast made no response.

"What if he elects not to become a god," said Royo. "What will you do, then?"

"That wouldn't make any sense," said Malast, though he sounded uncertain. "He could have surrendered at any time. Why would he have fought so hard in this tournament, if he didn't wish to win?"

"He does wish to win," said Royo. "He simply does not want the prize. At least, not to use."

"What does he want it for, then?"

“He wants to keep it so that none may use it,” said Royo. He didn’t actually know that, of course, but as long as it supported his cause and sounded convincing, then it didn’t matter whether it was true or not. As long as he said it with complete and utter confidence, then maybe Malast would believe it. “His goal is not to harness the power you are offering. His goal is to prevent anyone else from harnessing that power for evil--or what he views as evil, at least.”

Malast smacked his lips but didn’t say anything.

“Ask him yourself, if you want,” said Royo, in truth hoping that Malast wouldn’t do that. Perhaps this wasn’t the time for such a simple trick as reverse psychology, but he did have something to follow it up with. “Just don’t expect him to tell you the truth. Obviously, he would not want you to realize that he has no intention of doing as you want him to.”

The one called Zeff intervened. “What the hell are you talking about? What is all this nonsense about becoming a god?”

This was precisely what Royo didn’t need, right now. Why couldn’t this problematic fool have just stayed where he was back in Himmekel? Royo didn’t even know how the hell the one called Zeff had managed to get here.

“I thought you already knew all about that,” said Malast. “That’s what this whole tournament is for. Wasn’t that why you wanted to join?”

“I didn’t want to join your moronic tournament!” said Zeff. “I just want my people back! Either bring Hector here now or take me to him so that I can bring him back myself!”

“The tournament isn’t over yet.” Malast’s eyes returned to Royo. “Or is it?”

"1601

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 5 of 20))

Royo grimaced. There was no good way to answer that question directly. So he avoided it. “You must know by now that I will use your gift. I will not let it go to waste. Your friend Secho would be reborn with me, absolutely.”



And Royo saw Malast hesitate.

The one called Elise chimed in. "Why don't you just admit that you're too scared to fight Lord Darksteel and surrender?" she said.

What an obnoxious woman--and made all the more so, because he knew that she wasn't wrong.

He didn't have the energy to argue with her, though. What would be the point? To keep up appearances? Everyone present must have been able to tell that he was an exhausted wreck.

Besides, it didn't matter. He wouldn't achieve victory here by winning her over. Or any of these other interlopers, either. They were inconsequential. It was only Malast whom he needed to convince.

And judging from the Idle God's expression and sudden quietude, Royo felt like that might just be possible, after all. Malast probably didn't care one iota about any of these people or their opinions. Malast only wanted his friend back.

"Do you truly wish to see Secho again, or do you not?" said Royo.

"Ugh, you're not really listening to this, are you?" said the surface-woman. "He is obviously just--"

"Be silent," said Malast, with familiar force.

And she was. Her mouth continued to open, but no words came out.

The one called Zeff grabbed Malast by the throat. "What have you done to her?!" he roared.

"Begone with you." The Staff of Unso shined in Malast's hand.

And the one called Zeff vanished into thin air along with his ghost.

Royo blinked, thinking for a second that Malast had just annihilated the two of them. But then he saw them appear in the viewing window, alongside the Senmurai, whose body language suggested that he was quite surprised to see them.

Silence fell as no one else dared speak.

Even Royo was hesitant.

At length, Malast finally asked him something. "...Why would the Iron One believe that you would abuse Secho's power?"

A dangerous question, that one. "Because he is mistaken," said Royo, hoping that wasn't a foolish thing to say. Perhaps that could be helped with a qualifying follow up. "But of course, I cannot read his mind and know his reasoning with complete certainty. Perhaps he merely thinks that none should wield such power."

Malast sighed that familiar sigh of his. "Well, he wouldn't be the first."

Madly and impulsively, Royo wanted to say that Malast should simply ask Hector himself, but he was fortunately able to stop himself. No good would come of bringing Hector into this conversation, he felt.

"I think I'll ask him," said Malast.

It took everything Royo had not to scowl as he watched Hector and his ghost vanish from the viewing window and reappear in front of Malast.

Goddammit."

"1602

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 6 of 20))

The Senmurai noticed Royo there immediately, and the two exchanged looks.

"Eleyo," came the surface-dweller's armor-tinged voice. "Are you okay? You don't look so good..."

The answer to that, of course, was no. He felt like he might collapse if he lost focus for even a moment, but that was neither here nor there.

Even now, the Senmurai was making metal hover around himself, as if to intimidate Royo, as if to imply that he wasn't even tired after that grueling fight that everyone had just witnessed.

These damn supermen...

"Iron One," interrupted Malast. "Why do you wish to become a god?"

The question seemed to surprise him. "Uh... I don't."

Malast looked over at Royo.

Yes. That was the ideal answer.

"Then why did you apparently risk your life fighting that worm?" said Malast.

There came a long period of silence.

Then Hector finally said, "...Wait, what? I could've surrendered against it?"

Malast blinked dully at him. "Of course you could have. Are you stupid?"

"Hey, I... What? The last time I checked, none of the contestants were giant slime monsters. I didn't think that qualified as a proper match or whatever. I thought--agh... I--just... agh..."

"Mm. So in other words, you were fighting for your life, not to win the tournament."

"Yes! But wait a second! Are you really saying you would've teleported us out of there, if we'd asked you to?!"

"Of course I would have."

"What?! Why?!"

"What do you mean, why?"

"I thought you didn't care!" said Hector. "You kept on telling us about how much you don't care about anything, so I thought Garovel and I were just screwed!"

"Ah... hmm." Malast scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, I can understand why you would think that, but still, you could have at least asked, no? It would have been in perfect accordance with the rule I established before the tournament. And I mean, c'mon. I'm not entirely without empathy."

"Oh yeah? Is that why you forced everyone into a tournament without even asking us if we wanted to participate first?"

"What need was there to ask?" said Malast. "If you didn't want to participate, you could have just surrendered in the first round."

“Malast.” The Senmurai broke for a groan of exasperation. “It’s not that simple. Some of these people are my allies, you know. Friends. But others--we barely even know each other. And not to mention, we have completely different levels of strength, too. Pitting us against each other made no sense...”

“Sure it did,” said Malast, though he offered no counterargument.

“It was also kind of cruel,” Hector added.

“What? Cruel? I don’t see how.”

“It was really dangerous and confusing!” The Senmurai was looking around now. “Is everybody okay, by the way?!”

There were a few words of acknowledgment thrown out from everyone else.

“The only casualty in the tournament was that of Seyos,” said Malast.

Hector paused. “So it was dangerous and someone did die.”

“Ah... well... yes.”

Royo wasn’t sure what was happening. Why did it suddenly sound like the Senmurai was winning this argument? And why did the Idle God sound like a child being scolded?"

"1603

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 7 of 20))

“You see?” said Hector. “Just because you have the power to do things like that to people, doesn’t mean you should. Especially not without asking their permission first. I mean, you’re a god, aren’t you? Have a sense of responsibility or something!”

“I... I do have a sense of responsibility...”

Rather than responding, the Senmurai just stared at him, waiting for elaboration.

“I--” Malast looked over his audience. “Ugh. Why do you think I never

intervene in the affairs of your kind? Despite constantly being asked to, no less? It's because I have a responsibility to let you be the makers of your own fate."

"...Is that really true?" The Senmurai probably could not have sounded more doubtful if he tried.

"Yeah," added the one called Diego. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground with his ghost in his lap. "Seems like you intervened pretty hard with this little tournament of yours."

"You, return to silence," said Malast.

And again, the one called Diego found himself unable to speak.

"Was that really necessary?" said Hector.

"I find that one's voice particularly irritating for some reason."

Hector folded his armored arms. "He's not wrong, though. You did intervene in our affairs, didn't you?"

Malast's expression twitched. "That's. Because. Secho. Secho is an exception."

"Why?"

"Because!" said Malast with uncharacteristic fervor. "I told you before! He is my only friend! The only thing I have ever liked!"

"Okay," allowed Hector. "But then, doesn't that mean that the real reason you don't intervene in our affairs is just because you don't feel like it? Because we don't interest you? I mean, you are the God of Boredom, after all."

"I... well... that's... true, but..."

"I mean, you can rationalize it all you want, but you can't honestly say that you have a sense of responsibility if you're really just doing what you feel like doing."

And Malast appeared to be lost for words.

This was getting out of hand, Royo felt. He had no idea what the Senmurai's game here was, but it didn't seem like a good idea to just let it go unchecked.

He would have to challenge Hector himself, if there was to be any hope of rescuing Malast from him.

“Senmurai,” said Royo, gaining everyone’s attention. There was no point in pulling his punches. He needed to turn the conversation into favorable territory. “If Malast gives you the Urn of Growth, will you use it to merge with Secho’s remains? Or will you simply take it and do nothing with it?”

“Ah...”

Good. That seemed to have removed some of that momentum.

“Why are you asking?” said Hector.

An easy question to answer. “Because it is highly relevant to achieving a desirable resolution from our current circumstances. Malast wants nothing more than his friend to return to him.” He spared the Idle God a pitying glance. “Now, perhaps the manner in which he has gone about it... has been less than ideal, but he never claimed to be a perfect being, despite whatever biases you and I may possess toward the term ‘god.’”

"1604

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 8 of 20))

“...If that’s really all he wants,” said Hector, “then why hasn’t he done it by now?” He looked toward Malast again. “How many years have you been down here, holding onto that thing?”

Malast bobbed his head, having regained some composure, apparently. “...It has been quite a long time, I suppose. But then again, time is not time.”

“Oh, please, no,” said the Senmurai. “Don’t even start with that shit...”

“Bearers of the Supreme Will are quite rare,” said Malast. “And on top of that, finding one who is agreeable makes the task even more difficult. I tried in the past to find a suitable vessel for Secho, but to no avail.”

“...Did you really try that hard?” said Hector. “Are you sure you didn’t just get bored and lazy?”

"I... that's..." Malast grit his teeth, and then added force to his next words. "Be silent."

"...No," was all Hector said, unfazed.

"Agh... Supreme-Will-having bastard..." He broke for a familiar sigh. "Look. The point is, I had just about given up hope of ever seeing my friend reborn when Ettol finally arrived and said that he would help me out."

That piqued Royo's interest--and the Senmurai's, by the look of it.

Royo spoke up first, however. "Why did Ettol decide to help you?"

"I don't know," said Malast. "That guy never explains himself. And I honestly thought he was full of crap, until the three of you showed up."

"Three?" said Hector.

"Three suitable vessels. You, the Hidden One, and the Angry One."

Royo didn't need to ask. He had a pretty good idea of who the Angry One was. And Malast was probably right to think that the one called Zeff would not be very agreeable to his offer. Not in these circumstances, at least.

"Hmm," hummed Hector. "How did Secho die, anyway?"

Malast paused at that, shifting somewhat in his tall stone chair. "The Void rended him from existence."

Royo felt the air grow abruptly more tense when Malast said that, almost as if the Idle God's sheer animosity had been made physical.

A curious sensation, Royo thought.

"The Void?" said Hector while Royo was distracted. "You're telling me the Void is real, too?"

Malast seemed confused by that question. "Real? Of course not. How could the Void be real? The Void is all that is not. Non-existence cannot be real."

"...Excuse me?"

Royo didn't quite follow that, either.

“Whatever,” said Malast. “I’m not good at explaining things, okay? Can we just get back to resurrecting Secho, please? I’d like to get a nap in later, and this annoying conversation is really eating into my me time.”

Royo saw the opening and took it. “It should be clear by now that I am your only reliable option. You must know beyond doubt that I will absolutely revive Secho for you.”

“Hold on--” tried Hector.

“No, he’s right,” said Malast. “He is far more agreeable than you are, Iron One.””

"1605

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 9 of 20))

Yes! But Royo kept his weary eyes on Hector, wary of becoming too hopeful.

“Do you think the Hidden One will abuse Secho’s power?” said Malast.

And to Royo’s surprise, Hector did not immediately say yes.

Instead, the Senmurai hesitated. “I... ah...”

Royo was confused to see such apparent meekness from him, but he didn’t let the opportunity escape. “You needn’t worry. I give you my word that I will not abuse Secho’s power.”

Malast regarded Royo with a flat look. “Maybe you will, maybe you won’t. But if that is the Iron One’s concern, then I can understand it. And though the tournament seems to have reached a premature end, I believe it is obvious enough that the Iron One would have been the victor.”

Royo wished he could’ve argued with that, but he could imagine that if he did, Malast would call his bluff and force them to go fight. And that was precisely what Royo had been trying to avoid this whole time.

“As such,” the Idle God went on, “since I will be giving his prize to another, the Iron One deserves a different prize. A prize which may one day serve to check yours, Hidden One, should you ever decide to



misuse it.”

Royo Raju exchanged looks with the Senmurai.

They said nothing. It felt as if they didn't need to.

For his part, Royo sensed a kind of silent understanding between them.

A prize to check his own.

Royo wasn't in love with the idea, but he doubted he would ever get a better offer. And though he didn't know what was going through the Senmurai's head right now, he had a feeling that Hector felt the same way.

But it felt like more than that, too. Somehow.

He had never put much stock in prophecies, but he was a believer in destiny. He had never thought that mere mortals could--or even should--see what awaited them in the future. Destiny was important and meaningful, but spending one's time trying to predict it was folly, he felt.

Yet now, he did not know how else to explain this feeling. Perhaps it was because there were more than just “mere mortals” present. Whatever the case, it made him feel as if his destiny was being inextricably bound to this person. As if, one day, the Senmurai would become either his greatest ally or greatest foe.

He wondered if the Senmurai was feeling similarly in this moment. He almost considered using the Piercing Eye to try to find out.

Then, after the moment passed, the Idle God, He Who Sits, did something that no one was expecting him to do.

He stood.

“Alright,” said Malast as he walked over to the Senmurai, “let's see here...” He reached out with one hand.

The Senmurai, rather understandably, recoiled away from him.

Malast took notice and paused there. “Fear not. I will do you no harm. Allow me to place my hand upon you.””

"1606 -- CLXXIII.

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 10 of 20))

And with reluctance that was visible in his body language, the Senmurai did so. "W-what are you going to do?" he asked as the Idle God's hand found the pate of his helmet.

Malast ignored the question in favor of a long period of silence, instead. "Mm... yes... I see. As I thought. You possess the blessing of Focus."

"What?" said Hector.

"Granted to you, I presume, by that 'Rasalased' you mentioned before. Your prize, then, shall be a second blessing to complement that one. I shall grant you Domain."

"Uh... er, what does that do?"

Malast spared Royo a sidelong glance. "I do not think I would be doing you any favors by explaining its workings in front of the Hidden One." He allowed a beat to pass. "Also, I hate explaining things. I'm no good at it. I'm sure you'll figure it out on your own. You'll have to be patient, though. Like your first blessing, and like Secho's power, it will require time to grow."

"Ah, um, okay..."

There was another long period of silence.

"...Hmm," said Malast.

"Uh," said Hector. "Everything going okay up there?"

"Oh, sure. Of course. Sorry. It's just. I've only ever granted a blessing once before. It's a little weirder than I remember. Probably because you already have one. It's fine, though. Don't worry."

"...Are you sure? Because you sound a little worried, yourself."

"I said it's fine. I've got this. I mean, it might start to hurt here in a little bit, but that's how you'll know it's working."

“Wait, what?”

“Uh-oh.”

“What?! What does uh-oh mean?!”

“No, it’s fine. Might want to brace yourself, though.”

“For what?! I don’t--!”

The Senmurai’s armor exploded, and Hector went flying backward, all the way to the other side of the chamber, and slammed against the wall. He wasn’t dead, though, judging from the screams of agony that were coming out of him.

A few items had fallen out of his obliterated armor and landed at Malast’s feet.

“Oh, you dropped some things.” The Idle God bent down to pick them up, bundling them adjacent the Urn of Growth in his other hand.

Hector was apparently too busy enduring pure hell to respond, however.

Malast gave a nod. “I’ll just hold onto them for you, I guess...” Then his gaze turned toward Royo.

Suddenly, Royo wasn’t so sure that he wanted to become a god, anymore.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Three: ‘Ascension in body and spirit...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It wasn’t just pain. It was existential confusion. Where he was. Who he was. What he was doing. All of that knowledge escaped his mind and danced around it like teasing little gremlins, poking and prodding him, daring him to chase them in vain as Hector stumbled around in his own head.

Oh, but it was pain, too. There was still plenty of that, to be sure. More than he’d ever felt, possibly. It was hard to judge when every fiber of his being was on fire and imaginary horrors were beginning to rear up in his mind, parting the turbulent ocean of his thoughts and terrorizing him in ways that he had never known previously."

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 10 of 20))

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"...Hmm," said Malast.

"Uh," said Hector. "Everything going okay up there?"

"Oh, sure. Of course. Sorry. It's just. I've only ever granted a blessing once before. It's a little weirder than I remember. Probably because you already have one. It's fine, though. Don't worry."

"...Are you sure? Because you sound a little worried, yourself."

"I said it's fine. I've got this. I mean, it might start to hurt here in a little

bit, but that's how you'll know it's working."

"Wait, what?"

"Uh-oh."

"What?! What does uh-oh mean?!"

"No, it's fine. Might want to brace yourself, though."

"For what?! I don't--!"

The Senmurai's armor exploded, and Hector went flying backward, all the way to the other side of the chamber, and slammed against the wall. He wasn't dead, though, judging from the screams of agony that were coming out of him.

A few items had fallen out of his obliterated armor and landed at Malast's feet.

"Oh, you dropped some things." The Idle God bent down to pick them up, bundling them adjacent the Urn of Growth in his other hand.

Hector was apparently too busy enduring pure hell to respond, however.

Malast gave a nod. "I'll just hold onto them for you, I guess..." Then his gaze turned toward Royo.

Suddenly, Royo wasn't so sure that he wanted to become a god, anymore.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Three: 'Ascension in body and spirit...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It wasn't just pain. It was existential confusion. Where he was. Who he was. What he was doing. All of that knowledge escaped his mind and danced around it like teasing little gremlins, poking and prodding him, daring him to chase them in vain as Hector stumbled around in his own head.

Oh, but it was pain, too. There was still plenty of that, to be sure. More than he'd ever felt, possibly. It was hard to judge when every fiber of his being was on fire and imaginary horrors were beginning to rear up

in his mind, parting the turbulent ocean of his thoughts and terrorizing him in ways that he had never known previously."

"1607

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 11 of 20))

There was no compartmentalizing his thoughts this time. No way to disassociate himself from the confusion and agony. His mind was consumed in full, and he thought he saw all manner of things which defied comprehension or even visual cohesion.

Monsters with faces. Humanoid but distorted. Distended. Burning with light or fire or energy or some other thing that he couldn't even conceptualize. The colors, the fury, the chaos, the madness. Raw emotion made flesh. Raw flesh made emotion.

It was too much. Far, far too much. And he was naked against it. No armor to protect him. Not even a body to contain him. Just everything-- everything pouring through his mind and his soul, carving through him like a million knives, until suddenly--

Suddenly.

Suddenly, it wasn't. Suddenly, there was nothing.

No. Not nothing. It was all still there. But it felt like it was "outside," somehow. As if he'd found shelter. Like a little cabin in a blizzard.

And then, as if the very thought manifested itself into truth, it was a little cabin in a blizzard.

It wasn't quite right, perhaps. Still blurry and wispy and ethereal. But a cabin, nonetheless.

"Interesting choice," came an encompassing voice. A familiar one, too.

Hector was still trying to process everything, though. He hadn't gone insane, he was pretty sure. "W-wh... a-ah..." The words died in his fumbling mouth.

Did he even have a mouth?

He couldn't tell.

"How are you, Young Hector?" the voice said, all full of comfort and certainty--two things that Hector very much appreciated, at the moment.

"I... I don't... ah..."

"It is alright. You are well. You are having a difficult moment, but you are well."

Whose voice was that? It felt so clear and familiar to him. It felt like it should have been obvious. But he was still so confused. He'd just come in from the blizzard. He needed to warm up. To center himself.

"Take as long as you need."

He tried to focus. To find his thoughts. To hold them.

And he did. He had no idea how long it took, but he did.

"I am glad," the voice said.

"Who...?" As soon as the word left his thoughts, Hector realized the answer. "...Rasalased."

"Hello."

Hector thought he felt himself smile. "...How are we speaking like this?"

"We are not. And yet perhaps we are."

Maybe he should have seen that response coming. "...What?"

"Does the method matter?"

"...Why wouldn't it?"

Rasalased laughed. "I am but a shadow of myself here. In your mind. The piece of me which I placed within you in order to make up for the piece I took."

"...Hmm."

"You are feeling better."

It wasn't a question, Hector realized. It was an observation. "Yeah, I

guess I am..."

"That is good."

"Rasalased, what the hell is happening, right now?"

"I am preventing you from losing yourself to insanity."

"...Oh. Uh. Well, thank you, in that case."

"You are welcome."

"1608

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 12 of 20))

"Why, uh...? Why was I was going insane, though?"

"Your blessings are conflicting with one another."

"Oh. So... it's kind of your fault that I was going insane in the first place, then..."

"That is true, yes. I might have warned you against this, but I did not think that you would ever acquire a second blessing--and certainly not so quickly."

"Yeah, me too..."

"But there is no cause for concern. Though I am the problem, I am also the solution."

"Ah... yeah. Thanks again, by the way. And not just for what you're doing, now. Ivan would've killed everyone in Dunehall, if you hadn't helped me the way you did."

"That is also true, yes. But so too would they have died, if you had done nothing. If you must thank me for my help, then I must thank you for yours."

Hector didn't know what to say to that.

Rasalased pitched a different subject at him. "Who is it that granted you this new blessing, Young Hector?"



“Ah... you mean, you don’t already know?”

“Hmm? Perhaps I do. I would like you to tell me, nonetheless.”

“Uh. Alright. It was Malast.”

“Ah. Indeed. So it is the God of the Underworld who is holding one of my Shards, then.”

Hector might’ve blinked. That was right, wasn’t it? The Shard had been in his armor, along with the other items he’d stored there. So when his armor had been destroyed... right in front of Malast...

“...Is that gonna be a problem?” said Hector.

“I do not think so. It seems as though he does not sense my presence. I am still dormant within the Shards, after all. Only here, in your mind, am I awake.”

“...Hmm.” Hector wasn’t sure he understood, but that was nothing new when it came to Rasalased, he supposed.

“It is a pity,” said the Dry God. “I might have enjoyed speaking to him. He is far older than me.”

That, Hector had a hard time believing. “Really? He’s older?”

“Very much so.”

“But, uh... I mean, compared to you, he struck me as kinda... childish, in some ways.”

“Indeed? How curious. Now I would like to speak to him even more.”

Hector couldn’t even imagine what that encounter would be like. He didn’t entirely want to imagine it, either. “...Are you sure that wouldn’t, like, bring about the end of the world or something?”

Rasalased laughed again. “I am quite certain that it would not.”

“Hmm.” That brought another question to mind, something that he’d wanted to ask Malast about but hadn’t gotten the chance to. “Do you, uh... do you know anything about Ettol?”

“The God of Impulse?”

“Yeah.”

“I am afraid I do not. Why? Do you?”

Hector wasn't expecting a reversal like that. “Uh... no, it's just. I've been hearing his name a lot, lately.”

”1609

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 13 of 20))

“Curious,” said Rasalased. “The God of Impulse was said to have been consumed by the Void in the earliest days of humanity. Even in my time, the name Ettol was all but forgotten.”

That information was surprisingly coherent for Rasalased, Hector thought. He almost wanted to make a crack about time not being time, but he felt like it might ruin his chances of learning anything else here. “...Do you know more about Malast?”

“No. Only stories. That is why I would quite like to meet him.”

“Right...” The more he thought about it, the more questions came to mind. “How many... beings who can grant blessings are there? Do you know?”

“I do not.”

“Can you tell me anything about Sermung? Or Dozer? Or any of the servant emperors, really?”

“Only that they are very powerful. Perhaps if I were to meet them, I could learn more.”

“Hmm. What about Cocora? Do you know if she exists?”

“No.”

“What about Avar? Or Lhutwë?”

“Lhutwë?! Of course he never existed! Only a fool would believe in such nonsense!”

“W-whoa... okay.”

Oh, right. Rasalased was a Sandlord--and probably from a time when they hated the Rainlords. The Dry God had been nice enough to Emiliana, as Hector recalled, but he supposed it wasn't so surprising that there was still lingering animosity there.

He tried to think of more things to ask, but after that string of failures, his enthusiasm had waned somewhat, and the most pressing question that he could think of was, “How much time do I have here with you?”

“Time is not time.”

Well, he walked right into that one, Hector supposed. He decided to rephrase and try again. “...Am I stuck in here?”

“No.”

“So... how do I get out, then?”

“When your blizzard is calmed, you will return.”

Right, the blizzard. It was still raging “outside” of the “cabin” that they were currently taking shelter in. “Do, uh... do you know how long that's going to take?”

“As long as it must.”

Hector wanted to sigh and laugh at the same time. “...I've missed you, Rasalased.”

“Is that so?”

“Mostly.”

“Then I thank you.”

“You're welcome. I guess.”

“I have a question for you, Young Hector.”

“I can't wait to hear it.”

“What do you intend to do with these blessings?”

“Uh...” That was one hell of a question. “I... I think I'd have to know more about them before I could figure out what to do with them. Which,

uh--which reminds me. Malast said that the blessing you gave me was called Focus."

"Did he now?"

"...Yeah. I heard him myself."

"Interesting."

"...Could you maybe tell me a little more about what Focus actually does?"

"I do not think so, no."

"Figures."

"I did not think my blessing would have a name. Hmm.""

"1610

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 14 of 20))

This conversation wasn't going how Hector hoped. That seemed to be a running trend, of late.

Given who he was talking to, he'd thought that he would be able to learn something important, but if anything, it seemed like Rasalased was the one acquiring new information here, not him.

Pretty weird, Hector felt. The notion that he could tell a "god" anything that they didn't already know.

Malast had been the same way, though, now that he was thinking about it. He supposed that supported Garovel's belief that they were not truly "gods"--at least not in the sense of being all-powerful or all-knowing.

"I suppose that means you can't tell me anything about what Domain does, either," said Hector.

"Ah, is that what he called your second blessing?"

"Yeah."

“Fascinating.” And that was all Rasalased had for him, apparently.

Yeah, alright, fine. What was something that the Dry God might actually be able to tell him?

Hmm. Maybe something about the Sandlords? Or maybe just--oh yeah.

“...Do you know where Asad is, right now?”

“My successor.”

“Yeah.”

“He is in the town of Capaporo.”

Wow, a straight answer. And exactly the one he had been hoping for, too. That was a relief.

“You should hurry to him,” added Rasalased. “He is a prisoner.”

That was much less of a relief. “Prisoner?! But--wha--how?! Who’s holding him prisoner?!”

“Hmm. A good question. A lost sheep, it seems to me.”

“...Say what?”

“That is who is holding him prisoner.”

“A sheep.”

“Yes.”

“...Like a literal sheep, or...?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps not.”

“Ugh... could you give me a name, maybe?”

“No.”

“...Fair enough, I guess.”

“He is much confused and struggling to find himself. Full of regret. His mind is in such disorder that he does not even notice when I probe for his emotions.”

“...Are we talking about Asad or the sheep now?”

“The sheep. This is why I believe he is lost.”

“Right...”

“I hope you will help my successor one more time.”

“I’d love to, but, uh, h-how do I do that, exactly?”

“I do not know.”

“Agh...”

“Good luck to you, Young Hector.”

“Thanks...”

“And goodbye.”

“Wait, what?! I still have more questions!”

“As do I. I hope we will be able to speak again.”

“Aw--!”

He felt the world shift. The cabin disintegrated, and a vast calmness enveloped him. It felt simultaneously like a gentle wind, a warm sea, and a familiar set of clothes.

Hector awoke, wincing. His throat felt hoarse; his body felt like rubber; and he was so dizzy that it took him a minute to realize that he was face down on the ground.

Slowly, he picked himself up.

‘Hector!’ came Garovel’s soundless and private, but nonetheless very loud, voice. ‘You okay, buddy?!’

‘...Yeah,’ he finally managed to say. He could feel the undead vigor coursing through his body again. No pain anymore, either. ‘How long have I been out?’”

"1611

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‘A good ten minutes or so,’ said Garovel.

Hector tried to pick himself up and found it difficult.

Oh, right. He couldn’t feel pain at the moment, but he didn’t have his cooling armor on, so the heat of the Undercrust was trying to melt his body again, competing with his regeneration and sapping the strength from his muscles.

He focused and remade the armor. It materialized quickly and easily, requiring less concentration than he recalled.

Right. Emergence.

Someone else was saying something. They’d been saying something, he realized.

“--Iron One?”

Ah. Must’ve been Malast.

Sure enough, when Hector looked up, there the Idle God was. Along with the Hun’Kui man, Eleyo.

Eleyo looked normal enough. But the jar that had been in Malast’s

hands before was now in his, instead.

And it was open.

“Feeling better, Senmurai?” said Eleyo.

The man had two voices, Hector noticed, like that of a servant in a hyper-state.

Hector finally stood up fully. “Did you already...?” He didn’t know how to end that sentence.

“Yes,” said Malast. “It is done. Secho is reborn.”

Hector looked over the others. Diego, Yangéra, Carver, Elise, Manuel, Lorios, Mr. Sheridan, and the three other Hun’Kui, one of whom was unconscious and had been so all along.

They looked okay, all things considered--a bit awestruck and frightened, perhaps, but unharmed at least. Zeff and Axiolis were still in the viewing window above Malast’s head as well, though they did not look nearly as calm. If Hector hadn’t been so certain that he’d finished off that worm, then the silent mayhem in the viewing window might’ve made him worried that Zeff was fighting it now.

“We were waiting for you to awaken,” said Eleyo. Or was it Secho, now?

Hector was almost reluctant to ask, but he did so anyway. “...Why?”

“Before that,” said Eleyo, “I feel I should confess something. My name is not Eleyo. And I do not mean that it is no longer Eleyo. I mean it never was. I deceived you. And I wish to apologize.”

Hector had no response.

“My name is Royo Raju. Remember it well, for it will soon belong to a king.”

A chorus of unsettlement rose up from the two other conscious Hun’Kui in the room. They recognized the name, Hector figured.

“But there is more I should tell you,” Royo went on. “And perhaps you have realized this already, or perhaps you would have in the future, but I would like to say it now, regardless. It was I who caused your train to derail. It was I who brought those worms down upon us.”



Now it wasn't just the Hun'Kui who were unsettled.

Hector thought back. Through all the chaos, the question of why the worms had first attacked had never really occurred to him. He hadn't thought it was anyone's fault.

But apparently, it was.

Royo Raju wasn't done. "I have wronged you. I know this. I did what I had to do to escape a fate as wretched as any I can imagine, and you were all caught up in the dire consequences that followed."

"1612

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 16 of 20))

Everyone just listened, and Hector wondered where this was going. Despite what Royo had just admitted to--or perhaps even because of it--Hector didn't get the sense that Royo was going to attack them.

"I am indebted to you all," said Royo. Then he pointed at Manuel Delaguna. "Especially to you. And I do not take my debts lightly. Know that they will be repaid, in time. And know that I do not think of you as my enemies or wish harm upon any of you."

And there was silence again.

Everyone, presumably, was trying to process everything that they had just heard.

Malast broke the quietude with a yawn. "Oh. Hey." He walked over to Hector and handed the items he'd dropped earlier back to him. "Here."

It was quite a collection, Hector realized as he started taking them. The Scarf of Amordiin, the Shifting Spear of Logante, that weird orb on a tuning fork, and the Shard.

Wait, where was the Egg of Prosperity? Where was his one million troa? It hadn't gotten destroyed in the fight with the worm, had it?

Or, hold on. Did he even pick the Egg up in the first place?

...Had he really forgotten to grab it? Even after Garovel pointed it out to

him?

Well, fuck.

He wondered if this was how Asad felt all the time.

When it came around to returning the Shard, Hector's hand grabbed it, but Malast didn't let go.

"What is this thing, by the way?" said Malast. "It seems a little different to the others."

And Hector locked gazes with the God of the Underworld. Silently, he again considered telling Malast that the item he was holding contained the very same Rasalased that he had expressed an interest in earlier.

He considered it. And then, he decided to actually do it. "This is a Shard of the Dry God," said Hector. "Rasalased is inside it."

'Hector, what the fuck?!' said Garovel privately.

Malast's eyes widened. The perpetually glazed look on his face went away.

Hector didn't let go of his end of the Shard, though. "...Actually, I just talked to him again. He said he wouldn't mind meeting you, but he didn't seem to know how to make contact."

"...Huh," said Malast. "Interesting."

And to Hector's surprise, Malast let go of the Shard.

"I guess I'll have to look into that later," said the Idle God. Then that glazed look returned. "Agh. That's gonna suck. I hate having to learn new things."

Hector returned the Shard to its previous place inside his armor.

'Did you really just talk to Rasalased?' said Garovel, still privately.

'Yep.' A beat passed, and then he added, 'I think. I guess I could've been dreaming or something.'

'Hector--!'

Royo's words cut him off. "Perhaps I can do something for you, right now." He held up something in his hand. Some kind of orb? "I do not

think this will make up for my debt, but as I understand it, you are all trying to return to the surface, no?"

When did he learn that, Hector wondered? Did someone tell him?"  
"1613 -- CLXXIV.

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 17 of 20))

Royo looked around again, perhaps waiting for someone to answer him, but when no one did, he kept talking. "Allow me to expedite your journey for you." He turned to Malast, who was going back to his seat. "Might I borrow the Staff of Unso for a moment?"

Malast had rested the Staff against his chair earlier. After he sat down again, he shrugged, grabbed it, and flung it over to Royo.

Royo caught it with one hand. "Much appreciated, old friend."

And it was fleeting, but for a moment, Hector thought he saw Malast actually smile.

"Now." The pendant around Royo's neck began to glow along with the tip of the Staff. "Should you ever decide to return to the Higher West Layer, seek me out. I will give you a hero's welcome."

Arcing sparks jumped from the Staff to the four corners of the chamber, as they had done previously, and Hector's vision started to distort familiarly as well.

"Ah, but if possible, I would prefer you not bring your Dragon next time. Farewell."

Everything blurred and smeared into itself, and Hector lost all sense of direction and space.

The floating sensation lasted noticeably longer this time, however. It was disorienting, to be sure, but Hector was almost able to regain his bearings before it finished. And when it did, he wasn't nearly so confused as he might have otherwise been.

He saw sky.

For the first time in what felt like ages, he could see stars, twinkling in the night, and a full, lustrous moon.

"What in the--?" someone said. Elise Garza, Hector recognized after a moment.

"Where the hell are we now?" said Diego. "Oh, hey, I can talk again."

'Hector?' said Yangéra. 'Do you know?'

He wasn't sure why she had singled him out to ask, but in fact, he did know. While the Scarf of Amordiin wasn't revealing their exact location in a GPS-like sense, it was revealing the shape of a familiar, two-pronged monument that was standing behind everyone's back. Hector might not have remembered it so clearly if Garovel hadn't reminded him of it only a couple days ago.

"...We're in Atreya," said Hector.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Four: 'An untimely arrival...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It took a while for everyone to get a handle on what had just happened. The lingering blue sparks around Rathmore's Gate seemed to help them conceptualize it, somewhat, but even so, the fact that they had apparently teleported over such a tremendous distance was no small matter.

Hector might've been right there with them in their confusion, if he wasn't so distracted with something else--or rather, someone else.

Eleyo. Or, no. Not Eleyo. Royo Raju. Reborn with the remains of the God of Growth.

The fact that it was Royo who had teleported them all just now was what concerned Hector. Granted, he'd used some sort of magical artifact or something in that "Staff of Unso," but would he have been able to do that before?

And the way he spoke...

It had certainly sounded like Royo had some sort of plan. Hector wondered what it was."

"1613 -- CLXXIV.

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 17 of 20))

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"1614

'Well,' said Garovel at length, 'now we can get to Capaporo safely. It may take us another day or two, but at least there isn't a feldeath and an army of worms in the way. As far as I know, that is.'

Zeff stepped forward, trailing rocky dust behind him. He was quite the ragged picture, what with his wild and mussed hair that looked like it would fight any comb that tried to put it back in order. "Lead on, then," he said, and he raised everyone up on a short platform of ice. "I'll carry us to our destination as quickly as I am able."

Hector intervened, wearing normal armor now instead of the cooling variant. "Wait, um--"

The expression on Zeff's face did not suggest that the matter was open for discussion. "What?" he said flatly.

Hector held his ground, though. "Let me do it." And he raised a platform of iron on top of Zeff's. "You're supposed to be keeping a low profile, remember?"

Zeff did not look like he cared.

Axiolis floated up behind the man. 'This is Hector's territory. Let's defer to his discretion.'

At that, the Lord Elroy seemed to relent, and everyone felt the iron platform sink a little as the ice beneath it dematerialized. "Go quickly, then. Everyone is waiting for us."

Hector knew it. Better than Zeff did, probably. He hadn't forgotten Rasalased's words. That Asad was being held prisoner.

He was going to have to tell Zeff about that. And soon, too. For the moment, though, he focused on his materialization. If nothing else, it would be a good opportunity to test his new limits. A giant platform moving over a forest? That would take some doing. But Hector was--

"Hold on," said Manuel Delaguna, which took a bit of the wind out of Hector's sails. "Is someone missing?"

Everyone stopped to look around at one another.

The Hun'Kui weren't with them anymore, of course, but that didn't

seem like cause for the concern in Manuel's voice. Aside from them, Hector counted the four servants, the four reapers, Elise, and Mr. Sheridan.

Shit. Manuel was right.

'Carver,' said Yangéra. 'He's not here.'

'Eleyo--or Royo, I suppose--must have decided to keep him behind,' said Garovel.

'Why would he do that?' said Lorios.

'Any number of reasons,' said Garovel. 'At a guess, though, I'd say it has something to do with this "Ettol" figure we've been hearing about. Royo seemed interested in him before, and Carver claimed to be related to him.'

'Hmm.'

'There's not much we can do about it now,' said Garovel. 'And if Royo wants him for information, then I doubt he'll hurt him. He is probably not in danger.'

Hector wondered about that. He honestly didn't know what to make of Royo anymore.

"Hector," said Zeff, sounding annoyed again. "Hurry up. We can move while they talk."

The man wasn't wrong, Hector knew. So he set to work, raising the platform up higher and higher until it cleared the canopy of trees."

"1615

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'Which way?' Hector asked.

Garovel pointed to his left, and Hector grew the platform forward and then curved it around so that they would all be facing the direction that they were going.



He'd never used such a large volume of iron as method of transportation before. It was a bit strange but not difficult. In fact, the Scarf of Amordiin was making it rather easy.

Due to its ability to help him sense the movement of air all around him, Hector had a very clear picture of even the densest parts of the forest. He could sense where all the tree trunks were, where the leaves were, the underbrush, the rocks, and even the animals. A snake here, a rabbit there, a couple bears, a wolf, a group of monkeys, and tons of insects--though those were perhaps too small to sense individually. Maybe if he concentrated on them, but now wasn't the time for that.

He focused on his platform. Because the open air was telling him so much, Hector could see all the gaps in the forest--and therefore, all the places in which he could materialize iron without crushing anything. Well, except maybe a couple shrubs here and there. They'd probably be fine, though.

It was helpful, because he didn't want to obliterate the ecosystem. The area of the forest immediately around Rathmore's Gate was still plenty ruined already. Hell, even now that he'd carried them some distance away from it, he could still sense entire trees that had been uprooted or splintered in half. He noticed one tree that wasn't touching the ground. Instead, it was lodged horizontally in the canopy, dangling in midair. Some birds had made a nest on it.

All in all, it made for a type of training that he had never done before. Navigating the forest with a building-sized block of iron, creating and destroying his work around every single object and leaving it all unscathed--it certainly demanded attention to detail. And without the Scarf of Amordiin, he didn't think he would have been able to do this, not without simply flattening everything in their path.

But after a while, Hector started to get the hang of it a little too well, he felt. Even as he increased the speed to accommodate Zeff, Hector found himself thinking that this wasn't really challenging enough.

Even without his most recent emergence, he felt like he could have pulled this off as long as he had the Scarf. That was what really made this feel trivially easy. He could simply conceptualize his iron as if it were squeezing its way through all the holes in the forest, like a wave of iron jelly. Or iron sludge, perhaps.

Hmm.

Maybe that fight with the worm had more of an effect on his perception

than he'd thought. He could visualize the beast's movements pretty damn well now, after having followed it so attentively over such an extended battle."

"1616

((The 17 pages of St. Patrick's Day + Triple Saturday -- Page 20 of 20))

Regardless, Hector wanted to try something more difficult, but he was reluctant to get too crazy with his experimentation. He wasn't the only one riding this thing, after all.

"How long will it take to reach Warrenhold?" said Zeff.

'At this pace?' said Garovel. 'Maybe three or four hours.'

Zeff didn't say anything to that, but he was probably still displeased with their current speed, Hector figured. Hector wouldn't have minded increasing it even further, but Elise and Mr. Sheridan probably wouldn't appreciate that very much, and their safety was most important.

Then again, as Hector thought about it, Mr. Sheridan had seemed like kind of a lunatic, so maybe he would have liked to go even faster.

Whatever. This pace was plenty fast, Hector felt, and four hours was making good time, considering their current location in the Carthrace Nature Reserve was on the opposite side of the country to Warrenhold.

But that was Atreya for you. He'd almost forgotten how tiny it was. After gallivanting all over Sair with the Rainlords, it was nice to be back home, where traveling didn't take so damn long. That trip from Luzo to Moaban had been a little ridiculous.

Mr. Sheridan was eyeing him quite a bit, Hector noticed.

Hmm. Nervous, perhaps? Maybe because he wasn't sure if Hector had completely forgiven him for trying to kill him during the tournament?

Good. Because Hector hadn't. Nor did he intend to. Obviously, it was no big deal as far as Hector himself was concerned, but what about other people? How was he supposed to trust that Mr. Sheridan wouldn't just up and shoot somebody else in Warrenhold? Someone

who couldn't simply regenerate?

Maybe Mr. Sheridan really did know better. Maybe he would never do such a thing to a non-servant. But after that incident, "maybe" wasn't good enough for Hector. As soon as they reached Warrenhold, he meant to send Mr. Sheridan on his merry way back to Intar or wherever the hell he came from.

'So,' said Garovel in the echo of privacy, 'any idea yet about what this second "blessing" is?'

'...I was kinda hoping YOU would know something,' said Hector.

'Bah. Wish we had more time to figure it out.'

'Might not even matter right now. Malast said it would take a while to grow.'

'True. But still. Can't say I'm not curious. "Domain," huh? And you already had this "Focus" thing from Rasalased, too? Do you have any idea what that one does, by the way?'

He did, though he wasn't quite sure how to explain it. 'Uh...'

'I thought Rasalased just granted you the ability to materialize Haqq's shield as you please, but that doesn't sound like something that would be called Focus, to me.'

'Yeah, about that, ah... I think that's because I can... kind of... concentrate on multiple things at once...'

Garovel paused. '...Excuse me?'

'I mean, I'm still, uh... trying to figure it out. And maybe it's not that simple. But, um... yeah. My concentration seems better overall, lately, I guess...'

"1617

'Why are you only telling me about this now?' said Garovel.

'Well, I--uh. I was still figuring it out. And I didn't even think it was related to Rasalased's blessing until I heard Malast mention it.'

‘Huh...’

‘And, I guess, uh... I guess I kinda thought it was just natural. Er, uh, I mean, I thought it was because of all the meditating I do...’

‘Hmm. That’s reasonable enough, I suppose. And your meditation should be improving your concentration, too. But yeah, maybe not to THAT extent.’

‘Ah...’

‘Still. Your concentration was pretty good already. I’ve always thought you were a little absurd when it came to meditation. So if you got a boost ON TOP of that, then... Hmm. Hey, wait a minute. Is that why you’re able to just “tune me out,” sometimes? Like I’m some kind of friggin’ radio broadcast?’

‘Uh... I don’t know...’

‘It’s really obnoxious when you do that, by the way. Dunno if I mentioned that earlier.’

‘Ah. Sorry. But, I mean, it’s not like I do it for no reason.’

‘You could just ask me to be quiet. Y’know, politely. Believe it or not, I AM capable of that.’

‘...I find that hard to believe.’

‘And here comes the sass. Alright, fine. Maybe I do OCCASIONALLY talk a little too much, but c’mon, if we’re in a life and death situation, and you need to concentrate, then just say so!’

‘Oh, you mean like when a worm is trying to eat us?’

‘What? Oh. Hey. Look. You managed just fine, didn’t you? And sometimes--MOST times, even--I have insightful things to say. Which is my job, by the way. As a reaper, that is. I’m tasked with imparting all manner of mind-blowing wisdom.’

‘Uh-huh...’

‘I am a waterfall of knowledge, Hector. Trying to stem the tide of information that flows out of me is quite frankly impossible.’

‘So in other words, I should just ignore you, sometimes.’

‘...Yeah, probably.’

Hector let a breath of laughter slip out, but the others didn’t seem to notice, no doubt because of the howling wind rushing past as they traversed the top of the forest.

Hector had added a guardrail, of sorts, to the platform, as well as a ridged grip for the floor so that everyone didn’t have to worry so much about sliding around.

‘If we’re being completely serious, though,’ said Garovel, ‘then you really shouldn’t make a habit out of ignoring me during battle. I can provide observational support, which could very well save our asses, someday. Granted, now that you’ve got that spiffy Scarf, you might not actually need all that much observational support, but the basic principle that two heads are better than one still applies, I think.’

‘That’s... true.’

‘I’m glad you think so.’

‘We should probably work on that, though. I feel like we’re, maybe, not working together in combat as... efficiently as we could be.’

‘...Maybe so,’ said Garovel. ‘And I’ve certainly been feeling a bit useless, lately. It would be nice to change that.’

Hector blinked, because it didn’t sound like the reaper was joking. ‘What? You’re not useless.’

Garovel made no response."  
"1618

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

‘Garovel, are you being serious?’ said Hector. ‘You’re NOT useless! How could you even think that?!’

‘I wonder.’

Hector couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The reaper had done so much for him. He had to know that, right?

'I'm not trying to sound depressed or pessimistic,' said Garovel.  
'Rather, it's the opposite.'

'What do you mean?'

'Hector, c'mon. You've kinda been on a tear, lately. If I don't start working harder to step my game up, then you're probably just gonna leave me in the dust.'

'I...' Was that really how Garovel saw things? What was he even supposed to say to something like that?

'It's a GOOD thing, is what I'm saying. I want to make sure that I'm not holding you back.'

Holy shit. That might have been the most flattering thing anyone had ever said to him. 'I... you're not... Garovel, that's not true.'

'Oh, shut up. Yes, it is. Anyway, forget about it.'

'What the--?! How am I supposed to forget about it?!'

'I dunno. Maybe I shouldn't have even brought it up. Point is, we need to stay focused on our objective. Also, there's a highway coming up soon, so you should probably adjust your platform so that you don't squash any of the cars or the people inside them.'

That was a good idea.

Hector wondered briefly if he could make his iron move seamlessly around a group of cars in motion. He felt like he could, but something about the notion of experimenting with other people's lives struck him as something he probably shouldn't do.

Instead, he came up with a much safer experiment, something he'd been wanting to try for a while now.

As soon as he sensed the highway that Garovel was talking about, Hector slowed the pace of his iron, much to Zeff's expressed chagrin. Hector eliminated most of the platform below them, keeping only a comparatively thin layer for everyone to continue riding on and four tall legs.

His work was suddenly much more akin to a giant, moving table.

The shift in weight caused a bit of turbulence, which seemed to alarm the others, rather understandably, but Hector got it under control.

He wanted to eliminate the legs entirely. He wanted the platform to simply float, like one of his cubes in orbit.

It was similar, in theory, but the weight differential made for quite the leap in difficulty. The larger the mass, the more impact gravity had on his work--and therefore, the more he needed to counter its effects. With just an iron platform, that was straightforward enough, but there were people here, too, and they were weighing the platform down in different places. The same kind of "balance" that he used for his cubes in orbit had to be greatly adjusted here.

And Diego certainly wasn't helping, what with the way he was walking around, talking to everyone without a care in the world. The man probably had to get up close so that they could hear him over the wind, but still, at the moment, Hector was finding it rather obnoxious."  
"1619

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'Agh,' growled Hector. 'Tell Diego to stand still for a minute.'

'Hmm? Okay. Hey, Diego! Quit moving around so much! Hector's trying to do something!'

The Lord Redwater looked confused but acquiesced.

That was better.

He vanished the legs of the giant table as they neared the highway, and then he slapped a coating around the bottom of the remaining platform. But it wasn't just a normal coating. It was a hovering stabilizer, of sorts.

Hector couldn't simply have the platform itself hover, because the platform needed to remain stationary so that everyone didn't slide off of it like a moving walkway. This hadn't been an issue before, because on the ground, he could have the top of the platform remain still while everything below it grew and pushed onward. In midair, though, there was no longer anything to push against, which was why this new, floating "holster" for the platform was necessary.

And it worked, just as he thought it would. The platform soared over

the rushing cars below and up into the night sky.

‘Hector, holy shit!’

It was actually quite difficult, Hector discovered. Even now, with everyone staying still, he was having trouble keeping the encased platform fully stable. That, and every little jostle was worrisome in its own way, threatening each time to destroy his concentration, which he very much needed right now.

The others were talking more loudly now, perhaps even to him, but he still couldn’t make out their words over the wind. And he was busy trying not to panic and drop everyone, anyway.

Why the hell had he thought this was a good idea? There were two non-servants in their group. They would surely die if they fell from this height or at this speed.

‘Hector, we’re going the wrong way now,’ said Garovel.

Agh. Shit.

The wind was becoming a problem. The higher they went, the more intense it got. And it was somehow easier to make the platform ascend than descend. Probably because in the beginning, he’d been most worried about crashing into the ground and killing everyone, so he’d decided to err on the side of upward movement, just in case.

The idea of descending was simply more frightening. That was the problem, Hector realized. It wasn’t that it was actually more difficult to pull off. He was just more afraid to do it.

But now he didn’t have a choice. They’d have to go back down eventually. And at this height, going back down a little was no big deal, right?

Goddammit. This whole thing was way more nerve-wracking than he thought it would be. He had to get a hold of himself. They were flying. Under their own power.

He tried to ease up. He had to weaken the force that he’d applied in order to counter gravity.

It worked. They began to lose altitude. But not without more turbulence. Considerably more. He heard a feminine shriek.



Sorry, Elise.

He stabilized his work and course-corrected.

Yeah. This was a better altitude. Still maybe a little too high, but the wind wasn't so crazy, at least.

He opened his eyes. When had he even closed them? He'd been relying on the Scarf completely, he realized. Thankfully, he'd made sure to keep it wrapped snugly around his neck after removing his armor earlier.

Everyone was staring at him.

Not knowing what to do, he tried to pretend like he didn't notice.

It didn't work.

Diego started walking over to him, though he was obviously being slow and deliberate about it this time, which Hector appreciated. It was much easier to account for the balance changes."

"1620

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"So, uh," said Diego, once he was close enough, "how are you doing over here, Hector?"

That seemed like a strangely plain question. "Ah... I'm alright."

"It just occurred to me to that, despite all the craziness we've been through together recently, you and I haven't really spoken all that much."

And as was often the case, Hector wasn't sure what to say to that.

Garovel helped him out, though. 'That's sort of a running theme with Hector. He's not the most talkative.'

"He seemed rather talkative with Malast." Diego rubbed his jaw.

'Ah,' said Garovel. 'Yeah. Uh. Well, what can I say? He has his moments.'

‘That’s one way of putting it,’ said Yangéra.

Hector didn’t know what to make of the way she was staring at him.

Garovel changed the subject. ‘I don’t suppose you managed to get away with any of that treasure, eh?’

Diego frowned as he reached into his vest. “I only managed to swipe a few jewels there at the end.” He held out his hand to show his spoils. “What about you?”

‘We got a few things. We’ll show you later.’

“Hmm. Looking forward to it.”

‘By the way,’ said Yangéra, ‘what the hell was all that stuff that Malast was saying about “blessings”? I’ve been meaning to ask.’

Ah. That subject. Hector just let Garovel handle it, as usual. The reaper told them basically the same things that he and Hector had already discussed. Hector did notice that Garovel kept things vague when talking about Focus, however. Not that they had much detail to actually go into, of course, but still. It seemed like Garovel didn’t want to reveal even what little they already understood about the concentration boost it provided. Instead, he simply said that he and Hector were still trying to figure it out--which, in fairness, was not a lie.

From there, the two reapers took over the conversation for a while. Yangéra inquired about Warrenhold, and Garovel offered answers. He told her of how spacious it was, how it had seen better days, how they were currently in the middle of trying to restore it, how there was a lake near it, and how it was exceedingly durable thanks to an integrated material called nightrock.

Zeff and Axiolis came over as Garovel was explaining that last part.

‘It will be interesting to see Warrenhold again,’ said Axiolis.

‘Oh, that’s right,’ said Garovel. ‘Shenado said you’d been there before.’

‘Somehow, I doubt that is all she said,’ said Axiolis.

Garovel chortled. ‘She said you hated it.’

The other reaper’s skull-faced expression seemed to stiffen, somehow. ‘It is true that I have little love for that place. It caused considerable grief for our kin in the past.’

'I've heard,' said Garovel.

Garovel reiterated details of Warrenhold's "pest control" mechanism that they had learned from Voreese.

It didn't seem to do much for Axiolis' mood. Or Zeff's."

"1621

Zeff was staring at him again, Hector noticed. Did he want to ask a question? If so, why wasn't he saying anything? Maybe he was just waiting for an opening. The reapers were talking to each other again, so--

"You achieved emergence, didn't you?" said Zeff.

All the reapers went quiet.

"...Yeah," was all Hector could think to say.

"Good," said the Lord Elroy. "We will test your new limits as soon as we have the space and opportunity to do so. In the meantime, how difficult are you finding it to maintain this... flying platform of yours?"

"Ah... it's... kinda hard. It's the same basic principle as the orbiting technique, but there are a lot more little things to account for. I feel like, maybe, a more aerodynamic shape than a simple platform could make things easier, but I'm not really sure. The added complexity might just screw everything up, instead."

Zeff nodded. "Yes, perhaps it would. We can experiment with that when safety is not as great of a concern as it is now."

"That's what I was thinking."

"But do you feel that you are already near the limit of your ability? Or do you think you can do more than this?"

A tough question. Hector took a few moments to try and take stock of himself. His concentration was divided again, he noticed. A split between maintaining the variable factors of the flight and simply considering Zeff's words. Sure, the divide wasn't difficult when compared to what he'd had to do during that worm fight, but after

learning about his Focus, he was more mindful of the division in his thoughts than ever.

Which, in its own way, he supposed, was creating another divide, wasn't it? Instead of splitting his attention in two, it was being split three ways now.

Kind of a waste, then, this third thing. But it was hard to get rid of, somehow. Agh.

"...No," said Hector. "I don't think this is all that close to my new limit. It's tough, but I feel like it's getting easier as I do it more."

"Hmm." Zeff folded his arms. "Let's increase the difficulty, then. Try putting something in orbit around you, right now."

Diego held up a hand. "Ah--do you think that's really a good idea? Shouldn't you guys save the training for later?"

Zeff regarded the Lord Redwater with a raised eyebrow. "Are you worried about safety? Because as has already been mentioned, we have not forgotten it."

"Sure, but, c'mon, we just escaped the Undercrust and twenty-seven different brushes with death--at least, that's what it felt like. Can't you just take a moment to relax a little while we wait to arrive? You didn't even sleep or eat anything while we were in Himmekel, did you?"

Zeff glowered. "You have little room to speak. Why were you and Yangéra so exhausted when we found you in front of Malast, hmm?"

Diego opened his mouth but didn't respond this time."  
"1622

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Zeff didn't let up. "How close did you come to losing her, exactly? And how seriously have you been taking your training, recently? Did you train at all during the last two days?"

Diego just closed his mouth again.

"That's what I thought." Zeff pointed to the other side of the platform.

“Go practice your pan-forma.”

“But we’re still tired from earlier, and--”

“All the better for your training, then. Go on.”

Diego looked like he wanted to argue, but he didn’t. He turned and walked over to where Zeff had pointed, and Yangéra followed.

Hector watched them go. “That was a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“Warriors are not forged through comfort and coddling. I am sure Diego knows that, too, but it seems he needed reminding.”

“Still...”

“Focus on yourself,” said Zeff. “Do as I instructed. Put an object in orbit around you.”

Hector did so.

From there, Zeff kept pressing him further and further, bit by bit, trying to slowly and incrementally get Hector to find the new limit of his ability, but there wasn’t enough time left. The training ended up being cut short when they arrived at Warrenhold.

Hector controlled their descent with nervous and careful discomfort. When they finally touched ground again, he annihilated most of his work and left it in the shape of a short, wide staircase for everyone, pointing them in the direction of Warrenhold’s aboveground entrance.

No one was immediately around to greet them, but it was still the dead of night, so that wasn’t so surprising. Hector focused on what the Scarf was telling him, searching the area in a way that his eyes couldn’t with all this darkness.

Garovel got there before him, though. ‘Your mother and Madame Carthrace are asleep in their respective rooms in the Tower of Night. Mr. Easton is in the Entry Tower, along with four souls I don’t recognize.’

He let the reaper lead the way.

It was a strange feeling, being back here again. Being home again, he supposed.

It was nice. That was what was strange about it.

Repairs to the Entry Tower were coming along, he noticed. The first chamber actually looked fairly nice now, if still littered with dirt and stone dust. No more cracks in the walls or the floor, and the stairs leading downward were no longer slightly bent or uneven.

And of course, there was electricity now, too. Actual, functioning lamps adorned the narrow entry hall, inviting them further in. Back when he had first left for Sair, Warrenhold had still been waiting on the new generator to arrive and lift them out of the candlelit darkness.

It wasn't much longer until they found Jamal Easton and their two guests.

Hector had never met them before, yet he recognized them almost immediately from their dark complexion and the young man's yellow eyes. Without a doubt, that was Asad's son. Which meant the older woman next to him was probably the Lady Najir.

Zeff and Axiolis rushed forward to greet them. "Samira! Midhat! It is wonderful to see you both in good health!"

"1623

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Samira seemed more than a little caught off guard when the Lord Elroy moved in close and hugged her, even lifting her off her feet like a sack of potatoes.

Hector stared, arguably even more shocked by what he was seeing than she was.

"Oi--! Hah--! Y-yes! It is good to see you, too, Lord Zeff!" Her Valgan accent was much thicker than Asad's, and her gold-and-black robes dangled loosely over her whole body, covering everything but her face and hands.

Zeff let her back down, leaving the woman looking somewhat traumatized by the experience, and then went for Midhat, first shaking the young man's hand vigorously, only to pull him and lift him off his feet, too. "Oh, I haven't seen you in ages! You're almost a grown man, already!"

“Yes--I--Lord--thank--!”

Samira’s apparent reaper floated forward. ‘Lord Zeff, what are you doing? I am not sure this behavior is appropriate.’

‘Ah, I apologize,’ said Axiolis. ‘Zeff and I have been through quite a lot, lately. We are genuinely overjoyed to see you.’

The other reaper didn’t argue further.

Zeff let Midhat down. “I wish I could stay and talk more, but I must go and retrieve Asad.”

It was then that Mr. Easton approached Hector from the side and took his attention. His uniform was different than Hector remembered. The suit was even blacker than the man himself was. “Lord Goffe. There was no word of your return. We would have organized a welcome.”

“Ah, yeah. It was kind of sudden. I thought I’d be, uh--ah... well, it doesn’t matter now, I guess.” He took a breath and rethought his next words. “I haven’t actually ‘returned’ yet, though. I have to leave again for, like, a day or two. Then I’ll be back.”

“I see. I thought you might have returned after hearing the news.”

Hector paused at that. “What news?”

“So you haven’t heard. Two of Atreya’s four largest banks have collapsed. More than a million people have declared bankruptcy in the last two weeks alone.”

‘Holy fucking shit-grenades,’ said Garovel privately.

Hector just sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“They’re saying we’re about to see the greatest economic depression in the history of the country,” said Mr. Easton.

“Hoo boy.” Mr. Sheridan walked up behind Hector. “Sounds like a real pickle.” He offered Mr. Easton a handshake. “Good to meetcha. Name’s Robert Sheridan. West Intar Company.”

“Jamal Easton. Head of Security for Lord Goffe.”

“Oh! Head of Security, eh? You sure this kid needs anyone to protect him?! From what I’ve seen, he’s the one doing the protecting!”

"Ah. Well, yes..."

"Only teasing, of course," said Mr. Sheridan. "Important fella, your lord here. Nothin' but respect for him. Saved my life, y'know. Great guy. Just the best. I hope we can--"

"Mr. Sheridan," said Hector. "I'm sure you're tired. Mr. Easton will show you to a room where you can rest."

"1624

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"Oh," said Mr. Sheridan, "well, you're too kind. I am pretty exhausted, now that you mention it. Not as young as I used to be, unfortunately. If I could trouble you for a meal as well, I would be eternally grateful. Even more than I already am, I mean!"

"Of course," said Hector. "Just give us a minute." He pulled Mr. Easton aside in order to keep his next words just between the two of them. "Keep a close eye on this guy for me while I'm away. Be nice to him, but I don't want him wandering around on his own. I don't know if I trust him, yet."

Mr. Easton just stared at him for a second.

"...What's the matter?" said Hector. Shit. Had he said something weird just now? Or stupid?

The man blinked. "Nothing at all, sir. I'll take care of it."

"...Thanks." That was a relief. Hector was about to break away from him until he suddenly remembered something. "Oh, and here." He pulled out the Shifting Spear of Logante from the back of his waistband. "I want you to take this. Careful with it."

Mr. Easton took it. "...What is it?"

Hector took a couple minutes to explain its basic functionality, going over the voice commands that Garovel had told him about earlier. Hector suspected that there were more commands that he didn't know about yet, but Garovel was busy talking to the two new Najirs at the moment.



By the end of the explanation, Mr. Easton looked a bit overwhelmed.

"...You don't have to actually use it, if you don't want to," said Hector. "I know it's kinda weird, uh... so..."

"No, ah--thank you. I will give it a try."

And again, he was about to let Mr. Easton go, until he remembered another thing. "Oh, and uh, please make sure that Mr. Sheridan knows about Warrenhold's weird, ah... psychological effects on people. I can't remember if I ever told him about that or not, so..."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah--thanks. Again." And finally, he released Mr. Easton.

Hector breathed another sigh. There were so many things to take care of. And now there was some sort of financial crisis to worry about on top of everything else?

He was feeling pretty exhausted himself, now that he was allowing himself to relax a little. And he really would've liked to sit down and have a nice meal, too. He hadn't eaten very frequently in the Undercrust, partly because of the food shortage in Babbadelo and partly because it wasn't particularly to his tastes--especially after the numbing of pain wore off and he felt like he'd eaten a bowl of lava. Even Carver's biosphere had only had vegetables.

The more Hector allowed himself to think about it, the more he began to crave a hearty meal. Or two. Or five.

Maybe it was better to just not think about it, then.

He observed the Najirs again. Asad had sent them here in order to open the door to the Undercrust for them, which was a bit unnecessary now of course, but as Hector recalled, Asad had also ordered Jada to go with them.

And yet she had ended up staying with Asad and everyone else, instead.

Hector wondered why. He also remembered Garovel mentioning something strange with them as well. Some sort of family difficulties, perhaps.

He empathized."

Hector wondered if he should even bother greeting his own mother before setting out again.

Probably not, he decided. Garovel had said she was sleeping, anyway. No point in disturbing her. Oh, but he should've asked Mr. Easton how she was doing, at least.

Bah.

He hunted down a phone in order to give Gina a quick update and also ask for one in return, but she hadn't heard from Roman since she'd last spoken to Hector. It was nice to hear her voice again, but he knew he didn't have time to enjoy the conversation--or even to explain fully. It sounded like she had quite a few questions for him--particularly why he was back on the surface without Roman--but Hector ended up just telling her that it was a long story and not to worry about it for now.

She didn't seem pleased with being left hanging like that, but time was a factor here, and it looked like Zeff, Diego, and Manuel were ready to go again.

So they did. The group of four servants and four reapers made their way down to the lowest chamber in the Tower of Night and the heavy, round door to the Undercrust. Their reapers latched onto their bodies, and then one by one, with Hector going last, they jumped into the pitch dark hole.

It was going to be a very long fall.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Five: 'When the world began to shift...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

...171 years ago...

It was in the village of Trintol where they first met. A little place, by any account, not even large enough to make it onto a map. But it did have the sweeping vistas of the Melmoorian countryside going for it. The

rolling green hills in all directions and the view of the aptly named Storm Mountains in the east--together, they offered a view that was quite uncommon.

Shepherding was the trade that kept Trintol afloat, and that was the first job that the six-year-old Parson Miles ever held. He wasn't very good at it. Stefol, the family dog, did a lot of the work for him. His father might have been able to teach him, if he hadn't been drafted into the war.

But Parson was not alone in that regard. It was much the same for all the other children in the village, even Damian, the lord's son.

They met when he saw Damian throwing rocks at Stefol. And Stefol, though he was old and rather small for a Melmoorian Shepherd, did not appreciate that gesture very much. So the dog chased the boy down and bit him on the ass.

Needless to say, that wasn't a very favorable first impression.

Being the lord's son, and a vengeful little shit, Damian tried to get Stefol put down. It was outrageous that a peasant's animal should bite the son of a lord, he said.

But Trintol wasn't much for that sort of thing. Everyone knew that the Lord Lofar, though he was currently absent due to the war, would not have approved of such retribution being taken, especially when the animal in question was an important part of the livelihood for the family it belonged to. Not to mention, everyone in town knew and liked Stefol more than Damian."

"1625 -- CLXXV.

Hector wondered if he should even bother greeting his own mother before setting out again.

Probably not, he decided. Garovel had said she was sleeping, anyway. No point in disturbing her. Oh, but he should've asked Mr. Easton how she was doing, at least.

Bah.

He hunted down a phone in order to give Gina a quick update and also ask for one in return, but she hadn't heard from Roman since she'd

last spoken to Hector. It was nice to hear her voice again, but he knew he didn't have time to enjoy the conversation--or even to explain fully. It sounded like she had quite a few questions for him--particularly why he was back on the surface without Roman--but Hector ended up just telling her that it was a long story and not to worry about it for now.

She didn't seem pleased with being left hanging like that, but time was a factor here, and it looked like Zeff, Diego, and Manuel were ready to go again.

So they did. The group of four servants and four reapers made their way down to the lowest chamber in the Tower of Night and the heavy, round door to the Undercrust. Their reapers latched onto their bodies, and then one by one, with Hector going last, they jumped into the pitch dark hole.

It was going to be a very long fall.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Five: 'When the world began to shift...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

...171 years ago...

It was in the village of Trintol where they first met. A little place, by any account, not even large enough to make it onto a map. But it did have the sweeping vistas of the Melmoorian countryside going for it. The rolling green hills in all directions and the view of the aptly named Storm Mountains in the east--together, they offered a view that was quite uncommon.

Shepherding was the trade that kept Trintol afloat, and that was the first job that the six-year-old Parson Miles ever held. He wasn't very good at it. Stefol, the family dog, did a lot of the work for him. His father might have been able to teach him, if he hadn't been drafted into the war.

But Parson was not alone in that regard. It was much the same for all the other children in the village, even Damian, the lord's son.

They met when he saw Damian throwing rocks at Stefol. And Stefol, though he was old and rather small for a Melmoorian Shepherd, did not appreciate that gesture very much. So the dog chased the boy

down and bit him on the ass.

Needless to say, that wasn't a very favorable first impression.

Being the lord's son, and a vengeful little shit, Damian tried to get Stefol put down. It was outrageous that a peasant's animal should bite the son of a lord, he said.

But Trintol wasn't much for that sort of thing. Everyone knew that the Lord Lofar, though he was currently absent due to the war, would not have approved of such retribution being taken, especially when the animal in question was an important part of the livelihood for the family it belonged to. Not to mention, everyone in town knew and liked Stefol more than Damian."

"1626

After that, Parson made a habit of avoiding Damian whenever he saw him. He was a timid boy, Parson, and Damian was older by almost a year.

Then Parson met another boy who lived in the village, one whom he had seen around a few times but never learned the name of until their mothers forced them to play together.

The boy's mother said his name was Jonah, and he even answered to it when she called for him. Yet, when Parson was alone with him, the boy suddenly started acting otherwise.

"Don't call me that!" he said, hanging from a tree branch like a monkey.

Parson was confused. "Don't call you what?"

"Jonah! My name's not Jonah!"

"Then why did your mother--?"

"Shut up! She's stupid! She doesn't know anything!"

Parson didn't believe him, but he decided to play along. "Alright, so what's your 'real' name, then?"

Jonah hopped down from the tree and landed with showy toughness. "My real name is Parson."

Parson's face scrunched up. "What?! No, it isn't!"

"Yeah, it is!"

"Nuh-uh! You're a liar!"

"No, I'm not! My name's Parson! You have to call me that from now on!"

"No, I don't! Liar!"

"Yeah, you do! That's how names work, idiot!"

That was it. "Oh yeah?! Maybe I'll tell your mom that you said she was stupid!"

"What?!" That seemed to rattle him. "You better not!"

"Or what, huh?!"

"Or--! Or I'll tell everyone your stupid dog bit me, too! Then you'll be sorry!"

So Parson punched him.

Then Jonah punched him back.

It was the first fight Parson ever got into. It really hurt.

When both boys returned with black eyes and ripped clothes, their mothers were indignant. Parson got ten whips with father's old belt. His mother didn't seem to have any trouble carrying out the sentence in the man's absence, nor did she care to listen to his claims that Jonah had it coming.

When he saw Jonah the next day, though, the boy seemed different.

"I'm sorry for what I said before." Jonah's eyes were at his feet.

Parson checked to make sure the coast was clear, wondering if his mother was putting him up to this.

Oh. Yep. There she was in the window, watching them.

Better put on a good show for her, then. "Don't worry about it," said Parson, and he stuck his hand out to shake on it. "I'm sorry, too."

Jonah took the handshake with a big smile.

Huh.

It was only supposed to be for pretend, but as they continued to spend more time together, it became clear that Jonah didn't realize that. The little jerk actually took the words to heart.

Well, that was fine, Parson supposed. He still didn't like Jonah very much, but it was better than another spanking.

And they became friends. More or less.

"My name really isn't Jonah, though."

Parson rolled his eyes. "So what is it, then?"

"It's Peter. You have to call me Peter from now on."

"Ugh. Fine. You're Peter now."

"Yes! Thanks, Parson!"

"Sure."

"1627

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

As the days went by, they spent more and more time together, mainly because 'Peter' followed Parson around at every opportunity.

What an obnoxious brat. Parson wondered if this was what it was like to have a little brother. Peter claimed to be older than him, but when Parson asked the boy's mother directly, surprise, surprise, that turned out to be a lie. Parson had a full year on him.

Parson's next encounter with Damian was at the summer festival. All the boys in the town had gathered to play a game of tag. Some of the girls tried to join in, but the boys chased them off. Parson wouldn't have minded their company, especially not that of Alisa Brandt, but oh well. He hoped he would find an opening later so that he could kick dirt on that stupid pink dress she was wearing. Where did she even get a dress like that, anyway? She couldn't have made it herself. It was way

too nice.

Damian tagged Parson while he was distracted.

Agh. Stupid Alisa and her stupid dress. What was she laughing about, huh? It really bothered him.

He had to tag Damian back. For some reason, no one else would do. It had to be Damian. So Parson chased him down and ignored everyone else.

The other boys took notice fairly quickly, but Parson didn't care. Maybe it was because he wasn't feeling quite so timid, anymore. He'd been in a fight. He had this weird little minion following him around. Parson's confidence had grown. And he absolutely didn't want to lose to Damian, lord's son or not.

Eventually, Parson managed to tackle him. It was rougher than they were supposed to play, but that was how these games went. The boys all knew that. And so did the girls, probably, watching them the way they did.

But Damian didn't seem to take it that way. He socked Parson in the jaw, and then they were rolling in the dirt, kicking and screaming, punching and clawing.

The other boys had to pull them off of one another before the adults showed up.

And that was the strangest moment of all. Everyone understood without any words being spoken that, regardless of what they had just been doing, the grownups couldn't find out. Parson just didn't want to get punished. Were the other boys the same way?

It seemed to be working. They could pretend. He didn't even mind acting like Damian was his best friend.

But just as the adults were turning to leave, one of the girls ratted them out.

"They were fighting!" she said. "We saw them! Didn't we, girls?!"

The other girls all agreed with her--even Alisa, who scrunched her face up and stuck her tongue out at Parson in particular.

Traitorous wenches.



This was why girls couldn't be trusted.

The boys were all punished. Parson's mother whipped his ass so hard that it hurt to sit for the next few days."

"1628

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

However, the next time Parson, Damian, and Peter met, there was much less animosity. While Parson still couldn't exactly say that he liked Damian, there was a degree of camaraderie between them. They had a common enemy in the girls now. And arguably the adults as well.

And so it was that they became a trio, of sorts, and spent their days scheming away, trying to come up with various ways of terrorizing the girls. One time, they gathered as many frogs as they could find and released them like a plague upon the girls' most frequent haunts. No one ever knew who was responsible. Another time, they gathered up crickets. And still another time, they gathered up fleas.

They regretted that one, though, and resolved to start coming up with plans that didn't involve animals.

They relied on Peter for a while, helping him to hone his craft as a liar. First, they tried to trick the girls into thinking that Peter was a prince. It didn't work so well. Then they tried to convince the girls that the well on the south end of the village was haunted.

"By what?" one of the girls asked.

"By the ghost of Mad Man Morris!" said Peter.

"And who is that?"

"He was a lunatic and a murderer! He killed his whole family and laughed while he did it! They say he fell down the well and died, but you can still hear his moans at night!"

The girls didn't believe them, of course. But they convinced them to visit the well at night in order to prove their courage, at which point, Parson had already climbed into the well and was waiting for them. After a few timely moans of "agony," the girls quickly decided to leave.

And the next day, they began to hear rumors of the ghost in the well.

It was all they could do to contain their pride and laughter.

That meager taste of success was all the motivation they needed to push themselves toward ever greater heights. Story after story, prank after prank, the trio began to grow rather infamous as troublemakers.

But by far, their most triumphant venture was when they covered Damian in sheep's blood and told everyone--with the greatest of sincerity and commitment to their roles--that he'd been mauled by a pack of wild coyotes.

They had the whole village in an uproar.

Of course, when everyone realized the truth, the Trio caught hell to a greater degree than they ever had before, but it was worth it, Parson felt. He'd never laughed so hard in his life or had so much fun.

In time, some of the other boys wanted to join their little gang, but it was far too late for new members. The Trio were in agreement that they should keep things exactly the way they were.

The other boys didn't take the rejection well, perhaps because the Trio lobbed curses and mud at them, and for a while thereafter, the Trio went to war with all the other boys in Trintol."

"1629

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

Of course, it was only a pretend war. A game. Not like the real war that was raging in the south and the northeast.

"Think we'll ever see them again?" said Steven one day, while they were lounging around a hole that they had recently dug out for themselves as a hiding spot. He had stopped wanting to be called Peter a month ago, nor did he want to go back to Jonah. And rather than quarrel with him over something that they didn't really care about, Parson and Damian merely went with it. Besides, it made for an extra means of confusing people in the village, which was always a plus. "Our fathers, I mean. Think they'll ever come back?"

"Of course they will," said Damian. "Why wouldn't they?"

Steven scoffed. "Idiot. Don't you know what war is? It's where people die. Lots of people."

"I know that. But they're not gonna die."

"How do you know?"

"He doesn't," said Parson. "He's just being optimalistic."

"Do you even know what that word means?" said Damian.

"Do you?" said Parson.

Damian folded his arms. "You shouldn't use words you don't know the meaning of. It makes you look stupid."

"Shut up. You don't know anything."

"My mother says the war is going great for our side," said Damian. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Hmph," Parson huffed. "As if she would tell you the truth."

"You callin' my mother a liar?!"

"No, I'm callin' YOU a baby!"

And they fought again, but it didn't have the same kind of genuine anger behind it that it used to. They were both content to let it end in a draw. Steven tried to get them to shake hands. They both just slapped him instead for trying to order them around.

Not long after that, tragedy arrived and hit them like a ton of bricks.

Stefol passed away. The Miles family dog had simply grown too old.

The Trio didn't know how to react. This was their first experience with such things.

But they were sad. That much, they knew. Even Damian, who'd been bitten not that long ago. They'd all gotten to know Stefol much better in the recent months, Parson included. The old dog had seemed fuller with life during that time than Parson ever recalled before.

Then, at his mother's recommendation, Parson decided to make a

memorial for Stefol. The other two members of the Trio joined him.

Alas, it was a task which would never see completion.

“Hey, what’s that?” said Steven, pointing toward the horizon.

Parson saw what he meant. Smoke in the distance.

“A fire?” said Damian. He sat atop a tall boulder that they’d been trying unsuccessfully to roll up a hill for the past day or so. They hadn’t been exactly certain what they were going to do with it if they ever managed to actually get it up there, but it had seemed like it would make a good fixture for Stefol’s memorial.

Soon, they caught sight of a rider as well--a lone man on horseback crossing over the hills and coming toward Trintol. He was slumped forward in the saddle, not riding properly at all.”

"1630

When they saw the rider fall from his horse and not get back up, the Trio ran to meet him.

Damian went straight up to the downed man as the horse ran off on its own. He prodded the guy with a stick he often carried around, then put his hand under the man’s nose. “He’s still breathing, I think.”

“Why’s he dressed like that?” said Steven.

“It’s a uniform, stupid,” said Parson. “Soldiers wear ‘em.”

“I’m not stupid! I just ain’t never seen one before!”

“Neither have I, but it’s obvious. You should pay more attention when the grownups talk. They say all sorts of things when they think we can’t hear ‘em.”

“I do pay attention! I just ain’t never--”

“Those are Melmoorian colors,” said Damian. “That means he’s one of ours.”

Parson ran around to the man’s other side. “We should drag him back to the village, then.”

“What if they just think we’re playing another prank?” said Steven.

“How could this be a prank?” said Parson. “We can’t fake a dead body.”

“He’s not dead,” reiterated Damian.

“Just shut up and help me.”

“He looks heavy,” said Steven.

“So what?” said Damian. “You a weakling?”

“No! I’m super strong!”

“Coulda fooled me with those twig arms of yours,” said Parson.

“Shut up! I’m stronger than both of you!”

Damian and Parson both laughed. “Go ahead and prove it, then,” said Damian. “Grab his feet, Torocles.”

“What? I told you, I’m Steven!”

“Idiot,” said Parson. “Torocles was the strongest man who ever lived. Ain’t your mother ever read you that story?”

“What? Yeah, of course she has! Shut up!”

And it took a while, but with group effort, they managed to drag the man all the way back to Trintol.

The adults were all aghast at the sight of the stranger. They quickly shooed the boys away from him and then carried him off to Damian’s house, the largest in the village.

The Trio tried to follow and sneak a look in, but even Damian couldn’t find anything else out. The adults were too wary of them. And when night started to fall, Parson had to go home disappointed.

“Boy,” his mother said, taking that punishing tone that he’d heard so many times before. She raised her hand, and he braced himself, but she didn’t smack him. Instead, she patted him on the head and ran her fingers through his hair. “You did a good thing today. I’m proud of you.”

What a weird feeling, that was.

He went to bed happy.

He awoke to his mother shaking him. "Parson! Get up, Parson!"

It was still the middle of the night. "Ma? What's going--?"

She all but threw him out of his bed. "Get up! We have to go!"

He didn't dare protest. He followed her blindly and confusedly. What were all these noises from outside? Shouting and rushed footsteps? Horses, too?

And a scream. A terrible scream. Enough to make his blood run cold. He would've frozen in place at the mere sound of it if his mother hadn't been dragging him by the arm."

"1631

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

They abandoned their home and ran. As his mother pulled him into the dark and open wilderness, Parson looked back at the dwindling Trintol behind.

It was burning.

He could hear more screams like the one earlier, equally as horrible or more.

And he saw horsemen. Not just in the village but around it, too. One of them was riding toward them.

"Mother!" he tried to whisper. But there was too much chaos. Too much noise. She didn't seem to hear him. Or she was simply too focused on running.

He didn't need to be dragged, anymore. His legs were carrying him in stride with her now. He was almost dragging her, even.

But when he looked back, the horseman was still coming. It was dark, but his mother definitely noticed the rider now. She grabbed Parson and dove into a line of underbrush and rocks.

Without any shoes on, Parson's feet were getting cut up and bleeding, but he hardly even noticed. He could still hear the horse trotting, closer than ever now. His mother stopped and held him in place with her, huddled low behind a large stone. He could barely make out the contours of her face despite being close enough to feel her breath, to hear her heart beat, even.

His own heart was pounding harder than it ever had, too. He wanted to go back to running, but she was holding him too tightly in her arms and kissing his forehead.

The horse's clopping steps stopped, suddenly.

And they waited.

"Out with you, woman!" came a man's shout. "I know you are here! I saw you flying the town!"

Parson could feel her trembling.

"Make this easier for yourself and come out! I will not hurt you!"

His mother forced him to look up at her.

"Stay," she said beneath her breath. "Stay, boy."

He felt entirely unable to control himself, but he managed to nod, somehow.

Then she stood up.

He tried to hold onto her, to keep her where she was, but she was stronger than him.

And she left him there.

He didn't move. She had told him to stay. That was all he could think about. He had to listen to her.

He tried to listen for what was happening, but he could only vaguely make out a voice every now and then. A horse neighing. A bush rustling. A bird cawing. The wind howling.

He waited. He waited a very long time. He grew cold, but for the longest time, it didn't bother him. He was too occupied with listening, with waiting. When was she going to come back? What was taking so long? What was happening?

He wanted to know. And he also didn't. Just thinking about the answers to those questions made him feel far colder than he already was.

At length, however, dawn broke, and he began to feel the wilderness around him. The cold, the wind, the dirt, and the hunger."  
"1632 -- CLXXVI.

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

He couldn't stay here forever, he was beginning to think. He would have to move, eventually.

But not yet. He could wait for her. Just a little longer.

Then he finally heard something different. The horse. Rustling movement. Trotting off.

The rider was leaving, Parson realized.

He waited. He listened. He hoped. If the horseman was gone, perhaps his mother would return to him now.

And he kept waiting.

Had the horseman carried her off with him? Was she never going to return?

Eventually, Parson could abide the wait no longer. He had to know. He stood on unsteady legs and stepped out from his hiding place. He searched the area for the rider's camp from the previous night.

When he found it, he also found his mother.

She was on the ground, covered in blood. Her clothes were torn, and her throat had been cut.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Six: 'Descend, and have care...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)



The first part of the fall was a bit rough. Hector hadn't quite nailed the correct trajectory when he'd jumped in, so he soon ended up hitting the wall and bouncing off of it. He ping-ponged back and forth for a while before finally managing to correct his angle of descent with iron. He armored up during that time as well, finding it better to scrape against the wall with metal than with bare flesh.

Once that was done, though, the journey became quite peaceful. And long. It was a strange feeling, to be sure. As he got accustomed to the sensation and relaxed a bit more, his senses began to blend together, which eventually became disorienting as well. At times, he wasn't even sure if he was falling. It almost felt as if he were simply suspended in midair, instead.

'That's not too surprising,' said Garovel privately after Hector had told him about it. 'The human body is in no way adapted to falling such a great distance. That, and I've heard gravity can get pretty screwy in these holes, too. I'm sure your brain doesn't appreciate that very much, either.'

It was true that he felt a little woozy at times. He tried to maintain his focus, though. A question. He had to think of a question. 'Ah... oh, uh. By the way, um... you mentioned it before, didn't you?'

'...What? Mentioned what before?'

'Uh... ah...'

'You okay there, buddy?'

'Y-yeah, I think so. Sorry.'

'Want me to knock you out and just wake you up when we get there?'

'N-no, that's okay. This is... this is good training. I think.'

'Hmm. If you say so.'

'But you DID mention something before...'

Garovel laughed. 'Yes, Hector. I have mentioned lots of things before.'

'No. I mean. But. Yeah.'

Garovel laughed harder. 'This is more fun than I expected. I like disoriented Hector.'

‘Ah... er...’ Dammit, there was something. He was trying to remember. ‘You mentioned something about these giant holes, didn’t you?’

‘Mm, sure?’

‘Agh...’

‘C’mon, buddy, you can do it.’”

"1632 -- CLXXVI.

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

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'Agh...'

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"1633

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

'Something, uh...' Hector remembered. 'Names! They have names!'

'Oh, right, yeah. What about them?'

Shit, what about them? 'What, uh...? Ugh...'

'Oh, are you trying to ask what the name of this hole is?'

'Yeah! That's it!'

'Well, I don't actually know, sadly. I'd never even heard of Warrenhold before Voreese told us about it, and I definitely didn't know that it had a path to the Undercrust in it, much less the path's name.'

'Oh.'

'We can ask Voreese next time we see her. Or we could just name it ourselves. We could call it the Warrenhole. Heh.'

'Wow...'

'A thousand troa says that that's what Voreese calls it.'

'You don't have any money to bet with, Garovel.'

'I'll just use yours.'

'Why would I take a bet against my own money?'

'Look, stop being logical. I thought you were disoriented.'

'I think it's passed now.'

'Well, shit.'

'Speaking of owing me stuff, though, I haven't forgotten our last wager.'

'Hey, I wouldn't have owed you anything. Voreese is DEFINITELY going to call it Warrenhole.'

'Garovel.'

'What?'

'You're trying to change the subject.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Bullshit. We had a wager, and you lost.'

'That's funny. I remember you disqualifying yourself by cheating.'

'No way. I won fair and square, and we both know it. Now you have to tell me something significant about your past.'

'Eh, I dunno. I mean, given the circumstances and my overall generosity as a person, I think we can probably just consider it a draw.'

Hector couldn't help laughing. 'You're so full of shit.'

'Tell you what. I'll tell you something significant about my past, if you do what you promised, too.'

'It WASN'T a draw, Garovel.'

'It kinda was, though.'

Hector wasn't going to budge on this. 'You tried to redefine the definition of your second guess after the fact. That doesn't count as a draw at all.'

'That's YOUR interpretation. My interpretation was you tried to cheat by pretending my second guess was wrong.'

'You're unbelievable.'

‘You’re just scared of having to pay Lynn a compliment.’

‘Of course I--agh! Whatever.’

‘Just one compliment! It’d be easy! Here, I’ll even help you prepare. You can tell her her eye patch looks nice.’

‘What the fuck kinda compliment is that?’

‘The easy kind. And I’m saying that’s okay.’

‘It sounds sarcastic.’

‘Well, don’t say it in a sarcastic tone, then.’

‘I’m not gonna say it at all! I won the wager, jackass!’

‘Just because you keep saying that doesn’t make it true.’

‘I hate you.’

‘I hate you, too, buddy.’

Hector gave a mental sigh. ‘Fine. If you really don’t wanna tell me about yourself that badly, then I’m not gonna force it out of you.’”

"1634

‘Oh, you mean like you’ve BEEN doing? I’ve been feeling a lot of hostility, y’know.’

‘My apologies,’ said Hector dryly. ‘I don’t know what came over me. I’m sure it would’ve been a boring story, anyway.’

‘Oh shit. Really? You’re doing this, now?’

‘Doing what? It’s just--now that I’m thinking about it, I’m not even sure why I decided to bet for it in the first place. I mean, if you had anything interesting to say about your past, you probably would’ve told it to me a long time ago.’

‘This isn’t gonna work, Hector.’

‘What isn’t?’

‘First of all, I know that YOU know that I have tons of interesting stories left to tell. I’m three thousand years old. You can’t possibly believe I’m out of material, already.’

‘Whatever you say, Garovel.’

The reaper snorted a laugh. ‘You sack of a crap! Stop trying to piss me off!’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Fuckin’ liar.’

‘It’s alright, Garovel. You don’t need to be ashamed of your boring history. I understand.’

‘Wow.’

Hector laughed but decided to change tactics. With how stubborn the reaper was being, he was getting the impression that they were wading into sensitive territory here. ‘Do you really not want to tell me, though? I mean, you know, it actually IS okay, if you don’t want to. Seriously.’

The reaper made no response.

‘...Garovel?’

‘Um. Well. It’s not that I don’t want to tell you anything at all about my past. Because--and I’m being serious here--there’s plenty to tell. Obviously, I could pick a story from almost any point in my life, and you’d probably be fine with it. But... I’ve been thinking for a while now that there is... one story in particular that I’d like to tell you, even though it’s not one I like to tell.’

‘...So that’s why you’ve seemed so reluctant about this.’

‘I planned on telling it to you, sooner or later. It’s just easier to put these sorts of things off.’

‘Why don’t you like telling it?’

‘There are a few reasons. It’s quite personal, for one. And for another, it could be bad if other people found out about it. There’s sensitive information in it. But mostly... I think... the main reason I don’t like telling it is simply because... it doesn’t paint me in a very flattering light.’

‘Oh...’

‘While it did happen a very, VERY long time ago, I won’t blame you if you think less of me after I tell it to you.’

Suddenly, Hector wasn’t so sure he wanted to hear it anymore. ‘Uh... shit, Garovel. It’s really that bad?’

‘I would say yes. But then again, I don’t really know. I’m not sure what you’ll think.’

‘O-okay. Um.’ He tried to prepare himself. ‘I’ll try to keep an open mind, then.’”

"1635

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

‘Alright, then. Here goes.’ Garovel paused, perhaps to gather his thoughts. ‘It’s a story from when I was still alive. It took place on the continent now known as Exoltha.’

‘Ah--sorry to interrupt so soon into it, but, uh... I seem to recall you telling me that you weren’t sure what your homeland was called nowadays.’

‘Hmm, did I?’

‘Yeah. It was back when you first told me about the Lyzakks. Your native people, you said. And then later, you told Ibai that you grew up on Exoltha. Or the Dáinnbolg, is what I think you called it. Either way, I’m pretty sure everyone knows about the dead continent nowadays.’

‘How strange,’ said Garovel.

‘Right? It’s almost like you were lying or something.’

‘You’re probably just remembering wrong.’

‘Don’t think I am.’

‘Oh yeah? What makes you so confident, huh? Your memory’s not that good.’



‘Maybe not like yours, but I can remember stuff. Sometimes.’

‘Yeah, when it’s inconvenient for me, apparently.’

‘Why did you lie?’

‘Well, technically, I didn’t.’

‘Technically, you said you didn’t know something that you actually did know. That’s a lie, Garovel.’

‘No, see, while Chergoa and I did grow up on Exoltha, the small region of it where we lived was eventually broken off from the rest of the continent and therefore isn’t a part of it anymore. It became a group of islands and drifted rather far away.’

‘Drifted? Islands don’t float, do they? I mean, they’re made of rock.’

‘Islands DO drift, though admittedly not as quickly as these did. And you’re right, islands normally do not float, but these ones do, because they’re man-made. And I genuinely do not know what they’re called nowadays, either.’

‘Hmm.’

‘So you see, I didn’t actually lie.’

‘...Right. You just left a ton of stuff out.’

‘Well, it wasn’t especially important at the time and would’ve needlessly complicated the conversation, okay? And as you already know, I don’t particularly like talking about this part of my past very much. Now will you stop breaking my balls and let me continue on with my story?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Alright. So I was still alive and in the flesh. Living on Exoltha. And no, before you ask another pedantic question, we didn’t actually call it Exoltha in those days.’

‘I wasn’t gonna ask that.’

‘Mm. Regardless, for ease of storytelling, I’m just gonna keep referring to it as Exoltha, okay? Okay. Anyway, it began, like many stories, with war--’

'I'd still like to know more about those man-made islands, by the way.'

'Stop interrupting, dammit.'

'Sorry. It's just, I mean, this was like three thousand years ago, right? So who made them? A servant?'

'Yes. Now do you wanna hear this story or not?'

'Of course I do.'

'Then shut up for a minute.'

'...Fine.' If Hector was being completely honest, though, a part of him would've liked to keep stalling. He might've kept trying, if the reaper hadn't started to sound sincerely annoyed."

"1636

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

Garovel took a moment before continuing. 'So there was a war. But that wasn't such a rare thing. My people were a brutal sort. We fought all the time, often amongst ourselves. It's hard to truly articulate how different life was, compared to civilization as you know it today, but that was one of the biggest things. Bloodshed was as common a thing to us as eating or sleeping.'

Hector just listened.

'Part of the reason for that may have been because reapers were a well-known part of our culture, and there was a prevailing idea among the Lyzakks that death wasn't really the end. It was easier--mentally, that is--to risk our lives in deadly combat, because we knew that we could live on after our mortal end. At the time, we believed it was a measure of our courage and dutifulness in life. If we lived a "worthy" life in other words, then we would get to come back as a reaper and watch over our brethren.

'And I was certainly no exception. I believed that wholeheartedly. It wasn't until much, much later, after I'd already become a reaper myself, that I began to realize it was simply a hereditary, luck-of-the-draw type thing. That was quite the horrific revelation, let me tell you. Thinking that you'd lived a good and worthy life and that all of your

fellow reapers were the same--that was a comforting belief. Until it was gone, that is. I'd never felt so deluded and ashamed of myself as I did then.

'But I'm getting ahead of myself, I suppose. That's not even part of this story, really. This is just about what I did during the war.'

Hector thought of a question and decided to interrupt. 'Did this war have a name?'

'Not one that many have heard of, I should think. But in Mohssian, it would've translated to "the Thousand Books War."'

'It was a war over books?' said Hector.

'More or less. See, my people weren't very, uh, shall we say, "literarily inclined." We had a habit of going around and destroying places where any sort of writing was being kept.'

'Why?'

'It may be hard to believe by today's standards, but writing was a very controversial development in our culture. The idea was that writing things down made you "careless of mind," because if you wrote something down, then you wouldn't have to remember it. And that was considered a trick of sorcerers and saboteurs in an effort to weaken our culture and our people.'

'We did, however, write things down in stone. Even long before I was born, that was a revered tradition. Which, I freely admit, was maybe a bit hypocritical of us, but the difference, at least in our minds, was that because stone made the task so much more difficult, it couldn't be "abused" for trivial matters. You would only bother with the arduous task of writing something in stone if it was something that you really, REALLY wanted to write down.'

'Huh...'

"1637

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

'But anyway,' said Garovel, 'it wasn't what you might call a "good war." Or--okay, maybe that sounds like an oxymoron and simply an

impossibility--and maybe it is. War is obviously terrible. But what I mean is, it wasn't a war that we had a good reason for fighting. We were the aggressors, and we were trying to destroy all these libraries before they could "sow disorder" or "stir dark sentiments" among our people. That was basically the extent of our justification for it. And even though I believed it at the time and for many years thereafter, when I look back on it now... well. I'm ashamed of myself, to say the least.'

Hector wasn't sure what to say.

'...But perhaps that doesn't really give you a complete pictures of things,' said Garovel. 'I'll put it more bluntly. Over the course of the war, I burned down seven different libraries and slaughtered dozens of innocent people in the process.'

Now Hector really didn't know what to say.

'Of course, they didn't seem so innocent to me at the time, nor was I acting alone, but that doesn't absolve me of my crimes, I think.'

'It... it was three thousand years ago, Garovel.'

'That doesn't absolve me, either, Hector.'

'I... I don't... uh...'

'It's okay. You don't have to say anything. And you don't have to overlook it, either. It's a part of my past, and even though that's not who I am anymore, I wanted you to know about it.'

He felt like he had to say something, but he didn't know what. Garovel had really killed people? Innocents?

He was having a hard time with that. He didn't want to believe it. But then again, life was different three thousand years ago. And it was a different culture. And... and...

'...Why did you tell me that?' said Hector.

The reaper took his time answering. 'I... don't want to hide the truth from you. Even when it's terrible.'

'But that's...' Hector sighed in his own mind. A part of him--a rather strong part of him--wished that Garovel hadn't told him. He didn't want to think of Garovel as having done something like that. 'Did you... did

you really kill innocent people? Like, non-combatants who couldn't fight back?'

'...Yes.'

Somehow, that one word hurt Hector more than he thought it would. It was so difficult to understand, to consolidate with everything he had already known about Garovel. This was someone who had resurrected him for the expressed purpose of rescuing innocent people, and yet...? Now Garovel was saying...?

Agh.

It was one thing for Garovel to have fought and killed people in a war. Other warriors. That was what Hector had been thinking the reaper was going to say. Even that thought had made him uncomfortable, but now, he felt like he would've understood that a lot better, at least. When you were in a war, you were fighting for your own survival as much as you were to achieve victory for your side. It wasn't pleasant to think about, maybe, but it was understandable.

Killing non-combatants was beyond that, though, Hector felt. That was significantly more awful."

"1638

There arrived a very long silence as Hector deliberated over what to say. He knew that he wanted to say something, and perhaps Garovel could somehow tell, because the reaper was giving him plenty of time to think.

Would more context help, Hector wondered? He wasn't so sure that it would. And it wasn't like Garovel hadn't provided any, already. A culture where bloodshed was common as eating and sleeping, the reaper had said.

Hector was grasping. 'Was it... like, ah... w-were you following orders? Or I mean, was it, uh, peer pressure or something?'

'...I suppose I could make those arguments,' said Garovel very calmly and slowly. 'And there would even be truth in them. Certainly, if I had refused to follow orders, I would have been flogged and possibly executed. And there was definitely an element of peer pressure to it as

well. Every culture has peer pressure, to some extent, else it wouldn't really function as a culture.

'But if I am being entirely honest with both myself and with you, then, no. I believed quite strongly in what I was doing. I truly thought that those innocent people were simply not innocent. I thought they were evil and traitorous.'

Hector frowned inside his helmet. 'I don't suppose... there's any chance they actually were evil and traitorous, is there?'

The reaper gave a weak laugh. 'You're really trying to give me the benefit of the doubt, aren't you?'

'I just... I don't know.'

'Well. Contrary to what I may have said in the past, I am not omniscient. So maybe they were traitorous in some capacity. Maybe they were even evil, by some strange definition. But the fact of the matter was that I didn't have any good justification for believing so. And yet I did.'

Hector didn't have anything to say.

Garovel wasn't done, though. 'The killings were horrible enough, obviously, but I also don't want to understate the seriousness of burning down those libraries. These days, the whole world is a library, thanks to technology, so the loss of one is not nearly as much of a tragedy. In those days, though? I'm certain I helped destroy knowledge that could not have been found anywhere else. Probably even knowledge that remains lost even to this day. There's no way to tell. And when I imagine the potential rippling effect of that lost knowledge throughout history... it makes me wonder how many other innocent people might have been saved.'

'That's... that's unknowable, Garovel. You shouldn't think like that.'

It was the reaper's turn not to say anything.

And there was more silence. Hector wanted to say something, but this was all a lot to take in, and he didn't want to say something he didn't mean. He especially didn't want to say something that he knew was wrong, because even if it sounded good, it probably wouldn't help.

Garovel had just bent over backwards to tell him the truth. Hector didn't want to betray that effort by lying to him."

At length, however, Hector thought of something he wanted to ask. '...When did you change? And how?'

'My views didn't change until about a hundred years after I became a reaper,' said Garovel. 'That was when I decided to start traveling. As for "how"... well. There wasn't any singular cause, I'd say. It was more a cumulative effect. I was slow to change my mind--as you might expect from someone who'd lived that way his entire life.'

'...Is that why you decided to start taking servants? To make up for... all of that?'

The reaper paused again. 'Yes. That would be fair to say.'

'I... see.'

'It's also why I would like to turn Warrenhold into a place of safeguarding knowledge, if possible. Maybe it's too little, too late, but I'd still like to try, nonetheless.'

Hector didn't know what to say.

Garovel left it at that for a while, and Hector just allowed his thoughts to swirl in his mind, not really holding onto or trying to unpack any of them. He felt like he understood Garovel much better now, and yet he didn't know what to make of that understanding.

He didn't feel like he disliked Garovel any more, though. And that was strange. Because he should have, shouldn't he? Was his friendship with Garovel making him completely overlook this?

That didn't seem right...

But maybe there was more to it than just that. It was so long ago, and Garovel obviously regretted it. And Hector didn't know any of the people whom Garovel had killed, so...

Ugh.

Hector felt intensely uncomfortable with himself. He didn't think any less of Garovel. But he might've thought less of himself.

Maybe he was just thinking that way because it was familiar, though. Easier.

Agh. So confusing. He couldn't tell if he was being honest with himself about any of this. He only knew that it felt very strange and that he didn't like it.

In time, Garovel spoke up again. 'I can sense the bottom. You should try to protect your Scarf, if you can. Don't want to get blood all over it.'

Hector removed it and boxed it in iron.

Then he blacked out.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Seven: 'Attend to thee...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

When he awoke, Hector was nude. He was not surprised, though. While he hadn't felt the impact from the fall, it must have surely been enough to obliterate his whole body and force Garovel to regrow him from scratch. Mere iron armor certainly hadn't protected him from that shit.

The clothes he'd been wearing were soaked in blood and flesh and even splintered bits of bone, but Zeff was there to jetwash and steam-press them for him.

They weren't in very good shape afterward, though. The Lord Elroy wasn't the most delicate launderer. Maybe they weren't supposed to be cleaned with water. And of course, the multiple fights with worms and the impact from the fall just now probably hadn't done them any favors, either. They were hardly even recognizable compared to when he'd first gotten them, which was only a week or so ago, back in Babbadelo."

"1639 -- CLXXVII.

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"1640

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

Hector put the rags on anyway. Evangelina Stroud probably wouldn't be very pleased if she saw what had become of her gifts, but oh well. At least they covered his balls. And his cooling-variant armor would cover the rest of him.

The first chamber that they found themselves in was an expectedly

dark one. They still had their lamplights from before, but Hector discovered that his had broken during the fall. So had Manuel's, apparently, though Diego's and Zeff's lights were both fine.

Ah. They'd probably strengthened theirs with their souls, Hector figured. He wished he would've thought to at least try that with his own lamp, even if his soul wasn't yet strong enough to have actually protected it. Would've made for a good test, at least.

Oh well. He didn't even need it anymore, now that he had the Scarf. When he concentrated, he could sense the exact shape of the pitch black room they were in. It was bulbous, though also a bit lumpy and uneven in places. There were only two ways out. One was a large corridor to Hector's right, and the other was the hole above everyone's head--the Warrenhole, as it were.

He still wasn't sure how he felt about that name.

The group made their way to the right and continued onward. They tried to maintain a brisk pace, but Hector could see the hesitation in everyone's movements, too. The footing here was rocky, and their last adventure in the Undercrust was likely still fresh enough in everyone's mind to cause them due concern for what they might encounter next.

As they moved, the corridor began to widen and grow taller, until it was nearly as spacious as a basketball stadium. Eventually, however, they came upon an equally enormous blockage. Truck-sized boulders filled the entirety of the passageway, and it was so dense and deep that Hector couldn't sense any air flowing through it.

"Well, this is quite the setback," said Diego, rapping his knuckles against one of the largest rocks. "How long's it gonna take to get through here, do you think?"

Hector could already see Zeff stretching his arms.

'It won't do to be reckless here,' said Garovel aloud. 'Cave-ins like this are a frequent occurrence in the Undercrust for a reason. If we're not careful, we could end up causing another one, which would only serve to prolong things even more.'

"I am aware," said the Lord Elroy. He looked over at Hector, then at Diego and Manuel. "Hector and I will take care of this. You two give us some space to work."

Diego's brow rose. "I can help."

“Get some rest,” Zeff said. “You look like you could use it.”

“I look like I could use it?” said Diego. “You haven’t looked in a mirror lately, have you?”

“I feel fine,” said Zeff, firmer now. “Rest. Or meditate, if you prefer. But keep your distance.”

Deigo shrugged. “Alright, whatever you say. Let’s go, Mannie.”

“Please do not call me that,” said Manuel.

And they and their reapers ventured off.”

"1641

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

Zeff eyed Axiolis and Garovel as well. “You two should probably keep your distance as well.”

‘Is what you’re going to do really that dangerous?’ said Garovel.

“Only if it goes awry,” said Zeff, eyeing Hector again.

‘Try to be careful, then,’ said Axiolis, and he moved to leave.

Garovel, however, did not. He remained exactly where he was by Hector’s side.

Zeff stared at the reaper, waiting.

Hector could feel the silence growing uncomfortable. ‘Garovel...’

Rather than responding to him in private, the reaper just came right out and said it to Zeff’s face. ‘I’d rather not leave my servant alone with you.’

Zeff met the reaper’s gaze. “Why not?”

‘Because you haven’t been treating him very well, lately, and it annoys me.’

Zeff made no response.

Before the tense silence had an opportunity to return, Hector decided to intervene. "Garovel, please. It's fine. Just--I'm sure there're a lot of things you want to talk to Axiolis about, aren't there?"

Garovel's looked at Hector, and his skeletal face twisted somewhat. He didn't say anything, though.

'Garovel,' Hector tried again, more firmly this time. 'I'll be fine.'

After another silent moment, the reaper seemed to relent and said nothing more as he floated off to join Axiolis.

"I see that I have not endeared myself to your reaper," said Zeff after they were alone.

"He's just... protective of me, I guess."

"Indeed. And that is an admirable quality. But you should be careful not to allow his protectiveness to become an obstacle to your progress. That would be bad for both of you."

"I... don't think I need to worry about that. Garovel likes to get me involved in crazy shit pretty frequently, too."

"All the more reason to keep up with training, then."

"Oh, believe me, I know."

Zeff turned toward the wall of rocks and cracked his knuckles. "Let us stop dawdling, then. How is your precision crafting coming along?"

An odd and rather vague question, Hector felt. "Uh... okay, I guess? What do you mean, exactly?"

"Can you materialize drills yet?"

"Ah--I don't know. I haven't really tried."

"They require careful and continual application of very powerful velocity states. I will demonstrate, and then you--"

Sensing that this could become a rather long conversation, Hector felt he should finally tell Zeff what he had been meaning to. "Ah--uh, b-before we get into that, there's something I should tell you."

Zeff dropped his hands to his sides. "Go on, then."

He took a moment to consider how to phrase his next words. "...I have reason to believe that Asad and the others are currently being held prisoner by someone."

Zeff's face flashed with anger. "What?! How would you know that?!"

"I... spoke to Rasalased again after... uh... well, just before we got back to the surface. And he said that Asad was being held prisoner. By a "lost sheep," whatever that means. That was all he told me, though.""  
"1642

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

Zeff shut his eyes, scratched his brow, and breathed slowly and deeply. "Rasalased. I see. Frankly, I wasn't certain I believed that you had ever spoken to him in the first place, but now, I suppose I do." The man sighed with irritation. Then he opened his eyes again and glowered. "Why are you only telling me this now? Why not immediately after we returned to the surface?"

Hector didn't much care for the look the man was giving him. It reminded him of their staring contest on the train. "I didn't want you to worry any more than you already were. It wouldn't have helped anything."

"I would have gotten us to your Warrenhold much more quickly than you did. That would have helped quite a bit."

"Not if someone snapped a picture of your ice flying through the sky."

Zeff scoffed. "Unlikely. It was dark."

"It wasn't worth the risk. The whole point of going to Warrenhold is so that you guys can lay low there. We can't jeopardize that just to save a few extra minutes."

"Hmph. That was not your decision to make."

"Yes, it was. I'm not going to let what happened at Dunehall happen at Warrenhold, too."

Zeff glared at him but made no response.

"The reason I'm telling you now is because I thought if you have a faster way of getting us through this blockage, then you should just do it. Don't waste time training me. Even though I--uh... ah, even though I appreciate the thought and... er..."

Zeff raised an eyebrow in the middle of his scowl, but he still wasn't saying anything.

Hector had lost his momentum, though. Maybe it was a mistake to try to express his gratitude at that particular moment.

Shit.

Zeff's displeasure seemed to diminish, however. "Fine. No training, then. Observe closely and try to pick up what you can. And provide structural support."

Hector wasn't sure what he meant. "Structural support?"

Zeff turned toward the blockage again. "Your iron is much more suitable to construction in this environment. Even if I soul-strengthen my ice, it will eventually melt after we leave the area."

Ah. Hector felt like he understood, but Zeff didn't wait for him to say so.

The Lord Elroy raised both hands in front of him and then pressed them against the rock. Jets of water materialized all around the man. They were small but so numerous that Hector almost mistook them for a single archway. They disappeared into the rock, leaving a visible cut behind, and after a moment, Zeff stepped back from the rock so that ice could push out a huge chunk of freshly carved stone.

And just like that, there was a tunnel, though it had not reached all the way through the other side. With the Scarf of Amordiin, Hector quickly came to understand its current, dead-ended shape.

"Support," reiterated Zeff as he proceeded in to the tunnel.

Hector knew exactly what he was referring to. He could sense the instability in the rocks. There were cracks everywhere among the gigantic boulders and tiny pebbles. The slightest shift could collapse this tunnel in an instant."

"1643

He materialized an iron lining for it, and then added extra layers to it, as well as support beams. Maybe he overdid it a little bit, as the tunnel became much more narrow, with hardly even enough space for two people to walk side by side, but it was better to overdo it than to underdo it, Hector figured. The most important thing was to make sure all the weight over their heads stayed exactly where it was.

Zeff kept digging with his water drills just as he had been, though the narrowed tunnel proved a bit challenging in extricating each new chunk of rock from the blockage. He ultimately decided to just dice up the removed stone so that it could be shoved back through passageway without much concern.

It was taking quite a bit longer than either of them had expected, and even after a solid thirty minutes of working, they were still not through to the other side.

“...How far does this blockage go?” said Hector, beginning to wonder if they were even close to the end yet, because he still couldn’t sense any air flowing all the way through it yet.

“No telling,” said Zeff, though he sounded about as exasperated as Hector felt. “This is the Undercrust. This cave-in could be a mile long, for all we know.”

“Agh...”

“I’m going to try going even faster. Match my pace.”

“...Okay.”

Soon enough, they found a good rhythm. Hector paid close attention to all of Zeff’s movements, making sure to leave space for the man to work for as long as he needed it before filling that space in with iron and pushing onward. He also took over extracting the diced rock from the tunnel so that Zeff could focus entirely on the cutting. Working in unison, they were able to nearly double their tunneling speed.

Yet, even after another half-hour, Hector still could not sense the other side.

At length, Axiolis and Garovel came to check on them. Before the reapers got too close, they asked if it was safe, and Zeff told them it was.



Hector and Zeff didn't slacken their pace at all.

'I suppose this is one more reason why Warrenhold isn't more well-known,' said Garovel privately.

'What do you mean?' said Hector.

'I've mentioned this before, but holes to the Undercrust are precious rare and have historically been highly sought after. Even with Warrenhold's bad reputation, I thought it was strange that it would have been abandoned. But this blockage here must have been helping to keep it a secret all these years.'

Hector was reminded of something he'd been wondering about for a while now. 'Ah... do you know where these holes came from?'

'No, I do not,' the reaper said flatly.

Hector expected some sort of quip or annoyed sass about not knowing something. But it didn't arrive. So Hector decided to push a little.

'...Really? You don't even have any theories?'

"1644

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

'Oh, there are loads of theories regarding their origins,' said Garovel. 'Personally, I'm a believer of the Ancient Drillers Theory.'

'Is that what it sounds like?'

'That people drilled the holes in ancient times? Yeah, pretty much. It's not much of a theory, admittedly, but it does seem the most plausible explanation to me--certainly more so than the Megavolcanoes Theory.'

'Megavolcanoes?'

'Basically, it's the theory that the holes are perfectly natural and simply the result of volcanic activity from long before humankind evolved on the planet.'

‘Hmm.’

‘The reason that makes no sense, by the way, is because of the way the holes are shaped. They’re very even and go straight down. If they were truly natural formations, then they would have a much more irregular path.’

Hector had to agree. ‘Yeah. They’ve gotta be manmade. And couldn’t they have just been made by destruction users?’

‘Yeah. Who those destruction users were, however, remains a mystery. I’ve heard it said that the holes predate reapers, which would also mean that they predate destruction users, but I don’t know if I believe that.’

A beat passed as Hector thought about that. ‘You only “don’t know” if you believe it? I’d have thought you would tell me it was total horseshit or something.’

‘Well, according to the data, it’s a bit foggy. The holes are supposedly as old as five thousand years, give or take a few centuries. But the very first reapers supposedly began to appear around that same time, too. So it’s hard to tell either way.’

‘Seems like a hell of a coincidence.’

‘No kidding.’

‘I can’t even imagine what that must have been like. Being the first reaper, I mean.’

‘Confounding beyond belief, I’m sure. When I became a reaper, I’d at least had a conception that it could happen and what it might be like. But being one of the first ones? Waking up after your death and then having to figure all this shit out with no guidance to speak of? I don’t think I would have handled that very well.’

‘Do you know who the oldest reaper was?’

‘No. The oldest one I’ve ever known was a guy by the name of Heloxos. I met him right after I became a reaper, and he was already over a thousand years old at that point.’

‘Wow. Is he still around?’

‘No. He was killed by his own servant about a hundred years later.’

‘Why?’

‘Never found out. I knew they hadn’t been getting along, but learning the exact reason was impossible once the deed was done.’

That made sense, Hector supposed.

‘The oldest still-living reaper I’ve ever met is actually Axiolis here.’

Hector blinked and glanced over at Axiolis, who was hovering over Zeff’s shoulder. ‘Seriously?’

‘He said he’s over four thousand years old, and I’m inclined to believe him.’

‘Holy shit...’

‘Yeah. I don’t encounter many reapers older than myself anymore.’”  
"1645

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Another question occurred to Hector. ‘By the way, uh... why do you--I

mean, er, why do you guys all have such weird names?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘It’s just, uh. Y’know. Garovel isn’t exactly a normal name...’

‘When I was alive, it was.’

‘Yeah, but you just said that most reapers aren’t as old as you,’ said Hector. ‘But every reaper I’ve met so far has a weird name like yours.’

‘Ah. You’re wondering why you haven’t encountered a reaper with the name “Jeff” or “Bill” yet?’

‘More or less, yeah.’

‘A few of those exist. The main issue, though, is that it’s just very rare to meet a reaper who was born less than five hundred years ago.’

‘What about Bohwanox? Wasn’t he pretty young? Compared to you, at least?’

‘Yeah. He was a curious one. Having a name like that but not the age to go with it is definitely odd. But I suspect it means that, rather than being old himself, Bohwanox was born in an “old place,” so to speak.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He was probably born in one of the very few reaper enclaves in the world.’

Hector wanted to ask more about that, but he couldn’t formulate a coherent question before Garovel kept talking.

‘Places like that are EXTREMELY traditional. And very wary of outsiders. So much so, in fact, that I can’t even tell you where one of them is right now. I used to know, but they moved, as they often do. They tend to believe that a nomadic lifestyle is the easiest way to keep themselves hidden in the long-term. And they might be right.’

‘...Why do they want to hide themselves?’

‘Because there are a lot of dangerous people who would probably like to get their hands on a “reaper breeding ground,” as it were.’

‘Hmm.’

‘And you think Bohwanox was one of those reapers?’

‘Probably. No idea why he would have left his community, though. Boredom, maybe. He didn’t seem like he had anything in particular that he was trying to accomplish, outside of just reaping souls. Ah, maybe it was a sense of duty that drove him out into the world.’

It sounded like Garovel had more to say, but abruptly, Hector could sense a new air flow through the rock ahead of them.

“We’re almost to the other side,” said Hector.

Zeff stopped, but only briefly. His pace seemed to increase even more, though Hector wouldn’t have thought that even possible a few moments ago.

Sure enough, the last chunk of rock slid free, and rather than pushing it all the way back through the tunnel, Zeff shoved it forward and outward.

Finally, their digging had reached its end, and Hector completed the last bit of the tunnel while Zeff stepped out to shine his lamplight around."

"1646

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It was an absolutely gargantuan chamber that awaited them. Even with the Scarf’s help, the ceiling and walls were too distant for Hector to sense them.

‘Which direction is Capaporo from here?’ said Axiolis.

Garovel floated forward, ahead of the group, and Hector moved to catch up with him. ‘...To be completely frank with you, I am not entirely sure.’

“What?” Zeff did not sound pleased.

Garovel sighed. ‘This was why I had Hector write that letter to Roman. His reaper knows the route better than I do. I only know that Capaporo is close.’

'I see,' said Axiolis. 'And it would appear we have a branching pathway in front of us now.'

Indeed, the Lord Elroy's lamplight was revealing as much in the distance, even though the Scarf wasn't. There were tall divides in the rock, poking out from the ocean of blackness in front of them.

"What should we do?" said Hector.

'First, let us have the others rejoin us here,' said Axiolis.

Zeff didn't wait for anyone else to volunteer. He shot back toward the tunnel on a stream of materialized water and burst through the open passageway, leaving an evaporating trail in his wake.

"...I hope he doesn't break any of those support beams I put up," said Hector.

'I am sure he will be careful,' said Axiolis.

Hector wished he had the reaper's confidence.

'Shall we brainstorm while we wait?' said Garovel.

'Yes. I am thinking that we may need to split up and check the various paths independently.'

'I'd say that depends on how many paths there are. It's hard to tell in all this darkness.'

Hector began to walk. The reapers were as clear as day against the black surrounding them, but of course, despite appearances, their ethereal glow emitted no actual light for him to rely upon. He only had the Scarf to go by, but the chamber was so ridiculously spacious that it wasn't terrifically useful.

'Hector,' said Axiolis. 'Will you please make some light for us?'

Uh.

Hector didn't know what--

Oh. Wait. Of course.

He raised a tower of iron, adding enough heat to it to make it glow orange. He'd wanted to make it white hot, as that would've been brightest, but he supposed his application of heat had been too weak

for such a large volume of mass. It served well enough, though, and illuminated the room dimly but satisfactorily.

‘Four paths,’ said Garovel. ‘Five, if we’re counting the way we came from.’

‘One path for each servant, then.’

‘Looks that way.’

Soon enough, Zeff returned with the others, and they began to formulate their next move in more detail. The reapers would remain in this area while the servants scouted ahead and reported back. Then the reapers could act as a kind of a communication hub, sharing information with one another and relaying it all to their respective servants instantaneously."

"1647

There was a minor problem with Manuel Delaguna, however. Just like Hector, the man had lost his lamplight in the fall, and so he would have difficulty trying to navigate one of the paths on his own. Apparently, he didn't think that his argon materialization ability would help him in that regard.

‘...Maybe I should lend him the Scarf,’ thought Hector.

‘Absolutely not,’ said Garovel privately. ‘You’re not lending that thing to anyone, you hear me? You’re not gonna explain what it does to anyone, either.’

Hector could understand the reaper's concern, but at the same time, Manuel was an ally in need, and if Hector was in a position to do something about it... But then again, there was no telling if the Scarf would even help Manuel that much. This cave system was way too huge, and the Scarf's sensory range wasn't even enough for this one chamber that they were all standing in.

Thankfully, Diego intervened with an apparent solution. He handed his lamplight to Manuel. "Here," he said with a sigh.

Manuel took it hesitantly. "Thank you, but... are you sure?"

Diego nodded glumly. "Yeah. Technically, I don't need it." He held up a

hand and ignited his own flesh. His face went taught, and his clenched jawline became painfully visible.

Yangéra hovered forward and grabbed the man's shoulder.

Diego's expression relaxed again, and he breathed a sigh of relief. "Whew. This is gonna sting in the morning."

'Sooner than that if you don't return to me within half an hour,' said Yangéra.

"Right."

Manuel gave a grateful nod. "Thank you very much, Lord Diego."

"No sweat. Well. Okay, maybe a little sweat." He doused his hand, and its distorted and charred flesh began to regenerate. "How 'bout you come up with a good nickname for me, and we'll call it even?"

Manuel smiled. "I'm glad you brought that up, because I already have."

"Oh yeah?" said Diego. "Go on, then. Hit me with it."

Manuel pointed at Zeff first. "The Dragon of the Rain." Then he pointed at Hector. "Darksteel Wormsbane." Then at Diego. "And the Red Hunter."

Hector's face scrunched up inside his helmet.

"Huh," said Diego, rubbing his chin. "Red Hunter, eh? Yeah. I like that. Good job, Mannie."

"If you keep calling me that, I will make sure you are never known as the Red Hunter."

"Alright. Geez. Manuel it is, then."

Manuel turned to Zeff. "And you? What do you think of yours? I think the Dragon of the Rain has a much nicer ring to it than simply the Water Dragon, don't you? And it's much more in-tune with the Lion of the Desert, don't you think?"

Zeff's face might as well have been stone. "I could not possibly care less."

Manuel bit his lip. "Oh. I see..." After another moment, he rounded on Hector. "And what of you? Do you like the name I came up with?"



"Uh..." Hector figured he probably shouldn't lie to the man. "I... don't, actually."

"1648

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Manuel looked incredulous. "What? Why? What is wrong with it?"

"Sorry, I just--uh--" How was he supposed to explain this, he wondered? "Er--I... I just don't really wanna be called Wormsbane..."

"Why not? You don't think it suits you? It was such an incredible feat! We were all amazed when we watched you fell that monster single-handedly!"

Oh shit, not compliments. He couldn't handle those. And wait, they were all watching? "Um, th-thanks, but, uh--" Hector could feel himself beginning to panic. He didn't want to be rude, but he also really didn't like that name. In desperation, he pointed at Zeff. "It would suit him way better, wouldn't it? I mean, I only killed one worm. He killed like five or something, right?"

Manuel stopped. "I suppose that's true..." He looked at the Lord Elroy. "Perhaps you would--"

"ENOUGH." Zeff turned and began walking away. "Are you men? Or are you children? Everyone is waiting. Stop wasting time."

That seemed to kill the conversation quite thoroughly and without mercy. Probably because Zeff was one hundred percent right, Hector thought. The three remaining servants all exchanged last looks with one another before going their separate ways in silence.

Hector ended up taking the rightmost path. He raised pillars of red-hot iron in order to illuminate everything, but there wasn't much to see. Just an enormous and rocky corridor, one which only seemed to grow taller and wider as he went.

Soon enough, he increased his pace to a steady run. The clinking of his armor seemed louder than ever before, probably because of the echoes, so he tried to stop occasionally and just listen, in case there were any noises he hadn't been hearing.

‘Find anything?’ came Garovel’s echoing voice after a while.

‘Just a bunch of rocks,’ said Hector.

‘Thrilling.’

‘Hey, I don’t mind. I could do with a few LESS thrills in my life, actually.’

‘Mm, is that really true? Or are you just saying that to complain? Not that I’d fault you for that, by the way. Complaining is fun. I’m an aficionado of complaining myself, in case you haven’t noticed.’

‘I have.’

‘Heh. That doesn’t answer my question, though. Do you really wish that your life had fewer thrills? Because I’m pretty sure you love this shit as much as I do, if not more.’

‘What? No. I love helping people stay safe, sure. That’s, uh... that’s like, what I live for, I guess. But--er--I don’t love meeting fuckin’... gods or whatever they are. And I definitely don’t love getting trapped in a room with some sort of... hellish abomination.’

‘Yeah, okay, I could’ve done without that, too. But at the same time, I’m kinda glad it happened.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Oh yeah. We learned a lot in Himmekel, y’know.’

‘That’s... true, I guess.’”

"1649

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‘Also, you accidentally brought up an interesting point, just now.’

‘I did?’

‘About worms being hellish abominations, that is.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, ARE they?’

‘Well. Uh...’ He realized what the reaper was getting at. After the ensuing fight, he’d nearly forgotten, but now he remembered. ‘Hmm.’

‘The worm you killed was born from a Hun’Sho core.’

‘Right...’

‘That was certainly new information to me. I did not know that Hun’Sho could transform into monsters like that.’

‘Do you think... do you think all worms used to be Hun’Sho?’

‘No. Remember the eggs we found in Babbadelo?’

‘Oh, yeah. But, uh, we never actually saw those eggs, did we? They were in those vacuum-sealed boxes the whole time.’

‘Okay, that’s true, but I’VE seen worm eggs before. I know they exist.’

‘Have you seen worms actually being born from them, though? Or, uh, what if there’s a Hun’Sho core inside of every worm egg or something?’

‘Alright, well, that... would be horrifying. But I still don’t believe all worms come from Hun’Sho. Just, historically, it wouldn’t make much sense. There’ve been SO many worms. I don’t think the Hun’Sho ever had those kind of numbers, even at the peak of their civilization.’

‘Hmm.’

‘It seems clear to me that worms have some means of reproduction on their own. However, I’m now tempted to believe that worms as we know them today might have ORIGINATED from the Hun’Sho. And that’s a pretty horrifying thought, too.’

‘How old are the Hun’Sho?’

‘Oh, they’re old as fuck. Older than me, even.’

‘Older than all reapers?’

‘That, I don’t know. I don’t think so, though. It’s a subject I’ve looked into several times before, but recordkeeping in those days was far from ideal, to put it mildly.’

‘I wonder if Axiolis would know. He’s older than you, right?’

‘Alright, I’ll ask him. Hang on a second.’

Hector waited. The empty corridor just kept going. At this rate, he was beginning to hope that he would be the one to find Capaporo just so that he wouldn’t have to make the trek all the way back to everyone.

‘Hmm,’ said Garovel. ‘Axiolis says reapers came first.’

‘Oh, well, there you go.’

‘I don’t know if I believe him, though.’

‘What? Why?’

‘Because I don’t like that he knows more stuff than me. And if it’s bullshit, then that means he DOESN’T know more than me.’

Hector might’ve chuckled if he wasn’t regulating his breath so much as he ran. ‘You’re an inspiration for education everywhere, Garovel.’

‘Thanks, buddy.’

‘But, uh... since we’re talking about the Hun’Sho, um... I’m worried about Himmekel. What do you think’ll happen to them?’

Garovel was silent a moment. ‘Difficult to say. But we can’t do anything for them now. We’re way too far away. And even if we weren’t, we’re probably too late.’

Hector frowned to himself."

"1650

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‘On the bright side, though, we don’t have any reason to think that Royo and Malast will harm them.’

Hector wasn’t so sure about that. ‘Well... he did say that he was the one who derailed the train, which nearly killed us all.’

‘Okay, so maybe we have a slight reason to think they might harm them.’

‘Mm.’

‘But the unpleasant truth of the matter is that if Royo intends to kill all of the Hun’Sho, then he probably already has. It’s been several hours since he’s presumably had free reign in Himmekel.’

Hector wished he could argue with that point.

‘I honestly don’t think he’ll hurt them, though,’ said Garovel. ‘He seemed... diplomatic with us, there at the end. And the Hun’Sho would no doubt make for incredibly valuable allies, if he can manage to persuade them.’

‘Hmm...’

‘It’s a shame we couldn’t bring any of the Hun’Sho with us back to Warrenhold, actually. Even just one of them would have been great.’

‘What the--? I thought you didn’t trust them.’

‘Oh, I don’t. But they must know all sorts of good shit. Especially the older ones.’

‘I’d rather not live with people we don’t trust, Garovel. And besides, I feel like a Hun’Sho could very easily kill a non-servant, even just by accident.’

‘Eh, I’m sure we could figure something out. Keep ‘em segregated from all the normies, maybe.’

‘Now you’re making it sound like we’d be keeping the Hun’Sho prisoner.’

‘Maybe we would be.’

‘Garovel.’

‘What? They’re sneaky and barely even human.’

‘...I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.’

‘I just mean that if one or more of them happened to do something criminal, then that would justify us keeping them prisoner.’

Hector wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

‘And hey, I’m three thousand years old. I’m entitled to be a little racist,

aren't I?'

'Wow, Garovel.'

'Okay, that one was a joke, just so we're clear.'

'Was it, though?'

'Oh, don't even start. I'm very tolerant of other cultures and ethnicities, I'll have you know.'

'Uh-huh...'

'Like with you, for instance. I decided to take you on as a servant, even though I don't much care for the blacks.'

Hector coughed up a laugh so suddenly that he nearly tripped and so had to stop running. He doubled over and lost control of his cooling armor as he kept cracking up.

'I'd say that's pretty tolerant,' said Garovel, 'wouldn't you?'

When he felt the heat of the Undercrust creeping into his armor, he managed to get hold of himself and fix his armor. 'Holy shit, Garovel.' He started running again, seeing that there was still no sign of Capaporo or anything else around. 'You almost made me fall on my face, just now.'

The reaper laughed."

"1651

It was a relief to hear Garovel joking around again, Hector felt. After what the reaper had told him about his past earlier, Hector was glad to hear him sounding like himself again. 'Has anybody else found anything yet?'

'Nope.'

'Ugh.'

'Don't worry. Capaporo has to be close. Voreese said so. She wouldn't lie. And if she did, well, that's great, too, because then I'll get to give her SO much shit about it later.'

‘Somehow, that doesn’t alleviate my worries.’

‘Mm. Sounds like your problem.’

‘How close is close, anyway? Isn’t that kind of a vague term?’

‘I’m sure we’ll find it sometime within the next twenty-four hours.’

‘Aw, shit...’

‘Hey, at least you’re not Diego. I’m sure he’s gonna be feeling miserable, soon.’

Hector sympathized. He wasn’t entirely without pain himself, at the moment, as his own numbing had worn off already. He’d more or less gotten used to this level of bodily discomfort, so it wasn’t hindering him too terribly. It only felt like he had three or four broken ribs and maybe a few gunshot wounds here and there. It probably wasn’t nearly as bad as what transfiguration users had to deal with. That shit looked like it hurt.

‘Maybe I should’ve let Manuel borrow the Scarf, after all.’

‘No, Hector. I feel bad for Diego, too, but the Scarf is probably your greatest secret, right now. The fewer people that understand how it works, the better.’

‘I guess so...’

‘And besides, he’s not wearing armor, so it wouldn’t look nearly as good on him.’

Hector didn’t respond, but he couldn’t help smirking, either.

‘By the way, have you talked to Emiliana again since we got back?’

‘Oh. Uh. No, I haven’t...’

‘Presumably, you told her that you were in the middle of fighting the last time you spoke, right?’

‘Y-yeah...’

‘Maybe you should tell her you didn’t get eaten.’

‘Ah... I mean... I’d kinda prefer to wait until I know Marcos and Ramira



are safe.'

'Why? Just tell her you're alright real quick. It's not that hard, is it?'

'Er, she's, uh... she's not the easiest person in the world to talk to...'

'You mean because she's a girl, and you're you?'

'Actually, no, that's not it. It's more because she's just, uh... well, I don't know if she and I are going to get along very well...'

'...Are you serious? The two of you are fighting?'

'N-not exactly. I don't know.'

'Hmm. Well, even so, she must be worried about you.'

'I don't know about that. If she was really worried, she could use her Shard to call out to me, and I would hear her. But I'm not, so...'

'Oh, don't be a fuckin' baby. Just tell her you're alright real quick. It'll take two seconds.'

'I...' He supposed Garovel was right. 'Alright, fine. Gimme a minute.' He reached inside his armor for the Shard and then called out to her with his mind."

"1652

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It wasn't long before she answered. 'Hector?'

'Hi.'

'It is a relief to hear from you again,' she said. 'Allow me to apologize again for laughing at you before. That was inappropriate.'

'Oh, uh... don't worry about it. And, er, I'm sorry for saying that I hoped Gohvis eats you.'

'I did not think you were being serious when you said that.'

'I wasn't.'

‘Good. I am glad I did not misunderstand.’

An awkward silence arrived, which Hector felt like he should’ve seen coming. Why was this girl so difficult to talk to? Was it his own fault?

Probably, Hector figured. He just wished he knew what to do about it.

‘Do you still need me to continue researching worms?’ said Emiliana. ‘Or is that crisis well and truly over now?’

She really didn’t talk like any fourteen-year-olds that Hector had known back when he was that age. Which wasn’t even all that long ago, really, even though it felt like it was. ‘That, uh--that’s over now, yeah. Thanks for your help, by the way.’

‘Oh, was my information actually useful? I was under the impression that it had all been in vain.’

‘Uh... only mostly in vain.’

‘I... see. I think.’

‘The bit about killing worms by destroying ninety percent of their body mass--that was sort of helpful.’ Maybe. He was trying to be generous.

‘Ah. Then, do you have a new subject for me to research?’

He hadn’t even thought about that, but there were definitely a ton of ideas springing to mind. ‘Well, uh. I mean, if you’re offering, then yeah, there are loads of things I’d like to know more about. None of them are immediately pressing, though. In fact, they’re just things I’m generally curious about, I guess. Are you sure you don’t have better things to do with your time?’

‘Um... to be clear, I would appreciate it if you did not have me waste my time researching irrelevant subjects. I want to do whatever I can to help you and everyone else. I do not wish to become your private search engine for trivial questions.’

Hector bobbed his head to the side as he ran. ‘I get that. I wasn’t planning on asking you anything that I could just find out on the internet. But, uh... at the same time, everything’s still kind of... in flux, right now. There’s no way to know what information might prove useful in the future.’

‘...Very well. What would you like me to look into?’

Off the top of his head, Hector already had a list in mind, though he was sure that he was forgetting some things. 'Ancient gods. Particularly in regard to ones named Malast or Ettol. There was also a woman who lived a long time ago named Stasya Orlov. I'd like to know more about her. And about a race of people called the Hun'Sho. And--'

'H-hold on, let me write some of these down...'"

"1653

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That thought made Hector stop running. 'Are you sure that's a good idea? What if someone finds what you write down?'

She paused. 'They... wouldn't be able to discern anything important from this list, would they?'

'That's the thing. I don't know. Would they?'

'I...' She didn't finish her thought.

'Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but I think we need to be extremely careful with... whatever this is. Even if it's inconvenient for you, I don't think you should write down anything I tell you.'

'I suppose you are right,' said Emiliana. 'It is better to be safe than sorry.'

And as he thought about it more, Hector began to get a dreadful feeling of familiarity--a feeling that he very much wanted to heed. 'It might be best if we come up with some sort of code, too.'

'A code? Is that really necessary?'

'Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know. I'm just thinking that it would be good if we had an extra layer of... assurance, I guess. Assurance that you and I are really speaking to one another, I mean.'

'What are you talking about? You and I are the only ones who can use the Shards to communicate like this.'

'...As far as we know.' Hector started walking again, then gradually increased his pace. 'I admit that it's unlikely, but... I just... I've had

really bad experiences with... a lack of precaution in the past. And I've also seen some really weird shit, lately. Like, people's minds being screwed around with. So...'

'People's minds? As in, mind control?'

'Not sure. Might just be memories getting erased. It's something to that effect, though, so yeah, maybe I'm being a little paranoid, but it's just... it's easy for me to imagine someone trying to use this... link of ours against us.'

'Hmm. But, Hector, I know that I am talking to you. I do not know HOW, exactly, but I can sense that it is YOU who is talking to me. Is it not the same for you?'

'N-no, it is. I do recognize your... "voice" or whatever, but... uh... this is all just guesswork on our part. What if our brains can be tricked into thinking that they're talking to someone else? I mean, I just... I don't have much faith in the human brain, right now.'

'Hmm...'

'And because we can't see each other, all we have to go on is this vague "feeling" of who we're talking to.'

'I see your point, but... if that is what you truly think, then how can you be certain at this very moment that I really am Emiliana Elroy and not some imposter?'

That actually gave Hector pause, though only for a second. 'Because you remembered what we last talked about,' he told her.

'Ah...'

'In fact... maybe that should be our code.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean... from now on, whenever we start a new conversation with one another, we have to reference whatever we last talked about.'

'Hmm...'

"1654 -- CLXXVIII.

'That way, if one of us doesn't do it, then the other will know that something's wrong.'

'...What if we simply forget?' said Emiliana.

'That... would be a problem,' admitted Hector. 'But, uh... it shouldn't be that hard to remember, should it? Especially if we talk regularly.'

'I suppose...'

'If you're really worried about it, then tell Chergoa something that we said and have her remember it for you.'

'That might work... but this is all extremely hypothetical, isn't it? And if a hypothetical foe could use the Shards to trick us in such a way, what makes you think they would not be able to get around this strategy, too?'

'I... uh...' Eesh, what a question. 'Look, I'm not saying this idea will make us invincible. But it's one more layer of security that an enemy would have to overcome. And it's not too much extra hassle for us, so what's the downside, exactly?'

'I see your point.'

'And maybe we should come up with a backup code, too, in case that fails somehow...'

She sighed. 'This is getting rather tedious, Hector...'

Yeah, okay, maybe that was too much for now, Hector figured. 'Sorry. I just. Ah... well, we can worry about a backup code later, I guess.'

Emiliana made no response.

'How is Chergoa, by the way?' said Hector. 'Garovel doesn't really let it show, but I'm pretty sure he's worried about her.'

'She is... her usual insufferable self.'

'That's... good?'

'Yes. She doesn't seem to mind Gohvis' company very much at all. She may even like him. I cannot tell if she is putting on an act and

trying to trick him in some way.'

Hector's brow rose. 'She **LIKES** Gohvis?'

'Seemingly. Gohvis is rather... curious, in his own way. It may be impossible to describe without making you think I have gone crazy.'

'...I don't know about that,' said Hector. 'I think I've probably got you beat when it comes to seeing crazy shit.'

'Ha. Perhaps I--'

There came a pause, and Hector slowed his run down to a walk again as he waited for her continue.

'...I have to go,' she said.

And before he could even tell her goodbye, he sensed her let go of her Shard.

Well, that was worrying.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Eight: 'To a place of prospect...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It took a few more hours, but indeed, just as Garovel had said, one of the servants discovered Capaporo. Unfortunately, Hector was not that servant. It was Manuel Delaguna, which meant that Hector had to go all the way back to the reapers and then all the way to Manuel.

It gave him a lot of time to think, particularly about how much he hated running. Eventually, when his lungs began to feel like they were both exploding and collapsing with each new breath he took, Hector decided to stop running and start relying on his materialization to carry him."

"1654 -- CLXXVIII.

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'That way, if one of us doesn't do it, then the other will know that something's wrong.'

‘...What if we simply forget?’ said Emiliana.

‘That... would be a problem,’ admitted Hector. ‘But, uh... it shouldn’t be that hard to remember, should it? Especially if we talk regularly.’

‘I suppose...’

‘If you’re really worried about it, then tell Chergoa something that we said and have her remember it for you.’

‘That might work... but this is all extremely hypothetical, isn’t it? And if a hypothetical foe could use the Shards to trick us in such a way, what makes you think they would not be able to get around this strategy, too?’

‘I... uh...’ Eesh, what a question. ‘Look, I’m not saying this idea will make us invincible. But it’s one more layer of security that an enemy would have to overcome. And it’s not too much extra hassle for us, so what’s the downside, exactly?’

‘I see your point.’

‘And maybe we should come up with a backup code, too, in case that fails somehow...’

She sighed. ‘This is getting rather tedious, Hector...’

Yeah, okay, maybe that was too much for now, Hector figured. ‘Sorry. I just. Ah... well, we can worry about a backup code later, I guess.’

Emiliana made no response.

‘How is Chergoa, by the way?’ said Hector. ‘Garovel doesn’t really let it show, but I’m pretty sure he’s worried about her.’

‘She is... her usual insufferable self.’

‘That’s... good?’

‘Yes. She doesn’t seem to mind Gohvis’ company very much at all. She may even like him. I cannot tell if she is putting on an act and trying to trick him in some way.’

Hector’s brow rose. ‘She **LIKES** Gohvis?’

‘Seemingly. Gohvis is rather... curious, in his own way. It may be

impossible to describe without making you think I have gone crazy.'

'...I don't know about that,' said Hector. 'I think I've probably got you beat when it comes to seeing crazy shit.'

'Ha. Perhaps I--'

There came a pause, and Hector slowed his run down to a walk again as he waited for her continue.

'...I have to go,' she said.

And before he could even tell her goodbye, he sensed her let go of her Shard.

Well, that was worrying.

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"1655

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Hector used the opportunity to practice something he'd tried previously back in Gray Rock. He made a seat for himself and pushed it onward. It wasn't nearly as difficult as it had been before, though he didn't attribute that to his most recent emergence. While the emergence might've certainly been helping, the biggest difference was that he wasn't currently in the middle of a city full of innocent bystanders. The



path here was straight, more or less, and he didn't have to worry about running into anyone.

So he could really just let rip. He pushed his iron chair as fast as he could get it to go--which, he discovered, was actually quite fast indeed. It was easily faster than he'd ever gone on a motorcycle. Being able to just shoot the iron forward in a straight line without holding back--that really was the key difference.

But it still wasn't nearly as fast as he'd managed to make his orbiting discs go. Granted, those went so fast that he completely lost control of them, but still. It seemed a strange difference. He felt like this should have been able to achieve speed like that, so why wasn't it?

Was his own body weight a factor in it? Or perhaps it was simply a problem with his own perception? Was he limiting himself subconsciously, maybe? It was one thing to make something move that fast; it was another to try to make himself do it. Maybe it was some sort of natural, self-preservation instinct that he had to overcome.

He would be a little surprised if that was the case, though. He wasn't sure how much of that instinct he actually possessed. There was a time when he would've thought he didn't possess it at all, but he'd come to realize that he did have it at least a little. It was almost impossible to fight seriously without a sense of self-preservation, Hector figured.

So maybe that was the problem. Maybe he just had to let go of his brain's very natural and rational fear of going way too fucking fast.

Easier said than done, though. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to go about that.

Even with all the time he had to test things out, he didn't find a solution. And when he made it back to the reapers, Zeff was already there waiting, and Diego arrived not long after. The Lord Elroy didn't hesitate to carry everyone with him. They all shot forth on a wave of ice, moving much closer to the speed that Hector had been trying to achieve.

It was so quick, actually, that Hector's vision went briefly gray, then black, and he felt like he may have lost time and consciousness for a bit.

Which might've answered his earlier question, he figured. He couldn't materialize iron that pushed himself at such a speed that he began to

lose consciousness, because the second his focus began to fade, his materialization would no doubt begin to wane."

"1656

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But Zeff was obviously doing it just fine, which was probably thanks to the man's passive soul defense being so much greater than Hector's.

He wondered if there might be some way to make up for the difference in soul power with only his materialization skill. And of course, there was still the matter of that drilling technique that Zeff had showed off, too. Hector definitely wanted to try that out, soon.

All in all, it gave Hector plenty to mull over as they rushed toward Capaporo, even if he had to battle to keep his own thoughts clear in his mind. Garovel, for the most part, seemed content to leave Hector to his half-conscious deliberations, apparently finding something to talk about with Axiolis and Yangéra.

Hector couldn't tell how long it took to catch up to Manuel. It was all a bit of a blur by the time his head finally began to clear again, and he found himself already walking on his own two feet.

He concentrated on trying to regain his bearings. According to movement in the air, there was a lot of... empty space around him. Similar to the last cavern they'd been in, he supposed. The walls were too far away for him to sense them.

But the ground ahead was different, he noticed. There was a very steep drop off, like that of a cliff, almost. He searched for greater detail and sensed a narrow staircase far to his right.

'--ector?' came Garovel's echoing voice.

He opened his eyes, not even sure when he'd closed them. The reaper was right there in front of him. 'Yeah?'

'You okay there, buddy?'

'Y-yeah...'

Garovel's bony face twisted a little. 'Did you tune me out again?'

‘N-no.’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘...Yes, I did. Sorry. Didn’t mean to.’

‘How does that even--?’ The reaper’s private words were cut off, however, when Diego Redwater’s voice interrupted.

“What’s the best way to go about this?” he said, seemingly to everyone, though he was standing next to Zeff near the edge of the cliff.

Hector decided to join them and discovered a view that was not what he was expecting.

‘Cautiously,’ advised Axiolis. ‘I know that may not be our forte, at the moment, but if our kin are truly being held prisoner like Hector said, then jumping in without thinking is a good way of getting ourselves captured, too.’

As he listened, Hector couldn’t help marveling a little at the sight of what must have been the entirety of Capaporo. He hadn’t sensed the city at all before seeing it, and now he had an idea of why that was.

It sat in a giant hole. And at the moment, Hector was standing above it, right on the edge. The countless lights of civilization shone like stars in an otherwise pitch black night, not so much illuminating the hole as simply revealing its shape. A massive cylinder, going straight down."  
"1657

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At the bottom of the hole, Hector noticed discernible shapes in the darkness. Buildings, he supposed them to be. They must have been enormous for him to be able to make them out at this distance. Perhaps that was Capaporo’s metropolitan area--a “downtown,” in multiple senses of the word.

“First things first,” said Zeff. “Can any of you tell where our people are?”

‘Not me,’ said Garovel. ‘I’m searching, but there are a lot of souls down there in very close proximity to one another. It’s tough to tell them apart.’

‘I am struggling as well,’ said Yangéra. ‘We need to get closer. I don’t think they should be very difficult to sense. Assuming they didn’t get separated, they’ll all be in one big group. We just have to locate a recognizable cluster of souls.’

“How do we even get down there to start looking?” said Diego. “I have a feeling we’d make a bit of a scene if we just jump and splat our way down.”

Hector supposed that was his cue. He moved toward the staircase that he’d sensed earlier. “Over here.”

When the others drew close enough to illuminate the stairs with their lamplights, Diego blinked a couple times and then turned his light on Hector in order to assess the young lord from Atreya.

“How did you spot this?” the man said.

‘Don’t tell him,’ said Garovel privately.

Hector didn’t need reminding, but he also didn’t know what to say instead. ‘You want me to lie to him?’

‘If you can make it sound both convincing and benign, then yes.’

That was a tall order. Too tall, Hector immediately decided. “I can’t tell you,” he said plainly. “It’s a... trade secret, I guess. Sorry.”

Diego regarded him with a raised eyebrow but said nothing.

‘Taking a page out of Asad and Qorvass’ book?’ said Garovel, again privately.

It was true. That was basically what Qorvass had said to him and Garovel with regard to the functionality of the Shards as powerful catalysts. That felt like quite a while ago now, though. Hector had to wonder if Qorvass might be a little more forthcoming with that information, if they asked him again.

Something to worry about later, he supposed.

The group made their way down the staircase with Zeff leading the way. Thankfully, it had a guardrail, so the drop off wasn’t quite so

terrifying as it could have been, but Hector certainly couldn't say he was enjoying the feeling. It was barely wide enough for them to descend in single file.

They soon arrived on an open street, which wasn't all that much wider, really. The architecture here made Hector gawk, partly out of simple curiosity and partly out of genuine bafflement. On this street, the houses--assuming that was what they were--were not actually on the street. At least, not in the traditional sense. Instead, the houses were suspended above the street, attached to the wall of the great hole."

"1658

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After a while, though, he supposed the placement of these buildings made sense. The street was narrow enough already, and perhaps it was easier to simply suspend the houses in midair like this than to widen the road--or worse, suspend the houses over the side of the cliff. That seemed like it would be insanely dangerous, especially with how deep this hole went.

The party continued downward, which proved to be a more difficult task than it seemed. After one more instance of struggling to find another staircase leading down, Zeff decided to let Hector take the lead, and even then, it was slow going. On top of not wanting to rush into a bad situation and make it worse, the reapers were also scanning the area constantly, deliberately taking their time with trying not to miss anything.

'There's definitely someone strong in this city,' said Garovel after a while.

'Yes,' said Axiolis. 'Someone near the Salesman's level of strength, unless I am mistaken.'

'Sounds about right,' said Yangéra.

It was a bit early to tell, of course, but Hector supposed that person would be the "lost sheep" whom Rasalased had mentioned.

He had no idea what they were going to do about that. He really didn't want to deal with another person of that caliber, but he probably wasn't

going to have much choice, he figured.

As they started reaching the middle tiers of the great hole, the streets began growing wider, and Hector noticed small tunnels and caverns in the wall where more buildings were hiding--even entire side streets. He started seeing many, many more people as well--all of whom were Hun'Kui.

Unlike the Hun'Kui in Babbadelo, however, these ones were not usually wearing goggles, and even less frequently did they appear to be armed. Most of them looked like they were too busy with one thing or another to even give a bunch of surface-dwellers a moment's glance. The way they carried themselves seemed somehow fundamentally different, Hector thought. A kind of a weary resolve, perhaps, like someone who was on their way to do something that they didn't really want to do but knew that they had to.

Hector had seen the like before in high school. Hell, he'd felt the like before in high school.

When they finally began to reach the lower tiers, however, the sights changed even more significantly. Tall, metal tubes ran lengthwise along the roads, and at first, Hector wasn't even sure what they were, until he saw a train pass through them. It wasn't nearly as large or as loud as the ones he'd ridden previously, but it was especially noteworthy to him because he thought he spotted a few regular humans through its windows as it passed.

And indeed, the other areas of the lower only served to confirm that notion for him. The streets became more complexly interconnected, digging into the wall and diverting off into enclosed spaces. Hector and the others even encountered one street which was entirely enclosed and significantly cooled."

"1659

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Hector was able to comfortably remake his armor into a non-cooling variant. He drew a few looks from the apparent residents, as they were not even wearing climate suits, despite looking like normal human beings.

The cooled street branched off into several others just like it, Hector saw. He noticed enormous sliding doors at each intersection, and even though they currently stood open, Hector had a hunch as to their purpose. They were probably supposed to seal shut in the event of an emergency. If something went wrong on one street, then the rest of them wouldn't be compromised, too.

An interesting concept, Hector thought. The people here probably used it to help deal with heat leaks or whatever, but he could imagine it being used militarily as well, like to defend against or perhaps even trick a force of invaders.

Hmm.

At length, though, he had to ask Garovel the obvious question. 'How did all these people from the surface get down here?'

'They probably aren't actually from the surface,' the reaper told him privately.

'What?'

'These people were probably born here.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yep. While Hun'Kui are the most common to see out in the open, the Undercrust has always had a rather sizable population of people who aren't at all resilient to the extreme temperatures. And as technology has improved, I imagine that population has only grown.'

'Huh...' Hector recalled Garovel mentioning something to that effect before, but he was still having a rather difficult time believing it, quite frankly. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to articulate that disbelief into a comprehensive line of questioning.

'What a place to grow up in, huh? Gives a new meaning to the idea of an "indoor kid" when going outside means being roasted alive.'

Hector could hardly imagine it. Granted, he and the others had passed two checkpoints when they entered this area, but those checkpoints hadn't looked very well guarded. One of them was empty, and the other had a guy who seemed more interested in the book he was reading than in what they were doing.

'Didn't we hear that there was some kind of civil war going on around

here?’ said Yangéra.

‘Some kind, yes,’ said Axiolis.

‘So why do all these people seem so relaxed, then?’ she said.

‘It must not have affected Capaporo very much yet,’ said Axiolis.

‘And perhaps it never will,’ said Garovel. ‘Historically, cities in the Undercrust have been notoriously isolated from one another, even after its comparatively early invention of locomotives.’

‘That is true,’ said Axiolis.

‘Still,’ said Yangéra, ‘this does strike me as rather odd, especially considering the level of strength that we are all sensing, right now.’

‘Hold on a second,’ said Garovel, and he stopped, which made everyone else stop, too. ‘I think I sense our friend Roman.’”  
"1660 -- CLXXIX.

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Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Nine: ‘The Leech’s gambit ...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It had been an uncomfortable week. Roman Fullister from Atreya liked to consider himself an adaptable man, but his time spent traveling with this Leo from Lava Base had made him reevaluate a great many things.

The journey here to Capaporo had been quiet enough. Leo was rather chatty during it, but so could Roman be, when he wanted to. No, the trouble arose after they got here, when the Rainlords arrived.

Leo had neglected to mention what he had planned for them, and looking back on it now, Roman knew that Leo had indeed planned it all along. At the time, it had seemed like a spur of the moment thing, an impulsive and unprovoked decision, but not anymore.

It hadn’t helped that the Rainlords weren’t particularly friendly during



their encounter. A reaper by the name of Mevox had been especially prickly, as it sounded like Mevox knew something about Leo and didn't like him as a result. Roman hadn't gotten the chance to find out what that was, precisely, and even now, he was reluctant to have Voreese go and try to do so in his stead. He wanted to keep her as far away from Leo as he could, at least until he was reasonably confident that the man wouldn't simply snap and go on a killing spree.

He was doubtful that such a time would ever come, however. Sure, Leo was amiable enough towards him, but would he be that way towards Voreese? Or worse, would she provoke him?

Probably. It was Voreese, after all.

Yeah, he'd probably made the right call in not letting the two of them meet. Better safe than exploded into meaty chunks, he figured.

"Tell me something," said Roman as he mulled over the cards in his hand. He already had three fives, and they hadn't even started guessing yet. "And be honest with me."

Leo sat across the steely table from him, observing his own cards. "Yeah?"

"Do you really think that Sai-hee will forgive you? I mean, I know how you feel about negativity, but just--seriously, do you think your plan is going to work?"

"What kind of idiot would I be if I were tryin' a plan that I didn't think was going to work?"

A desperate one, Roman wanted to say. "What if she doesn't, though? I know you said she hates the Rainlords, but handing them over to her as an apology gift... what if she just decides to kill them and then you, too?"

Leo was quiet a moment. Then he looked Roman in the eye and said, "Do you have any twos?"

"Go fish."

"Tsk." Leo grabbed a card off the top of the deck.

"Answer my question," said Roman.

Leo flattened his lips together and kept his eyes on his cards. "It ain't

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((TZKS 5th Anniversary -- Page 9 of 24))

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"1661

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"Why do you say that?" said Roman. "How do you know that your reaper wouldn't allow you to simply do something else with your time?"

"Because," said Leo with a sigh, "Ericoros is one of those types. You know the ones."

Roman tilted his head. "I do?"

"Yeah, man. One of those super dutiful loyalists. Really believes in the mission 'n whatnot."

"Hmm. Do you have have any fives?"

"Go fish."

Roman drew a king from the deck and frowned. "And what is 'the mission' that Ericoros believes in so strongly?"

"The usual. Y'know. Protecting the Old Law. And the people in our territory. Or her territory, I guess. Never felt like I belonged, personally."

"Why not?"

"Everyone was just way too relaxed, man."

Roman couldn't stop himself from squinting and flattening his lips. "You didn't get along with them because they were too relaxed," he said, wanting to make sure he'd heard correctly.

"Yeah, man, I know. This was before I chilled out a little bit. I was a real square back then."

Roman was having trouble picturing that.

"I mean, I'd always wanted to let loose, y'know? Be myself. Or try to, at least, since I didn't really know who I was, know what I'm sayin'?"

"I... guess? What changed?"

"Nothin', really. But also everything, y'know?"

Roman didn't.

"One day, I just woke up and realized that I hated my life. So I made a change."

"And Ericoros didn't like that, huh?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, Ericoros was fine with it. This was ages ago. We didn't start having our disagreements until way later. Eri was very supportive during that whole process of reinventin' myself. He knew I'd been miserable for a long time and was tryin' to help me work through it."

Leo's eyes glazed over as he observed his cards. "Great guy, my Eri. Really great..."

Roman just waited.

"That's why I gotta make it up to him proper-like. I did him dirty."

"...So this isn't just about making it so that Ericoros won't release your soul, then."

Leo looked up at him but didn't say anything.

"Ah--I just mean, you actually want his forgiveness," said Roman.

"Course I do, man. What kinda question is that?"

Roman raised a hand defensively. "Didn't mean to offend."

Leo wasn't letting go, though. The man's eyes narrowed, and Roman felt an all too familiar pressure surrounding him. "You think I don't have feelings 'r somethin', big cat?"

Roman would've very much liked to not answer that, but that wasn't an option, apparently. "Well, uh... it's just--ergh--I did hear you murder a man and his reaper in cold blood, so..."

The pressure let up, and Leo set his cards face down on the table. "Yeah, but I--that wasn't... ah..." Leo took a long, slow breath while he rubbed his forehead. "I really screwed up this time, didn't I...?"  
"1662

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Well, it was at least a step in the right direction that the man was showing signs of remorse, Roman thought. And there was also the possibility that Leo hadn't been himself when he'd killed those two. Assuming that what the man had said about someone messing with his head wasn't complete horseshit, then an argument could certainly be made that, deep down, Leo was a nice guy.

And of course, Roman wasn't wholly averse to working with murderers, either. He'd done it many times before while honing his craft as a procurer of things that didn't belong to him.

Still, Roman preferred to know what he was getting himself into, whenever possible. And all things considered, this guy was quite the confused mess, right now. To Roman's mind, a conflicted and unstable killer was probably an even worse companion to have than a killer who was truly cold and calculating.

Roman wasn't quite sure what to say to him now, though. Leo looked like he could use some words of comfort or encouragement, but providing either of those seemed like a very bad idea. That was basically how he'd gotten himself into this mess in the first place.

'Oh shit!' came Voreese's private words from wherever she was. 'I sense Hector! Oh, and Garovel, too! Those wonderful pricks are finally here!'

Roman stopped himself from reacting in front of Leo, who was picking up his cards again to resume the game.

It was good news, of course, and Roman had certainly been wondering where the hell they were, but after witnessing how Leo handled the Rainlords, Roman had also felt a bit of relief that Hector wasn't around to get caught up in this mess. So now he was conflicted. It might've been better if Hector had just never showed up at all.

'How close are they to my position?' said Roman.

'Not very. They're pretty far from you. I'ma go talk to 'em.'

'Tell them to keep their distance for now.'

'Oh, I'm gonna tell them all sorts of stuff. Like how you screwed us all by making friends with a fucking deluded psychopath.'

'It's not my fault! And he's not a psychopath!'

'Sure he isn't.'

"Got any eights, big cat?" said Leo.

Roman handed the eight of clubs to him. For the time being, he supposed he should just focus on keeping Leo busy while the others came up with a plan. Roman did have a plan of his own, sort of, but he'd been very reluctant to take it any further.

According to Leo, getting in contact with Sai-hee was going to take several more days still, so Roman had been procrastinating while he

tried to come up with an alternative plan. Not that he had much confidence in this one. He just didn't want to offer Leo a job unless he absolutely had to. It was bad enough that the man already seemed determined to do him a "favor" as a friend. Roman wasn't looking to make this situation permanent."

"1663

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"So, uh..." Roman was struggling for a subject. He knew he didn't want to guess a card yet, because the longer the game went on, the easier it would be to keep Leo distracted.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, ah, I... I was just wondering about something you mentioned just now. You said that you never felt like you fit in with Sai-hee's people because they were too relaxed, but then you said that you eventually became more relaxed yourself, right?"

"Mmhmm."

"And you've been like that for a while now, haven't you?"

"Yuh."

That meant yes, right? "So, then... did you still not feel like you belonged even after you changed?"

"Totally."

"...I don't know if that answers my question."

"Yeah, man, I still felt totally out of place, even then."

"Why?"

"Because, man... it's like... those people, I mean. Dude. I'm talking about the normal people who live in the Peacemaker's territory. Not the folks who work for her. They're different. The normal people, the non-servants, they're the ones who are just... insufferable, I think is the word I'm lookin' for."

“How do you mean?”

Leo gestured absentmindedly with one hand, revealing his cards without apparently realizing it. “They’re just, y’know--they live in some of the calmest and most well-protected places in the world. And yo, there’s, like, a big difference between relaxing because you’re trying to enjoy your life and relaxing because you just don’t want to contribute. To anything. Ever.

“And then ON TOP OF THAT, they’re so elitist about it, too! As if they’ve accomplished anything! As if they’ve done anything to deserve their easy lives!” Leo shook his head and exhaled a heavy breath. “It was like they’re just determined to be unhappy, y’know? Even when everything is just handed to them, and they barely have to work at all, they don’t appreciate it, man. Most privileged people you ever did see, I swear. Drove me straight up crazy, sometimes.”

“Yeah, that sounds pretty irritating,” said Roman. “Maybe that’s your main problem, then.”

“Hmm? My main problem?”

“It’s gotta be tough to get invested in the goal of protecting a bunch of people you don’t care very much about. Maybe if you explained that to Ericoros, you could come to some sort of an arrangement and look for a new type of work. Something that you both find fulfilling.”

Leo returned a doubtful look.

“Got any sevens?” Roman knew that he did. He’d glimpsed one when Leo showed his hand.

Sure enough, Leo handed him the seven of diamonds. “You make it sound so easy...”

“Not saying it will be. Might take years to convince him. But you’re a servant. You’ve obviously got the time to spare.”

“I don’t think time will be the problem, big cat. You know how stubborn reapers are, right?”

“I most certainly do.””

"1664



"Then I don't need to explain," said Leo. "Eri is up there with the best of 'em, man. Or the worst, I guess. However you wanna look at it."

"Okay, but that doesn't mean it's truly impossible to convince him. Why don't you tell me a little about him? Maybe I can help you find a solution."

Leo blinked dully. "You... you would really try to help me like that?"

"Of course! What do you think I've been doing?"

"...I think you've been trying to keep me preoccupied while your reaper works on something," said Leo.

Roman kept his face perfectly still for a moment. Then he feigned confusion. "What? Why would you think that?"

"Just a feeling. Call it paranoia, if ya like."

"Maybe I will," said Roman. "I've been enjoying our game quite a bit. It's been ages since I was able to sit down and play cards with someone like this."

"Mm. Got any fives?"

"SHIT!" He slapped his three fives down on the table. "Didn't I just ask you for fives?! You're not cheating, are you?!"

"Nah, bruh. Pulled it from the deck just now. I swear."

"Tch..."

Leo took the cards with a faint smile and set them aside with his own five, completing the collection and scoring a point for himself. "You seem a little stressed, big cat. It's just a game, y'know."

"Easy to say that when you're winning. Do you have any jacks?"

"Go fish."

Roman grumbled as he grabbed the topmost card off the deck. It was the ace of spades.

"You one of them super competitive types?" said Leo.

"Maybe. That a problem?"

"Nah, just--I mean, if it means that much to you, I can just let you win."

"No, don't do that! That'd be even worse than losing!"

"Ya sure? It really doesn't make much difference to me, man. And at the end of the day, don't you think friendship is more important?"

"This is how you build friendship. Through healthy competition."

"You really believe that?"

"You don't?"

"Oh, I dunno, man. I always kinda thought that peace and love was the way to go, y'know? Whenever possible, I mean."

Roman held back a laugh. "Peace and love? Isn't that a little vague?"

"Vague? Nah, man. E'erybody knows what peace and love means. Having care and compassion for your fellow humans. Not getting all up in their business. Unless, y'know, you have to."

"Sure, but in my experience, 'love' can be rather aggressive and even rude. Doesn't necessarily jive with the notion of 'peace,' ya feel me?"  
Crap, he was starting to pick up some of this weirdo's speaking habits. Roman had always had something of a natural gift for acquiring accents and the like. Usually, it was helpful, but he wasn't appreciating it very much, at the moment."

"1665

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"Hmm," mused Leo. "Maybe you're right. I've known a fair few folks who did some bonkers stuff 'cuz of love. Or so they said. Hard to know these things for certain, right?"

Roman only returned a lame shrug and waited for Leo to guess a card.

Leo did not oblige, however. "You really think you can help me with Eri?" he asked.

“Dunno,” said Roman. “But I promise to try, at least.”

“Heh. Arighty, well... Ericoros is what you call... a drama king.”

Roman raised an eyebrow.

“He has a tendency to overreact to things. And sometimes he lets his emotions get the better of him. I mean, he makes an effort to be rational, but y’know...”

“I see. How old is he? Do you know?”

“He’s in his two thousands now.”

“Where is he from originally?”

“Luugh.”

“Where in Luugh? What country?”

“Doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Really? I thought all the countries there were pretty old.”

“They are. Not his, though. The Kingdom of Polura, was what it was called. These days, it’s known as the Republic of Grant. Named after that uppity Vanguardian, y’know.”

Roman did know. Field Marshal Grant. Celebrated hero across the continent of Luugh. Roman had been there a couple times. They had some real nice stuff there. Plenty worth stealing, certainly. And they were big fans of statues, those Luughans. And trees. And water. That was pretty much their entire culture condensed into three things, according to Roman’s admittedly meager experience.

It was too bad he hadn’t spent more time there. Might’ve been helpful, right about now. He considered asking Voreese, but she was probably still busy with the others. And she would probably just distract him, anyway. “Why do you think he’s so dutiful toward Sai-hee?”

“She saved his hometown four hundred years ago or so.”

“Mm, yeah, that’d do it.”

“Wasn’t actually her, though,” said Leo. “It was a group of her followers. Rescued the place from a small time warlord. Not even all that impressive from the sound of it, but to hear Eri talk about it, you’d

think she descended from the heavens 'r somethin'."

"Is Ericoros religious at all?"

"Yeah, kinda. He's a follower of Cocora."

"Oh, hey, so he might like it in Atreya, then."

"Yeah, maybe."

"That's a start, right?"

Leo made no response.

Not the kind of reaction Roman was looking for. Probably best to push quickly onward. "So Ericoros doesn't share your reservations about Sai-hee? You mentioned that you thought she was worse than Dozer, even."

"Oh yeah. Eri doesn't see any of that. Thinks the ends justify the means 'n all that."

"Maybe the solution to your problem lies there, then. If we could convince him that Sai-hee isn't as great as he thinks she is, then maybe he'll agree to quit with you and go do something else."

"You think I haven't tried that already? He won't listen, man.""

"1666

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"Not even if we show him some real evidence?" said Roman.

"You got any real evidence?" said Leo.

"Well, no, but we could work on that."

Leo looked doubtful. "Got any twos?"

"Go fish. You already asked for those earlier, by the way."

"Did I? Guess I really want some twos, then."

Roman was going to be extremely annoyed if he ended up losing to a

guy who was barely even paying attention to the game. Unfortunately, getting a glimpse at the man's cards hadn't even helped much, since he hadn't had any of the ones that Roman needed now. He could only hope that Leo had just drawn something that would be useful. "Also, ah--it would probably be helpful toward repairing your relationship if you told him about how you were brainwashed."

"...Wasn't really brainwashing, though, man."

"What do you mean?"

"I was still myself, man. I still knew what I was doing. I was just... a slightly different version of myself, I guess. That's the best I can put it, I think."

Roman mulled that over for a bit. "You should probably just say you were brainwashed. It's easier to conceptualize--and probably to forgive, which is what you want Ericoros to do, right?"

"Doesn't really matter, because there's no way he'll believe me, man."

"Sure he will! Especially if you've got someone to support your story, like me. In fact, we could just let all these Rainlords leave and then go find your reaper and have a nice, quality chat with him. Where is he, by the way?"

"...See, it's questions like that that make me paranoid, brother."

Roman tensed up as he felt the air in the room do the same. The expression on Leo's face was familiar. Roman had seen it once before, back when they first met. It was an unneeded reminder that this was not someone he wanted to push too far. "Ah... you're worried I'll try to kill Ericoros?"

Leo just kept staring at him.

"Oh, uh, heh, sorry. That thought hadn't even entered my mind. But yeah. Of course you'd be worried about that. We still barely know each other, after all."

Leo seemed to relax a little, though only because his dark eyes went back to his cards.

Roman took a silent breath. He could feel himself sweating, despite his control over particle vibrations making him immune to the heat of the Undercrust.

Roman was a little surprised that Leo didn't simply force the truth out of him again, though. He wouldn't have minded, since he wasn't lying. He certainly didn't plan on trying to kill Ericoros.

He was beginning to run out of ideas. Perhaps he really would have to offer Leo that job after all. Before pulling that trigger, though, he decided to check in with Voreese.

'Hey, you got a plan yet?' he asked her.

'No. And shut up. I'm having a very pleasant conversation with Garovel right now.'

"1667

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'I'm going to offer Leo a job.'

'WHAT?! DON'T YOU FUCKING DARE!'

'Then stop dicking around and come up with something!'

"It's your turn," said Leo.

"I know. I'm just... thinking."

"It's not that difficult of a game, chief."

"Okay, how many different nicknames are you gonna come up with for me, exactly? Because it's getting a little ridiculous."

"Bad ridiculous or good ridiculous?"

"I... I don't know. It's just strange."

"Maybe I like being strange."

"Well, at least you don't smell quite so strange, anymore."

Leo just looked at him again.

And Roman was hesitant again, too, but he was also fairly certain that he hadn't actually pissed Leo off just now. After all the time he'd spent

in this man's company over the last several days, he'd gotten a decent idea of the kinds of things that would and wouldn't do it.

Mostly.

Indeed, after a moment, Leo put his nose over his shoulder and sniffed. "Never did much care for bathing, if I'm completely honest."

Roman couldn't say he was surprised. Nonetheless, it had certainly been a relief when Leo had started doing it again. Roman didn't know if he would've been able to handle that level body odor throughout the entirety of their journey thus far.

"You got any aces?" said Roman.

"Go fish."

He drew the nine of diamonds from the deck. 'Voreese. Plan. Now.'

'I'm working on it. You can't rush greatness.'

'Not a concern when you're involved.'

'Stop distracting me, you little prick.'

'Do you need more information? Something I can help with, at least?'

'Uh... one sec.'

He'd already told her everything that he'd been able to learn about Leo so far, but he wasn't sure it would be enough.

"Got any clubs?" said Leo.

"Are you being serious, right now?"

"Sorry... I mean diamonds."

"Leo..."

"This game's kinda boring, dude. Maybe we should go do something else."

That was not what Roman wanted to hear. "I want to finish our game. You have no idea how emotionally invested in it I am, right now."

Leo scratched his cheek. "Eh... you sure? Think I saw a movie theater

on the third level the other day. Maybe they've got something interesting on."

Ugh. Movie theater or not, there was no telling what Leo would do if he left this room. The man was rather easily distracted, Roman had come to learn, so any number of things out there could catch his eye and make him wander off, which could throw a wrench into any plan the others came up with. "That's--sure, fine. We'll do that after our game, okay?"

"Myeah, alright..."

'Leo's getting antsy...'

'Oh, ah--ask him why he likes Sai-hee so much.'

'He DOESN'T like her! I told you that like six days ago!'

'You did?'

'Yes!'

'I dunno. I'm pretty sure I'd remember if you had...'"

"1668

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Roman's brow twitched. 'Have you not been listening to everything I've been saying?'

'Of course I have! I mean. Maybe not "everything," but you know, most of it, for sure.'

'Voreese!'

'Relax, Roman, I got this.'

'I feel like you don't!'

"Got any queens?" said Leo.

Roman did and handed it over to him. He spent the next few minutes reiterating everything that he had thought Voreese already knew, just to make sure everyone was on the same page. Between that and



paying close attention to Leo, Roman figured this had to be the most stressful game of Go Fish that he had ever played in his life.

At length, however, Leo set his cards down again, and that glazed look came over him one more time. "I'm just not feelin' this right now, my man."

"What? Why? What's wrong?"

"This is just takin' too long, dude."

"But we're almost done!" They weren't, really, but that was beside the point. He needed to keep Leo here.

"Whatever. You win. I concede." Leo stood up from the table and stretched his arms over his head. "Whew. How about that movie now, eh?"

That was pretty decisive. Not really any space for argument, Roman felt. If he tried to push the game on him any harder, then Leo would probably get suspicious. Which would certainly suck. "I--ah--hold on. Why don't we stay and talk a while. I'm still curious to know more about Ericoros."

"I can tell you about him on the way. Let's go." And he started for the door.

"Wait--uh, actually--" Running out of options, Roman just said the first thing that came to mind. "There's something important that I've been meaning to tell you."

That made Leo stop and turn.

Well, shit. There was only one thing he could think of that would justify saying something like that.

But then, maybe it was time. Maybe it wouldn't be a disaster. Maybe it would even work out well in the end.

Maybe.

'Voreese? Sorry. Gonna offer him a job.'

'I TOLD YOU TO WAIT!'

'Can't. I'm doin' it. Wish me luck.'

‘AGH! FUCK YOUR LUCK!’

Leo was waiting patiently and confusedly.

Roman was slow to pull out the necessary words. “...I think you should quit working for Sai-hee and come work for me, instead.”

Leo was silent a moment. “...‘Scuse me?”

“I know this was only supposed to be a temporary gig, you trying to repay me for helping you. Which, actually, I suppose you’d have to do TWICE over now, considering you’d be turning in my allies for your own gain--but that’s neither here nor there. What I’m saying is that I want to hire you full-time. To help me protect my homeland of Atreya, mainly, though I may come up with other jobs for you, too.”

Leo opened his mouth, then closed it again and puffed out his cheeks. “Hmm.”

"1669

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“And look,” said Roman, “I understand that you’re having difficulties with your reaper, right now, but I think you’ll find that I’m a very good employer. I will pay you well for your services, and I’m sure I can bring Ericoros around. Even if he loves Sai-hee, I’ll make him love me more.”

Leo squinted and scratched the tip of his nose. “Uh, how, exactly?”

“What do you mean, how?”

“I mean, how do you plan to make Ericoros love you? He’s, uh... rather difficult to win over.”

“Just leave that to me. I can be very persuasive.”

“Nope. Don’t think so. Appreciate the offer, though, chief.” He turned to leave again.

“Wait! What?! Why not?! It’s a great offer! I’m not lying, you know! Go ahead and check! I’m filthy rich! I’m so rich that sometimes I feel kinda bad about it!”

"That's good to know, but it ain't about money, man. Money don't bring you happiness."

"Yeah, well, not having it certainly brought me sadness. I know what it's like to be poorer than dirt, so don't give me any of that crap about money not being important. It's important as hell."

Leo sighed. "Yo, man, I ain't no sell out."

Oh... fuck. Leo was one of those people. Roman supposed he should've seen that coming, considering everything else he knew about the man.

"I'm--argh, I'm not saying you are, Leo. I'm just saying, I'd be a very good boss to have. Trust me. You'd like working for me. Money is only one aspect of it, alright? I'm not just some money loving psycho. I've got big plans for the future, and I'd like you to be part of them. That's how I plan on convincing Ericoros. By showing him that you and him will be a part of something much greater and more meaningful in the long-term."

Leo's eyes were already glazed over. "Spoken like a real youngin'. You know how many times I've heard people say stuff like that? Lemme guess, you wanna change the world? You upset the balance of power and save loads of people in the process?"

Roman couldn't deny that he wanted those things, but he also didn't want to come across as a starry-eyed child. "My reaper and I have a solid plan."

"Lemme guess that, too. You're gonna take it slow and steady until you can recruit more people like me to your side?"

"That's... one aspect of it, yes, but there are others--"

"Save your breath, bro. Heard it all before. And nothin' you say has any power behind it. Even if you make all the sense in the world, you gotta have that power to back it up. And what, you want ME to be that power for you? I'm not that strong, chief. Not against the likes of Iceheart and the Knife and whoever else might be out there now."

"1670

“What are you talking about?” said Roman. “It doesn’t matter if you’re more powerful than them or not. You’re not the only person who would be working for me.”

“Oh yeah? Who else you got, then? Any names I’d recognize?”

“Well, it’s a work-in-progress.”

Leo snorted. “Course it is. No offense, but you obviously don’t understand a thing. And how can you expect me to work for someone like that, huh?”

Roman frowned, not sure how to argue with that. Maybe by bringing up Voreese and how old she was? Eh...

“Ya gotta understand. I’m old as heck. So I know myself pretty well by now. And I ain’t much of a leader, daddy-o. You know I ain’t ever achieved emergence before? Not even once? Just ain’t me. Don’t have the temperature for it.”

“I think you mean ‘temperament.’”

“Whatever. Not much of an orator, either, okay? Nobody’s perfect.”

“I don’t need you to be perfect. I just need you to do what I tell you.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “And what happens when the day eventually comes that I don’t want do what you tell me, huh?”

“You... exercise self-control and do it, anyway?”

Leo threw up his hands. “You ain’t hearin’ me, man! I’m sayin’ I ain’t got any self-control! I’m a mess! I gotta be kept in line! I don’t do well with rules, dude!”

“Well, we could keep things casual, if that’s what you’d prefer...”

“Oh, just forget it!” Leo spun around and made for the door again. “The answer’s no, man!”

Roman just watched him go.

He supposed the guy had a point, in his own weird way. Leo certainly seemed like a loose cannon if ever there was one. Roman didn’t know how he would keep a handle on someone like that, especially since

money didn't seem like it mattered very much to him.

Ugh.

He stood up from the table and started after Leo. Whatever the case, he probably wanted to keep an eye on him. As much as he might've liked to just book it out of here and go meet up with Hector, something told him that the kid wasn't going to be down with leaving all these captured Rainlords behind.

'...Didn't go well,' he told Voreese as he stepped out onto the stony veranda. The view from the bottom of Capaporo was a peculiar one. White and amber lights filled his view, save directly above his head, where the giant pit just kept going.

'What does that mean?' said Voreese.

'He... he turned me down.'

She laughed like a jackass. 'You fuckin' loser!'

'Hey. If I'm a loser, then that makes you one, too, you know.'

'Yeah, whatever. So why'd he turn you down?'

'I think because he doesn't want to work for someone who's weaker than him. It was a little unclear, though.'

'Hmm.'

'I'm following him now.' Roman had already caught sight of him again. The guy wasn't exactly speeding along, what with having the walking posture of a limp noodle."

"1671

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'Doesn't wanna work for someone weaker than him, eh?' said Voreese. 'How old-fashioned.'

'Well, he IS pretty old...'

'Psh, that's no excuse. Still a goddamn baby, as far as I'm concerned.

But maybe we can take advantage of that.'

'Oh, do you actually have a plan now?'

'Garovel and I have been swapping intel, and apparently, he and Hector have been getting up to some pretty bonkers shit in our absence. And didn't you say that Leo originally said he wanted to follow you to Capaporo as "protocol?"'

'Uh, yeah? So?'

'He said that whenever there was someone he didn't recognize who had access to a Courier, he was obligated to identify that person, right?'

'Yeah, but that was just bullshit so that he could capture the Rainlords and offer them up to Sai-hee as an apology.'

'Maybe. I think that protocol might be real, though. I've heard of such things before.'

'Okay? What's your point?' Roman observed Leo stopping in front of a Hun'Kui street performer and tossing a few coins at him.

'We're gonna trick him,' said Voreese. 'Our problem so far has been that we can't free the Rainlords and escape, because you're the only one who'd be able to pull it off, and Leo was constantly breathing down your neck. But now we've got a few other people who can do it while you keep him distracted.'

'...He's kinda stopped paying attention to me, actually. He's going to the movies. Maybe I should just leave and go meet up with you.'

'No, I want you stay on him. In fact, I want you to bring up Hector. Talk him up a bit. Tell Leo all about how powerful he is, and how he's actually the one who YOU are working for.'

Roman's expression spoiled. '...Why?'

'Backup plan, just in case Leo shows up while we're busy freeing everyone. I'm assuming it won't be quick work. This way, you'll also be able to warn us if he starts heading our way.'

'...That doesn't explain why I have to pretend to be working for Hector.'

'Because that seed's already been planted with the whole Courier situation. Leo already has an idea who Hector is, so if you nourish that

seed a little, let it grow, then Leo might actually come to believe that Hector is powerful enough to leave Sai-hee for. Get it?’

‘...I don’t like this plan.’

‘Well, it’s the best we got. Now go be a good distraction for us. You can run away from him later.’

‘What if I can’t get away later?’

‘Then you can just destroy your brain and escape that way.’

Roman’s brow lowered. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Just use your power and blow your own brains out. I’ll recreate you from scratch at my location, and Leo will have no idea where you went. It’s the perfect escape plan. And a real classic, by the way. Widely used throughout history. Not that you would know, you ignorant piece of shit.’”

"1672 -- CLXXX.

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‘Voreese. I don’t know if I can actually do that.’

‘What? Sure you can.’

‘No. I’ve never tried to destroy my own brain before.’

‘Well, why not? What’re you, some kinda pussy?’

‘Voreese.’

‘Look. Just. Figure it out. You’re strong. I’ve got faith in you, Roman.’

‘Liar.’ Leo was on the move again, down a street that curved toward the middle of the city where taller buildings awaited. ‘And my ability doesn’t lend itself well to that sort of thing. I’m sure I could tear my head off with a strong enough concussive blast, but actually destroying it in a single go? I really don’t think I can manage that, Voreese. Especially not without practice.’

‘Ugh. Fine. Well. We’ll cross that bridge if and when we come to it,

alright? Hopefully, you'll just be able to slip away normally, once the rest of us are clear.'

There was virtually no way that was going to happen, Roman felt. Even if Leo was being rather inattentive at the moment, the man had very much NOT been that way during the rest of their time together.

But even so, Roman didn't see many other options. 'Alright, fine... What kind of stuff should I tell him? Anything I can say that's not just a straight up lie?'

'Lemme ask for some specifics real quick.' There was a pause. 'Well, um, apparently, he brought down the Salesman of Death.'

'That's hilarious, but I'm being serious here, Voreese.'

'...Hmm. So am I.'

Roman stopped walking to blink a couple times.

'Oh, he HELPED bring down the Salesman of Death. Ah, and I guess Garovel would prefer you not mention that one, unless you absolutely have to. Shit, this Manuel guy sure likes to talk. What is he, president of the Hector fan club or something?'

Roman was beyond confused. 'What the--? Who's Manuel?'

'Ah--whatever. Not important. Gimme a sec.'

And he wanted to protest with a variety of different questions, but he acquiesced. He started walking again, having nearly lost track of Leo.

'Okay, so Hector killed a worm, I guess.'

'So have I. I'm not sure that'll impress--'

'No, this one was the size of a house, apparently. And it shot lightning. Oh, no, it was bigger than just a normal house? More like an office building. Oh, and they met some gods, too.'

'...Okay, what the fuck are you talking about?'

'That's a good question. I'm relaying it now.'

Chapter One Hundred Eighty: 'Old cruelty...'



Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

...171 years ago...

She didn't get the burial she deserved, but it was the best that Parson could manage after hours and hours of digging with only his bare hands. Even if he'd had a shovel, it probably wouldn't have helped much. The ground here was rocky and unforgiving.

By the time he was done, his hands were numb and bloody, and his stomach was so empty that he couldn't vomit anymore, despite his body still trying to."

"1672 -- CLXXX.

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"1673

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It all became a haze as he sat there, looking over the shoddy grave and feeling the evening wind lick at the tears sliding down his face. He'd thought he'd ran out of those multiple times already. Tears. But they just kept coming back like waves.

At length, however, he could sit there no longer. Night was falling again, and his mouth was parched to the point that even just breathing through it was painful. So he finally stood and left his mother behind.

He needed to find water, first and foremost, and he knew exactly where to go. There was a rocky stream not far from town where he would sometimes take the flock to be watered. His mother had gotten angry at him for doing that, saying it was better to water them from the troughs at home, but Parson had kept doing it anyway from time to time, whenever he felt like she wouldn't find out. He just liked going there, and maybe he was wrong, but it seemed like the sheep liked it, too.

Now, though, the sight of it there, babbling down a gentle eastern slope, was not nearly enough to soothe his heart. He knelt down and drank from it until his thirst was quenched.

And then he didn't know what to do.

He cried some more.

He could still smell smoke from the village. The wind was blowing it this way, he noticed. And he thought he heard something, too. Yeah. The distant clapping of horse hooves. If he could hear them, then he was probably still close, he figured. He got up and ran, not even having a destination in mind until a thought struck him.

The hiding spot. The one that he'd dug with Damian and Steven. He

wanted to check on it. Maybe one of them was there. And if not, it might still make for a good place to sleep.

In the darkness, he made his way. It might have been more difficult if he didn't know the area so well. He recognized almost every tree in relation to the village, and so it didn't take him very long at all to loop around and find the hideout.

He was the last to arrive, apparently. Damian and Steven were both already there, though neither were their usual selves. Damian, at least, expressed surprise at seeing him, but Steven just remained huddled up in the corner, eyes wide and staring out over his knees.

At length, Parson tried to touch the younger boy's shoulder, to rouse him in some way, but Damian stopped him.

"Better not," said Damian, and he brought Parson around to Steven's other side, the side nestled up close to the wall.

Parson saw a bloodied dagger in Steven's hand, hidden behind his leg.

Damian pulled up one of his own sleeves and revealed a shallow wound. "The little monkey nicked me with it when I tried to move him.""  
"1674

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"We can't just stay here," said Parson.

"Why not?" said Damian. "It's safe here. Nobody'll find us."

It was true that they had hidden the entrance to this place pretty well behind a makeshift tapestry of leaves, but that was no guarantee, Parson felt. "What about food? Water?"

"I can hunt," said Damian.

Parson knew it. He'd seen the other boy kill snakes before with nothing but a stick and a rock. "It's still too dangerous to run around out there. We need to go somewhere far away from those soldiers. They'll kill us if they catch us."

Damian looked like he wanted to protest, but he didn't. After a moment, he merely nodded grimly. Then he looked over at Steven again. "What about him?"

Parson knew what the other boy was really asking. Should they just leave him here?

And Parson thought about it. Maybe it would be for the best.

But no. They weren't going to do that. Not if he could help it. Not after everything else they'd already lost.

Parson knelt down in front of him, mindful of the blade and the reach of the other boy's arm. "Hey."

Steven just sat there, not reacting at all.

"Hey," Parson tried again, louder this time.

Still nothing.

"Steven."

Again, no response.

"Steven!"

"It's useless," said Damian. "He's useless."

Parson sighed and stood back up. He looked around their hideout for something he could use. A couple blankets, some loose rocks, a few candles, and a whole lot of dirt.

He chose the dirt. He grabbed a handful and chucked it at Steven. "Look at me, you idiot!"

The boy did not. He just let the dirt hit him and kept his wide eyes forward.

"I don't wanna leave him behind, either," said Damian in a more conciliatory tone, "but if we have to--"

"We're not leaving him," said Parson, not even bothering to look at Damian. He grabbed one of the rocks next and wrapped it in a blanket. "Steven," he tried again as he readied his throw. "Steven. Look at me, Steven."

Steven did not.

Parson scowled and threw it, using perhaps a little more strength than he meant to.

The wrapped rock hit Steven in the side of the stomach. It had to have hurt, and yet even still, the boy did not react.

Parson growled angrily. "Say something!"

"I told you," said Damian.

Parson took a breath, looking around again. Should he try burning him with a candle?

No, probably not.

Parson took a breath and tried to think. His own hands were starting to ache something terribly as the numbness wore off. Maybe that was Steven's problem. He was just numb to pain.

In that case, maybe some other kind of stimulation would have more of an effect. The smell of food, maybe?

It was possible, Parson supposed. But even if they went out right now and caught something, would it be safe to cook it here, in their hideout? Or would the soldiers notice the smoke, like he had noticed from the town?

Why was everything so terrifying?

Parson rubbed his face, trying not to cry again. Not in front of these two. He couldn't let them see something like that. They'd humiliate him."

"1675

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Wait a minute. Humiliation? Maybe that was another solution.

Once Parson was sure that he wasn't going to start crying, he walked over to Steven again and crouched down. There was only one thing he could think of that might set the other boy off.

"Steven," he tried one last time, to no avail as expected. That was fine. "...Jonah."

No reaction.

Parson wasn't ready to give up, though. After all these months, he'd almost forgotten Steven's actual name and was therefore briefly concerned that he'd said the wrong one, but after a moment, he became certain again. "Jonah," he said more forcefully.

Steven's eyes twitched, then moved to meet Parson's.

"Finally," said Parson. "Get up, Jonah."

"...My name's not Jonah."

"Hmph." On any other day, that might have been enough to make Parson laugh. "Yes, it is, Jonah."

"No, it isn't...!"

"Well, then get up if you want us to start calling you Steven again."

"My name's not Steven, either."

Parson would've sighed, if he wasn't so relieved just to hear the other boy's voice again. "Oh yeah? What's your name, then?"

"It's... it's Damian."

The actual Damian scoffed. "No, it isn't, you ass! Pick a different one!"

"F-fine... my name's Germal."

"Germal?" said Damian. "Is that even a real name?"

"It is! I read it in a book once!"

"Liar. You can't read."

"Can so!"

"What was the book about then, huh?"

"It was about a hero who brings light to the whole world!"

"Yeah, sure, it was."

"It's true, idiot! He saved everyone from the darkness!"

"Uh-huh."

"Whatever! My name's Germal now! You have to call me Germal!"

Parson stood back up. "Fine, whatever you say." He held out his hand. "But you have to give me the knife, if you want me to start calling you Germal."

The boy hesitated. "...It's my mother's."

And at the look on his face, Parson couldn't help hesitating, too. He had to be strong, though, he told himself. "...I'll give it back to you, just as soon I'm sure that you won't use it against either of us."

"What? I wouldn't... uh..."

"Yeah, you would," said Damian, showing his cut again.

"...Okay, but you better give it back soon." And he gave the weapon to Parson.

Parson wiped the blood off of it with his tunic. Some of it had dried and required a few extra passes and hard scrubbing, but he managed to get it all and return it to its accompanying leather scabbard. That was when he noticed an engraving thereon. He didn't know how to read, though. He looked over at the newly dubbed Germal. "Hey. You really know how to read?"

"Yeah!"

Parson showed the engraving. "What does this say, then?"

"It says, 'Courage before Evil, Preparedness before Courage.' It's a quote from a famous guy."

"Hmm."

"What famous guy?" said Damian, still sounding doubtful.

"Arkos," said Germal, though his expression diminished into a frown. "That's what my mother said, anyway..."

"1676



((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

"I've heard of him," said Damian. "He built a bridge or something. With a quote like that, you'd think he was a warrior. What would he know about courage, anyway?"

"He'd know more about it than you," said Parson.

Damian folded his arms. "I'm braver than both of you combined."

A part of Parson wanted to keep arguing, but he just didn't have the energy for it. Not today. Everything hurt, and he was tired.

So he didn't say anything. He just grabbed a blanket and sat down quietly on the dirt floor.

Damian just frowned and watched him for a time. When Germal grabbed another blanket and joined him, Damian did the same.

Soon enough, they blew out the candles and tried to go to sleep. They didn't have anything to eat, but no one wanted to go out in the middle of the night to try to find something. Eventually, they huddled together for warmth.

Parson found it difficult to sleep, though. In the too-quiet hours of the dark--when there was nothing for his eyes or his ears to latch onto save his own breathing and his own heartbeat--all he could think about was his mother lying there in the dirt. That image wouldn't leave his mind. It was burned there.

"...Hey, guys?" came Germal's voice in the pitch blackness.

"What?" said Damian.

"...Why is there war?"

Damian didn't know what to say to that, apparently.

And neither did Parson.

"...Why is there war?" the boy repeated, perhaps thinking they hadn't heard him.

"How the hell should we know?" said Damian.

"It's just the way the world is," said Parson.

"But wouldn't it be better if there was no war?" said Germal.

"Who knows?" said Parson. "But if that were really true, then everyone would've stopped fighting a long time ago."

"People are stupid," said Damian. "That's all it is. We're weak and scared and stupid. Even the grownups. They act like they know what they're doing, but they don't."

Parson didn't know whether to agree or disagree.

And there was more silence, until Germal revived the conversation, "Do you think anyone else from the village survived?"

"Probably not," said Damian.

"Both of you, shut up," said Parson. "Go to sleep. We'll need our strength tomorrow."

And mercifully, they listened to him. And after a while, he realized that he could hear their breathing, too.

That helped a little.

Parson had a nightmare. He was being chased by a howling wind in the distance. It was far away, then all around him. The specter of death. Toying with him, like in so many Melmoorian fairy tales.

He was the first to awaken, and though he still felt tired, he didn't want to go back to sleep.

Germal seemed to be having a nightmare, too, from the way he was twitching and sweating. Parson couldn't stand looking at him, so he shook him awake. It wasn't much longer until Damian got up as well, and then the Trio set out from their little cave to find breakfast."

"1677

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

The sky was as clear and blue as it ever was. It made Parson angry,

somehow. Like it didn't know or didn't care. The sun, too, was bright and obnoxious.

Maybe it would've been better to go out at night, after all, Parson thought.

It wasn't long before Damian tracked down a nice, plump jackrabbit, but even though all three of them chased it down, the quick little bastard still managed to escape into a burrow. The Trio was discouraged for a while, until Parson finally plopped down on a wide boulder and heard a high-pitched and familiarly terrifying shhk sound.

A rattlesnake, he noticed. Barely a foot away from him.

A hefty rock sailed in from outside Parson's vision and smashed into the coiled body of the snake.

"Get it!" yelled Damian. "Go for the neck!"

Parson watched it flail there in the dirt and grass for a second before he remembered the knife. Then he pounced on it, somehow managing to grab its neck and slice its head off. He was surprised to find that the rattling did not immediately cease.

They wasted no time building a campfire. Parson and Damian did most of the work, while Germal just watched and hopefully learned something, what with all the questions he was asking.

They peeled its skin off and roasted its meat. It wasn't going to be enough to feed three hungry boys, but it was something, at least. And for the first time in a while, Parson actually felt marginally happy about something. A successful hunt. Being alive.

"I didn't know snake tasted this good," said Germal with a mouthful.

"It doesn't," said Damian. "That's just because you're so hungry. Everything tastes better when you're hungry."

"Huh, really?"

"We need to talk about what we're gonna do next," said Parson. "We can't just stick around here and hunt snakes forever."

"What, you want to go back to the village?" said Damian. "There's nothing there for us."

"No," said Parson. "The soldiers came from the south, so I think we

should head north.”

“Hmm.” Damian scratched his face while he chewed. “Yeah, okay. Sounds good to me.”

Germal bobbed from side to side as he listened to the two older boys. “There’s another village up that way, isn’t there?” he said.

“Yeah,” said Parson. “The soldiers are probably headed there, too. If we get there first, maybe we warn everybody.”

“We won’t get there first,” said Damian. “They’ve got horses.”

That was true, Parson supposed. Damn. “But maybe they’ll stay here for a few more days. And then we can--”

There was a noise from behind. The boys all went dead silent, listening.

More noises. Rustling in the bushes. Scraping metal? A sword being pulled from its sheath, Parson knew at once.

No words were needed. Parson ran away from the noise, and the other two boys followed. He glimpsed back in time to see a pair of uniformed soldiers convening on their campfire.

The boys kept running and didn’t look back again.”

"1678

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

They reached the open green of the eastern hills and just kept going. There wasn’t much to hide behind out here, save maybe the hills themselves. Only the occasional wild brumby or flock of sheep dotted the landscape.

Some or even all of those sheep had probably belonged to the village a couple days ago, Parson figured.

At length, Germal started to lag behind, and the Trio finally stopped running.

“Already tired?” said Damian, though he sounded out of breath himself.

"No--I'm--just--" Germal dropped to his hands and knees. "Just--one minute..."

Nobody seemed to be chasing them, as far as Parson could tell, but they were still fairly exposed out here. He looked around for a place to stop but didn't see a particularly good spot. Only the nearest hill offered any kind of visual cover from the treeline in the distance.

It would have to do, he supposed. "Over here," he said, and he helped Germal back to his feet so that the three of them could conceal themselves behind the hill's slope.

He could still see a few slender trails of smoke beyond the treeline, which at least helped him keep track of where the village was. The eastern mountains that were now at their back did not look particularly inviting, as usual. The Storm Mountains always lived up to their name, and the Trio was close enough now to even see flashes of lightning within the dark clouds that perpetually concealed the mountain peaks.

"Now what?" said Damian, keeping an eye out over the hilltop.

Parson was still tired. And hungry. That snake hadn't been nearly enough. His only solace was the blanket that he'd managed to bring with him from their hide out. He was glad that he'd told everyone to take theirs.

"I said, now what?"

Parson heard him the first time. He just didn't want to answer him. But he supposed he had to. Germal was giving him that expectant look that Parson had seen a dozen times before. "...I still say we go north," said Parson. "If we go south, we'll have to cross a river. If we go west, we'll probably run into more soldiers. And if we go east, we'll run into that."

The other two boys eyed the storm for a moment, and then appeared to agree.

And so, after an hour or so of rest, they headed north.

They spotted more sheep along the way. Damian tried to kill one so they could eat it, but he only managed to wound it before it ran off. Then the hunt turned into a rather long chase, as the boys were already a bit tired from earlier. Parson was the one that finally caught up to the beast and finished it off. At that point, killing it was a mercy.

They made another fire while Parson stripped the animal for its meat. He'd seen his mother do it a hundred times but never done it himself."  
"1679

He didn't do a very good job. Not like she would've done, anyway. Blood got everywhere, and some meat definitely went to waste, but it was the best he could manage. There would still be more than enough for the three of them, though.

They started cooking it immediately, and soon enough, the smell was making Parson's mouth water. He tried to wipe his hands clean onto his clothes and the grass, but it didn't work all that well.

They ate together. It was wonderful. Damian was absolutely right, Parson felt. Everything did taste better when you were hungry.

Parson gave Damian some crap for botching the kill. Damian defended himself by saying that he'd never hunted an animal that big before. Germal just ate in silence.

With their bellies finally full, they kicked dirt onto the fire and moved on, leaving most of the sheep for the worms or vultures or whatever else wanted it.

They still had a few hours of daylight left, and if they kept a good pace, Parson thought they might be able to reach the next village. Whether it would be a safe place to stay for the night was another story.

The hills just kept going, on and on along the foot of the mountains, but there was no shelter to speak of here, and Parson was worried it might rain, too. When they eventually started to see lights among the treeline, they knew they were close to the next village and so left the hills behind to go investigate.

They were wary, of course, and took their time approaching. The darkening twilight helped, though the lowering temperature did not.

From the concealing safety of the treeline, the Trio found a good view of the center of the village. Parson had been here a couple times before with his mother. It was called Lhustol, this place, and it had a nice creek running through it with a cobblestone bridge connecting the two sides.

Everything seemed calm enough at a glance. No burning houses or shrieking villagers.

But then a band of horsemen appeared at the far end of the town and rode over the bridge and right past where the boys were hiding.

Parson was frozen with fear as he watched, but he also got a good look at them. It wasn't just soldiers on those horses. There were kids, too. Girls.

Girls from Trintol.

Parson thought he saw Alisa Brandt among them. Her hands were bound; her brown hair was mussed; she had a black eye; and it was hard to tell in the evening light. But it could've been her. That torn dress looked kinda familiar.

Something stirred in the pit of his stomach. Anger like he'd never felt before. He wanted to just leap out of the shadows and attack the soldiers head on, but thankfully, his fear was keeping him in check.

He watched the horsemen ease to a stop in front of the tavern, tie their horses next to a trough, and then carry the girls inside with them.

Parson looked to the other two boys. They were already looking back at him."

"1680

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

"What should we do?" whispered Germal.

"We kill 'em," snarled Damian.

"How?" said Germal.

Damian didn't have an answer to that. He looked at Parson again.

Parson wished he could've agreed. He scratched his head, trying to think. Six soldiers versus the three of them? Maybe they could've taken one or two, but six? And all armed?

Impossible.

"We've gotta do something," said Damian.

"Yeah, but what?" said Germal.

Parson got an idea. "If we fight, we don't stand a chance, but... maybe we can at least rescue the girls."

"How?" said Germal again.

"The horses," said Parson. "We let 'em loose. The soldiers'll chase 'em. Then we go in and free the girls."

The other two mulled it over for few moments.

"Sounds good to me," said Damian.

"Yeah," said Germal.

"Okay, let's go," said Parson.

They moved closer, sticking to the treeline for as long as they could before finally stepping out onto the dirt road. They darted across the open street, mindful of the tavern windows, and snuck up to the horses.

Parson had never much cared for horses. Big, scary beasts was all he'd thought they were. And these ones weren't proving much otherwise. The first horse he touched was immediately hostile and swung its huge head at him, nearly knocking him over. It whinnied angrily, and the high-pitched noise cut through the otherwise quiet village like shattering glass.

He immediately heard a commotion from inside the tavern, and he just barely managed to pull Damian and Germal behind the corner of a house with him before a man's head appeared in the tavern window, no doubt checking on the horses.

Parson watched from just beyond the corner, and when it seemed like the man was about to look in his direction, Parson yanked his head back. He could feel his heart pumping just as hard as it had after all that running they did earlier.

After a while, he chanced another peek and saw that the man was gone from the window again.



He breathed a little easier.

“Don’t touch the horses yet,” whispered Damian. “Go for the reins first. Then we’ll spook ‘em.”

“I don’t know if they can be spooked,” said Germal. “They’re warhorses, right?”

That was a good point, Parson felt. And it might’ve also accounted for why that one horse was such an asshole.

“Hmph. Don’t worry about it. I’ll spook those stupid horses.” Damian seemed confident.

Parson wasn’t sure why, though. “What’re you gonna do?”

Damian revealed a hefty stick that he must’ve picked up earlier. “Jam this up their asses.”

Parson opened his mouth but had no words. Yeah. That sure sounded like a plan that Damian would come up with.

“You’ve still got that knife, don’t you?” said Damian.

Parson pulled it out. “Yeah.”

“If they don’t run, just use that.”

“What about me?” said Germal.

“Use your finger,” said Damian.

"1681

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Parson was a little surprised when Germal didn’t complain. He actually looked like he might do as Damian said, but there wasn’t time for Parson to tell him not to, because Damian was already sneaking over to the horses again. Parson and Germal followed.

They were more careful this time. The same horse from before still snorted and neighed lowly at him, and Parson tried not to let his fingers get too close to the horse’s big mouth. It took a bit of time, but

he finally managed to undo the tie on the post and move on to the next horse.

Soon enough, the boys' work was done, and they were ready for the next stage. Parson decided to take the initiative before Damian did anything drastic with that stick, and he poked one of the horses just above the tail with his knife.

It wasn't quite enough, but the horse was obviously displeased. Parson slapped its behind and gave a low, "Hyah!"

That did it. The horse scrambled away from him, bumping into the other beasts and disturbing them, too. The other boys slapped them, too, and Germal narrowly avoided a kick that probably would've sent him flying. Nonetheless, they accomplished their goal, and the horses all ran off into the night, creating enough of a clamor to alert the men in the tavern.

The boys scuttled up by the window just before a pair of men's faces appeared in it. A wooden barrel was all that hid them from view.

The men ran out of the building in time to see their horses bolting toward the horizon. And after a brief exchange of indistinguishable words that sounded like an argument, all five of the men ran off to chase them.

Wait.

Five?

Damian and Germal were already rushing into the tavern.

"Wait!" Parson tried to tell them as he followed.

Sure enough, the sixth man in his black-and-brown uniform was still there, standing by the stairs and having a word with the elderly bartender. He saw them come in and seemed confused, though not for long. Perhaps their body language or the looks on their faces gave them away, somehow.

"What do you rascals think you're doin'?" the man said, placing a hand on the pommel of his still-sheathed sword.

They all hesitated, none answering him.

"Boys?" said the bartender, apparently not understanding the situation.

"You're too young to be in here. Run on home, now. Go on."

One of the doors upstairs creaked, and everyone looked up at the same time to see a girl standing there. It wasn't Alisa, but Parson did recognize those pigtails and big eyebrows. Claudia was her name, and she was definitely from Trintol. She looked frightened.

Perhaps Damian thought it best to take advantage of the distraction she provided, because the boy chose that moment to rush in headfirst. He didn't seem to care that all he had on him was a stick."

"1682

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

And for some reason, Parson followed his lead. Not wanting to be outdone, maybe. Not wanting to be a coward. So he bolted forward, too, knife in hand. He went for the man's side while Damian soon acquired the soldier's attention.

It didn't last long. The man's sword came free, and he cut through Damian's stick and chest in one heavy downward stroke. Blood splattered across the floor.

Parson wasn't even thinking anymore. He was already in the blind spot, so he just jammed the knife into the man's thigh and yanked it upward.

The soldier howled and turned on him. The sword flashed up in Parson's vision, but then Germal was there, holding onto the man's sword arm like a wild monkey and trying to bite at his hand. The other hand came in hard and clobbered Germal in the face. The boy barely held on as the man changed his sword hand. Dangling, Germal couldn't do much more than watch as the blade skewered him through the chest, all the way to the hilt.

Parson had found his way to the man's back and jammed the knife through the uniform while he climbed up. The man flailed, and Parson tried to hang on, still pulling the knife out and jabbing it in repeatedly, working his way up to the man's neck.

And he found it, too. The knife dug deep into bare flesh just below the soldier's ear. The man stumbled back and slammed Parson against

the wall. He finally lost his grip and dropped to the floor.

Disoriented, Parson scrambled to his feet, but the monster of a man rounded on him one more time. Despite being covered in blood, despite blood even spurting out of his snarling mouth as he struggled to breathe, the soldier still drove his sword through Parson's stomach and tore the blade out through the side.

Parson fell. He heard himself scream in agony and watched as the soldier staggered back and dropped his sword. There was so much pain coursing through Parson's whole body that it almost reverted back in on itself, numbing every sensation at once.

He tried to move, to get up, but it was all he could do to crawl. His body wasn't listening. Even just breathing was becoming difficult. And the blood. There was so much blood. All over the floor.

Damian hadn't gotten back up. Nor had Germal. Even the soldier was on his back now, hardly moving at all and still coughing up red.

The girl from upstairs arrived in his field of view. Claudia. And a few others, too, though it was hard to recognize them. His mind was foggy, and it was a strain even to think. He looked for Alisa Brandt, but she wasn't there. Maybe she never had been.

Oh well.

Didn't matter, he supposed. Would've been nice to see her again, though.

The girls were huddling around him and the other two boys. What were they doing?

Oh, they were crying.

Stupid girls. They should've been running. The other soldiers could come back at any time. He tried to say something, tell them how stupid they were, but his voice didn't work anymore.

Then, finally, darkness took him.

But of course, that was not the end.

"Hello there, brave boy," were Overra's first words to him. "Looks like you could use a hand."

"1683 -- CLXXXI.

It took a while for him to understand what was happening. Even after the reaper explained it twice, he still wasn't sure he got it all.

But he could keep living. And he could be strong. Those things, he understood. There wasn't much more to think about besides that.

Aside from one thing.

"...What about my friends?" he asked.

"Little Damian and Germal? Don't worry. I've got friends, too. Their names are Feromas and Nerovoy. They're talking to them as we speak."

"So we'll all get to come back?"

"That's right," she said.

"You're... not lying, are you?"

"Oh, you dear boy. That's not a very good method of testing someone's honesty. But don't worry. I'll teach you. All in good time." She paused. "Oh, but yes, I am telling the truth. Worry not."

That hadn't done much to curb Parson's suspicion, but he didn't know what else to say.

"Hmm," said Overra. "Very well. If you would like the complete truth of it--and I assume you do--then I must admit that the three of us were originally only going to revive Damian and his family. Feromas is Damian's great grandfather, you see. That was why we returned to fair little Trintol in the first place. But sadly, we arrived too late. And when we saw that Damian was not among the dead there, we decided to search for him--and good thing we did. We nearly arrived here too late, as well."

And again, Parson wasn't sure he understood. How much time had passed? He had no idea.

"You should be glad," said Overra. "You're lucky boys. The three of you are going to help us change the world."

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It took quite some time to locate the captive Rainlords. Even with Roman's instructions and all the reapers around to guide them, Capaporo was not the easiest city to navigate. The walls along the pit stretched far and wide, and there were no bridges to use as shortcuts--something Hector considered to be a huge architectural oversight. Why, if he'd been the one in charge of building this city, there definitely would've been bridges galore. Maybe there would've even been some like the Rainlords had back in Sair--ones that were so big they could hold up entire buildings with ease.

Maybe that would've been expensive, but whatever. It didn't seem like Capaporo was dirt poor, what with all these climate-controlled areas near the bottom of the pit. They could probably afford it. Maybe.

At length, they finally arrived at a cluster of warehouses. The buildings were squirreled away in the back of a temperature-controlled cave, which turned out to be below even what the group previously thought was the lowest level of the city. Finding the narrow path down there had caused them considerable grief, because apparently, Voreese couldn't guide them to it very well, having not actually visited this place yet. Roman had wanted her to keep her distance for her own safety, she explained."

"1687

'By the way,' said Garovel privately as they waited for Zeff to finish drilling through, 'I saw what you did earlier.'

'What are you talking about?' said Hector.

'The way you tried to pat Diego on the shoulder and then gave up.'

Aw, shit.

'I'll give you points for trying, at least,' said Garovel. 'A solid B for effort.'

'The saying is "A for effort," Garovel.'

'I know, but you didn't do that well.'

'Shut--fuck--you...'

The reaper laughed, still privately. 'Say what? Shut fuck me? What does that mean?'

'You--I--it means shut up and fuck you, that's what it means.'

'Oh, okay.'

As the time drew out, Voreese in particular seemed to grow impatient and began scouting around the warehouses. Hector would have preferred she not do that, as they didn't know what other sorts of surprises or traps they might encounter, but when Garovel gave voice to Hector's concerns for him, she was unsurprisingly flippant about it.

'A girl needs her space, Garovel,' she said from around the farther warehouses. 'You can't expect to get in my pants by smothering me.'

Garovel didn't miss a step, however. 'Getting in your pants, eh? That would be a fascinating trick, considering you're not wearing any.'

'Hoho!' she laughed.

Hector was uncomfortable. Though, at the same time, it did make him wonder how Garovel viewed reapers.

Now there was a question he probably should have asked a while ago.

'Wow,' said Axiolis, sounding equal parts surprised and disgusted. 'How long has it been since I last heard two reapers flirting with one another?'

'Jealous?' said Voreese.

'Irritated,' said Axiolis. 'This is hardly the time or the place for such behavior, no?'

'And what, pray tell, would be the correct time and place, exactly?' said Voreese.

'When we are no longer in mortal danger, perhaps,' offered Yangéra.

'I'm not so sure we ever will be,' said Voreese. 'It's a mad and dangerous world, you know.'

‘Yes, and it is not made any safer by the carelessness brought on by poorly timed humor,’ said Axiolis.

‘Oof!’ said Voreese. ‘What a stick-in-the-mud!’ She broke for a snorting laugh, which Hector found interesting, considering she didn’t even have a nose. ‘Look, buddy, I know the world is a horrible place ‘n all, but that horribleness ain’t goin’ anywhere, either. It’ll still be there after every little vacation away from it that we decide to take. So you won’t have to worry about your fucking dourness going out of style.’

‘And you continue to make history,’ said Axiolis. ‘It has been many years since I have heard anyone say something so utterly nonsensical.’

‘Oh, so there IS some sharpness to that tongue!’ said Voreese. ‘I was beginning to wonder if you were just a fucking simpleton!’

‘Voreese,’ said Garovel. ‘Please don’t be so rude to our new friends.’

‘Hey, he started it, not me.’

‘You needn’t worry about my feelings,’ said Axiolis. ‘I know better than to take the reckless words of an unruly child to heart.’

Voreese let out a laugh that sounded like it could’ve come from a horse. ‘Wow! Where the hell did you find this guy, Garovel?! I like him! He’s a real piece of shit! But like an upper class piece of shit!’

‘I suppose I will take that as a compliment,’ said Axiolis.

‘Yeah, why wouldn’t you?! I meant it as one!’

Hector wasn’t sure he understood this conversation anymore."  
"1688

‘By the way,’ said Voreese, still talking from behind one of the other buildings, ‘how old are you, Axiolis? I only ask because usually, I find that you uppity-types are quite young, but if you’re a Rainlord, then there’s a good chance you’re pretty damn ancient, eh?’

‘I am older than most reapers, yes,’ said Axiolis. ‘And you?’

‘Oh, I’ve got a fair few years on me,’ she said. ‘Have you ever met any



of the current emperors?’

‘Yes, Zeff and I have both met Sermung several times. I have also met Sai-hee once, though that was over two hundred years ago now.’

‘Oh?’ said Voreese. ‘And what was she like?’

‘Hospitable. And quite passionate. Still building her reputation in those days. I do not think she would be quite so welcoming to us now.’

‘Yeah, Roman mentioned that she’s got a grudge against you guys. Said that Leo told him as much. Don’t suppose you’d have any idea as to why that might be, hmm?’

Axiolis spared a glance toward Garovel and the others. ‘In fact, I do. Have you heard of something called the Richland Affair?’

Voreese floated up over the farthest warehouse and was visible to Hector again. ‘The incident that gave birth to a brand new country in the middle of the Jungle Wars?’

‘That is the one, yes.’

Voreese hovered over to the group again, having apparently lost interest in her scouting. ‘You guys were responsible for that shit?’

‘I would not say we were “responsible” for it, no, but our kin did play a fairly significant role.’

‘Your kin? Not you, yourself?’

‘In truth, it was our Intarian brethren. Many of us from Sair might like to place the blame wholly upon them, but the fact of the matter is that we share blood ties, and the rest of the world is not going to forget that for quite some time.’

‘Hmm. So you’re saying, your cousins fucked everything up big time during the Jungle Wars, and now Sai-hee just hates all of you guys as a result?’

Axiolis paused. ‘That is... an oversimplification of what happened, but... not terribly inaccurate, either.’

‘Well, fork over some juicy details, then.’

Axiolis looked at Zeff a moment, who was still diligently drilling away. The hole that the man had thus far managed to make was big enough

for most of Hector's hovering platform to fit inside, but there was still no telling how close they were to breaking through yet.

'I was not involved in the Richland Affair personally,' said Axiolis, 'so I cannot give you a firsthand account of what happened. Perhaps Orric might be able to.'

'Who's that?' said Voreese.

'The reaper of Melchor Blackburn.'

Voreese's skeletal brow rose a little. 'Ooh, Darktide, huh? I've heard of him. Is he here, by the way?

'He should be, yes,' said Axiolis. 'We'll soon find out for certain.'

Hector recalled having a fairly pleasant conversation with that man. He also recalled having a fairly unpleasant fight against him."

"1689

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'Okay, well, you can still give us the basic gossip, right?' said Voreese. 'I mean, you're a damn reaper, aren't you? This kinda shit is what we live for.'

'She's not wrong,' said Garovel. 'I'd be interested to hear more from you as well.'

Axiolis gave a small sigh. 'If you insist.' He turned to Yangéra and Lorios first, however, who had both been rather quiet this whole time. 'Would either of you care to tell the tale?'

'Oh, no, thank you,' said Yangéra.

'Yeah, you go ahead,' said Lorios.

Axiolis paused again, perhaps considering how to begin. 'Well... the Jungle Wars had been raging on and off for some years when it happened. In fact, that was ostensibly the root cause behind it. A number of Melmoorian and Corricooan aristocrats claimed that they sought "a true end to the conflict" and so decided to break away from their respective nations and form their own.'

‘Richland,’ said Voreese.

‘Yes,’ said Axiolis. ‘The name is not a misnomer. They managed to get away with a considerable portion of the most arable land in the region, as well as seventy percent of the diamonds that had been the chief cause of the conflict from the beginning.’

Voreese laughed. ‘Gotta admire the sheer audacity it takes to even attempt something like that, let alone to actually pull it off. That’d be like runnin’ up to a group of guys who are already fighting, waiting until they’re a little tired, and then just kicking them all in the balls.’

‘Mm,’ hummed Axiolis. ‘They certainly managed to anger everyone at once with that move. And my Intarian brethren helped them both acquire and secure their wealth.’

‘How did Sai-hee factor into it?’

‘She had been trying to broker a peace between all of the warring nations for decades. She had even managed to succeed, though only briefly. There was a cultural hatred that was born during those conflicts, and I imagine that proved difficult to overcome in a sustainable manner.’

‘So she blames you guys for prolonging the war?’

‘My understanding is that she believed she was getting close to achieving a true, lasting peace which would have been to the benefit of all parties. Whether or not that was actually the case--well, that is something we may never know.’

‘Hmm,’ said Voreese. ‘Still seems like a strange thing to blame you guys for. Why not the audacious pricks in Richland?’

‘Oh, I imagine she does reserve some hatred for them as well,’ said Axiolis. ‘But there was also... another element to it.’

Voreese perked up at that. ‘Oh? Do I sense something salacious in what you are about to say?’

Axiolis tilted his head at her. ‘You have heard a few rumors, I presume?’

‘I may have,’ she said with a smirk. ‘What can I say? I’m a gossip-loving girl at heart.’

‘Yes, well... from what I have been told, there was at least a degree of truth in those rumors.’”

"1690

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‘You mean the rumors about an actual “affair” within the Richland Affair?’ said Voreese. ‘The forbidden and sexual kind of affair?’

‘I am afraid so,’ said Axiolis.

‘Ooh. And you’re saying Sai-hee was involved in it?’

‘Yes. And so was one of our kin. A bold and brazen lad by the name of Eric Olmos. I met him on the occasion of the Generational Rite.’ Axiolis paused to look over his audience again. ‘Which, I suppose, you may be unfamiliar with?’

‘It’s a coming-of-age ceremony, I presume?’ said Garovel.

‘Yes,’ said Axiolis. ‘A chance for the families to gather and present their children who have recently reached adulthood. Eric was only one of twelve whom were presented on that occasion, but you would hardly have guessed such, had you been there. Most people at that age are timid as a lamb in front of so many relatives whom they have likely never met before, but not Eric. He adored the attention--and handled it gracefully, as well. Rarely have I ever seen such a naturally charismatic young man.’ His hollow gaze fell on the still-meditating Diego Redwater. ‘That one there is not entirely dissimilar, I suppose.’

Diego opened one eye and looked around with it. “Is that flattery I hear? Because I sure wouldn’t mind some right now.”

‘You should not be allowing yourself to be distracted by our words,’ said Axiolis.

“Oh, c’mon, I have to pay at least a little attention to what you guys are saying. What if we get attacked?”

‘I’m sure Zeff would be happy to slap you,’ said Axiolis.

“Mm,” said Diego. “As generous as that offer is, I don’t find it particularly motivating for some reason.”

‘Regardless,’ said Axiolis, ‘I brought the subject up, because I suspect that Eric’s charisma had something to do with why Sai-hee fell in love with him.’

‘Ahhh,’ said Voreese. ‘Seduced by a younger man, was she? At least, I’m assuming he wasn’t nearly as old as her, considering the Richland Affair was only about seventy-five years ago, and she’s currently, what, pushin’ six hundred?’

‘Something like that,’ said Axiolis.

‘So what’d this idiot do to piss her off so much, then?’

‘He promised to leave his fiancée for her. And then he didn’t.’

‘Ah. A truly classic douche maneuver. That’d do it, alright. But if she knew he was already betrothed, then I mean, she’s partly to blame, too.’

‘Again, I cannot speak to the validity of the details, but the story goes that his parents had arranged a marriage for him to a young woman among the Richland aristocracy--the very same ones whom they had recently helped secure new territory. And when the aristocracy heard about the possibility of Eric’s elopement, they increased the promised dowry by such a substantial amount that it caused Eric to change his mind. “For the future of House Olmos,” was the argument put forward.’”

"1691

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‘Hmm,’ said Voreese. ‘I suppose when you put it like that, it ALMOST doesn’t sound like the most moronic thing he could’ve ever done. Almost.’

‘I am not trying to defend his actions,’ said Axiolis. ‘I am merely recounting what I have been told.’

‘I get that,’ said Voreese. ‘But jilting one of the most powerful individuals in the entire world? That is some top tier stupidity. I mean, what did he think would happen?’

Axiolis only bobbed his head.

Lorios, however, decided to chime in now. 'Okay, well, if nobody else is going to do it, then I guess I'll play devil's advocate here and try to defend Eric's behavior--at least a little.'

'Ha,' said Voreese. 'Go on, then. I can't wait to hear this.'

The usually quiet reaper had everyone's attention but Zeff's now. 'I will not pretend that it was a wise thing to do. It certainly was not. And the consequences of it have been terrible beyond measure. However, I'm sure you all remember Sai-hee's reputation from those days. She was widely regarded as the gentlest and most peaceful of the four emperors. The compassionate "Peacemaker" was very well-loved all over the world. Many even mentioned her in the same breath as the Goddess of the Light herself--that was how saintly some people viewed this woman. And even today, some seventy years later, that reputation is not completely gone.

'However, she also had a reputation as a bit of a "pushover" as well. As in, people thought she was SO nice that she would never raise a hand in anger or do anything unreasonable--certainly not to anyone who hadn't committed some sort of crime against humanity. She was the "pragmatic one" among the emperors. Many people even believed that she was virtually a higher being. The purest and most perfect type of human. I know, because I was one such person. I genuinely thought that about her for a while. So I don't think it's outside the realm of possibility that Eric Olmos may have viewed her that way as well.'

'This is why hero worship is dangerous,' said Voreese. 'You can never really know what evil any given person is capable of until it's too late.'

'I would agree with you,' said Lorios. 'But my point is, Eric probably thought that, ultimately, she would forgive him. Because that was her reputation. Pure and gentle and forgiving.'

'This is why I don't trust saints,' said Garovel.

'It is as Arkos once said,' said Yangéra. "'The brighter the light, the harsher the shadow it casts.'"

'Egh, that's why I never liked that guy as a philosopher,' said Voreese. 'You could interpret that any number of ways to make it fit. Hell, someone could be the bright light, and the harsh shadow could be someone else who resents them. Or it could just refer to a single person hiding their true nature. Therefore, that "wisdom," although it

sure sounds nice, is fucking useless.'"  
"1692

'Not a fan of Arkos, huh?' said Garovel.

'He built some cool shit,' said Voreese. 'And I never met him, but I always got the impression that he thought he was a lot smarter than he really was.'

"I feel like we're drifting from the subject of Sai-hee," said Diego, again with his eyes closed.

'Oh yeah,' said Voreese. She looked back at Lorios. 'I guess I can kinda see your point about this Eric Olmos being only MOSTLY stupid. She did have the kind of reputation you described. And also, I forgot to mention: it definitely seems incredibly unreasonable on Sai-hee's part to hold a grudge against ALL of you guys, just because of the actions of one dumbass who broke her heart. You sure there's not more to this story that you've neglected to mention?'

'Oh, the story is not done,' said Axiolis. 'Eric Olmos was simply the lightning bolt that struck the forest, so to speak.'

'Ah, okay. So some serious blood was eventually spilled, then?'

'Yes,' said Axiolis. 'When Sai-hee confronted Eric, matters escalated beyond anyone's control, and in a single night, her forces slaughtered every male member of House Olmos.'

'What the fuck?' said Garovel.

'Holy shit,' said Voreese. 'I never heard about that. Even the young boys, too?'

'Yes,' said Axiolis. 'And it did not end there, either. Several other Houses were caught up in the mayhem, some of which were from Sair. The Sebolts, Zabats, Blackburns, and Merlos all suffered severe losses that day.'

'Goddamn,' said Voreese. 'What'd you do next?'

'We gathered our forces and responded in kind,' said Axiolis. 'We killed one of her "generals"--or whatever she calls them. A woman named

Ariana. She had been present during the initial attack and was responsible for at least thirty of the fatalities, five of whom had been mere boys. It was Rayen Merlo and Melchor Blackburn who ended her life, working in tandem. I witnessed that myself. It was quite the battle.'

'I can't imagine Sai-hee was too pleased about that,' said Garovel.

'No, but she seemed to at least acknowledge that Ariana had wronged us and that our battle was justified,' said Axiolis. 'We were able to negotiate a fragile peace, but the Intarians didn't maintain it. They harassed her forces periodically, which cost many more lives even after the Jungle Wars ended. I think that was when those of us from Sair began to feel a greater degree of separation from our Intarian brethren than ever before.'

'You blamed them for fucking everything up so hard,' said Voreese.

Axiolis made no response.

'Not saying you were wrong,' said Voreese. 'They sound like a bunch of fuck-ups.'

'...Regardless,' Axiolis went on, 'our collective relationship with Sai-hee has remained bad ever since then. Melchor Blackburn has a particular hatred for her--or if not her, then her people, at the very least. House Blackburn suffered the worst from those battles, in addition to clashing with Abolish around that time as well. I believe Darktide went on a veritable crusade sometime thereafter. A largely successful crusade, from what I have heard.'

"1693

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'Yeah, I'm familiar with some of his exploits,' said Voreese. 'He snuck into an Abolish fortress and killed two dudes who were pretty infamous at the time. Real malevolent bastards, those ones. I was following their careers because of an awful encounter I had with them several years earlier, so it was quite the pleasant surprise for me when I learned that some guy named Darktide had not only crushed them, but made 'em look like utter fools, too.'

That brought up a question that Hector wanted answered. "How do you



sneak into a fortress full of reapers? Wouldn't they sense any intruders immediately?"

'Yep,' said Voreese. 'That's one of the reasons why it was so impressive. According to what I learned, Darktide pretended to be a non-servant and allowed himself to be taken prisoner. Now, Abolish is known for not usually taking prisoners, but in this instance, they were kidnapping locals and using them for experimentation. Pretty horrific stuff, from what I heard. But essentially, Darktide was able to use their own shittiness against them. I always liked that thought. Can't wait to meet the guy. What's he like? Is he nice?'

"Uh," said Hector, "y-yeah, I guess. I only talked to him a little bit, but, er, I kinda like him."

'Hector is being modest,' said Garovel. 'They hit it off pretty well. I bet they'll get along famously, if and when they spend more time together.'

'Ooh, you're makin' me jealous,' said Voreese. 'I wonder if Roman'll be able to get along with him, too. Never can tell with that guy. Sometimes, he seems like he can make friends with anyone, but then he'll surprise you and totally ruin everything.'

'Are you sure that it is not YOU who has difficulty getting along with people?' said Axiolis.

'Psh, no. Everyone loves my ability to speak the truth in a straightforward and candid manner.'

'Straightforward and candid are two words that mean the same thing,' said Axiolis.

'Yeah, I know,' said Voreese. 'The redundancy enhances the ease of comprehension for the listener. Don't tell me you're a grammar purist, too.'

'More like a grammar appreciator,' said Axiolis.

'Oh, geez,' said Voreeze. 'You must be a blast at parties.'

'I imagine you must be, as well,' said Axiolis, 'on the rare occasion when someone invites you.'

And there was silence as Voreese merely stared at him for a moment. The only noise was that of Zeff's digging.

Then she gave an approving nod. 'Not bad, you uptight son of a bitch. That one actually kinda stung.'

'...I apologize if I caused offense,' said Axiolis.

Voreese laughed. 'Oh, fuck you! Don't try to take it back now! Just be proud and own it! That's what I'd do!'

'Why would I ever wish to model my behavior after yours?'

'There, you see?! That's more like it!'

A loud and abrupt crack sound intervened in the conversation, and everyone looked toward Zeff and saw the small breakthrough that he had finally made in the wall of black. They were so deep that the entire platform now fit into the greater hole that Zeff have carved out, but only now could they see light pouring through."

"1694

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It was a breakthrough, but not a large enough one. Voreese immediately volunteered to squeeze through and check on everyone, but Zeff didn't want any of the reapers going in on their own. So the group waited a while longer before the Lord Elroy finally managed to widen the hole enough to peek through, and ultimately, for a person to fit through.

Zeff made an icy staircase extending up from within the warehouse and connected it to Hector's platform. They all descended in single file with Zeff in the lead. Hector was slightly worried that a staircase made of solid ice would be rather perilous to walk on and so added a ribbed layer of iron to it.

The light source from within the warehouse turned out to be a tall lamp with several people clustered around it, all wearing climate suits, though none were donning their helmets.

Hector recognized a couple faces from House Sebolt, one from House Delaguna, two from House Blackburn, and after a moment, two from House Elroy. Marcos and Ramira Elroy stepped out from behind the others.

When they saw their father, their eyes lit up, and they ran to him. The man dropped to his knees and hugged both, a child for each arm.

Hector breathed a sigh of relief. It had only been a few days, but it felt like he hadn't seen them in ages, and it was certainly a load off his mind to finally see that they were okay. Their living conditions didn't look too bad, either. They had some chairs, the lamp, a pile of books to read, a cart full of food, and a bathroom.

There was still much to be done, however. Just this one warehouse

was loaded up with pods full of sleeping Rainlords, and getting them all out of here safely was not going to be an easy task. The first task, everyone agreed, was to find all the captive servants and free them so that they could assist in the effort. Certain servants like Dimas or Melchor might have been a priority, but the problem was that no one knew where any individual servant's brain was located. They only knew that they were all stored somewhere up in the rafters or in one of the other warehouses--all of which were currently filled with whatever that black material was.

Hector, Zeff, and Diego set to work trying to find and free the servants while Manuel got started removing the plethora of pods from the warehouse.

Hector didn't much care for the digging. Since they were only looking for servant brains this time, they didn't have to be quite as careful as Zeff had been earlier, but there was still the concern that they would run across a captive reaper and accidentally kill it. Not to mention all the slumbering Rainlords below could get hurt by any falling debris.

So it was an exercise in precision. And damn this black stuff was tough. Hector couldn't even put a dent in it without resorting to his orbiting technique, but he was simultaneously afraid of using that technique with the same level of intensity as he had against the worm. It was tricky, trying to find a happy medium. So tricky, in fact, that he only managed to find one brain by the time Zeff and Diego had each found four."

"1695

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Of course, none of those brains were going to be particularly helpful until they located the reapers that went with them, but it was a start.

At length, they began to get the impression that there were simply no reapers to be found in this building, so Zeff moved on to the next warehouse over while Hector and Diego continued trying dig out more servant brains.

'Hey, Voreese,' said Garovel after a while.

'Yeah?' she said, floating over to him and Hector.

‘What’s the name of the passage to the Undercrust beneath Warrenhold?’

‘Oh, I always just called it the Warrenhole,’ said Voreese.

‘Ha! I knew it! Hector, you owe me money.’

“No, I don’t.”

‘The proper name for the hole, though, is Do’orach,’ said Voreese.  
‘Proper name, as in the original one.’

‘Hmm,’ said Garovel. ‘Is that from the Apeirian language?’

‘Close. It’s Nykeirian, actually.’

‘Ah. Haven’t heard either of those languages spoken in, oh, must be almost two thousand years now.’

‘Yeah. They kinda died out with their empires.’

‘You wouldn’t happen to be Nykeirian yourself, would you?’

‘As a matter of fact, I am,’ said Voreese. ‘I was born toward the end of the empire. Never got to see it during its prime, sadly. Stories I’ve heard make it sound pretty wondrous. Though, they were probably overhyping it, the way legends tend to do.’

That brought a question to Hector’s mind regarding the builder of Warrenhold, so he stopped working for a moment to turn and look at Voreese. “Was Stasya Orlov, uh... was she N-Nykeirian, too?”

‘Ah, haven’t forgotten about her, huh? That makes me happy. But no, not exactly. She was a descendant of the then-displaced Nykeirian people, but she was born during the early Mohssian Empire and was therefore a product of the Mohssian culture. The Nykeirian culture disappeared pretty quickly into the larger melting pot that was the Mohssian one. Which sounds a bit sad, I suppose, but it was kind of ideal, actually. When different cultures are forced together but don’t blend and integrate properly... well, that’s oftentimes how we end up with things like institutionalized racism and generations-spanning wars.’

‘I have to agree,’ said Garovel.

Hector nodded, feeling like he more or less understood, and returned

to his digging while the two reapers kept talking.

It sure was dark up here, though. The tall lamp in the middle of the warehouse had been useful for a while, but now it was just too far away to help him see around all these hard angles and crevices. If only he had a way to light things up better.

Wait a minute. He did, didn't he?

He materialized a red hot cube above his hand, using the perpetually falling technique that Zeff and Asad had taught him. It worked pretty well, though it proved difficult to keep it perfectly still while he continued moving independently. Still, it illuminated the small cavern that he'd carved out for himself fairly well."

"1696

'We also wanted to ask you about how Warrenhold affects children,' said Garovel. 'Babies, in particular.'

That made Hector pay attention again.

'Mm,' hummed Voreese. 'You're worried that Stasya's pest control mechanism might negatively impact some of these Rainlord kids?'

'Pretty much.'

'That won't be a problem,' said Voreese. 'In fact, it'll have just the opposite effect. Instead of feeling immense discomfort, kids who grow up in Warrenhold will come to have a strong association between that unnatural sensation and "home." So it might seem a little counter-intuitive, but what ends up happening is that those kids become quite attached to Warrenhold when they're older.'

'Wow, really?'

'That is assuming, of course, that those kids don't have horrible lives at Warrenhold for other reasons. Basically, whatever kind of overall experience the kids have when they're very young will be amplified in their minds after their brains begin to mature.'

'I see. But this doesn't work for animals?'

'Nope.'

‘Any idea why?’

‘I think it has something to do with the human brain being much more capable of adaptation and self-protection. It’s probably a combination of things, I imagine.’

‘Interesting. So then, there must be a cut off point in a child’s age, right?’

‘Yes. It’s around thirteen years old, but it can vary a little. After that, you have to explain the effects to them like everyone else or they’ll start freaking out.’

‘Thirteen? That seems rather late. I assume it has something to do with puberty, then?’

‘Yeah, but I couldn’t tell you the exact reason why it works that way. It’s just what I’ve observed.’

‘So that means that Marcos and Ramira Elroy are still eligible for the little “nostalgia boost,” then,’ said Garovel.

‘That depends,’ said Voreese. ‘Are either of them servants yet?’

‘Oh. Yes. Marcos is.’

‘Then he’s not “eligible,” as you put it, because servants can’t even feel a difference in Warrenhold to begin with.’

‘Right. Okay.’

As he continued digging, Hector thought he glimpsed something in the dark material, and when he slammed a small iron spike into it another time, a chunk of the unknown element broke off, and Hector caught in his hand.

And, yep. In the opening it had left, he could see another brain waiting to be dug out. He eyed the material in his hand another time, though.

“Can either of you tell what this stuff is?” he asked. It was black and had a hard, shiny texture to it.

‘It’s different from the brown powdery material we saw outside the warehouses,’ said Garovel. ‘I suppose that could mean that we’re actually dealing with two materializers, but that’s not likely, is it?’

'No,' said Voreese. 'Roman definitely would've mentioned that. Even he's not so incompetent as to overlook a second opponent.'

'Then this black stuff and that brown stuff must be the same element,' said Garovel.

"How can that be?" said Hector.

'Because of allotropes,' said Garovel."

1697

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Hector looked between the two reapers. "Uh...?"

Voreese took the initiative. 'Allotropes are basically alternate versions of the same element. The most famous examples would probably be something like diamond and charcoal. Both of those things are just pure carbon, and yet they don't exactly look identical, do they? Those are carbon allotropes.'

Hector blinked at that. "Huh..." Now that he was thinking about it, he seemed to recall reading about something like this during the research he did a while back. He hadn't really looked into much further, though, perhaps because it hadn't immediately clicked for him like some other ideas had. "So, uh... how can a materialization user make different allotropes, then?"

'That IS the question, isn't it?' said Voreese, turning to Garovel. 'Do you know?'

'My understanding is that it takes an absolutely ridiculous level of precision. Which would make sense, because allotropes are only differentiated from one another by their atomic structure. So I imagine that the materializer would have to first be capable of manipulating their element on the atomic level.'

Hector's eyes widened as he tried to imagine that. "That... sounds kinda hard."

'No kidding,' said Garovel. 'I'm pretty sure it's a technique that only extremely old servants would be able to pull off. Otherwise, I would've had you trying to do it a long time ago.'



“Right...” Hector let the shiny black element fall from his hand and returned to digging.

‘Asad and Zeff may know more about it, of course. We can try asking them at the next opportunity, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up, if I were you. I know you’ve been improving by leaps and bounds lately, but let’s not get too full of ourselves just yet, eh?’

‘Speaking of,’ said Voreese. ‘What the hell is with all this orbiting stuff, huh? I’ve never seen shit like this before.’

‘Heh, well, perhaps I’ll explain that later,’ said Garovel.

‘Oh? Why not now?’

‘Eh. Don’t feel like it.’

‘What? Bullshit.’

‘No, it’s true. I really don’t feel like it.’

‘Pfft. You tryin’ to keep this shit a secret or something?’

‘I’m sure we have no idea what you’re talking about. Right, Hector?’

Hector just glanced at the two reapers and shrugged before going back his digging. With just a little more oomph, he was pretty sure he’d be able to pull the brain out.

He was a little amazed at how much it didn’t bother him, the sight of a human brain just sitting there in front of his face. It wasn’t pulsating or anything like that, but it was pretty squishy and slimy to the touch. Not to mention the smell.

He supposed he had just gotten used to seeing this kind of thing, though he couldn’t really recall a time when it did disturb him, either.

Hmm.

And abruptly, Hector found himself having one of those moments where he simply wondered how the hell he had ended up in this situation. Trying to dig brains out of a ceiling? That was definitely a new one. Certainly not something he’d ever imagined himself doing."

"1698

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

At length, a familiar reaper came flying into the warehouse and went straight for one of the brains on the ground. It was Iziol, Hector realized, reaper to the Lord Dimas Sebolt. As soon as the reaper touched the brain, the regeneration began. Veins and tissue and bone all gradually began to appear around the brain.

Hector lowered himself down. Knowing the process as well as he did from personal experience, Hector knew that Dimas was going to be butt naked by the time it was done and so decided to remove his own shirt in preparation for it. Just the shirt alone certainly wouldn't be enough, given how much taller the man was, but maybe bundled with some iron armor, it would suffice.

Before Dimas could even finish regenerating, however, more reapers began to arrive and resurrect their respective servants. Mevox, reaper to the Lord Salvador Delaguna. Ezura, reaper to the Lady Evangelina Stroud. Olijas, reaper to Carlos Sebolt. And more. The one Hector was really waiting on was Orric, for Melchor Blackburn, but by the time several of the servants were getting up, Orric had still not arrived.

On his feet again, Dimas looked down at the suit of armor that Hector had made for him. It wasn't a set of full plate like what Hector himself was wearing, but it didn't look too bad, Hector thought.

"Good to see you again, Lord Goffe," said Dimas.

Hector had already moved on to the next servant in need of concealment, that being the hulking figure of Lord Salvador. He threw a glance back toward Dimas and couldn't help smiling a little behind his faceguard. "Would you like a helmet like mine?" he asked.

Dimas seemed to think about it, then looked toward Iziol, who was busy talking to Garovel and Voreese. The man turned back to Hector and shrugged. "Sure."

Hector was happy to make one for him. It was a little weird, materializing a helmet onto another person, but he didn't struggle with it. He even decided to try something slightly different with it, making it more angular than his own and gave it a T-shaped opening in the faceguard. He momentarily considered giving the man horns, too, but he figured they might be impractical for combat. No sense in giving an

enemy something to grab onto.

“Sorry if it’s a little uncomfortable,” said Hector.

“It is fine,” said Dimas, now with the tinge of metal in his voice. “More importantly, where have you been? And what is happening?”

Thankfully, the reapers chose that moment to arrive, so Hector didn’t have to explain. They were more than happy to bring the Lord Sebolt up to speed, and soon, the man was up in the rafters, digging out more servants while Hector continued providing armor for each newly regenerated arrival.

As the crowd of familiar servants grew, so did their progress, and it wasn’t much longer before Hector finally noticed Orric there, already having located Melchor’s brain, apparently.”

"1699

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Hector made his way over to him and observed the slow regeneration of Darktide. “H-hello...”

‘Ah,’ said Orric. ‘Hello, Lord Goffe.’ The reaper looked around at the warehouse full of armored servants and gave a faint laugh. ‘I see you are building an army of knights.’

“It’s--ah, for, y’know--” He stopped and gathered his thoughts. Slow and deliberate speech, he reminded himself. “...I just figured they didn’t all want to walk around in the nude.”

‘Yes, I thought as much. It is good to see you are well.’

“Ah--same to you.”

Melchor’s torso had just about finished regenerating, so Hector materialized an iron breastplate for him and got a head start on making the crotch-guard so as to help preserve the man’s dignity.

Hector had a question in mind for Orric. “...So you and Melchor fought this Leo guy?”

‘We did,’ said Orric. ‘And by that question, am I to assume he is still at

large?’

“Yeah,” said Hector. “What can you tell me about him?”

‘Only that he is frighteningly skillful with materialization, though you might not guess it by looking at him. Not the most physically intimidating of specimens, but not to be underestimated, either. Clearly.’

“Were you able to figure out what his element is?”

‘I believe it may be boron, but I could be mistaken. The battle did not last very long.’

Boron? Hector didn’t know a damn thing about that element. “...Did he attack you guys without warning?”

‘Not exactly. He announced himself first, saying that he wanted us to help him with Sai-hee, but we did not find that very agreeable. THEN he attacked. In the middle of his own sentence. I can only presume that he did not like how negotiations were going, but even though we were mostly on our guard, that tactic still managed to catch us by surprise. Like I said, he did not look intimidating.’

“I see...”

Melchor’s body was mostly complete, as was the armor that Hector made for him. Darktide sat up with a groan and rubbed his forehead.

‘How are you feeling?’ said Orric.

“I’ve been better...” Melchor noticed his iron armor. Then he noticed Hector standing there. “Ah...”

“Hi,” said Hector plainly. He offered the man a hand to help him to his feet.

“That is alright,” said Melchor and stood up on his own. “What have I missed?”

Hector struggled his way through an explanation, until again, Garovel and Voreese arrived to help him. At that point, Hector considered returning to the ceiling to help dig out more brains, but from the looks of things, the others had it covered. There wasn’t much ceiling left to dig through, anymore.

‘So you’re the famous Darktide, eh?’ said Voreese. ‘It’s an honor to

make your acquaintance.'

"Ah. Likewise." The man sounded tired. Hector couldn't blame him. The guy had been through just as many fights recently as Hector had, and he'd been right at the heart of them all, too.

Phew. Thinking about all that made Hector remember how exhausted he was, too."

"1700

'Oh, I doubt you consider it as much of an honor as I do,' said Voreese. 'If I'm being completely honest here, I'm a bit of a fangirl of yours.'

Melchor just raised a thick eyebrow at that.

'I'm an admirer of a lot of the ass kicking you've done, especially against Abolish. I remember hearing news of your exploits a few times over the years, and they were usually pretty damn cathartic. If I still had tits, I'd totally ask you sign them for me, right now.'

The man looked briefly at the young Lord Darksteel, but Hector didn't have anything for him. "Ah... um... I see," said Melchor. "Thank you for those... kind words."

'Yeah, no problem,' said Voreese.

The pleasantries didn't last much longer, and Melchor soon joined the rest of the servants in trying to free everyone. For a second, Hector thought the guy and his reaper might use pan-rozum to aid in the process, but they didn't. No doubt, they didn't want to deal with the exhaustive consequences of it, in case they ended up needing to fight soon.

The last few weeks must have been especially crazy and confusing from that guy's perspective, Hector figured. Melchor Blackburn had probably spent the majority of it unconscious and been continuously woken up just before another fight broke out.

Hector hoped everyone would be getting some well-deserved rest once they finally made it back to Warrenhold. There would still be plenty of things to be concerned about, of course--not the least of which was the other large group of Rainlords who'd been captured by

the Gargoyle of Korgum at Rheinhal--but at least they wouldn't have to worry about being attacked at Warrenhold.

Probably.

The notion of Warrenhold coming under siege, too, had not really crossed his mind before. But it was definitely something that he should've been giving some thought to, he now figured.

Lord of Warrenhold, huh? Protecting it was on him. No doubt about that. And with the kind of enemies that could end up knocking on his door, combat strength alone probably wasn't going to be enough.

At least, not their current level of combat strength.

Hmm.

And of course, there was still the matter of what the hell he was going to tell the Queen. This probably wasn't something he should try to keep her in the dark about. Hell, she'd been looking for strong allies to help her protect Atreya in the future. Maybe he and Garovel would be able to convince her that this was a positive development in that regard.

There was also the restoration of Warrenhold itself to consider. The glimpse he'd gotten of its repairs had been nice, but he knew there were still quite a few places in total shambles.

Ugh. So much to take care of. He was pretty sure he was forgetting a few things at the moment, too.

Whatever. For now, it was nice to be able to just assist the Rainlords in extricating all these climate pods from the warehouses. The pods were still covered in the myriad of shields he'd made when he had arrived in the Undercrust. Maybe a few had fallen off here or there, but the pods still looked pretty well-protected, all things considered, and the Rainlords weren't bothering to remove the shields, either, despite how much more unwieldy they made them."

"1701

Soon, everything was moving. The warehouses were bustling with dozens of servants working together, and there was a feeling that they were finally making good progress. The pods were only being removed

from the buildings and placed on the other side of the layer of brown dirt, but it was a start.

He eventually spotted Asad and his family moving among the crowd. They were especially noticeable because of their robes, which Hector was surprised to see were still intact, unlike almost everyone else's clothes. He would've liked to say hello, but they already seemed pretty invested in helping with the evacuation effort. The Lord Najir did take notice of him, however, despite how many other servants were wearing armor similar to his; and when the tattooed man offered him an acknowledging wave, Hector was quite pleased to return one of his own.

As the work continued, Hector also thought to ask Garovel about the threat potential of boron, but the reaper just said it wasn't a particularly volatile element, as far as he was aware. Then he asked Garovel if anyone present might have some sort of elemental advantage against it, but the reaper didn't think so.

'Maybe if someone here could materialize pure hydrogen,' said Garovel. 'Though, that might be more of a double-edged sword than an actual advantage.'

The closer they got to completing the evacuation, the more Hector worried that bad news would arrive at any moment. Maybe it was just his natural pessimism, or maybe it was an entirely rational adaptation to his lifestyle, but whatever it was, he kept expecting to hear Voreese suddenly tell everyone that Leo was on his way or that a feldeath was about to rip Capaporo to pieces or something.

But to Hector's immense surprise and relief, that didn't happen.

They finished removing all of the climate pods safely from the warehouse--by which time, Zeff and Axiolis had already begun leading a trail of Rainlords back towards Warrenhold. Manuel and Lorios led another entourage shortly thereafter, followed by Diego and Yangéra, and finally Hector and Garovel.

And since he was bringing up the rear, Hector ended up with perhaps more than his fair share of some of those powerful Rainlords in his group, including Melchor and several of the top Blackburns, Dimas and several of the top Sebolts, and Evangelina Stroud by herself. The rest of her family members were still captives of the Vanguard, after all.

The woman seemed to be in relatively high spirits, however.

"I have never worn armor like this before," she said, clad head to toe in full iron plate like pretty much everyone else in their party. "It is a bit restrictive, but I can see why you appear so fond of it."

Hector wasn't sure what to say. Materializing armor that fit the female form had easily been his most harrowing experience today, but he was glad that she seemed to like it. She was even carrying one of his shields."

"1702

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

'That is not entirely true, now is it?' said Ezura, the woman's reaper. 'I vividly remember you putting on Lord Romero's armor when you were a little girl. Or TRYING to, at least.' The reaper laughed.

"Oh, I had forgotten all about that," said the Lady Stroud. She eyed Hector through her dotted faceguard. "I was quite the tomboy in my youth, you know."

"...Think I'd be more surprised if you hadn't been," said Hector.

"Excuse me?!" the woman tittered.

"Ah--uh... s-sorry, I didn't mean that in a bad way..."

"Hmph! While it may be true that I have not acted in the most ladylike manner of late, I assure you that I have many traditionally feminine qualities."

"...I, ah, o-okay."

"Why do you sound so doubtful?"

"I--er--I don't. This is just how I sound."

'What "traditionally feminine qualities" might you be talking about, I wonder?' said Ezura.

Evangelina held up a gauntleted finger. "Do not even start."

'I am simply curious,' said Ezura.



“Don’t listen to them, Angie,” said Melchor, coming up on Hector’s right as they ascended a staircase that was wider than most others in Capaporo. “I have always thought you to be very feminine.”

“Thank you!” she said.

‘Perhaps YOU can provide examples of such qualities, then,’ said Ezura.

Melchor hesitated visibly.

Evangelina slowed her walking pace a little to put herself in stride with Melchor, looking abruptly even more eager to hear his response than Ezura was.

“Well,” said Melchor. “Obviously. Um. She likes wearing beautiful dresses.”

‘Uh-huh,’ said Ezura. ‘Is that all?’

“Of course not. She also... likes to shop, right?”

“Yes! I go shopping with my friends all the time!”

‘Okay, that’s two things. What else?’

“Ah... She is very... uh... agh, I did not realize this was going to be a quiz.”

“I hate sports! That counts, does it not?!”

‘I don’t know,’ said Ezura. ‘What does the young Lord Goffe think?’

At this point, Hector just wanted to run away. “I... I don’t think anything. At all, really.”

Garovel floated over from a conversation with Dimas and Iziol. ‘Are you guys giving my servant a hard time? I’ll have you know, I don’t appreciate people doing my job for me.’

‘It is mostly Evangelina whom I am trying to give a hard time,’ said Ezura, unable to completely conceal her giggling, ‘but I must admit, your young lord from Atreya is quite the tempting specimen in that regard, as well.’

‘Oh, I know, right?!’ Now it was Voreese’s turn to chime in, apparently. ‘Lemme get in on this action, too! Hey, Hector! If you had to bang any

Rainlord right now, who would it be?’

‘Pardon me,’ said Iziol, hovering closer with Dimas behind him, ‘but who is this woman, exactly, and why is she so vulgar?’

‘Didn’t I tell you my name earlier?’ said Voreese. ‘Don’t tell me you forgot already. The fuck kinda reaper are you?’

‘The polite and civilized kind,’ said Iziol.

‘Oho! Well, la-dee-fucking-da!’

"1703

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

‘I find you very unpleasant,’ said Iziol.

‘Been called a lot worse than that, honey,’ said Voreese. ‘Why, even just today. A couple hours ago, my servant called me a moldy bitch.’

‘It sounds like the two of you are made for one another, then.’

‘Heh. Maybe. He can be a big ol’ shithead, sometimes.’

‘Hmph,’ said Iziol. ‘Have you met Mevox yet? I imagine you and he would either get along famously or try to tear each other to pieces.’

‘Is that so? Mevox, huh? I’ve not yet had the pleasure, but with an endorsement like that, I gotta admit, you’re makin’ me curious. Where is this guy? He isn’t here with us right now, is he?’

‘No, he is not. He is the reaper of Lord Salvador Delaguna, so naturally, he went with the rest of House Delaguna.’

‘Pity,’ said Voreese. ‘I’m always happy to meet a fellow shit talker.’

‘I am sure you will get your chance,’ said Iziol.

As Hector might have expected with so many reapers in such close proximity to one another, the servants ended up not getting much opportunity to chime in. No one seemed to mind, however. The reapers made for pretty good entertainment during the rather long and winding trek back up the great pit of Capaporo.

The group's progress was a bit on the slow side, due to the many climate pods they were bringing along. Dimas took care of the most impressive portion on his own. His alteration ability to manipulate gravity was pretty much perfect for the task, allowing the man to have a veritable fleet of pods following the group in midair.

Everyone else was carrying at least one pod as well. There were no non-servants walking with the group, as those had all departed earlier with Zeff.

They drew many a strange look from the inhabitants of Capaporo, and fellow pedestrians were quick to make way for them.

One thing that Hector had yet to see in the Undercrust was a car. Aside from trains, he hadn't noticed vehicles of any sort. He supposed it made sense for Capaporo, given how narrow the streets were here, but what was Babbadelo's reason? He wanted to ask Garovel about it, but the reaper was already occupied with another conversation.

He did eventually notice a large set of elevators, however--not large enough for the group to comfortably board with all of their climate pods, unfortunately, but it was something, at least. Hector wondered how he hadn't seen them on the way down earlier, and perhaps the immense crowd in the area was the explanation. He must have missed it because of all the bodies blocking his view.

He was still convinced that this city was in desperate need of some good bridges, though. No amount of elevators would change his mind about that.

Eventually, they reached the top of the giant pit again, and gingerly navigated their way through the even narrower side streets that led back up to the long path toward Warrenhold. There was still a ways to go yet, but they'd finally made it out of Capaporo, at least."

"1704

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

They managed to quicken their pace now that they had left the city behind. The lighting was much poorer here, but with so much more open space, Hector was able to carry the whole party forward on a growing platform. It was similar to the technique that Zeff had used to

carry the group TO Capaporo earlier that day, though Hector wasn't trying to make his move at the same breakneck speed that Zeff's had.

At this pace, it would probably be a few more hours before they reached that same big cavern with all the branching pathways, Hector figured. If they were able to make it that far, though, then it would be a straight shot the rest of the way to Warrenhold.

From the corner of his helmet's opening, Hector could see Voreese staring at him. She wasn't saying anything, though, which was certainly unlike her.

He wanted to ask her if something was wrong, but the noise of the rushing wind would have made it impractical, so he asked Garovel to do it for him.

'You're awfully quiet all of a sudden,' the reaper told her.

She finally moved her empty eye sockets away from Hector. 'Hmm? Oh. Yeah. Just thinkin' about stuff. Why? You got something you want to talk about?'

'More like, I was wondering if YOU did,' said Garovel.

'Not as of yet,' said Voreese.

Garovel pushed a little more after that, but she would say nothing else.

Hector had a dreadful feeling that he knew what could be bothering her, and as the hours passed, he became increasingly convinced of it. By the time they reached the cavern of split paths, he could hold his tongue no longer and brought the group to a stop.

Everyone was looking at him now, but he was prepared for it.

"Voreese," he said softly. "Where's Roman?"

'He's with Leo,' she said.

"...He still hasn't managed to sneak away?" said Hector. "It's been hours since we left Capaporo."

'Well, he can't just run, now can he? Leo would obviously notice that. So he's waiting for Leo to go to sleep.'

Hector found that strange. "...Will it really be that easy? What if Leo checks on the warehouses and sees that everyone's gone? He'll

probably suspect Roman immediately.”

‘...That is a possibility,’ said Voreese.

‘Why doesn’t he just destroy his own brain?’ said Iziol. ‘It is a grisly tactic, I know, but quite useful for these types of situations.’

‘He’s never done that before,’ said Voreese. ‘He’s worried he’ll screw it up and accidentally let Leo capture him.’

‘I see,’ said Iziol, glancing at his own servant. ‘I suppose it CAN be a little tricky.’

“Okay,” said Hector, raising up an iron chair for himself to sit down in. “I’ll wait for him here. Garovel can show you guys the rest of the way. It’s not that far now.””

"1705

‘What?’ said Voreese. ‘There’s no need for that. I’m sure Roman will manage. He’s a resourceful guy.’

“I know,” said Hector, folding his arms. “I’m just... eager to see him again, I guess.” He didn’t remove his eyes from Voreese, however.

“If you are waiting, then I will wait with you,” said Evangelina.

Hector held up a hand. “No, please--I want you all to go get some rest. And some food. Please.”

Melchor stepped toward him now. “It hardly seems appropriate that we should return without our host. You are not concerned we will make a mess of things?”

‘Yeah, we’re pretty good at making messes,’ said Orric.

‘No need to worry about that,’ said Garovel, though he was staring at Hector. ‘Warrenhold is a bit of a mess already. We’re in the middle of trying to restore it. That being said, though, we’d prefer it if you didn’t make more work for us.’

“Ah--yeah,” added Hector. “Just promise me you’ll behave yourselves.” He meant that as a joke and so tried to force out a meager laugh to make that more apparent, but the sound didn’t quite manifest from his

throat properly. Somehow, it ended up sounding more like a sigh.

And for a few moments thereafter, none of the Rainlords responded.

Aw, shit. Had he just pissed them off?

Agh. He should've known better than to try and force a joke out in an otherwise serious conversation. That was something he should just leave to the reapers, he decided.

Iziol was the first one to speak up again. 'Is there some reason to be concerned about the well-being of Voreese's servant?'

Everyone looked at Voreese.

Her head reared back a little at all the sudden attention. 'I'm telling you, he's fine. He's just biding his time.'

Everyone looked back at Hector.

"Okay," said the Lord Goffe. "Then ask him something for me."

Voreese stared back at him steadily.

"...What did he say to me just before the Battle at Rathmore's Gate?" said Hector.

Everyone looked back to Voreese again.

Her skeletal face twisted with irritation. 'Agh! Fuck you, Hector! Why do you gotta call me out like this, huh?!'

Hector wasn't having any of it, though. "Why were you lying?" he said firmly.

'Ugh! Why do you think?! For your own good, obviously!'

"If Roman needs help, then--"

'Then, what?! What, huh?! You're gonna go help him?! How, exactly?! This Leo guy is one of Sai-hee's strongest people! One of the strongest people in the whole world, in other words! How do you plan to deal with that?!'

Hector didn't say anything.

'I mean, would I like you guys to go and rescue him for me?' said

Voreese. 'Of course I would! But Leo already made you all his bitches once before!' After a beat, she added, 'No offense.'

"1706 -- CLXXXII.

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

Orric hovered closer to Hector. 'If we did decide to mount a counterattack, we would have the element of surprise this time. It would not be like it was before.'

'Oh, don't give me that shit!' said Voreese. 'You also don't have nearly as many fighters as you did before! Or do you plan to go to Warrenhold and get everyone to rejoin us first? All so you can rescue a single servant you know nothing about? A servant whose reaper isn't even in danger? Get real.'

Izior chimed in now. 'Are you truly saying that you do not mind leaving your servant behind?'

'Of course I'm not saying that! But putting yourselves in danger for him makes no goddamn sense! So don't try and pretend that it does just so you can feel all noble and shit!'

"She is right," said Melchor. "We have no reason to rescue this man, and it would be incredibly dangerous. We have our own people to think of."

"I agree," said Evangelina, eyeing Hector now. "Harsh as it may be, I do not think we should get involved. Facing Leo again would be ill-advised, especially so soon after our previous encounter."

'I have to concur as well,' added Ezura. 'The risk far outweighs the benefit, and we have already lost far too much in recent days.'

At that, no one said anything for a while, not even Voreese.

"...That's fine," said Hector, drawing everyone's gaze one more time. "You guys don't have a reason to go after him. But I do."

'Hector,' said Garovel privately. 'What are you--?'

"Honestly, I didn't want to bring you guys back to Capaporo with me, anyway," said Hector. "Just head to Warrenhold and get some rest. I'll

take care of this.”

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Two: ‘O, resolute Iron...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

‘You’ll “take care” of it?!’ said Voreese. ‘Are you fucking kidding me?! I already asked before, didn’t I?! How the fuck do you plan on pulling that off, huh?!’

That was a very good question. And since Hector wasn’t entirely sure of the answer, he instead decided to say, “Don’t worry. I have experience with this sort of thing.”

‘What the fuck?! You have experience with--?! Are you--?! Wh--?!’

Amazingly enough, she seemed to be lost for words. Perhaps she was suddenly remembering what Garovel had told her about their recent adventures.

Hector was more concerned about how the Rainlords would react, however. He genuinely had no idea what they were going to do.

Currently, they were simply looking at him, not moving or saying anything.

‘Hector,’ came Garovel’s private voice again, ‘what the fuck are you doing?’

Again, another very good question. He answered it with the only thing that came to mind. ‘I’m not leaving Roman behind, Garovel. It’s my fault he even came here in the first place.’

‘Agh--that’s true, but--’

Now Garovel seemed lost for words as well.

Hmm.

Two for two. Hector felt pretty good about that."  
"1706 -- CLXXXII.



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'Agh--that's true, but--'

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Hmm.

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"1707

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

Melchor was the one to break the silence. "...Do you truly believe that you can defeat Leo on your own?"

Absolutely fucking not. But admitting that so bluntly was probably a bad idea, Hector felt. He had the feeling that they wouldn't let him go if

he didn't act like he knew what he was doing.

So the lie here would have to be convincing. And acting overly confident in his own power would not be convincing, Hector felt. Strong people like Evangelina, Dimas, and Melchor wouldn't be swayed by boasting. No doubt, they'd seen plenty of people talk a big game in the past and then not be able to deliver.

No, in that moment, Hector felt like he had to strike a particular balance between self-certainty and pragmatism. That was what he had to project, if he was to have any hope of being allowed to go after Roman on his own.

Which meant the question of whether or not he believed he could defeat Leo by himself was a crucial one.

"Maybe," Hector decided to say, "but I probably won't bother fighting him. My goal isn't to test my strength. It's to get Roman back. And fighting isn't the only way to accomplish that."

Darktide just stared at him, not saying anything.

Was that good? Did he buy it? Hector couldn't tell. Agh. It seemed like every old servant had an incredible poker face.

Evangelina chose to say something now. "If not by fighting, then what do you intend to do?"

Oof. He hadn't fully figured that out yet, but again, admitting as much seemed like a bad idea.

"I... can't tell you," said Hector.

"Excuse me?" said Evangelina, sounding irritated. "Why can you not tell us?"

He decided to borrow a tactic from Asad and Qorvass again. "Trade secret," he said.

"Ridiculous," she said. "Tell us your plan now."

"...No."

It was a bit hard to tell through her faceguard, but she did not look happy.

Okay, maybe saying all of that was a stupid thing to do, but Hector

couldn't help feeling that, of the two options available to him, it was better to come across as cagey than as lacking a concrete plan.

Everyone was being quiet again.

Hmm. Maybe they needed some reassurance.

"I won't do anything stupid," Hector lied, knowing that he was already doing that. "You don't need to worry. And besides, er, it'll be easier if I go by myself, because Leo won't know who I am. If I bring you guys along, he'll recognize you immediately and probably just attack us." Huh. That seemed like a surprisingly good point, Hector felt. He had kind of been thinking that all along, he supposed, but it sure would have been nice if he could have articulated it earlier.

'Does that mean you intend to negotiate with him?' said Orric.

Aw, shit. Why did they have to read so much into it?

"Ah... maybe," said Hector again. "If I have to. Look, uh, that's not important. Just let me handle this, okay?" And one more lie to top it all off. "I know what I'm doing."

He was starting to feel like a really bad person with all this lying. And also maybe a dumbass."

"1708

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

One of the several other servants who had been watching but not saying anything up to now decided to speak up. "Well, if Lord Goffe believes he can do it, then..." It was one of the Blackburn women. Silvia, Hector was pretty sure.

He was surprised to hear her say that, as well, considering she'd actually seen him fight, all the way back in Luzo. She couldn't have been very impressed by his prowess back then, either, considering Asad had done all the heavy lifting in that battle.

Strange. Hector wondered what had changed her view of him.

Though, perhaps it would make more sense if nothing had. Maybe her view of him hadn't changed at all, and she was simply saying that

because she didn't give two shits about the current situation and just wanted to move things along so that her family could get to safety.

Yeah, Hector found that much more believable. Aside from Melchor and occasionally Horatio, the Blackburns were noticeably different from the other Rainlords. More withdrawn. Even now, Hector could see it in the way they were standing so close together, especially around the Lady Nere. She was wearing full iron armor like everyone else, but Hector could still easily pick her out of the crowd from her body language alone. That slumped posture, the frequently downcast gaze. From what he'd heard, she'd been that way ever since leaving Dunehall.

Dunehall, where her husband Ismael had been killed, and her son Ibai had gone missing, in addition to all of the other casualties her House had suffered.

Hector certainly couldn't blame the Blackburns for seeming that much more protective of her now.

A few other voices arose in agreement with Silvia, more Blackburns and a few Sebolts as well, until at length, Evangelina Stroud spoke up again.

"Fine." She tapped Hector on the pate of his helmet with the iron knuckle of her own gauntlet. "We will go. But do not tarry long. Else you give us reason to come looking for you." She turned and started walking away.

Hector was too busy blinking to come up with a response. She'd actually agreed? He'd expected her to be the most difficult to convince.

The other Rainlords began following her, reapers included, but Dimas and Melchor lingered a bit longer, as did Voreese, Garovel, Iziol, and Orric.

'This is moronic,' said Voreese. 'You can't possibly... agh, I mean, I'm grateful, but... Hector, what the fuck?'

"I'll need you to point me toward Roman," said Hector. "I hope you won't mind coming with me part of the way, at least."

'Of course I won't mind, you piece of shit! But--! Argh!'

Melchor stepped closer to him. "What if you do not return?"

Hector didn't know how to answer that.

"If you are captured," said Melchor, "and if we are unable to locate or otherwise retrieve your brain... in such a circumstance, is there something you would like us to do for you? As a final request?"

Oh. Hmm."

"1709

Hector thought about it a moment. "If that happens, then... please look after Warrenhold for me. There are, uh... only three people living there, right now. My mother, a woman named Amelia Carthrace, and a man named Jamal Easton. But... ah..."

"I understand," said Melchor.

'It would be our honor to protect them,' said Orric.

"But not our preference," said Dimas, which was perhaps the first thing that Hector had heard him say since Capaporo. "Please do not get captured."

Hector just gave him a nod.

After that, Melchor and Dimas turned to leave, and Orric and Izio followed suit.

Mr. Easton was probably going to be quite overwhelmed with all of these guests. Hector had never actually told the man directly they would be arriving, but he was fairly certain Mr. Easton already knew. Asad's wife and son should have conveyed that message when they first arrived.

Probably.

One more thing to worry about later, he supposed.

Only Garovel and Voreese now remained.

'Huh,' said Garovel aloud. 'Shall we head back to Capaporo, then?'

Hector eyed him. "Garovel..."

‘They don’t need me to guide them. They know the correct direction now, and from here, it’s a straight shot back to Warrenhold.’

“That doesn’t change the fact that it’s too dangerous to bring you.”

‘I’ll keep my distance and observe from afar,’ said Garovel. ‘It’s like you said. Leo doesn’t know who you are. He won’t know who I am, either, or that you’re my servant. Or that you even ARE a servant.’

Hector frowned.

‘And considering how apparently reluctant you were to share your plan with everyone, I have a feeling that you don’t actually HAVE a plan. Or, at least not one that doesn’t sound completely insane. Am I close?’

Hector didn’t say anything and just glanced at Voreese.

Voreese was already looking at Garovel, though. ‘You’re not exactly filling me with confidence over here, sayin’ shit like that.’

‘All I’m saying is, it wouldn’t hurt to come up with a sound plan.’

“Do you have some suggestions?” said Hector.

‘Let’s move while we talk,’ said Garovel. ‘It’ll take a few hours to get back there.’

That was a good point, Hector supposed. He still didn’t really want to bring Garovel along, but as long as the reaper intended to keep his distance when the time came, there wasn’t much actual justification for leaving him behind.

This time, he pushed himself for a faster pace. Without all the climate pods in tow, he no longer had to worry about having a delicate touch. He simply let the two reapers attach themselves to him beneath his cooling variant armor, and then they blasted off toward Capaporo again, as fast as his iron could carry him.

‘So the fact that Leo doesn’t know who you are may be our greatest advantage,’ said Garovel.

‘Are you thinking Hector can just sneak up and yoink Roman away from him?’ said Voreese.”

"1710

'That is exactly what I am thinking, yes,' said Garovel. 'If Hector can find a good opening, he might not even have to get very close to Leo in the first place. Assuming that Roman is just a frozen head or brain at the moment, then Hector could use materialization to punt Roman over to himself like a kickball.'

'And then we all escape without ever being noticed?' said Voreese.

'Ideally.'

'Yeah, sure, sounds great. In theory.'

'Yes. In theory.'

Hector might have said the same thing, if not for the howl of the wind rushing past.

The reapers continued to strategize for the length of the journey, and Hector mostly just listened while occasionally sharing his thoughts with Garovel. The consensus seemed to be that it would be best if Leo never even noticed they were there in the first place, but that was also where the main concern lay. If, for whatever reason, Leo did notice Hector, what the hell was he going to do?

They came up with a few different plans for that, though neither of the reapers sounded terrifically confident in them. Part of the reason for that was probably because of how little they actually knew about Leo. None of them had ever even met the guy, so it was hard to guess how he would react to any hypothetical situation.

They did know that he hadn't permanently harmed any of the Rainlords, however. And that was important, Hector felt. Leo had gone through a fair amount of trouble to make sure that the non-servants were taken care of during their captivity. Even some who were servants, like Marcos Elroy, had not been harmed. Though, perhaps Leo simply couldn't tell that Marcos was a servant just by looking at him. The boy was extremely young and probably hadn't participated in the fighting, after all.

All in all, that spoke quite a bit about Leo's character, Hector thought, when it probably would've been so much easier to just kill them.



Unless, of course, Leo knew that Sai-hee would want them all alive for some reason.

Bah.

Best not to assume too much, Hector supposed. If nothing else, though, at least he could take mild comfort in the fact that he wasn't dealing with another one of those maniacs from Abolish.

When they finally made it back to Capaporo again, Hector eased to a stop near the narrow staircase that led down into the city and looked over the enormous pit again. "Can either of you sense Roman's location yet?"

'If he's really just a brain right now, then it'll be tougher to sense his soul,' said Voreese. 'But he should be closer to the bottom of the pit, at least.'

Hector took the staircase, trying to keep a brisk pace as he looked for the same path downward that they'd used earlier. "Why would his soul be more difficult to sense? Is there, like, less of it or something?"  
"1711

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

'Sort of, but not exactly,' said Garovel. 'It's tough to explain in physical terms, but you can kind of imagine the soul as being like water, and the body being like a vessel that it conforms to the shape of. Or in other words, as reapers, we "see" souls in the shape of the body they reside within. So the smaller that body is, the more difficult it becomes to notice, especially in a crowd.'

"Huh..."

'Also, that's not a perfect analogy, by the way, because water still has physical volume, and souls do not. At least, not as far as I know. So a smaller vessel would be able to contain less water, but it's not the same with souls. Your soul doesn't start leaking out of your arm if you get it chopped off. It just conforms to the new shape of your body.'

"Oh. Right..."

Hector navigated his way downward again. There seemed to be more

Hun'Kui on these upper levels than there were the last time, and they didn't all look like they were in the middle of going somewhere this time, either. Many of them were simply loitering and chatting. Maybe they'd all been at work earlier. Or school. He couldn't really tell if any of the Hun'Kui were teenagers or adults.

Regardless, it was a bit of an inconvenience for him, because it meant more eyes on him. It seemed like he was drawing much more attention than he had before, despite the fact that he'd been part of a rather large party the last time. He would've thought it would be easier to keep a low profile, not harder.

Maybe that was just a feeling, though, and not the actual truth. Maybe there'd been plenty of people noticing them last time, but they'd just been too afraid to stare, and now that he was alone, he was much less intimidating.

Hmm.

It only got more crowded as he descended. The elevators were even more jam-packed than before, so he avoided them. He briefly considered leaping over the edge of the pit and catching himself with his iron, but he didn't think that would help him keep a low profile, which he was having a hard enough time with already.

'Ah,' said Voreese at length, 'I can sense Leo.'

"Leo?" said Hector, trying to whisper so as not to draw the attention of a big Hun'Kui family walking by. It didn't work. "Not Roman?"

'Hmm. Ah, yeah, I can sense Roman, too. He's with him.'

Hector was still confused, though. "But how can you sense Leo? I thought you never met him."

'Those warehouses that he used to imprison everybody,' said Voreese. 'He soul-strengthened his material there. I memorized his soul based on that.'

"Oh..." Hector wouldn't have even thought of that.

'Follow me,' said Voreese, taking a path to the right that wasn't even visible because of the crowd.

Hector gently pushed his way through and went after her."

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Another long staircase awaited, and Hector descended toward another of the climate-controlled zones. Garovel hovered by his side, and Hector tried to keep him in his peripheral vision, right at the edge of the eye slit in his helmet.

‘By the way,’ said Voreese, slowing her pace to match Hector’s, ‘there’s something I forgot to tell you.’

Garovel answered for the both of them. ‘What’s that?’

‘Um. Well. Okay. First, you have to promise not to get upset.’

‘Voreese... What did you do?’

‘Excuse me, but that doesn’t sound like a promise.’

‘And you’re not gonna get one. What did you do?’

‘Agh. Well. It’s nothing, really. It’s just. You see. I may have. Um. Told Roman to. Tell Leo. A few things.’

‘Uh-huh. What things?’

‘Things about Hector.’

Garovel stopped. ‘What?! Why?!’

Voreese and Hector both stopped as well.

‘It was supposed to be part of a backup plan,’ she said, ‘in case Leo caught us in the middle of trying to free your Rainlord pals. I figured fighting in that situation would’ve been less than ideal, so it might’ve been worth a shot to just bluff our way out. If we got him to believe that Hector was some sort of super badass, then maybe Leo would back down. Or join us.’

‘Join us?!’ said Garovel.

‘Yeah, Roman tried to hire him earlier. Did I not mention that?’

‘No, you didn’t!’

‘Ah. My bad.’

‘Voreese!’

‘Leo said he didn’t want to work for someone who was weaker than him, so I figured, maybe, y’know, with all that crazy shit you were tellin’ me earlier, we could preemptively build Hector up as someone who Leo might think was strong enough to work for.’

Garovel groaned but steadied his voice. ‘Why didn’t you tell us this earlier?’

‘I’m telling you now.’

‘This might’ve been nice to know while we were brainstorming on the way here.’

‘Oh, I doubt it would’ve helped. You’d have just gotten mad at me like you are right now, which would’ve made it harder for you to think rationally.’

‘What a load of horseshit.’

‘Look, I’m sorry, okay?! It seemed like a good plan at the time!’

‘How much did Roman tell him, exactly?’

‘Not that much. Just, y’know, about those things you told me. Meeting Ivan. Killing worms ‘n stuff. Also, Leo might be thinking that the Rainlords are, um... following Hector as their new leader.’

Hector’s eyes widened, and he stared at her.

‘Voreese, are you fucking kidding me, right now?’ said Garovel.

‘Well, Leo had already fought the Rainlords! So obviously, I had to make Hector more powerful than them! Wouldn’t have been believable otherwise!’

‘Ugh...’ Garovel paused for another sigh and perhaps also just to think. ‘Did Roman tell him what Hector looks like?’

She hesitated. ‘...A little bit.’”

"1713

‘Elaborate,’ said Garovel flatly.

‘I just had Roman mention that Hector looks super young for his level of strength, and... that he’s black.’

Garovel lost his composure again. ‘That’s NOT a little bit, Voreese! Hector’s probably the only black person in Capaporo, right now!’

‘Eh, I mean, that’s debatable, isn’t it? The Hun’Kui sort of count as black, right? Ashy gray tones ‘n whatnot.’

‘I can’t believe you.’

‘Hey, it’s not like Leo knows we’re coming. Or what you and I look like. As long as Hector stays out of sight, we can still get the jump on him.’

‘This means that if he DOES spot Hector, then Hector can no longer pretend to be someone else. Someone who, for example, is NOT connected to the Rainlords whom Leo is probably very upset about losing track of.’

‘Yeah, that would be a problem,’ said Voreese. ‘But on the bright side, Leo could be too scared to fight Hector now.’

‘Oh, sure, and he might also decide to give us a trillion fucking troas for no reason.’

In spite of everything, the party of three soon continued onward and entered the climate-controlled zone. Hector removed his cooling variant armor and decided not to remake it in its normal form. It would be too noisy, he felt, and considering everything that they had just learned, stealth seemed more important than ever. He did remake a few pieces of the armor, though, for modesty’s sake. Walking around half-naked wouldn’t have been very stealthy, either.

After a few more flights of stairs and several white-and-silver corridors, Voreese finally began to slow down.

‘Leo’s just up here to the left,’ she said.

Hector reached the apparent corner in question and took a breath to gather himself. He poked his head around for a peek.

Thankfully, the crowd wasn’t nearly as dense in this area, so it was

easy to discern who Leo must have been. There was no one else around the man with dreadlocks as he sat on a bench in front of a glassy wall.

No. Not just a wall, Hector realized after a moment. A water tank. So big that it spanned that entire side of the chamber. Hector could just barely make out tall shadows in the water. Some type of plant, he was pretty sure.

He searched for Roman but couldn't see him anywhere. Unless... that pitch black lump under Leo's hand...

'Is that Roman's head?' said Hector.

'Yep,' the reaper said privately.

Great.

This was also a very bad location for a fight, Hector thought. He'd been wondering where all the normal people down here were getting their water, and now he had his answer. No doubt, water was an extremely difficult commodity to come by in the Undercrust. The Hun'Sho and the Hun'Kui hadn't seemed to need it much, if at all, but everyone in these climate-controlled zones obviously did.

So if that tank ended up damaged, somehow...

Hector didn't even want to imagine how bad the collateral damage might be."

"1714

At least Leo wasn't looking in this direction. He was just staring at the tank. Perhaps he was thinking about something. Or sleeping, maybe. Hector couldn't see his face.

Hector considered his options. He had the element of surprise, still. Therefore, the plan to get Roman and escape without being noticed was at least possible. The problem was that hand on Roman's encapsulated head. As long as that hand was there, Leo would immediately notice if Hector tried to use materialization to move Roman.

So, then... a distraction. How could he distract Leo without revealing

himself?

Hector looked around another time. He needed more information.

The Scarf of Amordiin revealed the geometry of the room to him, as well as that of the corridor from which Hector was looking in. The room had a half-circle shape but was mostly featureless beyond that. It seemed to be a gallery of some sort. Paintings hung on all the walls, save the one that was the water tank. A few people dotted the area, apparently admiring said paintings.

Ugh. Not much to go on.

Hector concentrated. Maybe the Scarf could tell him more about Leo himself. He tried to sense the movement of the air around the man, wanting to discern the shape of not just his overall figure but his clothes, too. Was he carrying anything on him? In his coat?

Yes, he was. Something in the inner pocket. A pen. A small key. And some coins. Hmm. What about the other pockets? All empty, as far as Hector could tell. Hard to be sure, though, since the man's pants seemed to fit him pretty tightly.

Wow. Such useful intel.

Hector wasn't sure what he'd been expecting. What could the man possibly have been carrying that would help Hector rescue Roman?

Agh. Getting distracted. And discouraged. Not the time for that.

He tried to think. To concentrate. To try again. He just needed a distraction. Something that would make Leo move his hand away from Roman.

As much as Hector thought about it, though, he couldn't think of anything that could guarantee that.

Except maybe attacking Leo. Cutting the hand off. Or decapitating the guy.

Probably a horrible idea. Probably the literal worst idea, in fact.

Part of Hector felt like he might actually be able to pull that off, though. With the element of surprise on his side like this? Maybe. Hector still recalled Lord Abbas' fight with Ivan. More specifically, he recalled how quickly it had ended and how Abbas had attributed the victory to

catching Ivan off guard.

Oftentimes, with the kind of power that Hector had borne witness to, he felt like defeating a significantly older servant was simply impossible, no matter the circumstances. But perhaps that wasn't truly so. Abbas had overcome an incredible power gap, thanks almost entirely to favorable conditions. To strategy.

It was an encouraging thought.

And a dangerous one.

Hector didn't want to attack the guy unless he had no other choice. But that was also a problem, wasn't it? If it truly reached a point where he had no other choice, then it would probably be too late. In a straight fight, Leo would obviously obliterate him.

Agh..."

"1715

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

The reapers were being noticeably quiet all of a sudden, Hector thought. When he turned to look at them, he realized they weren't there anymore.

Oh, right. They'd said they would keep their distance.

'Where'd you guys go?' thought Hector.

'We're about a hundred meters to your right,' came Garovel's private answer.

Well, at least they were keeping themselves safe. He still didn't really like them wandering around on their own when the Undercrust was known for having ardor-fueled weaponry, but Capaporo seemed peaceful enough, he supposed. And they were probably even more wary of such things than he was.

'Any idea what you're gonna do?' said Garovel.

'Not really,' said Hector. 'Open to suggestions.'



‘Voreese and I recommend patience. Take your time and wait for an opening to present itself. And stay out of his line of sight.’

Not the most compelling plan but probably most reasonable, Hector figured. Certainly more so than attacking Leo in a location where one of the city’s most valuable resources would be put in jeopardy. And that wasn’t even considering what would happen if the attack failed, and Leo counterattacked. Which seemed incredibly likely.

So Hector waited. He waited, and he watched. People came and went from the gallery, often staring at him as they passed. Eventually, Hector resorted to leaning with his back to the wall. He shut his eyes and relied entirely on the Scarf for information instead of staring at Leo around the corner like an idiot.

He wasn’t sure why he’d ever been doing that in the first place. He was just accustomed to relying on his eyes for everything.

Then again, there was certainly still utility in using his eyes. He couldn’t see color with the Scarf, obviously. If he concentrated, though, he could vaguely discern the shape of Leo’s face. The guy seemed to have a pretty big nose. And a trimmed beard.

Most importantly and obviously, however, the Scarf didn’t let him see reapers. Air would simply flow right through them. Definitely still needed eyes for that.

After a while, Hector began to wonder what the hell this guy was doing here. Why was he just sitting there like that? His eyes weren’t closed, according to the Scarf, so he probably wasn’t meditating. He was just staring at the water tank.

Was he waiting for something?

Hold on a second.

...Wasn’t Sai-hee supposed to show up? Or, maybe not her, but at least someone who represented her? That had been Leo’s plan, hadn’t it? To turn the Rainlords over to her and earn her forgiveness?

But Leo didn’t HAVE the Rainlords anymore, so what the hell was his plan now?

Or...?

Hector blinked, remembering Rasalased’s words.

"A lost sheep," the Dry God had said.

Leo was the lost sheep, clearly. Which meant...

Had Leo simply given up? Was he just waiting for Sai-hee to show up and either kill or capture him?"

"1716

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

It made almost too much sense, Hector felt. And worse, whether he was killed or captured hardly even mattered at this point, didn't it? Voreese had of course informed Hector and everyone else of Leo's troubled relationship with his reaper. So if Leo was captured as a brain, like Roman currently was, then the man's reaper probably wasn't going to bother reviving him. Unless Sai-hee ordered it, perhaps.

Regardless, Leo's circumstances were looking more than a little grim. To Hector's mind, Leo should have been running for his life right about now, and yet he wasn't. He was just sitting there, instead. Waiting for judgment and whatever came after.

Hector didn't know anything about the guy, but he still felt a little bad for him.

And in a strange way, he related to him.

Hector was no stranger to that feeling of giving up. Of utter hopelessness. He hadn't been letting it win lately, but he certainly remembered a time when he did. In fact, that was probably part of the reason why he hadn't wanted to let it win. Not again.

Ah, but here Hector was, probably reading way too much into the situation. Leo was way older than him, and his problems were probably way more complicated.

Maybe.

Rasalased had definitely called him a lost sheep, though. And the Dry God hadn't told Hector to stay away from him, either.

But Hector had also come to learn Rasalased was far from omniscient. So...

There was no telling what the correct course of action here was.

Shit.

Hector was tempted to just walk over and talk to the guy. Try to console him, maybe. Try to reason with him. And perhaps even try to help him.

He was tempted, but... was that actually a good idea?

Leo would doubtless figure out who he was almost immediately. And then he might just try to force Hector to give up the Rainlords so that he could resume his previous plan.

But... so what if he did that? Hector wasn't going to give up the Rainlords. There was zero chance that Leo would be able to get that information out of him. And if Hector could somehow make Leo realize that, too...

Then...

Hmm.

Oh, and there was also Sai-hee's people to worry about. There was no telling when they would show up. And if they arrived while Hector was just twiddling his thumbs here, then it would probably become even more difficult to get Roman back--if not straight up impossible.

But wait. That wasn't even the worst-case scenario, was it?

No, the worst-case scenario would be if Sai-hee showed up, and then Leo told her... that the Rainlords... were now following... someone named Hector...

That was just Voreese's bullshit, of course, but if Sai-hee actually believed it and then ended up coming to Warrenhold in search of them, then it would still be catastrophic just the same. And if she really did hate the Rainlords, then it would make plenty of sense to go after them now, while they were weakened and no longer had their affiliation with the Vanguard for protection.

Oh. Fuck.

Hector rubbed his forehead and took a deep breath. Waiting for an

opening wasn't looking like such an attractive option, all of sudden."  
"1717 -- CLXXXIII.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

He had to take action, Hector felt. He couldn't just wait around and hope for the best, not when he was responsible for protecting so many people. If nothing else, he had to ensure that the worst-case scenario didn't come to pass.

That really only left two options, then. Either attack preemptively or try to talk to the guy.

Both of those seemed like they could go horribly.

But... Hector didn't really want to attack him. Maybe it was just because he felt bad for Leo. Maybe it was softness on Hector's part. He didn't want to make an emotional decision here, but at the same time, there didn't seem to be a rationally best option.

Except, maybe... well, if talking went awry, then Leo would probably capture him. But if fighting went awry, then the water tank would likely get damaged, AND Leo would probably capture him.

Hmm.

Hector supposed that was about as rational as he could hope for, given the circumstances.

He took a deep breath and tried to prepare himself, thinking over the situation one last time.

A thought occurred him.

'...Does Leo know what my ability is?' said Hector.

'I'll ask,' said Garovel. And there was a pause. 'He shouldn't. Voreese didn't have Roman tell him that.'

Interesting.

Okay.

He stepped away from the corner and into the room with Leo.

‘Hector, what are you doing?’ said Garovel.

Hector tried to explain his reasoning as best he could. It took a little while, and he was mindful of Leo turning around the whole time, but Hector managed to impart the gist of it.

‘This is a really bad idea,’ said Garovel at length.

‘Yeah, I know,’ said Hector. ‘But it’s like you said. Sometimes there won’t be a good option left to choose.’

‘Goddammit, don’t throw my own words back at me.’

‘I’m doing this, Garovel. Wish me luck.’

‘Ugh. Good luck.’

Hector took a deep breath and then walked up behind the man. When he was close enough, he decided to armor up fully again. It might conceal his identity somewhat, though he suspected that Leo would be able to guess who he was anyway.

Mainly, he wanted the armor for himself. Heavy as it was, he was somehow more comfortable in it. It didn’t make him feel safer, precisely, but maybe just a little more powerful. He could almost pretend to be someone else while he was wearing it. Someone who actually knew what they were doing.

And he was going to need that feeling, he thought.

Then, finally, Hector dared to speak up.

“...Are you alright?” he asked.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Three: ‘Thine addled hearts...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector saw Leo twitch a little at the sound of his voice. He walked around the bench as his armor clinked noisily with each step, feeling Leo’s gaze on him now. When he reached the other side, however, he noticed that the man’s eyes were wide.

What was he so surprised about, Hector wondered?

Maybe he just hadn't been expecting to see someone in full plate armor all of a sudden.

Yeah, okay, maybe that made sense."  
"1717 -- CLXXXIII.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

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Hector tried to explain his reasoning as best he could. It took a little while, and he was mindful of Leo turning around the whole time, but Hector managed to impart the gist of it.

‘This is a really bad idea,’ said Garovel at length.

‘Yeah, I know,’ said Hector. ‘But it’s like you said. Sometimes there won’t be a good option left to choose.’

‘Goddammit, don’t throw my own words back at me.’

‘I’m doing this, Garovel. Wish me luck.’

‘Ugh. Good luck.’

Hector took a deep breath and then walked up behind the man. When he was close enough, he decided to armor up fully again. It might conceal his identity somewhat, though he suspected that Leo would be able to guess who he was anyway.

Mainly, he wanted the armor for himself. Heavy as it was, he was somehow more comfortable in it. It didn’t make him feel safer, precisely, but maybe just a little more powerful. He could almost pretend to be someone else while he was wearing it. Someone who actually knew what they were doing.

And he was going to need that feeling, he thought.

Then, finally, Hector dared to speak up.

“...Are you alright?” he asked.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Three: ‘Thine addled hearts...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector saw Leo twitch a little at the sound of his voice. He walked

around the bench as his armor clinked noisily with each step, feeling Leo's gaze on him now. When he reached the other side, however, he noticed that the man's eyes were wide.

What was he so surprised about, Hector wondered?

Maybe he just hadn't been expecting to see someone in full plate armor all of a sudden.

Yeah, okay, maybe that made sense."

"1718

Hector waited, matching the man's gaze evenly, but when Leo didn't respond, Hector decided to materialize an iron seat for himself instead of just sitting next to Leo on the bench. He added significantly more detail into the seat than was probably necessary, making it less like a chair and more like a throne.

He felt like he had to project power, lest this conversation would end before it even began.

Hector sat down and folded his arms. "...Hello, by the way."

"Who are you?" asked Leo, still wide-eyed and attentive.

That was a dangerous question to answer, Hector felt. It was a big risk to reveal the truth right now. Leo could react very poorly to it. But on the other hand, lying could prove just as awful, if not more so. Hector didn't know if he should try to bullshit his way to victory again.

So he decided to choose a third option.

"...Do you really not know already?" said Hector. It seemed like the best way to gauge Leo's potential reaction.

"Impossible..." Leo's expression seemed to tremble for a moment, then he blinked a couple times. His gaze went down to Roman's captive head. "Ah..." He looked up again. "You must be Hector."

Hmm. What was all that about, Hector wondered?

"...Yeah," said Hector. "And you're Leo, aren't you?"



"Guess his reaper told you all about me, huh?"

"That's right."

"Surprised you didn't attack me while my guard was down."

Hector had certainly thought about it. "...You never answered my question."

"Hmm?"

"...Are you alright?"

Leo let his eyes drift to the side. "This the part where you try to get on my good side? To recruit me? Manipulate me, like everyone else?"

"...Actually, I'm just here for my friend. I'd like it if you gave him back to me."

"Why should I? He's my friend, too."

"Do you normally keep your friends prisoner?"

Leo's gaze returned to Hector, but he just stared, not saying anything.

Hector felt the air grow abruptly heavier. A familiar sensation.

Yeah, this dude was definitely powerful.

Hector needed to be very careful with his words. Slow and deliberate, he reminded himself. And maybe cool it with the sarcasm, too.

"...Was I wrong?" said Hector. "When I saw you sitting here, I thought you looked... rather... distraught." That was the right word, wasn't it? He hoped so.

"Why? You lookin' to take all my worries away and earn my trust?"

Wow, this guy was pretty blatantly cynical. Hector didn't think this would go on for much longer unless he did something to change the direction of the conversation. "...I don't see any reason why I would need to earn your trust," he said. "If anything, you would need to earn mine."

Leo's eyes narrowed a little. "Say what?"

"You attacked and imprisoned my friends. What, you think that makes

you trustworthy in my eyes?"

"1719

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

Leo bobbed his head to the side. "S'pose you have a point."

Not knowing how to respond to that, Hector resorted to silence.

Leo exhaled heavily through his nose. "...Whaddya want from me, man?"

"...Just my friend back, like I said."

"Well, I don't wanna give him to you. So what're ya gonna do about it?"

"...Mm. Tell me. Are you one of those people who... prefers to solve their problems with their fists?"

"Sometimes. When the mood strikes me."

"...Even when it would put innocent people in danger?"

Leo didn't answer. Instead, his eyes went briefly to the enormous water tank.

"...Is that why you chose this location?" said Hector. "I assume you're waiting for Sai-hee to show up. Are you hoping they won't attack you in a place like this?"

Leo looked around, and so did Hector. There were still a few civilians in the chamber with them, observing the paintings. Two or three of them were glancing in this direction, probably curious about the armored weirdo sitting here.

"If you'd rather fight somewhere else," said Leo, "I'd be happy to oblige."

"...That doesn't answer my question," said Hector.

"Is that s'posed to bother me?"

Agh. This guy was kind of a prick. Time to change tactics again.

“...Why aren't you running?” said Hector. “By now, you could've been long gone from Capaporo.”

“Oh, is that your game, then?” said Leo. “Get me to run and leave your buddy here behind?”

Hector groaned. “Could you stop trying to read the worst into my motivations and just answer me? I know you may find it hard to believe, but I'm actually interested to hear what you'll say.”

“I bet you are.”

Agh. Yep. Definitely a prick.

Fine. Time to try yet another approach.

“...Obviously, you don't have to talk to me,” said Hector. “But... I don't have to talk to you, either. In fact, I don't have to do anything. I could just wait for Sai-hee's people to carry you off. I doubt they'd mind giving me... my friend back.” He'd almost said Roman's name just then. But given Roman's tendency to disguise himself, Hector didn't know if Roman had ever actually told Leo his name. Better to avoid that potential confusion, Hector felt.

“Think they'd be so receptive after I told 'em about your ties to the Rainlords?” said Leo.

Shit. Hector had been hoping that Leo wouldn't realize that. What a stupid mistake.

But backing off now wouldn't project much power. It might even convince Leo of his weakness.

Nothing for it, then. He had to double down.

“...I'm not worried about that,” Hector lied.

“Oh?” said Leo. “And why would that be?”

“...There's a reason that they came to me for protection, you know.”

Ugh. On a list of things that he might one day regret saying, Hector felt like that would be near the top.

This was Voreese's fault.”

"1720

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

Leo just stared back at him, not saying anything.

Was that... good? Hector couldn't really tell.

It was probably best to move the conversation along while he had the chance, Hector figured. The fewer lies he was forced to tell, the better. "...Why are you holding my friend captive, by the way? Did he do something wrong?"

Leo took his time answering. His expression seemed different than it was before. Sharper, maybe. Not quite angry, but close. "...He betrayed me. Followin' your orders, I'm guessin'."

"Ah..." Hector understood. Leo must have gone back to the warehouses, seen that the Rainlords were missing, and immediately blamed Roman. "That's a bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

"... 'Scuse me?"

"I mean... you betrayed him first, didn't you? He was coming to meet me here in Capaporo, and... then you betrayed his trust in order to capture my Rainlords."

Again, Leo didn't say anything.

Oh, man, this was ridiculous. Hector couldn't help feeling like Zeff would kick him in the teeth if he'd heard what he just said.

Hector knew that he couldn't let any such feelings show, though. He had to keep it together. Composure might've been the only thing preventing Leo from attacking him, right now.

"...Also," Hector went on, "I'd argue that he wasn't so much betraying you, as he was just being loyal to me."

Leo snorted loud enough to draw a couple looks from the other people in the gallery. "The hell difference does that make?!"

"It makes a big difference," said Hector. "A proper betrayal would be more... malicious. Or selfish, at least. But what he did was the complete opposite of selfish. And... it definitely wasn't malicious, either."

I'm sure he didn't want to hurt you."

"Hmph." Leo did not look convinced, but he didn't offer a counterargument.

Agh. Was that really it? More silent treatment? Hector racked his brain for another angle of attack. He was having trouble, though. If the guy was just gonna keep shutting down and not responding, then how the hell were they supposed to discuss anything?

At length, however, he did think of something else.

"...Did you really consider him your friend?" said Hector.

Leo's glare only seemed to be growing more intense with each new question. "Why do you care?"

"Just curious, I guess." And when it seemed like Leo might not answer him again, Hector decided to add, "I know how difficult it can be to make friends."

Leo's expression flickered for a second, though in what way, Hector couldn't tell. "You offerin' to be my friend, after all?"

Oh shit, back to this? "Ah... maybe."

"Maybe? The hell does that mean, man? You wanna be my friend 'r not?"

Hector allowed himself a small sigh. "You're kinda pushy, you know that?"

"And you're kinda annoying."

"Mm... Too annoying to be friends with?"

"...I didn't say that." Somehow, Leo looked a lot angrier than those words or even his tone implied."

"1721

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

Hector tilted his head to the side a little as he considered his next

words. He kept his arms folded, because he wanted to be sure that he didn't give off a false sense of aggression. A servant's hands were arguably the most dangerous part of their body, after all.

"Do you wanna know why I didn't attack you while your guard was down?" said Hector.

"Sure," said Leo.

"It was because you kept all of my Rainlords alive." That definitely hadn't been the reason, but it sure sounded good, Hector thought. "You didn't have to do that."

Leo's gaze turned to the floor, and he fell silent one more time.

"I thought... maybe you don't have to be my enemy. And seeing you sitting there, looking kind of... lost... I thought maybe you needed some help."

"...Hence why you asked if I was alright," said Leo.

"Yeah."

"Well..." Leo bit the inside of his bottom lip for a second. "You weren't wrong, I s'pose. I have been feeling kinda... lost."

Chalk another one up for Rasalased, Hector thought.

"More than kinda, actually," Leo continued. "I'm pretty much at the end of my rope, if I'm bein' totally honest." He looked up at Hector again. "Did the big cat's reaper tell you that about me, too?"

"...Big cat?"

"Roman," said Leo.

Oh, so he did know Roman's name. "Ah..." Hector couldn't actually remember if Voreese had mentioned anything about Leo's state of mind. He didn't think so, though. He only recalled Rasalased's words about it. "No, but... his reaper did mention that he was worried about you."

"...Really?"

No. It was an easy way to score some brownie points for Roman, though. "Really."

Leo eyed Roman's encased head.

Hector saw the opening and took it. "...Now, why don't you give him back to me?"

Leo was quiet again, and Hector could practically see the gears turning in his head. At length, Leo finally said, "What'll ya give me in return?"

Agh, of course. "What do you want?" said Hector.

"...I'd like your protection as well," said Leo.

"My...?" The word was left stranded.

"Your protection," reiterated Leo. "From Sai-hee, specifically. Y'know. The same protection you're giving to your Rainlords."

Was this fucking guy serious? Was he being sarcastic? What the fuck was happening, right now?

Silence was all Hector could conjure as a response.

"...Is that a no?" said Leo.

Okay, seriously, what the fuck? It didn't sound like sarcasm.

Did this guy actually believe everything that Hector had just said? He'd expected considerably more skepticism. Had Roman and Voreese just been that good at talking him up?

"Why so quiet all of a sudden, bro?" said Leo. "You just said you could protect all the Rainlords from her, so why not me, too?"

Ah, wait a minute... This was a test.

Okay.

That made more sense.

Kind of."

"1722 -- CLXXXIV.

Regardless, this was still an enormous problem. Hector couldn't very well accept Leo's proposal, because that would mean bringing the guy

back to Warrenhold with him. And Hector could immediately think of about a dozen ways that could blow up in his and everyone's faces.

But he couldn't just outright refuse him, either. That wouldn't project much power, and it would also completely go against what Hector had said earlier, asking if Leo was alright.

He had to strike a delicate balance here, Hector decided.

"...I'm afraid I don't grant my protection quite that easily," said Hector. He had to keep himself steady. Leo's strategy had nearly thrown him off, just now.

"That so?" said Leo. "Why do the Rainlords qualify, while I don't?"

"...Because they have my trust," said Hector.

"Ah. And I don't."

"That's right."

Leo scratched his brow with his free hand. "Well, how do I gain your trust, then?"

Oh, geez. "Well... you could start by giving Roman back to me."

Leo snorted. "Isn't that the same deal I just offered you?"

"...No," said Hector. "Give me Roman, and I'll give you a chance to earn my trust."

Leo pursed his lips together briefly. "Just a chance? Seems like kind of a raw deal from where I'm sittin', daddy-o."

Daddy-o? Who the hell says--? Whatever. "...It's the best you're gonna get," said Hector. "I'm not gonna trust you until you prove yourself trustworthy."

"Dude, you're askin' me to give up my only bargaining chip for just a promise. Less than a promise, even."

"...Roman isn't a bargaining chip," said Hector. "I already told you... I can just wait this out and get Roman back from Sai-hee. You don't actually have anything I want."

Leo stared again, though his black eyes were much more hollow this time, as if he were looking past Hector instead of at him.



Slowly, Hector unfolded his arms. He held out a gauntleted hand, palm upward. "...Give me my friend back," he said.

Leo took a breath through gritted teeth. He shut his eyes, rubbed his forehead hard enough to leave a fleeting red mark, and finally exhaled a long sigh. He lifted Roman's head and placed it in Hector's waiting hand.

It required all of Hector's composure not to go wide-eyed and stare at what had just happened.

"Okay, now what?" said Leo.

That was a very good question, Hector thought.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Four: 'Submit unto thee or begone...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"...Earning my trust won't be easy," said Hector. He paused to let Leo say something, but the man just waited. "...Firstly, I will need assurance that... you won't harm anyone else who is under my protection."

Leo held out his fist and extended the little finger. "I pinky promise that I will not hurt anyone unless you say it's okay."

Hector couldn't quite tell if the man was joking, but he exhaled half a laugh, anyway, and said, "That's not enough."

Leo smacked his lips. "Never is."

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"1723

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

Hector very much wanted to stand up and start moving toward the exit, but he refrained. Now that he had Roman in hand, his only real objective had been achieved, but the danger was still far from passed, Hector knew. If Leo got it into his head that Hector was scared or lying or anything other than everything he'd thus far claimed to be, then this could all come crumbling down in a matter of seconds.

"...In order to be sure that you won't hurt anyone," said Hector, "I'll need you to bring your reaper to me."

Leo opened his mouth, then shut it again and looked down at the floor.

It was a big ask. Would he refuse? Hector kind of hoped he would. If Leo decided that it was too much of a risk and they simply parted ways here on amicable terms with maybe the potential for a future working relationship... well, Hector couldn't imagine a more ideal outcome to the current circumstances.

"...Is that really necessary, man?" said Leo.

"Yes," said Hector firmly. C'mon. Refuse. Refuse, dammit.

"But how do I know you won't just kill him?" said Leo.

"Well... You don't. That's what makes it a demonstration of trust."

Leo sighed. "...Okay, I'll bring him to you."

Fuck, really?! Man, this guy must have been even more desperate than Hector thought. He'd thought that with all the initial hostility that Leo had shown, the guy would've been much less agreeable now.

But, okay. This was fine. He could still make this work.

Probably.

Shit.

"Will you at least give me your word that you won't kill him?" said Leo.

Hector had to stop himself from sighing. "Of course."

"What'll you do with him? Besides, y'know, keep him prisoner."

"Ah... I will... get to know him."

"That it?"

"...Is that not enough?"

"No, it's just--well, I thought you might try to persuade him to forgive me 'r somethin', y'know?"

Ah. Hmm. "I might do that. If it seems possible."

"Don't think it will be, just so you know. Ericoros is beyond stubborn. And to be honest, I dunno if I'll ever be able to trust him again, either."

Reapers tend to tell you what you wanna hear.”

“...Yeah, I know,” said Hector.

“Ah--course ya do. My bad. Didn’t mean any offense.”

An apology now? Geez, this guy was all over the place. “It’s fine.”

“So, uh... I, um... I got another question, if ya don’t mind answerin’.”

Hector wasn’t sure why he was bothering to preface it. “Then ask.”

“What sort of, um... aha... er... how do I put this...? Ah...”

Hector cocked an eyebrow inside his helmet as he waited.

“Y’see, I was just wondering what kind of... work you do. And, y’know, whether or not you might have any... for me to do.”

Hector blinked. Work? This guy wanted to work? “I... thought you just wanted my protection.”

“Yeah, I mean, I do, but, it’s just--I mean, you seem like you--ah--kinda know what you’re, uh--like, you’ve got your stuff ‘n whatnot--and, er, y’know what I’m sayin’?”

“...I don’t, actually. I don’t think that was a complete sentence, either.””  
"1724

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

Leo took a breath. “Well, I just figured, y’know, ah--what better way to prove myself trustworthy than through honest work? ‘Cuz you... you do have that type of work, right? I mean, I just kinda got the impression that you did.”

Hector had to stop and think about that. “...I might.”

“Yeah! Right!” Leo gave a laugh that sounded a little nervous. “‘Cuz you’re not like a, heh... a super drug lord ‘r anything... are you?”

“...No, I’m not.”

“I mean, don’t get me wrong--I’m ultra-supportive of recreational drug

use, but only in a safe, controlled, and well-educated environment, know what I'm sayin'?"

Hector didn't, really, but decided to just nod anyway.

"People who prey on and help propagate the misery of the less fortunate--I ain't got much forgiveness in me for folks like that, man."

This guy sure was chatty all of a sudden. "...What sort of 'honest work' are you looking for, exactly?" said Hector.

"Oh, ah, hmm, that's, uh... that's a good question, man. Just... ah... a-anything you need done, I s'pose. I mean, it's been kind of a long time since I've had a proper job, y'know? Like a job-job. If I'm bein' totally honest, I'm kinda blankin' on examples at the moment... I guess it's just been that long... egh..." Leo scratched his cheek. "Fact, maybe I never had a proper job... I musta, though, right?" He was looking at Hector as if it were somehow possible for Hector to know the answer to that question. "Be kinda embarrassing if I didn't, man..."

Hmm. This was actually beginning to make a surprising amount of sense, Hector thought. Leo was a lost sheep, after all. He needed direction. He seemed to be craving it, even.

A sheep in need of a shepherd.

It sure would've been nice if Hector had any fucking idea how he was supposed be a goddamn shepherd or whatever. Because apparently, he'd managed to convince this guy that he was.

He only hoped that Garovel would be able to bail him out of this situation later, somehow. He'd have to survive it first, though.

"...Ah, well, I'll figure something out for you," said Hector, trying not to worry about the fact that he was tossing yet another log onto the roaring bonfire of problems and promises that were already waiting to be dealt with.

"Cool. It's just, y'know, I've been feelin' kinda worthless lately, so I'd really like to, uh, contribute. To a good cause, I mean." Leo shook his head. "E'erbody makes that seem so easy, man. I dunno how they do it. Especially when we start gettin' older, know what I mean? All the things we've seen? All the betrayals and broken promises?"

Hector didn't like where this conversation was going.

"I 'member, this one time, I was workin' for a charity out in Steccat. Big business stuff. Real famous, very well-known and respected. I forget the name 'cuz it folded up after the scandal, but yeah. Seemed totally legit and trustworthy at the time, man." He clicked his tongue. "But nope. Embezzlin' funds. Stealin' from the poor. Buncha bastards.""

"1725

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

"...Mm," was all Hector could think to say. He'd tried to give it an agreeing inflection.

"How 'bout you?" said Leo. "You must have tons of stories like that one, too."

Aw, shit. "...Of course," said Hector.

"Oh, then, uh--c'mon, dude, ya gotta gimme some juicy deets."

"Ah... maybe some other time." Hector seized the initiative and stood up. He needed to start moving things along before he tripped over one of these conversational landmines. "For now, we should leave before Sai-hee shows up looking for you."

"Eh, she prolly won't be here for a couple more days, at least. We still got time." Leo did decide to stand up as well, however.

"...Is she actually coming in person?" said Hector, starting toward the corridor from which he'd entered earlier.

Leo followed. "No idea. Hell, I barely ever knew her whereabouts back when I was in regular contact with her. She likes to keep her movements unpredictable. Security 'n whatnot."

"...If you don't know her whereabouts, then why are you so confident that she won't show up here for another couple days?"

"She's always super slow to take action, dude. Always tryin' to 'play the game,' y'know? Scared to make a wrong move, I think."

That seemed to contradict the story that Axiolis had told everyone earlier. 'We're leaving together,' warned Hector. 'Keep your distance.'

'Yeah, we can tell,' came Garovel's echoing voice. 'What's your plan?'

'Uh. Still working that out. Hold on.'

"So c'mon," said Leo, "tell me a story."

Hector wasn't sure he could bullshit up an entire story on the spot.

"...Before that, we need to talk about where we're going."

"Oh. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Hector supposed he should address the issue directly. "I can't bring you with me, right now. The Rainlords are already waiting for me, and... if I show up with you, they might just attack you first and ask questions later."

"What, you don't think you can keep them under control?"

That was a problematic question. One which could not be ignored. Hector stopped walking in order to look the man in the eye. "...Well, there's also the possibility that you're lying to me and still intend to recapture them."

"Ah. Right..."

Hector watched the man's face for a moment more, trying to read his expression. It seemed regretful, but Hector didn't know if he believed that or not. He started walking again. "Anyway... you need to lay low for a while. Do you have a... safe house or something that you can use?"

Leo flicked at one of his dreadlocks. "Uh... not one that the old biddy wouldn't know about."

That was unfortunate.

'Garovel?' said Hector.

'Yeah?'

'Do you know of a place where we can hide Leo?'

'...Why?'

'He, uh... he wants to work for me, apparently.'

'...He wants to WHAT?!'



‘Well, he wants protection from Sai-hee. And also a job.’”

"1726

Silence arrived, and Hector was left to observe the curving hallway and the throngs of people walking past him, all bathed in the silvery white light from the long, rectangular lamps that were embedded in the ceiling. It was still a ways to the edge of the climate-controlled zone, but Hector was already thinking about what would happen when they reached it. He would need to remake his armor into the cooling variant, but if Leo noticed him do so... that might be a little difficult to explain.

‘Garovel, c’mon,’ he said. ‘Kind of a pressing situation here.’

‘Ah--yeah, I’m talking to Voreese. Roman has tons of safe houses we can use.’

‘You really think we should bring him back to Atreya?’

‘Roman has some in other countries, too, but I don’t know. What do you make of the guy?’

‘He’s... all over the place. But I think he mainly just needs... a sense of purpose, I guess. I mean, that’s why he wants a job, I’m pretty sure.’

‘Hmm.’

Hector tried to keep an eye on Leo. The guy seemed to be keeping a fairly close eye on him as well.

‘It should be a good job, too. Like, good for the soul, I mean. I don’t think he cares too much about money.’ That seemed like a safe bet, considering how simple the guy’s wardrobe appeared to be, as well as how he’d apparently turned down a job offer from Roman, according to what Voreese told them earlier.

Which, if actually true, was particularly baffling to Hector. Roman must’ve been able to offer this guy absurd amounts of money and probably all sorts of other shit. And yet here he was, asking Hector for work instead.

‘How do you intend to get away from him?’ said Garovel.

‘Uh... I think he’ll listen if I tell him to go somewhere,’ said Hector.

‘Are you serious?’

‘Yeah. You got an address for me?’

‘Hold on.’

Hector waited. He noticed that Leo wasn’t looking back at him now. Instead, the man’s attention was on a narrow side street to their right. A man and a woman were standing in an open doorway and having a rather loud conversation with one another.

Leo slowed and stopped to watch, and Hector couldn’t help doing the same. They weren’t the only onlookers, either. Nobody else was stopping, but there were certainly a few turned heads and craned necks.

The audience didn’t seem to deter the couple at all, however.

‘Okay, I got one,’ said Garovel. ‘You ready?’

‘One sec.’ Hector couldn’t tell what language the couple was speaking--possibly Hunese even though they weren’t Hun’Kui--but it seemed obvious enough that they were in disagreement. Judging from the elaborate black-and-white attire, Hector figured they were either wealthy or dressed up for a special occasion. From what Hector had seen during his brief time in Capaporo, those colors seemed to be popular among the upper class."

"1727

‘Something wrong?’ said Garovel.

‘No, just a... domestic disturbance, I guess,’ said Hector.

The woman began screeching to the point that she was spitting, and then she slapped the man. After a recoiling moment of apparent shock and visible anger, he slapped her back. Hard. She dropped to the ground like a bag of rocks.

Immediately, the man was encased in a shiny black material that Hector recognized as Leo’s element. Even the man’s head was fully encased, and Leo was stomping toward him.

“Leo,” said Hector while checking on the woman. She was clutching her cheek and slowly getting up.

Leo stopped in his tracks. He half-turned toward Hector. “What? You don’t mind, do you?”

“...Yes, I do mind, actually.”

Leo’s face scrunched up. “Why? This dude’s obviously a waste of oxygen.”

“...Let him breathe, Leo.”

Leo paused for a curt sigh, and then he flicked his wrist. The material around the man’s head vanished, and he gasped for breath.

Now the onlookers weren’t paying much attention to the couple and were instead more interested in Hector and Leo. Interested and frightened.

Leo didn’t seem to mind the attention, though. “Whaddya wanna do with this guy, then, hmm?”

The woman wasn’t yelling anymore. She was staring at Hector and backing away.

“...I’m sure the local authorities can handle it,” said Hector.

“Ya sure about that?” said Leo. “Figured you’d be more interventionist ‘r somethin’.”

“These people aren’t servants,” said Hector, mindful of all the eyes on them. He wondered if any of them understood Mohssian. “Our job is to protect them.”

“I am,” said Leo. “Protectin’ ‘em from each other.”

“...Yeah, that’s fine,” said Hector. “I’ve done that, too. But killing them in the process is not fine.”

“Oh, c’mon. Dude had it coming.”

“...You don’t know anything about him.”

“I know he hit a woman.”

Hector wanted to sigh. "...Yeah. But executing him for it is a little extreme, don't you think?"

"Ugh. Man, are you all about tryin' to keep neutrality above all else, too? Was kinda hopin' you were different from the old biddy, y'know?"

"Leo." He had to be firm here, Hector felt. If he wasn't, then this could become a very big problem later. Not that it wasn't one already, of course. "If you intend to kill people without... extremely good justification, then... this relationship is not going to work out at all, and you should probably just leave before you find out exactly how not neutral I can be."

Leo blinked at him. "Alright, man. Simmer down. I didn't eighty-six the guy. And I already said I wouldn't kill anyone without your approval, didn't I?"

Hector just stared at him.

Leo put a hand over his heart. "I promise not to kill anybody without your permission. There. Said it again. This time all formal-like. Ya happy?"

Hector looked around another time. People were still watching, though several had scurried away. He thought he heard some sort of siren in the distance. It was different from the sound he was familiar with, but it was probably law enforcement. "...Release him and let's go," said Hector."

"1728

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

With another flick of his wrist, Leo removed the rest of the encasing, and the man dropped to his hands and knees and started scurrying off.

"I guess you are pretty different from her, actually," said Leo as he rejoined Hector in walking away from the scene.

Hector could only assume that he was still referring to Sai-hee.

"She prolly wouldn'ta let that guy live. She definitely wouldn'ta let him go."

"I didn't let him go." Hector threw a glance back at the man in question, and Leo turned to look as well.

The guy hadn't made it far. Iron shackles bound his ankles and wrists.

"The locals can figure out what to do with him," said Hector.

Leo furrowed his brow. "If you were just gonna do that, then why'd you make me release him?"

"Because I didn't soul-strengthen those shackles. But your coating would've been... unreasonably difficult for non-servants to remove him from."

"...I woulda put him in shackles, if you'd asked."

Hector knew that, but he still wouldn't have been able to tell if such shackles would be soul-strengthened or not. He was on the verge of admitting as much until he thought that perhaps it would betray his age, somehow. Maybe old enough servants could tell if something was soul-strengthened just by looking at it. Hector had only assumed that Leo's coating was soul-strengthened because of how laborious it had been to dig through at the warehouses, but he supposed now that that could've been a mistaken assumption.

Oh man.

He had to be careful. The more time he spent around this guy, the more likely it was that some small thing might make him realize that Hector was lying. After all, Hector didn't know what he didn't know. There was no telling how long this charade could be maintained.

Maybe a more lighthearted response was warranted here, then-- something to ease the tension and hopefully not make Leo question him too much more.

"...Maybe I just wanted the credit for capturing him," said Hector.

Leo seemed more uncertain than amused. "Was that... was that a joke 'r somethin'?"

"...Yes, it was," said Hector.

"Oh. Oh! Hah! Good one!"

Not the most satisfying reception, but Hector wasn't about to complain, given the awful timing and context.

“Huh,” said Leo. “Somehow, I didn’t think you even had a sense of humor, man.”

“...Well, I do,” said Hector.

“In that case, I look forward to hearin’ more of it.”

Hector didn’t find that thought very comforting. He put it out of his mind, though. He had other things to worry about now. ‘I’m ready for that address now,’ he told Garovel.

The reaper relayed it to him. It was south of Gray Rock in a little town called Loxeville.”

"1729

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

Hector supposed that would do. It would put Leo near enough to Warrenhold to be checked up on relatively easily--but not so near Warrenhold as to clash with the Rainlords.

Hector still had no clue how he was going to explain all of this to them yet--or for that matter, what the hell he was going to do with Leo in the long-term. It didn’t seem like a good idea to try to keep up this lie indefinitely, but he also wasn’t seeing much other choice than to do precisely that.

Ugh...

Soon enough, Hector saw the edge of the climate-controlled zone in the distance and decided to stop walking. “Alright,” he said, “we’ll part ways here.” He materialized a small iron plate with the numbers and letters of the address imprinted into it. After checking to make sure he’d gotten it right, he handed the plate off to Leo.

Leo squinted at it. “This is a little hard to read, dude.”

“Well, I don’t have pen and paper on me,” said Hector.

Leo just looked at him, not saying anything.

Hector almost preferred the more chatty Leo. These silences were

unsettling. He figured he should just push on. "Get your reaper, and take him to that address," said Hector. "I'll meet you there in a couple weeks."

"A couple weeks?" said Leo. "That long?"

Hector would've liked to have said a couple months. Or years. Or centuries. "...I want to give you plenty of time to get there. In case you... run into any trouble getting back to the surface on your own."

"Ah... yeah, that could be tough, huh? A'ight, man. Couple weeks. And then you'll gimme a proper job?"

"...If that's what you want."

Leo gave a nod. "Oh, it is, daddy-o. Felt like an unproductive lump o' dooky, lately, so it'd be real nice to feel like I'm contributin' to a good cause, y'know?"

"...Alright. I'll see you in two weeks, then." And Hector waited, but when Leo didn't move, he added, "You head out first."

Leo smirked. "Heh. Wantin' to make sure I don't try 'n follow you, huh?"

"...Yes," said Hector flatly. "But also... Sai-hee's looking for you, not me. You should get out of the city as soon as possible."

"Mighty thoughtful of ya." Leo's smirk grew into a full smile. "Got a good feelin' about you. Somethin' tells me you'll make a good boss."

Hector very much doubted that, but he hoped to the goddess Cocora that it would somehow be true.

He watched Leo go, ambling into a wall of people and then disappearing from view.

At length, Hector finally allowed himself a sigh of utter exhaustion. He found the nearest wall and leaned against it for support. His body was trembling all over. His stomach was so empty that each breath was a reminder of how long it had been since he'd eaten, and his muscles were so tired that he was considering just flopping onto the ground and not getting back up again.

And now, both of those feelings were accompanied by a lovely dose of existential dread. Somehow, the future looked simultaneously full of potential and also horrifying beyond words.

'...How ya doin' there, pal?' came Garovel's public voice.

Hector looked up to see Garovel and Voreese hovering there in front of him. "...I've been better.""

"1730 -- CLXXXV.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Five: 'O, quondam desire...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

...167 years ago...

Parson's heel tapped rapidly against the floor of the wagon as it clattered over the dirt road. He wanted to meditate, but his mind was racing as he thought about their destination. It was somehow even more nerve-wracking than heading into battle. He tried to focus on his breathing and calm down a little.

"Nervous?" said the man sitting across from him. His icy blue eyes had a piercing quality to them, and the sharp features of his deceptively young face only added to the effect.

Parson managed a nod.

'There's no need to be,' said Overra, who was attached to the boy's shoulder. 'I assure you, he's quite nice. I'm sure you'll like him.'

"That's not it," said Parson. "I'm just... I'm not sure I deserve to be here with you..."

"Nonsense," said the man. "You were instrumental."

Parson gave him a dubious look. "You killed all of them."

The man smiled, and Parson knew what a rare sight that was. "You were a valuable distraction."

"...I also hid for most of the fight."

That made the man snicker. "Sometimes, focusing on your own



survival is the best strategy.”

‘Don’t be so quick to compare yourself to us,’ said the man’s reaper, who was similarly attached to the man’s shoulder. ‘Down that road, lies only jealousy and a profound inadequacy.’

‘It’s your humility that we really admire,’ said Overra dryly.

‘Humility isn’t what creates men of action,’ said the other reaper. ‘If you ask me, this world could use more bold and brazen men like Monty here.’

‘Bold, maybe,’ said Overra. ‘Brazen? I think that’s just you, Hovess.’

‘Psh. C’mon, Monty. Tell her how wrong she is.’

“I would. If she was.”

‘How dare you.’

The journey lasted quite a while longer and was so bumpy that Parson almost would’ve preferred to walk. When they finally arrived, he was quick to leap out the back and stretch his legs.

Monty tipped the wagoner with a golden tremol, at which the wagoner’s eyes bulged before the man began spouting gratitude. Monty handled it with his typical grace, then he and Parson bid the man farewell and began the last leg of their trek up a steep and winding path of stone steps. Rocks and verdant grass flanked the staircase on both sides, and the early afternoon air held the scent of recent rain.

When they reached the top, Parson’s nervousness and excitement died a little. The cobblestone watchtower standing before him was not at all what he had been expecting. Humble was one word to describe it. Small and ruined were two others.

There were, however, many more Vanguardians patrolling the premises. Too many, Parson thought, which suggested to him that this was not their usual or permanent residence. Several unfamiliar people greeted Monty or Overra as they made their way around to the far side of the building.”

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"1731

Parson could certainly feel the immense presence of the person they were looking for. He’d been feeling it for a while, actually, and it hadn’t been doing much to help calm his nerves.

Monty stopped in front of a tall wooden door and knocked.

“Enter,” came a heavy voice from the other side.

They did so.

The man therein was seated at a desk that was probably too large for the chamber. It wasn't lacking for paperwork, however. Stacks upon stacks littered the desk, as well the floor and chairs by the tall window. "Ah, there you are. I've been expecting you."

Parson was at once confused and starstruck. This was him? He looked like a regular guy. Brown eyes, brown hair, average height, plain face. Parson didn't think he could imagine a more ordinary looking man if he tried. The only distinguishing thing about him might've been that famed overcoat of white, gold, and black--but the man wasn't even wearing it. Instead, it was simply draped over the chair behind his desk.

Monty gave a salute. "You honor us, High Commander."

Parson followed suit but kept his mouth shut.

The man tried to go around his desk but found that there wasn't enough space between it and either wall to squeeze through. After a chin-scratching moment, he decided to simply leap over the desk instead, but his shoe caught one of the stacks thereon, and he kicked a splattering of books and paperwork across the room.

The man looked at what he'd just done with wide eyes and a frown. "...It took me two hours to organize all those..."

'Nice going,' said his accompanying reaper, which was a small tornado to Parson's eyes.

"...You think Jackson'll yell at me again if I mail it to him out of order?"

'Yes.'

"...I'm gonna do it, anyway."

'I'd be more surprised if you didn't.'

Parson was now much much more confused than starstruck. This was really Sermung? The Crystal Titan?

The man spun around to look at them again. "Anyway. You guys just pretend you didn't see that, okay? That's an order."

"Yes, sir," said Monty, still maintaining his salute.

“At ease, Captain Lamont. Or rather, Lieutenant General Lamont.”

Monty blinked as he lowered his hand. “I... I did not realize I would be receiving a promotion today, sir.”

“Yeah, I sorta just decided it a few hours ago. Congratulations.”

“Ah--er--thank you, High Commander.”

“No sweat.”

An intermission of silence arrived suddenly, and Sermung’s gaze turned to his reaper for a moment while he scratched his nose.

“Oh!” said Sermung, snapping his fingers a couple times. “Uh! Right! Your medals. I’ve got those... um... somewhere around here...” He looked around the chamber hurriedly.

His reaper grew a windy appendage out of its airy body in order to point.

Sermung rushed over to the directed spot and dug through a pile of papers to retrieve a pair of small boxes. “Here we are.””

"1732

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

Monty bowed his head as the man stepped closer, and Parson did the same.

“Ah!” said Sermung with the sound of sudden recognition. “Overra! I didn’t even realize that was you there!”

‘Hello, Sermung,’ she said. ‘And Tenebrach.’

“It is wonderful to see you again,” said Sermung. “How many years has it been?”

‘Eighty-three,’ said Tenebrach. ‘I only realized you had rejoined the Vanguard after reading your servant’s file the other day. Why did you not send word of your return earlier? We would have welcomed you personally.’

‘I knew how busy you would be,’ said Overra. ‘I wanted to earn an audience with you on my own merits. Or rather, those of my chosen servant. Though, I must admit, I did not expect it to happen this soon.’

Sermung laughed mildly. “Does that mean that this strapping young lad here is the ‘hope of the future’ that you once promised to find?”

At that, Parson couldn’t help raising his head. The Crystal Titan’s smile was as warm as any Parson had ever seen.

‘Hmph,’ said Overra. ‘I know you are being sarcastic, but as a matter of fact, yes, he is. He has a long way to go yet, but I believe he has the aptitude for the task, burdensome though it may be.’

Sermung’s smile only seemed to widen, and he offered the boy a handshake. “What is your name?”

Tenebrach answered for him, however. ‘It’s Parson Miles. Didn’t you read his file? Oh, nevermind, of course you didn’t. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have been surprised to see Overra here.’

Sermung’s smile flattened somewhat, and he looked at his reaper. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t attempt to undermine my authority in front of my men. I doubt it does much for their morale.”

‘Yes, well, I would appreciate it if you didn’t say such obviously stupid things in front of your men, but I guess we’re both destined to live in disappointment.’

Sermung returned to Parson with a taut grin. “In any case, I shan’t forget your name again.”

‘You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep,’ said Tenebrach.

“I’ll keep it,” said Sermung. “Just you wait and see.”

‘More likely, I’ll have to keep it for you in secret.’

“As if I could trust you not to rat me out at every opportunity.” Sermung kept Parson’s gaze and shook his head. “Learn well, young one. A reaper is only trustworthy when it matters most. Which is good, of course, but be wary that all other times, they will gleefully betray you.”

‘Please do not teach Parson any of your strange lessons,’ said Overra, though she was tittering.

‘Yes,’ said Tenebrach. ‘Do not be fooled, young Parson. Though he is

quite old, this man is severely lacking in the wisdom that would normally come with age.'

Sermung turned to Monty for help. "I speak nothing but the truth, no?"

Monty held up both hands and said nothing.

"Tch. Suddenly, I'm not so sure you deserve a medal for your bravery.""

"1733

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

Parson knew the man was only teasing, but a rather strong part of him agreed with that sentiment, at least with regard to himself. The battle at Luminal City had been the most terrifying event of his young life. There were several moments where he'd felt somehow even more powerless than he had during that fateful night in Trintol four years ago.

And yet, here he was. Still alive. Thanks entirely to Monty here. Now people were starting to call him things like the Lawman and the Judge, because Monty had brought order to Luminal City in a single night. Five separate gangs of superpowered outlaws, all of which had been quietly ruling the region for decades--each one had been routed or crushed.

It made Parson proud to have him as a mentor.

'By the way,' said Tenebrach as Sermung pinned the round, blue medal on Parson's little coat, 'have you figured out how you are going to save the world, yet?'

'Hah,' said Overra. 'If I did, I would not tell you. I know you would only laugh at me.'

'Oh, come now. We are all friends here. If you truly have a plan, I would love to hear it.'

'Then perhaps you will hear of it. One day.'

Tenebrach did not look impressed. 'You don't have a plan at all, do you?'

'I'm afraid I don't. At least, not one that I could explain to a simpleton like yourself.'

'Hoho! She bites! I don't recall you being so vicious. The Overra that I remember was a sweet-hearted idealist to her very core. I hope you haven't let this miserable world turn you into a misanthrope after all these years.'

'Never. I will always believe in the innate goodness of humanity. How that goodness might be best realized and harnessed, however--well, let's just say, on those points, I'm still making up my mind.'

--++--++--

...165 years ago...

Germal rubbed his head and tried not to think about the pain. It was all over his body, as usual, but today's headache was especially bad. The small nub in the center of his forehead throbbed in a way that was horrifically familiar.

After six years as a servant, this feeling was what he dreaded most. The feeling that told him another change was imminent. Try as he might, there was no suppressing it. The most that he'd managed to do so far was to internalize it, to direct the change inward.

To wreak utter havoc on his body.

Such was the source of his chronic pain. Stomach, liver, kidneys, pancreas, diaphragm, rib cage, hip bones, abdominal muscles, large intestines, small intestines--what would be next? There was no telling. Maybe it would just be another one of those. Instead of adding to the pain, maybe it would just multiply.

Nerovoy had been little help, despite the early optimism that the reaper had expressed.

Most days, Germal wished he hadn't been revived. He didn't know how much longer he would be able to go on like this."



((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

'I think we are getting close,' said Nerovoy.

Germal could barely make out the reaper's words between the pounding in his head and the howling noise outside of it. His patchwork cloak whipped all around him in the swirling wind and punishing hail, threatening to throw him off balance with each new step that he dared to take up the rocky mountain path.

He wished now that he could've found a cloak that wasn't three sizes too big for him, but this was the best one in the town full of dead men that he'd passed through on his way here.

Lightning crashed overhead, carving out a chunk of the mountain. It triggered a rockslide that was no more than five meters away from the path that Germal was using.

He watched the boulders fall and then glared at his reaper. To his eyes, the reaper was a kind of winged demon--small, devious-looking, and carrying a spear made of both fire and wind.

'Don't look at me like that,' said Nerovoy. 'It is not my fault that the information pointed us in this direction.'

As a child, Germal had frequently been told not to come anywhere near this place, and now he fully understood why. The Storm Mountains were every bit as terrifying as he'd been led to believe.

Now that he was a servant, at least he didn't have to worry about being swept off the side of the mountain and falling to his death.

Though, at this point, such an ending didn't look so bad.

He continued the climb, and as he did, he noticed Nerovoy moving gradually closer to him.

'What's got you spooked?' said Germal.

'This place might be more dangerous than I thought,' said Nerovoy.

A suddenly stronger burst of wind hit him, and Germal braced himself. His leather cap nearly flew off his head, but the hood of his cloak caught it for him. He nestled it back over the nub of his horn. 'If you wanna turn back, that's fine with me.'

'Absolutely not,' said Nerovoy. 'We stick with the plan. And besides, you obviously need help, and he may be one of the few people who can provide it.'

'That is assuming he's even here.'

'Well, that town back there bodes well for our chances.'

'The town full of dead people, you mean?'

'That's the one.'

'How does that bode well for us at all?'

'The Living Void isn't known for his mercy--at least, not in that sense.'

Germal's eyes widened, and he stopped climbing. 'What?!'

'Yeah, I know. You're upset I didn't tell you that was who we were going to see earlier, but it's alright--'

'You're taking me to meet an emperor of Abolish?!'

The reaper allowed a beat to pass. 'Yeah.'

'Why?!'

'Hey, it'll be alright. He's not as bad as everyone says.'

Germal had no words."

"1735

'And his reaper, Engomat, is an old friend of mine,' said Nerovoy.

'Why didn't you tell me any of this sooner?!'

'See? I knew you were upset about that.'

'Tell me!'

‘I didn’t want you panicking on me. But now that we’re so close, I felt I should allow you to prepare yourself. And you seemed like you were panicking a bit already. So now you can panic over two things at once! It’ll save us some time!’

Germal closed his eyes and rubbed his aching head another time.  
‘Nero...’

‘Yeah, buddy?’

‘I hate everything about you...’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, you’re not. At all.’

‘You’re right. But I’m telling you, everything will be okay. You should be happy! You’re finally going to get the help that you need!’

Germal wanted to yell, but he knew it would be fruitless. Infiltrating Abolish had been Nerovoy’s plan from day one. And yes, while it was true that that plan had gone horrendously awry at just about every conceivable opportunity over the last six years, that was probably also why the reaper was trying to take him straight to the source this time.

There was little doubt in Germal’s mind that this, too, would go terribly wrong in some new and unexpected way, but what the hell did it matter anymore? He decided to just focus on climbing. Maybe if he went high enough, lightning would strike him down and give him a few minutes of respite before Nerovoy revived him.

When he reached the first crest in the path, a new gale arrived from the south and nearly sent him tumbling back down. He pressed onward, this time fighting the wind head on.

The view was nice from here, he supposed. Forested valleys and snowy peaks filled the horizon, and the path forward was at least clear, if still long and winding. Visible sheets of rain and hail flexed with the shifting winds. And of course, the frequent lightning was the icing on the cake.

At length, after his feet had begun to hurt nearly as much as the rest of him, the only thing on Germal’s mind was why Nerovoy was putting him through all of this, making him walk all this way.

'...Can't you just kill me and go search the area on your own?' he finally asked.

'No,' the reaper said, having attached himself to Germal's chest and hidden beneath the cloak.

'Why not? The only thing in danger here is my sanity...'

'You're wrong. This whole place is full of ardor and soul power. If lightning strikes me, I'm toast. Even the hail could kill me, if I just sit out in the open and let it shred me.'

That information made him look around another time. The path crossed above a river full of rapids, and he could see a group of bears hanging around the water's edge."

"1736

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

'Don't go anywhere near those, by the way,' said Nerovoy.

He hadn't been planning to. 'Are they dangerous?'

'Anything that can live in this place is dangerous.'

They continued on, but they didn't get much farther before the ground began to rumble. Instinctively, Germal stopped and crouched down low as he surveyed their surroundings one more time.

In the distance, a crashing boom arrived along with an enormous cloud of rock and dust.

'Go!' said Nero. 'That must be him!'

Germal leapt up to his feet and bolted onward. The prospect of finally being done with this wretched journey was more than enough motivation to keep him in full sprint, despite his body's protests. After he rounded the next bend in the path and overcame another crest, he finally caught sight of someone standing on the edge of a crater.

Two someones, actually.

'Slow down,' said Nero privately.

Germal did so, and when the two figures both turned and saw him there, he stopped entirely.

One was an elderly man, but the other? Was that thing even human? It was as tall as a man, perhaps, but it looked more like a black lizard with its reptilian face and tail.

Nero wasted no time. 'Hello there!' he called out. 'Engomat, is that you?'

After a tense moment, a reaper that Germal hadn't even noticed floated out into the open.

'Nerovoy?' said the presumable Engomat. 'What in the world are you doing here?'

'Looking for you, as it so happens! What are YOU doing in this godforsaken place?'

The two figures were coming closer now, and Germal couldn't take his eyes off of them.

'Oh, nothing too exciting, I am afraid,' said Engomat. 'Searching for ancient treasure and not finding it, sadly. I was certain that a place like this would have more than its fair share of secrets, but alas, I have found no such evidence.'

Nerovoy laughed. 'You say that isn't exciting, and yet it sounds pretty adventurous to me! Here, allow me to introduce my new servant. This is Germal.'

'Hello, young man.'

He nodded. "H-hello... my name isn't Germal, though. You should--"

'Yes, it is,' said Nerovoy. 'That's just an annoying game he likes to play with people whenever he meets them for the first time. Don't be difficult, Germal. And stand up straight, for god's sake. You're in honorable company.'

That was easier said than done when his back felt like it was twisted into knots.

'My, my,' said Engomat. 'You do not look so good, my boy. Are you unwell?'

Germal opened his mouth, unsure of what manner of lie might come out, but Nero wasn't having it.

'He has been cursed with mutation,' the reaper said quickly. 'I have heard that, these days, it is now possible to do something about it, but I know not what.'

'Ah.'

'I was hoping that you, with all of the influence that you have apparently accumulated in my absence, would be able to help.'

"1737

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

'I see,' said Engomat. 'You were right to seek me out, old friend. It would be my pleasure to help your--'

As the old man and the lizard man approached, Germal expected them to come to a stop behind Engomat and listen to the two reapers conversing, but that was not what happened. Instead, only the old man stopped, while the lizard walked right up to Germal and crouched down to look the young man in the eye.

'Gohvis?' said Engomat. 'What are you doing?'

The lizard man ignored him. His eyes were those of a reptile, as well, with slitted pupils and bright yellow-green irises. He grabbed Germal's chin and turned the boy's head for him.

"E-excuse me--" tried Germal.

Gohvis pulled the boy's hood back and removed his leather cap to inspect the horn on his forehead. "One horn?" he said in two voices, though they sounded a bit odd to Germal's ears. "How long have you been a servant, boy?"

"Ah, oh, uh, fifty-nine--"

'It's been six years,' said Nero.

Germal gave the reaper an annoyed look, but he didn't get a chance to complain beyond that.

Gohvis lifted him off his feet as if he weighed no more than a carton of milk. The lizard man lifted up the boy's tunic and pressed his ear hole up against Germal's bare stomach.

Germal just kind of wagged his limbs uncomfortably and helplessly in midair, afraid to say anything--and also not even sure what he would say if he did have the courage. His whole body tensed up, and he looked around awkwardly with wide eyes.

"Gohvis," said the old man, who Germal could only assume to be the infamous Dozer now. Under normal circumstances, that person would undoubtedly be the one Germal feared most, but right now, that prize went to the lizard man treating him like some kind of seashell. "Gohvis, answer Engomat's question."

After another moment, Gohvis let Germal down. "I was checking to see if it was already too late for the boy," he said.

'Ah,' said Engomat. 'And what was your conclusion?'

"...I will take the boy into my care," said Gohvis. "He will be safest with me."

'That is not your decision to make,' said Engomat. 'And you did not quite answer my question, either.'

Gohvis looked to Dozer. "...Do you have a problem with it?"

For a time, the old man didn't answer him. The wrinkles of his face seemed to intensify his stare, somehow, and all the rain falling and lightning crashing in the distance seemed almost in accordance with the man's will. Germal could certainly feel the abrupt change in air pressure.

"...I suppose not," Dozer finally said. "You are our only authority on mutation now, after all."

'Hmph,' said Engomat. 'Try not to kill this one.'

Gohvis merely returned a flat stare, and the reaper hovered more closely to Dozer."

"1738

‘...Are you certain you can help him?’ said Nerovoy.

“No,” said Gohvis flatly. “He has internalized his mutations, which will make them almost impossible to counteract properly until he is significantly more experienced.” He eyed Germal again. “I imagine you are in constant pain, no?”

Even Germal didn’t want to lie about that. He gave a meek nod.

“Our first objective will be to heighten your pain tolerance, then. This will likely fail and make matters far worse for you, but it will also serve as an invaluable learning experience. If you can endure that, then there may be hope for you yet.”

That wasn’t exactly what Germal wanted to hear, but he supposed it provided him with more hope than he’d had five minutes ago. “O-okay...”

Gohvis lifted the boy up and again placed him on his shoulder. “Come. I shall teach you of the nervous system.”

“The what?” said Germal.

Gohvis began walking and explaining.

But they didn’t make it far before Engomat interrupted.

‘Our work here is not yet done,’ the reaper said. ‘You have not been excused.’

Gohvis just looked at him again, then at Dozer.

“There are two more areas I wish to check,” the old man said. “After that, you are free to take your leave.”

“I am sure you can handle it without me,” said Gohvis.

“I am sure I can as well,” said Dozer, “but your senses will expedite matters.”

“Fine. Lead on, then.”

The wind and rain seemed only to worsen as they headed deeper into the mountains. They deviated from the path entirely and descended



into a narrow valley.

Germal remained on Gohvis' shoulder, even as they ran briefly along the side of a cliff and bounded over a twenty meter gap.

'...This has gone a lot better than I thought it would,' said Germal.

'You think so?' said Nero in the echo of privacy.

'Yeah. Engomat already trusts you and everything.'

The reaper kept his laugh private as well. 'No, he doesn't.'

Germal didn't understand. 'What? But he--'

'It's been almost a hundred years since he last saw me. We parted on good terms, so he doesn't have an excuse to distrust me yet, but you can bet your last meal that he is looking for any reason at all to believe that I might betray him, right now.'

'...How do you know?'

'Because he is a reaper. Our loyalties and motivations change all the time. Your most trusted friend a century ago could be your worst enemy today. We all know this.'

'Huh...'

'It is something of a game, really. Or dance, perhaps. He suspects me. I know he suspects me. He knows that I know he suspects me. To say that we should be careful with our words right now would be an understatement. Even the mere perception of betrayal could doom us.'

"1739

'So in other words,' said Germal, 'I shouldn't lie to them?'

'Yes,' said Nero. 'It would be helpful if you did not make things even more difficult for me than they already are.'

'...I'll try.'

'Thank you. But if you fail, rest assured that I will call you out on it

publicly every time. In theory, it should be fine for you to get caught in a lie, so long as I make sure everyone knows that you are a compulsive liar and that you cannot help yourself.'

Germal couldn't say that he liked this plan very much. But then, he rarely ever did. Nero had a habit of making him do things he didn't want to do.

He wondered when he would be able to see Parson and Damian again. It had already been years, and he had a feeling that it would be many more yet.

They would probably give him all sorts of crap if he didn't do a good job. They were probably doing way better than he was. They were probably way stronger. They were always so good at everything, while he just followed their lead, did whatever they said.

He couldn't let it be that way again. He had to keep up with them, make them acknowledge him. He had to be their equal.

There was nothing he wanted more in this world than that.

Germal's headache worsened. Gohvis continued trying to explain various things to him, but Germal began to feel disoriented and found it difficult to listen. Combined with all the noise of the storm and bumpy ride on the lizard man's shoulder, Germal completely lost track of what was happening.

'...tohah.'

He winced and opened his eyes. Had they been closed? Agh, his head was still throbbing, though now it seemed to be focused mostly around the horn.

'...argobadah.'

What was that? Who was whispering?

'Nero?' said Germal.

'Yes?' the reaper said privately.

He looked around for the reaper. Oh, there he was, attached his arm. 'What were you saying just now?'

'Hmm? I wasn't saying anything.'

What? Had he imagined it? Germal didn't understand. Why was everything so confusing, all of a sudden?

Agh, this headache. It felt like someone was taking a dagger to his forehead.

But it also felt like it had a direction to it, somehow. Like it was coming from somewhere. Yeah. Less like a dagger, then, and more like a fishing hook still attached to the line. In fact, he could almost see the line. It was invisible, but he sensed it nonetheless, going all the way through the mountain to the north and beyond. Where did the line end? He couldn't tell. It was too far. And the pain made it difficult.

--want to do now, then?" Gohvis was saying, standing over a crater the size of a house.

"We shall return," said Dozer, standing in the middle of the crater."  
"1740

Had that crater been there the whole time? Germal wasn't sure. It was so difficult to pay attention--or even concentrate, for that matter--but he did his best.

"You are sure?" said Gohvis. "It is not like you to give up."

"I have exhausted all of our current leads," said Dozer. "This region is too large, and it could be buried in the earth for all we know."

'You don't have to answer this if you wish,' said Nero, 'but what are you hoping to find in this place?'

'A most ancient power,' said Engomat.

'Ah,' said Nero. 'Can you not be more specific?'

'I am afraid not, no.'

'I see.'

Huh.

Germal suddenly had to wonder if the invisible fishing line might be related to whatever it was they were looking for. That might make a

degree of sense. Maybe he should tell them about it. Yeah, that might be a good idea, he decided.

He passed out, instead, and toppled backwards off Gohvis' shoulder.

-+--+--+-

...162 years ago...

The stench of human waste and rotting flesh was difficult to get used to, but somehow, Damian had managed it. Not that he'd had much choice. Being stuck in this cell with Feromas for the last month had made it something of a priority.

He scratched his nose, then his chin.

Oh, hey. Facial hair. He'd finally started growing some. He stood and checked himself out in a cracked mirror over a black-stained sink. Yeah. It wasn't very noticeable yet, but it was there.

'You look pleased with yourself,' said Feromas.

"I am," said Damian, admiring the little hairs.

'I doubt you'll be that way when you have to cut it every morning just so you won't look like a slovenly drunkard. Lofar men are exceptionally hairy.'

Damian wasn't going to let the reaper spoil his good mood, though. It was a rare enough occurrence for him, already.

'I'm sure today will be the day,' said Feromas.

Damian just gave the reaper a look. He knew that Feromas was talking about when they would be released from this horrific place, because the reaper had said the exact same thing every day for the last three weeks. Or close to it, anyway. Without any sunlight to go by, the days had started to blur together.

'I'm telling you,' the reaper said privately, 'the plan will work. It is only a matter of time until Bool gets word of our presence here.'

Bool was the reaper of Morgunov, according to Feromas, though Damian was beginning to have his doubts about even that information now. 'Maybe he already knows we're here and doesn't care,' said Damian.

'Nonsense. Abolish doesn't keep prisoners for no reason. If Bool knew we were here, we would either be released or killed.'

'That's not comforting.'

'The truth often isn't. The only reason they took us prisoner in the first place was because they were worried our story might not be complete twaddle.'

'...And it's NOT complete twaddle, right?'

'Of course it isn't! I'm telling you, I know Bool!'

'This past month would seem to suggest otherwise...''

"1741

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

It was useless to argue with Feromas, Damian knew. The only thing to do was wait, it seemed.

So he did. He might've liked to bust his way out of here, but he had learned early on that the bars and walls of his cell were far too strong for him to break through. Feromas could squeeze through the bars, of course, but the greater prison beyond those bars was filled with guards who had already demonstrated their joy in killing.

Still, it might've been possible for Feromas to leave Damian alone and escape on his own--not advisable, perhaps, but possible.

And yet the reaper didn't.

Damian supposed Feromas deserved some credit for that. Maybe the reaper's claim of being Damian's great grandfather was actually true. Damian's parents had never told him his great grandfather's name, so he'd been rather doubtful about the whole thing ever since Feromas told it to him all those years ago. Damian had never actually voiced that doubt, simply because of how much power the reaper had over him, but now the last of his doubts were finally abating. It would have been a rather strange thing to lie about, he figured.

And of course, Feromas knew things. About Damian's father and

grandfather. The reaper claimed to have been following Damian's father throughout the Machas War--the war of which Trintol had been a casualty. Feromas said that he had wanted to revive Damian's father as his servant instead, but when news arrived of the enemy advancing toward Trintol, the reaper decided to rush back there in order to check up on the rest of the Lofar family. Overra and Nerovoy had agreed to help.

But they arrived too late, apparently. There was a strict time limit on when a soul could be resurrected, the reaper said. So his mother and grandmother were gone.

Naturally, after being told all these things, the first thing that Damian had wanted to do was go find his father. And Feromas and the others had obliged. It had taken nearly a year, but they found him.

Dead and buried. The man had been given a respectable tombstone with the words "Our Heroic Brother-In-Arms" carved into it.

Damian had cried that night, and for once, he hadn't cared that the other boys saw. That year of searching had been driven entirely by hope, and yet that was how it ended?

It was simply too cruel. Life. This world. All of it. So little of it was fair or good.

Damian had been utterly numb by the time he parted ways with Parson and Germal. This plan that the reapers had... to use their connections in order to infiltrate the Vanguard and Abolish... to play a very long and dangerous game...

Damian couldn't have cared less about it. And even now, his feelings on the matter hadn't changed much. But they had changed on another matter."

"1742

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

Perhaps it was just time healing all wounds. Perhaps it was the slow realization that his family wasn't completely gone since Feromas was still here. But whatever it was, he had begun to look forward to the future again--to seeing Parson and Germal again, especially.

And he was starting to think even beyond that, as well. Maybe one day, he would be able to start a new family. If he could live that long. If he could find a good woman. If he could find a nice place. Somewhere peaceful. Somewhere he could raise children safely and quietly, away from all this blood and chaos and undead business.

He was still barely even a teenager, but he couldn't imagine anything that he would have liked more than that.

He focused on his meditation for most of the day. Perhaps if he could develop his power more, he could break them out of here, but he wasn't particularly hopeful. He still didn't even understand what his ability was, really.

Feromas, Overra, and Nerovoy had of course explained all about servant powers, but even they had been at a loss for what Damian's ability was, exactly. The only apparent thing was that he could use it to disintegrate things. At first, they'd all told him that it was the destruction type, but as time passed, it became clear that that was not the case.

Damian had met several destruction users since then. They created a path whenever they used their power, and there was a particular sound associated with it, too. But Damian's ability didn't work that way. He simply turned things to dust at will--often accidentally, back when he was first acclimating himself to it.

So, really, he didn't know for sure if his ability couldn't overcome these walls. He'd already tried and failed several times, but there was no telling what it would be able to do for him with more development.

Probably not much, though, he figured. It seemed to be an all-or-nothing kind of power.

Three meals of yellow-brown slop arrived, as usual, and he was hungry enough to choke down two of them but not the third.

He was preparing for another night of uncomfortable sleep in a flea-ridden, rat-eaten bedroll when he suddenly felt it.

An oppressive presence unlike any he had felt before.

'It's him,' said Feromas. 'He's here.'

Damian could hear the other prisoners stirring in their cells and guards whispering to one another. There soon came a commotion of keys jangling and metal doors creaking and clanking--and finally, footsteps.

Drawing steadily nearer.

Damian only sat and waited with attentive eyes.

When a group of men appeared on the other side of the bars, Damian didn't have much trouble discerning which among them was the Mad Demon of Abolish. The others were all familiar-looking guards, of course, but even if they weren't, it probably still would have been obvious from just the eyes and smile."

"1743

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

The Mad Demon's raven hair was so wild that it almost looked alive. He wore a blazingly red frock coat with gold-lined squares all over it, and a white cravat protruded farther out from his neck than was probably proper.

"Feromas, you old so-and-so!" Morgunov threw up his hands and placed them against the bars but didn't open the cell. "How in the heck are ya?!"

'I... have been better. But it is good to see you, Nibas.'

"Nibas?!" Morgunov snorted. "Why, nobody's called me that in... three hundred years! It's Morgunov now! Obviously! What kind of stoop would want to be called Nibas, huh?"

"...Stoop?"

"Yes. It's an abbreviation of 'stupid person.'"

'I don't think that's a real word.'

"It is, if I say it is. I have that kind of power now. I'm a real trend-setter, you know."

'...I suppose you are, aren't you? Where is Bool, by the way? I was hoping to speak with him.'

Morgunov's smile seemed to widen, though Damian wouldn't have thought that possible, and the man snickered. "Oh, I'm sure you would like to talk to him, wouldn't you? And I have no doubt that he would like



to talk to you.”

Damian wasn't liking the Mad Demon's tone all of a sudden--not that he'd liked it all that much before.

“But ya see,” Morgunov went on, “I dunno if I should actually trust you. As I recall, you were quite the persuasive little rascal, weren'tcha? You talked Bool into doing all sorts of stuff with you, didn't you? Of course, this was all back when I was still just a teeny-weeny baby servant who barely knew up from down, but I remember you and your mischievous ways! Don't think I don't!”

‘I am glad you have not forgotten me,’ said Feromas. ‘But what, precisely, are you afraid that I will convince Bool to do?’

“Oh, who knows?” said Morgunov, gesturing wildly with his hands. “But therein lies the rub, eh? What. Do. Ya plan. To do? Hmm? I know how sneaky you reapers can be. Got all sorts of things going on inside those extra-dimensional brains of yours, don'tcha?”

Feromas sighed. ‘I assure you, I have no such devious plans for Bool.’

“Eheh, well, we'll see about that.” The Mad Demon's wide, gray eyes fell upon Damian. “And who is your little friend here? Your servant, I presume?”

‘Yes,’ said Feromas. ‘His name is Damian Lofar. He is my great grandson, as it so happens.’

“Ya don't say! Well, how about that! Lovely to make your acquaintance, my young friend!” Morgunov reached a hand through the bars.

Damian didn't see much choice and decided to shake it.

Morgunov took the opportunity to yank the boy over to him, and his other hand found Damian's face. “Hmm. Hmmm...!”

“Agh--! W-what are you doing?” said Damian.

“Oh, nothing. Just checking something. Don't mind me. Hmm. Yes. This skin certainly looks like your own. I suppose you're not a jabberwock or a tomokooni, then. Hmm. Good. Yes, quite good.”

"1744

"What the hell is a jabberwock or a tomokooni?" said Damian, still struggling.

Morgunov let him go, and Damian staggered a few steps back toward the rear of the cell. "You are probably better off not knowing. It could be the knowing that attracts them!"

Damian stayed near the far corner and rubbed the sore spot on his arm where the man had grabbed him. What a monstrous grip Morgunov had.

'Does Bool know you are here?' said Feromas.

"He sure doesn't!" said Morgunov. "And how you answer my next questions will determine whether or not you ever get to see him again! So think carefully, now! Eheh!"

Feromas' next words were private. 'Let me do the talking.'

Damian hadn't been planning otherwise.

Morgunov pointed at Feromas. "First thing first. I'll start us off with an easy one. Are you planning to betray me?"

'No, of course we aren't,' said Feromas, apparently unable to conceal his exasperation.

"Yes, that is what I expected you to say," said Morgunov. "But you see, I'm not sure I believe you, so I'm going to ask that same question one more time. And I want you to be honest now! No lying! Understood?"

'...Understood.'

"Okay, here we go. You ready?"

'...Yes. What are you waiting for?'

"Eheh! What, indeed!" Morgunov gestured broadly with his hands again, though this time spent more time on it, as if performing a dance or casting a spell. "And beeeee... truthful!" He slammed his hands against the bars of the cell.

Damian felt an immediate difference. The air was suddenly thicker,

more oppressive. Breathing became simultaneously easier and more difficult. It was as if he couldn't even control his own breath, yet at the same, the air itself seemed more resistant as well.

'W-what...?' said Feromas, apparently able to feel a difference also. 'What is this?! What are you doing to us?'

"Ya like it? It's one of my latest tricks!"

'I don't--!'

"Shh-shh, no talky unless I say so. Which I do, by the way! I do say so! But not about that. Whatever you were about to say, I'm sure it can wait. The important thing is that you answer my question again. Are you planning to betray me?"

'Wha--?! I--! Argh--!'

"C'mon, now! Don't be bashful! Just tell Papa Morgunov the truth! You'll feel better! I promise!"

Damian could only watch in horror. Words weren't even forming in his mind, much less from his mouth.

'I--! Argh--! Yes!'

"Oh? Yes, what?"

'Yes... yes, I plan on betraying you...'

"Yeah-huh. See? Doesn't it feel good to come clean?"

'I... you... how...?'

"Eheh, how, indeed? I'd love to explain, but, well, ya know--you did just admit to being a traitor, so. Don't have much reason to share my secrets with you, now do I?"

"1745

((Mother's Day Special -- Page 2 of 12))

'Nibas, wait--' tried Feromas.

"I told you, my name is Morgunov, now."

‘Fine, I--’

“It’s funny. I didn’t think you would break on the first question. I’m quite disappointed, honestly. I thought we could do a whole little dance with this, have a bit of back-and-forth, make a pleasant evening out of it! But no! You already gave me all the reason I need to kill you!”

Feromas was looking around frantically now, eyes lingering briefly on Damian. ‘Morgunov, wait! I can tell you where the Mask of Amordiin is! You’re interested in that, aren’t you?! But you’ll never find out where it is if you kill me!’

Morgunov’s expression went briefly flat, and when the man’s smile returned, it seemed pitying this time. He banged the bar cells another time. “Do you really know where the Mask is? ‘Cuz I have a funny feeling you’re lying again.”

‘I--! Agh--!’

“Hmm? What’s that?”

‘I... I don’t...’

“You don’t what?”

‘I don’t know where the Mask is.’

Morgunov let loose a throaty cackle. “You really didn’t understand what I was doing, did you? Well, that’s okay. Reapers are always a bit slow on the uptake with things like this, eh? So stuck in the past that you have trouble realizing when the future is staring you right in the face! It’s not your fault, though. It’s just your nature. I won’t hold it against you.”

Damian didn’t know what to do. Clearly, this was not going how Feromas had wanted, and his reaper’s panic had quickly become his own.

“Oh well,” said Morgunov. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and be reincarnated as a beautiful emu. Majestic creatures, those. I got myself one as a pet, recently. I don’t think he likes me much, but that just makes me yearn for his affection even more, somehow. But anyway, I suppose I’m just rambling now. And you know what? Since you’ve been such good listeners, and since you’ve also been so patiently waiting for me here, I’m going to give you a choice! How would you like to die?”

Oh no.

‘Morgunov, wait--’

“No. Waiting isn’t one of the choices, silly. Well, maybe it is. In a sense. I’ll just explain them, shall I? Okay, so first, I could kill ya slowly and painfully. Now, of course, the benefit to this option is that you get to live slightly longer, but I won’t sugarcoat it--it’s going to be quite miserable. Wouldn’t be my choice, necessarily. Though, maybe it would depend on my mood. Anyway, the second option is, as you can probably guess, quick and painless. Now, this one’s quite popular, but I don’t--”

As he listened, Damian became increasingly convinced there was no sense in any of this. He certainly didn’t want to die without a fight.

--which brings us to the third option. And maybe you’re thinking, ‘Papa Morgunov, how could there be a third option when the first two seem to cover everything so thoroughly?’ Well, that’s the thing! The third option is a surprise! Might be even quicker! Might be even slower! Might be a mixture! Who knows?! Could involve some fun gadgets I’ve been working on! Now, what do you--?!”

Damian raised his hand and concentrated with everything he had, trying to disintegrate Morgunov’s head."

"1746 -- CLXXXVI.

((Mother's Day Special -- Page 3 of 12))

Morgunov’s head twitched, and he blinked a couple times, staring at Damian. “What are you doing there, boy? Eheh, that tickles a bit!”

Damian just grit his teeth and pushed harder, demanding still more from himself. He thought he felt a response, even.

Morgunov began to giggle. “Ooh! Now it really tickles! You’re a funny boy! What’s that ability of yours, hmm?”

‘...We don’t know,’ said Feromas. ‘We haven’t been able to figure it out, either.’

“Ya don’t say! Well, I do love me a good mystery! Maybe I won’t be

killing you, after all!"

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Six: 'Take repose and steady thyself...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector almost couldn't believe it when he finally, truly, actually made it back to Warrenhold in one piece. The journey had taken several more hours, of course, but there was no further interruptions or delays, which he considered a miracle enough on its own.

He ended up waiting to have Voreese revive Roman, however. The heat of the Undercrust would have made the regeneration more difficult and caused Roman needless extra pain later, so Hector didn't get a chance to catch up with Roman just yet.

Even after he made it back, there wasn't much opportunity for pleasantries. Now that everyone was safe--for the time being, at least--all Hector really wanted to do was sleep. And he wasn't the only one, either. The exhaustion among the Rainlords was plain as day. He supposed being held captive as brains for the past few days hadn't qualified as proper rest.

As he dragged himself toward the Tower of Night, to the master bedroom therein, he couldn't help thinking about all of the things that he would have to take care of after he woke up.

Garovel and Voreese were going to bring the Rainlords up to speed for him, regarding everything that had transpired with Leo, and a part of Hector was glad that he wouldn't be conscious for their reactions. Somehow, he didn't think that they would want to play along with the fiction that Voreese had concocted about him being their new leader.

And of course, he would have to inform the Queen of the situation as well. He had no idea how he was going to explain all of this to her. Harboring a bunch of fugitives from the Vanguard was bad enough, but now he had to tell her about Leo, too? A likely fugitive from Sai-hee?

She probably wasn't going to be very pleased about that.

Still. At least they were here. They'd made it to Warrenhold.

There sure were a lot of people around now, too. Most, if not all, of the non-servant Rainlords were up and about, it seemed. Many of them

were staring at him as he passed, and a few even came up to him and tried to strike up a conversation. He tried his best to politely decline, citing exhaustion, and they all seemed to understand.

When he opened the door to his room and saw the bed there, he couldn't imagine a more relieving sight in the entire world."

"1746 -- CLXXXVI.

((Mother's Day Special -- Page 3 of 12))

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[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector almost couldn't believe it when he finally, truly, actually made it back to Warrenhold in one piece. The journey had taken several more hours, of course, but there was no further interruptions or delays, which he considered a miracle enough on its own.

He ended up waiting to have Voreese revive Roman, however. The heat of the Undercrust would have made the regeneration more difficult and caused Roman needless extra pain later, so Hector didn't get a chance to catch up with Roman just yet.

Even after he made it back, there wasn't much opportunity for

pleasantries. Now that everyone was safe--for the time being, at least--all Hector really wanted to do was sleep. And he wasn't the only one, either. The exhaustion among the Rainlords was plain as day. He supposed being held captive as brains for the past few days hadn't qualified as proper rest.

As he dragged himself toward the Tower of Night, to the master bedroom therein, he couldn't help thinking about all of the things that he would have to take care of after he woke up.

Garovel and Voreese were going to bring the Rainlords up to speed for him, regarding everything that had transpired with Leo, and a part of Hector was glad that he wouldn't be conscious for their reactions. Somehow, he didn't think that they would want to play along with the fiction that Voreese had concocted about him being their new leader.

And of course, he would have to inform the Queen of the situation as well. He had no idea how he was going to explain all of this to her. Harboring a bunch of fugitives from the Vanguard was bad enough, but now he had to tell her about Leo, too? A likely fugitive from Sai-hee?

She probably wasn't going to be very pleased about that.

Still. At least they were here. They'd made it to Warrenhold.

There sure were a lot of people around now, too. Most, if not all, of the non-servant Rainlords were up and about, it seemed. Many of them were staring at him as he passed, and a few even came up to him and tried to strike up a conversation. He tried his best to politely decline, citing exhaustion, and they all seemed to understand.

When he opened the door to his room and saw the bed there, he couldn't imagine a more relieving sight in the entire world."

"1747

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He knew that he couldn't plop down on the mattress just yet, though. He was still holding Roman's encased head in one arm--the same arm that was also carrying his shield. He hadn't wanted to dematerialize the shield, because if he did, he knew that he wouldn't be able to rematerialize it later. With all the other identical shields currently



residing in Warrenhold, the volume limit for the shield's unique materialization had certainly been reached.

Before he could enter the room, however, his mother's voice acquired his attention.

"Hector?" she said, stepping closer.

He hadn't even noticed her there at the end of the hall. Why hadn't Garovel warned him of her presence? Oh, right, he was off talking to the Rainlords, already. Why hadn't the Scarf of Amordiin warned him, then? Oh, it had, Hector realized. He just hadn't been paying attention.

Man, he needed some sleep.

"...Hi, mom." His voice was still ringing with metal, he realized. Because he was still wearing armor.

"What are you--?"

He dematerialized most of his armor so she could see his face.

She recoiled a little.

Oh, right, she hadn't actually seen him use his power all that much, had she?

"Ah, sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She didn't say anything.

And neither did he.

Ugh. Was he supposed to be telling her something? He couldn't remember. He was way too tired for this, right now, but at the same time, just ignoring her seemed like the wrong thing to do.

"...You look like crap," she eventually said.

"Yeah," he said with a sigh, "it's been a long... uh..."

"Month?" she finished.

Holy shit, had it really been that long since he'd last seen her? "Er, yeah," was all he could think to say. He noticed Voreese hovering there next to him. She was still waiting to revive Roman. He supposed he shouldn't keep her waiting.

He entered the room and set Roman's head down on a table by the balcony window. "Ah... h-how have you been?" he decided to ask.

His mother followed him as far as the open doorway. "Fine," was all she said.

"That's... good." He sat down at the table and started trying to chip away at the encasement. Then, thinking better of it, he stopped. It might be more than a little surprising for his mother if she saw that there was a human head inside it.

Shit.

Now he didn't know what to do with his hands, so he just kind of sat there awkwardly, looking between her and the window. He knew there was a nice view of the underground courtyard there, but he'd have to go out onto the balcony to see it.

"...Have you eaten anything recently?" his mother asked.

Had he? Why was it so hard to remember all of sudden? "Er, no, I haven't..." Truth be told, he was fucking starving. He was only marginally more exhausted than he was hungry.

"I'll make you something, then. What do you want?"

At that, he genuinely did not know what to say."

"1748

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She seemed to grow impatient with him. "Do you want something or not?"

"Ah--er, sure. W-whatever's fine. I don't care. I mean, eh, I could eat just about anything..."

"...Okay." And she left.

His brown eyes lingered on the empty doorway.

Hmm.

‘She seems... nice,’ said Voreese.

Hector just spared the reaper a look and elected not to comment on that. Instead, he returned to his work, trying to free Roman. He supposed he didn’t have to be gentle. He could just destroy the brain, and the end result would be the same. It might be faster, too.

Though, it would probably also get brain matter all over the table. And possibly the rest of the room, depending on how violent he tried to get with it.

He decided to try to avoid that type of mess. He didn’t think it would be good to spill cerebral juices or whatever in the same place where he wanted to go to sleep.

It was slow going but still not quite as slow as it had been before, and within a few minutes, he managed to free enough of Roman’s neck-stump for Voreese to begin the regeneration.

He worked on trying to free the man’s face and cranium while Roman’s torso began to form.

Voreese seemed to grow anxious while she waited. ‘So how do you like it here, by the way? Warrenhold’s pretty great, right? I bet you’re glad you listened to me now, eh?’

“Yeah, I am,” he said with small laugh.

‘Heh.’

An iron spike cracked off another black chunk, revealing Roman’s mouth. Well, at least he’d be able to breathe now.

‘Hector, listen, um...’

He spared another glance as he worked. “What?”

‘I know I kinda said this, already... or at least implied it, I’m pretty sure, but, uh... it’s just, ah, I really do mean it, you know?’

Hector didn’t follow. “Mean what?”

‘Oh, c’mon, you know what I’m saying, don’t you?’

He just cocked an eyebrow at her.

‘Wow, are you really gonna make me repeat myself? It’s not very

gentlemanly to embarrass a lady like this, you know.'

Now he was just confused. "...Voreese, what the hell are you talking about?"

'Ugh! I'm saying I'm grateful, okay! There! Ya happy, ya little punk?!'

"Oh..." That was all she was trying to say? Shit. He could feel himself starting to blush. "Uh... it's, ah... I mean, you guys've helped me a bunch, too, so it's not really, like, I, er--"

'Hector, what the fuck? Quit that. I can't deal with it. You're gonna give me diabetes.'

"Ah--what?"

'Just shut up and listen, okay? What you did--going back for Roman like that... when, frankly, you probably shouldn't have... It's just. Look, that's a really big deal, okay?'

He didn't know what to say. Roman's torso was almost done, so he started giving the man some armor."

"1749

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Voreese was apparently unsatisfied by that reaction, however. 'Hector, do you...? Do you actually not understand how big of a deal that was? I could've EASILY ended up separated from Roman for the next twenty years. Or longer, even. If he ended up falling into Sai-hee's hands, then there really would've been no telling when I could've gotten him back.'

Hector scratched his cheek, not really sure what her point was. "I mean... yeah, of course I understand that. That's why I went back for him."

'Then why are you so fucking nonchalant about it, huh? Do you know how ridiculously difficult it's gonna be to repay you for this shit?'

He breathed a laugh. "You don't have to repay me for anything. You guys are... like I was trying to say, you've already done so much. It's not like--"

‘Okay, enough of that. We don’t need your fucking charity, alright? We will definitely--’

“Charity?” interrupted Hector. He was getting a little pissed off now. “What the hell are you talking about? That wasn’t charity. That was just--it was--agh...” What were the right words here, dammit?

‘Fine, not charity, whatever. I’m just saying that Roman and I don’t like being indebted to people, so--’

“Agh, yeah, and I’m saying you’re not indebted to me.”

‘The fuck’re you talking about? Of course we are, you little prick!’

Hector didn’t intend to budge on this, though. “No. You’re not.”

‘I don’t think you--’ But she stopped herself for some reason. Then she tilted her head at him, seemingly more confused than irritated now. ‘Why’re you being so stubborn about this?’

“Why are you?” he said right back.

‘Because I--agh...!’ She gave an exasperated groan and pointed a skeletal finger at him. ‘Now, you listen here, young man. I am two thousand years old or some shit like that. You don’t get to win arguments against me, understand?’

Hector all but threw up his hands. “Now what are you saying?! What is this argument even about?!”

‘I don’t know, okay?! I just know that you’re annoying me with all this backtalk! You’re supposed to be this adorable little boy who never argues with me, goddammit!’

Hector just squinted at her.

‘The fuck kinda look is that?!’ said Voreese. ‘Alright, y’know what? I’ve been thinkin’ this for a while now, but I just have to come right out and say it! You are NOT the same Hector that I remember! Are you a body snatcher or something?! What did you do with him, huh?!’

At that, Hector couldn’t help laughing a little. Roman was just about finished regenerating, he realized, so Hector completed the man’s armor set for him. Roman was already beginning to move again, and Hector helped him onto his feet.

The man's head was still half-encased, so Voreese touched his shoulder, and then Roman was able to yank the rest of it off himself-- though not without ripping off some of his face and scalp."

"1750

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'How ya feelin', dumbass?' said Voreese.

Roman touched the regenerating chunk of his face and eyed the blood on his fingertips. "Numb, thankfully." When he saw Hector there, he smiled ghoulishly. "Well, look who it is."

Hector couldn't help smiling, too. "Finally. Sorry for all the trouble I've caused you."

"Heh. Same here." Roman took the opportunity to stretch his arms and legs, though his iron armor didn't lend itself particularly well to that purpose.

Hector plopped back down in the chair, feeling like he could fall asleep right then and there, if he wanted. It seemed like he'd been wanting to talk to Roman for ages, but now that he actually had the opportunity, he was having trouble thinking of anything to say.

Fortunately, that didn't prove too much of a problem with Voreese there. She brought Roman up to speed. Apparently, he'd been at least semi-conscious for a while now, and Voreese had already been trying to explain things to him privately.

Hector supposed that made sense. Leo's encasing hadn't felt very cold at all, even though Roman's actual head had. Perhaps Leo had frozen Roman's head initially and then given it a normal coating. Perhaps to make it easier to carry? Hector wasn't sure, and he was too tired to give it much more thought.

Roman and Voreese were already shouting at one another for some reason, but it didn't seem like something to be worried about, considering their body language. And considering that it was them.

Pretty soon, Hector just gave up and drifted off.

Agh. It was so nice not to think about anything. Just an ocean of

comfortable darkness and nothing at all concerning him.

It was gone all too quickly, however.

‘Hector, wake up,’ came Garovel’s voice.

And Hector did, though not because he wanted to. His eyes still felt heavy. Hell, his whole body did. “Ugh... no...”

‘I know you’re tired,’ said Garovel, ‘but it’s already been eight hours, and I can’t just let you sleep for the next week--not with all the things we need to take care of.’

He rolled over in his bed. “Just... five more... hours...”

‘Sorry, buddy.’

Hector felt the reaper’s touch against the back of his skull, and instantly, his fatigue was gone. All bodily desire to sleep vanished, though a part of him wanted to stay in bed out of spite.

He sighed and sat up. He knew only too well that putting off his exhaustion like this meant that it was just going to hit him even harder later.

He got out of bed. When had he even gotten into bed, he wondered? Last thing he remembered was falling asleep in the chair by the table.

He noticed a bowl and a glass on the table now.

Shit.

He walked over to it. Some type of soup. Ice cold now and possibly no longer safe to eat. The drink, on the other hand, was lukewarm tea.

Hmm.

He materialized a red hot ball of iron into the soup and a freezing one into the tea.

‘Are you really gonna eat that?’ said Garovel, observing from over his shoulder. ‘Just throw it out. Go downstairs and get something fresh from the kitchen.’

“It’s alright,” said Hector. “I’ll do that, too. I’m hungry enough.”

‘If you say so.’”

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He turned to Garovel while he waited. "So what should we deal with first?"

'You need to meet with Madame Carthrace.'

"Oh, yeah. I haven't seen her at all yet. How's she doing?"

'She seems to be handling things fairly well, considering two days ago, she only had to worry about a handful of people. Now she's suddenly got hundreds in need of accommodations. I heard her mention that she didn't want to disturb you while you were resting, but I imagine she must be quite eager to have a conversation with you by now.'

"Ah... right." He decided to just blurt out one of the questions that he'd been dreading. "Do we even have enough money to take care of everyone here?"

'For a little while, sure,' said Garovel. 'Combined with the cost of renovations, we could probably last a few months just on what we have. Before we go completely bankrupt, that is.'

Hector sighed and sat down to eat. "That's... not very encouraging."

'Wasn't supposed to be. Madame Carthrace would probably have a more accurate estimate for you, but I think it's safe to say that if we don't come up with a reliable source of income soon, we are gonna have some big problems on our hands.'

"Agh, and with this... economic crisis or whatever going on..." The soup didn't have much flavor, but he liked how chunky it was. He'd definitely have to get more to eat after this, though.

'Yeah. Making money might prove somewhat challenging at the moment, but on the bright side, we've got plenty of rich allies who are probably willing to help us out.'

That piqued Hector's curiosity. "Do the Rainlords still have access to their money, by the way?"



‘Yes and no. I was wondering the same thing, so I asked the various head reapers about it, and apparently, many of the Rainlords have had their assets completely frozen, but there’s also a pretty strong contingent of them who were prepared for this sort of thing.’

“For fleeing their own country as fugitives?”

‘Yep. They say they’ve got hidden funds stored in banks all over the world. Some even have actual secret store houses that they plan on making a trip to at their first opportunity. It’s obviously not as much money as they normally have access to, but they’re still far from broke.’

“Huh... I’m a little surprised that the Vanguard is able to freeze any of their assets at all.”

‘My understanding is that the Vanguard isn’t doing it directly. Rather, they’re applying pressure in the government of western Sair--which, by all accounts, is in total fucking chaos, by the way.’

Hector bobbed his head at that news. “I can imagine... The Rainlords made up, uh, most of the leadership there, didn’t they?”

‘They sure did. Now they’re all missing, and their civilian subjects are left feeling scared and unprotected.’

“Geez...”

"1752

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‘From what I’ve heard and been seeing on television, it looks like the Sandlords are intervening in the Rainlords’ territory now.’

Hector stopped eating for a moment to look at Garovel. “Seriously?”

‘Yep.’

“But isn’t that, like... overreach or something?”

‘Quite possibly. The Rainlords don’t seem too pleased about it, but they also seem to understand that it’s a difficult situation, and the Sandlords probably shouldn’t just sit back and watch half of their own

country fall into disorder and lawlessness.'

"Hmm." Hector returned to his meal and discovered that he was already almost finished with it.

'It's a difficult situation for everyone, but the Sandlords deciding to take action here is pretty damn justified, I'd say. What that means for Sair's future, though--that's another matter. I'm sure the Rainlords aren't loving the thought of their thousand-year-old rivals taking over their territory permanently.'

"Yeah..."

'But hey! With their new Lord Darksteel taking them under his protection, maybe the Rainlords are only thinking about how bright their future is!'

Hector groaned. "Why'd you have to remind me about that shit...?"

The reaper chortled. 'What, you don't like being the new leader of the Rainlords?'

Hector just groaned again.

'Voreese and I did tell them about that, by the way. Or we STARTED to tell them, at least. Word seems to be getting around pretty well on its own now.'

Hector groaned again, even louder this time. "How are they reacting to it?"

'Hard to say. Mainly they just seemed confused. Though, I think some of them are under the impression that it's a conspiracy.'

"Wha? A conspiracy?"

'As in, they think that it might actually be true--that it's not just a ruse to fool Leo and that you might genuinely be their new de facto leader.'

Hector stared at Garovel, trying to discern something--anything--from the reaper's skeletal expression. "Tell me you're lying, Garovel."

'Sorry, buddy. I'm not.'

He buried his face in his hands. "Argh..."

'Hey, on the plus side, some of those conspiracy believers seemed...

fairly receptive to the idea.'

Hector didn't remove his face from his hands.

'Admittedly, though, some others seemed a bit less so... Anyway, we won't know what the Rainlords are really thinking about everything until the heads have another meeting. They're mostly just trying to let everyone get some rest, still.'

That last part, Hector was actually glad to hear. After everything those people had been through, they definitely deserved a break.

He slurped up the rest of his soup, chugged the rest of his tea, and then hopped in the shower. The master bathroom was certainly spacious, though a bit odd. The whole thing was made out of the pitch black nightrock, just like the rest of the Tower of Night, but certain key pieces of it were very recently added, such as the porcelain toilet and sinks, the steel faucets, and the big, glassy shower."

"1753

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It was strange to imagine how long ago this bathroom must have been built. Due to those few additions, it looked fairly modern, apart from perhaps the bathtub, which was embedded in the floor and could've doubled as a small pool.

'Is there any other news about the Sandlords?' said Hector as he scrubbed his back. He quite appreciated the scent of soap. It was a welcome change from all the awful stench that he was getting used to smelling. 'Like, er, how they're dealing with the Vanguard or whatever?'

'No,' said Garovel from the other room, 'but it's a safe bet that the Vanguard is working closely with them, regardless. Lamont had just arrived in Sair when we left, and that guy doesn't have a reputation for leaving things half done. With the Salesman's frozen head in the Sandlords' possession, I'm sure the Vanguard will be wanting to keep a very close eye on everything that's going on in Sair, right now.'

'Hmm. Do you think the Vanguard is pressuring the Sandlords into taking over the Rainlords' territory?'

‘It’s possible, but I’m not sure how much extra motivation the Sandlords would need. I mean, they’re already gaining land while simultaneously preventing a humanitarian crisis. It’s kind of a win-win, y’know? On paper, at least. Who the hell knows how it’ll all shake out in the long-term?’

That was a good question, Hector thought. He didn’t imagine that the Rainlords would be content to stay here in Atreya forever. Eventually, they would want to go take their home back, and if the Sandlords didn’t want to give it up, then how were they going to avoid bloodshed?

‘There’s also some other other big news,’ said Garovel. ‘Big and significantly worse news, that is.’

‘Great. What is it?’

‘Well, it’s not relevant to us at all, but it’s pretty awful just the same.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Remember the civil war going on in Kavia?’

‘Uh... kinda?’

‘It’s over now--which, I guess is good--but the problem is, the side that won was supported by Abolish.’

‘Oh. The Vanguard lost there?’

‘Yeah. A few of their rising stars were killed, apparently. None of the marshals, at least, but it’s still a pretty big defeat.’

‘Hmm. Who’s the, uh... I mean, who from Abolish is the victory being, er, attributed to?’

‘That would be Jercash, the Devil’s Knife.’

‘Ugh. What a nice nickname...’

‘It wasn’t just him, though. There’s also word going around of someone else from Abolish who made a big impact there. Someone new. Someone who’s now being called the Bolt of Kavia.’

That made Hector pause. ‘Bolt? As in... lightning bolt?’

‘Dunno. Details are scarce. I thought it was interesting, though.’

‘...You really think Karkash is making a name for himself out there?’

‘Wouldn’t surprise me,’ said Garovel. ‘Power like that is pretty damn versatile. Not to mention deadly. And we witnessed him achieve emergence, you may recall.’”

"1754

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‘You think he might’ve achieved it again since then?’ said Hector.

‘It’s definitely possible,’ said Garovel. ‘You’re not the only one in the world going through crazy shit, you know. And you’re definitely not the only one growing, either.’

Hector certainly knew that. He eyed the Scarf of Amordiin that he’d set on the counter by the shower. ‘He could’ve gotten his hands on some kind of magical artifact.’

‘Yeah. Or hell, he could’ve met a “god,” too, and received a blessing.’

‘Agh, don’t even joke about that...’

‘What, you don’t like the idea of other “gods” existing out there in the world?’

‘Not really, no.’

‘Heh. Can’t say I’m in love with the idea, either. But weren’t you giving me shit about not wanting gods to exist?’

‘Yeah, that was before we met Malast,’ said Hector.

‘You’re afraid the other gods might be like him?’

‘I don’t know. I mean, it’s not like he was the worst god ever ‘r anything, but shit...’

‘Well, okay, I don’t think you’ll have to worry about gods being all that prevalent in the world. If they were, then I definitely would’ve heard about them a long time ago.’

‘Hmm...’

‘It makes sense that I wouldn’t know about Malast being real, since his whole deal is apparently just sitting there and doing jack shit all day long, but if the others were real? They would’ve been having a pretty damn big impact on the world.’

‘Yeah, but isn’t that because the Void “rended” them from existence or whatever?’

‘Supposedly.’

‘That’s what Malast said, isn’t it? You think he was lying?’

‘I honestly have no fucking clue. A part of me would like to pretend half of that shit we went through in Himmekel never even happened.’

‘It’s not good to ignore reality, Garovel.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ the reaper laughed. ‘I’m not ignoring anything. I’m just expressing my displeasure, okay? I’m still allowed to do that, aren’t I?’

‘As if anything could stop you.’

Hector finished up his shower, wrapped himself in a towel, and then went to the dresser by his bed in order to pick out some clothes. There were more garments inside it than he remembered there being, and he found himself faced with a harder decision in choosing what to wear than he expected.

He’d never been much for fashion, but he supposed walking around Warrenhold in full iron armor wouldn’t be a good idea. He deferred to Garovel’s judgment and went with black trousers and a black waistcoat over a silky gray-and-white undershirt. There were a few ties there as well, and Garovel even tried to show him how to tie one, but after a while of fiddling with it, he grew frustrated and gave up.

‘You’ll probably wanna figure that out sooner or later,’ said Garovel.

‘Later’s fine with me,’ said Hector as he pulled on brown work boots and began tying them.”

"1755

‘I’m not sure those go with the rest of your outfit,’ said Garovel.

He stopped. ‘Wha? You told me to wear all this shit.’

‘Yeah, but I didn’t know you were gonna choose work boots. And brown? There are some wingtips in your closet, I think. Try those.’

Hector didn’t want to stand up yet. ‘What’s a wingtip?’

‘It’s a--look, just go to the closet and I’ll point ‘em out, okay?’

Reluctantly, Hector did as he was bid. In the end, he preferred the work boots. They were more comfortable, perhaps because they were already broken in.

‘Yeah, see, isn’t that better?’ said Garovel as Hector was grabbing the Scarf of Amordiin and wrapping it around his neck. ‘Now you’re starting to look a little more lordly. You sure do like the color black, don’t you?’

Hector finally left the room. ‘Again, you told me to wear all this.’

‘You’re kinda blending into the nightrock now. Maybe you should go back and change.’

‘Go fuck yourself.’

Garovel chortled. ‘That foul mouth isn’t very becoming of a lord, you know.’

‘You swear just as much as I do. If not more.’

‘Hmm, are you saying you want to be like me?’

Hector stopped at the top of the stairs and gave the reaper a look. ‘Okay, good point.’

Garovel just laughed as they descended together. The kitchen was on the bottom floor, and all the floors along the way were filled with Rainlords, many of whom were sleeping. It seemed like all the heads of the Houses and their immediate families were here in the Tower of Night with him.

Strange. Maybe he’d just been too tired to notice, but he was pretty sure that they hadn’t been here before he’d gone to sleep.

He gained considerable attention as he made his way down the tower. Many of the non-servants decided to come greet and subsequently join

him. By the time he made it down to the fourth floor, he'd acquired an entourage that was at least a dozen strong, mostly consisting of people his own age or younger.

They weren't shy with their questions, either.

"Lord Darksteel, ensir, could you show us some of your moves?"

"What was the Salesman like? Was he scary?"

"I heard he was super yellow."

"What?"

"Hey, could you make Seth's head explode?"

"Don't ask him that! I like my head!"

"Lord Darksteel, ensir, is it true that you made everyone bend the knee?"

"Did you really meet a god?"

"Lord Darksteel, ensir, how long have you been a servant for?"

Hector wanted to just run away, but he was still hungry. 'Garovel, please help...'

'Ask them if they need something to do.'

'What?'

'Tell them there's plenty of work around here that needs tending to, and since they've apparently got all this time to spare, it would be useful if they pitched in.'

'Seems a little rude, Garovel...'

'Yeah, they're being rude, too. And we DO have a shitload of work that needs taking care of.'

"1756



‘They’re kids,’ said Hector. ‘I can’t just put them to work like employees or whatever. That’s probably against the law or something, isn’t it?’

‘Bah. If you ask me, child labor laws are mostly a pile of nonsense. Sure, kids need freedom to grow up, but actually growing up means having discipline and a sense of responsibility, and what better place to get those things than at a job, huh?’

‘Garovel...’

‘Alright, fine, here’s something else you can do.’

Hector listened, and by the time they reached the bottom floor, he had a plan. He stopped and turned around to face everyone, and they all stopped as well, going abruptly silent.

Oh geez. That was a lot of eyes staring at him.

“...I’d like to answer your questions,” said Hector, “but I can’t when you ask them all at once like that. So instead, what we’ll do is--”

“Hey, I was here first, so--” tried a short kid with a bowl cut.

“No, you weren’t!” said a stocky boy with glasses.

“Yeah, I was first!” said a young girl with long bangs.

“What?! No, I--!”

“Quiet,” came a stern and familiar voice from behind Hector. It belonged to the Lord Dimas Sebolt, approaching with his reaper Iziol. “You are being rude.”

That seemed to silence them all again. The way the man towered over everyone had a commanding effect, Hector thought.

Dimas looked to Hector, as if prompting him to continue.

With all eyes on him again, Hector tried to keep his composure. Momentarily, he wondered if he would ever stop feeling so uncomfortable in front of groups of people like this. “...We’ll make a game of it,” he said slowly. He held his hand out, palm up, and shut his eyes while he gathered his concentration. He focused on what the Scarf was telling him of Warrenhold, of its layout.

Whoa.

The Scarf wasn't enough to reveal all eight of the castle's towers to him in their entirety, but he could sense most of the Tower of Night and much of its surroundings as well, including parts of the Bell Tower and the Entry Tower.

It was so much information. The Tower of Night alone had such a complex structure to it that he probably could've lost himself in trying to examine every little nook and cranny that he could find, and if he wasn't standing in front of a bunch of people who were waiting on his next words, he might've done exactly that.

Instead, though, he picked an empty table in one of the middle floors of the Entry Tower and concentrated on it. He wanted to materialize something there. But what? Something benign. He didn't want to give the kids anything dangerous to look for.

A little figurine, he decided. An armored knight. Seemed appropriate.

He materialized a second one in the palm of his hand, making it identical to the first--or at least, as close to identical as he could get it."  
"1757

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Hector opened his eyes again, and everyone was staring at the figurine now. "There," he said. "I've just placed a knight that looks like this somewhere in Warrenhold. The first one who brings it back to me... I'll answer your question."

His audience remained entirely silent and started looking at one another.

Uh-oh. Had he upset them? "...Does that sound good?" said Hector, trying not to sound as uncertain as he felt.

The kid with the bowl cut darted past Hector and out the front door of the tower. Within seconds, everyone else was running after him, and the clamor of stomping feet filled the air. Only Dimas and Iziol remained behind, watching the mayhem unfold.

Hector scratched his cheek as the last of them scrambled out the door. He'd been intending to give them a hint, thinking that it might be unfair if they thought they had to search every room--and maybe a little

obnoxious for everyone who was still trying to rest.

“...I didn’t think they would all just shoot off like that,” said Hector.

‘Rainlord youth can be a terrifying thing,’ said IzioI with a sigh. ‘I suppose I will go keep an eye on them.’ And he phased through the wall leading out into Warrenhold’s main cavern.

“...Maybe we should’ve put more thought into this,” said Hector.

‘Eh, I’m sure it’ll be fine,’ said Garovel. ‘This place could do with a bit of livening up.’

Hector just gave the reaper a dubious look.

‘Don’t you remember what that pediatrician told us about child development?’ said Garovel. ‘Kids need engagement. They need to have their minds stimulated, and games are a great way to achieve that.’

“...Wasn’t he talking about toddlers?” said Hector.

‘Yeah, but I’d argue that the basic principle holds true for young people, too. Hell, if you think about it, it even holds true for adults. It’s really just the sophistication of the game that changes. It’s the instinct that pushes us to grow. We always want something that we find challenging, right? But not SO challenging that it makes us feel discouraged and incompetent.’

That was a little more psychological than Hector cared to think about, right now. He really just wanted something to eat. “If you say so...”

‘C’mon, I’m right, aren’t I? Back me up here, Dimas.’

The Lord Sebolt was just standing there, observing. He looked a bit more rested than the last time Hector had seen him, but that wasn’t saying a whole lot. He was cleanly shaven with combed hair and a fresh suit, but he still had bags under his eyes.

Perhaps that wasn’t so strange, though. Hector seemed to recall the man mentioning something about being an insomniac.

“...I am afraid I do not know much about children,” said Dimas. “I have never been very good with them, myself.”

‘Well, I’m not talking about just kids,’ said Garovel. ‘And hey, is that really true? Marcos Elroy sure seems to like you.’

The reaper certainly had a point there, Hector felt.

“...You may be right,” said Dimas, “but I would not call him a good example of my rapport with children. Marcos is... a strange boy.””  
"1758

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‘Whatever,’ said Garovel. ‘My point still stands. Young people need things to keep them busy. All the better if it involves physical activity. I have little doubt in my mind that they will go absolutely stir crazy in this place if we don’t find things for them to do. Their parents have taken all their phones away from them, you know.’

That was news to Hector. “They have?”

‘Oh yeah. Can’t have the kids accidentally giving away their location. The Vanguard has quite a strong online presence, apparently.’

Suddenly, Hector felt significantly more sympathy for those children.

“They will adapt,” said Dimas. “They might even be better off.”

‘Amen to that,’ said Garovel.

Hector wasn’t so sure he agreed. That might’ve been the age difference here rearing its head, though. As his hunger compelled him toward the kitchen again, he found himself wanting to ask Dimas about something else. “By the way, uh, h-how are the Elroys doing? Do you know? I just woke up, so I haven’t seen them yet.”

Dimas followed. “Considering the circumstances, I would say they are doing well, if a bit restless.”

“Restless?” said Hector, frowning a little. “They just got here. Can’t they just take it easy for a while?”

“They are trying,” said Dimas. “As are we all.”

There was a square-faced man and a bespectacled woman in the kitchen, apparently in the middle of cooking something. They were both non-servants, Hector was fairly sure, though he was struggling to

put names to their faces.

When they noticed Hector and Dimas there, they each stopped to wipe their hands on their aprons.

“Lords,” said the man with a nod. “Are you hungry? Can we prepare something for you?”

“Ah--we hope you don’t mind our imposition,” said the woman, sounding somewhat nervous.

“The Lady Carthrace gave us permission to use the facilities here,” said the man hastily. “And not just us. There are probably three or four cooks from every family she granted access to, so I hope--” He kept talking, but Garovel’s private words echoed over him in Hector’s head.

‘Ask them their names. And shake their hands.’

Ah. Hector appreciated the instructions, honestly. “...What are your names?” he said, extending a hand.

“Oh.” The man took the hand and shook it. “I am Lluís Delaguna, and this lovely creature is my wife, Margot.”

“We cannot thank you enough for all you are doing for us,” said Margot.

Hector was a bit reluctant to shake the woman’s hand, but he didn’t let it show, figuring it would only lead to a misunderstanding. “It’s... a pleasure to meet you both,” he said.

They were a middle-aged couple, by the look of them, and judging from all the stains on their aprons, they must have been at this for a while now.”

"1759

“So what would you like?” said Lluís.

“Ah--are you sure you don’t need a break?” said Hector. “I’d rather you rest, if you’re tired.”

“Oh, nonsense,” said Margot. “It would be our honor to cook for you.”

“Do you have any calamari?” said Dimas.

At that, the pair hesitated. “Er--no, I’m sorry, Lord Dimas,” said Lluís.

“Mm,” said Dimas. “Lobster?”

“I’m afraid there isn’t any seafood in stock at the moment,” said Lluís.

“I thought a new food shipment arrived a few hours ago,” said Dimas.

“It did, lord, but there was no seafood in it,” said Lluís.

And Dimas’ normally expressionless face let slip a frown. “What do you have in stock, then?”

“Bread, beef, and cheese, mainly,” said Margot. “We could whip up some fantastic burgers for you, if you like.”

“That sounds great,” said Hector. “Make mine a double, please.”

The married couple smiled. “As you wish, lord,” said Lluís.

When they looked at Dimas, however, their mirth diminished somewhat. The man’s face was far from enthusiastic.

“Would you like something else, Lord Dimas?” said Lluís.

Dimas waited a moment, glancing between them and Hector briefly. “...No, that sounds fine,” he said, though it sounded rather like a sigh.

“V-very well,” said Lluís, and the couple ventured off together to the store room on the other side of the kitchen.

Hector and Dimas returned to the dining chamber immediately outside. It wasn’t as spacious as the enormous banquet hall that made up the entirety of the second floor, but the two of them didn’t have need of such room.

“...Do you not like burgers?” said Hector as they sat down at a long table across from one another.

“...Yes,” said Dimas.

Hector’s brow lowered. “Yes, you do? Or yes, you don’t?”

“...I find them perfectly edible,” said Dimas.

Hector almost snorted a laugh. "If you wanted something else, you could've just said so."

"...I did not want you to think I am a picky eater," said Dimas.

"...Are you a picky eater?"

"...No."

"Why did that "no" sound more like a "yes?"" said Garovel.

Dimas didn't say anything and averted his gaze.

"Hey, uh, it's okay," said Hector. "I'm kinda picky, too. I don't really like mushrooms."

Dimas' eyes fell upon him again. "...Only mushrooms?"

"I... er..." It was suddenly difficult to think. "Maybe... oh, I don't like horseradish. That stuff's gross."

"...Anything else?" said Dimas.

"Ah... p-probably. What about you?"

A beat passed, and the Lord Sebolt shook his head. "...It doesn't matter."

Hector stifled a laugh, and for a few long seconds, they just sat there in complete silence.

As was perhaps both expected and appropriate, it was up to the reaper to revive things. 'Welp, uh, anywho... Hector and I could really use your input on a few things, if you wouldn't mind hearing us out.'

Dimas straightened in his seat. "Yes, of course."

"1760

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'Appreciated.' Garovel broke for a pause. 'Now, okay, I should preface this by saying that you are absolutely welcome to stay here at Warrenhold as long as you need or want. However, I am curious as to what plans you or your family might have going forward.'

Dimas' eyes fell to the table.

Hector waited. This man sitting in front of him was the very recently recognized new head of House Sebolt. No doubt, the tragic losses to his family at Dunehall were even fresher in his mind than they were in Hector's. It was certainly an important question that Garovel had just asked, and Hector wanted to know the answer, but he might've asked the reaper to wait a bit longer before posing it, if he'd known Garovel was going to.

At length, Hector felt compelled to add, "You don't have to answer that right now, if you don't want to. There's no rush."

'Indeed,' said Garovel. 'If anything, we're more worried about you leaving. I can say with confidence that Hector and I would both prefer that you all stay here. Indefinitely, if need be.'

Dimas looked up. "Indefinitely?"

'If need be,' Garovel reiterated.

Dimas took a breath and rubbed his brow. "I know virtually beyond doubt that my kin will wish to locate and free the others from the Vanguard's captivity."

'Yeah, that's what we're worried about,' said Garovel. 'I don't think that's a very good idea--not with everything you've been through recently--with everything we've ALL been through recently.'

Dimas just clenched his jaw and said nothing.

Hector could see the man's dilemma. From everything that Hector had come to learn of the Rainlords, the idea seemed embedded into their very identity that they should take enormous risks for the sake of their blood and loved ones.

Maybe that was historically what kept getting them into trouble, but Hector also got the feeling that that was why they seemed to be so fiercely loyal to one another, too. And that loyalty, by extension, was probably how they had survived all that trouble that they got into.

A double-edged sword, if ever Hector had seen one.

"...I have to agree," said Dimas. "Pursuing our captive brethren now would obviously be a fool's errand. We hardly even know where to



begin looking for them. Korgum, perhaps, considering that is where the Gargoyle is most likely stationed, but that is not enough information on which to base a rescue attempt.”

‘I’m glad to hear you say that,’ said Garovel. ‘Personally, I think you and your people need time--and perhaps a lot of it.’

“...You may be right,” said Dimas. “But I worry what will happen if and when a supposed ‘opportunity’ appears before us. I fear that the others will jump at any chance as soon as they see it.”

‘So don’t let them,’ said Garovel.

Hector gave the reaper a look. That was a stronger stance to take than Hector had been expecting.

He couldn’t say he disagreed, though.

‘You’re the presiding Lord of House Sebolt now,’ Garovel went on. ‘Your opinion will have considerable weight behind it.’”

"1761

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

“Sitting on our thumbs and abusing your hospitality is hardly an admirable counterposition,” said Dimas.

‘Well, I’m sure we can come up with something a bit more appealing than that,’ said Garovel. ‘And you certainly wouldn’t be abusing our hospitality while you help us restore Warrenhold--as you have already begun doing, that is. You see, Hector and I have big plans for this castle. We would like it to eventually become one of the safest places on the planet.’

Dimas merely returned a rigid expression.

‘Perhaps you think that sounds a bit overly optimistic,’ said Garovel, ‘but I don’t believe it is. Not after that trip through the Undercrust we just took.’

“...What do you mean?” said Dimas.

The reaper glanced at Hector. ‘Well, I don’t want to get ahead of

myself here, but obviously, this group of ours, formidable though it may be, still lacks the power it requires to achieve its ultimate objectives. I simply think that, together, we may be able to discover a good path forward, one which would benefit us all. Beyond that, though, I'm not yet prepared to say.'

Dimas made no response.

Hector wanted to ask Garovel something, though he wasn't quite sure what. It sounded like the reaper already had some sort of plan, but if that was the case, then why not just say so right now? Dimas was obviously trustworthy, Hector felt.

Hmm.

Soon, their food arrived, and Hector hardly even tasted it as he wolfed it down. Dimas was noticeably more reserved and even seemed to be reluctant to continue eating it. Hector didn't give him any crap about it, but Garovel did.

After that, it was finally time to go meet Amelia Carthrace. Garovel offered Dimas the opportunity to join them, but the Lord Sebolt politely declined, saying that he should get back to his family. They said their goodbyes and parted ways.

Along the way to the Book Tower, in the middle of the rocky courtyard in the main cavern, the group of children from earlier ran up to him, and one of them presented the knight figurine to him.

Hector stepped closer to one of the pathway lamps so that he could examine the object. It wasn't quite identical to the one he'd made earlier, but it it was pretty decent, he felt. More importantly, it gave him a clear idea of how much his precision was lost when he materialized something over a large distance and without being able to see it.

'Give them some encouragement,' said Garovel privately.

"Ah... well done," said Hector. Agh. He needed to stop being so self-absorbed. "So... what's your question, then?"

The boy with the bowl cut looked around at his peers triumphantly before settling back on Hector. "I wanna know if you're the new leader of the Rainlords or not!"

A chorus of murmurs ran through the small crowd."

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

'Be careful how you answer that,' said Garovel.

Hector understood why the reaper was saying that, but he honestly didn't think it was that difficult of a question. Sure, these kids were young, but not that young. He was fairly confident that they would understand, as long as he didn't treat them like they were babies.

That was something that he knew a thing or two about from personal experience. Even teachers often seemed not to realize just how much kids could comprehend. He remembered an instance in middle school when one of the girls in his class had asked the elderly teacher about why her parents weren't living together anymore. The teacher didn't even know how to approach that question, much less answer it, but during recess, a group of kids had gotten together and explained it to the girl. She hadn't been happy about it, and maybe the kids lacked a bit of tact, but the girl ultimately understood the situation just fine.

And so, looking at these kids now, Hector didn't want to lie to them or tell them any half-truths.

"No, I'm not the new leader of the Rainlords," said Hector plainly.

There came a second chorus of murmurs, but Hector wasn't done.

"It's a trick we're playing," said Hector. "And you're all in on it. You guys know that you're staying here in secret, right?"

"Yeah," a couple kids said, while several others nodded.

"Well," Hector went on, "we want certain other people to believe that I... well, that I'm a really dangerous guy. That way, they'll be less inclined to come after you. So it's important that you guys are in on the trick, too. It's something we all have to do together."

There was a brief intermission of silence, and then the kid with the bowl cut asked, "What if they come after us, anyway?"

Okay. Maybe now was a moment to lie--or at least, a moment to feign confidence. "If that happens... then we'll fight them. And they'll realize what a mistake they made."

There was briefly more silence.

"But still," added Hector, "it's always better to avoid unnecessary fights. We're talking about the lives of you and your parents, your siblings and cousins. That's important. You guys understand that, right?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Of course we do..."

"Good," said Hector firmly. "Because the goal of this trick is to make sure... that what happened at Dunehall doesn't happen here. Understand?"

"Yeah," said a few kids in unison.

"Good," repeated Hector. "It's important that you guys take this stuff seriously. But I bet you knew that already, huh? Because you're Rainlords, right?"

"Duh!"

"Yeah!"

"That's right!"

"I'm still confused, though," said a girl with a ponytail. "So are you a really dangerous guy or not?"

Eesh. Now there was a difficult question, Hector felt.

'Ask her her name first,' said Garovel.

"Ah... what's your name?" said Hector.

"Maria..."

"Maria what?" said Hector.

"Maria Blackburn," she said."

"1763 -- CLXXXVII.

'Tell her you're not dangerous to any of them,' said Garovel. 'And use

her name.'

Aw, shit, that was a pretty tall order. "Ah... well... Maria... as far as you guys are concerned, I'm not dangerous at all..."

"Yeah, but how many bad guys could you beat up at once?"

"I heard Lord Dimas beat up like fifty, one time!"

"Could you beat up Lord Dimas?!"

Oh shit. Hector held his hands up but also couldn't help laughing a little. "Alright, that's enough. I already answered enough of your questions. If you want to ask a bunch of new ones, you'll have to find the knight again."

"Aw, c'mon! Don't be so stingy!"

Hector considered hiding the next figurine so well that they would never be able to find it. He also wondered if this game was getting a little too intense.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Seven: 'Temper thine ambition...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Her office in the Book Tower was more spacious than she needed, quite frankly, but with all these new guests running around and knowing what she did of her young Lord Goffe, Amelia Carthrace had a dreadful and exciting feeling that she might actually have need of all this space, someday.

When the Queen had offered her this position, Amelia had not been able to tell if it had been offered out of pity or punishment or something else entirely. Working for the most infamous teenager in the nation? It was hardly a job that anyone was pining for.

But now, with the economy the way it was, she could think of several, very high profile financiers who would have killed to be in her shoes--especially because some of those people were currently out of a job.

With so many banks folding up so suddenly, there was a profound surplus of financial talent out there, just waiting to be scooped up. The problem was, of course, that there was almost no one in Atreya who could scoop them up. Which meant they would not be staying in Atreya

for much longer. They would have to act soon, lest the cream of their nation's crop would head off to Intar or Steccat or Vantalay, maybe. And if they really did leave, then, well...

Then Atreya would see a real financial crisis.

To say that she was antsy about this meeting with Hector today would have been an understatement. Truthfully, she had wanted to talk to him the very second he had gotten back, but for something like this, she knew she couldn't come off as too eager or pushy. In all likelihood, the young lord wouldn't understand what an incredible opportunity this was and would therefore probably be rather off-put by too much enthusiasm for the situation. Millions of people were going bankrupt, after all.

And besides, such behavior was unbecoming of a woman her age. She had to maintain her dignity, if nothing else."

"1763 -- CLXXXVII.

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Still, never would she have expected to feel so excited about working with money again. After thirty grueling years in the business, working for banks, an insurance agency, an accounting firm, a hedge fund, and even the Lord High Treasurer himself, she'd thought that she had lost all taste for this sort of thing. And this job wasn't even supposed to be like any of those. She had only been supposed to help the young lord manage his assets and hopefully grow them.

What a curious world it was, that all of this would fall into her lap now, seven years after her supposed retirement.

No doubt, if things went even remotely as she expected them to, her family would come knocking on her door in the very near future. There may have been no love lost between her and them, but money? They weren't ones to abide losses like that.

She planned to have insulation in place for the young lord by then, though. Hell, she would be insulation, if he needed her to. There was absolutely no way that she was going to sit by and let them sink their claws into him.

Ah, but she was getting ahead of herself. The present problems were still far from dealt with, she knew, and her hand stopped in the middle of signing a document as she realized that she'd allowed her mind to wander so much that she'd hardly even bothered to read the damn thing first.

True, it was just a simple shipment order for white Lysten marble, but still, it was a bad habit to get into--and one that had cost her dearly in the past.

"Anything you put your name to, you read," her mentor had once told her. "If you don't have time to read it, you shouldn't be signing it. You should be hiring someone else to read it, sign it, and take the blame if it goes badly, instead."

A shrewd bastard--that had been Henry Vollier in a nutshell, though she certainly knew that there had been more to him than what most people ever got to see. Even to this day, she had never met anyone who could be so heartless in one breath and yet so generous in the next.

Her affair with him may have been what caused so much strife between the Carthraces and the Volliers, but she'd long since stopped regretting it. He may have been almost thirty years older than her, but she'd loved him more deeply and truly than anyone else in her life, and



he deserved better than that bitter shell-of-a-woman he'd been forced to marry. That callous witch hadn't even been there on his deathbed.

For a while after that, she truly would not have minded if both of their families had ended up in ruins. If not for some of those wonderful nieces and nephews, the brightness and hope of the future, she might never have returned from that place of resentment in her heart."

"1765

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

It was a shame that that brightness had not lasted. Instead, it had merely transferred to the next generation of children. As it probably would again, she'd often thought.

When the knock on her door arrived, she stopped reading. "Come in."

Hector entered, and Amelia set her pen down.

Wow. What a difference one month made. Had he gotten taller? Probably. The vitality of young people still amazed her, sometimes. Those clothes certainly made an impact, too. He hadn't been wearing things like that very much before, probably because the boy had so frequently been assisting with the reconstruction effort. No sense in dressing up for manual labor.

It must have been the effect of these Rainlords on him, she figured. Either he was imitating their behavior, or he simply wanted to look dignified in their presence. Or both, perhaps.

She certainly knew what that was like.

"It is good to finally see you again," said Amelia.

"Thanks," said Hector as he took a seat on the other side of her desk. "It's, uh, it's good to see you, too."

A part of her wanted to just launch into her proposal straight away, but again, she controlled herself. It wouldn't do to overwhelm the young man. She had to work up to it slowly and clearly if she wanted to get his approval.

He may have been young, but that didn't mean he was going to do

whatever she told him. Meek and mild as he may act, she did not think that he had earned his reputation as the Darksteel Soldier by accident. And she'd spoken to Prince David about this boy, too. This was not someone she should treat like a child, she felt.

"Are you sure you have rested enough?" she made herself say. "I heard that you looked rather exhausted upon your arrival."

"I'm still pretty tired, but I'll catch up on sleep later," said Hector. "I wanted to ask... ah... how have things been going while I was gone?"

"Here at Warrenhold? Fairly well, I suppose. The reconstruction has been progressing, albeit slowly. If you are asking about the country as a whole, however, well..."

"I heard about the, er, economic crisis or whatever..."

"Y-yes." Amelia straightened in her chair. Was it too soon to go into it? She wasn't quite sure. "Truthfully... I was hoping to talk to you about that."

Hector tilted his head at her. "Why's that? Do you think there's something we can do to help?"

Oh, sweet Cocora.

Calm. She had to look calm.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I believe there is. However... perhaps you would like to table that discussion for the moment and talk about your Rainlord friends or... some such thing?"

"...Why?" said Hector. "Does the order matter?"

"Ah... w-well..." Agh. This wasn't going how she expected. It was too fast. She dared not hope that it might actually be going better than she expected."

"1766

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

"Is something wrong?" said Hector.

"N-no," she said, taking a breath. If she kept this up, he was going to

get the completely wrong impression. "Very well. Allow me to speak quite plainly with you. The current economic crisis, terrible though it may be, presents us--presents you, I should say--with an opportunity. And a rather remarkable one, at that."

"...Okay," said Hector slowly, keeping his eyes fixed upon her. "I'm listening."

"With both Atreya National and Longrun collapsing, virtually everyone who worked for them is now out of a job."

"You're... talking about banks?" said Hector.

"Yes. Atreya National Bank and Longrun Banking. With them suddenly out of the picture, you could say that there is quite a large gap in the market. People need their funds protected. And now that there is an absolutely ungodly amount of insoluble debt floating around this country, what will happen now is--"

"Ah, uh, sorry, you're kinda losing me here," said Hector. "In... insoluble debt? What does that mean, exactly?"

"Debt that cannot be repaid. More than a million people have just declared bankruptcy in this country, because they no longer have access to any of their funds due to the banks collapsing, because the banks are the very institutions which are supposed to secure these things for them. This means that any debt that these people previously owed is now insoluble. There is essentially no hope of it ever being paid back. Understand?"

"I think so, yeah..."

"So what will probably happen now," Amelia went on, "is that someone with a LOT of money will come in and buy up all of that insoluble debt at a fraction of the cost, because it is functionally worthless now. And then, since they now 'own' the debt, they can 'forgive' it or otherwise shrink it down to a 'soluble' level--and then try to collect it. Or they could simply resell the debt elsewhere, but the fact of the matter is that because they didn't spend very much money to acquire it, that debt has the potential to earn them an absolute killing. Financially speaking, of course."

"Hmm..."

Amelia placed her hands on the table. "Now, this may all sound horrible, and... well... in a way, it is, but it is also mostly good. In the end, it will probably prevent Atreya's economy from collapsing completely. Almost everyone who declared bankruptcy will have a way to move forward without having their entire lives ruined. For the most part."

"But?" said the young lord, apparently sensing where she was going with this.

"But... a very large problem could arise, based on who it is that buys up all of that debt. Atreya is quite a small country, so in all likelihood, it

is going to be a foreign bank. Domestic banks are no doubt attempting to get in on the action as we speak, but they simply won't have the funds to spare. Tens of thousands of people--if not hundreds of thousands of people--have already been flocking to them simply to avoid bankruptcy, and in order to accommodate all of those new customers, most of their reserve funds--assuming they even had that much to begin with--will likely now be in active circulation."

"Uh... huh."

"1767

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"Of course," Amelia continued, "the domestic banks could use money which they do not technically own in order to start buying up the debt, but that would be incredibly ill-advised--and indeed, illegal. For good reason, might I add. Such practices are extremely dangerous and could potentially make matters significantly worse than they already are.

"However, I am digressing. The point is that domestic banks will, in all likelihood, simply be unable to 'pick up the slack,' so to speak, which means that foreign banks will. Either them, or foreign companies which specialize in this sort of thing. Regardless, the reason this is bad is because it presents an extreme threat to the economic independence of the nation. Foreign powers would likely be able to develop more influence over our country than even the Queen herself possesses."

"Ah..."

"She understands this as well, because I--and no doubt others--have advised her on it. But the Queen is also in a very difficult position right now. In order to prevent this from coming to pass, she has to hold back the tide of foreign influence with very little support from the people. As I said before, this debt buyout can be considered mostly good. All of the currently bankrupt citizens of Atreya will want that foreign influence. And justifiably so."

"O-okay," said Hector, holding up a hand. "This is all... really complicated, and I think I understand, but, uh... I mean... what do you want me to do about it? Are you seriously suggesting that I buy up all the debt? Because, er...?"

"Well... yes and no," said Amelia. "Frankly speaking, you don't have enough money for that. Even your billionaire friend, Roman Fullister, doesn't have enough money--though, that is mostly because his assets are tied up in about a million different ways."

“Whoa, how do you know that?”

She couldn't help smiling a little. “Money is my life, Lord Goffe. And I have made many like-minded friends over the course of it.”

Hector didn't look entirely satisfied by that answer, but he didn't press her further on it. Instead, he returned to his previous question. “So... if I can't buy the debt, then what are you asking of me?”

It was time to lay all her cards on the table, she supposed. “I feel that there is still considerably more that I should explain, but... if you would like to cut right to the heart of the matter first, then, well... put simply, I would like to open a bank in your name.”

Hector just sat there for a moment, blinking at her. He opened his mouth but no words came out. Then he leaned back in his chair, folded his arms, and took a long, deep breath.

Huh.

That was not quite the reaction that she had been expecting. Though, if she thought about it, she wasn't entirely sure what a more appropriate response would have been.”

"1768

Hector's gaze went to the empty space to his right. Talking to his invisible companion, Amelia supposed. She couldn't say that she fully understood this business about reapers, and if she was being completely honest, a small part of her still worried that it might just be some form of psychosis that the boy was suffering from. That explanation might've even made sense, as a terrible side effect of his supernatural powers.

But of course, she'd never dared say any of that aloud. Strange as it was, this “Garovel” being real or not was almost a moot point, as far as Amelia was concerned. The reaper was obviously real to Hector.

And that was the main reason why she had been so concerned about this meeting. If she couldn't get this Garovel's approval, then she doubted she would be able to get Hector's.

“So let me make sure I've got this right,” Hector finally said. “You want to open a bank in my name. Not a bank account. A bank.”

“Yes,” said Amelia.

Hector just gave her a look like she was crazy.

"I understand that is... a highly unconventional proposition," said Amelia, "and probably not one that you expected to hear when you walked into this office, but I assure you, I am not recommending it impulsively. I have given the matter considerable thought."

"Then... I assume you've thought about how we're going to fund this? The Queen only gave us three million to work with, and you're talking about starting a bank that would be big enough to rescue the whole country. Garovel doesn't think that three million will be nearly enough for that."

"Indeed, it is true that this would be a very costly endeavor. Currently, you have around 1.2 million troa at your disposal, and to get the ball rolling on this--"

"Whoa, whoa." Hector held up a hand. "We've already burned through 1.8 million troa? In like, what, four months?"

She nodded. "I am afraid so. However, the vast majority of those expenses fell upon the hydroelectric generator. That alone cost us 1.4 million."

"Holy sh--" Hector stopped himself, perhaps out of consideration for her, which Amelia appreciated. "I... knew it was expensive, but I didn't think it was that much."

"Believe it or not, that was actually quite a good deal," said Amelia. "The amount of power that it generates is rather impressive given that cost." She might've expected the boy to sigh, but he didn't. "We could have negotiated a staggered payment plan over several years, but it would have cost us nearly three times as much in the long run. I thought it would be better to pay it all off at once, since we actually could. The manufacturer's representative was quite surprised by that decision."

"I see..."

"And of course, we also required furniture to even begin living here, so much of that lost capital was due to one-time purchases, if that makes you feel any better. Renovations moving forward should be a considerably slower drain on your funds."

"1769

"That's... good to hear," said Hector, "but the renovations aren't even halfway through the Entry Tower yet."

"Yes, and that is another reason why I believe this bank is a good idea. With our current resources, renovating all eight towers properly is impossible, much less building new ones on the surface and attending to the sunken structures in the lake. A bank, however, would provide us with a valuable source of income."

Hector fell quiet for a moment again, obviously thinking. Then he looked at her. "I interrupted you. What were you going to say about getting the ball rolling?"

"Ah. Yes. In order to get started on this bank, we will require considerably more capital than we currently possess. I could go into excruciating detail, but the short of it is that we will need a loan."

"A loan?" said Hector. "You mean, like, from another bank? Wouldn't they be opposed to the idea of, uh, funding their rivals or something?"

"Indeed. Which is why the loan would have to come from somewhere else."

"You have somewhere in mind?"

"I would recommend multiple sources, actually," she said. "In the event that one of them turns us down or ends up having difficulties of their own in the future, it would be best if we did not have all of our eggs in one basket, as they say."

"Okay... but what sources are you thinking of?"

She almost didn't want to say. "The government would be one."

"...You want me to ask the Queen for even more money?" said Hector.

"Well... yes. It could not hurt to ask at least, no?"

Hector rubbed his face with both hands. Amelia was beginning to see that tiredness he mentioned earlier.

"I admit, it may be a bad idea to take more money from the government. No doubt, they have dire need of it, at the moment. Assuming they even have any left to lend. However, the point remains

that you would be working to help them resolve the current economic crisis, and I imagine the Queen would be interested in helping you to speed your work along.”

Hector put his hands down again. “...Hold on. You just said, ‘assuming they even have any money left?’ Why wouldn’t they have any money left?”

“Ah, well... because there are some rather unsavory rumors about, regarding the true cause of this crisis. Some are saying that the government’s coffers are empty, and so the entire reason Atreya National and Longrun collapsed first was because they were so deeply connected with the state treasury.”

Hector’s brow lowered. “You’re saying the Queen’s broke?”

“I am only saying what I have heard. But such rumors, even if they are untrue, are terrible for business.”

“Wouldn’t something like that already be all over the news if it were true?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps the Queen believes that such news would be so damaging to the nation that she has been suppressing it.””

”1770

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

“Hmm,” said Hector. “But you’re, like, an insider or something, right? Do you really think she’d be able to keep that kind of gigantic news from even people like you?”

Amelia bobbed her head to the side a little. “No, I do not. Eventually, we will find out, but for the time being, there remains quite a bit of chatter regarding the subject, and different people are offering conflicting information. I imagine for the next month or two, it will continue to be difficult to discern the genuine truth of the matter.”

Her young lord’s gaze went to the floor, then back to the empty air beside him.

Amelia just waited, and when Hector looked at her again, she braced herself for his next question.



“...How much money do we need to get from this loan, exactly?” he said.

Now there was a question that he would probably not like the answer to, Amelia felt. She tried to give him a smile, though it probably came across as more pitying than encouraging. “There are various methods for starting, but if we are to begin here, on domestic soil, then we will require seven million troa as the barest minimum.”

Hector’s mouth hung open as he looked at her.

Unfortunately, she was still far from done. “And when I say ‘barest minimum,’ I do mean that. Barring some sort of royal decree or other government action, proof that we possess seven million troa is required before we may even be legally recognized as a bank. There are several other qualifying factors, of course, but that is the big one, you might say.”

“So... you’re saying seven million isn’t even enough. Because we need more than just the barest minimum, right?”

“Indeed. Seven million would allow us to get started, so if that is all we are able to acquire, then at least we would be able to do something, but the difficult truth, in my estimation, is that we would require a loan in the neighborhood of... one hundred million troa.”

Hector’s hand slowly found his forehead, and he stared blankly at Amelia’s rosewood desk. “A hundred million...”

Amelia had no words of comfort for him. “And even that would only make for a good start. It would still be far from enough to resolve the economic crisis overnight, in case that was what you were thinking.”

Hector took some more time to gather his thoughts and perhaps consult his imaginary friend another time. “Somehow,” he eventually said with a sigh, “I don’t think the Queen is going to lend me a hundred million troa.”

“Yes, I do not think she will, either,” said Amelia. “However, we do not necessarily need her to. There are many other members of the aristocracy whom we could call upon. And there is your friend Mr. Fullister, of course. I have high hopes for his assistance. And... the Rainlords, perhaps. I would caution you against accepting too much help from them, however.”

Hector looked at her again. "Why?"

"Our entire purpose in opening this bank is to prevent foreign powers from taking over our country, and, well... to be blunt, the Rainlords are exactly that. A foreign power."

"Hmm."

"1771

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

"I do not mean to say that you should refuse any and all help they may offer," said Amelia, "and I am sure that you understand these people better than I do, but all the same, I am advising caution. If you do decide to enter into any kind of financial negotiations with them, I hope you will include me. Truthfully, I would like to be present for such negotiations with anyone, but them in particular, should the need arise."

Hector just looked at her for a moment longer, perhaps thinking on her words, and then he said, "...Of course."

The tone of that response was a bit more reserved than Amelia might have preferred, but such was the nature of her young lord, she'd come to realize. Bright-eyed reassurance and enthusiasm was not something she should ever expect from him, she supposed.

"...There's something else I'm wondering about," said Hector. "With all this... stuff about needing a loan... I mean... why me?"

Amelia tilted her head at him. "I am sorry. I am not certain I understand. Why you?"

Hector stood up and walked over to the side of the room while rubbing his neck. "It's just... if I don't even have the money to pull this off in the first place, then why don't we just let someone else do it?"

"You do not wish to save the country?" said Amelia.

Hector gave her a flat look. "Obviously, I do. I'm just saying, wouldn't it be better to leave it to someone more suited to the task? Someone like... my friend you already mentioned? Mr. Fullister? Just as one example."

Amelia frowned. "And the potential here to make an enormous amount of money and restore Warrenhold to its former glory? You do not find that motivating?"

"...Would it really be like that?" said Hector. "Because this bank sounds like a lot of responsibility and headaches. And I have enough of those, already. Besides, there are other ways we can make money, aren't there?"

Amelia took a breath and leaned back in her chair. She'd thought that she had already convinced him that this was a good idea. It seemed fairly self-evident, but now it appeared as though he wasn't going to be swayed by appeals to future prosperity or self-interest.

Which was very strange.

No doubt, he had many other things on his mind. She supposed it was understandable that he wouldn't want yet another. But there was something he wasn't seeing, and it seemed as though she would have to be the one to explain it to him.

"It has to be you," she said, interlocking her fingers and resting them on her lap. "I can tell you now that, yes, several other people in this country will likely attempt this very same tactic. However, I earnestly believe that you are the only one who might be able to pull it off before foreign intervention squirms its way around the Queen's regulations."

"Why?"

"Because you are a national hero. Most of Atreya adores the Darksteel Soldier. And yes, some still do not, but everyone at least knows who you are. Aside from perhaps the Queen herself, you have better brand recognition than anyone else in this country."

"I have better what?"

"1772

"Brand recognition," she reiterated. "People know who you are. They trust you. If we put the word Darksteel in the name of your bank, people will instantly associate it with you and everything that you have done. And that is very good. That is why I think this will work."

Hector made no response. His gaze went to the floor again, and he paced toward the other side of the room now.

“It is safe to say that the Atreyan people have very little faith in banks, at the moment, so the trust that the public has in you will be absolutely crucial for this plan to succeed. Your friend Mr. Fullister, who I am sure is a wonderful man, would simply not be able to make up for that difference in public trust, regardless of how much money he may possess.”

Hector stopped pacing and just looked at her again.

“It has to be you, Lord Goffe,” she said.

Hector did not look pleased to hear that, but if he had any complaints, he kept them to himself. He returned to his chair and sat down.

Amelia didn’t know what else she could say to convince him, however, so she merely waited.

“...Alright,” he finally said. “Let’s just... let’s suppose all of this works out. Hypothetically. Everything goes smoothly or whatever.” He leveled a stare at her. “If that were to happen, and this bank were to become as big and important as you’re suggesting, then... you would have a lot more power and influence, wouldn’t you?”

Amelia’s head reared back a little, and she blinked.

Hector’s gaze didn’t budge, though. He was watching her carefully, probably wanting to gauge her reaction.

Amelia fidgeted in her seat, abruptly uncomfortable. “Yes... I suppose I would...”

“Convince me you wouldn’t abuse that power,” he said plainly.

Oh, goodness. She hadn’t felt like this since she was a schoolgirl on the verge of being given detention, some fifty years ago.

How was he doing that?

No time to think about it. She just maintained her composure. “How would you suggest I go about doing that?”

“I don’t know,” said Hector. “You seem to be pretty persuasive, though.”

She managed a weak smile. "I appreciate the compliment, assuming it was one."

"It was," said Hector. "And... look, I'm grateful for everything you've been doing here. For me. And I think... it's fairly obvious at this point that I... value your opinion. And I definitely want to trust you. But the simple truth is that you and I still barely know each other."

"You are not wrong," she said. "But I do not know how I can convince you to trust me. I doubt words alone will suffice for an undertaking of this magnitude, no? Trusting me with your own money isn't quite the same as trusting me with everyone's money, is it?"

"No, it is not," was all Hector said."

"1773

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Amelia tried to think. Honestly, she hadn't given much thought to the issue of how to earn the young lord's trust. Mostly because she'd thought that she'd already had it.

And perhaps that was strange. Why had she thought that? She was having difficulty thinking of the reason, but there must have been one. She couldn't have been so naive as to overlook something like that, right?

What an odd thing to be asking herself. Where was her head, right now?

Ah. There was a reason, she realized.

"The Queen," said Amelia. "If you are finding yourself uncertain with regard to trusting me, then perhaps you should ask those who know me better for a character reference. And I can think of none more appropriate than the Queen, considering she was the one who offered me this position in the first place. Have you spoken to her yet?"

"Not since getting back, no," said Hector.

"Perfect, then. I imagine she will be wanting to hear from you, if for no other reason than to know that you have returned safely. Perhaps you can take that opportunity to ask about me."

Hector was quiet again.

Hmm. Perhaps her young lord had already been planning to do that.

“...I’d like to meet your family,” said Hector.

Amelia pressed her lips together flatly as she thought about that. “If we move forward with the bank, then I am sure that they will like to meet you, too.”

“I mean before that.”

“Yes, I thought you did. And perhaps that would be for the best. Meeting them before we give them every reason in the world to ingratiate themselves toward you might give you a clearer picture of their true characters.”

The young lord looked abruptly remorseful. “...I don’t mean to reopen old wounds or anything like that. I just need to know more about you before we commit to... all of this.”

“I understand,” said Amelia. “Caution is an admirable quality in a lord. And I have nothing to hide, though you should be forewarned that my family is not likely to speak very fondly of me.”

“Yeah, I figured they wouldn’t,” said Hector. “I remember you calling yourself a black sheep.”

“Ah. Well, I shall attempt to arrange a meeting, but in the meantime, might I have your permission to begin preliminary hiring proceedings?”

“...What does that mean, exactly?”

“With the banks collapsing, there are a number of highly skilled individuals who are now looking for a new job--so skilled, in fact, that I imagine some of them have already found one. The rest will likely not remain unemployed for long, so I would like to, at the very least, send them... an expression of our interest, let’s say. Hopefully, that will give them a reason to stay in the country while you and I... figure things out.””

"1774 -- CLXXXVIII.

"You think they'll leave Atreya?" said Hector.

"They will go wherever opportunity leads them," said Amelia. "And Atreya is rather short on opportunity at the moment, so yes, I think they will have their pick of the many foreign companies that are no doubt observing the economic situation here."

"...Who are these 'skilled individuals' you're talking about?"

"Various people whom I have come to know and respect over the years. Some of them, I do not know personally, but I do know of their work and of their professionalism. I could go over each and every one of them with you right now, but there are quite a few, and I imagine you probably have more important things to do."

"...Alright. I'll leave it to your, ah... discretion." He looked like he had more to say, however.

Amelia waited.

"...I'd like to meet these people, too," said Hector. "Before you hire them."

She smiled, then nodded. "Of course."

Perhaps she didn't have to worry so much about her family sinking their claws into this boy, after all.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Eight: 'O, convalescing companions...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The meeting lasted a while longer after that. They discussed the restoration of Warrenhold in a bit more detail, and Madame Carthrace also told him about some of the local happenings around Gray Rock. Apparently, there had been a spike in crime during his absence--perhaps even because of his absence--and a number of prominent figures around the city had been trying to get in touch with him, the mayor of Gray Rock being among them.

Hector had no idea why the mayor would want to talk to him, and he almost didn't want to find out. Madame Carthrace and Garovel both seemed to think it was probably just a formal greeting-type-thing, but

Hector didn't know if he believed that.

There was also the matter of the Rainlords. Hector asked her about how she had been handling all of them, and she rather bluntly told him that she hadn't been. For the most part, they were taking care of and keeping to themselves. Each time she'd talked to them, they had apparently been both extremely polite and very reluctant to accept aid without reimbursement.

After he heard that, Hector figured he should probably go talk to each of the families himself and concluded his meeting with Madame Carthrace. It wasn't a long walk to the outside of the Book Tower, since the office had been on the bottom floor.

'That is one sharp woman,' said Garovel privately as they made their way back toward the Tower of Night. 'If she's as trustworthy as she seems, then we're lucky to have her.'

Hector couldn't help but agree.

The gaggle of children from earlier caught up to him before he could reach the Tower of Night, and when they presented the knight figurine to him again, he was forced to answer more impossible questions like how strong he was or if he thought he could beat Dimas in a fight."  
"1774 -- CLXXXVIII.

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"1775

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Garovel advised him to play coy, so he did. He told them that questions about strength were important secrets that he couldn't divulge.

Half the kids lost interest when he told them that and wandered off, but the other half stayed and asked him other, more innocuous questions, like about his favorite food or color or animal.

Somehow, those proved even more difficult to answer.

He lost the interest of the rest of the kids soon thereafter. It felt like most of his confidence and self-worth left with them, as well.

However, his mood improved again after he entered the Tower of Night and found the Najirs there, having breakfast. It was the first time he'd seen them all together. Asad, his wife, sister, daughter, and son. Hector remembered Imas and Jada, but the wife's and son's names were escaping him.

Wait a minute. They were having breakfast?

'Garovel, what time is it?' asked Hector.

The reaper shrugged.

Hector supposed it didn't matter much. Not having any daylight to go by was just one of the challenges of living in a giant hole in the ground.

He made his way over to the Sandlord family, who'd already taken notice of him.

They looked a bit tense, however. Perhaps because he and Garovel were watching them?

Asad spoke up first after finishing whatever he was chewing. "Hector. It is good to see you. Allow me to introduce my wife, Samira, and my son, Midhat."

"We have already met," said Samira. "Briefly."

"Yeah," said Hector with a nod. "Hello again."

'No introductions for us?' said the reaper hovering behind Midhat.

"That is Ekkos," said Asad, "my son's reaper. Samira's is Lemirat."

'Good to meet you both. I'm Garovel.'

'Yes, we have been hearing quite a bit about you and your servant,' said Lemirat. 'This is an interesting home you have here.'

'Yeah, it's a work-in-progress,' said Garovel. 'You're welcome to stay as long as you like, though we won't be offended if you find the place a bit uncomfortable.'

'More fortress than resort,' said Lemirat. 'I cannot say it bothers me, personally. I generally find the sturdiness of fortresses more pleasant.'

"I do not," said Samira with an obvious tinge of irritation. "And it would appear we have made the trip here for no reason, as well."

Asad gave his wife a look. "Samira."

She saw his face, looked toward Hector and Garovel, then turned away.

Uncomfortable silence arrived.

Garovel was the one to break it. 'You're right, Lady Najir. I must apologize. I was the one who requested that Asad send someone here ahead of us. I didn't foresee how strange our travels in the Undercrust would become. It's not everyday you get teleported back to your home country, you know. It was quite the surprise.'

The woman looked between Hector and Garovel again. "Yes, well... it is good that you returned safely. I have never been, but I have heard many tales of the perils in the Undercrust."

‘Oh, indeed,’ said Garovel. ‘And I’m afraid it was also my idea to venture down there. I must apologize again for putting your family in harm’s way.’

“Nonsense,” said Asad. “We chose to go with you of our own volition. Why, I even said--”

‘Yes, but you chose to do that because you are so fiercely kind,’ said Garovel. ‘I fear that perhaps Hector and I have taken advantage of that kindness, in some ways.’

Asad merely frowned and exchanged glances with his wife.

‘If you are ever in need of our help, I hope you will allow us the opportunity to repay you for that kindness,’ said Garovel. ‘For the moment, however, we’ll leave you in peace. Hector and I have several pressing matters we must attend to. Good day, all.’

Hector followed the reaper’s lead, and they left the robed family alone. Hector had hoped to talk to Asad more about various things like Rasalased and materialization training, but he supposed there was no rush.

Hector also wanted to ask Garovel if he knew something about the Najirs that he hadn’t mentioned yet, but there wasn’t time. Before Hector even finished climbing the stairs up to the second floor, he encountered Horatio Blackburn.

‘Ah,’ said Garovel. ‘Just the man we were hoping to see. Do you have a few minutes to talk?’

The flat-faced man had been descending the staircase and now began going back up it without turning around. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

‘No, no,’ said Garovel. ‘But we would like to take stock of things. We’re checking up on everyone.’

The man stopped. “You needn’t worry about us.”

‘Well, we do anyway,’ said Garovel. ‘Come on. Let’s find somewhere we can talk in private.’

Horatio looked reluctant, but he acquiesced nonetheless. They found a vacant room near the stairs. It was small and lacking furniture, but it would do. Hector materialized a couple chairs for them while they waited for Horatio's reaper to join them.

When she did, Hector encased the room in iron and empowered it with his soul. Apparently, this would prevent any outside reapers from overhearing what the two reapers in here were saying.

Of course, it also created a vacuum seal in the chamber, limiting the amount of breathable air left in it. That wouldn't be a big problem, but Hector was made to wonder if he would still be able to speak if there was nothing but carbon dioxide left in the room.

Garovel started things off. 'So. How are things?'

Horatio seemed almost reluctant to answer. "Things are... difficult but adequate."

Garovel's next words were private. 'Ask him something.'

'Like what?' said Hector.

'Whatever you want to know.'

Hector had expected a more direct, instructive answer. Maybe Garovel wanted him to think for himself on this. The way a lord probably should.

"...How is the Lady Nere doing?" asked Hector.

Horatio's frown deepened."

"1777

'She has not spoken in several days,' said Horatio's reaper. Her name was Yovess, as Hector recalled.

'Is there anything we can do?' said Garovel. 'Anything you need?'

'Thank you, but I do not think so,' said Yovess.

'Does she need a doctor?'

‘We have one tending to her.’

‘I see.’

“There’s... something you should know,” said Hector. In truth, it was something that he probably should have told the Blackburns a while ago now, but with everything going on, it had somehow slipped his mind. “Ibai is alive.”

Horatio and Yovess both stared at him.

“How do you know that?” said Horatio.

Hmm. How to explain? The only ones he’d told about the Shards and Emiliana were the Najirs and the Elroys. Both of those families were directly involved, so it only made sense that they should know, but he supposed now that the Blackburns had just as much right to know.

So he told Horatio everything. About the Shards. About Rasalased. About being able to communicate with Emiliana. About her telling him that Ibai was with her. And about Gohvis.

Horatio and Yovess didn’t seem so surprised about that last part. They’d already known that Gohvis had chased after them at Dunehall, so it wasn’t much of a stretch to imagine that Gohvis hadn’t allowed them to escape.

The expected question of Ibai’s current location came up, and Hector had to give the disappointing answer that he didn’t know, that Emiliana seemed to be refusing to tell him--likely for everyone’s safety.

Horatio and Yovess fell quiet again.

Hector wondered if that news would help the Lady Nere at all. He hoped so. And he felt bad for not telling the Blackburns about this earlier. He didn’t see much point in telling them that he could have told them earlier, though. That only seemed like it would piss them off.

And justifiably so.

He wondered how he’d forgotten about it all this time. Maybe it was because he barely ever interacted with the Blackburns. They were always sequestered away from the others, never really mingling much. That was no excuse, of course, but Hector supposed it made a degree of sense, at least.

He had to be more attentive in the future, he felt. These people were hurting. Any support he could provide would be well worth the effort, but it seemed like they didn't want to ask for help at all.

It seemed that way with all the Rainlords, really. Maybe it was a pride thing.

'We spoke to Madame Carthrace about you and the other Rainlords,' said Garovel. 'She mentioned that you insisted on reimbursing us for everything while you're here.'

"That's right," said Horatio.

'While we appreciate that, it isn't necessary in the slightest,' said Garovel.

"Yes, it is," said Horatio, more strongly now. "We do not intend to be a burden."

'If we were concerned about things like that, we never would've invited you back to Warrenhold in the first place,' said Garovel.

"All the same," said Horatio, "it is a matter of honor. And we take such things very seriously."

'So we've noticed,' said Garovel."  
"1778

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

"If it's just about not wanting to be in our debt," said Hector, "then there are other ways you could pay us back. I mean, money is nice and all, but, er..."

'It would be kind of a hassle to exchange all of your Sairi escaltos for our Atreyan troas,' said Garovel, 'especially because we'd have to come up with an official excuse for why we suddenly have a steady influx of foreign currency.'

"I... see," said Horatio.

'Plus, Hector here made a fairly large impression on the locals in Moaban, so it probably wouldn't be too difficult for someone to find out

that he was in Sair while the country was in turmoil. We really shouldn't be giving anyone more dots to connect beyond that.'

'Your reasoning is sound,' said Yovess, 'but are you really suggesting that we simply stay for free? That is not something that we as Rainlords can abide, and I know that all of our kin will feel similarly.'

"Ah--like I said, if it's just about not wanting to be in our debt, then there are other ways you could help us."

'Such as?'

"Well, er--you're kinda doing it already, aren't you? It seems like a few of you guys have, uh... have taken a bit of... initiative with helping restore Warrenhold."

'Ah, yes,' said Yovess. 'However, I believe that has more to do with some among us feeling restless, not wanting to remain idle.'

"Even while you're supposed to be resting?" said Hector.

'Yes,' she said plainly.

Horatio looked briefly amused. "And perhaps you are overestimating how much rest we require. Not all of us have had to push ourselves beyond the point of absurdity."

Hector just kind of scratched his chin.

'Still,' said Garovel, 'the point remains that it would be of immense help to have a bunch of superhuman construction workers on the job. If you're willing to accept food, shelter, and our winning smiles as payment, then I think we can agree that you won't be in our debt.'

Horatio and Yovess looked at one another for a time, perhaps deliberating privately.

'Oh, and also,' added Garovel, 'this arrangement might prove useful in keeping up appearances with Leo.'

'You intend to bring him back here?' said Yovess.

"Not anytime soon," said Hector with some confidence, "but... eventually, maybe."

'But it also may not be up to us,' said Garovel. 'There's always a chance that Leo could decide to just drop in on us unannounced. It's



not like Warrenhold's location is some great secret.'

Horatio and Yovess looked displeased.

'In such an event, it would be good if it looked like the Rainlords really were working for us.'

"...Some might argue that this is more than merely looking like it," said Horatio, though his expression remained neutral.

Hector met the man's gaze evenly. Somehow, it seemed like it would be disrespectful to look away. Or cowardly, perhaps."

"1779

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

Garovel, however, simply laughed. 'Well, if you'd like to make this a permanent solution, I can't say that Hector and I would mind. And it would certainly make the deception easier if it actually WASN'T a deception, eh?'

Horatio and Yovess did not seem to share his amusement.

But Garovel was not deterred. 'So serious. Fine. If you want to actually hear us say it, then no, we are not trying to trick all of you into working for us--or something. How would that even work, precisely?'

"...I was merely mentioning what I think some will believe," said Horatio. "I did not say that I believed it, myself."

'You must understand,' said Yovess. 'Lord Goffe's recent... accomplishments have left quite an impression on our people, particularly the younger ones. And though we know you are our allies, it is also in our nature to be... cautious.' Her hollow gaze fell upon Garovel. 'Especially when it comes to reapers. We know all too well about how manipulative our kind can be.'

Holy shit, Hector thought. Was this gonna be yet another problem he had to worry about?

Agh...

‘I understand completely,’ said Garovel, sounding less jovial now. ‘And I most definitely do not want there to be any ill feelings between us. I hope that if you are ever beginning to get the impression that Hector and I are trying to manipulate you, then you will give us the benefit of the doubt first and communicate your concerns to us. There are many out there who would like to do us harm, and if we allow a rift to form between us, I fear that will only make it easier for them to succeed.’

‘Heh. You know just what to say, don’t you?’

‘Well, I’ve had lots of practice,’ said Garovel.

Yovess shook her skull and chortled. ‘Very well. We will continue to place our trust in you, for the time being.’

‘Thank you. We’ll do the same.’

‘And in this spirit of trust,’ said Yovess, ‘there is something that we should tell you.’

‘Oh?’

‘We have heard rumblings on this matter already. That is why Horatio said that, just now.’

‘What kind of rumblings?’

“There is a concern that you may have lied to us,” said Horatio.

Hector couldn’t help blinking. “Lied? About what?” Oh shit. Had he lied to them? He didn’t think so, but...

“Regarding your age, specifically,” said the Lord Blackburn.

Hector couldn’t help blinking even more.

“Given your recent track record, some have been worried that you might be... shall we say, significantly older than you claimed to be,” said Horatio.

Wait, what the fuck? They thought he might’ve lied about how young he was? Shouldn’t it have been the opposite?

Yovess continued where her servant left off. ‘A few have expressed concern that you might have been pretending to be weaker than you really are. Acting like you needed a climate suit, for instance. And now,

your mother appearing to be relatively young and a non-servant.'

Oh shit, they'd met his mother already? He hadn't even thought about how she must be handling all of these foreign visitors."

"1780 -- CLXXXIX.

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'Now, of course, if you ARE older than you say, you have every reason to keep that information private,' said Yovess, 'so it would not be terribly surprising that you would want to put on an act in front of us, and I don't think any of our kin would hold it against you.'

'This sounds like more than rumblings,' said Garovel. 'It sounds like you believe these things yourself.'

'I don't know if I do,' said Yovess. 'But it would make a degree of sense, I suppose.'

Hector wanted to intervene with a question that he doubted Garovel would ask. "Have you met my mother?"

"Briefly," said Horatio. "She seemed a curt woman."

That was one way of putting it. "But... lemme get this straight. You're saying that you think she might not actually be my mother?"

"Or that she is secretly a servant as well and far older than she appears," said Horatio.

Hector took a breath, unsure of what to make of all this new information.

'I admit,' said Yovess, 'it does seem a bit unlikely that you would go so far as to use your own mother to throw us off, but at the same time, it seems similarly unlikely that you would have fended off Melchor at Marshrock, Ivan at Dunehall, and Leo in Capaporo.'

Hector didn't know where to begin explaining--or if he even could, for that matter. "Uh..."

'Your confusion is understandable,' said Garovel, making Hector wonder what the hell the reaper was about to say. 'The simple truth of

the matter, however, is that Hector is significantly more powerful than his age would suggest. And you're right to be thinking that his age is a difficult issue for us. If word were to get out about how young he is in spite of his prowess, unwanted guests would likely come knocking on our door.'

'You are saying he is an astero?' said Yovess.

'An astero?' said Garovel. 'I'm unfamiliar with that term.'

'Ah. Forgive me. It's a old Arman term for exactly what you just described.'

'I see. In that case, yes, I suppose that is what I am saying.'

'Then there is no need to explain further,' said Yovess. 'I understand your dilemma very well. Thank you for trusting us with that information. I imagine you must have been hesitant to do so.'

Hmm.

Hector wasn't sure he followed all of that, but it sounded like it went surprisingly well.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Nine: 'O, ravenous flower...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

There were certainly a lot of people around. Surely, there had to be a good man here somewhere. It had been months since her last real relationship. Frankly, she was getting a bit desperate, and she knew it. Going this long without a boyfriend was just ridiculous. At this point, she was prepared to lower her standards quite a bit.

But wow. Maybe she wouldn't have to."  
"1780 -- CLXXXIX.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

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"1781

Just wandering around this underground castle for half an hour or so, she’d already seen scores of men. And not the pampered-looking types that she’d grown accustomed to seeing in Steccat. Sure, they didn’t exactly look like movie stars, but there was a certain... something to them that she had rarely ever seen before, something she was having trouble articulating to herself.

A realness, perhaps? A heaviness in their presence. A sense of importance in the way that they carried themselves. Not self-importance, no. Not smugness. She’d seen that plenty of times before. This was like... an importance of intent.

Men at work.

Yeah. That’s what it was. These were men with missions in mind, with tasks that needed doing.

And, damn, was that hot. She could feel herself getting flustered just being here.

She needed to calm herself down. Madison Reach had never been in this type of environment before, and it was a bit overwhelming to say the least, but it certainly wouldn't be good for her if her potential beau saw her like this, drooling over every eligible bachelor in sight. While she wouldn't necessarily mind a jealous man in the right context, this was not that context--not before a relationship had even begun.

She'd come here with Gina in order to see Roman, but knowing what she now did of Gina's feelings for him, Madison decided not to intrude on their bonding time. Hopefully, Gina would be able to take advantage of the circumstances, but Madison wasn't getting her hopes up. The poor girl seemed a bit repressed when it came to these things.

Warrenhold was a strange place, though. She'd of course been preemptively informed of the "uneasiness" that the castle could cause, but it was still taking some getting used to. But then, maybe she'd be able to find herself a dashing gentleman to help her feel safe again.

She'd taken notice of several candidates already and had been attempting to stealthily learn their names. Eager though she was, she didn't want to overplay her hand. She was still alone in a crowd of strangers, after all.

To that end, however, things were unfortunately not going so well. When she went to the banquet hall in the big dark tower where everyone was conglomerating, not a single one of the hunky guys there bothered to approach. She could see them looking her way, but none of them made any moves.

So what the hell?!

This always worked back in Steccat. She could just go to a night club, sit at the bar, and wait to be approached. Granted, it had led to meeting a lot sleazeballs, but there'd been some nice ones in there, too.

What were they waiting for? Were they intimidated? They didn't look intimidated. If anything, they were kind of glaring at her. Like they were suspicious of her or something. But that couldn't be the case, right? What sense would that make?

What the hell was wrong with these Rainlords?! Argh!"  
"1782

((Memorial Day Special -- Page 1 of 12))

She'd heard about them in passing before, but she didn't really know much about their lifestyle or culture. She'd hoped to change that over the course of a conversation with an interesting gentleman, but that was looking less likely by the minute.

Maybe there was something wrong with her, she wondered. Maybe she was dressed inappropriately in their eyes. She wasn't showing any cleavage and barely any thigh, but maybe that didn't matter to them. She seemed to recall hearing something about the Sandlords having an ultra conservative culture, so maybe the Rainlords were the same way?

Dammit. She hadn't been prepared to take the initiative here, and seeing some of the disapproving looks she was getting, now she was no longer sure that she even wanted to.

Maybe it was a bad idea to go off on her own. Maybe it was just the artificial "uneasiness" getting to her. Whatever it was, she was beginning to feel uncomfortable. And undesirable. And depressed.

It wasn't like she was perfect. Maybe they could just see right through her. Maybe they could tell what a phony she was, how insecure she was.

Ugh, and now she was starting to think about her ex, about all those terrible things he'd said about her, about how much truth had been in them.

She'd been trying to quit drinking, but now she really wished this place had some damn alcohol. Why didn't it have any, anyway? Did the Rainlords have something against that, too? Or was it the local lord's fault? Whoever was to blame, she would've liked to give them a piece of her mind, right about now.

"Excuse me," came a distinctly masculine voice from behind her.

That alone was enough to make her perk up and turn. Her breath caught at the sight of the chiseled jawline on the incredibly tall man standing there. She tried to say something, but her words couldn't find her mouth--or even her mind, for that matter.



“What are you doing here?” the towering man said. His expression was noticeably flat and not at all welcoming, but Madison was still too stunned to be bothered by such things.

He was exactly her type. It was like he’d walked right out of her imagination and into reality in order to sweep her off her feet. That was what he was here to do, right? Oh, dear sweet Cocora, please let that be the case.

The man seemed to become mildly impatient, however. “Do you have some business here? Are you a guest?”

“Oh!” she said, finally regaining herself. “Yes! I’m a guest!”

“Of whom?” he asked.

“Ah... G-Gina and Roman? My name is, er--” She caught herself. She was supposed to be in hiding, after all. A part of her wanted this prime specimen of a man to recognize her--maybe even tell her that he was a fan--but it was probably for the best if that didn’t happen. There was still a chance that he would recognize her name, though, so she should take steps to avoid that, she felt.”

"1783

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“Your name is...?”

“My name is Madison,” she decided to say. It was a common enough name, she supposed, so long as she omitted the latter part of it. Something about this guy’s face told her that he wouldn’t have any idea who she was even if she did tell him her last name, but it was better to be safe than sorry. She forced herself to smile and held out her hand daintily. “And what is your name, Mr. Giant?”

For a moment, the man just stared at her.

Madison just maintained her smile and her composure. It was best to confront uncomfortable situations with as much charisma as could be mustered, she’d always found.

But maybe that only worked in Steccat. This gentleman here wasn’t

looking too impressed with her, at the moment.

At length, however, he did eventually say, "...My name is Dimas. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Huh. Those words were significantly more courteous than his expression implied.

Madison allowed her smile to turn a little mischievous--a trick she'd perfected in one of her earlier films. "Is it a pleasure?" she said teasingly. "Is it, really?"

Dimas made no response.

Oh crap, time to clarify. "Ah--it's just, well--I've noticed the looks everyone has been giving me. It doesn't quite seem like I'm the most desirable girl at the ball, if you take my meaning."

Dimas threw that same flat expression around the banquet hall before returning it to her again. "They are concerned that you might attempt to kill someone," he said.

Madison laughed and touched Dimas' arm. It was a strange joke, to be sure, but Madison had heard worse. She could easily 'magnify' how funny she found it--for the man's sake, of course. Men always seemed to love that. Hell, so did she, honestly.

Dimas' face did not change in the slightest, however.

Madison's mirth died rather abruptly. "Wait, are you being serious?"

"Yes."

She looked around the room another time, suddenly even more conscious of all the people observing her now. "What?!" she said, lowering her voice while still heightening its urgency. "Why would they think that?! I'm completely harmless! I'm less than harmless, even! I'm harm-negative! Like, mathematically or something!"

Dimas just cocked an eyebrow at her.

Well, that was a slightly different response, at least. She tried a frown--hopefully a cute one. "...You don't think I'm dangerous, do you?"

"I have not decided yet."

"Seriously? What about me could possibly hurt anyone? I mean, I

know I have eyes that are to die for, but that doesn't count, right?"

And again, Dimas made no response.

Madison's expression tightened. What was with this guy? Couldn't he tell that was a joke? Oh shit, had it not sounded like one? Did he think she was an arrogant bitch, already?

"I-I was just joking," she felt compelled to say. "I'm not that full of myself, just so it's clear."

"Mm," was all Dimas had to say, apparently.

Agh, this was going terribly."

"1784

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She had to try something different. Maybe he would want to talk about himself. "So, uh, what brings you here, Dimas? How'd you end up in a spooky place like this?"

"...It doesn't matter," said Dimas.

Well, crumb. She should've known better. Men hated talking about themselves.

Well.

Most men.

She'd known many exceptions, certainly, but Dimas here didn't appear to be one of them.

She liked that, though. Damn, did she like that. A boyfriend who wasn't in love with the sound of his own voice? That was basically her ideal man, after the repeated dumpster fires that were her last few relationships. Peace and quiet without all the loneliness that usually came with it? Where did she have to sign?

And sure, maybe Dimas seemed a little scary, but that was just a preliminary thing. She didn't know anything about him yet, really. And... if she was being entirely, horrifically honest with herself... she found

that scariness kinda hot, too--so help her. She'd never dated anyone who seemed genuinely "mysterious" or "dangerous" before.

Not from the beginning of the relationship, anyway.

Dimas also seemed like a gentleman, though, curiously enough. So she wondered if she could attack him from that angle.

"Well, ah... would it be too much trouble to ask you to show me around?" said Madison.

"...I am not very familiar with Warrenhold, myself."

A meek woman might've gotten discouraged by that response. Not Madison, though. "Perfect!" she said, grabbing Dimas' arm. "We can explore it together, then. That's even better, right?"

Dimas just kind of stood there, looking down at her on his arm as if he were assessing a rash and trying to decide if he needed to take medication for it.

At least, that was what it seemed like to Madison. Honestly, she wasn't accustomed to seeing expressions like that--certainly not from men. She'd seen a lot of other things from them. Eagerness, confidence, anger, even timidity and desperation--but this?

This was pretty new to her.

She was becoming more determined by the second to not let this one get away.

But she couldn't be too aggressive, either, she knew. A hunk like this probably liked to do most of the work himself. And she still didn't know much about him, of course. There were still a lot of deal-breaking obstacles that could crop up any moment now.

She decided to release his arm and take a step back toward the empty bar behind her. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just very excitable, sometimes."

"...It's fine," said Dimas, as gorgeous and expressionless as ever.

Madison gathered her courage and went straight for the first big thing that she needed to know. "Yeah, well, I'm sure your wife wouldn't appreciate some strange woman hanging all over you, right?"

"...I'm not married."

She resisted the urge to leap into his enormous arms. "Oh," she said with forced calmness. "Then... does that mean you wouldn't mind exploring this castle with me?"

"...Sure."

"1785

((Memorial Day Special -- Page 4 of 12))

She contained herself with just another smile. Bubbly and cheerful was one thing. Psychotically happy and clingy was another.

"Oh, you're just terribly sweet, aren't you?" said Madison. "Thank you for humoring me. I'll try not to be too annoying--I promise!" She knew that fishing for compliments was an old and very well-known tactic, but that didn't mean it couldn't still be effective, especially against strangers. People who knew her well would doubtlessly show no mercy in calling her out on that, but she was betting that the mysterious gentleman in front of her wouldn't mind.

"Not at all," said Dimas. "It will be my pleasure."

Madison didn't even have to force her smile, this time. Sure, maybe Dimas didn't have the most receptive tone or expression, but somehow, she still felt like he meant those words.

Ah, but that could've just been her wanting him to mean them, she knew. She'd certainly made that mistake before. She wanted to be smarter than her past self.

They exited the banquet hall together, with Madison having to take the lead. She had no idea where she was going, of course, and the two of them were now drawing even more attention than she'd been getting on her own, but none of that could remove the grin from her face.

A date. This was totally a date. Not an official one, of course, but it was basically the same thing, just not as formal. And there was plenty of potential there, she knew.

Now she just had to not fuck everything up.

In spite of herself, she was getting nervous. She was only twenty-eight

years old, but truthfully, she was already beginning to feel a little bit like she was over the hill. She experienced heartburn for the first time in her entire life last year, and every time she thought about all the newer, younger actresses making waves now in Steccat... Not to mention, she hadn't actually landed a movie role in several months now... Oh, and how many of her girlfriends had gotten married over the last few years?

And that wasn't even broaching the subject of that old drug problem...

Agh. The more she allowed herself to think about it, the more reason she found to justify each and every one of her insecurities.

If Dimas knew everything she was thinking, right now, he would ditch her in a heartbeat. Hell, maybe he was already planning to and really was just being polite.

Hmm? Where he'd go? She looked around. Oh, goddess, please--

Wait, no, there he was, following a few meters behind her. Phew.

Someone was walking with him and talking quietly. A fellow Rainlord, presumably. Of course, she hadn't actually gotten confirmation that Dimas himself was a Rainlord, but it seemed a safe gamble.

Madison slowed her pace to match theirs, but they stopped talking before she was close enough to overhear what they were saying.

Huh."

"1786

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Madison tried not to read too much into that. She didn't need any other excuses to feel insecure. "Is something the matter?" she dared to ask.

"No," said Dimas, and he waved at the other man as if shoos him away.

The shorter man merely nodded and excused himself.

Wait a minute. Was Dimas some sort of big shot, on top of everything else?

Oh, hell.

Was she getting herself into trouble again? Because she was starting to feel like she was.

And she didn't know what to do about it, either.

"I apologize for not engaging with you more," said Dimas. "You must be bored."

"Oh, no, I'm fine. And besides, it's a little early for us to be getting engaged, don't you think?"

That just made him raise an eyebrow at her again.

"That was another joke," she clarified.

"...I know," said Dimas. "It was very funny."

Her face scrunched up a little. "Are you...? Are you being sarcastic?"

"No."

Her face scrunched up a little more. "Are you sure? Because it sounded like you were."

"I promise that I was not being sarcastic."

"Well, if you thought it was funny, then why didn't you laugh?"

A beat passed, and the man gave a hulking shrug. "I don't know."

Not sure what to say to that, she pouted.

Surprisingly enough, that seemed to get a reaction out of the man. Not a big one, of course, but something at least. She couldn't tell what that expression meant, partly because it was gone as quickly as it appeared, but immediately thereafter, Dimas took the lead in walking. "Perhaps I can show you something," he said.

Madison's eyes lit up, and she skipped a bit closer to him. "Oh? What kind of something would that be?"

"A certain room," said Dimas, taking them through the main courtyard where Warrenhold's eight great towers all surrounded them.

"What kind of room?" she said with a slight grin. That room wouldn't happen to have a hot tub or a bed, would it? She had to stop herself from saying that out loud.

"A shrine," said Dimas.

Oh. Well, that was a little disappointing, but she was curious, at least. She'd never been taken to a shrine on a date before. She didn't think she'd ever been taken to a shrine, period.

"From what I understand," Dimas went on, "there are several shrines in Warrenhold, but I only know where two of them are. I'll take you to the one that is probably quieter."

"Alrighty," said Madison with a nod. She followed him toward the tallest and skinniest building, the one she'd heard people calling the Entry Tower.

As they neared it, another man approached Dimas and spoke quietly into his ear. He held up a finger in her direction before excusing himself and asking her to wait a moment."

"1787

((Memorial Day Special -- Page 6 of 12))

She agreed with as courteous a smile as she could muster, of course, and observed the two men step away from her for a minute.

Okay, yeah, Dimas was definitely some sort of big shot around here, she figured. What to do with that information, she wasn't quite sure. It wouldn't have really mattered to her if he was flat broke and utterly unremarkable in everyone else's eyes--in fact, she might have even preferred that, because then she would've had him all to herself. And she certainly didn't need any more money. Sure, she didn't currently have very good access to that money, but that problem would likely change soon.

Hopefully.

She gave the men their space, nonetheless, putting her hands together behind her back and turning around to take in the view of the enormous underground courtyard another time.



It was quite something, she supposed, though it maybe wasn't as romantic as she would have personally preferred. The amber lamps were a nice touch, though if it was up to her, there would be about two dozen more of them scattered up and down each tower--perhaps even hanging from that distant ceiling. There was obviously a ton of open space here, but so much of it remained in darkness that it didn't look nearly as spacious as it could have, she thought.

An interior decorator on the payroll would not be a waste of money, she felt; but at the same time, wow, such a person would definitely have their work cut out for them. More light would be a good first step, but it would take a lot more than that to make this place not look like a haunted ruin. Some greenery would probably be a big improvement, too, but she wondered if anything would even be able to grow down here. Maybe some artificial plants would fit the bill, instead. They could practically fit a whole fake forest down here, if they wanted, though that would obviously be pretty weird.

She was far from an expert on these things, however. While decorating had been a passion of hers ever since she was a little girl, she had never actually owned her own place for long enough to really get invested in it. Her acting career had taken over her life for the last several years, so her love for interior design had mostly been relegated to watching home makeover shows on television and ogling pictures of pretty houses on the internet.

Maybe Valerie Reinbach would be able to do something with this place. On her show, Reinbach Renovations, she made it look like she could beautify just about any location in the world. In fact, now that she was thinking about it, Madison was pretty sure there was an episode where Valerie restored an old, ruined castle for an Ardoran prince or something.

Madison wouldn't mind meeting her, one day--assuming she ever managed to make it back out into the world, that was."

"1788

((Memorial Day Special -- Page 7 of 12))

She still had no idea what she was going to do about that whole mess. She'd been trying not to think about it too much, if only because it felt like there was nothing that she really could do.

The Andalero group wanted her dead, and they tended to get what they wanted, especially in Steccat. They were a pretty mysterious bunch, and truth be told, Madison hadn't previously known all that much about them, really--aside from the rumors, that was. The rumors about them being a cult. About them controlling half of all the money in the world from the shadows. About them being malevolent puppeteers in matters on an international level. And about them disemboweling farm animals and wearing their still-bloody skins as meat suits during all manner of depraved rituals.

She didn't think that last one was true--mainly because of how stupid it sounded--but unfortunately, she had already gotten tentative confirmation on those other ones. Maybe they didn't actually control half the money in the world, but they definitely had a terrifying degree of influence. A hotel receptionist, a burger shop employee, a bus driver, even a damn kid with a lemonade stand--they'd all tried to pull a gun on her and blow her brains out without any warning whatsoever. And those were just all the ones she could remember. She genuinely wasn't sure how many assassination attempts Roman had foiled while getting her out of Steccat.

She was alright now, but that had definitely been the most terrifying experience of her life. Knowing that literally any random stranger might just walk up and try to kill her at any moment? That hadn't been fun.

And all because she overheard a conversation she wasn't supposed to. She didn't even know what the hell was so scandalous about it. It had just been her ex-boyfriend Darius talking to some old guy about something called "black song." Apparently, it was some kind of super secret meeting or something going down in a place called Ridgemark. She didn't even know where that was or what the meeting was about.

Yet that was enough for them to want her dead. And Roman, too, of course, though they had no idea who he was. After all that craziness, Madison hadn't needed to ask why Roman had originally disguised himself as her new assistant.

She'd been furious with him, at first. Dragging her into all this. But after a while, she realized it wasn't actually his fault that she'd overheard what she did. He'd actually tried to ditch her a couple times before that, which she now realized had been for her own safety. And of course, he had saved her life about a dozen times since then, too. That had earned him more than a few points with her as well.

It felt so strange, thinking about all of that stuff now. It had only been a few weeks ago, but her life had changed so much since then, and she still felt like she was caught up in a whirlwind, like her feet hadn't quite touched the ground again just yet."

"1789

((Memorial Day Special -- Page 8 of 12))

She was in some tiny country she'd never heard of, walking around a creepy castle she didn't much care for, surrounded by a bunch of people she didn't know.

And yet, she wasn't freaking out. For the most part.

Maybe she'd just expended all of her freaking out energy back in Steccat. In retrospect, Roman had been an absolute saint in dealing with her for those first couple days on the run.

Too bad.

Hopefully, he and Gina would figure things out between themselves soon. They had only just reunited, but Madison was already feeling immensely tempted to help them along. She knew better, though. She didn't have enough information about Roman's feelings toward Gina, so trying to force the issue now could easily just make everything worse. Madison knew only too well that these kinds of things required a delicate touch.

At length, her internal musings came to an end when she noticed Dimas had dismissed his apparent associate and was returning to her.

"Thank you for waiting," he said, as calm and flat as before.

"No problem," she said as they started walking again. "It seems like you're in high demand around here."

Dimas didn't have anything to say to that, apparently.

She tried again as they set foot in the Entry Tower. "Are you a... I dunno, a high-ranking Rainlord or something? Do you guys have ranks?"

"No, we do not," said Dimas. "However, yes, I am the current head of

House Sebolt.”

“Ooh, the head, huh? That sounds important.”

“...Yes.”

They took a left and ascended a curving staircase, then Dimas guided her down a corridor and into the room in question.

It was empty, and there were giant cracks in all the walls, but she supposed it had a certain charm to it. Rainbow tiles were an interesting choice. Not something she would have chosen, certainly, but she couldn't deny that it made an impact.

“Are all of your shrines this colorful?” she asked.

“This is not a Rainlord shrine,” said Dimas. “This is not our castle, either.”

“Oh. Right. I knew that, I think. It belongs to, uh... ah...?”

“Lord Goffe. He is not a Rainlord.”

“Ah. Gotcha.” It didn't make much difference to her, but she figured it would be rude if she didn't at least try to keep track of these things.

Dimas walked toward the far corner of the room and sat by the lamp there. There was no chair or bench to sit on, though. Instead, it was a long, blocky protrusion from the wall, seemingly designed to be sat on, given the row of concave indentations where butts were presumably supposed to go.

“The Lord Goffe's associate mentioned that he wished for these shrines to be places where people of all different faiths could come to observe peace.”

Madison sat down next to him. “That sounds nice.”

“Indeed.”

That was it, huh? Of course it was. “So... you like this place, then?”

“...Yes.””

"1790

Oi. Madison was beginning to see a few potential hiccups in her grand plan to get herself a boyfriend who was the strong, silent type. Why had he even brought her here, anyway? She wanted to ask him that directly, but she was struggling to think of a way to make it not sound terribly rude.

Seriously, though, what a weird place to bring a date. Well, maybe he didn't think it was a date. In fact, he probably didn't. It was her hopeful delusions that had put that idea in her head, she knew.

Dammit. How was she supposed to save the situation? The silence was already so long and awkward. She could do it, couldn't she? Being a social butterfly was practically her job--no, her life.

That had mostly come from attending tons of ritzy parties, though. And this was not that.

She didn't have much experience dealing with people like this. Hell, did anyone have much experience with it?

"Do you know of Lhutwë?" said Dimas, stirring Madison from her thoughts.

Agh, she had to pay better attention. That was key to any good social interaction, she knew. Paying attention to whoever you're talking to--and not paying so much attention to yourself. When you paid too much attention to yourself, you became self-conscious, and when you became self-conscious, you became uncertain and awkward. Avoiding that pitfall was usually easy, but it got a lot harder when the person you were talking to didn't actually talk.

Regardless, it was a rookie mistake. She did her best to recover, though. "Oh. Um. Ah... Lhutwë? Is that... some kind of Rainlord cuisine?"

Dimas' expression flashed with the faintest hint of what looked like a smile. Or irritation, perhaps. Madison couldn't really tell.

"No," the tall man said. "Lhutwë is the name of the old water god whom our ancestors worshiped."

"Ooh..." Yikes. That one had been a genuine airhead moment. She

hoped he didn't think she was a complete idiot now. "I, ah... I guess I'm not all that knowledgeable when it comes to religion. I only know a little bit about Cocora, and that's it."

"I see."

Crap. She needed to step her game up and try to ask an intelligent question or something. "But, um... I'm curious about them." Okay, maybe that would've been a lie two minutes ago, but it was totally true now. "Is there a reason why you only said that your ancestors worshiped him? Or, wait, is Lhutwë a woman?"

"No, Lhutwë is described as male."

"Ah, okay. I love it when I assume things that turn out to be true. It sure is better than the opposite thing."

"I am not sure I understood your first question. A reason why I said only my ancestors?"

"Oh, I meant, like, did you mean that you don't worship him anymore? And if so, why?"

"1791

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"Ah," said Dimas. "Yes, we have mostly ceased all such religious practices regarding him. However, he still remains an important aspect of our history, in my opinion. And... there are some among us who do still truly believe in him."

She nodded attentively, not wanting to miss a single word. "I see. And does that include you?"

"I... honestly do not know," said Dimas.

Huh. Madison was a bit surprised by that. He didn't strike her as the indecisive type, and now she had to know more. "Why not?"

"One of my family members is quite religious," said Dimas, "and he frequently tries to convince me that the old ways were correct. I do not yet know if I believe him or not. And there is also..." He seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say, and the sentence went

unfinished.

That was okay, though. Madison could relate. "I've had friends like that, too," she said. "Lemme guess. Is he super nice and friendly but also kinda guilt-trippy?"

"...That describes him exactly, yes."

"Knew it," she said with a nod. "Friends like that can be tough to deal with. It's usually best to just be straight with them, though, and tell them when they're making you uncomfortable with their proselytizing." Man, that word-a-day app was the best thing she ever downloaded.

"I don't think that will work with him," said Dimas.

"Really? Well, you might be surprised. But even if it doesn't, you could just tell him to cut it out."

"But what if he is right?"

"Oh. Uh. Then... listen to what he says?"

"And what if he is wrong?"

"Alright, hey, I don't have all the answers. I know I look like I do, but gimme a break."

That finally pulled a smile out of him. Not a big one, maybe, but she could at least be sure that she'd seen it this time.

Her heart swelled up a little, and she couldn't help smiling as well. She hated when that happened, though. Her most natural smile was goofy and stupid, she'd always felt. It was too mouthy, if that made any sense, and it had been that way ever since her awkward teenage years. The smile that she'd perfected for her movie career was the one that she wanted Dimas to see, but it was so damn difficult to control, sometimes.

She averted her gaze and pretended to observe the rainbow room another time while she recomposed herself.

"...Would you like to hear an old fable of Lhutwë?" said Dimas.

"Perhaps then you will be able to tell me what you think of my friend's beliefs."

"Oh, ah, sure! Though, I'm not sure I should pass judgment on an entire religion after hearing only one story from it."

“...That is true and wise,” said Dimas. “But I want you to do it, anyway.”

She actually snorted a laugh that time.”

"1792

((Memorial Day Special -- Page 11 of 12))

Aw, crap. That hadn't been very dainty or graceful. Maybe he didn't notice.

“That was a cute laugh,” said Dimas, looking right at her.

Wait, what?! Did she hear that right?! “Ah--uh! No, it wasn't!”

Dimas was silent again, however.

She didn't know what to say. Thank you? Should she blush? Wait, was she already doing that? What had she just said, again? No, it wasn't? Why the fuck had she said that?! Taking compliments was easy as shit! She'd done it a million times!

She averted her gaze again, trying to think, to refocus. Calm down. It was just a game. A game she was good at. There was no reason to panic. Dimas was just a man. A tall, strong, and beautiful man who might even have a great personality, too. Jury was still out on that one, but it was looking good so far.

Looking damn good.

Oh, boy...

“...So did you want to hear a fable of Lhutwë?” said Dimas. “Or was that a polite way of saying no?”

“No! I mean, yes! I'd love to hear it!” At the moment, she could listen to him talk about paint drying or his car or just about anything, really.

“Are you certain?” he asked. “I promise I will not be offended.”

“Of course! Tell me!”

“Very well...” The man took a moment to observe his hands, as if to find his words there. “There are many stories of Lhutwë to choose



from, but the one I have in mind is the story of how he came to choose my ancestors as his most beloved people.”

“The Armans, right?” said Madison.

“You know of them,” Dimas observed.

“Only a little. The common knowledge stuff. Peace-loving people of the rain, until a great war came along, and they kicked everyone’s butts.”

“A flattering summation.”

“Was I wrong?”

“I suppose not. But there are many important details being left out.”

She nudged herself ever so slightly closer. “Well, tell them to me, then.”

He eyed her briefly before nodding. “If the tale is to be believed, then my ancestors were not born into the rain.”

“Oh? Uh... what does that mean?”

“Our land. It was not always flooded as it is now. Nor did the Wares Mountains exist. Lhutwē was the one who bestowed them both upon us.”

“Ah... but, uh... haven’t mountains existed for, like, ever? Like, a lot longer than humans have?”

“Yes. And radiometric tests have confirmed as much for us, as well.”

“So I guess that’s why this is just a fable, then?”

“Indeed.”

“Right. Okay. Please continue.”

“The story tells of a time of immense strife and poverty for our people. However, the story also says that we had such nobility of spirit that these tribulations did not break us, which was why Lhutwē chose to grant us his protection. Again, a rather flattering portrayal, no?”

“I’m not judging. Yet.””

”1793

((Memorial Day Special -- Page 12 of 12))

“According to the tale,” Dimas went on, “Lhutwë ‘claimed us as his very own kin.’ Supposedly, he began treating us like his children. It is said that this was a long-held desire of his, to have children. And soon after this kinship began, Lhutwë spoke thus: ‘I shall bring to you the sea, for it will make you strong, and strength will bring you peace. And all those who believeth in me shall partake of my fountain; and all others, should war exist in their hearts, shall know my wrath.’”

“Whoa,” said Madison. “That sounds pretty serious.”

“Yes. The fable goes on to say that, by Lhutwë’s command, a great fountain arose out of the earth, and the land was overcome with all manner of water. Lakes and seas flowed forth from the bottom of the fountain, and clouds full of rain billowed from its peak. The story even claims that this fountain was the source of all water in the world--not just the water in our territory. Our water was considered the most sacred, of course, being closest to the fountain, but all water in the world was kindred to us and to the fountain.

“However, the waters were far from a blessing. At first. The land changed so dramatically that our people struggled to adapt. Many despaired and even cursed Lhutwë for what he had done. But in time, we did adapt, and just as he said, we grew strong, and we grew peaceful. For a time.

“Disputes broke out over who should lead us, over whether we should even have a leader. And our people fought. Blood was shed. And Lhutwë grew angry with us. He had protected us from outsiders for many years, but now he was troubled, because he did not know how to protect us from one another.”

Madison figured she should say something to demonstrate she was actually listening. “That sounds rough. What did he do?”

“He took his fountain away from us,” said Dimas. “According to the story, he raised the Wareess Mountains in order to seal the fountain’s power so that we could never use it against one another again. That is also where the name ‘Wareess’ comes from. In the tongue of my ancestors, it means ‘war’s end.’”

“I see.” Madison wasn’t sure what she was supposed to take away from any of this, but she didn’t care all that much. She just didn’t want him to stop talking, really.

“Unfortunately,” Dimas went on, “that is where the fable begins to break down.”

“Oh?”

“How it ends depends on whom you ask. As some tell it, Lhutwë abandoned us because of our foolishness. They say he could not abide war among his children and so simply disowned us, leaving us to our fates.”

“Pretty harsh.”

“1794

“As others tell it, however, Lhutwë chose a divine successor to lead us in his absence. The Water Dragon. They say that Lhutwë, though he can no longer intervene in our lives directly due to our own profound imperfection, still continues to work through the Water Dragon to guide and protect us.”

“Wow. I’m guessing you don’t believe that?”

“No, I do not. Few among us do, anymore.”

“It does seem a little far-fetched.”

“But there is evidence to support it.”

Madison blinked. “Really?”

“For all of the fable’s faults, there is certainly a degree of truth in it.”

“How so?”

“The fountain,” said Dimas. “The Fountain of Lhutwë is real. Or was, at the very least. In the story, its power seems exaggerated, but in reality, there are many historical accounts of the Fountain being used by the Water Dragon of a given generation to acquire unparalleled strength.”

Madison didn’t quite follow. “But in the story, Lhutwë took the fountain

away, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"So then...?"

"It does not make sense, yes."

"Oh. Okay. Just checking."

"However, due to recent... events, I have been thinking about this story quite a bit."

"Why?"

"A friend of mine put forth a new theory. He said that, rather than choosing to abandon us of his own accord, perhaps Lhutwë was forced to leave for some other reason."

"What other reason?"

"...That is difficult to say," said Dimas.

"You seem awfully interested in it for someone who said you don't believe any of this stuff."

"I also said that I did not know what I believed."

"Well, if you're looking for answers, then I'm afraid you've come to the wrong person, because I don't know what I believe, either." At Dimas' blank expression, Madison nudged herself closer again. "If you're looking for a girlfriend, though... I might be able to help you out."

He cocked an eyebrow at her another time. "Is that right?"

Rather than answering, she just returned a big smile.

"Even after hearing that story, you would be interested in a relationship with me?"

Madison was confused. "Why would that have deterred me? And, hey, wait a minute. Did you know I was interested all along?"

"...That story paints a rather bleak picture of my kin, I feel. Are you sure you wish to get involved with people like us? Because make no mistake, I am inexorably bound to my brethren. I have a duty to them which goes beyond anything else in this life or the next."

"Excuse me, but you didn't answer the question."

"I answered a question."

"Honey, if you're trying to make me stop finding you attractive, you're doing a terrible job of it. I happen to love being teased."

At that, Dimas' eyes widened a little."

"1795 -- CXC.

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

Chapter One Hundred Ninety: 'O, respectable reunion...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The meetings with the Rainlords ended up taking most of the day. He mainly just told them exactly what he had told Horatio about there being no need for financial reimbursement, and as expected, each family required a similar degree of convincing.

House Elroy was the worst in that regard. Hector wasn't exactly surprised about that, though. By the end of it, Zeff ended up making Hector promise to train with him everyday from now on. Hector didn't know if he would actually have the time for that, but he was more than happy to try, at least. Training was important, after all.

Perhaps more than ever, now.

If nothing else, however, Hector was at least glad to see that Zeff had finally managed to get some proper rest. Everyone was still looking pretty battered and worn out, but for the first time in what felt like a very long time, Hector had hope that that might actually begin to change soon.

He had less hope for himself, however. With so much to do, so many things to worry about, he wondered if he would ever be able to find time to sleep again.

At the moment, odds weren't looking too good.

Around dinner time, he was finally able to sit down and talk to Roman, Gina, and Voreese.

Thankfully, this meeting didn't feel quite so redundant or formal. It was arguably the most important one of the day, though, Hector knew.

He wasn't at all sure how to broach the subject of a loan. He certainly would've preferred to not broach it at all.

'Okay, boys, it's time to fess up,' said Voreese. 'How in the name of all that is sacred did you two manage to get yourselves mixed up with a bunch of fucking Rainlords? Not that I don't absolutely adore them all, of course, in case any of them happen to be overhearing our conversation, right now.'

"That's an easy question," said Hector. "Garovel's sister got mixed up with them first."

'What?! Garovel, you've got yourself a living sister?!'

'Yup.'

'Well, where the hell is she, then, huh? You know I've gotta meet her, right?!'

'Sadly, she and her servant ended up separated from us.'

'Aww.'

'We're not sure of her whereabouts, at the moment.'

'Well, that seriously bites. You got my hopes up, dammit.'

'Her name's Chergoa, in case you somehow happen to cross paths with her before we do.'

'Oh, I doubt that'll happen. Roman and I intend to never leave you guys alone again. Isn't that right, Roman?'

Roman seemed more interested in his ricotta-filled lasagna than anything else.

Hector didn't blame him. It was damn good. But of course, everything Gina made seemed to turn out that way.

'Stop ignoring me, you son of a bitch.'

"No."  
"1795 -- CXC.

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

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‘Stop ignoring me, you son of a bitch.’

“No.””

"1796



‘You can’t just say no like that,’ said Voreese. ‘You’re confusing poor Gina. She can’t hear my end of the conversation.’

“She probably prefers it that way. Right, Gina?”

“Whatever you say, Master Roman.”

‘That’s not funny. Tell Gina that’s not funny.’

“Voreese says she loves you and thinks you’re hilarious.”

“Oh, thank you, Voreese.”

‘You’re both assholes.’

“Tell Voreese I love her, too.”

‘Eh, okay, I guess she’s alright. You’re still a bucktoothed penis, though, Roman.’

Honestly, Hector was content to simply eat his meal and enjoy their conversation with a smile on his face, but he knew that he probably shouldn’t do that. And even if he left all the important talking to Garovel, that would be a little rude to Gina, he felt.

The subjects of killing worms and meeting gods soon came up, and Hector and Garovel struggled through those explanations together.

“...So you’re telling us that there are now a couple of ‘ancient beings’ with untold power roaming around in the Undercrust, doing whatever they want?” said Roman.

Hector bobbed his head. “Well... they wouldn’t be the first. Reapers, servants, worms, feldeaths, Hun’Sho. Those are all ancient beings, too, right?”

“Guess that’s true,” said Roman with a small laugh. “I’m sure a couple of gods will barely even make a splash, then.”

Hector couldn’t really argue with the man’s sarcasm. He had no idea what Royo and Malast would do next, and he almost didn’t want to know.

Roman gave him a look. “You realize this is going to be a gigantic problem, don’t you?”

“Probably, yeah,” said Hector.

"I mean, you've got a direct line to the Undercrust here. They could pop up here any time they want and attack you."

"I don't think they know where the hole to Warrenhold is," said Hector.

'The Warrenhole,' said Voreese.

"If they're really gods, they could know just about anything," said Roman.

'They're NOT really gods,' said Garovel.

"But you said you don't know the extent of their power," said Roman. "If they're strong enough, it doesn't really matter if they're gods or not, does it? We still wouldn't be able to stop them."

"They didn't seem... that hostile toward us," said Hector.

"That's good," said Roman. "Guess you wouldn't be here if they had been, eh?"

'Who knows?' said Garovel. 'I wouldn't bet against Hector, though.'

Hector threw the reaper a look and noticed Roman and Voreese doing the same. He felt like this conversation was going down a strange road and decided to change the subject. "Whatever happens, we'll deal with it when the time comes," said Hector. "For now, I'd rather focus on the problems facing Warrenhold and Atreya."

'Oh yeah, you guys are in some pretty deep shit, aren't you?' said Voreese.

"We're in it, too, you know," said Roman.

'Maybe YOU are,' said Voreese, 'but I'm not. I'm an intangible ghost woman. Your crummy economy isn't gonna affect me.'

"1797

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

"A very helpful way of looking at things, as always," said Roman.

'I'm just jokin', c'mon. Obviously, I care greatly about what happens to

this worthless piece of shit you call a homeland.'

"It's not the land we're worried about, Voreese," said Roman. "It's the people."

'You think I don't know that, you fucking dolt? Don't try to argue semantics with me.'

"Why not? Semantics are important. You saying clarity doesn't matter now, you ignorant bint?"

Hector exchanged glances with Gina and wondered how many times she'd heard half of an argument like this. All things considered, she didn't look particularly confused.

Roman and Voreese's arguing didn't seem like it was slowing down, however, so Hector decided to intervene with a question for Gina. "Have you been following the economic crisis?"

"Of course," she said. "There seems to be a lot of confusion about what actually caused it, though. I don't think anyone will know that for a while."

"Madame Carthrace said something similar," said Hector. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Um..." Gina took a moment to think, perhaps noticing that Roman had stopped back sassing his imaginary friend. "Well, I'm not much of a financial person, myself, but I've got a guy for that, and he--"

"I think you mean I've got a guy for that," said Roman.

Gina tilted her brow at him. "Yes, Master Roman. Technically, he works for you, not me, but do you even know what he looks like?"

"That's not important."

"Isn't it?"

"Why would it be? I bet he doesn't know what I look like, either."

"That's not a good counterargument, Master Roman."

"What did your financial guy tell you?" said Hector with a mild laugh.

"Oh, he said that the situation probably isn't as bad as everyone is currently making it out to be," said Gina. "He's mainly an investment

guy, so he's really annoyed and thinks that all of this panic is going to upend a lot of the projects he was eyeballing."

Hector didn't know what to make of that. It sounded counter to what Amelia had told him.

Or, wait. Did it?

She had said that a bunch of foreign interests would come in and "save" the economy. Maybe that was why this guy, whoever he was, didn't see the crisis as that big of a deal. Atreya's financial sovereignty probably didn't matter to most people.

Hell, did it even matter to Hector?

A year ago, he would've said absolutely not, but now?

Shit.

'Do you want to bring it up, or shall I?' said Garovel privately.

He knew the reaper was referring to the loan. The specter hanging over this conversation.

'I'll do it,' said Hector. 'There's no reason to exclude Gina.'

'Have at it, then. We can't sit here all night.'

Roman and Voreese were already arguing over one thing or another again."

"1798

He was going to have to interrupt them one more time, Hector knew. No great surprise there. He waited briefly so as not to talk over either of them and then jumped in.

"Mr. Roman," said Hector, drawing the man's attention, "I have to--"

"You can just call me Roman, you know." Roman's head bobbed to the side. "Unless you intend to make me call you Lord Goffe from now on. In which case, yes, you absolutely have to call me Mr. Roman. Or Mr. Fullister. Or Master Fullister. I do like being called Master. Not Master Roman, though. Only Gina can call me that. It'd be weird if you started

saying it, too.”

As he listened, Hector found it increasingly hard to believe that this man was a billionaire. It probably didn't help that the guy had, as usual, found something weird to wear again. Instead of the armor that Hector had originally materialized for him, Roman was sporting a billiards visor and a windbreaker coat with the words 'Right On Cue' on the back in sharply styled letters.

“Fine,” said Hector flatly after Roman was done. “Just Roman, then.”

“Good. And I'll just call you Hector. Glad we got that all sorted.”

“I have to ask you something,” said Hector, still trying to find the right words here. “And... it's not... a small something, either.”

“Hmm. I see.” Roman placed his hands on the table. “This not-so-small something wouldn't happen to be money, would it?”

“...It would, yeah.”

“Ah.” Roman spared a glance at Gina before returning to Hector, then scratched cheek absently. “And here I thought you liked me for my personality.”

At that, Hector couldn't help exhaling half a laugh, almost like a sigh, and his eyes fell to the table. “I... ah...”

“C'mon, then,” said Roman. “Out with it. How much do you need?”

Hector's gaze remained on the table as he inhaled through his teeth. He looked up at Roman, then over at Garovel, then at Gina and Voreese, then back at Roman. “...A hundred million?”

Roman's eyes widened.

“To start with,” Hector felt compelled to add.

Roman's mouth hung open for a moment, and he furrowed his brow. “What the fuck do you need that much money for?”

“To start a bank,” said Hector. “One that'll be big enough to... prevent Atreya from being taken over by... foreign interests.”

Roman just kind of kept that same look on his face and didn't say anything.

"I know it's a lot to ask," said Hector.

"Oh, well, that's good," said Roman. "I was worried you didn't know what the fuck you were saying, for a second."

"And I don't necessarily... ah... need you to give me all of that. I mean, if you can't, then--"

"Of course I can't!" said Roman. "Look, Hector. Yes, I'm filthy rich. I'm not gonna pretend I'm not, but--"

"Ah--are you sure about that?" said Hector. "Because you kinda seem like you're pretending. All the time, actually."

"1799

"Yeah, alright, sure, you got me," said Roman, "but that's not what I'm talking about here. Technically, yes, I could give you a hundred million troa--just out of the kindness of my heart, I guess. But in order to actually do that, I would have to liquidate so many of my assets that, well... let's just say, I wouldn't be the only one affected by it. Pretty much of all of my money is being used, right now. That's what I do. In fact, I'd say that's the entire point. To put it back into the community. All my money is in real estate, small businesses, charities, that type of thing. I don't just go home and sit on a big pile of gold coins all day."

'Well, there was that one time--' tried Voreese.

"The point is," Roman continued, "even if I wanted to just give you that much money--which, by the way, Hector, I don't particularly--but even if I did, I would have to financially ruin or otherwise fuck over thousands of people, first. Many of whom are children or elderly, mind you."

Hector gave a slow nod. "I... completely understand."

"Do you?" said Roman, frowning. "You don't really know much about me or my business interests."

Hector had a feeling that he could ask Madame Carthrace and suddenly know a whole lot more about them, but he elected not to say that. "I kinda figured you didn't want me to know much about them," he said instead. "Didn't you say you were a thief?"

"That's just one aspect of what I do," said Roman. "Though, lately, I haven't even been able to do that. Hands've been pretty full, if you hadn't noticed."

'You're preaching to the choir over here,' said Garovel.

"Look," said Hector, taking a breath, "I was just telling you what I... currently know about the situation. I wasn't actually expecting you to just give me a hundred million troa. But that is about how much I need, so any help you would be... willing to offer, ah--that would be appreciated."

Roman was quiet for a time, and his frown didn't leave his face. He rubbed his nose and his chin while he deliberated, perhaps consulting Voreese privately as well.

"Hector," Roman finally said. "I will do whatever I can to help you. Of course I will. I'm grateful beyond words for everything you've done, both for me and for our country. Hell, I'd even go so far as to say that you have my trust--which is not something of mine that many people can claim to have. So, even though I hardly understand what your actual objective is here, that's almost inconsequential to me, when we get down to it. I may not be able to free up a cool hundred mil for you, but how does ten sound? To start things off, at least."

"...Ten million?" Hector could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"No, ten troa. Of course ten million! I'm not that much of a dick."  
"1800

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

"That's..." Hector didn't even know what to say.

Roman was just looking at him, waiting for him to finish.

'Say thank you,' said Garovel privately.

"Ah--er--thank you. That's amazing. That's more than I possibly could have hoped for."

"Funny," said Roman with a smile. "Wasn't more than you asked for."

“Y-yeah...”

“And what did you say this money was going to be used for, again?” said Roman.

Hector’s mouth flattened, mostly from disbelief. “Uh... are you seriously asking me that?”

“Yeah, why? Is it that much trouble to repeat yourself or elaborate?”

“No, it’s just... I mean, did you really just decide to give me ten million troa without understanding what it was for?”

“Well, like I said, you have my trust.”

Hector didn’t know whether to smile or frown at that.

“That’s a bit reckless, Master Roman.”

“Yeah, well, that’s why I’m asking for clarification.”

“You should’ve done that before saying you would give him the money,” said Gina.

“Why? It’s not too late to change my mind. I’m not above going back on my word. Even when it’s in writing. Remember that contract with Genuto Motors a few years ago? Never paid those fuckers a thing.”

“I remember them suing you,” said Gina.

“And I remember them dropping it after one of their server rooms mysteriously caught fire,” said Roman.

“Narrowly avoiding bankruptcy is not something you should brag about, Master Roman.”

“Whatever. That’s all water under the bridge now. C’mon, Hector. Tell me what this money is for again. Some kind of bank, right?”

“Oh, ah, yeah.”

“See? I listen.”

“It’s, ah... basically, it’s to prevent foreign banks from taking over the country,” said Hector, “and, er, challenging the Queen’s power.”

Roman folded his arms, nodding. “So you’re gonna use this money to



challenge the Queen's power?"

Hector reared back in his chair. "Wait, what? No! It's to stop foreign banks from doing that, not me!"

'Foreign interests,' clarified Garovel. 'Not necessarily banks. We're hoping to help preserve Atreya's financial independence through this economic crisis.'

"Oh, okay," said Roman. "I thought that was a little weird."

"You didn't actually think that, did you?!" said Hector.

"Well, I dunno," said Roman. "I mean, you've got all these Rainlords here... and all this land... and I haven't seen you in a while..."

Hector just lowered his brow at him.

"Heh. You might want to be careful when you tell the Queen about this plan of yours." Roman allowed a beat to pass. "Or, have you told her about it, already?"

"Not yet," said Hector. He rubbed his neck, figuring that he should probably go see her soon. How was he even supposed to do that? Or would just a phone call be enough? He'd have to ask Garovel about that later, he supposed.

"Have fun with that, then," said Roman. "Tell her I said hi."

"Ah, heh, okay..."

"1801

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

Roman returned to his food, shoveling portions into his mouth at a greater pace than before. "Well, now that that's out of the way, there's something else I gotta know. What the hell're you planning to do with all of these Rainlords?"

Hector busied himself with his own lasagna for a moment while he thought about how to answer that. "...I don't plan to do anything with them," he said.

Roman gave him a doubtful look. "Really?"

It didn't seem like a simple yes would suffice here. "Well, ah... for now, they're just going to stay here while they figure out their next move."

"Mm," hummed Roman. "So all this is just temporary, then?"

"...Yeah," said Hector, though with a bit of uncertainty. "Did Voreese not explain that to you, already?"

"She did. I just didn't believe her. And now, I'm not sure I believe you, either."

Hector just cocked an eyebrow at him.

Roman exhaled a sigh. "You're not really planning to just let these people go, are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Hector. You've got an army here. An army that kinda loves you, from what I've seen. And you're just gonna let it slip through your fingers?" Roman put his fork down and stared him in the eye. "C'mon. Seriously. I don't have to spell this out for you, do I?"

Hector's expression soured a little bit. "I think you've got the wrong impression of these people..."

"And I think you're missing the obvious. Listen. The Queen sent me on a recruitment mission for a reason. She knows we need strong people to protect Atreya. She knows that even if things seem fairly safe now, Abolish could return at any time and try to finish what it started. These Rainlords are perfect for--"

Hector held up a hand. "No, I get it. I mean. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about that, too, but..."

"But, what?"

"They have a lot going on, right now," said Hector. "They're here to rest."

"They seemed pretty rested to me," said Roman.

"Well, they aren't," said Hector, more firmly now. "You don't understand. They've been through so much shit, recently. They've been betrayed. Attacked. Multiple times. They were even forced to

fight each other for a while. And tensions between the families still aren't exactly perfect, either."

Roman sat back in his seat a little. "I'm not claiming to know more about their circumstances than you. At this table, you and Garovel are obviously the experts on that. All I'm saying is that there's a golden opportunity here, and you're a fool if you let it pass you by."

"It's not that--"

'How would you suggest we take advantage of it, then?' said Garovel, drawing Hector's glance.

"Simple," said Roman. "Make them dependent on you."

Okay. Hector did not appreciate that advice.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," said Roman. "They're already dependent on you, aren't they? I just mean, use these circumstances to your advantage and try to foster a relationship that continues on like this into the foreseeable future."

Hector just kept staring at him."

"1802

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

"What?" said Roman. "I'm not saying you should try to keep them under your thumb like some kind of dictator. That'd be a good way to make them hate you. For anything like this to work, they would have to consider it a beneficial relationship from their end, too."

Still, Hector merely kept looking at him.

Roman sighed. "Hector. Trust me. If you just let them go, they will."

'That, or they'll try to take Warrenhold from you,' said Voreese. "Bout a fifty-fifty shot either way, I'd say.'

Hector shot her a look, now. "The Rainlords wouldn't do something like that."

'Oh, right, because they're so honorable or whatever?' said Voreese.

‘Please. Lotta pretty words and warm feelings--that’s all that is. Make no mistake, Hector. If they ever come to see you as an obstacle, they’ll turn on you in a heartbeat. Unless you marry into one of the families, maybe. In fact, I bet they’ll try to pressure you into that soon.’

‘Gah, why’d you have to go and warn him?’ said Garovel. ‘I wanted to see his raw reaction when they suddenly spring it on him, dammit.’

‘Oh. Ah. My bad.’

Hector’s face was stuck as he thought about what they’d just said. Marriage? What the fuck? Who the hell was gonna--?

‘There, you see? Look at him. You’ve ruined it.’

‘Sorry. It’s probably for the best that he’s thinking about it, though. Wouldn’t want him to make a poor decision while he’s too surprised to think clearly.’

‘As if I’d let him do that.’

‘Oho. Feeling protective of your prize-winning pony? Don’t want him to breed with any old donkey, eh?’

‘Of course.’

That was enough to bring Hector back into the conversation. “You guys are disgusting.”

“I think they’re kidding,” said Roman.

‘Of course we’re kidding,’ said Vorese. ‘Hector can fuck all the donkeys he wants. We don’t care.’

The conversation lasted until the end of the meal, and as was perhaps to be expected, there was considerably more shit talk than business talk. Roman and Voreese both kept trying to encourage him to do something about the Rainlords--what, exactly, remained unclear. The way they talked about it, they made it sound like they wanted him to trick the Rainlords somehow, but just as before, they kept saying that it would have to be a mutually beneficial relationship. Or something.

Hector didn’t really understand what they were trying to say, and he wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to, either.

After the meal, they went their separate ways again. Roman said that they would be sticking around Warrenhold for a while and that he also

wanted to go with Hector to meet Leo again. Hector didn't know if that last part was such a good idea, but he couldn't think of a very good reason to refuse the man, nor did he particularly want to talk to Leo without any sort of backup again, either. Hector was still reluctant, however, and in the end, he told Roman that he wanted to think about it a bit more. Roman didn't look like he appreciated that answer very much, but the man didn't argue with him."

"1803

Of all the things on his to-do list, Hector knew that figuring out how to handle Leo was pretty much the top priority. Thankfully, he still had time, but that didn't stop him from thinking about how catastrophically horrible things could become if negotiations with Leo broke down. Maybe it had been a mistake to direct him back to Atreya.

Agh. It was too late for regrets. That kind of thinking was useless at this point, he felt.

And it wasn't like the situation was hopeless, either. Far from it. He already had a few ideas about how to approach the Leo problem, and he had a feeling that talking to the Queen would help clarify his thinking. He could hardly imagine what would come out of that conversation. After the mayhem in both Sair and the Undercrust, it now felt like a lifetime had transpired since his last encounter with the Queen.

Not to mention, he had no idea how she was going to react to everything that he had to tell her. He'd previously been concerned that she would simply be angry that he had brought so many fugitives from the Vanguard into her country, but now, a part of him was worried that she would take a stance similar to Roman regarding the Rainlords.

Would she see them as tools to be exploited? Or merely potential allies?

Too many unanswerable questions. He didn't want to get lost in pointless worrying. He didn't have time for that. He barely even had time for sleep.

It had been a long day of meetings, and now that it was over, he felt a different kind of exhausted. Not so much physical--though that was certainly there, too--but mental. He wondered if he'd talked more today

than he had in any other day in his life. It seemed quite possible, but he was way too tired to devote any more brain power to the notion.

He was preparing for bed in his own room--properly preparing for it with silky pajamas and everything for the first time in ages--when a knock arrived at his door.

Garovel wasn't immediately around to tell him who it was, and he had also removed the Scarf and lain it on the nightstand by his bed. Momentarily, he considered grabbing it and trying to discern the identity of the knocker thereby, but then he just shook his head and said, "Who is it?"

"Selena Cortes," came a young and feminine voice.

Holy fucking shit, a girl was at the door to his bedroom.

"I don't know if you remember me, Lord Goffe, or if I'm bothering you--ah, er--if I am, just tell me, and I'll leave you alone."

Unsurprisingly, Hector had no idea what to say. Should he even say anything? Should he open the door? Should he tell her to open the door? Should he cry to Garovel for help like a goddamn baby? He was unclear."

"1804

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

He heard Selena clear her throat.

"...Um," she said, "I just wanted to thank you for saving me the way you did. And, um. To apologize for my behavior. And for my... ah... for... er..."

Maybe if he just sat here on the edge of the bed and didn't move, she would forget he'd said anything and think the room was empty.

"...Well, um. Sorry. Again." Her voice was fading a little, as if she were moving away from the door. "And thank you. Again. Uh... hmm..."

Hector waited. Hector listened.

After a while of persistent silence, he was fairly sure that she was

gone. He decided to grab the Scarf and check.

Yeah. She was gone.

Phew.

He relaxed.

Then he realized how fucking pathetic that just was.

Aw, dammit. He definitely should've talked to her. That was super rude.

He sighed and laid down. He'd have to find her and try to talk to her tomorrow. Probably not to apologize, though. He felt like that would just make things even weirder, considering she only came here to thank him. But he could at least check in on her. He seemed to recall some weirdness with her reaper. It was all kind of a blur, though. Garovel would probably remember.

So many things to worry about. So many people to worry about. Somehow, he was feeling even more overwhelmed now than he had during any of the battles he'd been in recently.

That probably wasn't normal, he figured.

Soon enough, he let his fatigue take over and fell asleep. Deep and dreamless.

It was not Garovel who awoke him, however.

"Get up, Hector."

He opened his eyes to see the not wholly welcomed face of Zeff Elroy there at the foot of his bed.

"It's time to train," the Lord Elroy said.

What time was it? Ugh, actually, he didn't even care. Garovel was the one in charge of his schedule, not Zeff, so Hector just rolled over and snuggled into his sheets. "No, it isn't. Go away..."

"Hmph. I'll give you this one warning. You can get up. Or I can douse you in ice water. Your choice."

Hector groaned and sat up. "Are you training me to hate you? Because, if so, then..."

“Get dressed.”

“Fine...”

Hector dragged himself out of bed, threw on some light clothes that he didn't mind getting destroyed, and followed Zeff downstairs. “Shouldn't you be with your family, right now?”

“They're resting.”

“You should be, too.”

“I am not tired.”

“Bullshit.”

Zeff paused in the middle of the stairs to throw him a look of disapproval.

Hector merely returned the man's gaze flatly.

They continued on, all the way down into the main courtyard.

A few people lingered about, all familiar Rainlord faces, though Hector couldn't have put names to pretty much any of them. Zeff led him to the edge of the courtyard--and then over the cliff and out onto the lake.”

”1805

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

The Lord Elroy materialized a layer of ice over the lake for them to stand on. It was still clear enough for Hector to make out the sunken buildings below their feet, but it wasn't cracking or feeling unstable at all.

It was pretty slippery, though, which Hector didn't appreciate very much.

“Try adding spikes to your shoes,” Zeff advised him.

Good idea. Hector did so. He was a little worried that the spikes would weaken and destabilize the ice, but Zeff apparently wasn't. And Hector



supposed it wouldn't be too big of a deal if they fell into the lake, either.

They ventured out rather far, until Hector nearly couldn't make out the amber lights of Warrenhold's main courtyard anymore.

"I believe I promised you an explanation the other day," said Zeff after they'd come to a stop.

Hector tried to remember what he was referring to. "...For that trapping technique that Leo used."

"Yes. Would you like to hear it now?"

"Ah--sure."

"Very well. First, put one hundred cubes in orbit around yourself."

Uh. One hundred? He'd never done that many, so he--

"Do not look so uncertain," said Zeff. "After witnessing your battle with that worm, I am sure you can do it."

"Er, alright..."

He focused. Orbital cubes. Dozens. He had the Scarf of Amordiin to help him sense all of them, so it was relatively easy to keep track. As the number climbed, though, he did notice it becoming more difficult.

No surprise there.

As instructed, he reached one hundred, and opened his eyes again.

Zeff was staring. "Remarkable... in Babbadelo, you could hardly keep thirty in orbit, and now, you can do this. How many times did you achieve emergence?"

"Uh...? Er, just once."

"Hmm."

Hector wondered if he should tell him about the Scarf. Obviously, emergence had played a role here, but much of this current feat was attributed to the Scarf, too, he knew.

Eh, Garovel had told him to keep it a secret, though. He supposed he shouldn't--

"That scarf is special in some way, no?" said Zeff.

Well, shit.

"You have been wearing it ever since we left Himmekel. Is it somehow factoring into your ability to materialize?"

Hector kept his mouth shut. He wanted to just come clean, but he also wanted to do as Garovel had told him. He ended up just kind of clenching his jaw and waiting.

"...I see," said Zeff, sounding calmer than Hector might have expected. "Yes. You would be wise to keep such information to yourself. Perhaps I would wish to take it from you, hmm?"

For a moment, Hector just stared at him. "...What makes you think one emergence wouldn't be enough?" he said.

Zeff folded his arms. "While it is true that emergences can vary in power, there is generally considered to be a limit to how far one can go in a single leap."

"1806

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

A limit, huh? Hector found that a little strange, considering emergence itself was all about superseding limitations.

"Now," said Zeff, "the explanation of Leo's trapping technique."

Hector paid close attention.

"As I said before, it is extremely advanced, beyond even my own capabilities. This is because it requires a 'reaction state.'"

"Is that what it sounds like?"

"More or less. The principle is essentially the same as that of applying velocity states. The added difficulty comes from the properties being applied. With velocity states, the application is simple. Comparatively. You apply a blanket speed to the materialized object, and that is all."

"I've, uh... I've found that applying velocity states feels like giving my

iron a command.”

“Is that so? Hmm. I suppose that makes a degree of sense.”

“It’s not really like covering it in a blanket or whatever...”

“I wasn’t saying that you should cover it in a blanket. That was merely a description of--agh, nevermind. The crux of the matter is applying a reaction state is essentially the same.”

“So... it’s only the ‘reaction’ part that’s different?”

“What?”

“I mean, you’re saying that applying the ‘state’ part is the same, so it’s the ‘reaction’ part that’s the problem.”

Zeff hesitated. “That is... one way of thinking about it, I suppose.”

Hector hoped he wasn’t misunderstanding something here. He also kinda wished Asad was here to help explain some of this. “So what is it about the ‘reaction’ part that makes it so much more difficult than the ‘velocity’ part?”

Zeff just kind of looked at him for a second, and Hector briefly wondered if the man was about to tell him that he was complete fucking moron or something. “...The reaction part, as you say, instigates a change in your material in accordance with a specified stimulus in the environment. In the case of Leo’s trap, that stimulus was pressure. The reason this is more difficult is because it is so much more complex than simply adding velocity.”

“Hmm.”

“And to make matters worse, it has been demonstrated that the scale of the challenge differential in the application of these higher states is exponential instead of linear.”

Hector’s brow lowered. “Ah... uh, w-what?”

Zeff opened his mouth, then closed it again, perhaps rethinking what he was about to say. He unfolded his arms, then refolded them. “In other words... ah... reaction states are unreasonably more difficult to apply than velocity or temperature states are. And the more complex the reaction, the more unreasonably difficult it becomes.”

“Oh. Uh. Okay...” Why hadn’t he just said that?

"I am not going to make you practice it--or even attempt it, for that matter."

Hector nodded. That was fine. He kinda wanted to mess with it on his own, anyway. Assuming, of course, that he would ever be able to find the time to dick around with materialization again."

"1807

"Hmph. It seems these hundred cubes are not pushing you very hard."

Oh, right, the cubes. He'd almost forgotten about them. Almost. They were still orbiting around him, all small enough that they didn't obstruct his normal vision very much. He had relegated them to a background thought process while listening to Zeff's explanation.

"Perhaps we should try increasing the volume," said the Lord Elroy.

A thought occurred to Hector. Truthfully, it had occurred to him a while ago, and he'd been looking for an opportunity to bring it up. Now seemed like a good time, because he didn't want to get lost in training and forget it later. "Ah--before that, there's something I want to ask you. It's about your, uh... your niece, I think? Selena Cortes?"

Zeff's expression hardened. Somehow. "What about her?"

Aw, shit, maybe he was butting in where he shouldn't. It might've been wiser to consult Garovel again before asking Zeff about it.

Well. Too late now.

"...Is she... ah... I mean, is she okay?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Ah... Well, uh. Maybe it's nothing, but I kinda got the impression that she and her reaper weren't getting along."

Zeff turned back toward Warrenhold, thinking.

Hector tried to recall why he'd gotten that impression. Oh yeah. "Garovel and I overheard her reaper yelling at her. Pretty harshly, too, I thought. But, er, I could be mistaken. I don't really, uh..."

Zeff was looking at him like he was contemplating murder.

“...I don’t really know much about them,” Hector finished.

“What was said, exactly?” said Zeff.

“I... don’t remember. It happened during the fight after the train derailed. It was super chaotic. I’m sure the reaper had reason to be stressed out. I mean, we all did...”

“Garovel overheard it as well, you said?”

“Yeah.”

“Please call him over to us, then.”

Oh, boy. Hector did as the man asked, and it wasn’t much longer before Garovel joined them.

‘Ah, yes,’ the reaper said after Zeff asked him about it, ‘I have actually been looking into this matter, myself, though I have been trying to be discreet about it.’ He glanced at Hector.

“Mm,” said Zeff. “And have you learned anything?”

‘Your sister, Joana, mentioned that Selena has been having a rough go of it. I couldn’t get any details out of her without tipping my hand, unfortunately--’

“The girl has been suffering from depression,” said Zeff. “She has also...” He paused. “Well, suffice to say, she has indeed been having a rough go of it, as you said. What were the exact words that Ojarea used when you and Hector overheard her yelling at Selena?”

‘Her exact words to her were, “God, you’re so useless. I can’t believe I ended up with such a--” And that was it. I got the impression that the reaper hadn’t intended for us to hear even that much and so cut herself off before saying anything more. I could have been reading too much into it, though.’

"1808 -- CXCI.

Zeff glowered. "Thank you for informing me of this." He eyed Hector again. "I'm afraid today's training has been canceled. If you are free later in the day, I will make time for you." He turned and started walking back toward the castle.

Hector and Garovel followed. "W-what are you planning to do?"

"Talk to my sister."

'Is that all?' said Garovel.

"For the moment."

'Hmm. Well, if you do end up deciding to do anything drastic, I would advise you to talk to Axiolis about it first.'

"I do not need you to tell me that." After a beat, he added, "However, I appreciate your desire to help. Thank you."

The walk back to Warrenhold was a long and uncomfortable one.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-One: 'In times of peace and revival...'

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...126 years ago...

The Wall of Montero was a sight to behold. It was taller than any of the buildings in the city itself, and in the evening sun, it had a kind gentle shimmer--a sparkle, even. That was the product of millions of tiny crystals embedded into its otherwise yellow sandstone.

Parson Miles sat at the top of it, inside one of its turreted watchtowers.

He was not alone, however. A plump, raven-haired woman sat with him, enjoying a mostly-melted mixture of chocolate and vanilla ice cream from a big, wooden bowl.

And enjoying it loudly. As she often did.

"...Mmmm!"

"...Darling--" Parson tried.

“Mm-mmm-mmm!”

He just shook his head faintly, though he didn't avert his eyes from his work. A watchman's job was usually a solitary one, but this woman had made such a fuss about being left home alone all day that Parson had eventually been convinced to bring her along. She had a way of wearing him down with cuteness. And occasionally a bit of guilt-tripping, but mostly cuteness.

“Are you sure you do not want any of this?” she asked.

“I'm certain,” he said, still not looking away.

“Are you suuure?”

He could see her pushing a spoonful toward him in his peripheral vision. Then he felt it bump against his cheek. “Erisa.”

She pulled back. “Oookay. Have it your way. However, I sincerely do not understand how anyone could dislike sweets.”

“I don't dislike them. It's just that I'm working, right now.”

“You can eat and watch the horizon at the same time. It's not like it's going anywhere.”

“Darling, you said you wouldn't be a distraction.”

She sighed. “Alright...”

She lasted about ten minutes.

“It's just, you never eat sweets. And it makes me feel self-conscious, because I end up eating them all by myself and feeling like a fat cow.”

“I eat them sometimes.”

“Not enough times!”

“Maybe I want to make sure that there is enough for my lovely wife.”

“Oh, that's sweet. Horseshit, but sweet. You didn't even like our wedding cake.”

“It was coconut.”

“You couldn't even taste the coconut!”

"I could."

"1808 -- CXCI.

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

Zeff glowered. "Thank you for informing me of this." He eyed Hector again. "I'm afraid today's training has been canceled. If you are free later in the day, I will make time for you." He turned and started walking back toward the castle.

Hector and Garovel followed. "W-what are you planning to do?"

"Talk to my sister."

'Is that all?' said Garovel.

"For the moment."

'Hmm. Well, if you do end up deciding to do anything drastic, I would advise you to talk to Axiolis about it first.'

"I do not need you to tell me that." After a beat, he added, "However, I appreciate your desire to help. Thank you."

The walk back to Warrenhold was a long and uncomfortable one.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-One: 'In times of peace and revival...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

...126 years ago...

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"Oh, that's sweet. Horseshit, but sweet. You didn't even like our wedding cake."

"It was coconut."

"You couldn't even taste the coconut!"

"I could."

"1809

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

"Agh, could you at least look at me when you are talking to me?" said Erisa.

"You know I can't," said Parson. "My job is to not take my eyes off the field in front of me."

"Hmph. Honestly, what could possibly happen if you looked away for two seconds?"

Oh, what an innocent creature, she was. That was what he loved about her, though. Not a cynical bone in her body, not a jaded thought in her head. He just smiled to himself and kept watching.

She wasn't entirely unjustified in her annoyance, however. She knew how old he was despite his appearance. She knew how powerful he was. No doubt, she thought this kind of work to be below a regional captain of the Vanguard.

And indeed, it was. But they were short-handed. Abolish had struck a major blow in Korgum two years ago, and Parson had been forced to send most of his men there as reinforcements. Now, he had to either help pick up some of the slack around here himself or let the weaknesses in the city's security get worse.

It didn't help matters that Calthos as a whole was in a state of disarray, either. Montero, being the capital, may have been the safest place in the country, but that was really only due to the Wall.

Parson knew very well that if something were to happen here-- something beyond mere civil unrest and political turmoil--then the task of protecting the city would fall largely upon his shoulders.

His and Overra's.

It had only been four years since he and she had finally become capable of using pan-rozum. With that, had come his promotion to regional captain from a normal captain, but even now, he wasn't entirely confident in his ability to control that power. Pan-forma, though less powerful, was still much more comfortable and useful, he felt. And he and Overra could maintain it for a much longer period of time, as well.

But that was something that they needed to work on, he knew. Pan-rozum, as one might expect of the most difficult and advanced of all the hyper-states, was incredibly flexible and held such potential that even some of the strongest people in the world said that they felt as though they had hardly scratched the surface of what pan-rozum could theoretically make possible.

The problem, they usually said, was practice. Pan-rozum was so much more taxing on both the body and soul than any of the lesser hyper-states that even just maintaining it for long enough to test anything out would leave the servant and reaper unconscious for days.

Until they neared that crucial one hundred year marker, apparently.

From what Overra had been telling him, one hundred years was widely considered the "turning point" for any servant and reaper pairing. The level of soul-synchronization around that time would begin opening many doors.

Which was why it was their goal.

Overra, Nerovoy, and Feromas' goal."  
"1810

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Over these last fifty years, Overra had remained somewhat cagey when it came to what she had actually meant by what she'd said to him on that fateful night when she'd first revived him--that Parson,

Damian, and Germal would “change the world.”

She had offered him bits and bobs of the plan, usually just enough to placate him whenever he grew bold enough to broach the subject, but it wasn't until quite recently that she had finally deigned to share more details with him.

The infiltration of the Vanguard and Abolish was only the first step. And the longest step, of course. It was a slow game that they were playing, but it wasn't just about acquiring power and influence. It was also about learning and growing as a servant. As a person, even.

‘That is the most important aspect of this all,’ Overra had told him. ‘And that is why I have not wanted to go into too much detail for so long-- because I wanted you to focus on yourself, honing your abilities and your intellect. You're still not quite there yet, I'd say, but I honestly do think that you have the potential to be a great leader, Parson.’

‘A leader?’

‘Yes. The kind of leader that this world badly needs, in fact.’

‘And what kind of leader is that?’

‘One who will not avert his gaze from the horrors and instead understands the utility of them in the pursuit of greater interest.’

He hadn't needed to ask what “greater interest” she was referring to. She'd told him that much long ago.

True peace. That was what she was after. An end to the eternal war between Vanguard and Abolish.

‘The Vanguard is wonderful and necessary,’ said Overra, ‘but it is also blind, at times. Sermung, as much as I love him and Tenebrach--they simply aren't suited to the role. And I don't blame them for that, either, because almost no one is. Sermung's rise to power was largely an accident. He didn't outwit or outcompete his contemporaries. He simply outlived them. They mostly killed each other or gave up.’

‘You truly think I can do a better job of leading the Vanguard than Sermung?’

‘Not in your current state, no. But in time? Absolutely.’

‘How can you sound so certain of that?’

‘Because. There is one thing that I have never told you, Parson. The darkest secret of the Vanguard.’

Parson had been hoping at that point that she was simply joking, but her tone did not suggest that at all.

‘But now, I think I can tell it to you.’

‘Hmm. Not that I don’t appreciate the thought, but why now? Why have you waited so long?’

‘I needed time to examine your thoughts. To come to know your heart. And I now feel that I do know you. Perhaps even better than you know yourself.’”

"1811

Parson recalled, then, an occasionally odd feeling whenever he and Overra had merged for pan-forma--and more recently pan-rozum. It had been a feeling like someone was present in the back of his mind, digging through him. That someone had been Overra, of course. He’d come to that conclusion rather early on, but now he was thinking on that feeling again. It hadn’t been constant. In fact, it had been rather infrequent. But he remembered it giving him a strange and uncomfortable sensation, like that of entering his home and finding a stranger there.

Overra hadn’t been a stranger, obviously, but the feeling remained the same, nonetheless.

Remembering that made him realize. She had been using their time together in hyper-states all these years for this very purpose. To examine the darkest recesses of his mind and discover who he truly was, beneath it all.

That was not a very comforting realization, to say the least, but he supposed there was nothing to be done about it. He felt as if he had come to know Overra similarly well, himself. Not completely, perhaps, but he had more than merely glimpsed the twisted darkness within her. And not just from sharing minds with her, either. He’d seen it even in her outward behavior and especially in her actions.

She could be almost inhumanly brutal and uncompromising, Parson

knew.

But even further down, beneath even that darkness, existed a wondrous light.

He didn't know how else to conceptualize it. Perhaps that was a gross oversimplification. In fact, it almost certainly was. But because of that, there was no one he trusted more in this world than her.

He wondered if that was a consequence of soul-synchronization or simply a product of knowing her for nearly fifty years.

'This secret,' she continued, 'is something that you must never tell anyone else. You understand? Even if you think they might know of it already, do not speak of it.'

'Okay... What is it? Is it honestly that bad?'

She had taken her time answering. It had seemed, even, as if she might decide to change her mind and not tell him after all.

But at length, she finally did.

'Sermung is looking for a way to die.'

Those words had stuck with him. As had the ones that followed them.

'Much of the reason I am doing this is motivated by that knowledge,' said Overra. 'Sermung is one of the greatest heroes in the history of humanity--and a dear friend, besides. He doesn't let it show, for obvious reasons, but I know for a fact that he is at his psychological limit. And has been for some time now. I would like to help him find peace, if I can.'

Parson didn't need her to explain the implications of this information.

If Sermung died, Abolish would run rampant as perhaps never before.

At times, Parson had certainly felt as if the weight of the world were resting upon his own shoulders, but for Sermung?

For Sermung, that was actually true.

And everyone knew it."

"1812

Parson had argued with her. The idea that he could be the one to replace Sermung...

Well, it was absurd, quite frankly. He was far too young, and there were obviously many more people who were better suited to the task.

'No, there really are not,' she'd told him. 'There aren't many Vanguardians with useful ties to anyone in Abolish. When the time comes, you will see. It will be just like I said. You three boys will help us change the world.'

And she rebuffed any attempt Parson made to reason with her. She had a counterargument for everything, praise for every expression of insecurity, and confidence in her plan.

Her goal was set. And it had been so for many long years, it seemed--since before she had even met him.

Even now, sitting next to Erisa like this while trying to focus on his work, he couldn't fully extricate those thoughts from his mind. They were almost always there, in the back, lingering, looming.

A great and terrible shadow of the future.

He didn't know if he would be able to handle it. He didn't know if he would be able to live up to Overra's expectations or be the kind of man that she apparently thought he was.

He wondered how the others were holding up. Parson felt at times as though, of the three of them, he was the one having the easiest time. Germal had undergone such a radical personality transformation over the years that Parson hardly even recognized him. It was almost impossible to believe that he was the same bratty kid who used to follow him around all the time.

And Damian?

Damian had to deal with the Mad Demon. If what he'd told Parson was true, then he was living in a state of almost perpetual fear, never quite knowing if Morgunov would simply snap and decide to torture or kill him.

Everyone had advised Damian and Feromas to give up on their strategy, to come up with some alternate means of infiltrating Abolish,

perhaps alongside Germal, but the pair refused every time. Hellish though it was, they said, they were learning a lot from the madman, and they were convinced that they were genuinely earning his trust, as well.

Parson didn't see how any of that knowledge would be useful if they ended up dead.

It had to be said, however, that the greater plan was finally beginning to bear fruit. Only slightly, perhaps, but fruit nonetheless.

Only six years ago, while he was working in Kavia, Parson had managed to successfully evacuate an entire town after receiving word from Damian that the Devil's Knife was on his way to seize it.

And two years ago, Parson had managed to avert disaster here in Montero when Germal sent him word that a platoon of Abolish soldiers planned to enter the country by haphazardly digging an underground network.

Parson had informed Air Marshal Artemis of this "discovery," and together, they had crushed the assault before it even had a chance to attack anyone."

"1813

Those victories had given Parson some much needed encouragement after the Breaking of Korgum, which was what they had begun calling Dozer's first invasion into the once prosperous nation. That was fifteen years ago now, though it hardly seemed like it, Parson thought. And despite the fact that the invasion itself had ultimately failed, the Breaking had not.

Korgum was a perpetual battleground now.

Tensions between the two nations had been high since the beginning--since Dozer had taken over the now defunct nation of Olotes, renamed it after himself, and begun implementing all manner of aggressive foreign policy with regard to the country's neighbors.

Despite the Vanguard's best efforts over the last century, the NRD--the Nualist Republic of Dozer--had steadily been gaining in power, even after its "defeat" at the hands of Korgum and the Vanguard.



Even now, it seemed as though Dozer might decide to launch another full scale invasion at any time. Smaller skirmishes were frequent occurrences, and the Korgumites were constantly struggling to maintain a hold on their resources and supply lines.

Perhaps Dozer preferred it this way. For several years now, he was keeping the Vanguard quite busy without actually investing all that much in the war effort himself. Overra was of the opinion that this left him free to conduct other, stealthier operations elsewhere in the world, unmolested by the notoriously interventionist Vanguard. This would also explain why the NRD's strength appeared to be growing especially quickly in recent years.

Parson bought into Overra's theory as well, but thus far, Germal and Nerovoy had been unable to confirm it for them.

More and more, as he'd grown older, Parson had begun to see his reaper's perspective of things more clearly. She was always concerned first and foremost about the bigger picture. That was something that she had been trying to drill into his thick head for quite a long time now, and he'd often resisted her efforts.

Even now, he was doing so. His marriage to Erisa had not been met with approval from Overra. Instead, the reaper had tried to warn about the dangers of getting attached to non-servants, the weight of the responsibility he would be taking on, and the fleetingness of love.

And yet, Overra hadn't tried to outright forbid him from marrying Erisa, either. Which, quite frankly, Parson had found surprising. The reaper hadn't been shy about forbidding him from doing other things in the past, like drinking and visiting brothels, so he wondered why she hadn't pulled that trigger this time.

Perhaps she'd considered it an unwinnable battle. Perhaps she could tell that he genuinely did love this woman and that no "rule" was going to stand in his way.

Whatever the case, Parson was now just trying to be grateful for the time that he had with Erisa. He'd lived long enough as a servant to know that it wouldn't last forever.

He knew that Overra's warnings were not without their merit. As was frequently the case."

"1814

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

He didn't want to think about it. Erisa was still young. Barely even in her thirties. When the time came...

No. That was not today's concern. Or even tomorrow's. That was a lifetime away.

He just needed to stay focused on the task at hand. It may have been tedious watchman's work, but that was fine. It was similar to meditation, in a way, requiring discipline of the mind. Patience. Attentiveness.

Those were not qualities his wife possessed.

"Ugh! I don't know how you can do this all day, dove!"

"I told you that you would be bored, my dear."

"Oh, don't give me that! Entertain me!"

"No."

"Wah...? How dare you."

"Feel free to return home at any time. It will not be getting any more exciting than this. I promise you." If he'd actually expected there to be any 'excitement' today, he wouldn't have agreed to letting her accompany him.

"You really know how to kill the mood, don't you?"

For a moment, Parson considered telling her that he was accustomed to killing a lot more than just moods, but he thought better of it. A year ago, he might've said that to her, but after the passing of her mother, things had changed. Now he felt as though saying something like that would just make Erisa worry. And for all her talk, Parson knew that his poor wife certainly didn't need any more of that in her life, right now.

"Couldn't you just loosen up a little?" she was saying. "You're so tense all the time. It's not good to go through life like that. You'll drive yourself mad, dove."

Parson recognized that familiar lilt in her voice. A faint hint of sincerity.

Of concern. It was sometimes difficult to parse out from all of her snarky and less serious overtones, but he'd gotten better at picking up on it recently, he felt. "Isn't that what I have you for?"

"Oh? I thought you just kept me around to cook your meals and wash your uniforms."

"Those do come first, yes."

"Hmph. One day, you'll see that I'm right. You'll look up and realize that life is just like this here ice cream. You'll realize that you've let it melt."

"That doesn't seem to have stopped you from finishing it."

"How do you know I've finished it? You haven't so much as glanced at me this whole time."

"I assumed you were done after I stopped hearing you licking the bowl clean."

"...Alright, smart guy. Yeah, I finished my ice cream. Now why don't you go fetch me some more? Like a good husband and provider?"

"Tempting, but I think I shall continue watching for invaders from the south."

"Don't you have peons for that sort of thing?"

"I have you."

"1815

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

"Oh, ha-ha. But I'm being serious. Where are all your men? I've hardly seen any of them around. Not even that handsome one with all the muscles."

In spite of himself, Parson turned and glared at her. Then he remembered his work and returned his eyes to the empty field ahead.

"Hah. Made you look."

He growled. "Woman. Supper had best be ready by the time I get home, tonight."

She laughed. "It will, dove. Which reminds me. I need to go to the market, today. I was hoping you'd come with me, actually."

"Can't."

"Tch. You don't mind Lerotos sprouts, then, do you?"

"Of course I mind Lero--"

'North entrance,' interrupted Overra's silent voice. 'Come quickly.'

'On my way.' He stood immediately and gave his wife a peck on the cheek. "Back soon."

"Where are you--?!"

"No sprouts!" He leapt out of the watchtower and down onto the top of the Wall.

It was a long drop, but his body held fast, and he ran along the Wall at top speed, looking for a safe place to jump down. He wasn't concerned about himself, but rather the crowd of pedestrians there. If he dropped down that far, the impact would doubtless crush several hapless people.

The street below was far too crowded, however, and he couldn't see a safe or quick way down from here. So it was going to be annoying, but he decided that he would use the rooftops.

The nearest roof was a good twenty meters away, much too far to jump normally, but with his ability, it was doable.

Transfiguration was an irritating power, however. Without Overra present, it required him to sacrifice body parts in order to be useful, which could be quite the downside at times like this.

To accommodate, Parson had devoted much of his training over the years toward trying to mitigate the amount of bodily mass required for each use of his ability. Twenty years ago, he might've needed to sacrifice both legs in order to propel himself with enough force to make such a leap, but now, he needed only sacrifice the epidermal layer and blood. It hurt like hell, of course, but that was no new thing. Pain was more common in this life than not for a transfiguration user.

As he soared through the air, his shoes and socks slipped off and flew away from him. That, too, was an annoyingly common occurrence. He was beginning to think that he should simply stop bothering to wear socks and shoes altogether. It was just a shame that he had to be mindful of his appearance as a ranking officer of the Vanguard."

"1816

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

He rushed onward to the northern end of Montero. It was quite a distance, but the rooftop route offered a clear path, at least, and he could boost himself along with extra surges of oxygen from his skinless feet. If he hadn't had so much experience with this technique, he would've had much more trouble keeping his balance, let alone compensating for the uneven footing on the top of all these buildings.

'How urgent is it?' he asked Overra along the the way, wanting to know if he should push himself harder and sacrifice even more of his flesh to transfiguration.

'I can't tell,' said Overra. 'It's just a man outside the city gates. I don't recognize him, and his movements are a bit odd.'

At that information, Parson decided to heighten his pace somewhat. 'Odd in what way?'

'Hunching forward. Clutching his stomach. Taking unsteady steps. The guards aren't sure what to make of him, either. They're talking about going over to him, which I would highly advise against. Please get here before they do something stupid.'

'Very well.' At the edge of the next rooftop, Parson leapt off and then launched himself in mid-air with a pounding explosion of oxygen that replaced both of his legs from the knees down. There was enough force behind it to send him sailing over the entire city, which was why he'd waited until after leaping off the building to invoke it. He knew from experience that a roof such as that one would have caved in completely and perhaps even collapsed the entire structure.

And for a time, he was flying. His long coat and empty pant legs flapped in the rushing wind while he reached the peak of his jump and slowly began arching back down again.

He might've been able to enjoy the far reaching view a bit more if not for the agony of his missing legs.

He was pleased, however, to see to that he had at least managed to estimate the distance correctly, more or less. He only needed to adjust his trajectory with a couple tiny jets of oxygen in order to make it the rest of the way to the northern gate.

Twenty-five years ago, he wouldn't have been able to land safely from a jump of this height. But now he had the control and the power. He sacrificed the rest of his legs in order to create a kind of oxygen cushion for himself to land on and ease his descent and thereby prevent the rest of his body from splatting against the top of the gate.

Overra met him before he even touched down and began invoking the regeneration. While he waited for his legs to return, he held on to the edge of the battlements and looked out in the direction that Overra was pointing.

Indeed, he could see the man she had been talking about in the distance. A fumbling, zigzagging little ant."

"1817

Parson wasn't sure what to make of it. That posture brought to mind the notion of a broken servant, one whose reaper had been killed; but if that were the case here, then this man would have been acting much, much more aggressively instead of merely stumbling around.

Was the man simply ill? If so, he could pose just as much of a threat to the city as an army of ten thousand strong.

The guards along the wall were looking to Parson for direction now.

He wanted to consult with Overra another time, however. 'What do you think?' he asked.

'I'm not happy about it, but I think you're going to have to go talk to him yourself. If he's carrying some sort of plague, we can't risk sending any of the guards.'

Parson had been afraid she was going to say that. She was right, of course, but he knew from personal experience that merely being a

servant did not mean that he could wholly disregard all forms of disease and waltz around as he pleased.

That was a common misconceptions among younger servants--and indeed, even among reapers, it seemed. Perhaps it was because reaper themselves were truly immune to disease and therefore did not pay the subject the attention and concern that it was due, but from the servant's end, Parson had found that illness was a hugely complicated and underestimated issue.

Too many young servants seemed to think themselves invincible against the natural world. And yes, while it was true that their reaper could "cure" them of almost any disease by invoking the regeneration or simply resurrecting them from scratch, there was still the very real problem of spreading contagions. Even if servants themselves did not have to worry about a normally fatal illness, they could still spread it to non-servants and annihilate entire cities without even realizing what they had done.

Parson was keenly aware of that issue because it was the pet project of one of his earliest comrades within the Vanguard. Fen Frederick was his name. He hadn't seen him in years, but the man had left such a favorable impression that Parson didn't expect to forget him anytime soon. Moreover, Parson had recently heard about him receiving a promotion to regional captain much like himself, as well as acquiring the nickname of the Surgeon Saint while touring the Ardoran continent.

And so, that was where Parson's mind went as he looked out over the barren stretch of land outside the city and observed the obviously troubled man there. He wondered briefly how Fen would handle this situation. It didn't take him long to realize that he already knew exactly what the man would do.

With his legs under him again, Parson stood and turned to his guards. He pointed at the nearest group. "You three, go fill my position in the Arlick Tower. Watch the border. Don't listen to my wife if she asks you for anything."

There were a few nods and chuckles, and they were off.

"The rest of you, stay here and wait for my order."

"Yes, sir."

"1818

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

Parson made his way down to the ground, taking the stairs this time instead of sacrificing more flesh needlessly. It was slower, but it didn't seem like the stranger was going anywhere. He ordered the heavy gates open, slipped through the crack, then ordered them closed again behind him.

Overra latched onto his shoulder as he made his way over.

The winds were picking up, stirring enormous clouds of dust into the air and obscuring the stranger's silhouette at times as Parson drew nearer.

So bothersome. Such was the weather of Montero, however. It was called the Dusty Jorum for a reason.

"Sir!" yelled Parson over the howling winds. "Sir, are you okay?!"

Only the scratching sound of swirling dirt answered him.

He pressed closer and tried again. "Sir! Do you need help?! Are you unwell?!"

After a flash of passing dust, the man in question was suddenly right there in front of him, close enough to touch.

Parson went rigid as he eyed the man carefully.

Whoever he was, he had the attire of a commoner. Only a ragged tunic and cotton trousers, both caked with dirt. He didn't even have a traveling cloak, though he must have been walking for days to have ended up here, unless he'd gotten separated from a caravan or something.

"Where are you?" the man said in a haggard, desperate tone. "Where are you?"

Parson craned his neck forward a little, trying to examine the stranger's face. "I'm here," he said.

"Where are you? Where are you?" He kept not looking at Parson and instead looking past him--or through him, perhaps.



"Sir, I'm right here," Parson tried. "Can you not--?"

"No. That is wrong. You are wrong. This is wrong. Where is he? Yes, where is he? Where are you? No, where is he? Can you not see me? How far did you go? Did he go?" The man reached a hand out, and Parson recoiled from it.

"Sir, what is your name? Can you tell me?"

The man stopped and looked at his own hand as the wind calmed for a brief moment. Then he looked up at Parson, eyes renewed with light, as if seeing him for the first time. "Yes, it's you."

Parson squinted. "Me? You're looking for me?"

"No. Yes. But no. You are not he. Where is he? Where did he go?"

Parson was growing impatient, and the wind and dust were, too, it seemed. They grew in fury again, making it difficult to hear the confused man over the noise.

Having had just about enough of this windstorm, Parson resorted to pan-forma with Overra.

In an instant, the area burst clear of all dust, and the roaring winds died upon an explosion of transfigured oxygen. He'd expelled it in all directions, save in front, where the poor and confused stranger was standing.

"Sir," he tried again, as Overra melted out of his body again, "can you tell me your name?"

The man was staring at him in rapt attention, now. "...My name is Ettol, cedo."

"1819

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

"Ettol. Okay. Good to meet you, Ettol. I am Parson Miles."

"A pleasure, is it?"

Parson tilted his brow a little. "Y-yes? It is a pleasure to meet you,

yes.”

“Thank you, cedo.”

“You are... welcome. Ettol, do you know where you are, right now?”

“I am searching.”

“Yes, but do you know where you are? Can you tell me what country you are in?”

The man was quiet a moment, perhaps thinking, yet he never removed his gaze from Parson’s face. “Angdolia,” he said.

“Angdolia?” What a confusing answer. Was that even a word? Parson needed to make sure he was understanding what he was hearing. “You think you’re in a country called Angdolia, right now?”

“Yes. This is Angdolia.”

“No,” said Parson slowly. “No, it isn’t. This is Calthos. Do you know where Calthos is?”

Ettol didn’t answer him this time. Instead, he merely looked around, as if examining his surroundings anew.

Parson took a breath. This was going to be an excruciatingly slow and difficult conversation, wasn’t it? “I don’t know what you--”

‘He’s not entirely wrong,’ interrupted Overra privately.

Parson didn’t turn to look at her. ‘What?’

‘Two thousand years ago, this region used to be called Angdolia.’

At that information, he couldn’t help blinking a couple times. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying exactly what I said. This placed used to be known as Angdolia. Make of that what you will, but ask him something else, first.’

Parson’s expression flickered with sudden doubt mixed among the confusion. “Ettol?”

The man looked at him again. “Yes, Parson?”

That gaze. There was something different in it now, Parson felt. The

man's hazel eyes seemed a bit brighter. More open. More alert. More inquisitive, even.

Parson found that strangely unsettling, somehow.

"Why are you wandering around out here by yourself?" asked Parson.

Ettol tilted his head, thinking again. "I am not sure."

"Are you lost?"

"Lost? Perhaps I am. Yes. Lost."

"You said you were searching for someone."

"Did I?"

"...Yes, you did."

"I see. Who am I searching for?"

"I was hoping you would be able to tell me that."

"I see. You are very helpful, aren't you, Parson Miles? Good. That's very good."

Parson's eyes narrowed. "I'm glad you think so. What is your full name, Ettol?"

"Full? Is the name Ettol not full?"

"Assuming Ettol is your first name, then no, it isn't. What is your last name?"

"Ah. You mean like yourself, Parson Miles. I do not think I have one of those. I am only Ettol, I am afraid."

Parson sized the man up another time. His appearance was unremarkable, sure, but there was something about him that he didn't like.

"You seem displeased, Parson Miles."

Parson couldn't really deny that. He didn't wish to admit it, either, however."

"1820

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

"Is there some way that I might be able to improve your dour mood?" said Ettol, smiling now.

Parson took a step back unconsciously. 'Overra...'

'Ask him why his own mood appears to have improved so suddenly.'

It sounded like as good a question as any. "Why do you seem so different from how you were a moment ago?" said Parson. "You were acting very confused before, yet now you're behaving rather cheerfully."

Ettol looked up at the sky as the wind from earlier was beginning to return. "Hmm. You may be right. Perhaps I was lost in more ways than one."

"But now you are not? What changed in so short a time?"

The man gave him another smile. "I met you."

That did little to provide Parson with comfort. "So what? You don't know anything about me."

"That is not true, Parson Miles. I know your name. You told it to me yourself."

"You are beginning to annoy me."

"Am I? Oh dear. I apologize. And here I thought we were getting along quite well. Hmm. I think I will blame the weather. I am not feeling myself with all this fog around."

Parson didn't need to check. "There is no fog here."

"Oh? Curious. That does not bode very well for me, then. I suppose I should get to the point."

"Point? What point would that be?"

"I cannot be quite certain, but I believe that I have come here because of you, Parson Miles."

Somehow, Parson already felt prepared for this conversation to get even stranger. "Is that so?"

"I would have liked to befriend you, but it seems that the best I will be able to manage is an introduction. If I had but more time, perhaps you would not be thinking so poorly of me already. 'Tis a shame."

Parson merely eyed the man dubiously.

Ettol slowly extended a hand, palm up. "I know this may seem odd, but would you mind holding my hand?"

Parson eyed the hand even more dubiously.

'Don't you dare touch that thing,' said Overra privately.

He absolutely agreed, but he would've liked an explanation. 'Why? Do you know who this man is?'

'I haven't the faintest idea, but I do not trust him.'

'That makes two of us, then.'

"Please," said Ettol, extending his hand a little further now. "I will not harm you. And it will only take a moment."

Parson's mind went to his earlier concerns, which had quickly vanished but now would make a suitable justification for this reticence that he was currently feeling. "I mean no offense," said Parson, "but I know nothing about you. You could be contagiously ill."

"Ah..." Ettol frowned. "I see. Would you perhaps change your mind if I told you that touching my hand would allow you a benign glimpse into Chaos itself?"

"1821

"What in the world are you talking about?" said Parson.

"It is a privilege that few have had," said Ettol. "To see beyond what is and into the realm of what could be."

A beat passed, and Parson blinked dully. "Right. Well, I think I'll forego it, just the same. I'm largely content with what is."

"Hmm. Pity. In that case, might I ask you to deliver a message for me?"

"I'm no messenger. I'm sure you can find someone else."

"Not likely. I have little time."

"What do you mean?"

"Please. I am begging you." Ettol's eyes grew abruptly wider, and Parson saw something in them that he had not at all been expecting to see.

Desperation.

"You may be my only hope," said Ettol. "Tell your friend to come find me."

"I have many friends."

"I know not his name. But you and he are bound. You and he and one other." The man smiled again, though it seemed somehow sadder this time. "A trio."

Parson only stared at him.

"You know of whom I speak," said Ettol. "Please, tell him to come find me."

Parson didn't know what was happening here, but he felt abruptly as if this man might not be spouting complete nonsense, after all. And more importantly, he felt as if perhaps there really was a limited amount of time to ask questions. "...Why would I do that?" he decided to say. "Why would I want him to find you?"

"Because I need his help. Your friend is a key unto Chaos, where I am sadly trapped."

Well, that was... somewhat of an explanation. Not a particularly good or believable one, but it was still more than Parson had been expecting, honestly. "Even if that's true, why should he bother helping you?"

"Because, Parson Miles, I can grant your wish."

That was too vague. Parson wasn't buying it. "What wish would that

be?"

Ettol looked at him for a long moment. "Why, the wish, of course. To change the world."

Parson was without words. How could he know about that? Who was this man, really? Did Overra--?

"Chaos beckons," said Ettol. "Time is vengeful. Please pass on my message to your friend. Ah, and you may wish to move away from me. This will likely not be pretty. But fear not, for I--" The man's eyes bulged, and he broke for a cough. Then another. And another.

Parson did as he'd been asked and took a few steps back.

Ettol tried to cover his mouth, but upon the next cough, something black and slimy spewed forth, coating his hand and dripping down his arm. He heaved another time, and more blackness appeared, splattering against the dry ground and nearly reaching Parson's feet.

Parson wanted to ask what was happening, but he was too appalled to say anything."

"1822

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

Another cough, and the black increased yet again. This time, however, it was different. This time, it didn't splatter anywhere. Instead, it stopped halfway down the length of his arm and retracted.

Then it moved. On its own. Like some sort of tentacle. It stirred and swirled and soon began to coat Ettol's entire body.

Parson could only watch with wide eyes. The way the black goop moved... he'd seen the like before. It was similar to that of those monsters in the Undercrust. Perhaps that was mere coincidence, but he doubted it.

However, as the coating completed, he noticed the blackness begin to shift and change. Where before it had been a liquid-like substance, it now seemed sharper and thinner.

Like a living shadow, perhaps.

That, he had most definitely never seen before, and he had no idea what to make of it, either. It was difficult to tell if the goo itself had transformed into the shadow or if the shadow had simply appeared on its own and encapsulated the goo.

Ettol's pained groans grew quieted, muted behind the coating, and his movements became more rigid and slow, until at length, the man stopped moving altogether.

Parson thought it was done, until the black coating began to change again, this time cracking faintly and turning deeply gray.

Stone, Parson realized, though that did little to alleviate his confusion.

The sludge that had splattered near his feet earlier was still black, he noticed. And it was still moving, too--weakly, perhaps, but moving, nonetheless. It oozed out in all direction, then contracted again into a trembling, uneven lump before repeating the process.

'A pulse, perhaps,' said Overra.



'Hmm?'

'Capture that sludge so that we might have it examined later,' she told him.

Parson knew of a few eager men who would be most interested in doing so. He was not one of them himself, however. 'Capture it, how? I'm not a materializer, and I don't exactly have a glass jar on me.'

'If it is the same material which comprises worms, then such a small amount should be safe enough for you to touch.'

'If.'

'Yes. If.'

'I can also imagine it trying to consume me the way that it consumed him.'

'That is very unlikely.'

'What makes you sound so confident?'

'Look at it. It is hardly moving. It seems to me that it is struggling even to retain its shape.'

'I'm content to let it keep struggling,' said Parson. 'I can't believe you want me to touch it.'

'Where is your courage?'

'Where is your common sense?'

'Hmph. Fine. Do what you will.'

Parson pulled his eyes away from the small sludge pile to look at Ettol--or what remained of him, anyway.

A stone statue.

How strange."

"1823

After a short time, he felt bold enough to step closer to it. Perhaps Overra was right, and he was being overly cautious, but he was in a certain mental state now, in his life as a servant. It was something he'd heard about many times previously but never taken all that seriously. Some called it the Firing Phase or the Goldening Stage.

Put simply, it was the time period in a servant's life when they were beginning to grow powerful enough to witness truly monstrous events, yet not powerful enough to actually take part in them.

The reapers and older servants considered it a kind of rite of passage. All it really did, though, was make Parson see danger around every corner. For all the power he wielded, he was only too aware of how quickly it could be taken from him, either by one of the obscene powerhouses that lived in this world or simply by a stray attack that obliterated Overra in an instant.

Carelessness was all it would take. And fifty years of work, of growth, and of ambition would be snuffed out. Gone.

He'd seen it several times before.

So to say that he was hesitant to get close to the statue of Ettol would be something of an understatement. Of course, he could have told her to go back to the city and wait for him, but separating himself from her had its own dangers, he knew. And she probably wouldn't listen to him, anyway.

The ironic thing was that if he were twenty years younger, twenty years weaker, he would've waltzed right up to that statue without a second's hesitation.

How odd, this kind of strength was.

All the same, he still made the trip over to it, albeit slowly. And once he was near enough, he could hear a noise amid the uneven sound of the varying winds.

Cracking?

Yes. The stone was cracking. He could see it, too. Tiny fissures growing in the otherwise smooth gray surface.

'It's breaking down,' said Overra.

Parson was about to ask why when the statue's left arm fell off. It hit the dirt and clumped apart like ashes.

'Fascinating,' said Overra. 'Try touching it.'

'Be quiet.'

The other arm fell off now and broke apart even more intensely. Parson could see dust trailing off of the statue's head and shoulders in the aggressive wind. It wasn't much longer before the torso gave way, and the whole upper body crumpled to the ground as well.

It was all rather grotesque and more than a little strange, but there was one thing that he was looking for in particular. One thing that was noticeably missing.

The soul.

Parson was more than old enough to see souls that no longer had a body. Obviously, Ettol's body was gone now, but his soul should have remained behind. Yet it was nowhere to be found."

"1824

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Overra noticed the absence of Ettol's soul as well, of course, but she could offer no explanation for it, and after a while longer of observing the statue crumbling to dust, there was nothing left to be done here.

Nothing, that was, except gathering up some of the remains. He'd been afraid of touching the sludge, but this pile of dust seemed safer, somehow. It was just dust, after all. Not some some sort of semi-living abomination of nature.

If he'd known that he would be collecting scientific samples when he came out here, he would have dressed very differently. His overcoat did have an abundance of pockets, but it was hardly an appropriate means of carrying a dead man's ashes.

What a strange day it had turned out to be.

When his pockets were nearly full, his mind returned to the sludge from earlier. He looked over at it, and sure enough, it was still there,

still pulsing gently.

He had to admit that he was curious. God help him, he was. After what he'd just witnessed, how could he not be? And he already knew that he had Overra's go ahead...

Maybe just a quick touch.

He started toward it again.

'Oh?' said Overra. 'Are you going to capture it, after all?'

'I'm considering it.'

'Don't let me pressure you into it.'

'What, now you don't want me to?'

'No, I do. Of course I want you to. But I will admit that it may be a bad idea.'

'...Do you have an actual reason for saying that, or is this just a feeling you have?'

'I've just started to recall hearing a few ancient stories where living beings are turned to stone. An hour ago, I would have told you that they were just stories--or, barring that, perhaps the work of servants. But now...?'

'I see. Can you tell me anything more about these stories, then? Specifics?'

'Of course I can. There are several to choose from. Which one would you like to hear?'

'I don't want to hear any of them. I want you to exercise good judgment and inform me of any relevant information that might be contained within them.'

'I am not certain I like your tone.'

'Overra.'

She sighed. 'Oh, very well. If I think about it... then... I suppose there is the Tale of the Stone Prince. In it, a prince who defies the will of heaven is about to become king. But instead, he is turned to stone and watches as his kingdom achieves great prosperity under the tutelage

of his blessed younger brother.'

'What part of that story is relevant to our circumstances here?'

'I don't know. I'm still thinking.'

'Overra, please.'

'What? Are you in a rush? The sludge isn't going anywhere, and you want me to get this right, don't you?'

He exhaled. 'Yes. Fine. Take your time. It's not like there's an army in the south that could invade Montero or anything, right?'

'There is that tone again.'

'Just hurry up, would you?'

"1825

'Okay, well, there is also the Tale of the Eternal Mason. In that story, a man strives to become the greatest stonemason who ever lived. Ostensibly, he achieves his goal, but in so doing, he also turns his own body to stone.'

'Not seeing much relevance in that story, either, Overra.'

'I think it is intended to be a cautionary tale about the single-minded pursuit of greatness at the cost of one's own life. Which, while true, is hardly worth its salt as a wise old story, if you ask me. How many people need that kind of advice? Honestly? In general, people are lazy, and much of civilization has been achieved off the labor of a hard working minority. Why, if human beings were naturally hard working, then surely, slavery would never have been invented.'

'Fascinating.'

'Why, thank you. I am glad you genuinely think so and are not being in any way sarcastic.'

'Do you have anything to say that is of actual consequence or use?'

'In that regard, everything I have ever said and will ever say should qualify, I think.'

‘Alright. I give up. I’m just going to dig around it.’

‘Dig around what? Oh, yes, the sludge. I had nearly forgotten it was there.’

‘Overra...’

‘I am only teasing. Lord, I never thought I would be considered the laid-back one in this relationship. Perhaps your wife is right about you being too uptight.’

Parson just sighed and knelt down to get to work. Digging in this harsh ground with his bare hands wasn’t going to be easy--unless he sacrificed some of his flesh to transfiguration, of course. He was reluctant to do so, but he supposed there was no getting around it and decided to start small. He sacrificed only the top layer of skin on his hands in order to create small, pressurized jets of oxygen at the tips of his fingers.

With careful strength, he pressed his hands into the earth and gathered up a pile of dirt around and beneath the pulsing sludge. He lifted it up, and then he had the sludge safely in his left hand.

It was more repulsive close up than he expected. There was a grotesque lumpiness to it that hadn’t been noticeable at a distance.

Surprisingly, it had no smell that he could discern. He’d been expecting a truly horrendous odor.

‘So are you going to touch it or not?’ said Overra.

A good question. The lack of a repulsive smell was making him consider it again. Maybe it was harmless.

A benign glimpse at Chaos itself, huh?

Parson had to wonder what that had meant. He wished now that he would have gotten some manner of clarification.

“Chaos itself” was a particularly interesting choice of words, he felt. Referring to chaos as a single, manifested thing instead of simply a concept--that was something that Parson had heard before.

In one of the doctrines of Abolish. Morgunov’s side, specifically.”  
"1826

Every Vanguardian knew the basic tenets of Abolish's various religions. Though they differed in minor ways, they all followed their ancient tripartite mantra of "Pursue Chaos, Sow Destruction, and Reap Death."

He knew that certain sects added in further bits about "Peace at All Costs" or "True Equality for All" or "Salvation in Brimstone"--as if any of that made sense.

It was rare to know details beyond that, however. Parson had been passingly interested in it, at times, if only as a means of better understanding his enemy, but they were such confusing and disorganized bastards that it was difficult to make heads or tails of what most of them actually believed.

If anything at all. Mostly, Parson was of the opinion that all of their religious talk was simply a means of either concealing or excusing their own madness. It was no secret that Abolish attracted the violently insane, after all.

However, Parson had asked Damian and Feromas to explain the Morgunovian religion to him, once. It was called Mawtalla, though it was more widely known as the religion of Chaos.

'There is the Void, and there is Chaos,' Feromas had said. 'While the Void is the ultimate, collective consciousness, Chaos is a specific subset within the Void. It is difficult to explain in a way that makes material or even rational sense, but you can think of Chaos as a "region" within the Void where "dreams" occur. Dreams. And nightmares. A volatile battleground of creativity, if that makes any kind of sense.'

At the time, Parson hadn't thought much of that explanation. It was just one more thing that made Abolish crazy. Not really worth thinking too deeply about.

Now, however... he was feeling less certain.

His right hand wandered up toward the pulsing sludge pile.

This was a terrible idea. He absolutely knew that.

But he wanted to know. He didn't even know what he wanted to know,

what sort of answer he was hoping for--or even why he was so curious. But it didn't matter.

He hesitated one last time, right as the freshly regenerated skin of his index finger was about to touch the sludge. He was already resolved to go the rest of the way, but a part of him in the back of his mind was still warning him not to do this, telling him what an idiot he was.

As it turned out, however, his finger didn't have to make the rest of the trip.

The sludge stretched suddenly to meet him.

He didn't even have time to jump or react in any way. His vision flashed to darkness, then to lightness, then back to darkness.

And in an instant, he witnessed more things than his mind was capable of perceiving. A hulking beast with a million faces. A white tower with a million windows. A blue star exploding a million times. A million harps playing in perfect harmony. An army of snakes and an army of angels, all dying a million deaths. A million kings. A million heroes. A million explorers. A million sages, wizards, clowns, virgins, lovers, rebels, mothers. A million. A million? More. Uncountable. Imperceptible. Yet there, in his mind, all the same."

"1827

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

It was all so far beyond him that he didn't even know how to pursue any of it in greater detail. Everywhere he looked was a thread leading into a never-ending hole. And it was all woven together and clashing in a mad kind of tapestry, destroying itself while simultaneously creating new things.

Infinite infinities. All in conflict.

And he felt as if he were part of it as well--or rather, as if it wanted him to be part of it. As if it were trying to suck him in, to send him on an endless journey through unfiltered mayhem.

But that wasn't what was happening. He felt safe somehow, even though that seemed irrational to him. There was a feeling of being on the other side of something. An invisible wall, perhaps. It was like he



was watching a lion roar inside its cage, only magnified to an ungodly degree. And he was so close to that cage, practically pressing his face up against it. There was little reason to think that any cage could contain all of that insanity.

And yet it did. The cage that was reality. Preventing the impossible from existing.

No. That wasn't quite right, was it?

Not just the impossible. The possible, as well. That was what it was. Chaos. Both the possible and impossible. He could see it, in places. Things that could exist, hypothetically, but simply didn't. Like that vile tower. Or that crying child. Or that other version of himself, staring back at him like a distorted reflection, screaming in muted agony.

That was about as much as Parson was able to perceive. Chaos merely excluded what was. All else was fair game, it seemed.

But so what?

What utility was there in any of this?

Overwhelming as it all was, as easy as it would have been to lose himself in it, Parson had virtually no trouble in holding himself back. Perhaps the cage of reality played a role in that. Perhaps his own mind. Perhaps both.

Yes.

Yes, that was more likely. Both.

Oddly enough, he felt as if he understood himself a little better now.

Chaos? Dreams and nightmares? Infinity and darkness and monsters and madness?

He was unimpressed.

Reality was what interested him. Could this Chaos affect reality in some way? Because as he stared at it, stared into it, he was getting the feeling that it couldn't.

But perhaps that was strange. Ettol had existed in reality, hadn't he? Perhaps only briefly, but that at least meant that it was possible for Chaos to break through into reality, didn't it?

Or did it?

Ettol mentioned being trapped. Perhaps Ettol himself was real, then? One real thing lost in a ocean of unreal things.

Hmm.

Parson could see why he wanted to leave. What indescribable misery that would be, Parson felt.

So miserable and so indescribable, perhaps, that it would drive a sentient mind to madness. Just perceiving what little of it that he could right now, that was the impression that Parson got. That if not for the cage of reality, that Chaos would be invading his mind and driving him mad.

Yes."

"1828

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

He could practically sense the hunger that dwelt within the Chaos. It was scratching at the cage, trying to reach him, trying to devour him.

Hmm.

So this was what those Abolish fools were always salivating over? He supposed that only made sense. Madmen in love with madness.

Parson, however, had seen his fill and wished to return to reality or to consciousness or wherever his physical body had gone.

And just like that, he did. As suddenly as his vision had changed, it shifted back. He saw the dusty wasteland outside Montero once more, felt the heat of the sun on his skin and the flailing of his coat in the wind.

He looked down at his hands to inspect the sludge again. If such a vision could be induced every time it was touched, then this sample could prove immensely--

The sludge had turned to stone. It, too, was already beginning to crumble. He could hear it cracking and see dust trails escaping from it.

Had he already used up its power?

Damn.

He would keep these ashes, too, but he had a feeling that they wouldn't prove very useful. He wondered if anyone would even believe him after telling them what he had seen just now.

Bah. He could already see the stain to his reputation that such nonsense would have if he went around blabbering about it like a tactless moron. He'd have to be very careful who he mentioned any of this to, he felt.

At length, he started back toward Montero. As confused as he was, his men were probably even more so right about now, though for different reasons.

En route, he remembered that Overra was still there on his back. Maybe she would be able to tell him something. 'Did you manage to see any of that?'

There was no response.

'...Overra?'

Still nothing.

He stopped walking. She was definitely there. He could feel her clinging to him. 'Overra.' He reached over his shoulder and grabbed her with a soul-empowered hand. 'Overra, wake up.'

She did not answer him.

He peeled her off of his back and held her in his hands.

Her ethereal body was shriveled to the point that it was hardly recognizable. She should have been a swirling and perpetually silent tornado, but instead, she was scarcely even a shrunken cloud--and not so much swirling now as just slowly turning. It looked like her body might even cease spinning entirely, what with the way it was struggling.

His eyes widened with urgency. He'd seen this before, when she had been gravely wounded in battle. 'Overra. Overra! Please...!'

And then he realized that he felt somewhat weak, himself. His body

was a bit stiff. His muscles felt somehow farther from his brain, as if his orders were taking longer to reach them, as if they might not even be his.

His soul's grip on his body was loosening, he knew. His mind was becoming foggy. Overra must have been even closer to death than he'd thought."

"1829 -- CXCII.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

He sat down on the dry earth. He'd experience this a handful of times before. It was never pleasant. The first time it had happened, he'd just about lost his mind from worry alone. Now, though, it was strangely easy not to panic. Perhaps the dulling of his thoughts was factoring in there. Or perhaps it was just going to be the end, this time.

Well. If it was, it was.

He closed his eyes and meditated, tried to focus his murky mind. He knew that there was essentially nothing he could do at this point.

This was any servant's greatest fear. Any person's, really. This feeling of utter powerlessness and uncertainty. Whether it was the end or not.

Difficult though it was, he knew there was naught he could do now but wait. Either Overra would recover, or she wouldn't. Either he would die along with her, or he wouldn't.

So he waited. And he waited. And he waited.

For the end. Or whatever came next.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Two: 'Dalliance with fortune...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The next few days were a constant mash of maintenance and activity for Hector. He never had any downtime, and indeed, he was beginning to feel like he never would again.

Mornings were usually devoted to training with Zeff, though Asad and a few others frequently joined in. Afternoons were spent checking up on affairs around Warrenhold, meeting with the top Rainlords and Madame Carthrace, and helping out with the restoration project. Evenings, if he had any time left by then, went toward the city of Gray Rock.

It had felt like ages since he'd actually been able to go out and just patrol the city for crime. Which was strange. This was his whole reason for becoming a servant, after all. To help normal people.

Now, though, it felt like a very different activity. Much less stressful. Almost relaxing, even.

No less rewarding, however. He didn't think that helping people in mortal danger would ever stop being that, no matter how much easier it became.

Plus, it made for the best kind of practice, he thought. Field experience, is what Zeff had called it. And it certainly gave him plenty of opportunity to try out various techniques, even just when navigating the city--which was smoother than ever before. With the Scarf of Amordiin and his improving control over materialization, Hector was able to slingshot himself into the air haphazardly and catch himself without having to worry about causing any collateral damage. And of course, honing his flying technique was a priority as well.

Still, it did feel supremely strange that he considered this to be practice, now. This used to be the end goal. The aim. Yet now... it was more like a hobby or something.

The only thing that stopped it from feeling quite like that was the sense of urgency in it, the panicked people he ran into, ones in the midst of being victimized. He could only relax so much when hearing a man screaming for his life inside a burning building or witnessing a terrified shopkeeper being held at gunpoint."

"1829 -- CXCII.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

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about lost his mind from worry alone. Now, though, it was strangely easy not to panic. Perhaps the dulling of his thoughts was factoring in there. Or perhaps it was just going to be the end, this time.

Well. If it was, it was.

He closed his eyes and meditated, tried to focus his murky mind. He knew that there was essentially nothing he could do at this point.

This was any servant's greatest fear. Any person's, really. This feeling of utter powerlessness and uncertainty. Whether it was the end or not.

Difficult though it was, he knew there was naught he could do now but wait. Either Overra would recover, or she wouldn't. Either he would die along with her, or he wouldn't.

So he waited. And he waited. And he waited.

For the end. Or whatever came next.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Two: 'Dalliance with fortune...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The next few days were a constant mash of maintenance and activity for Hector. He never had any downtime, and indeed, he was beginning to feel like he never would again.

Mornings were usually devoted to training with Zeff, though Asad and a few others frequently joined in. Afternoons were spent checking up on affairs around Warrenhold, meeting with the top Rainlords and Madame Carthrace, and helping out with the restoration project. Evenings, if he had any time left by then, went toward the city of Gray Rock.

It had felt like ages since he'd actually been able to go out and just patrol the city for crime. Which was strange. This was his whole reason for becoming a servant, after all. To help normal people.

Now, though, it felt like a very different activity. Much less stressful. Almost relaxing, even.

No less rewarding, however. He didn't think that helping people in mortal danger would ever stop being that, no matter how much easier it became.

Plus, it made for the best kind of practice, he thought. Field experience, is what Zeff had called it. And it certainly gave him plenty of opportunity to try out various techniques, even just when navigating the city--which was smoother than ever before. With the Scarf of Amordiin and his improving control over materialization, Hector was able to slingshot himself into the air haphazardly and catch himself without having to worry about causing any collateral damage. And of course, honing his flying technique was a priority as well.

Still, it did feel supremely strange that he considered this to be practice, now. This used to be the end goal. The aim. Yet now... it was more like a hobby or something.

The only thing that stopped it from feeling quite like that was the sense of urgency in it, the panicked people he ran into, ones in the midst of being victimized. He could only relax so much when hearing a man screaming for his life inside a burning building or witnessing a terrified shopkeeper being held at gunpoint."

"1830

Madame Carthrace certainly hadn't been exaggerating when she mentioned there being a spike in criminal activity during his absence. Hector could hardly believe how easy it was for Garovel to find people in trouble.

It was worrisome, actually. After the first night, things settled down a little bit but still not to the same extent that they were before he'd left for Sair.

At first, he'd thought it was his fault for leaving. News outlets were explaining it that way, at least. Without the Darksteel Soldier around, the criminal element in the city had felt suddenly emboldened.

But if that were truly the case, then Hector was having trouble understanding why the crime rate wasn't going back down all that quickly now that he'd returned. And it wasn't like those same news outlets were shy about reporting his return, either. It seemed like he saw some news anchor talking about him every time he passed a television.

With all this attention, he'd been rather worried that they would find out

that he had been in Sair with the Rainlords, but so far, the news didn't seem to know about that.

According to Asad, he had the Sandlords to thank for that, apparently. He'd been especially worried about his activities in Moaban making the news, but the Hahls Najir, Saqqaf, Duxan, and Shihab had all had a hand in keeping Hector's time in that city quiet.

Hector was grateful, though he knew they hadn't done it for his benefit. The Sandlords had as much stake in preventing the Vanguard from finding out where the Rainlords were as he did. Invariably, if the Vanguard discovered that the Sandlords had facilitated the Rainlords' escape from the country, it would cause the lords of the desert all sorts of problems.

'You shouldn't be too surprised if the news is getting it wrong,' said Garovel. 'Journalists are only human, after all. And with all this newfangled technology of yours, they're lazier than ever.'

In full armor, Hector crouched on the edge of a rooftop. Even just a couple months ago, he probably wouldn't have been able to crouch in armor as heavy as this, but he'd tweaked it enough and gotten so comfortable wearing it that it hardly felt like a hindrance anymore, even without the undead vigor enhancing his strength. 'Uh... are you defending journalists or insulting them?'

'Bit a both, I guess.'

He was watching a man on the far end of the street below. Apparently, the guy had the aura of doom around him, but it wasn't yet clear what the cause was.

Hector hoped the guy wasn't planning to kill himself. Apart from not even knowing how to handle that kind of situation, Hector knew that it would also mean that the aura could persist for months without any other apparent cause.

And that would be something that no amount of skill in materialization would be able to resolve.

'But it makes sense that the crime wave wouldn't be your fault,' Garovel was saying. 'Or at least, not JUST your fault.'

'Why's that?'

'Because of the economic crisis, of course.'



‘Oh yeah. Hmm.’”

"1831

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‘So unless you plan on taking the blame for the economy, too, then I don’t think this spike in crime can be fully attributed to you,’ said Garovel.

‘That’s... comforting, I guess.’

‘Good. I’m glad you think so. I was worried you were gonna start acting all guilt-ridden and annoying.’

‘Well, uh... I mean, maybe I was working up to it.’

The reaper just snorted.

Hector breathed half a laugh, too. ‘It’s just, I mean... I dunno. I know they were saying it was my fault ‘n everything, but... like, what the fuck was I supposed to have done differently? Just never leave Gray Rock, no matter what? That’s kinda...’

‘Unreasonable?’

‘Y-yeah.’

‘Mm. You make a good point. I’m happy that you’re thinking clearly about this. Blaming yourself for things you can’t control could really end up biting you in the ass, in the long run.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, speaking hypothetically here, if you become overly concerned about messing things up, then you’ll likewise become hesitant to take action when you might otherwise need to. When you might otherwise be able to save someone’s life, for instance. Maintaining a healthy psychological state is important for keeping yourself focused.’

Hmm.

Hector supposed that was true, though he wasn’t so sure that his

current psychological state could be considered "healthy." He wasn't sure of a whole lot when it came to his own mind, right now. The issue of Domain was still lingering in the back of head, making him second guess himself every now and then.

It was a discomforting feeling, knowing that his mind had been messed with in some unspecified way. The first time with Rasalased had been bad enough, but he'd more or less worked out what the blessing of Focus was.

At least, he hoped he had. He was getting a little sick of surprises, even theoretically good ones.

But judging by what he knew of Focus, Hector had been wondering if the benefits of Domain would similarly be constrained entirely within his mind. Going by the name--Domain--he'd thought, at first, that it might have something to do with his ability to materialize his iron in the environment. However, he had thus far been unable to discern any changes in his abilities in that regard.

With Zeff's help, Hector had also managed to test out the strength of his soul. But there, too, no noticeable difference had been observed. Neither his field density nor his passive soul defense seemed improved or changed at all.

Of course, it was possible that it was still too early for any changes to be observable, but the effects of Focus hadn't taken all that long to manifest, so Hector wondered what the hold up might be. Or if there was just something else that he was missing.

'Someone's coming,' said Garovel.

'Where?' said Hector.

The reaper pointed in the opposite direction that Hector had been looking, and sure enough, Hector saw a silhouette through a side street."

"1832

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It was too dark to tell much about the newcomer with just his eyes alone, but Hector was near enough for the Scarf to help him discern

some of the details.

Short. Long hair. Long skirt. Slim, feminine figure. And he could sense the shape of her high heels, as well as hear them clicking against the sidewalk's pavement.

Hmm. Hector focused harder and checked inside the purse she was carrying.

Wow, it was full of stuff. And not knowing much about the kinds of things that women carried in their purses, Hector found it a bit difficult to pick out any object in particular, except maybe--

Was that a gun?

He couldn't be sure, but that shape definitely seemed like it could be the barrel of a small pistol. And considering that it was illegal for average citizens to carry firearms in Atreya, that didn't bode especially well.

He'd have to pay close attention. In a place like this, at this time of night, there was a fair chance she was just carrying it for her own protection, even if it was unlawful. Hector wasn't about to judge someone who didn't have the luxury of superpowers on their side for prioritizing their own safety over following the law.

Or hell, maybe she wasn't an average citizen. She could've been an undercover cop or something.

Sticking to the rooftops, Hector tried to stay close to her as she approached the man at the other end of the street. If nothing else, he wanted to stay in range of the Scarf so that he could react in time in case she went for that weapon.

Judging from the man's body language, he had been expecting her.

'Seems like they're going to talk,' said Garovel privately. 'I'll go eavesdrop. Make sure they don't kill me, eh?'

Hector clenched his jaw, wanting to tell the reaper not to, but he held his tongue. In all likelihood, neither of them were servants, and he was paying extra close attention to where their heads were pointing. If either of them turned to look at Garovel, Hector would know it immediately.

Hector waited and observed, ready to move on a moment's notice. The

man and woman met below a street lamp and exchanged a few words. Pleasantries, according to Garovel. Neither one seemed to notice the reaper's presence a couple meters away from them.

That was good, of course, but Hector did not allow himself to relax.

Whatever they were talking about, it didn't take very long. The woman handed the man a piece of paper and a small bag, and then walked away, in the opposite direction that she had come from.

'...What was that about?' he had to ask.

'Dunno,' said Garovel. 'They didn't say much. Guess they didn't need to.'

The man was still there, reading the paper that he had been given. Garovel hovered up behind him, no doubt trying to read it as well.

'It's some kind of report,' the reaper said. 'Financial in nature, looks like.'

"1833

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The man slipped the paper into his coat, and then exhaled noticeably. The night air was cold enough that Hector could see breath, though only faintly.

'Bah,' said Garovel. 'Couldn't tell anything else about it.'

After a short time, the man pulled out a cigarette and a small drink and began partaking of both.

Hector relaxed a little, feeling mildly irritated. 'Back to waiting, I guess...'

'Hmm. Well, I suppose you could just walk up and talk to him, ask him if anything's wrong.

'You really think that'd work?'

'No. Just saying it's an option.'

'I feel like he'd just run away if I did that.'

'I'm sure you'd be able to catch him and make him talk.'

'Uh... he's not a bad guy, Garovel.'

'We don't know that. We don't know anything about him, other than he's in danger. He could be the biggest son of a bitch in the world, for all we know.'

'I'm not sure that justifies torturing him.'

'I never said anything about torturing him. I said you could "make him talk." That doesn't mean torture.'

'...It kinda does, though, doesn't it?'

'No, Hector. It could mean scaring the information out of him, for instance.'

'By threatening to torture him.'

'Hey, threatening to torture someone is not the same as torturing someone.'

'Garovel.'

'Look, I'm just spitballin' ideas here. Not saying you have to do anything you don't feel comfortable doing.'

'I don't feel comfortable threatening to torture some random dude on the street, no.'

'Alright, fine. Geez. It's not like I was--' The reaper cut himself off, which drew Hector's attention anew.

There was something different about the man now, Hector suddenly realized. The way he was standing had changed. He seemed unsteady. Weaker. After a moment, he leaned against the street lamp for support but struggled even to hold himself up and began sliding against it toward the ground.

'Hector!'

He was already leaping off the roof. He summoned a descending platform to soften his landing, and then he was in full sprint toward the man, no longer caring how noisy the iron armor might be.

Hector slid up beside him as the man was just about flat on the pavement. 'What's wrong with him?! He didn't hurt himself, did he?!'

'No, I was watching for that. He might just be sick. Let's take him to the hospital. And don't carry him. Use your iron. You want to keep his body from flailing around and worsening his condition while you're transporting him.'

'Okay!' Hector did exactly as the reaper instructed and materialized a kind of small, stabilization chamber. A pod, basically--not so dissimilar to the ones that had been used to transport the non-servant Rainlords through the Undercrust. This one was just purely iron, of course, but it seemed to do the job well enough as Hector brought it along with him on its own, accompanying platform."

"1834

He followed Garovel's directions, pushing the pace while focusing on making the ride smooth. It didn't take long to reach the nearest hospital. "UGR Health" was the logo on the side of the main building, though there were many accompanying it. Hector was glad that Garovel seemed to know where he was going, because there were about a half-dozen entrances that Hector could see from the air.

There were plenty of cars around, but thankfully, the place didn't seem especially busy at the moment. Hector had no trouble walking right through the front entrance, even with all iron that he was materializing behind him.

A few shrieks rang out in the main lobby, but Hector didn't have to be concerned about that. He went straight up to the reception desk and addressed the pair of wide-eyed women who were sitting behind it.

"Excuse me," he said, keeping his voice calm so as not to startle anyone. He brought the iron pod forward so that they could see the person lying therein. "I think this man may be in need of medical attention..."

It took a moment for the nearer woman to blink and then respond. "Ah! O-okay! Um! One moment please!" Her hands fumbled for the phone on her desk.

Hector hoped she was calling a doctor and not security.

Garovel was busy observing the man's condition. 'When you get a chance, search his pockets. There are probably some clues on him.'

'Okay.'

Hector noticed a couple of men in white coats walking through a small, indoor plaza that was off to the side. Or rather, he noticed them stop walking. They had noticed the commotion in the lobby. They had noticed Hector.

Hector might've liked to wave them down or something, but he figured there was probably a procedure to these types of things. And more importantly, he didn't want to scare them.

Maybe he wasn't doing such a good job of that, though. He wondered if they were going to just turn around and walk away. Judging from the looks on their faces, they wanted to.

The one on the right, a balding and bespectacled man, just kind of took a deep breath, bobbed his head forward a little, and then walked over. His companion soon followed.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Carlyle," said the balding man. "Is there some way I can be of assistance?"

The receptionist from before almost leapt out of her chair. "Ah! Yes, this, um--this man here said--" She cut herself off when Hector looked at her.

Wait. Why had she done that? Aw, shit. He hadn't meant for her to stop explaining.

Hector brought the pod closer to Dr. Carlyle and his colleague.

They both took a few steps back as the hulking iron contraption materialized its way toward them.

Dammit! Why was it so hard not to frighten people?!

Was it the armor? It was probably the armor. Argh.

He dematerialized it and tried again. "Sorry... I, uh... I'm just trying to get this guy some help."

Thankfully, that actually did seem to ease the tension a little."

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

Dr. Carlyle was the one to step forward again. "W-well, uh, I'll just take a look then, shall I?"

"Please." Hector obliterated the top half of the pod so that the doctor would have plenty of space to work. "And, ah, thank you..."

The whole room was watching now as Dr. Carlyle checked the man's pulse.

Scarcely ten seconds passed before he turned to his colleague. "Get a cart ready now." The other man nodded, and he turned to Hector. "Quickly, follow me." He was already jogging away.

Oh shit.

Hector pursued the doctor down a hallway and corner, bringing the unconscious man along as well, of course. They entered a small room with an elevated bed and all manner of medical supplies on the counters.

"Place him there, if you would," said Dr. Carlyle as he pulled on a pair of blue rubber gloves.

The doctor hadn't actually pointed anywhere, but it was apparent enough that he meant the bed, so that was where Hector put him, using iron to lift him up and then ease him down again.

Hector wanted to ask some questions, like if Dr. Carlyle knew what was wrong, but he didn't want to interrupt. The doctor's facial expression and body language were both warning of urgency and the need for concentration.

The other doctor arrived with a wheeled cart full of equipment, and Hector made way for him. Then more people began flowing into the room, and a nurse ushered Hector away.

He wasn't about to argue.

The nurse led him into another room. Not a waiting a room, per se, just



an empty one. She told him that someone would be in to talk to him soon.

He waited.

Garovel had stayed with the doctors, however.

'How's it going in there?' Hector asked.

'Too early to tell,' the reaper said. 'Not super great, though.'

Hector supposed it would be a while for he learned anything. He noticed a chair in the corner of the room and sat down.

Soon, someone new did arrive, as promised. It was an older woman. Maybe a doctor, though she only had purple scrubs on. She began asking him questions. How was he related to the patient? What prompted the hospital visit? How was the patient's condition previously?

Those were somewhat difficult to answer. When he told her that he just found the guy on the street, she seemed a little surprised but kept going. When he told her his name, she actually stopped for a second and stared at him.

Only for a second, though. Professionalism soon won out, and she kept going with her questions.

It was only when he started asking questions of his own that she became visibly uncomfortable.

"Would you mind getting his clothes for me?" said Hector.

"I... ah... that's not really, um--I'm not really supposed to--"

"I know," he said, "but this is important. I didn't have time to examine his belongings before bringing him here. There might be, uh, some sort of clue about what brought this on, so..."

"1836

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

"I'll--I'll, er, I'll let the doctors know," she said. "They'll figure it out. You

don't need to do anything else. Believe me. It's good enough that you got him here as quickly as you did."

Hector just frowned at her, but he supposed she had a point. The doctors would probably have a better idea of what clues to look for, as well.

He wasn't ready to give up, though. "Well, uh... when the doctors are done with his clothes, I'd still like to examine them, myself. If you don't mind."

"Ah, uh, o-okay. Very well. Erm. M'lord."

Oi, that looked awkward for her. She seemed like she wanted to be just about anywhere but here, right about now.

He wondered if there was anything he could do help put her at ease. That was the kind of thing a lord was supposed to be able to do, right?

"Ah--by the way," said Hector, "I never caught your name."

"Oh. Um. It's Jenna. Jenna Brandt."

His body resisted, but he forced himself to extend a hand toward her. "It's... a pleasure to meet you."

She looked about as reluctant as he felt, but she took the hand nonetheless and shook it. "Th-thank you, m'lord."

He tried to give her a smile but only managed to press his lips together flatly. Eh, maybe that was more appropriate, anyway, considering the circumstances.

After that, she excused herself, and Hector was alone again.

He breathed a sigh of relief and sat back down. He didn't know if asking her name and shaking her hand had actually made her feel better or not, but it was pretty much all he had been able to think of.

Why, he wondered?

Hmm, maybe because that was what Garovel had instructed him to do back at Warrenhold with those two Rainlord cooks. The husband and wife. What were their names? Agh, so many names to keep track of.

But yeah, that was probably the reason.

Oh well. Whatever.

The wait continued for a while longer, and Hector ended up meditating to pass the time. He wasn't sure how much time had passed when Dr. Carlyle entered the room, looking more disheveled than before.

Garovel followed him in.

"I understand that you bear no relation to the patient?" said the doctor. It wasn't actually a question, but he posed it like one.

Hector sat up straighter. "That's right..."

The doctor nodded. "In that case, I'm not supposed to share information regarding his treatment with you."

Hector merely returned a blank expression. Then what he hell had he been waiting here for?

"However," the doctor said slowly, "these are... extenuating circumstances, I suppose."

"What do you mean?" said Hector.

"Well... would I be correct in thinking that you are investigating this man in some way?"

"...Yes."

"Then... normally, this information would only be shared with the police, but you're... well, you're you, aren't you?"

"1837

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Hector wasn't sure what to say to that. Being famous sure was fucking weird.

The doctor reached into his lab coat and pulled out a folded up paper. "Here's a copy of my preliminary assessment."

Hector took it and looked it over, though he wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

"It's still too early to say for sure," said Dr. Carlyle, "but... there is unfortunately a very real possibility that the patient will never wake up."

Hector blinked. "Why?"

"The damage done to his brain and nervous system may not have been fatal, but it would not be strange if he remains comatose. As I said, it's still too early to tell. He may wake up. He may not."

"...Do you know what caused this?" said Hector.

"We do," said the doctor. "We identified the alcoholic drink in his possession as containing a lethal dose of potassium cyanide."

Hector's head reared back a little. "Cyanide...?" Now there was a scary word.

"It is safe to say that if you had not gotten him here as quickly as you did, he would be dead."

Holy shit.

So someone really did try to kill the guy.

He needed information. Hector asked the doctor for details regarding the man's identity, and the doctor obliged, producing a folder from his lab coat with everything the hospital knew about the man.

Jeremy Lang. Thirty-seven years old. Employed as an Administrative Assistant in the Human Resources Department at Lindhold & Barter.

That was one hell of a job title, Hector thought.

"I hope you find your culprit," said Dr. Carlyle. "Now, if you'll excuse me." He turned to leave.

"Will you call me if he wakes up?" said Hector, pulling out his phone. "Or if there are any other developments?"

The doctor's expression became strained. "I... suppose I could. It wouldn't really be proper, since you're not with the police or listed as one of his emergency contacts, but... you are a lord. And a national hero. Conventional rules don't really apply to you, I guess."

Hector was speechless and embarrassed.

Dr. Carlyle smirked. "You'll use your status to protect me if I get in

trouble for this, won't you?"

"Er. Sure."

"That answer does not fill me with confidence, milord." Dr. Carlyle adjusted his glasses and smiled. "Stressful as it sometimes is, I do like this job and would prefer not to lose it. It pays very well, and my wife loves spending money."

Hector couldn't help but breathe half a laugh. The man wanted confidence from him, huh?

Alright.

"...I promise you will have my protection," said Hector.

"That's better. Thank you." The doctor pulled out his phone as well.

They exchanged numbers.

Dr. Carlyle smirked another time as he eyed his phone. "I imagine there are plenty of journalists who would love to get their hands on this, eh? How much do you think I could get for it?"

"Do that and you're dead to me," said Hector flatly.

The man just laughed."

"1838

Hector was glad to see that the man could laugh in these circumstances. Then again, doctors were probably pretty accustomed to stress, he figured.

'I like this guy,' said Garovel. 'Ask him if he wants to come work for you.'

Hector had to consciously keep his face still. 'What?!'

'What, you can ask Leo to work for you, but this doctor is a bridge too far?'

'He JUST said that he likes his current job.'

'You could still ASK.'

‘No, Garovel.’

‘Bah.’

“Ah, well, I suppose I should be going now,” said Dr. Carlyle. “Is there anything else I can do for you before I go? Questions? Concerns?”

“Oh. Um. I’d like to take a look at Mr. Lang’s belongings, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Mm. Given everything else that I’m not supposed to be doing for you, I guess one more thing wouldn’t hurt. This way.”

The doctor led Hector to Mr. Lang’s room, which was different from the one that they had originally taken the man to. This one looked a bit more comfortable, and they had him hooked up to all sorts of different machines.

Mr. Lang’s clothes were in a folded pile on the chair in the corner. Before sorting through them, Hector materialized some coatings for his fingertips so as not to contaminate any potential evidence with his fingerprints. The last thing he needed was the police making him a suspect.

Dr. Carlyle just watched. The doctor didn’t have to stay, Hector thought, but maybe he was still a little worried about leaving Hector alone with the guy.

It didn’t matter.

Hector found the financial note that Garovel had mentioned earlier, though he couldn’t really make heads or tails of it. He knew someone who might be able to, though, and decided to take a picture of it with his phone. Then he took pictures of everything else, including the unconscious Mr. Lang.

“Where’s the drink?” asked Hector at length, noticing its absence.

“It was a hazardous material, so we had to contain it,” said Dr. Carlyle. “We haven’t disposed of it yet, however, since it is evidence. I can take you to it, if you want.”

Hector took him up on that offer, but it didn’t prove particularly illuminating. He made sure to get a picture of the poisoned drink just in case, but there wasn’t much to see. It was just a simple metal canteen,

featureless and pretty nondescript. Dr. Carlyle didn't think that they would be able to trace the poison back to either the distributor or manufacturer, either.

From there, Hector's hospital visit drew to a close, and he left. It felt a bit strange, just leaving like that, but he didn't actually know Mr. Lang, and the hospital had placed security on his room, so Hector didn't see much point in sticking around. According to Dr. Carlyle, Mr. Lang's family was currently out of the country and so wouldn't be here until tomorrow.

Hector was still trying to decide if it was worth coming back in order to talk to them. If they'd been out of the country, they made for pretty poor suspects, and he didn't want to make things even more difficult for them, either."

"1839

'So,' said Garovel after a while of silence. Instead of attaching himself to Hector, he was flying on his own and keeping pace with him as they soared through the night sky together. 'Got any idea why someone tried to kill that guy?'

'You're asking ME?' said Hector.

'I'm just curious about where your mind's at. I'm trying to keep track of how your critical thinking skills are developing. This is our second mysterious case we're working on, after all.'

'Second? What was the first?'

'The mystery at Dunehall. You remember. When it looked like Ibai Blackburn had killed Fuad Saqqaf.'

'Oh, yeah.'

'Shame, too. I was getting really invested in trying to crack that case wide open. Then everything started exploding, and nobody really cared, anymore. I never got a chance to show everyone my unfathomable intellect.'

'...Unfathomable even to yourself, you mean?'

'Heh. Yes. Even I don't fully grasp the enormity of my brain.'

‘Your brain which technically doesn’t exist.’

‘Oh, don’t start down that road. We’ll be busy for hours.’

‘Hey, why does Dunehall count as the first case? Why not the, uh... all that shit with Colt and Rofal? That was a case, wasn’t it?’

‘Eh, not REALLY. I mean, where was the mystery, huh?’

‘YOU were the mystery, I think.’

‘Hmm. I’m not sure whether to be flattered or offended. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. This is our official second case. I’m calling it now. Everything else was just build up to this.’

Hector snorted a laugh. ‘Everything, huh? Even though we have no reason to believe that Mr. Lang is in any way related to anything we’ve seen or been through so far?’

‘That doesn’t matter. Chronologically, everything has been building to this.’

‘Oh, okay. Then I guess everything has been building toward breakfast tomorrow morning, too.’

‘Heh. Well, maybe not breakfast but definitely dinner.’

Hector knew what the reaper was referring to. He would be having dinner tomorrow in Sescoria. With the Queen and about a hundred other lords and ladies of Atreya.

The invitation had been delivered to him two days ago--in person, no less, by a sharply dressed officer of the royal court.

The Atreyan Gala of Royal Associates was an annual occurrence--one that Hector had heard about since he was a kid and had certainly never expected to be invited to. It was being held a month early this year, possibly because of the economic crisis, though Hector didn’t really know what the Queen was thinking in that regard. The news certainly wasn’t making light of the timing. With so much concern over money in the public consciousness, it seemed to him like a bad idea to have all of the wealthiest people in Atreya show off in front of a bunch of cameras.

According to Madame Carthrace, though, the Gala was more than just a fancy gathering for the nobility. It was an unparalleled opportunity for



the nation's most influential people to discuss policy and make decisions that could affect their own communities for many years to come."

"1840

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"Once upon a time, I, too, harbored such thoughts," Madame Carthrace had told him. "That it was just a chance for my peers to flaunt their wealth and indulge in all manner of debauched excess, but I've long since changed my mind about that, and I think you will, too."

Hector was trying to keep an open mind.

He still wasn't exactly looking forward to it, though. With as much as he'd been in the news recently, he was a little afraid of how much attention he would be getting--both from the other lords and from the camera crews.

Ugh.

It was gonna be an absolute shit show.

He really would've liked to just not go, but that would probably make matters even worse. Plus, he did need to talk to the Queen.

And of course, there was also Lynn to be worried about. Garovel had been trying to get him to call her for some inexplicable reason, and with so much on his plate, Hector had been able to ignore him relatively easily. But not tomorrow. She was almost definitely going to be there. She was the White Sword of Atreya, after all. The Queen's personal bodyguard.

Hector knew he was being irrational, though. This was such a strange feeling. He was dreading seeing her. Obviously. And yet, just as much as he was dreading it, he was looking forward to it, too.

What sense did that make? What sense did he make?

It would've been a lot easier if he was just scared of her. Crazy as that seemed. He could deal with fear. He knew he could. But there was so much more to it.

Wanting to be liked. Not wanting to be humiliated. Or hated. Or pitied.

It reminded him so much of his school days. The endless anxiety.

However, between worrying about all of that again and simply discussing Mr. Lang's "case" with Garovel, Hector knew which one he wanted to do, right now. He'd already gotten his fill of agonizing over tomorrow night's dinner and didn't feel like getting into it again.

'Why don't you just save us both some time and tell me what YOU think of the case?' said Hector.

'No, no. You first. Like I said, I've gotta evaluate your critical thinking progress, my dear boy.'

He thought about arguing, but... oh, whatever. 'Okay, well, uh... I don't really know what to make of it yet, I guess.'

'Stunning. You've floored me with your observational brilliance.'

'Are you telling me you've already got it all figured out?'

'Well. Obviously, no case is too mysterious for my ferociously sharp mind. But y'know. For purely academic reasons, I think you should put a little more thought into it before asking me for help.'

'Right...'

'So? C'mon. Put some brain mass into it, Detective Goffe.'

He sighed and tried to think. 'Alright, uh... I guess... there's a chance that he just...' He hesitated, but this was the only thing coming to mind. 'Er... is it possible that he tried to kill himself?'

'Mm. Not likely.'

'Why do you say that?'

"1841

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

'Well, firstly, the time and place are incredibly strange for someone trying to commit suicide,' said Garovel. 'Out in the middle of the street?'

And after a vaguely clandestine meeting with someone?’

‘Yeah, I guess that would be a hell of a coincidence...’

‘And secondly, the method. Cyanide? That would be a profoundly strange choice.’

‘Why? Is it super painful or something?’

‘I don’t think it’s very pleasant, but then again, I can’t really attest to that, personally. Accessibility would be an issue, though. Getting your hands on cyanide, while certainly not impossible, would be inconvenient. So why choose that over something more widely available? Or something painless, perhaps?’

That was another good point, Hector thought. But he couldn’t help relating everything the reaper was saying back to his own death. He was a little surprised that Garovel hadn’t brought it up yet.

‘Plus, it’s all just a little too shady,’ the reaper went on. ‘Poison in the drink? If you were going to knowingly ingest poison, why would you bother mixing it with something?’

‘Er. Maybe he was worried about the taste?’

‘Yeah, sure he was. As far as I’m concerned, the presence of the drink really suggests murderous intent by some as yet unknown third party.’

‘Well, uh... okay. What should we do about it?’

‘We can probably just let the police handle it for now.’

‘Wait, what? Really?’

‘Sure. As far as we know, no one is in immediate danger now. There’s an attempted murderer out there who still needs to be brought to justice, of course, but that’s what the police are for. I’ll be keeping an eye on their investigation, though.’

‘What happened to all that shit about this being our second case together?’

The reaper laughed. ‘Are you disappointed?’

‘Well, you kinda built it up like it was a big deal...’

‘I was just screwing around, Hector. Having fun. You know what that is,

right?’

‘Garovel...’

‘Relax. And you should actually be hoping that I don’t ask you to do anything else on this case. Because if I do, then that’ll mean that the police can’t handle it on their own.’

‘Ah...’

‘You’re like a fire extinguisher, Hector. We only want to break you out for emergencies.’

‘I... uh... hmm.’

‘You did good work tonight, though. You should be proud of yourself.’

Pride wasn’t a feeling that Hector was particularly familiar with, but he appreciated Garovel saying so, at least. ‘Thanks...’

‘How does it feel to go around protecting normal people again?’

‘It’s, uh. It’s pretty nice, actually.’

‘How does it compare to fighting giant worms in Hell?’

‘...I like it a lot better.’

‘Me, too.’

Soon, they made it back to Warrenhold, and Hector went straight to his room. He’d been getting good sleep the past few days, but he was still feeling consistently exhausted. Eight hours never quite seemed like enough, but Garovel said that feeling would go away in a week or so, as long as he kept to a healthy schedule."

"1842

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

As had quickly become the norm, Hector started the next day early by training with Zeff. That may have been another reason for his persistent exhaustion, actually. The Lord Elroy did not hold back. At times, their sparring grew to have such ground-shaking intensity that

Hector worried they might wake up everyone in Warrenhold despite the increasingly long distances they traveled from it.

A sudden surge of ice water knocked Hector off his feet, and the shield in his hand went flying from his grasp. He clattered to the ground like a sack of iron potatoes. Half of his armor was cracked or crumbling off of him already.

“Not good enough,” said Zeff. “If you plan to keep using that shield, then you had better learn to keep it in front of you.”

Hector appreciated all the effort the man was going through for him, teaching him personally. Truth be told, though, he was getting a little tired of the condescending lectures. “I’m trying,” he said as he climbed back onto his feet and reformed his armor.

“Try harder, then.”

Something in the man’s inflection made Hector immediately think that another attack was already coming at him from behind. Zeff had also made a habit of doing that, attacking him before he was actually ready to keep going.

Sure enough, he sensed something there with the Scarf of Amordiin, but even by then, he was already moving, having predicted what Zeff was going to do.

However, the attack did not arrive, and Hector ended up dodging out of the way of nothing at all.

Then a block of ice clobbered him from the front, and put him right back on his ass.

“Where are you trying to dodge?” said Zeff. “You face an opponent who is familiar with your capabilities. You can try to predict my actions, but I can predict yours as well, you know. Maintain your awareness at all moments and react accordingly. And keep your shield up, for god’s sake.”

Hector exhaled and just lay there for a moment longer.

“This is not the ferocity I witnessed when you were fighting that worm,” said Zeff.

Yeah, because this was just practice. Why would he--?

Oh shit.

Hector shoved himself out of the way of a half-dozen frozen spikes and was back on his feet again. More were coming, though, and he had to keep dodging, just barely skating out of the way and occasionally losing chunks of armor to them.

"Better, but not perfect," said Zeff, raising his voice as the distance between them grew. "Are you ever going to get around to counterattacking, I wonder? Or do you plan to keep on like this forever?"

The swirls of water were only growing faster, Hector noticed, and some had the sharpness of blades in addition to their speed. Everywhere around him. So much to keep track of.

He split his focus and materialized a thin, moving layer of iron beneath Zeff's feet while simultaneously launching a boulder down on the man from above.

Perhaps the Lord Elroy hadn't been expecting a two-pronged attack, because the man lost his footing for a moment, and the boulder nearly hit him before being slapped away by a tower of ice."

"1843

The storm of water around Hector subsided, giving him some room to breathe, but he knew it wouldn't last long. Zeff would no doubt get mad if he didn't seize the opening and attack.

He rushed in from the front and decided to flank Zeff with a trio of materialized lances, all bearing a velocity state.

A small castle of ice froze everything in place, including Hector.

He struggled, but without the undead vigor, the ice was way too strong to break through. Hell, it might've been too strong even with the vigor.

Well, shit.

Zeff opened a hole in the ice so that Hector could hear him. "That was better," he said. "You almost managed to hit me that time."

Hector just kind of sighed.

“It was impressive that you could materialize something under my feet without even looking in my direction. I suppose that, too, is thanks to that scarf of yours?”

Hector didn't answer him. Zeff probably knew that he wouldn't. Everything that the man knew about the Scarf had come from the past few days of observing Hector wearing it. Hector hadn't even told him its name.

“You have very good agility and spatial awareness, even for a materialization user, but neither of that really matters if your opponent is able to seal your movement, now does it? Preventing precisely this situation should be one of your top priorities.”

“...I'll try to keep that in mind,” said Hector. Damn, this ice was cold. His teeth were chattering, and he was already losing sensation in his extremities.

“Good.” Zeff folded his arms and stood there. “Now. Try and get out of it.”

Hector could barely even move his neck. “...How, exactly?”

“There are only two choices. Force or heat.” A rare smile found the Lord Elroy's face. “Hmph. Or you could try to talk me into undoing it, I suppose.”

Heat it was, then. Hector focused on his armor. It was stuck in the ice just as thoroughly as he was. But he could still dematerialize it and remake it from scratch, hotter.

So that was what he did.

It didn't do much.

Some sizzling and cracking noises permeated the ice, but that was about it. No breaking free, and certainly no melting.

“Mm. Wow. Another thirty minutes, and you might be out of there. Assuming I don't just make more, of course.”

Hector didn't want to spoil one of Zeff's anomalous good moods, but he was getting annoyed. “Yeah, you're stronger than I am.”

“Yes, I am,” said Zeff, frowning again. “Why don't you do something about it, then?”

Hector squinted with one eye. What was this supposed to accomplish? Was Zeff trying to make him achieve emergence? Because there was no fucking way that was going to happen.

"Alternatively," said Zeff, "you could tell me what you've been hiding from me with regard to Emiliana. I might be persuaded to let you out, then."

"1844

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

Hector's irritation was only growing. "I told you, already. She's not telling me anything about her situation. Probably because she's worried you'll try to rescue her and get yourself killed by Gohvis."

Surprisingly, the Lord Elroy did not get angry at that response. Which was perhaps even more unsettling, somehow. Instead, he merely returned a flat, dead-eyed stare for a moment.

"...Fine," said Zeff. "In any event, I suppose we can end our session a bit early today. We wouldn't want you to be too exhausted to attend your royal dinner tonight." The man turned and started walking away. "You're free to go, whenever you like."

"Wha? How do--? I'm still--!" Hector stopped himself. Obviously, Zeff knew what he was doing, that Hector was still trapped inside the soul-strengthened ice.

Maybe he was mistaken, but in that moment, Hector felt like Zeff wanted him to say something in desperation. To beg the man to let him out.

And Hector didn't want to do that.

Why, though? Was this pride? Or just stubbornness? It was weird, whatever it was, and Hector didn't like it much. It was putting strange thoughts in his head. In all likelihood, Zeff was just messing with him to mess with him. Or to teach him something, maybe. Not to humiliate him or assert dominance.

Probably.



Regardless, Hector held his tongue as he watched the Lord Elroy walk away. And much like the man had said, it took about half an hour to finally free himself. He was freezing his ass off and hardly able to move after he was out, but he was out.

He materialized himself a fresh suit of warm armor before heading back.

After that, the rest of the day went by way too quickly for Hector's liking. But then, most days were like that, recently. With so much he wanted to check up on and so many people he wanted to talk to, he was genuinely starting to feel like there were simply not enough hours in the day anymore. It sucked to always be in a rush.

He had a couple of interviews with more of the people Madame Carthrace was planning to hire. He had the reconstruction to help with. He had people coming up to him constantly, wanting to discuss one thing or another.

Independent though they were, the Rainlords sure had a lot of concerns. The tension between House Blackburn and the others worried him most, though. He'd heard about a few heated arguments that had taken place--so heated that they'd nearly come to blows.

The last thing Hector needed right now was the Rainlords fighting amongst themselves again, so he'd been trying to figure out what to do about it, but they weren't making it easy for him. Most of them didn't even want to talk about it. They seemed to find it embarrassing. Unbecoming of "lords," perhaps. And whenever Hector was around, everyone appeared to be very polite with one another."

"1845

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

That was just like them, though. Even now, with all they'd been through, the Rainlords were still concerned about not being a bother or a burden to their host. They made that pretty clear. Repeatedly, even.

"Yeah, but the thing is," said Hector, "you doing that is being a bother to me."

Horatio Blackburn and Salvador Delaguna just sat there, looking back

at him. The last mention of a heated argument breaking out had been between members of their two houses, though they refused to acknowledge it, much to Hector's growing annoyance.

Hector frowned at their silence. "While I'm gone, Warrenhold and even Gray Rock is under the Rainlords' protection. If you guys can't even tell me what's wrong, then how am I supposed to trust you to take care of all these people in my absence?" This was something he'd given a lot of thought to already, and he was trying not to sound too irritated with them.

Horatio just cast his eyes to the floor, still not saying anything.

Salvador, however, kept his gaze locked on Hector.

Hector had a hard time looking back at the man, though. Not because he was embarrassed, but rather because the man's recent losses were so painfully visible on his face. The Lord Delaguna was one of the largest men Hector had ever seen, but that shrunken posture and those big brown eyes full of remorse made him seem somehow smaller.

Hector knew only too well how much grief the man was still coping with, how many family members he'd lost at Dunehall. It seemed wrong to be doing anything but trying to accommodate him, but after consulting Garovel a couple of times on the matter, he'd come to believe that treating Salvador any differently would just make things worse.

'The man needs many things right now,' Garovel had said, 'but from us, he needs only normalcy and respect. We need to treat him like a companion. Not a child or a victim.'

And though a part of him didn't want to, Hector agreed. Remembering his own, personal experiences with such things, he felt like Garovel was right on the money with that assessment.

So it was hard to look back at him, but Hector did it, nonetheless. Looking away would have been disrespectful in its own way, Hector felt.

"...You are right," Salvador eventually said, sighing. "My house is not in order..."

"Nor is mine," said Horatio, glancing over at the man before sighing as well. "I don't know how my uncle was able to make everyone feel so

united and... I..."

"H-hold on," said Hector, feeling abruptly like he'd just slapped both of these poor men across the face. "I mean... look, all I'm saying is that you should let me help. It's, ah... it's okay if things aren't exactly stable for you, right now. It would be weird if they were. But you can't shut me out like you've been doing. You can't just... you can't just pretend like there's no problem when there obviously is, okay?"

"1846

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

Both men returned a solemn nod, still looking rather defeated.

Aw, geez. Even after saying all that, how exactly was he supposed to help these people?

'We need more information,' said Garovel privately.

All of their reapers were also present. Hector had invited everyone to discuss the matter in his bedroom. There was a conference chamber one floor above that he had been using pretty frequently, but Hector hadn't wanted this meeting to feel quite as formal as the ones in that chamber had begun to feel.

It didn't seem to be helping, though.

Garovel's next words were public. 'We would like you both to provide us with twice-weekly assessments of your houses' interpersonal affairs.'

Hector's eyes widened a little.

Mevox, Salvador's reaper, was the first to respond. 'Say what?'

'I know it might be a hassle or even a bit controversial,' said Garovel, 'but I assure you that you can trust Hector and I to keep any sensitive information you share with us to ourselves. And this is a very important matter. Above all, Hector and I want Warrenhold to be a place where everyone who comes here can have a reasonable expectation of safety. You must understand. Anything which might jeopardize that... well, that's just not something we can ignore, even if it inconveniences you for a while.'

Mevox opened his skeletal mouth but no words came out.

‘And I do apologize for the imposition,’ Garovel went on, ‘but it is my hope that these reports will help us come to grips with this problem before it gets out of hand. It’s imperative that we identify the cause of all this before taking any other kind of action which might make things worse.’

With the way Garovel was talking, it didn’t sound like he was leaving much room for discussion. It sounded like he was issuing an order, Hector thought. And he didn’t think the Rainlords would appreciate that.

There arrived an intermission of silence, presumably in which the other reapers and servants were discussing the matter privately.

Hector used the opportunity to ask Garovel a question of his own. ‘This is a little much, don’t you think? What if they say no?’

‘They won’t.’

‘But what if they do?’

‘Then I guess you’ll have to show them who’s boss.’

Hector’s jaw clenched. ‘Garovel! I’m not their boss!’

‘You’re the Lord of Warrenhold, Hector. We’re in Warrenhold. You’re the boss.’

Argh. He wanted to argue, but there wasn’t time, because Mevox spoke up again.

‘We understand,’ the reaper said. ‘Assessments sound like a reasonable step to take.’

‘Yes,’ said Yovess. ‘We think so as well. Obviously, we know what the overall cause of these tensions is, given what happened in Sair, but I do think a closer look at the finer details with an objective third party such as yourselves might prove helpful. I would even go so far as to recommend this as something all of the houses should begin doing.’”

"1847

'You might be right about that,' said Mevox. 'At least with regard to the larger houses. I doubt Zeff or Joana will want to do this.'

Hector very much doubted that as well.

'That's fine,' said Garovel. 'Their numbers are few enough that it shouldn't be a problem. Same goes for Evangelina and Diego, of course.'

The other reapers merely nodded, as did their servants.

'In the meantime,' said Garovel, 'I would suggest ensuring all of the men involved in the fight are given plenty to do over the next few weeks.'

'Way ahead of you there,' said Mevox. 'We have a very old saying in Deynos. Haven't gotten to use it in, oh, seven hundred years or so, but now seems like a good time to bust it out again. "Idle hands will be put in chains."'

There was a brief quiet.

'Ah--well, you may not need go quite THAT far,' said Garovel.

'Why not?' said Mevox.

'Because you're essentially talking about slavery?' said Garovel.

'Eh, what's a little slavery among family? Builds character and establishes discipline, if you ask me. Besides, it worked pretty well in the past.'

'I seem to recall a slave revolt taking place in Roth,' said Yovess. 'Which, funnily enough, also happened around seven hundred years ago, I think.'

'Yeah, but up UNTIL then, it was working great.'

The conversation lasted a little longer, and they discussed what sort of work would be assigned to the offenders. They ultimately decided on breaking down rocks and laying brick. There was certainly enough of that that still needed doing. After the two lords and their reapers left, there wasn't much time left before Hector would have to depart for Sescoria.

While he was getting ready, Roman paid him a visit, accompanied by

Voreese and Gina, as usual.

'I still think it's bullshit that we weren't invited,' said Voreese.

"You know there's no way that I could show my face at such an event," said Roman. "And the Queen knows that, too."

'I'm not saying I think we should go. I'm just saying it would've been nice to be invited.'

"Shut up, Voreese."

'No, you shut up.'

As he was adjusting his black tie, which he'd finally managed to get right after nearly half an hour of trying, Hector thought of a question for his billionaire friend. "You've been to lots of parties like this before, haven't you?"

Roman gave a shrug. "Sure."

"Any advice for me?" said Hector.

"Oh. Hmm. Well, now, let me think..." Roman scratched his nose and sucked on his teeth for a moment. "Find the richest girl in the room, turn on the old charm faucet, leave her wanting for more, and THEN go and impress her father."

Hector just gave the man a look.

"Not that I've. Ever. Done that before. Or anything."

"1848

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

"...I was hoping for advice about how to conduct myself properly," said Hector.

"I don't think Master Roman is the right person to consult about conducting yourself properly," said Gina.

"That is both hurtful and profoundly untrue," said Roman. "I am a wonderful party guest. Ask anyone. Except maybe the President of

Stecat. Though, I doubt he'd remember me, so that might be fine, too, now that I think about it."

"Well, then, uh... could you maybe tell me a little about the other nobles? Like, is there anyone I should be, er... wary of? Or something?"

'Oh-ho!' said Voreese. 'Good question!'

Roman bobbed his head to the side. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I do know a fair bit about the major players in Atreya. Your Madame Carthrace might know more, though, of course."

With the way that Roman let his gaze linger on Hector for a moment, Hector had to wonder if he had met her. By now, he must've. He wanted to ask what Roman thought of her, but now probably wasn't the best time.

"But, ah, yeah," Roman went on. "You've got your straight-up royals, of course. The Belgrants and the Lumenbels. The Lumenbels took a significant hit recently, as I'm sure you well know, so they're not quite as... shall we say, "politically potent" at the moment, as they once were. The Belgrants, as far as families go, probably have more influence now than any single family has ever had before in this country."

None of that was really news to Hector, but it was at least nice to have his current understanding of Atreyan politics reaffirmed as being correct.

"After those two, though, all of the other families can pretty much be described as either 'royalist' or 'nationalist' in nature. With maybe a couple wild cards thrown in there, for good measure."

'Which one are you?' said Garovel.

"Me?" The question seemed to take Roman by surprise. "Mm. That's a tough one. A year ago, I would've said nationalist without the slightest bit of hesitation, but now that I'm BFFs with the Queen, it's kinda hard not to consider myself more of a royalist." He smacked his lips. "I hate to be one of those fence-sitters, but right now, I guess that's what I am."

'You're kinda making it sound like Hector and I are royalists,' said Garovel.

Roman just returned a flat look. "Sayin' you aren't?"

'Heh. Maybe.'

Roman glanced at Hector, who had no idea what to say. "Whatever," said Roman. "The royalists and the nationalists aren't terribly different from one another, anyway. They definitely agree with each other more than they disagree. The main point of controversy between them, as you might expect, is their support of the royal family."

'Specifically, it's about whether or not they believe the royal family is appointed by divine will,' said Voreese."

"1849

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

"Really?" said Hector, not having known that. "The royalists believe the Queen was chosen by Cocora?"

'I think it's a little more complicated than that, but basically, yeah,' said Voreese.

"Hence why I have trouble calling myself a royalist, even though I obviously do support the Queen," said Roman.

Hector could understand that. He wasn't so sure he would be able to call himself a royalist, either, in that case--or why it was politically relevant, for that matter.

He wanted to keep an open mind, though. It was not lost on him, the fact that he was stepping into an arena that was very different from what he was accustomed to. It didn't seem like a good idea to go into it with too many preconceived notions about the way these things should or shouldn't work.

From the sound of it, though, it seemed like Roman wouldn't agree with that sentiment. "Anyway, the royalists are mostly a bunch of a small-minded pricks trying to get in the way of progress."

Hector couldn't help laughing. "Your objectivity impresses me," he said dryly.

Roman gave a shrug. "Look, I'm not your history teacher."



'Yeah, that's my job,' said Garovel. 'Don't try to teach him your biased version of events. Only I'm allowed to do that.'

Roman looked to Voreese. "It's the truth, isn't it?"

'Of course not, you ignorant douche. The royalists are all about protecting the system--you know, the one that's been in place for over three hundred years now and that seems to be doing pretty well for the people of this country?'

"You mean the system that's currently threatening to collapse and plunge the nation into poverty? THAT system?"

'YES, that system! The solution is to preserve what works and fix what doesn't! Not to shit on everything, you barbaric fuck!'

"Oh, here we go..."

'Shut up,' said Voreese. 'I'm not saying the current system is perfect, or that I agree with royalists all the time, but there's definitely something to be said for the importance that they place upon traditionalism.'

'That is the absolute last argument I ever expected to hear from you,' said Garovel.

'Really?' said Voreese. 'Garovel, I'll have you know, I am very old-fashioned kinda gal, deep down.'

"Horseshit," said Roman. "You're always yappin' to me about shit that you wanna change."

'Yeah, but it's gotta be the CORRECT shit!'

"Yeah. And it usually is."

'NO, IT USUALLY FUCKING ISN'T! That's the whole point! You need to be really fucking careful whenever you decide to disregard conventional wisdom, dammit! Oftentimes, it's conventional for a good fucking reason!'

'Alright, alright,' said Garovel. 'We're getting sidetracked here. And Voreese, I'm not sure yelling is helping your case.'

'Bah.'

Roman took a moment to put his hand on Gina's shoulder. "Sorry. I was just arguing with Voreese again."

"Yeah, I could tell," she said."

"1850

((Belated Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Hector had an idea. "Can you tell me about the other big Atreyan houses?"

She eyed Roman, then pursed her lips together.

"Why're you askin' her?" said Roman.

Hector scratched his cheek but couldn't help smirking just a little. "Ah... well, I just figured that she knows lots of stuff, and she probably isn't going to get sidetracked arguing with Voreese, so..."

Roman blinked, and his neck whipped around so that he could stare at Voreese.

'What?' she said. 'It's not my fault that Hector's finally realized he's been talking to a dumbass this whole time.'

As usual, Roman didn't look especially fazed by her insults, but seeing as his own name and thoughts were being brought into it, Hector felt compelled to intervene.

"I don't think Roman's a dumbass," he said.

'A close approximation of a dumbass, then.'

"No," said Hector through mild laughter.

'Aw, Hector, are you just saying that, because you guys are friends?' said Voreese. 'That's sweet, but it's okay. You can totally have a friend who's a dumbass.'

Hector just sighed and looked at Roman apologetically.

"Sometimes, I envy Gina for not being able to hear Voreese," said Roman.

‘See?! That right there is a prime example of his dumbassery! As if not being able to hear me could ever be considered a good thing! Absolute fucking idiocy, I tell you!’

Roman tapped Gina on the shoulder. “You just go ahead and explain the rest for me, please. It looks like I’ll have to take care of Voreese again for a little while.”

‘Take care of me?! What’s that supposed to mean, asshole?! I’m not some baby! I can--’

Without looking, Roman’s hand shot out and grabbed the reaper’s center of non-existent mass.

‘Whoa, hey! Easy on the merchandise! What do you think you’re doing?!’

“C’mon,” said Roman, standing. “We’re gonna leave ‘em to it.”

‘What?! No! I’m not done talking!’

“I know,” said Roman. “Everyone knows.”

‘No! I wanna stay! Stop it! I’ve still gotta tell them all about your tiny penis!’

“Wow.” He started carrying her toward the exit.

‘No! Hector, save me! Roman’s abusing me! This is illegal! It’s a human rights violation! I want my lawyer!’

“You don’t have a lawyer.”

‘Then I’ll use yours! This is a miscarriage of justice! I’ll sue, you bastard! I’ll take you for all you’re worth!’

By that point, Hector didn’t really know what to do, so he just kind of sat there and watched them go, watched Roman wave apologetically with one hand while gripping the thrashing reaper with the other.

There was a brief period of silence after they were gone.

Garovel was the first to speak up. ‘Well, that was... certainly something.’

Hector had to agree.

Gina smacked her lips. "Well, um... judging from your silence and the look on your face, I'm guessing Voreese just made a scene?"

"Uh. That's... one way of putting it, I guess."

"Yeah... she's been doing that a lot, apparently."

Hector cocked an eyebrow. "You mean that's, like, a recent development?"

"1851

"Yeah," said Gina. "As I understand it, she got into an argument with another reaper the other day. And ever since then, she's been acting even more out of control than usual. That was what Master Roman told me, anyway."

"Huh..."

"But anyway, that's not really important, right now." Gina folded her hands on the small table in front of her. She was sitting in the corner of the room while Hector stood by the wide window that overlooked the great courtyard of Warrenhold far below. "There's not much time left before you have to leave. Do you really not know anything about the political establishment? You were born in this country, weren't you?"

"Uh. I mean, sure, I know a little. Like, names and stuff. But, er..."

"Well, I assume you know who the Carthraces are, at least? You do have their oldest member working for you, after all."

"Ah... yeah," said Hector, suddenly trying to recall everything he'd ever heard about them over the course of his entire life. "I haven't met any of them besides Amelia yet, but uh, they're... real estate people, aren't they?"

"That's right," said Gina. "They own tons of land, especially in Sescoria and Klein. Probably other cities, too. And that makes them very influential. Who else do you already know about?"

He thought about it. "...Masdens. Volliers. Holbachs. Greenways. Um...?"

She kept waiting, but he couldn't think of any more. "That's not bad,"

said Gina. "You named pretty much all the major players, apart from the Kemps and the Gaolanets."

He was glad to hear that. "But like I said, all I know are names, really."

She straightened in her chair and cleared her throat. "Alright, well, let's run through them real quick. House Masden. They're a big fishing family. Their main territory is coastline, but they're pretty influential outside of Atreya, too. House Vollier. They're the country's leading industrialists. Nobody owns more factories in Atreya than they do. House Holbach. They're the nation's biggest tech family. Which isn't really saying much, compared to what's going on in Intar and Melmoore, but y'know. They're the best we've got."

She paused a moment, eyeing him and perhaps also gathering her thoughts.

Hector just waited patiently.

"House Greenway," she went on. "They're a little weird. They're more of a pure political family. A lot of people wonder how they're able to maintain their fortune, but there's no great mystery there, really. They invest. All the families invest in things, of course, but the Greenways take it to a whole different level. It's like all they do."

Hector nodded to show that he was listening.

"House Kemp," said Gina, looking at her phone now. "Their money comes from fashion and clothing. They're also pretty influential outside of Atreya, too. And then, finally, there's House Gaolanet." She paused again. "I'm a little surprised that they weren't on your list."

"Why?" said Hector.

"Because they're the local power around Gray Rock," said Gina.

Hector blinked.

"Or at least, before you showed up, they were," she added.  
"1852 -- CXCIII.

Hector turned and looked out the window. "That's... good to know."

“If I had to pick one family that I thought you should be wary of, it’d probably be them. For obvious reasons.”

Hector nodded at his own faint reflection in the glass. He could only imagine what a miserable first impression he would’ve made if he had ended up meeting the leader of House Gaolanet without even realizing who they were. “Thank you for telling me...”

“Sure.”

‘Hey, I could’ve told you most of that,’ said Garovel.

‘Then why didn’t you?’ said Hector.

‘You never asked. And I was planning to. On the way to Sescoria, that is.’

‘Mm. Have you got any other information on the nobles for me, then?’

‘Of course I do. Hector, I’ve probably been preparing for this dinner even more than you have.’

‘Heh. Well, I’m listening.’

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Three: ‘The Gathering at Bosliat...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It felt like ages since he’d last seen the royal palace, but he knew it hadn’t been all that long, really. After having seen Warrenhold, the Golden Fort, Marshrock, Dunehall, and the Swallow’s Nest, Hector now felt an even greater sense of appreciation for this place. Despite all that competition, Bosliat Palace did not pale in comparison. Sure, it may not have been as big as Warrenhold or the Golden Fort; nor did it have a particularly eye-popping gimmick like Marshrock’s rock or Dunehall’s sand or the Nest’s defensive structure, but it did have a certain “regalness” to it, he thought.

Perhaps it was the national colors that did it. The more he looked at it, the more it seemed as if the blue-and-white flag of Atreya had been imbued into the building itself, somehow.

And perhaps it was, in a sense.

After receiving the invitation to the Gala, Hector’s curiosity had been

piqued, so he'd been looking up the building's history during his rare moments of downtime--which usually meant reading off his phone while he was out patrolling Gray Rock. He remembered vaguely learning about the palace in school, but he certainly didn't remember any of his teachers telling him that it had been built as part of a declaration of independence.

Economic independence, that was. No actual rebellion had been fought, but Bosliat Palace had played a key role in accomplishing that feat--of securing the nation's borders without bloodshed. Of course, it had also helped that the Mohssian Empire had already been fighting five other wars at the time and probably hadn't wanted to make it six.

The idea that this building, with its turreted towers and sprawling gardens and dozens of guardhouses, was designed to be the proud, beating heart of an emerging nation, to represent Atreya as much as the sun-and-stars of the flag did--that made sense to Hector.

"1852 -- CXCIII.

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"1853



And indeed, Hector had read the historical accounting of the ambassador of the Mohssian Empire who had been largely responsible for convincing the emperor to grant Atreya its independence. In the account, the ambassador had arrived in this brazen little country to chastise its newly appointed King Domitrus and negotiate terms of a legal retraction, believing that a nation with such comparatively little land would have no other choice.

However, according to the account, the ambassador began changing his mind almost immediately upon seeing Bosliat Palace, because he didn't think there would be enough wealth in the entire nation to create such a grand structure.

It had made one hell of a first impression, in other words, and the king and all of his supporters had furthermore been able to follow through and change the ambassador's view of them so radically that Atreya's independence was officially recognized by the Mohssian Empire in less than a year.

Weirdly enough, Hector had never really felt or put much thought into national pride, but reading that had stirred something inside. Just a bit.

An odd feeling. Especially considering he'd already met the Queen and even fought for her. Multiple times. Shouldn't he have been feeling this way about Atreya all along?

He couldn't recall the school system ever evoking any sense of nationalism in him. Which was strange, wasn't it? Shouldn't they have been teaching national unity or whatever?

Eh, maybe they had, and he just hadn't been paying attention. In fact, that seemed like the most likely explanation, the more he thought about it.

He'd been thinking about what he would say if he were to be asked what he thought of Atreya--which, tonight, might very well happen. It was a tough notion to wrestle with. In the end, he felt like his allegiance was more to simply protecting innocent people, but he certainly knew that there were limits to that. There was only so much that he could do. And if he overextended himself, then the people who were already safe under his protection might very well end up in danger again.

Lives were on the line here. With a whole castle full of people waiting for him back in Gray Rock, Hector felt like he'd been too naive in the past. He needed be realistic about things now.

As he stepped out of the black SUV and onto the blue-striped carpet, he tried to push his anxiety down as far as it would go.

Which wasn't very far, sadly--not with all the cameras and microphones and eager reporters in front of him. The path forward remained clear, at least, thanks to a team of burly guardsmen holding the news crews behind a velvet rope, but the shouting and shuttering of cameras was still plenty distracting.

Oh man.

Jamal Easton was already there in front of him, having stepped out first, and Amelia Carthrace was stepping out behind him."

"1854

((Belated Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

The Rainlords had also put up something of a fuss about letting him go to the Gala alone. They'd repeatedly told him that he should take a team of servant bodyguards with him, but the obvious issue with that was the Rainlords' infamy. As much as Hector might've liked to bring Diego Redwater or Dimas Sebolt or someone else along, it wouldn't do if the Vanguard saw their faces on camera. Sure, the Gala was not an international event, but it wasn't like it was a national secret, either.

But the Rainlords had nonetheless been insistent. And the solution that they'd come up with was to simply avoid sending anyone recognizable. Hector had outright refused a full team of bodyguards, believing that would be more intimidating than protective, but he did decide to accept one Rainlord bodyguard, at least.

Matteo Delaguna was the chosen young man's name. Hector had seen his square face and heavy gaze a few times before, but that was it. The guy couldn't have been much older than him, probably not even twenty years old. His reaper, Ernivoc, accompanied them as well.

Matteo seemed to be taking his role as a bodyguard pretty damn seriously, too. He even dressed like one, complete with a dark suit,

black tie, and sunglasses. He'd barely said anything since they'd left Warrenhold, though that was just fine with Hector. Ernivoc and Garovel talked plenty in their stead.

But it was weird, having this extra body around, following him like a shadow. He'd just been starting to get used to Jamal's frequent presence, and now there was this guy.

Hector felt like maybe he should've asked him some questions or something. Tried to get to know him better, maybe.

He felt that way. But he didn't act on that feeling, which ended up just making the feeling worse.

Agh.

Baby steps, he supposed.

It didn't help that he had about a thousand other things on his mind, as well. In between conversing with Ernivoc, Garovel had privately been explaining to Hector about all of the intel he'd been gathering recently about the various Atreyan nobles, and even now, as they were walking down the greeting carpet toward the palace, Garovel was still coming up with new things to tell him.

'Ah, see that guy?' The reaper pointed subtly forward with the tip of his scythe.

'Yeah?' said Hector, noting the well-dressed, gray-haired gentleman whom he was referring to.

'That's the Lord of House Vollier right there,' the reaper said. 'Domitrus Vollier. Important guy. Arguably the richest man in Atreya, right now.'

That name caught Hector by surprise. 'He's named after the first king?'

'Yep. Heh. Surprised you picked up on that. I'm proud of you.'

'Even first graders know who King Domitrus was,' said Hector.

'Exactly my point. That's very advanced historical knowledge for you.'

'Shut up.'

"1855

Garovel kept pointing notable people out to him as they continued toward the main entrance. It provided him with a helpful distraction, but even so, the walk felt like it was taking an eternity.

And everyone was staring at him, he realized. Not just the cameras but the other lords, too.

He just had to walk. And breathe. Walking and breathing. He could do that.

In theory.

Holy fuck, this was way too much attention. All the lights on him, the eyes, the noise. The weight of it was almost physical, as if he were suddenly moving underwater.

He'd known it was going to be like this, of course, but he still couldn't help feeling overwhelmed.

He could help showing that feeling, however. He just had to keep his thoughts and his actions separate, to maintain a poker face. Maybe that wasn't going to look particularly welcoming or friendly, but at least it would be better than looking like a panicking wreck. And at least it was something he'd been getting considerable practice with, too.

'How we doin', buddy?' said Garovel as they neared the enormous double doors with inlaid silver ornamentation. 'You're looking a little rigid there.'

He honestly didn't know how to answer that. Almost there. Just a bit farther. The long, flat steps up to the doors were only six in number, but they were beginning to look like a mountain climb unto themselves with so many people crowding the edges of the path.

Oh god.

'C'mon,' said Garovel. 'Keep talking to me. You can do it. You don't want the people of Atreya to see their fearless hero freaking out on national television, do you?'

'...That's not helping, Garovel.'

'Well, you're talking to me, so I think it is.'

He might've frowned if he wasn't so intent on keeping his face like

stone.

Miraculously, he managed to make it up the steps and into the building. The noise from outside began to fade slowly, and a sharply dressed woman appeared in front of him, bowed, and then motioned him to follow her.

He did so.

He spotted more nobles loitering around the massive welcoming chamber, talking amongst themselves and throwing glances his way. Apparently, the press hadn't been invited inside yet, but Hector was fairly sure that they would be eventually. As he understood it, most of the Gala was going to be televised.

The guide led him through a number of rooms, and Hector relied on the Scarf to scout ahead a little. He was trying to make out where the Queen and Lynn might be. It was probably safe to assume that they were together, he figured, but there were just too many people around to tell. Bosliat was positively bustling with activity. He could only imagine how busy the palace's staff was.

Then, abruptly, Hector realized that the guide had taken him to a familiar room--a small offshoot of the main dining chamber. He'd previously had dinner with the Queen here, he recalled. That was when she'd decided to give him Warrenhold.

And lo and behold, there the woman sat again. With Lynn standing beside her."

"1856

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

Hector was still feeling locked into his poker face, so he didn't smile, but the corners of his mouth did edge up ever so slightly.

Wow, it was good to see them. Safe and well, seemingly.

The Queen was looking more queenly than ever, he thought strangely. It was probably because of her dress. He'd never seen her wear anything so elaborate and flowing. It covered the entire booth she was seated at, draping over the side and sprawling across the floor like a sparkling blue carpet.

And her crown. She wasn't wearing it at the moment, but it was sitting right there on the table in front of her. A circle of silver, lined with gold and topped with sapphires in the shapes of stars. He'd seen it a few times in a history book or on television, but laying eyes on it in person was providing a decidedly different feeling.

He was perhaps the most keenly aware of Lynn's presence, however.

Her uniform was a little more elaborate than he recalled, too. The Atreyan Seal and the crest of House Belgrant were both woven into her collar. He remembered that she'd often taken to wearing her white cloak while on duty, but the one she was wearing now bore long silver stripes and boasted miniature Atreyan flags at each shoulder. It also had a deeply black interior, perhaps to conceal pockets or to be reversible.

She still had her eye patch and sword as well, of course. And her bone half-gauntlet was concealed beneath a glove, but Hector had no doubt that it was there, too.

And damn.

He was torn, wanting to both stare at her and to avoid eye contact.

"There you are," said the Queen upon seeing him. "I am glad you were able to arrive before the Gala was officially underway. I doubt we will have much opportunity to speak privately tonight--certainly not before midnight." She gestured to the other side of the table. "Please, come and have a seat, Lord Goffe."

Hector made his way over. Lynn was watching him like a one-eyed hawk. He thought she might say something, but she didn't, and he sat down.

Oh shit, he was probably supposed to say something here, wasn't he? "Ah, uh--thank you, Your Highness..."

Helen smiled warmly at him. "It is very good to see you again," she said. "In truth, we had been growing quite worried about you."

"Oh, ah... yeah. Er. Sorry about that..." He glanced between her and Lynn. Mehlsanz was there as well, he noticed, floating up from behind the Queen's enormous gown.

"I understand you had quite the eventful trip," said Helen.

"That's... one way of putting it, yeah."

"I wish I could hear all of the details, but from what Amelia told me, it would be quite a long story, and we have other matters to discuss."

'Not to worry,' said Garovel. 'I'll tell Mehlsanz all about it later, and then she can relay it to you.'

'Yes, I think I'd rather hear it from you than Voreese,' said Mehlsanz.

'Heh. I'll let her know you said that.'

'Oh, god, please don't.'

"1857

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

"I am, however, very curious to hear about these 'guests' who are currently staying at Warrenhold," said the Queen.

Hector had been wondering when that would come up. He'd known that Madame Carthrace had told her about them.

He considered his next words carefully. He knew that he shouldn't keep any of the important details from her, but it was still tough to know where to begin. He supposed he should just get the hardest part out of the way, though.

"...They're fugitives from the Vanguard," he told her.

For a moment, the Queen merely looked at him, her expression tightening. Then she exhaled and averted her gaze. "And here I was worried that they might be on the run from Abolish." She rubbed her brow with a manicured hand. "This is far worse."

"...Sorry," was all Hector could think to say. He glanced at Lynn, who seemed more interested with the Queen's reaction.

Helen took a long breath. "I assume you have a good reason for bringing them to Atreya?"

Hector had had plenty of time to prepare for that question. "They're

good and noble people,” he said. “The Vanguard was in the wrong. And, ah... Abolish attacked them, too. They were kind of desperate for help, so...”

The Queen nodded. “So you volunteered.” She still did not sound terribly pleased. “I also understand that they are... warriors, of some sort?”

Lynn was looking at him again, he noticed.

“...Yeah,” said Hector. “They’re... well, they’re incredibly powerful, actually.”

“Wait,” said Lynn, her one eye widening, “these aren’t the Rainlords you went to help, are they?”

Hector head reared back a little. “Er, yeah, they are. I... thought you guys already knew that.”

Helen’s eyes widened a little now, too. “You brought the Rainlords back from Sair with you?”

He gave a small nod. “Ah, well, about half of them, anyway. The other half was captured by Sanko.”

“You fought Sanko?!” said Lynn.

“What? No, I didn’t fight her. The other half of the Rainlords did. And, er, they lost.” He was little surprised that Lynn even recognized that name, but after a moment, he supposed he shouldn’t have been.

The Queen was rubbing her brow again. Suddenly, she looked a lot more exhausted than she had a minute ago.

“...Madame Carthrace didn’t tell you they were Rainlords?” said Hector.

“No, she did not,” said Helen.

That was surprising. When she’d said that she’d “told the Queen about their new house guests,” Hector had just assumed that she’d informed her of everything she’d been learning about them while managing Warrenhold’s affairs.

Clearly, he should not have assumed that.

Bah. How amateurish of him. Not very lordly at all.



"How long do you intend to give them refuge at Warrenhold?" the Queen asked.

Now there was an important question. He exchanged looks with Garovel, wondering if he wanted to chime in here, but the reaper merely nodded at him.

"...As long as they need," said Hector.

The Queen expression tightened again. "Indefinitely?"  
"1858

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

"Well, they've been driven out of their homeland," said Hector. "But they're very... proud, to say the least. I'm sure they'll want to go and win it back, sooner or later. I'm just hoping that it'll be later."

"Hector." The Queen rested her hands on the table and interlocked her fingers together. "I know you have only been back for a handful of days, but even so, you must realize that Atreya does not need this manner of trouble, at the moment."

He frowned, knowing that her mood was probably not going to improve after what he was about to say. "Ah... honestly, I don't think the Rainlords are going to be a problem. But I do think someone else will be..."

"Excuse me?" said the Queen.

There was no good way of putting this, he felt. "You know who Sai-hee is, right?"

Helen blinked at him a couple times. "Please tell me Sai-hee is not going to invade."

"Oh, uh, she's not. I mean, not as far as I know."

Helen did not look very reassured.

"...But I did bring another fugitive from her group with me," said Hector.

At that, the Queen actually buried her face in her hands.

‘Mm,’ said Garovel, ‘if I could butt in for a second here, I feel like maybe Hector isn’t explaining the situation quite as well as he could be.’

The Queen did not look up, but she did answer through her hands. “Do go on, then, Garovel.”

‘Well, y’see, we didn’t really have a whole lot of options with this Sai-hee fugitive. This guy isn’t one of the Rainlords, by the way. In fact, they kinda hate him, at the moment.’

‘I’m not sure your explanation is any better,’ said Mehlsanz.

‘Look, okay, we get it,’ said Garovel. ‘It’s a precarious situation. But it’s also an opportunity like no other, right? Like Hector said, the Rainlords are incredibly powerful. And right now, we’re on quite good terms with them.’

‘Yes.’ The Queen removed her hands from her face and took another breath. “Amelia mentioned that these guests of yours might make for valuable allies. I, however, remain unconvinced.”

Abruptly, Hector realized that Madame Carthrace had not followed him into this meeting. Jamal and Matteo weren’t there anymore, either. With the Scarf, though, he could sense that they were waiting outside the room with a pair of royal guardsmen. He had no idea where Madame Carthrace had gone, though.

‘That’s perfectly understandable,’ Garovel was saying. ‘I encourage you to come to Warrenhold and meet them yourself.’

The Queen gave the reaper a flat look.

‘We don’t really have the time for that,’ said Mehlsanz. ‘And all eyes are on us. It was difficult enough arranging this meeting here without drawing the attention of the entire media. If we visited Warrenhold, it would make it that much more difficult for you to keep your “guests” hidden--which I assume you wish to continue doing?’”

"1859

‘Yes,’ said Garovel, ‘but if nothing else, then at least YOU could come,

Mehlsanz, and give them a look.'

'Mm, perhaps. But I'm a busy girl, too, you know. And besides, I don't think Helen values my opinion that much.'

The Queen gave her a flat look, now.

'Heh, well, if that's true, then maybe she's right to not care about your opinion,' said Garovel.

'Excuse me?' said Mehlsanz dryly, though Hector heard a hint of amusement in her voice.

'You can't just revive someone and then expect them to treat you like a sophisticated intellectual,' said Garovel. 'I know I make it look easy, being this obviously smart all the time, but trust me, it's a whole ordeal unto itself.'

'Careful,' said Mehlsanz. 'You and I are old friends, but not THAT old.'

Garovel just chuckled.

"This fugitive from Sai-hee," said the Queen, apparently wanting to get the conversation back on track, "tell me about him. You said that you did not think these Rainlords will be a problem but that you think someone else will. You were referring to this man?"

"Oh," said Hector, "ah... yeah. He's... well, his name's Leo. He seems to trust me, but... ah... he might be under the impression that I'm... one of the oldest servants in the world."

The Queen expression remained blank, and she just stared at Hector for a time.

Hector and Garovel did their best to bring the Queen up to speed with regard to what had happened with Leo in the Undercrust. It ended up drifting all the way back into what happened at Dunehall and even into Marshrock, and by the end it, Helen and Mehlsanz were looking more bewildered than ever. Even Lynn was eyeing him as if he was suddenly a different person or something. It was always tough to tell what was going through her head, though.

'But anyway, enough about us,' said Garovel at the protracted silence. 'Tell us about what's going on with you. We'd like to help, if we can.'

'It sounds like you already have your hands full,' said Mehlsanz.

‘Yeah, well, if we can help you with your problems, then maybe you wouldn’t mind helping us with ours.’

“I am not certain how I could help with this Leo character,” said Helen. “He sounds rather unstable. Do you have a particular tactic in mind?”

‘We have a few,’ said Garovel, though Hector wasn’t sure if that was a lie or not. ‘But for the moment, I don’t think we’ll need your help in dealing with him. The way Hector talked about the man was a bit foreboding--and not unduly so, perhaps--but as for me, I’m optimistic about our relationship with him. I think Hector and I will be able to bring him around and count him as another valuable ally and protector of Atreya.’”

"1860

The Queen regarded Hector and Garovel both another time. “I see. Forgive me if I seem skeptical. I have had few reasons for optimism, of late.” She removed her hands from the table and folded them over her stomach.

“I can imagine,” said Hector. He wanted to say something more, something reassuring preferably, but nothing was coming to mind.

“This financial crisis,” the Queen said slowly, “it is... my failure. So many of this nation’s problems might have been avoided if I had only been more attentive in these last five years.”

Hector observed her face with silent surprise. He’d been seeing her all over the news lately, giving speeches and the like, and she always looked so confident and composed. But here and now? Hector had never seen her so uncertain.

Come to think of it, her worried reactions earlier were a lot more expressive as well.

It put a question in Hector’s head.

“...Is the crisis even worse than the public realizes?” he asked.

The Queen met his gaze but didn’t answer him.

Perhaps that was an answer in itself, though.

“...Madame Carthrace wants to open a bank in my name,” said Hector.

Helen’s eyes drifted away from him, seemingly in thought. “A bank? Why would she...?”

“Ah... she seems to think that, er... that my reputation would be able to help stabilize the economy. I mean, I don’t know if, uh... if that would work, but... eh... that’s what she said.”

The Queen seemed lost in thought, but she still managed to say, “I see.” And then, after a beat, “Interesting.”

Hector supposed he shouldn’t stop there. “She, uh... she also wanted me to ask you for funding for it.”

Helen frowned at him.

“Ah--if you can’t help, though, then, er, I understand...”

She sighed mildly through her nose and shook her head. “At this time, I am afraid I can offer you no such assistance.”

‘Really?’ said Garovel. ‘I don’t want to give you a hard time, but it seems a little odd that you wouldn’t choose to subsidize a potential solution to the main problem facing the nation. Or HELP subsidize it, at the very least.’

The Queen’s frown deepened. “I would if I could,” she said.

‘It’s that bad, huh?’ said Garovel.

‘It is,’ said Mehlsanz. ‘We’re already running on fumes, as it is. The Gala? Everything you see here tonight? Bought with funds borrowed from Intar.’

‘Intar, huh?’ said Garovel. ‘Well, it’s true that they’ve got plenty of money to throw around, but I can’t say I like the idea of Atreya being indebted to them.’

“Nor do I,” said Helen, “but it is all we can do to keep up appearances, for the moment. Why, if not for David’s silver tongue, I doubt even they would have agreed to lend us any more.”

‘And now they’re pressuring us to grant special privileges to their businesses. Their influence is growing stronger by the day.’

Well, that corroborated what Madame Carthrace had told him, Hector

figured.

He would've much preferred to learn that she'd been wrong."  
"1861 -- CXCIV.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

'I see,' said Garovel. 'So, then, what's your strategy moving forward? If things continue on like they have been, then it sounds like you won't be able to keep up appearances for much longer.'

At that, the Queen was silent for an uncomfortably long time.

Hector studied her expression, as well as Lynn's, and he couldn't help worrying about what he was seeing. Their solemn gazes. Their aversion of eye contact.

This wasn't right at all. He was the one who was supposed to be afraid of eye contact, not them.

At length, however, the Queen finally answered. "It may already be too late," she said. "I know you are expecting me to say that I have some grand plan to save the kingdom, and if you were any other of the lords here tonight, I would say exactly that. I would tell you what I thought you would wish to hear--indeed, what I would wish to hear. But with the two of you, at least, I feel I must share the fullness of my thoughts on this matter, terrible though they are."

Hector's own expression hardened as he listened, bracing himself for whatever he was about to hear.

"I fear there may simply be no way out of this particular crisis," said the Queen. "Not for me, at least. Not for the Crown."

Hector was confused. He waited for her to explain what she meant.

"Atreya will survive," she went on. "There is no doubt in my mind about that. Because Atreya is its people. And we are a hardier bunch than I think even we ourselves realize. We are tough and often underestimated." A thin smile crossed her lips briefly. "I would say you are a fine example."

Hector might've blushed if he wasn't more concerned about where this

was going.

“And perhaps I am being overly dramatic,” she said. “It is not as if I will be gutted and thrown out onto the street.”

Hector couldn't hold his questions any longer. “What are you talking about? Why are you saying all of this?”

For a short time, the Queen merely looked at him, her eyes softening before seeming to find their steel again. “This information is not yet public, but... Intar has offered to annex Atreya.”

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Four: ‘Thine uncertain destiny...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector's head reared back. He didn't even know what to make of that news.

The Queen was not done talking, however. “I have not yet given them an answer, but it is certainly not something I can dismiss out of hand. And the terms of it, as they have been relayed to me thus far, would be rather generous, considering our circumstances.”

‘Wow,’ said Garovel. ‘And what are these “rather generous” terms, if you don't mind my asking?’

“Complete absolution of all our debts to them,” said Helen, “as well as the shouldering of all debts we have to other nations--namely Korgum and Dozer.””

"1861 -- CXCIV.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

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"1862

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

'Atreya is indebted to Korgum and Dozer?' said Garovel. 'How the hell did that happen?'

"A parting gift from my incarcerated brother, Luther," she said. "And it is no insignificant sum, mind you."

'Goddamn,' said Garovel privately. Then, publicly, he said, 'Okay, well, is that all we'd be getting out of the deal? Debt removal?'

"No," said Helen. "Intar would also grant an additional four billion troa to each of the great houses of Atreya. Which would include you, by the way."

Hector just blinked at that.

'The "equivalent" of four billion troa, you mean,' said Mehlsanz.

"Yes," said Helen. "The troa would become a defunct form of currency. We would have to transfer over to the Intarian tero."

'I can't imagine that the exchange rate on the troa is doing so great, at the moment,' said Garovel.

"I am aware," said the Queen. "I assure you, I would never agree to such a deal without being entirely certain of such details."

‘Of course,’ said Garovel. ‘But still, is that all? Money is great and all, but it takes more than that to make a nation whole.’

“Yes, Atreya would also be formally recognized as a ‘territory’ within Intar and granted all accompanying rights,” said the Queen. “Every Atreyan citizen would be granted full Intarian citizenship, as would any child born in Atreya in the future.”

‘Ah.’ Garovel paused. ‘Alright, now THAT does sweeten the deal quite a bit, if you ask me.’

“Indeed,” said Helen.

‘But still, are they offering anything else?’ said Garovel.

‘Is that not enough for you?’ said Mehlsanz.

‘What can I say? I’m greedy. And if we’re gonna go through with this, we should aim for the best deal possible, shouldn’t we?’

“No other beneficial stipulations were put forward,” said the Queen, “but there is time yet for further negotiations.”

‘Ooh, interesting,’ said Garovel. ‘So you could theoretically still swing for maybe another few billion for new infrastructure or schooling, eh?’

A faint smile crossed the woman’s lips again. “That would be pushing it, I imagine.”

‘Maybe a nice, big park for every city?’ said Garovel. ‘Gray Rock could use a nice, big park. Weirdly enough, Gray Rock has a lot of actually gray rocks everywhere. Not much greenery for all the proud, Atreyan families to raise their healthy, Atreyan kids in.’

The Queen tilted her head at the reaper. “I can no longer tell if you are for or against this deal.”

‘Why, I’m neither. Yet. You still haven’t told us what they want us to give up. Specifically.’

The Queen’s frown returned. “First and foremost, I would have to relinquish all governmental authority.”

‘Mm,’ hummed Garovel.

“I would still remain Queen of Atreya, but I would have no actual

power. I would become a figurehead." She did not look like she much cared for that idea."

"1863

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

Hector could hardly blame her, especially after all she had done to hold on to her power.

Everything Hector had helped her do, no less.

What a strange notion, that it might have all been for naught.

Well, okay, not all. They weren't at war with Rendon. That was kinda important, Hector felt.

"In my stead," Helen continued, "a governor would be elected, as is the case with all of the other Intarian territories. The ultimate authority over Atreya, however, would defer to the President of Intar."

'And this governor would be elected by Atreyans, right?' said Garovel. 'Not some sort of Inatarian council somewhere?'

"Yes, it would be a fully republican process," said the Queen. She shook her head. "And my traitorous brother's goal will have been achieved..."

Hector had no words for her.

Nor did anyone else, apparently.

The Queen soon found her composure again. "Apart from that, of course, Intarian federal law will apply in Atreyan territory, which will usher in a host of legislative changes. Taxes, in particular, come to mind."

'Still, that's pretty tame,' said Garovel. 'Were there any other stipulations?'

"Not as of yet, no," said Helen.

'Hmm. Then, is it just me, or is this deal sounding a little too good to be true? Not that I'm eager to see you removed from power 'r anything.'

‘No, I was thinking the same thing,’ said Mehlsanz. ‘The worst part is that it’s not entirely clear what Intar stands to gain from this deal. Land? Sure, but not that much. Atreya is a tiny country, after all. Extra taxes? Maybe, but it’ll be some time before that revenue pays off all the money that they would be spending on this deal.’

‘Ah, well, I may be able to answer that for you, then,’ said Garovel.

He had both Mehlsanz and the Queen’s attention.

‘Technically, Intar is not at war with anyone at the moment,’ said Garovel, ‘but from what I’ve been learning from the Rainlords and their reapers over the last month or so, Intar has developed a tendency in recent years to discreetly involve itself in international conflicts.’

Mehlsanz nodded. ‘Mm. Yes. I heard that as well when I was working for the Vanguard. The Vangaurd doesn’t keep its own “territory,” per se--not like Sai-hee and Abolish do, certainly--but at the same time, it would not be wholly inaccurate to say that Intar is one of the main countries where the Vanguard operates.’

‘Yes,’ said Garovel. ‘One of the core values of the Vanguard has been to never interfere with the peaceful governing of a people, so it has historically held Intarian law in high esteem--and even agreed to work for it, from time to time. It seems, however, that the bonds between the two are stronger than they have ever been. There is some fear that they may be merging into one, as is the case with Abolish and Dozer.’”  
"1864

“What does that have to do with their desire to annex Atreya?” said the Queen.

‘Your debt to Korgum and Dozer,’ said Garovel. ‘Intar may be thinking a few steps ahead here. Suppose, for instance, that you went on being unable to repay your debt to Dozer, and then Dozer decided to come and collect? How would a country with such a reputation for violence do that?’

“You think Dozer would attempt to conquer Atreya?”

‘I think Intar may think that. And they probably have a better grasp of the situation across the continent than we do, so if they think it might

happen, then I'd say, yeah, it might happen.'

'You're using a bit of circular logic there, aren't you?' said Mehlsanz.

'Am I? Well, you see my point, though, right? Intar is quietly allied with Korgum and therefore at war with Dozer. So in their eyes, it would probably be best if you never repay any of your debt to Dozer.'

The queen seemed to give the idea some thought. "If that is true, then that is quite the expensive strategy on their part..."

'Not as expensive as Korgum losing the war,' said Garovel. 'Abolish already has a fairly strong presence in Azirat, Kortan, and Calthos. It may not be completely dominant there, but Korgum and Lyste are currently barring Dozer's passage north. If Korgum were to fall, though, then I suspect that Dozer would storm into those countries and have them subjugated within a few months. Maybe less. Then Dozer would be able to knock on Intar's southeastern door or maybe just invade Sair and try to add that to the pile.'

'The Vanguard would never allow Dozer to take Azirat, Kortan, and Calthos that easily,' said Mehlsanz.

'Oh, I don't think they'd LET them do anything,' said Garovel. 'The Vanguard is having plenty of its own problems, right now--and worse, I think it might be blind to about half of them.'

"But its recent victory in Jesbol is a good sign, no?" said the Queen.

'Sure, but its even more recent loss in Kavia should raise a few eyebrows, too,' said Garovel. 'In fact, the line of thinking you just brought up is exactly what I'm most concerned about. It's true that the victory in Jesbol was a major one and that Abolish is no doubt suffering hugely for military strength now that both Dunhouser and Gunther are dead at Jackson's hands. But this is a full-blown war we're talking about. It's more complicated than just how strong its top guys are. The Vanguard still has to worry about managing its time and resources properly and not playing into the enemy's hands. Overconfidence isn't going to do them any favors. And anyway, the real top threats are Dozer and Morgunov, and they're both still alive.'

The Queen just folded her hands in front of her again.

'You think the Vanguard is growing overconfident?' said Mehlsanz."

"1865

‘Maybe,’ said Garovel. ‘The loss in Kavia shouldn’t be disregarded as a total fluke, I think. Considering the Vanguard’s current advantage in numbers, that loss probably shouldn’t have happened, so the fact that it did is a warning sign, in my opinion. And now you’re telling me about this annexation offer? I think there may be a connection. I think the Vanguard is trying to pull out every weapon in its arsenal in order to finally deliver a decisive blow to Dozer.’

“That may be true,” said the Queen, “but it does not answer the question of whether or not I should accept Intar’s terms.”

Garovel laughed mildly. ‘Are you asking me to make that decision for you? Why, I’m flattered you hold my opinion in such high regard.’

She gave the reaper another flat look, but the edge of her mouth turned up with the whisper of a smile. “I would appreciate your counsel, though nothing more.”

‘Heh. Well, regardless, I won’t pretend to know what the right decision for Atreya is, but as should be evident from the explanation of my perspective just now, I don’t think Intar is looking to abuse or exploit Atreya or its people, necessarily. I think they’re playing a complicated political and military game, and Atreya is just one small part of it.’

“I do not know if that is a relief to hear or a worry,” said Helen. “Even if Intar holds no ill will towards us, I still fear that Atreya is far from their mind. What is to stop this kingdom from being trampled under the feet of these warring juggernauts?”

‘What’s to stop it, you ask?’ said Garovel. ‘Well, I’m pretty sure that’s our job, isn’t it?’ He motioned not just to Hector but to everyone at the table. ‘And perhaps I’m wrong, but I don’t think any of our feelings on that particular subject are going to change anytime soon, even under Intarian law.’

The Queen’s gaze fell to the table, and she was silent.

So was everyone else for a time.

A question occurred to Hector, and given the current opening in the conversation, he decided to take it. “...If you did decide to give up power, what would you do?”

She looked at him, considerate. "A good question. I would still be queen, but I would have no legal authority. That does not mean I would be powerless, however."

Hector understood her meaning. Not being able to order people to do things didn't mean she wouldn't still have considerable influence.

But still. Queen Helen not being in charge?

He could hardly imagine it.

'Well, so far, I'm not hearing a whole lot of reasons why you should turn the Intarians down,' said Garovel.

The Queen merely frowned.

'Whatever you decide, though, you should know that we'll be with you,' said Garovel. 'Even, hypothetically speaking, if you were to make a horrifically unpopular decision that caused the public to turn on you, Hector and I would still be on your side.'

The Queen exhaled a curt sigh. "Thank you."

"1866

'And for the record, I do think it would be ideal if we could resolve this crisis without relying on the Intarians or any other foreigners,' said Garovel. 'Hector and I will continue to work towards that end--at least until you tell us otherwise.'

She looked between the two of them and nodded. "I appreciate that. I will take your words into consideration."

'You look great in that dress, by the way,' said Garovel.

The Queen seemed surprised by the compliment and eyed Hector, perhaps for an explanation.

He scrambled for an answer. "Ah--yeah. Uh. You do."

"Thank you," said Helen, though not without hesitation in her voice.

'Ask her about the King,' said Garovel privately.

It took Hector a second to realize that he was receiving instruction. He'd gotten comfortable just listening. "H-How is the King doing?"

"He is well," said the Queen. "I am sure he would like to speak to you, himself. He has been wanting to visit Warrenhold."

"Oh, uh. Well, uh, we'd love to have him."

"Only him?" said the Queen with a teasing smile. "Am I not invited, as well?"

Hector felt a flash of embarrassment at having missed that, but then realized that it was probably too late to backtrack with any sort of dignity, and so decided to just go with it. "...Eh, I'll have to think about it."

And the Queen actually laughed. Lynn cracked a smile, too.

Hector wasn't sure he'd ever felt more pleased with himself.

What an amazing feeling it was to make someone laugh. And royalty, no less.

Strange. For the briefest moment, he felt like he was having an epiphany.

He really liked making people laugh. In fact, it was one of the things he liked most.

How was he just now realizing this about himself?

'The party's going to begin soon,' said Mehlsanz.

'Soon isn't NOW, though, is it?' said Garovel.

'You have more you wish to discuss?' she said.

'Not particularly. But it's rare that I get to enjoy such fine company. I don't want it to end yet.'

'What a charmer.'

Hector noticed Garovel's hollow gaze turn toward Lynn. 'How is your bodyguard doing, by the way?'

The Queen perked up at that question, glancing at Lynn herself before regarding Garovel again. "Good, I hope. Is there anything specific you



would like to know?"

Lynn's expression shifted somewhat as she was perhaps sensing that she was being talked about.

'Her aura seems a bit stronger than before,' said Garovel.

Oh? That certainly piqued Hector's interest.

"Yes, I am not surprised," said the Queen. "She has been training diligently."

'What manner of training would that be?' said Garovel.

"Attempting to unlock the secrets of that gauntlet," said Helen. "Mr. Norez has been kind enough to offer his assistance in that regard, as well."

Lynn just looked around awkwardly.

'Oh, yeah, Harper,' said Garovel. 'I'm looking forward to seeing him and Darsihm again, too. They're here, aren't they? It's tough to sense them with all these people around.'

'They are, yes,' said Mehlsanz."

"1867

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

"I am sure they will be happy to see you as well," said Helen.

'Yeah, no kidding,' said Mehlsanz. 'Darsihm wouldn't shut up about you the other day. It seems you left quite an impression on him, Garovel.'

'Oh, really?' laughed Garovel. 'That makes me happy.'

There arrived a knock at the door, and the amusement on the Queen's face diminished suddenly. "Enter," she said loudly.

The same guide from earlier poked her head into the room. "Dinner is ready to be served, Your Highness. Everyone is gathering."

"I see. Thank you, Willow."

The young woman bowed her head lightly and disappeared again.

Helen inhaled deeply. "I suppose we had better make an appearance." She stood, and her gigantic dress moved beneath her like a suddenly disturbed sea. Lynn had to step out of its way.

Hector stood up as well.

"Let us speak again later tonight," said Helen. "There is more I would yet discuss with you."

Hector just gave her a nod and followed her out of the room.

Somehow, he ended up walking next to Lynn.

It didn't seem like there would be enough time to say much of anything to her, but he still couldn't help being intensely conscious of her presence. She was so close. All of his discomfort from earlier came rushing back, stronger than ever, and his neck felt suddenly rigid as he tried not to glance awkwardly at her.

It was just a short walk. No big deal.

But she was right there next to him...

And she was looking damn good, too.

Oh, shit, he'd glanced at her, hadn't he?

And she'd noticed, too. He could see her looking at him in his peripheral vision.

Shit shit shit shit."

"1868 -- CXCV.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

He had to relax. Everything was probably fine. They were in the dining room. Everyone was being seated. He just had to focus on finding his assigned spot. His eyes half-panickedly searched among the triangular name cards for "Hector Goffe." There were so many tables, all pristinely decorated, but the Queen's was the largest and at the center of the room. That one would probably be reserved for all the Belgrants and Lumenbels, though, right? He wouldn't be assigned there, would he? He'd have been placed somewhere--

Nope. His name was right there at the Queen's table, only one chair away from her. And that one chair between them had the name "Lynnette Edith" assigned to it.

He was going to have to sit next to Lynn.

Of-fucking-course he was.

He closed his eyes, rubbed his forehead with one hand, and inhaled deeply.

It was going to be a long dinner.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Five: 'The furtive banquet...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The media was finally allowed into the castle, but only to take photographs of the enormous gathering before dinner. They were soon ushered back out by the security staff, presumably so as not to disturb the guests while they were eating.

Hector appreciated that, at least. The last thing he wanted was to have this miserable meal televised.

Unfortunately, it also had the effect of lessening the overall tension in the room, which seemed to make people more comfortable talking.

Hector was not one of those people.

But perhaps Lynn wasn't, either, because she was remaining noticeably quiet.

The person sitting on his left, however, was very much one such talker. Not that Hector minded. Prince David of House Lumenbel was someone he was most interested in listening to.

"I'm glad to see we both made it back in time for the Gala," said David.

"How was your time in Intar?" asked Hector, thankful for any excuse not to look to his right."

"1868 -- CXCXV.

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

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"1869

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

The Prince frowned. "Not as productive as I would have hoped, sadly."

Hector just listened.

“Rather a turbulent place, Intar,” said David. “You wouldn’t know it just by looking, though. It’s a country full of deception. Calm on the surface, but a maelstrom beneath. Spies everywhere. I’m not sure I met a single trustworthy person while I was there.”

“Wow,” was all Hector could think to say.

“My business there is not yet concluded, however,” said David. “I will have to venture back into that den of vipers in a few days.” He allowed his gaze to linger on Hector a moment. “I don’t suppose there is any way I could convince you to accompany me, is there?”

Hector blinked at that. “Uh...”

David merely waited for an answer. He was genuinely asking, it seemed--not making some sort of strange joke.

“...Are you really that worried about your safety?” said Hector.

David bobbed his head. “Not to put too fine a point on it, but yes. I visited Intar much in my youth. I even studied at university there.” He paused. “Various universities, to be more precise. And before this year, I felt I had a fairly good grasp of the Intarian culture, mindset, and even its political landscape. But now...”

“Something’s changed?” Hector inferred.

“That is putting it mildly. Though, perhaps it is only my perception of it that has changed. Certainly, learning about the existence of... your less corporeal friends has had an effect on my worldview.”

“Hmm.”

“But even so, I cannot help but feel as though there is a greater game being played in Intar, right now.”

“Greater, how?” said Hector.

“Greater than a typical power struggle, I mean,” said the Prince.

“Those are common enough among those with influence.

Neverending, one might even argue. No, this strikes me as something different. It is more a war of ideas, I think.””

"1870

That sounded familiar to Hector, but he didn't want to jump to any conclusions about what the Prince was referring to. "...What ideas do you mean, exactly?"

Before the man could answer, however, their food began to arrive. Hector had almost forgotten what he'd ordered. He'd had to choose four days ago from a menu the size of a book. Apparently, the staff needed that much time to prepare all of these dishes.

A simple salmon entree with mashed potatoes and vegetables was all he'd gone for, but they'd managed to make even that look lavishly gourmet--and taste fantastic, too.

David picked the conversation back up as soon as the servers were gone. "I believe the clash of ideas, at its deepest core, is between pacifism and interventionism."

Hector was mid-bite as he thought about that. He wanted to say something, but he figured he should finish chewing first. A voice to his right was therefore able to beat him to the punch.

"Pacifism?" said Lynn.

Hector barely avoided flinching. He'd almost managed to forget that she was there.

"Indeed," said David. "It seems a popular ideology among youthful Intarian activists. They argue that their nation has been 'an arbiter of subjective truths on the world stage for too long.'"

"What does that mean?" said Lynn.

"Yes, the language they use makes it a bit unclear," said David, "but I believe they are saying that they think Intar is unfairly imposing its own sense of morality and justice upon the rest of the world. Eloa, in particular." The man paused. "Which, I have to say, is not an argument without merit."

Hector supposed that lined up with what Garovel had said about Intar becoming more interventionist in recent years--and growing closer to the Vanguard.

"And they think pacifism is the answer?" said Lynn, apparently not caring to conceal the disapproval in her tone."

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

"I take it you disagree?" said David.

Hector looked at her.

She looked back at him, perhaps thinking, then gave a small shrug. "I'm not a philosopher. It just seems... impractical, I suppose."

"Mm," was all David said.

She wasn't wrong, Hector felt. Trying to get an entire nation to become pacifistic? Especially one as big and proud as Intar? Impractical wasn't even the word for it.

He could only imagine what the Rainlords would think of that. Though, Intar had its own Rainlords, too, didn't it? Now more than ever, he wondered what they were like.

David skewered a small slice of buttered duck with his fork. "So would you mind joining me on my next trip to Intar?" he asked.

Hector hadn't forgotten the proposal. He'd been trying to work out an appropriate response in the back of his mind. "I, ah..." He looked toward Garovel, who was on the other side of the room, apparently eavesdropping on some of the lords' conversations.

Hector supposed he would have to decide on his own. If he was being honest with himself, though, he already knew what he needed to say. "I'm sorry. I... don't think I can leave the country, right now. I've got a lot, uh... that still needs taking care of here."

The Prince frowned but nodded. "I see."

After a moment of observing the man's face, Hector reconsidered his answer. "But... I may be able to find someone else to escort you."

"Oh?" said David. "Who, might I ask?"

That seemed to pique Lynn's interest as well.



Hector recoiled from both their gazes a little. "Ah, uh--er--like I said, I may be able to find someone. I don't, uh, have anyone in particular in mind yet..."

"1872

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

"Ah." David took a quick bite before lowering his voice a little. "Might this have anything to do with these 'guests' of yours I've been hearing about?"

Talking with his mouth full didn't strike Hector as very princely. Hector decided to keep that thought to himself, though. "What have you been hearing, exactly?"

"Oh, this and that. You're taking people prisoner. You're building an army. You've cloned yourself."

Hector cocked his head to the side. "Excuse me?"

"Wild speculation en masse," said David. "You are a popular subject, you know."

"...Cloned myself, though? Really?"

"At this point, I think people just have fun talking about what you might be up to. Much of what gets said is similarly unbelievable. But perhaps you would like to inform me of the truth of the matter?"

"Uh... I would like to, actually, but..." He looked toward the Queen, who was busy conversing with her husband, then toward Lynn, who merely gave him a knowing look. "This may not be the best place for it," he told the Prince. "But I already told, er... ah..."

The Prince glanced toward his sister as well, then nodded. "Ah. Say no more, then." David went for his glass of wine and held it up to Hector. "Let us forestall our worries for the moment and enjoy this fine meal, shall we?"

"Ah--" Hector grabbed his own glass of ice water and tapped it against the Prince's.

It was to Hector's surprise, however, when David turned to the man

sitting on the other side of him--his brother Meriwether--to toast with him as well.

Which meant that Hector suddenly felt an obligation to do the same with the other person that he was sitting next to.

Lynn was already looking at him, holding her own glass, and waiting.

Dear god, why was this situation so immediately terrifying?"

"1873

((Triple Monday -- Page 3 of 3))

Somehow, he managed to clink his glass against hers without the entire universe exploding.

He sipped his water quietly and tried to focus on keeping a clear mind. Clear like the water. Nice and calm. Nothing worth freaking out over. As peaceful as meditating.

"Are you okay?" said Lynn. "You seem a little..."

Oh fuck. A little, what? What was she about to say?

"...Different."

Agh. What in the hell did that mean? He needed more information. But that meant asking a question. Fuck! "...What do you mean?" he managed to ask without dying.

"I'm not sure," she said. "You're kind of... zen. Or something."

What?

No.

Huh?

"Also, what're you wearing?" She touched the Scarf of Amordiin.

Hector was not concerned about her suddenly being overwhelming by its sensory enhancing properties, however. Previously, that had been a worry, but he had discovered during his sparring with Zeff that the Scarf didn't work for other people. At least, as far as they had been

able to tell. They hadn't revealed its power to Zeff, nor did they wish to, but the Lord Elroy had definitely touched it several times and apparently not noticed anything strange.

Hector still wasn't entirely sure why the Scarf didn't work for other people, but Garovel seemed fairly certain that it was a matter of the Scarf only being able to bond with one soul at a time. Something to do with the way bodies functioned as conduits for soul. Hector hadn't really followed the reaper's explanation too well."

"1874

None of that helped Hector to know what to say right now, though. He was still so far beyond confused that he was beginning to wonder if this was a dream or something. Or possibly a nightmare.

"Not that it looks bad on you or anything," said Lynn.

What was she talking about? Oh, the Scarf. Right. Agh. He had to say something. She was going to think he was a weirdo if he just kept sitting there in silence.

Well, she probably already thought that.

But what was he supposed to say? Nothing was coming to mind. All he could think about was how much he was fucking this up, right now.

Shit.

Perhaps Lynn grew tired of waiting, because she pulled back a little. "In any case... it's good to see you again."

Had she really just said that? Even if she was just being friendly or polite, Hector was over the moon. Did she actually mean that?

He had to say something in return, though. He had to.

"It, uh--" C'mon, he told himself. This shouldn't be that hard. "It's good to--er... to... I..."

"It's good to see me, too?" said Lynn. "Is that what you're trying to say?"

For a moment, Hector just stared at her, trying his hardest not to look

like a wide-eyed idiot. He managed to nod, though.

"Well, thank you," she said with a demure smile.

Good god, this woman was incredible.

"On second thought, though, maybe you're not as different as I thought," she said.

Hector didn't know if he should take that as an insult or a compliment, but after a second, he realized he didn't really care. It was clear enough from the tone of her voice and smile on her face that she was enjoying herself.

Yeah.

This was the best dinner ever."

"1875

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 1 of 3))

"You definitely do seem like you've gotten stronger, though," Lynn went on. "How about a sparring match later on? I'll gauge your progress."

"Uh--sure," said Hector unthinkingly. "Oh, but, uh... I'm not sure we'll have time for that..."

She glanced across the banquet hall. The myriad of guests were all talking amongst themselves at the moment, but there was little doubt that they would all be wanting attention from the Queen shortly.

"You're probably right." Her smile turned faintly more mischievous.

"Maybe we should just fight right here and make the news."

Hector gave her a look. He was only mostly sure that she was joking. "We've been in the news enough already, I think."

"Heh. Maybe you have. I wouldn't mind being in the news a little more."

"Really?" said Hector. "You want to become even more famous than you already are?"

She sat up more rigidly in her chair. "Oh, I don't want anything. I serve

at the pleasure of the Queen. I have no desires of my own.”

Hector just kind of blinked at her.

“Aside from this salmon here.” She reached over to Hector’s plate with her fork and skewered a piece for herself. “You don’t mind, do you? This looks really good.”

That made him laugh, and he scooted the plate closer to her. “Go crazy.”

She took a bite. “Mm! Yeah, that’s great. Here, you want some of mine? It’s only fair, right?” She pushed her plate toward him now.

Oh geez. This was getting kinda--

Wait, what the hell was that on her plate? Octopus? Squid? Slimy, whatever it was. Covered in a white sauce and squishy yellow vegetables. Squash, maybe.

Ugh. He’d always hated squash.”

"1876

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 2 of 3))

Hector hesitated, but Lynn was looking at him expectantly. Well, shit. He wasn’t about to refuse her, but he still had to ask, “...What is that, exactly?”

“Calamari and squash,” she told him, pushing the plate even closer now. “Try some.”

He was not pleased to know that his guess had been correct, but he supposed it didn’t matter now. He cut off a piece with his fork. It gooped together quite easily. And he shoveled it into his mouth.

“Oh,” he said as the taste hit his tongue and his face tried to scrunch into itself. “Oh, that’s awful.”

“I know, right?” said Lynn, laughing. “I made a huge mistake ordering it.”

He placed his fist in front of his mouth as he tried to muscle the food

down. There was something especially horrible about the sauce. It was sweet in the most unfitting way he could imagine.

He got it down, though, and couldn't help coughing a little afterwards.

"Want some more?" she asked. "I've got plenty left."

"...You're a bad person," said Hector.

She laughed. "I'm sorry. But I need help finishing this. I don't think I can get through it on my own."

"I don't think you have to finish it."

"My mother would disagree with you."

Hector recalled Isabelle Edith and had no trouble believing that. "Well, I won't tell her if you don't."

Lynn just smiled faintly again before reassessing her meal. She took another bite. Her face remained perfectly undisturbed as she chewed.

"...You're good at hiding your disgust," Hector observed.

"It's a matter of professionalism," she said. Then she pushed the plate closer to him again. "Now have some more before I vomit."

"1877

((Triple Wednesday -- Page 3 of 3))

Hector didn't know why he was listening to her now, but he did as she asked and took another bite. It was just as bad as the first, if not worse.

Horrible as it was, though, he was enjoying himself. They kept taking turns, and Hector watched her face, waiting to see her facade break--which it eventually did, though only barely. But even just that small twist in her expression was more than enough to make him laugh. He helped her finish her abysmal meal and shared the rest of his own with her in order to alleviate the aftertaste.

It wasn't much longer until the servers began bringing out everyone's chosen dessert courses. Hector had ordered himself a slice of

strawberry cheesecake with whipped cream. Prince David had gone for the chocolate cake, Hector noticed, and Lynn, apparently, had ordered... some sort of thick, yellow drink with a carrot sticking out of it.

Hector just looked at it, then at her, not saying anything.

She noticed his gaze. "What?"

He pointed at it. "What the hell is that?"

"It's carrot cake," she said. "In milkshake form. With honey. And something else, I think. I can't remember."

"Why...?" After a moment, he realized that word alone was enough. "Just, why?"

Another tiny smile crept into her face, and she looked momentarily distressed. "Why not?"

Hector just blinked slowly and shook his head. "Have you ever ordered that before?"

"No..."

"I am not helping you finish it."

"Oh, come on! It might be really good!"

"Yeah? Well, I can't wait to see you try it."

"Are you sure you don't want to try it first? I don't mind."

Hector almost refused immediately, but then he thought better of it. "Alright, fine, I will." He reached over and grabbed a spoonful for himself.

Lynn just watched him in silence.

Wow.

It tasted like a sugar pixie had taken a shit in his mouth."

"1878

Hector kept his composure, though. He'd expected it to taste horrible.

Maybe not quite this horrible, sure, but his plan remained unchanged.

He made his face light up. "Wow, it's actually pretty good," he said.

Lynn blinked and then tried the concoction herself. She wasn't able to conceal her displeasure at all this time, and she had to put a hand over her mouth.

He tried not to laugh too hard while she was glaring at him with her one eye, but he could see that she was trembling from muted laughter of her own, as well. He pushed his cheesecake closer to her as a peace offering.

The cheesecake didn't last much longer with the both of them sharing it, and not even Lynn wanted to touch the milkshake monstrosity again.

As everyone in the chamber finished up their dessert, Hector began noticing more movement among the serving staff all around them. At first, he thought they were bringing out some kind of secret extra course, but when he saw that they were carrying folded cards instead of food, he began to wonder what they were doing.

To and fro, they scurried, dropping cards off in front of the various lords and ladies. He didn't have to wait long in order to find out what the cards were for, because several of them arrived in front of him. He unfolded one and read its contents.

'Lord Henrich Masden requests a meeting this evening,' it read.

He picked up another one, and it said exactly the same thing, save that it pertained to Lord Arnold Greenway. Still another was for Lady Margaret Holbach.

And more cards kept arriving with more names, all requesting a meeting.

As he looked around at the other lords and ladies in confusion, he couldn't help noticing that they were all staring at him now."

"1879

It looked as though most of the dinner guests hadn't received any cards at all, and the ones that did had only received seven or eight, but



here he was, sitting in front of a small mountain.

This did not bode well for the rest of the evening, he felt.

Now that he was thinking about it, he recalled reading about something along these lines during the dinner preparations. In the preliminary paperwork, where he'd also submitted his meal order, there had been a list of names whom he could extend up to four invitations to. He hadn't given it much thought, since he wasn't especially interested in meeting with any of the other guests, specifically. He might've picked the Queen, but she hadn't even been on the list, probably because she was the host, not a guest.

"Looks like you're in for a fun night," said Lynn dryly, brushing away a couple cards that had spilled over to her side of the table.

David was chortling as he stacked his own cards together. "I am not sure whether to envy you or pity you."

"I wonder what they all want to talk to you about," said Lynn.

Hector was wondering that as well. It probably wasn't just one thing, right?

Might be easier if it was, though.

After that, as if all the sudden attention from the other lords wasn't enough of a weight, the media was also let back into the dinning hall in order to take more pictures and even video this time.

He couldn't help but notice that they were fixating on him again. This stupid pile of cards was going to make the news, wasn't it?

Goddammit."

"1880

((Triple Saturday -- Page 1 of 3))

He had no idea what do, but he tried not to let that show on his face. He didn't know how successful he was at that, since there were probably about a thousand different ways for facial expressions and body language to be interpreted, but he did his best. It helped that he was able to compartmentalize this panic a little. He could focus on his

body, his breathing, his posture--his existence in the universe, even. Like meditating.

When everyone started moving again, though, that wasn't much of a solution anymore. For a terrible second, he was worried that the press was going to start asking tons of questions, but apparently not. They were only allowed to take pictures and video, thankfully.

The dining tables were cleared away, and Hector was given a box to store all his cards in. The guests began to spread out and talk amongst themselves again, but Hector still couldn't help feeling like everyone was still staring at him. It was enough to make him consider putting on his armor again, just to help him cope with the pressure.

But then, he supposed he'd felt worse than this. Not much worse, but worse. Talking to Ivan and Leo, specifically came to mind. And Malast, too?

Actually, no, not really. He hadn't felt all that much pressure talking to that guy, comparatively speaking. Perhaps it was because he'd never really felt like Malast might slaughter him and everyone around him. That did tend to increase the stress level of a situation.

Ugh. He was not looking forward to talking to Leo again.

When he thought about it like that, though, it made all this attention feel a bit more bearable.

Madame Carthrace soon found him and started going through his invitations with him."

"1881

((Triple Saturday -- Page 2 of 3))

It seemed entirely apparent from the get-go that there would simply not be enough time to meet with everyone who had requested it--not this evening, at least. Madame Carthrace was already talking about scheduling future meetings back at Warrenhold for anyone they weren't able to speak to tonight.

"But that also presents its own challenges as well," she said. "These people are tremendously prideful. If we do not prioritize those with the most influence, some among them are liable to feel slighted. And while

I would find that intensely amusing, it would unfortunately be counterproductive.”

Hector just listened closely. He had little doubt that Amelia’s knowledge and experience here needed to be the driving force behind these interactions. Mostly, he just wanted to not say anything stupid.

“With your permission,” said Amelia, “I would like for us to meet with Lionel Carthrace first.”

Hector blinked at the name but didn’t say anything.

“You previously mentioned wanting to meet my family,” she went on, “and this is as good an opportunity as any. My nephew should not yet know about our plan to open a bank, and I would prefer that you talk to him before he does. I fear that knowledge will change how he presents himself to you.”

“I remember you mentioning that before,” said Hector.

“I don’t know what he wants to talk to you about, but there is a strong chance that he will not wish for me to be present during your meeting. In fact, it may even be better for me to not go with you at all. My presence will likely change his demeanor as well.”

“Hmm.”

“That being said, I would still like to be there with you.”

Hector considered her words.”

1882

((Triple Saturday -- Page 3 of 3))

Truth be told, he very much wanted Amelia to be there, too, but he still remembered his own reasoning for wanting to meet her family. He wanted to know more about her. If he was going to put this woman at the helm of the largest bank in the country, potentially, then he wanted to have a better measure of her as a person.

So maybe, in this case, going against his more fearful instinct and talking to the man without her would better help him achieve that end.

Plus, he would still have Garovel with him, so it wasn't like he'd be entirely on his own.

Yeah.

"...I'll talk to him by myself," he told her, "but I'd like you there for all the other meetings."

She frowned but nodded. "Very well."

They went through more names after that and began forming a list. They didn't get very far into it, considering how many names there were in total, but it would be enough for tonight. They gave their list to the palace staff so as to help with organization, and then Hector was off to go meet the Lord Lionel Carthrace.

En route, however, a man in glasses came up to him.

"Lord Goffe," the stranger said, "it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Ah--" Hector wasn't quite sure what to say. This didn't feel quite right. They were in a hall, and one of the palace staff had been in the middle of guiding him to a more private location where he could have his meeting. Who was this random guy?

"My name is Matthew Elias." The guy whipped out a pen and notepad. "Would you mind if I asked you a few quick questions, sir?"

Oh, shit.

'Careful,' warned Garovel privately."  
"1883

"Do you think it's proper to be having the Gala now, given the current financial crisis the country is facing?" said Mr. Elias.

Wow. Hector definitely didn't plan on answering that. He could hear his guide from the palace staff radioing for security.

"No statement?" Mr. Elias scribbled something. "That's fine. I understand. What do you think about the Queen's recent decision to reinstitute the death penalty?"

What?

Hector's guide was intervening personally now, placing himself between Hector and the reporter and trying to usher the man away. Security was already arriving from the far end of the hall.

"Lord Goffe! Do you have a statement?!" Mr. Elias struggled mildly to hold his ground. "Where have you been these past few months?! Did you leave the country?! What have you been doing?! Lord Goffe!"

Hector felt a little bad for the guy as security arrived and pulled him away, all but dragging him.

Geez.

Hector didn't have much love for reporters, given how intrusive he'd known them to be, but seeing that dude fight so hard just for a story... well, there was something admirable about that, he supposed.

They proceeded on, with Hector's guide offering copious apologies and Hector assuring him that it wasn't a big deal.

It was still a long way to the negotiating chamber--such a long way, in fact, that Garovel seemed to grow impatient.

'Why the hell is this little walk taking so long?' he said privately. 'There are plenty of other rooms around here, and they're all empty. And we don't even need this guide, anyway. There's nobody else around, so I can sense where the Carthraces are pretty easily. I could take you right to them in twenty seconds flat.'

'Actually, uh... I know the answer to that,' said Hector.

'Hmm?' said Garovel."

"1884

((Triple Monday -- Page 1 of 3))

'Er... I'm pretty sure that we're going to the solar level,' said Hector.

Garovel paused. 'The what?'

'The solar level. The floor where all the solars are. The top floor of

Bosliat's main house was designed to have a bunch of solars, as a tribute to the Goddess of Light. Important negotiations are traditionally held there because they're supposed to be, like, sacred. You're not supposed to do anything shady in front of Cocora.'

Garovel didn't say anything.

Hector had more, though. 'The rooms are all on the top floor because they have windows in the ceiling--to let in the Goddess' light. The design became a problem at one point, though, when someone used them to break into the palace and try to assassinate the king. Like a hundred years ago or something. So all the windows have bars on them now.'

There arrived noticeable silence as Garovel just looked at him.

'...What?' said Hector.

'I really don't like it when you explain things to me,' said Garovel. 'Just feels all kinds of wrong.'

Hector had to suppress a laugh so as not to freak out his guide. 'I just, uh, happened to read up about Bosliat the other day.'

'You and your castle fetish.'

'I don't think being interested in something makes it a fetish.'

'Whatever you say, you little weirdo.'

Sure enough, after an elevator ride and a couple more long hallways, they arrived at their destination, which was a handsome room of mostly burnished wood with visible support beams under the ceiling--and a big window with bars under it as well. Of course, it was late enough into the evening that hardly any sunlight made it through, but a pair of tall bronze lamps still bathed the solar with plenty of warm light."  
"1885

((Triple Monday -- Page 2 of 3))

Lionel Carthrace was not yet here, but Garovel informed him that he soon would be, so Hector took a seat at the table in the middle of the room and waited. The guide bowed and excused himself.

When Lionel Carthrace arrived, the man was not alone. A pair of enormous bodyguards in suits and ties flanked him. One entered the room, and the other remained just outside the door.

Briefly, Hector wondered if those bodyguards were here because of him. After a moment, though, he figured probably not.

Wait a minute, didn't he bring a bodyguard of his own?

Wow, he'd almost forgotten about Matteo Delaguna and Ernivoc. Hector hoped the guy wasn't too upset about being left to his own devices. He'd have to ask Garovel about where those two were later. Right now, the presence of the Lord Carthrace was demanding his full attention.

The middle-aged man had a friendlier disposition than Hector had been expecting. From the way Amelia talked about her family, he'd thought the current head of House Carthrace would appear more stern and unwelcoming.

Maybe he was just accustomed to the Rainlords, though.

"It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Lord Goffe." The man offered him a smile and a handshake.

Hector took the latter and said, "Likewise."

"I must say," said Lionel as he took his seat, "I am surprised that my dear aunt is not with you."

Hector wasn't sure what to say to that. Inquire? Yeah, maybe inquire. "Why do you say that?"

"She has a way of injecting herself into situations," said Lionel. "Not that that is such a terrible quality."

Again, Hector wasn't sure what to say to that and this time decided to say nothing."

"1886

For a moment, the Lord Carthrace merely sat there, perhaps expecting him to say something or perhaps just observing him. "Well," the man said, "seeing as you clearly received many more requests than just my own tonight, I suppose I should not keep you. Allow me to get right to the point."

Hector appreciated that.

"The reason why I--and so many of the others, I suspect--wished to speak with you was because I am gravely concerned about the direction our nation is going in."

Hector just nodded lightly, figuring that made sense--and that the man was not yet done talking.

"Furthermore," Lionel went on, "I believe you will play a large role in shaping Atreya's future."

Hearing that, Hector tried to keep his expression still. It was difficult. He couldn't stop himself from blinking a couple times, though the rest of his face remained flat.

Shaping Atreya's future?

Talk about pressure.

He supposed he couldn't really deny it, though. With so many people relying on him now, so many responsibilities to be mindful of, it wasn't such a stretch of the imagination.

It sure felt like it, though.

Ugh.

'Yeah, that's great 'n all,' said Garovel, who was hovering over his shoulder, 'but ask him to be more specific.'

"...Was there something specific that you wanted to discuss with me?" said Hector.

Lionel eyed him for a moment. "...No. No, not specifically. I simply wished to gain an understanding of your views. In general terms. Your worldview, in other words."

Why did Hector find that so hard to believe?

"...I find that very strange," said Hector flatly. "I would imagine... that a



man with a real estate empire such as yourself... would be a little too busy to wonder about what I'm thinking.'"

"1887

Lionel breathed half a laugh. "You flatter me. I am not so busy a man as that. These days, I pay other people to run my 'empire,' as you put it, for me. I am much more of a man of leisure, I'm afraid."

Somehow, Hector doubted that. But he also wasn't about to come right out and declare the man a liar to his face. Mainly, he just wondered what game this guy was playing.

Thankfully, he had a three thousand year old reaper to consult.

'What do you make of him?' said Hector.

'Not much, so far,' said Garovel in the echo of privacy. There was no one else around who might be able to overhear him, but Hector supposed the extra caution couldn't hurt. 'He's just testing the waters right now, I think--trying to get the measure of you.'

"I wonder what my aunt has told you about me," said Lionel, tilting his head.

"She doesn't talk about her family very often," said Hector. "But I understand that you aren't... on the best of terms."

Lionel frowned and gave a nod. "Alas, that is so. Old wounds have a way of resurfacing when ignored."

"...What do you think of her?" said Hector.

"Mm. A difficult question, that."

"Why is that?"

"Because my opinion of her has changed over the years. Many times, in fact."

Hector just kept listening.

"Even when I was a boy, she was a bit of an outcast from the rest of the family. But I liked that about her. She had a kind of... ostentatious

energy to her. She may not have gotten along with our parents, but there was little doubt that she loved us fiercely--the children, I mean.” Lionel shook his head with a small laugh. “That woman has always been a paradox. She said she never wanted children, yet she would play with us nonstop. She said she never wanted a husband, yet she only ever loved one man. She said she wanted to retire, yet now she has involved herself with you.””

"1888

Hector wasn't sure what to make of the man's tone. It didn't sound resentful or even condescending.

Lionel left an opening in the conversation for him to respond, but when Hector again elected not to say anything, the man asked, "What do you think of her?"

For some reason, Hector didn't want to answer that, but he supposed it was a perfectly fair question, considering he'd just asked it himself. "...I'm not sure yet," he decided to say.

"Ah. Truly?"

Hector just tilted his head at the man.

"If so, that surprises me," said Lionel. "I've always thought that my aunt was one of those rare people, those charismatic savants who can earn almost anyone's affection."

That didn't track with everything else Lionel had implied, Hector thought. "Then why is your relationship with her so strained?"

"Ah. Because charisma is, at the end of the day, only a superficial element of one's person. Inevitably, the underlying values that one cherishes are the real judge of someone's character."

Hector was trying to remain impartial, but he didn't much care for what the man was suggesting about Amelia. "In that case... what are the 'underlying values' of hers that you dislike?"

Lionel smiled, then frowned. "This is getting quite personal. And rather off-topic, perhaps."

"Maybe so," said Hector. "But all the same... it would be helpful to me if

you... could provide a more rounded picture of her for me.”

At that, the man paused and leaned back a little in his seat. For a time, he merely studied Hector’s face.

It looked like he wanted to say something, though, so Hector just waited for him.

“Forgive me,” said Lionel. “When I came here this evening, I honestly expected you to have already been quite thoroughly wrapped around her finger, but I see now that this is not so.”

"1889

Again, Hector didn’t particularly care for what the man was implying, but he still resisted the urge to jump to any conclusions. It was important to keep a level head here, he felt. He knew only too well about how complex people and their relationships with one another could be. Families even more so. And he supposed the man was trying to pay him a compliment, as well, in his own way.

“In truth, I am relieved,” Lionel went on. “You are your own man, and that is a rarer and rarer thing in this day and age.”

Hector wanted to glance at Garovel but purposely held his gaze still. Ironic, he felt, that Lionel would say such a thing about a servant, of all people.

“I believe this country needs more people like you,” said Lionel. “You are an inspiration to many, you know.”

Boy, this guy sure was generous with the praise. Usually, Hector had a hard time dealing with that, but something about this conversation--or the context surrounding it, perhaps--was preventing any such flustered feelings from reaching him. It was hard to tell how genuine any of Lionel’s words were.

At the protracted silence, Lionel seemed to intuit that Hector was still waiting on him. “Ah, I apologize. I suppose you are wanting an answer to that rather penetrating question that you asked before, no? What underlying values of hers do I dislike? That is a tough one, I must admit. And I do find it very distasteful to speak ill of others. Are you sure you wish to pry these sour feelings out of me? Would it not be

best to simply let sleeping dogs lie, as it were?"

Were all of these meetings going to go like this? Hector hoped not. "...Weren't you the one who just said that old wounds have a way of resurfacing when ignored?"

Lionel paused at that, then smiled. "Aha... I suppose you have got me there." Then he frowned.

"1890

Huh. Suddenly, Hector felt a little bad for him. Not enough to ease up, though. If Amelia Carthrace was going to run some gigantic, nation-rescuing bank for him, then he needed to know more about her.

Lionel took another moment to gather his thoughts. "Well... if I had to put my misgivings with her into words... then I would have to point to her propensity to say one thing and then do another."

Hmm. That was actually a pretty serious accusation, Hector felt. It spoke of untrustworthiness. He was going to need a hell of a lot more detail, though. "Is there a specific incident that you're referring to?" he asked.

"More than one, to be sure," said Lionel, "but off the top of my head, there was the incident in which she promised my sister a position in her company, only to turn around and give the job to someone else."

Hmm.

"And there was the time," Lionel continued, "when she claimed to be supportive of a marriage between my nephew and the daughter of Arnold Greenway. She decided to withdraw said support mere hours before our two families were to finalize terms, and when the Greenways caught wind of her change of heart, they decided to call off the entire thing. To the misery of my nephew. He was quite smitten, you see."

Hmmmm.

"Oh, and of course, there was also the time that she decided to go on a drunken tirade about my late father--her own brother--on the very occasion of his funeral. In front of hundreds of esteemed guests. That was certainly a manner of insult and humiliation that is difficult to

simply forgive and forget, let me tell you.”

Okay, now that one did sound pretty bad, Hector thought. But Lionel was far from done, apparently, and as Hector continued to listen, he still couldn't help distrusting every version of events that this guy was feeding him.”

"1891 -- CXCVI.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Six: ‘Take root, seedling, and germinate...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Emiliana Elroy sighed as she realized that she had stopped paying attention to what she was reading again. Her lack of sleep was really starting to get to her, it seemed, and it certainly didn't help that her chosen reading material for the evening was so damn confusing.

The Many Mysteries of Mutation, by Agam Elroy.

Technically, she had read this thing twice already, but even now, she still wasn't sure that she actually understood any of it. The subject matter seemed complicated enough on its own, but the archaic prose only made it more difficult. And strangely enough, there was quite a bit of poetry in it, too.

That last part might've been more discouraging to her, but the book's normal writing was so incomprehensible to her that she kind of preferred the parts with poetry. She could at least occasionally feel like she understood what the poems were trying to say.

Desires held, promises kept.

The mind, the labyrinthine self, an unconscious adjudicator.

Therein is fulfillment met.

Desires held, promises broken.

The mind, the saboteur of god, a righteous terror.

Therein is misery spoken.

Aimless heart, promises unthought.

The mind, the ceaseless turner, a motivating factor.

Therein is a world of rot.

She'd been staring at this particular passage for the better part of an hour now, feeling somehow stupider with each passing minute. She could've sworn that it made sense to her the first time she read it, but the more she tried to deepen her understanding, the less clear it seemed to become.

She set the book down and rubbed her eyes. Maybe she needed a break. She'd been doing nothing but reading lately. It just seemed like the most useful way to spend her time, given the circumstances."

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"1892

She hadn't forgotten Germal's warning to her regarding the "honey trap" nature of the Library of Erudition, but according to Gohvis, as long as she followed the Library's rules, she would be fine. And she was being careful.

But there were other things to do besides read books all day. There was an impressive kitchen on the first floor where a few of Gohvis' followers had offered to instruct her in the culinary arts. Which was actually quite tempting, honestly. She had no idea how in the world these people managed to keep their food stores so well-stocked, but the skills of the chefs here were undeniable. Virtually every meal she'd had in this place had been an utter delight, and just thinking about next one was beginning to make her mouth water.

Aside from learning to cook, however, there was also the underground training facility where she'd seen people honing various combat abilities. She had yet to even ask if she was allowed to partake in any combat training, but she did plan to give it a go, eventually.

There was also a game room on the second floor, though she hadn't actually seen anyone using it yet. She might've liked to play someone in chess or pool or even foosball, but without any opponents, that didn't seem like it was going to happen. Maybe she just hadn't visited that room at the right time of day yet, but she wasn't getting her hopes up. These people belonged to the Dozer-half of Abolish, after all. She was frankly amazed that this place even had a game room.

All-in-all, this was a strange manner of captivity. So far, she and Chergoa had been free to roam around the building as they pleased, talk to whomever they desired, and seemingly do whatever they wanted.

Except leave, of course. Not that there was any chance of that, what with the Dáinnbolg raging endlessly beyond the Library's walls."  
"1893

The main reason she felt reading to be the most valuable use of her time was simply because of the Shard of the Dry God in her possession--her one link to the outside world. As far as she had been able to tell, conventional communications technologies didn't even work here--which wasn't so surprising, she supposed. The eternal storm that enveloped Exoltha no doubt rendered such things impossible.

But that only made the Shard seem that much more incredible and precious.

For a while, she'd been intensely paranoid that someone in the Library might recognize the Shard and try to take it from her, but at the same time, trying too hard to conceal it also seemed like a bad idea. If someone noticed her hiding it or acting strangely with it, then that might tip them off to its importance. But if she acted like it wasn't anything special, then maybe no one would be the wiser.

That was what Chergoa had advised her to do, at least. Emiliana had also consulted Hector for Garovel's opinion on the matter and been told basically the same thing. Apparently, the Shards were not all that widely known about, and even the few who did couldn't possibly know about their "heretofore unheard of" capabilities as some type of psychic telephone.

She still couldn't help worrying about it in the back of her mind, though. Most of all, she was worried that Gohvis might take it from her, that he might somehow just... know. A part of her honestly questioned whether it was even truly possible to hide something from him. He had tracked her down from half a world away based on nothing more than some sort of shared "link," after all.



But surely, if he knew about the Shard, about the full extent of its capabilities, then he would've confiscated it by now.

...Right?"

"1894

She shook her head, not even wanting to go down that particular rabbit hole. She had enough things to worry about already without getting lost in paranoia over things she couldn't even control in the first place.

She wondered if she should contact Hector again soon. He had mostly been leaving her alone, probably because he'd gotten the impression that she didn't want to be bothered--which wasn't exactly inaccurate, of course--but even so, she wouldn't have minded another update on how her family was doing.

Then again, she was almost afraid to ask. What was that saying? No news was good news? She could see the wisdom in that now. No doubt, Hector would tell her if something really important happened.

Probably.

He was such an... odd fellow. Sometimes, he seemed so meek and fragile, and other times, he became downright obstinate. Of all the people for her to have ended up "bonded" to in this weird way, why was it him?

He was not entirely unpleasant to talk to, though, she supposed. Perhaps she merely needed to get to know him better.

Yes, she would have to--

A monstrous hand appeared suddenly from her peripheral vision and picked up the book that she had put down earlier. She flinched a little at the sight of Gohvis standing there next to her.

While she wasn't quite as uncomfortable around the Monster of the East as she was when she had first arrived here, she didn't know if she would ever get used to the way that he could just show up like that. No footsteps, no warning of any kind. How could someone so gigantic move so silently? "Back to this one again, are you?" he said, handing the book back to her.

She took it. "...I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around it.""  
"1895

"Mm," hummed Gohvis with his low double-voice. He pushed the chair on the other side of the small table out of his way and sat down on the floor instead. He was tall enough that he was still slightly above Emiliana's eye level. "And the fact that it was written by your own ancestor has no bearing on your interest in it."

She eyed Agam Elroy's name on the binding another time. "I didn't say that."

"What do you hope to glean from that book?"

That question made her hesitate. "I don't know..."

Gohvis merely sat there, waiting for her to elaborate.

"What, um..." She felt like she might be treading on thin ice with this next question, but she just couldn't get it out her mind. "What was Agam like? You knew him, didn't you?"

The Monster took his time answering. "He was unique."

It was her turn to wait. That couldn't have been all Gohvis was going to say about him, surely.

"But he was not someone you should look up to, if that is what you are hoping for," said Gohvis.

That irked her for some reason, and she couldn't stop herself from saying, "And you are?"

And for a long moment, the Monster of the East merely looked at her.

Emiliana met his gaze steadily, but she could feel her heart in her throat, and her whole body seemed to become a statue, too scared to even twitch. In her mind, though, she was sure that Gohvis wasn't going to hurt her.

Mostly sure.

"Agam was more mystic than scientist," Gohvis finally said. "He was

brilliant, to be sure, but superstitious did not even begin to describe him.”

Emiliana breathed again. Then her eyes went to the book in her hands.

“Perhaps it is for the best that you do not understand,” said Gohvis.

“His words have a way of seeding irrational thoughts into impressionable minds.””

”1896

She tried to consider her next words a bit more carefully than her last ones. “What was the nature of your relationship with him?”

Gohvis allowed that question to linger for a while before answering it. “He was like a father to me.”

“...That is difficult to imagine,” she said.

“Then don’t.”

She frowned. “He wasn’t a member of Abolish, was he?”

“No.”

“Were you with Abolish back then?”

“No.”

“Then...?”

“Then, what?” said Gohvis. “Ask a clear question.”

She wanted to, certainly, but she was afraid. She was abruptly on the verge of asking what she most wanted to know, what she had been wondering ever since she’d arrived here and begun learning more about Gohvis. It was perhaps the single most important question that she could possibly ask, but even though she finally found a good opportunity to pose it, she was somehow terrified of what the answer could be. She felt as if everything she knew about the world might be called into question if she heard it, as if such an answer might simply undo her as she currently knew herself.

But...

She still had to ask. She couldn't stop herself. "Then... why are you with Abolish now?"

"Because Abolish, at least, understands the greater problem facing this planet," said Gohvis.

"Which is?"

"Humanity itself, of course."

Emiliana didn't know what to say to that.

"Abolish has many different ideas about how to deal with the problem of humanity," said Gohvis. "Some of those ideas, it must be said, are mad. Yes. But such ideas are still attempting to address the problem, instead of merely ignoring it, as the Vanguard does. As everyone does."

"And what is the problem of humanity, precisely?"

"In a word? Growth."

She was even more lost than before. That hadn't been the word she would have expected.

"Humanity requires growth," said Gohvis. "In all things. Biological, philosophical, technological, psychological. Humanity requires growth. Growth requires struggle. Struggle requires conflict. And conflict? Conflict requires instigation.""

"1897

Emiliana didn't understand. "Are you... really trying to tell me that Abolish is helping humanity grow?"

Gohvis shook his huge head. "No. It may be true that Abolish is preventing stagnation on some level, but that is beside the point. What I am saying is that the aspect of humanity which compels growth is itself the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"It is a fundamental element of human nature to require--and therefore

pursue--growth. Without that fundamental element, humans wither and die in agony. But as I said, growth requires conflict. That conflict may mean physical violence. It may mean an entirely psychological process. It may mean something in between. But that conflict is still nonetheless required for growth to occur. That is its nature."

She touched her forehead, still trying to understand what he was getting at. "So then... are you saying... that Abolish is trying to destroy humanity's need for growth?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"But... how does that translate into callously murdering so many innocent people?"

"You don't see? It could not be more simple. Broadly speaking, there are only two perspectives with regard to solving the problem of growth. The first is the very basic, straightforward method which you just mentioned. Genocide. No human conflict can exist if no humans exist."

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. "How can you say that so matter-of-factly? That's horrible..."

"Yes," said Gohvis. "To believe in such a method first requires a deep hatred of humanity--or perhaps of existence as a whole. And for people such as yourself, who have no doubt never personally felt such hatred, then its logical conclusion of genocide does not seem logical at all. I might as well be trying to describe the beliefs of an alien species. It would be just as relatable to you, I imagine.""

"1898

"The way you're talking about it," said Emiliana, becoming mildly hopeful, "you make it sound like you do not believe in that method yourself."

"That is because I don't," said Gohvis.

"I'm glad to hear that."

"I am more of a believer in the second method," the Monster said.

"And that is?"

"To change human nature."

A doubtful expression crossed her face, and she tilted her head. "And how do you plan to accomplish that?"

"I make no claim that it would be easy," said the Monster. "But there are many in Abolish who are pursuing this same goal, in their own way."

"But what is your way?"

"Hmph." He leaned back a little and allowed his gaze to drift away from her. "Take a guess."

Guess? How would she know how he intended to...?

Her eyes widened a little as the thought struck her. "...Mutation?"

"Indeed."

"You want to use mutation to change human nature itself?" Somehow, that notion made so much sense and yet none at all, like she'd connected all the dots correctly only to see them create an impossible image.

"Essentially, yes."

"But... how?"

Rather than answering, Gohvis merely looked at her again. Was he waiting for her to connect the dots again? Or to ask a more specific question? Or was he just done with the conversation entirely?

She wracked her brain for something, anything. "That's... I mean... you can't."

"Why not?" said Gohvis with even more of a knowing calmness than usual.

"Because--you--" It seemed so obvious that she was having trouble even putting it into words. "Because mutation only affects the user. And to change human nature, you would have to change everyone in the world. And everyone in the world can't be a mutation user."

"Are you sure about that?"

"1899

"I'm--" A horrified pause came over her as she considered what he might be implying. "I'm... pretty sure?"

"Mm."

She was hesitant to inquire any further, but there was no point in stopping now, she figured. "Are you really saying... that it is possible to make everyone like us?"

"I'm not saying anything," said Gohvis. "I'm merely questioning your certitude."

Emiliana just stared at him, trying to discern something from his unreadable lizard face.

Gohvis didn't say anything more, however. Even after another minute or so of silence, he seemed perfectly content to let the conversation end there.

She tried to think. She felt like she still had a million questions for him, but there was only one that was dominating her thoughts at the moment. "...Doesn't it bother you that your supposed comrades in Abolish are trying to kill so many innocent people?"

"Not particularly," he said flatly.

"But why? You said you don't believe in what they are doing."

"Yes," said Gohvis, "but just because I don't believe in it, doesn't mean I don't understand their perspective. And more importantly, it doesn't mean that they are incorrect."

That was not what she had wanted to hear. "What...?"

"The simple fact of the matter is, even if I disagree with them on principle, their logic is still perfectly sound. From a purely objective standpoint, they could be right, and I could be wrong."

"That's..." She sighed. "No. They can't possibly be right. How can you even think that?"

"How can you not?" he countered. "Just because you don't want something to be true doesn't mean it isn't."

She merely furrowed her brow at that response.

"I don't actually know if it is possible to change such a fundamental aspect of human nature," said Gohvis. "Certainly, there is little in the way of historical evidence that such a thing has ever been done before. It may very well be impossible.""

"1900

"That has nothing to do with the fact that you apparently think it's okay to kill innocent people," said Emiliana.

"It is not ideal, no," said Gohvis. "But if human nature itself is so flawed, then from a purely logical standpoint, there is no such thing as an 'innocent person.' Everyone is contributing to the decline of humanity merely by being alive."

She took an exasperated breath. "That's so wrong, though..."

"Mm. Hence why I said that only those who have known hatred for humanity are able to understand it, much less believe it. Try as they might, humans are not purely logical beings."

Agh...

Emiliana wanted to keep arguing, but she felt like she would only be reiterating her disapproval and dismay in various new ways, and that didn't seem very helpful.

Her eyes went to Agam's book again, and another thought occurred to her. "Isn't there a third option for dealing with the problem of growth?"

Gohvis merely looked at her, again seeming as if he might already know what she was going to say.

Emiliana was not going to let that deter her, however. "Making human growth sustainable. That's a solution, too, isn't it?"

"Hah." The Monster sounded in equal parts dismissive and amused. "I am sure the supposed 'brains' of the Vanguard would be pleased to hear you say that. Or they might even be foolish enough to argue that growth isn't a problem to begin with. But it is all wishful, emotional thinking--unsupported by the science. A dispassionate mind will see



reality for what it is, no matter how horrible.”

It seemed they would have to agree to disagree on that point, but Emiliana was afraid to say as much. There was precisely a snowball’s chance in lakefire that she would be able to change Gohvis’ mind on a subject like this, she felt.”

”1901

But she was at least beginning to understand him a bit more. And he certainly wasn’t called the Monster of the East for no reason. As much as she had wanted to believe Germal’s words from before, that Gohvis might actually be some type of hard-working savior of humanity... well, suffice to say, she still wasn’t seeing it.

She considered trying to challenge his assertion that growth required conflict, but wasn’t sure how to go about it. Wait, had he even said that he was against conflict? He must’ve implied it, surely, but then again, he was also a member of Abolish, which instigated all sorts of conflict, so...?

Agh. She needed some sleep, and this was just too confusing for her, at the moment. If only someone else were here to argue with Gohvis for her. She certainly didn’t carry much love for the Vanguard in her heart right now, but wondered what their best and brightest would say about this subject.

“Hey, what’cha guys doing over here?” came the familiarly eager voice of Ibai Blackburn, and Emiliana turned to see him walking towards the table after having apparently teleported first, judging by the fleeting specks of brown shadow behind him. “Strategy meeting? Bonding time? Book club?” His eyes widened a moment, and his smile broadened as a thought seemed to strike him. “Staring contest?!”

“Philosophical discussion,” said Gohvis.

“Oooh! Can I join?”

“No.”

Emiliana spotted Chergoa hovering over as well, now. She wasn’t terribly surprised. Chergoa and Ibai had become quite good buddies, recently. It seemed like the reaper spent almost as much time with him

as she did with Emiliana.

“Oh, c’mon, don’t be like that,” Ibai was saying. “I’ll admit, I don’t know a whole lot about philosophy, but I’d love to learn!”

“Go find a book, then,” said Gohvis.”

”1902

((Halloween Special -- Page 1 of 4))

Emiliana knew he wasn’t talking to her, but that sounded like a pretty good idea. The Library must’ve had tons of philosophy books, so maybe she could add some to her reading list.

Ibai opened his mouth again to say something, but a low rumble interrupted him.

Emiliana recognized that sound. She gave Ibai a look. “Have you been checking out too many books again?”

“No,” said the middle-aged Blackburn with all the composure of a child. “I’ve been good, I swear!”

“Hmm,” was all Emiliana said.

“He is telling the truth,” said Gohvis. “The Library simply doesn’t like him.”

Another low rumble arrived, as if in affirmation.

“Oh, no,” said Ibai, “is that really true?”

One more rumble.

Ibai just frowned.

Emiliana felt a bit bad for him. Ever since she had informed him about the death of Ismael Blackburn, his father, Emiliana had become even more uncertain about Ibai’s state of mind than before.

The aberration took the news... pretty well, Emiliana supposed, but he was rather quiet for a few days thereafter, and she had also been seeing him around less frequently.

His current demeanor didn't seem all that different from normal, but that too was worrisome in its own way. Being an aberration, Emiliana had to wonder if the man knew how to grieve properly--or the more terrible question of if he even felt grief in the first place.

Perhaps that was why Chergoa was spending so much time with him, lately. Emiliana had asked her about him, but the reaper hadn't told her anything that seemed out of the ordinary.

'I wouldn't worry too much about what a building thinks, if I were you,' said Chergoa.

"But it's not just any building," said Ibai. "It's my new best buddy! I can't have my best buddy hating me! That's not a best buddy at all, then!"

"1903

((Halloween Special -- Page 2 of 4))

'Ibai,' said Chergoa with the cadence of a disapproving mother. 'You can't be best friends with a building. Especially one that wants you dead.'

Ibai, however, seemed oblivious to her tone. "How come?"

'Because--that--it just makes no sense.'

"Why?"

'You--' Chergoa paused. 'Y'know what? You're right. You can be best friends with a rock, for all I care.'

Emiliana squinted and glanced at the reaper. 'Are you getting jealous of a building?'

'No,' she said privately. 'Shut up.'

Ibai was looking inquisitively towards Gohvis. "How can I get on the Library's good side?"

A beat passed, and the Monster gave a hulking shrug.

"Well, dang."

Surprising herself, Emiliana had an idea. "Um, maybe you could try writing a book of your own and then give it to the Library as a gift."

Ibai stopped. And then his face lit up. "That's brilliant! Ooh! What should it be about?! Wait, no, don't tell me! It would be better if I figured that on my own, wouldn't it?! Hmm! Interesting!" He turned around and started back in the direction that he'd just come from. "A book, a book! Fiction or non-fiction? Pictures or no pictures? Hmm!"

'And there he goes,' said Chergoa.

"I wonder how long that will keep him occupied for," said Emiliana.

'No telling,' said Chergoa. 'I could see it being ten minutes or ten months, depending entirely on how interested it keeps him.'

"Mm," hummed Gohvis. "I'm more curious about what manner of creation might arise from that brain. I am reasonably certain than no aberration-written book currently exists."

Chergoa's next words had the echo of privacy to them. 'You alright, Em?'

The question caught her off guard, but after a moment, Emiliana understood why the reaper was posing it. There hadn't been many occasions thus far where Emiliana had been alone with Gohvis. 'Yes, I am fine.'

Gohvis was still looking off in the direction that Ibai had gone.

"Increasingly, he reminds me of someone.""

"1904

((Halloween Special -- Page 3 of 4))

'Really?' said Chergoa. 'Who?'

Gohvis didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "How did an aberration come to be among the Rainlords?"

Emiliana had no idea how to answer that and so looked to her reaper.

'We're not sure,' was all she said.

"Mm."

There arrived an uncomfortable silence before Gohvis picked the conversation back up again.

"Do either of you know how aberrations are created?" he asked.

'No,' said Chergoa for the both of them.

And again, Gohvis fell silent.

'Well? Aren't you going to dispel our ignorance for us?'

"No."

Emiliana saw the reaper's face twist a little.

Gohvis stood. "I shall leave you to your studies. Make sure you meditate before you fall asleep." And without waiting for a response, he walked away, silent as a shadow.

'That guy can be a real prick when he wants to,' said Chergoa with privacy.

Emiliana could hardly disagree, but it was hard for her to dislike him too much, given everything he had done for her so far. Even if she was here against her will, a rather large part of her felt like she was probably better off in Gohvis' care--for the time being, at least.

Before coming here, she'd been terrified of her mutation power. But now? Now, she at least had a grip on it, and that was entirely thanks to Gohvis. He had been personally instructing her in how to safely tap into and moderate her ability.

The key, she had learned, was in the passively "building" nature of mutation. If she went too long without activating it, then it would eventually activate on its own, causing uncontrolled changes to her body. Previously, she had thought that the only way to cope with this problem was to use her ability in small, hopefully harmless ways in order to alleviate the buildup so that it could never activate on its own, but Gohvis had been teaching her a better, albeit more difficult, strategy."

"1905

"One thing you must understand immediately," Gohvis had told her, "is that meditation is more important for us than any other servant class. By far. Especially in the beginning. I believe this is the main reason why, historically, we have suffered so greatly. We and our accompanying reapers have vastly underestimated how much meditation is required for us to achieve stability with our power."

And indeed, ever since then, meditation had become the largest part of her daily routine. When she wasn't reading, eating, or sleeping, she was most likely meditating--and she hadn't been eating or sleeping that much.

More recently, she had reached a point where Gohvis finally allowed her to reduce her meditation hours by a small margin, which was why she had time to explore the Library more and talk to the Monster's followers, but it wasn't just increasing the amount of meditating that had been important. She had also needed to change how she meditated.

"How familiar are you with the concept of altered states of consciousness?" Gohvis had asked her.

"Um, not very?"

"Then it is time to learn."

The Monster went on to explain that the primary purpose of meditation for mutation users was to enter into a different state of consciousness so that they could achieve more meticulous management over their own bodies.

Supposedly, there were multiple states that she would eventually be learning, but the first and apparently most important one that Gohvis had taught her was what he had dubbed a "storage" state.

--or Sto, for short," he'd explained. "Naming them is helpful for codifying them in your mind over time. It makes them easier to reenter, which speeds up the meditation process."

The purpose of Sto, she had learned, was to create a space in her mind where she could "store" the problematic buildup of her mutation power. If mutation was like a leaky roof, then Sto was like a bucket in which to catch the dripping water."

"1906

Sto was not a cure for the buildup, as the metaphorical ""bucket"" could still ""overflow"" if not attended to regularly, but it did serve as an invaluable buffer to further postpone the unintended activation of mutation. And from what Emiliana had been able to tell, the activation could be postponed for quite a long time, depending on how much the user was able to refine Sto.

Needless to say, mastering Sto instantly became Emiliana's top priority.

From the way Gohvis had talked about it, she had expected it to be incredibly difficult, but she was relieved to discover how easy it was. Within a couple hours, she had begun ""constructing"" it. She could visualize the space as a kind of pocket dimension, to which her own mind was merely a window. She didn't know if that was actually case, though, since it seemed just as likely--if not more so--that space required for Sto simply existed in her own mind. But somehow, thinking about Sto as a different space, separate from herself, seemed to make the whole process easier.

She wondered if it was because of what happened with Rasalased. The so-called Dry God. Perhaps something about that experience was now informing her view of reality or planes of existence.

Regardless, she wasn't complaining. Sure, the construction of Sto was still a rather slow and tedious process, since she wanted it to have as much ""capacity"" as possible, but she definitely didn't find it difficult. In fact, it was so easy that she had even been able to construct it while performing a general meditation as well.

She could even almost do it while reading.

She had only been attempting that feat for the past couple days, but she felt like it was possible. Perhaps if she wasn't so tired."

"1907

She really needed to get some rest. Heh, maybe she should try to

sleep and meditate at the same time. That would be helpful.

'You look like hell,' said Chergoa. 'Still haven't been sleeping well?'

""Yes...""

'So that herbal tea I told you to make didn't work?'

She gave a mild laugh. ""I'm afraid not.""

'Tsk. I knew that recipe was horseshit. I'm sorry, Em.'

""It's not like it's your fault.""

'Have the nightmares changed, at least?'

""I don't think so. It is all a bit murky. It can start normally enough, perfectly pleasant, but it always ends with that weird... starfish monster. Screeching at me."" She grimaced a little, just recalling the horrible image.

'Well, that sucks. If it gets any worse--holy shit!'

Emiliana turned to see what Chergoa was reacting to, only to flinch when she saw Gohvis' hulking figure standing there again.

""What were you talking about, just now?"" the Monster said with his two voices.

Hadn't he gone off to--? Wait, where had he gone? And why was he back?

'Would you mind not scaring the crap out of us like that?' said Chergoa. 'You just left. Why did you come back so soon?'

""I happened to overhear your conversation,"" said Gohvis. ""Or I thought I did, at least, and it interested me. Mind repeating what you were saying?""

""Uh..."" It took Emiliana a second to find her words. ""I've... been having nightmares?""

""Mm. About what?""

""A... er... some kind of starfish thing?""



""And these have been preventing you from sleeping soundly?""

""Y-yes...""

""I see."" He turned and started walking away again.

Emiliana stood up. ""Where are you going now?""

""Return to your quarters and sleep. But don't forget your meditations first.""

She was getting really sick of all these unanswered questions. ""No. Wherever you're going, I'm going, too."" She ran to catch up with him."  
"1908

He didn't stop walking, but he did turn to look back at her. ""Hmph. Are you sure you want to do that? You may come to regret it.""

She matched his pace, as did Chergoa. ""Why? Where are we going?""

""Do you wish to see your nightmare with your waking eyes?""

Admittedly, that did give her pause. ""Um... not especially, no.""

""Then do as I said.""

She gave a wide frown. ""Well, I don't want to do that even more.""

""That is not a proper sentence,"" said Gohvis.

""Oh, whatever, just tell me where we are going.""

""To see the Weaver.""

Emiliana was about to ask who or what that was when Gohvis abruptly stopped in front of a blank wall.

He pressed his huge hand against it, and then it became clear that there was a square-shaped button there, previously imperceptible due to how seamlessly its edges had blended into the rest of the wall's flat gray stone. A deep click resounded, followed by a shunk, and then a nearby section of the wall gave way, revealing a hidden path.

Gohvis went first, though he was too tall and had to duck down.

Emiliana exchanged uncertain looks with Chergoa before following.

The path forked multiple times, and it wasn't long before Emiliana was sure that she would have gotten lost in these musty tunnels for ages if Gohvis wasn't here.

In time, they arrived at a stone door, which lead to another area of the Library that she had never seen before.

It was a cavernous chamber with a vaulted ceiling and not much light. Rows of candles filled several long tables, and the scent of vanilla hung in the air. The atmosphere was strangely pleasant in its own way, but Emiliana's wariness wasn't allowing her to feel much other than creeped out."

"1909

'What the fuck am I sensing right now?' said Chergoa privately.

The reaper didn't often curse around her, which told Emiliana that Chergoa really was shaken up, right now--and that knowledge didn't do much to ease her own anxious heart.

Continuing to follow Gohvis, it soon became clear that they were heading toward the far end of the chamber, which was largely concealed in shadow. But as they drew closer, Emiliana gradually began to make out a form therein.

And not a humanoid one, either.

The shape just sat there in the darkness, lumpy and pulsing and as big as a rhinoceros. Emiliana had to strain a bit, but she could hear the sound of faintly labored breathing as well. The ground seemed to be damp around it, too.

""Weaver,"" said Gohvis in a stern tone when they were finally close enough.

'Greetings, Master,' came an unfamiliar voice in Emiliana's head. 'And to you as well, Elroy.'

""Why have you been intruding in her dreams?"" the Monster said.

'I wished to speak with her. It seems I only succeeded in frightening her, however. I must apologize.'

Wide-eyed and still mildly horrified, Emiliana couldn't help herself and asked what was probably quite a rude question. ""What are you?""

'Ah, yes. A relic, perhaps. One that has lasted long past her usefulness.'

Chergoa decided to chime in now. 'You were human once?'

'You say that as if I no longer am,' said the Weaver.

'No offense, but I'm not sure you are,' said Chergoa. 'I've never met a human, servant or otherwise, who could speak to other humans telepathically like you're doing now.'

'Ah. So you do not consider yourself human anymore, either, then?'

'Not really, no. That's why I meant it when I said no offense.'

'Ah. I see.'"

"1910

Gohvis decided to interject. ""Why did you wish to speak with her? And more importantly, why did you invade her dreams instead of simply asking me to let you see her?""

'Would you have allowed me such a privilege?' the Weaver said.

Gohvis folded his arms. ""She is here now, is she not?""

'With your supervision, yes.'

Gohvis was quiet a moment. ""And why would my presence be such a bother?"" His tone was only becoming more irate.

'Because, Master, you have a way of stifling discussion with your imposing disposition.'

""Mm, yes. Or perhaps you simply wished to play with her mind.""

'Ah.'

Emiliana was liking this conversation less and less by the second.

'Her brain DOES have a curious complexion to it,' said the Weaver, 'but do you think her so malleable as to be my plaything?'

""She is a child,"" said Gohvis.

'True. But stubbornness knows no age.'

Emiliana didn't much care for the way they were talking about her like she wasn't even present. And now Gohvis was giving her a look, as if he were reconsidering the Weaver's words.

She felt she had to say something before the lull in the conversation disappeared. ""Why are you here in the dark, all by yourself?""

'I am sensitive to light,' said the Weaver. 'And it must be said, I am not very pleasant to look at. It is better for everyone this way. I do not wish to be seen.'

Emiliana could believe that. If the Weaver looked anything like that starfish monster from her nightmares, then it made sense. There was another thing that still didn't, though. ""Why were you screaming at me in my dreams?""

'Screaming? I was not screaming.'

""Um, yes, you were. It was terrifying.""

'Ah. That is very strange. I merely attempted to speak to you, as I am now. Perhaps your mind is even more curious than I thought.'"

"1911

'HER mind is curious?' said Chergoa. 'What about yours?'

'Ah. Flattery? I have not received that in many years.'

'Wasn't what I was getting at, but sure.'

""You still have not answered my question,"" said Gohvis. ""What did you wish to talk to her about?""

The Weaver gave a telepathic sigh. 'If you must know, I was wondering

if she remembered me.'

Emiliana blinked a couple times, and she glanced at both Gohvis and Chergoa in bewilderment. ""I've never met you. I'm sure I'd remember if I had.""

'As I am now, no, I suppose you would not remember me,' said the Weaver. 'And not you as you are now, either.'

For some reason, those words gave Emiliana a chill. ""What is that supposed to mean?""

""Stop confusing her,"" said Gohvis. ""You are mistaking her for Agam.""

'No, I am not,' said the Weaver. 'Agam, you may recall, would sometimes remember people whom he had never met previously. Places he had never been before. Knowledge which, by all conventional expectations, should not have belonged to him.'

""And as I said, she is not Agam,"" repeated Gohvis.

'Hmph. Do not play dumb, Master. Her mind is not Agam's, yes, but does it not remind you of him? That curious complexion? His was not perfectly identical, but is the resemblance not still uncanny? I am sure that is why you have brought her here, no?'

Gohvis made no response.

Emiliana was only growing more uncomfortable, but she didn't know what to say, what question to ask.

Apparently, Chergoa did, though, and she didn't hold back, either. 'Are you talking about reincarnation? As in the true, reaperless variety? Because if you are, then I think you're trying to sell me some bullshit, right now. There are plenty of other explanations for why someone might have memories that they didn't recognize as their own.'

"1912

'Ah.' The Weaver sounded amused for the first time so far. 'I would not call it reincarnation, no. Rather, I suspect it is a higher form of inheritance.'

'A higher form?' said Chergoa. 'You make it sound like some kind of magic.'

'I cannot help how you choose to interpret my perspective,' said the Weaver.

'Hmph.'

'In the matter of inheritance, the Rainlords of Sair already carry quite a pedigree, would you not agree? The ancient Water Dragon walks among us still, does he not? Is it so difficult to believe that this blood of kings might yet hold more secrets?'

Blood of kings? That was one way of putting it, but Emiliana had to disagree on principle. ""You seem to know a lot about me,"" she said, ""I'll grant you that. But you don't know much about Rainlords, do you?""

'Why do you say that?' the Weaver asked.

""We do not suffer kings. We never have."" And Emiliana couldn't explain it, but she had felt an unexpected warmth in her chest when those thoughts had occurred to her--and it only swelled further when she spoke them.

Her entire life, she had never once thought that being a Rainlord was anything special. Despite all the stories and lectures and reapers and powers, she had always thought it was just silly bravado. Masculine posturing.

But here and now, all of a sudden, it made complete sense to her.

She was a Rainlord. And she was proud.

'Call it what you like,' the Weaver said. 'The purportedly divine appointment of the Water Dragon is a kingly quality. But that is neither here nor there. All that matters is your inheritance from Agam. Perhaps we should reconsider the potential of such a gift.'

Emiliana was still listening, but she couldn't help feeling suddenly homesick. Something in this strange conversation was making her wonder if she would ever see her family again."

"1913 -- CXCVII.

'I encourage you to search your memories when you find the time,' said the Weaver. 'One day, you may discover more there than you expect.'

'And what might she discover about you?' said Chergoa.

'I would like to know that myself.'

Chergoa's next words were private. 'She's being evasive again.'

Emiliana was hardly surprised.

Gohvis unfolded his arms, but his tone remained grave. ""Whatever the case, you will stop bothering her in her dreams. You will not bother her at all without my permission.""

'As you wish, Master.'

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Seven: 'O, lordly guardian, know thy burdens...'

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Boy, had there been a lot more that Lionel Carthrace had ended up telling Hector. For all the fuss that the guy had made about not wanting to speak ill of his aunt, once he'd finally gotten going, it was like a dam had burst, and story after story flowed out with such force that Hector eventually began to realize that Lionel probably didn't care so much about changing Hector's mind regarding Amelia as he did about finally having someone listen to him complaining about her.

Which seemed odd in its own way. Surely, his other family members would be happy to listen to him complain, no? Then again, perhaps not. Lionel was the head of House Carthrace, after all. Maybe he didn't want them to think he was weak or something by whining a whole bunch.

It didn't really matter, Hector supposed. After a while, he just kind of tuned the guy out and consulted Garovel about how best to extricate himself from the situation.

In the end, Hector relied on the thankfully good excuse that they had many more meetings to get to before the night concluded, and Lionel

became abruptly apologetic, having apparently regained control of himself.

And after all that, Hector still didn't really know what to make of Amelia Carthrace and her family."

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"1914

Hector's next few meetings went a bit more smoothly, perhaps because the Madame Carthrace was present for them. She didn't speak all that much, but when she did, it usually served to point the conversation in a helpful direction.

The meeting with Domitrus Vollier left perhaps the biggest impression on Hector. The wealthiest man in the country certainly did not carry himself like everyone else, but Hector wouldn't go so far as to call him arrogant, either. The man was very collected and polite, and his relationship with Amelia seemed somehow both affectionate and hostile, though maybe that was just some trick of the aristocracy that he didn't quite understand yet.

Oddly enough, Hector ended up kind of liking Domitrus, but he didn't exactly know why.

"He would be a very good ally to have," said Amelia in between meetings. "The Volliers are probably the second most influential family in the nation, at the moment."

Hector wanted to ask about her history with him, but there wasn't much time, and it seemed like there would be a lot to tell.

As the evening drew on, with meeting following meeting following still more meetings, Hector gradually began to feel less like a guest of

royalty and more like a prisoner being interrogated.

'How many are left?' he asked Garovel.

'A mere fifty-seven,' the reaper said dryly.

He tried not to sigh audibly. 'Garovel, if I asked you to release my soul right now, would you do it?'

'Maybe if I got to go with you.'

Each meeting was only five to ten minutes, but with so many to get through, it quickly became clear that they were simply not going to be able to finish them all tonight."

"1915

Amelia and her apparent secretary set to work writing up apology letters, including requests to reschedule. It looked like Hector was going to be having sporadic meetings with the rest of the Atreyan lords for the next two or three months.

He wasn't terribly excited by that notion, but at least it freed up what little remained of the evening. He still hadn't even gotten to talk to Harper Norez yet.

When he finally did, however, it was not quite the reunion that he had expected.

'Well, look who it is,' said Darsihm, Harper's reaper. 'A pleasure to finally see you two again.'

'Likewise,' said Garovel, though his hollow eye sockets were drifting towards the unconscious man sitting at the bar. 'Uh...'

'Oh, ah--sorry.' Darsihm tapped his servant on the back of his head, and Harper jolted awake.

""Mugh?!""

Hector caught the stocky man before he fell off his bar stool. When Harper turned and squinted confusedly at him, Hector returned a flat smile. ""Hello, Mr. Norez...""

The man needed a moment. ""Oh, hey."" He stood up without Hector's help and suppressed a burp. ""Great to see you guys. How've you been? You look great. Been workin' out? It shows. Me, I'm doin' good, too, thanks for asking. You guys are so thoughtful, y'know that? There's no one better. Y-you--you guys're just the best. I hope you know that, okay? If anyone tells you different, y'just--"" He had to steady himself on the edge of the bar. ""Y'just send 'em my way. I'll set 'em straight, mkay? And y'know what else? This country of yours is great, too. You should be so proud of all the things that, uh, y'know. You have. Here. It's just great. Everyone's great. I hope we can--""

And the man just kept talking.

Hector was wholly entertained, but he did have a question. 'Garovel, can reapers fix drunkenness in their servants?'

"1916

'Mm, sort of,' the reaper said privately. 'We can suppress it temporarily, and we can numb the pain of a hangover, but they just come back stronger later.'

Perhaps Darsihm was guessing what they were thinking, because he said, 'If there's anything important you want to talk about, I can put him back to normal for you real quick.'

""What're you sayin'? I'm not broken. I'm feelin' great, right now. I could talk about anything. I could tell you the secrets of the universe. Ask me whatever you want. I've got an answer.""

'Is that right?' said Garovel through mild laughter, and Hector could already tell that the reaper planned to screw with him.

""You're damn right it is,"" said Harper, sniffing loudly.

'Alright, then I've got a question for you,' said Garovel. 'What is the meaning of life?'

""Oh, duuude. What a great question. Y'know somethin'? You're a great questioner. Anyone ever tell you that? 'Cuz it's true. Hundred percent. So great. If I could give you an award, right now, I would. I'd vote for you, too. Come election time. You'd be a great prez-i-p-prezi... m-minister.""

'Well, thank you.' Garovel sounded like he could barely contain himself.

""You think I'm kiddin'? I'm not. You'd kill it. I'm sure you could fix. Just. Everything, y'know?""

Garovel was nodding along. 'Do you even remember my name?'

Harper squinted at him. Then he inhaled so much air at once that Hector wondered if he was trying to inflate his whole body until he popped like a balloon. ""Yeah, o'course I 'member your name. You're... V... Vvv--?""

'Starts with a ""G"",' advised Darsihm, who apparently didn't feel like keeping that bit of assistance private.

""Mm."" Harper thought for a long moment. ""Grant?""

'That's a Vanguardian Field Marshal,' said Garovel. 'Good try, though.'

""Buh..."" Harper scratched his head. ""Germal?""

"1917

'Germal?' said Garovel. 'That's an Ancient Melmoorian folk hero. How do you even know that name?'

""Mugh?"" was all Harper had to say.

Darsihm chimed in for him. 'You're very knowledgeable. But as it so happens, Germal is also currently the name of a prominent member of Abolish. Perhaps you've heard of him without realizing it. The Liar of Lyste?'

'Ah, yes, I remember that moniker,' said Garovel. 'Have the two you ever encountered this person?'

'We have not,' said Darsihm, 'but one of our superiors has taken a keen interest in him--an interest which I think has rubbed off on Harper here.'

Harper looked like he wasn't even listening, anymore. He was staring at the bartender, who was busy pouring a glass of wine for a different guest.

'When he's sober, anyway,' the reaper added.

'Hmm. Which superior would that be, if you don't mind my asking?'

Darsiim took a moment to perhaps deliberate whether or not he should share that information with them. 'Captain General Frederick. I'm not at liberty to share any more than that, I'm afraid. I probably shouldn't have even shared that much, honestly, but I feel you've earned a modicum of trust.'

'I understand,' said Garovel. 'Believe me, there's no need to explain yourself.'

The reapers kept talking, but a familiar voice acquired Hector's attention.

""Lord Goffe?""

He turned to see King William standing there, looking quite regal in his formal attire. His coat was mostly white laced with silver, aside from the big blue sash that extended diagonally down his chest. The man's missing arm wasn't all that noticeable if one wasn't looking for it, but Hector was. In fact, it was usually the first thing he thought of when seeing the King, and that probably wasn't going to change anytime soon.

Hector had no intention of ever forgetting the brutality that Abolish had visited upon this innocent man.

Upon his king."

"1918

""Your Highness,"" Hector said with an uncertain bow. ""How are you feeling?""

The King smiled at him. ""Quite well, thank you. And are you in good health, my young friend?""

""Ah--yeah. I'm--er--thank you."" Crap, why was he getting nervous again? Sure, he didn't know all that much about King William compared to the Queen, but they were just exchanging pleasantries here. Why was that beginning to feel more stressful than talking business with a bunch nobles he'd never met?

""You certainly look well,"" said William. ""Unlike the poor Lt. General over there.""

They both glanced at Harper, who was unconscious again. Perhaps Darsi had knocked him out to prevent him from drinking more.

That made Hector curious, though. ""Have you been getting to know him?""

""I have. And I must say, I find his company quite enjoyable when he is sober.""

Hector bobbed his head. ""I found it quite enjoyable when he was drunk, too.""

The King chortled. ""At first, I was worried that such inebriation would hinder his ability to protect my wife, but he was happy to demonstrate for me earlier this evening that he could turn it on and off as easily as flipping a switch.""

Hector wondered if the King knew about the longer term ramifications of 'turning it off,' but he supposed it didn't matter that much.

""You servants are very curious,"" said William. ""The term 'servant' hardly even seems appropriate, given all of which you are capable.""

Hector could only bob his head again. He was pretty sure that the man already knew all about reapers as well, so he didn't try to clarify that point.

""But I digress,"" said the King. ""There was a matter that I have been wishing to discuss with you. Perhaps we could talk in private?""

Hector was a bit surprised to hear that, honestly, considering he'd already had a serious conversation with the Queen earlier this evening, but he certainly wasn't about to turn the man down, either.

""Ah--sure. Lead the way.""

"1919

William guided Hector to the eastern hallway, then into a small conference room. A couple of palace staff members were using it, but when the King asked to borrow it for a few minutes, they were

practically falling over themselves to accommodate him.

Once they were alone, William walked to the other end of the long table in the middle of the room. While he waited for the man to begin talking again, Hector noticed Garovel phase through the wall.

'What're you talking about in here?'

'Don't know yet,' said Hector. 'The King seems kind of... apprehensive for some reason.'

Garovel didn't get the chance to inquire further, because William began talking.

""This has been stewing in my mind for some months now, and yet with all of that time to prepare my thoughts, I am still uncertain about where to begin.""

Hector gave a sympathetic frown. The man sounded like he needed reassurance, so Hector decided to say, ""Whatever it is, I'm listening.""

The King spared him a glance. ""I appreciate that.""

And there was more silence, but Hector chose to just be patient.

""In this past year,"" said William, ""I have come to realize that the world is far stranger and more terrifying than I ever dared imagine. In particular, learning about the existence of reapers has caused me to reevaluate my perspective on a great many things.""

Still, Hector merely waited.

""...How much do you know about my family?"" the King asked.

""About House Belgrant?""

""Ah... not very much, I guess.""

""Are you at all familiar with the story of how House Belgrant came to be?""

Hector shook his head.

""Then perhaps I should tell it to you before I say anything more. Forgive me if this seems self-indulgent. That is not my intent. I do not mean to waste your time or mine.""

""Okay... ""

"1920

""Before Atreya was born, this land belonged to the Mohssian Empire,"" said William. ""And at that time, the noble House of Belgrant did not exist, either--unlike virtually every other family that is present at the Gala tonight. As far as the aristocracy is concerned, we are still comparatively young.""

""You're talking about over three hundred years ago,"" said Hector. ""If your house is young, then what does that make mine?""

The man gave a faint laugh. ""You have a point, but such is the nature of this country's aristocracy."" He paused, perhaps to regather his thoughts. ""Regardless, the story of how my family rose to the noble class is intimately tied to the story of Atreya's independence.""

""Er, really?"" said Hector. ""I, uh... I happened to be reading about that subject the other day, and I don't remember seeing the name Belgrant mentioned.""

""Ah, yes. We were given little credit for our role, historically. The nobles of the era likely thought that our ascension into the aristocracy was enough of a reward.""

""I see...""

""But if you know the story of Atreya's acquisition of independence, then you know that it was a peaceful affair accomplished with no bloodshed.""

""Yeah,"" affirmed Hector. ""And it was even more impressive because of how violent things were at the time.""

""Indeed,"" said William. ""Some might even argue that it was more than impressive. They might say that it was a genuinely impossible feat.""

Hector wasn't sure what he was getting at.

""Such claims, when I heard them in the past, I did not take seriously,"" said William. ""And why would I? It was an achievement to be admired, not questioned--not used to fuel conspiratorial or magical thinking.""



Hector couldn't conceal the confusion on his face. ""What are you trying to say?""

"1921

The King took a deliberate breath. ""I am saying there may be evidence--which I previously dismissed as mere superstition--that my ancestor used something from your realm of expertise in order to help secure Atreya's independence from the Mohssian Empire.""

""Something like what?"" said Hector.

""Some type of object, I think.""

""Why do you think that?""

""Stories told among my family imply the existence of such an object. And more recently--"" William reached into his coat and retrieved something. ""--I discovered this.""

It was a small, misshapen book, leathery and brown apart from the black edges on one side, where it looked like a chunk had been ripped out of it--or burned out, perhaps.

""The ancestor in question was named Charles Belgrant,"" the King said. ""Unfortunately, this is not his journal. From what I have gathered, he may not have even known how to read or write, despite being the one who elevated my family into the upper class. Instead, this is the journal of his eldest daughter, Irina Belgrant.""

Hector was sufficiently intrigued. ""And what does it say?""

""Well, as you can see, it is somewhat... charred. I believe this was the result of the tragic fire which nearly ended my family's bloodline--and also burnt Belgrant Castle to the ground.""

""Wow, uh... I'm sorry to hear that.""

""As was I.""

That last bit of information sparked an incredulous question from Hector. ""How many times has that castle been destroyed, by the way?""

The man took a moment to think. ""Four, I believe.""

Hector's eyes widened a little. ""Seriously?""

The man nodded. ""But we are digressing. This journal, as you might imagine, gives only a partial picture of Charles' life and accomplishments, but having pored through its pages multiple times now, I can say with some confidence that it corroborates the notion that Charles was in possession of some type of special item--if only briefly. It also mentions him losing it, though the text is unclear as to when this occurred.""

"1922

A special item, huh?

After everything that happened during his last treasure hunt, Hector wasn't terribly excited to get involved in another one.

Still, he couldn't deny that his curiosity was piqued. ""Do you have any clue what this 'special item' actually was?" he asked.

""Not exactly," said William. ""I was hoping that you would be able to help me discover more details--or the item itself, even.""

""Ah--hmm."" Hector nearly asked how the King expected him to be of any help, but he held his tongue. It seemed like the man had more to say, anyway.

""The only clues I currently have are those that can be gleaned from the story of Charles and our nation's independence. And that is not much from which to work.""

Hector bobbed his head, then shrugged. ""Well. It's better than nothing. Tell me.""

""Very well," said William. ""There are various tellings of the tale, but they all begin the same way: with Charles having the spirit of an explorer from a very young age. He enlists in the military not in order to serve the Empire, but instead simply to escape Sunland, his hometown. And a life of poverty, perhaps.

""His time in the Mohssian army is always glossed over in the tales, and his service records paint a rather uneventful picture as well, but I

feel that something quite crucial must have happened to him during this period of his life, because in every telling of his story, he returns to Atreya a changed man. He is charismatic and confident. He gets married and starts a family. He quickly builds a reputation for himself as a reliable and personable man. And though he is not described as extravagant, he never seems to struggle financially, either.""

Hector already had more questions, but he decided to just concentrate on listening for now."

"1923

William continued. ""Charles becomes involved in the independence movement several years before it begins to pick up steam with the general public. He continues to travel to other countries regularly for various reasons, but increasingly, those reasons involve speaking with prominent revolutionaries across the Empire."" The King paused, eyeing Hector a moment. ""The Rainlords were among them. Lluc and Marcelo Redwater. Perhaps you know of them?""

The last name certainly rang a bell, but he didn't recognize the first ones.

Garovel chimed in privately. 'Those two were the chief instigators of the Redwater Uprising. I'd be happy to explain all about them later.'

Hector didn't doubt the reaper's enthusiasm. ""The Redwater Uprising,"" was all Hector chose to say to the King, however.

""Yes. Now that I'm thinking of it, Warrenhold had an oblique connection to that ordeal as well, did it not?"" He smiled, but his eyes seemed to hold a keener interest behind them. ""What an interesting coincidence.""

Garovel was chortling. 'Is this guy some kind of history nut?'

Hector was beginning to think so.

'We should talk to him more often.'

That pulled a small laugh out of Hector, despite trying to hold back. And at the King's apparent curiosity, he tried to clarify. ""I think my reaper likes you, Your Highness.""

""Oh? I am... flattered. I think.""

""Yeah, it's a compliment.""

The man looked aimlessly around the room. ""Well, thank you then, wherever you are.""

Hector pointed the reaper out for him, and the King corrected his line of sight.

'Hey, tell him my name.'

""His name is Garovel, by the way.""

""Ah, yes, that sounds familiar. Helen may have mentioned him before.""

Garovel gasped. 'Now I'M flattered. Tell him how flattered I am.'

""Now he's flattered, too.""

'Tell him how smart and handsome I am, as well.'

'Shut up, Garovel.'

"1924

""Well, I am pleased to please,"" said William.

Hector smiled but also cocked an eyebrow at the man.

""Heh."" The King's expression was briefly distant with memory. ""My father used to say that all the time. He greatly enjoyed making other people happy."" After a moment, the nostalgia in his eyes passed.

""But I suppose we are getting sidetracked again. Where am I in Charles' story?""

""He's meeting revolutionaries around the Empire,"" said Hector.

""That's right. It is at this time that the Atreyan independence movement begins to gain popularity--in large part, I think, because the idea of achieving it peacefully is put forth by a young and vibrant Domitrus Lumenbel. The news of all the inhuman violence taking place elsewhere in the world has likely soured the general public to any and

all notions of war. Charles, meanwhile, returns home after another long journey abroad, and this is where his story becomes... questionable."

Hector just tilted his head and waited.

"As far as I have been able to tell, up until this point in his life, Charles Belgrant has had no direct contact with any members of the aristocracy. He has built up quite a network of friends and associates all across the Empire--and perhaps even beyond it--but no Atreyan nobles have ever been among them. Until, that is, his long-time involvement in the independence movement propels him to the forefront of discussion between the aristocracy and the lower classes.

"Why he is chosen as one of the mediators between these clashing groups... is unclear. Perhaps it is merely his charisma, but it still seems strange to me, given the rather oppressive era in which this took place, that someone without even a drop of noble blood would have been picked for such a task. Every other mediator mentioned is someone of this type. A distant cousin's fifth son. An eccentric lord's stepchild. Lower nobles, yet nobles nonetheless. But not Charles."

"1925

Perhaps it was a bit late into the conversation, but Hector decided to pick one of the conference chairs and sit down as he listened.

The King followed suit with barely a pause. "I believe that Charles, at this point, may have already been in possession of the special object in question."

"Really?"

"Yes, I think his appointment as mediator might just be odd enough to have been instigated via some supernatural means."

"Hmm."

"In any case, the job of the mediators at this time is very important. Though the aristocracy may be loathe to admit it, they need the public's support on grand matters of state such as this, lest they end up having to fight both a revolutionary war and a civil war simultaneously. And moreover, there is no definitive Atreyan royalty yet. The aristocracy can choose anyone to lead them at their own

discretion, of course, but if they pick someone who is sufficiently despised by the commoners, then that too might very well result in a quick demise for this fledgling nation.""

'Y'know, I really appreciate all these unnecessary-yet-still-relevant-and-interesting details,' said Garovel. 'This is a man after my own heart.'

Hector knew the reaper wasn't being sarcastic.

""And so,"" the King went on, ""Domitrus Lumenbel emerges as a candidate for rule. He has both the pedigree and disposition for it. We know now, of course, that he went on to become Atreya's first king, but he was not without competition. His foremost rival in this endeavor is Linus Vollier, and in the competition between these two men, Charles becomes a significant factor. You see, there is a tournament being held in Brighton."" The King paused again, apparently remembering. ""Your hometown, no?""

""Oh, uh, actually, I was born in Selbury,"" said Hector. ""But my family moved around a lot when I was younger, so... uh, I don't really... feel like I have a hometown, I guess."" After a beat, he felt compelled to add, ""I do like Gray Rock so far, though.""

"1926

""I see,"" said the King. ""In any case, the tournament in Brighton that I am speaking of is perhaps different from what you might be imagining."" Before continuing, he seemed to catch himself, and then smirked. ""Then again, perhaps it is exactly what you, of all people, would imagine.""

Hector cocked an eyebrow at that. ""What do you mean by that?""

""Heh. Because it is a knight's tourney.""

Hector was unsurprised. Of course it was. Was there any other kind of tournament three hundred years ago? Well, on second thought, Hector supposed it could've been one of those super old sports for rich people, like polo or something.

Oh, but this was what the King meant, wasn't it? That he, of all people, would already be imagining it correctly.

Hmm.

""In terms of physical prowess, I am sure this tournament pales in comparison to those featuring the monstrous knights of Intar or Sair,"" said the King, ""but I feel it is nonetheless still an event of virtually incomparable importance where the history of Atreya is concerned.

""Charles, of course, is not a knight, so he does not personally participate, but at the beginning of the tournament, he befriends one Paul Greenway, who does participate--and in spectacular fashion, no less.

""You see, Paul is one of many knights who support Domitrus, but they are still outnumbered by those who support Linus. As far as the Empire is concerned, the official prize of the tournament is merely coin and horses, but unofficially, there is a quiet agreement among the lords that whichever faction wins will be the one that they all rally behind in pursuit of independence.

""As you might imagine, this raises the stakes quite a bit. In particular, the melee is especially brutal, where over a dozen men are killed, and even more are wounded. There are rumors of sabotaging horses and equipment, rampant bribery, and even attempts to assassinate competitors while they sleep.""

Hector was staring. ""Holy crap..."""  
"1927

""It does not paint a very 'noble' picture, does it?"" said William.

Hector had a question that he both did and did not want to ask.  
""Was... was King Domitrus' faction doing that, too? Cheating?""

""The exact truth of the matter is unclear, but it would not surprise me if that were the case. At the very least, I suspect that Charles did something because of what happens at the climax of the tourney.

""Paul Greenway is alone in the final melee against four mounted opponents. Half of his quad had become suddenly ill and were therefore unable to participate. His only companion in the fight was killed almost immediately, and even his own horse threw him off and fled the arena.""

Hector could guess where this was going. ""And he still won?""

""Yes. In a miraculous display of ability, Paul Greenway is able to win the day single-handedly.""

""Do you think he was a servant?"" Hector asked.

""That is one possibility,"" said the King, ""but by all accounts that I have read, Paul went on to live a largely unremarkable life thereafter. Never again did he distinguish himself in any military matters, and he died peacefully in his sleep at the age of seventy-three.""

""Hmm.""

""While it is possible that he could have hidden his abilities for the rest of his life or that these records could simply be false, I am now of the opinion that Charles gave Paul some manner of supernatural aid.""

""Were there any details of the fight itself?""

""Only that his opponents never landed a single blow on him. This, despite him being lightly wounded earlier in the tournament.""

""That does sound pretty suspicious..." Hector wondered if even the Scarf of Amordiin would allow him to avoid getting hit by four simultaneous opponents on horseback. Eh, maybe it could. He almost wanted to give it a try."

"1928

""In the end,"" said William, ""I believe this tournament served as a springboard for Charles into the upper class. Naturally, in the wake of the tourney, Paul's reputation skyrockets, and his friendship also grows even stronger. Nearly every event to which Paul is invited, Charles also attends.

""And now, finally, we arrive at the heart of the story. The push for independence. Charles' role as a mediator between the aristocracy and the lower classes is more important than ever. He understands the plight of the common man, and he is also able to articulate his points to the lords and ladies without slighting them or otherwise incurring their wrath.

""Within six months of the Tourney at Brighton Castle, Charles has gained a reputation for charm and persuasiveness. It is he who



convinces the many advisors to King Domitrus to build Bosliat Palace as a show of wealth and power to all who would later visit our nation.""

Hector was still listening, but in a parallel thought, he couldn't help being surprised at something.

There was a castle in Brighton? Was it still standing to this day? What did it look like? What kind of fortifications did it have? Was it still functional?

""It was for this reason,"" the King was saying, ""that I believe Domitrus chose Charles to be a member of the welcoming party for Nominus Lobo, the now famous ambassador of the Mohssian Empire who would later convince the emperor to grant Atreya its independence.""

Hector merely nodded. He'd read Lobo's personal account of events just the other day, but somehow, mentioning that now seemed like a bad idea--like he would be trying to show off, maybe. That, and he didn't want to interrupt the King. He enjoyed observing the man's apparent passion for his subject matter as he spoke."

"1929

""This next part of the tale is not widely agreed upon by Atreyan historians,"" said William. ""Many, I am sure, would argue that Charles' role in persuading Ambassador Lobo was minimal or even nonexistent. But I tell you: I do not believe it. Two other members of that welcoming party wrote of their experience, and they both stated that Lobo was incredibly unpleasant from the moment he set foot in the palace. He refused to try any local cuisines and instead demanded that every meal include certain foods, one of which was carambola, a fruit which only grows on the other side of the world in Ardora.""

""Geez..."

""He was also reportedly disrespectful toward King Domitrus and even made a pass at the man's wife--along with several other married women.""

Hector pressed his lips together flatly as he painfully imagined that.

""However,"" the King continued, ""on the third day of his visit, his attitude suddenly and dramatically changed. He became much more

accommodating and amiable. He even apologized for his past behavior."

Hector scratched his cheek, still a bit skeptical. "'And you think Charles was behind that?'"

"'I do.'"

"'But...'" Hector was worried he might spoil the King's enthusiasm by saying this, but he needed clarification. "'Lobo's own accounting of those events never even mentioned a Charles Belgrant.'"

"'Ah!'" Instead than looking upset, the King's expression lit up even more. "'You have read it?'"

Oh, crap, he'd intended to keep that to himself, hadn't he? "'Er, y-yeah...'"

"'Wonderful!'" The man's smile only broadened, but he tilted his head at Hector, too. "'Why do you seem so embarrassed?'"

"'Uh... I... ah...'" Aw, shit, what should he say? Maybe just the truth? "'I... I don't know.'"

The man's brow depressed with either confusion or pity--or possibly both. "'You are a very strange young man.'"

Hector just kind of rubbed his neck and averted his gaze."  
"1930

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"'But you are right,'" said William. "'Nominus Lobo's personal account of the visit makes no mention of Charles. This fact is precisely what most historians point to whenever they try to downplay Charles' role in the independence movement.'"

"'Ah--I didn't mean to be disrespectful or anything, er--'"

William held up a hand. "'Oh, no, I understand that. Worry not. I appreciate your concern, but it is not necessary. While I do cherish my family's legacy, it is not pride that compels me to share this story with you. Rather, I am hoping it will be of some use to you--or your reaper, perhaps.'"

Hector glanced at Garovel.

'Thoughtful guy,' the reaper said.

""In any case,"" said William, ""there is a reason why I believe Nominus Lobo's personal account may be inaccurate, and that is because of Paul Greenway's account of the knight's tourney.

""Late in his life, Paul wrote a memoir in which he reveals that, despite how much of an impact that tournament had on the rest of his life, he did not actually remember the final melee. He could recall nothing after his first joust, in which he was injured. After that, he only remembered waking up and being informed of the spectacular events after the fact.""

Hector's eyes went to the floor as he thought about that.

""To me,"" said the King, ""this speaks to the nature of Charles' intervention. I believe Charles did something to help Paul, and in so doing, left the man with no memory of what happened. And if this was truly the case, then I do not think it unlikely that Charles could have done something to Lobo's memory as well.""

Hector was quiet. He did not much care for how uncomfortably familiar this tale was beginning to sound."

"1931

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The King motioned to the charred book from earlier, which he had since laid on the conference table. ""In Irina's journal, she describes her father's version of events regarding Lobo. According to her, Lobo became much more 'persuadable' after Charles showed him... something. The chunk of text where Irina presumably named and provided details about the object in question was unfortunately burned off.""

Of course it was, Hector thought. ""So... to sum up... this is secondhand information that is in dispute by other, firsthand information. And it's been partially burned, too, so this secondhand information isn't even complete.""

A beat passed as the King looked at him. ""Yes, that about covers it.""

Hector gave a chuckling nod. ""Great.""

""You can see why most of our historians do not put much credence into this theory.""

""Yes, Your Highness. Yes, I can.""

""I acknowledge that it is not ideal.""

Hector held back a sigh, but not because he found the King's story exasperating. Rather, if he was being one hundred percent honest with himself, he already kinda believed it. He just wished that he didn't.

As little as three months ago, he probably would've been far more skeptical of a story like this, but after his experiences in the Undercrust--particularly in Himmekel--this flimsy, barely-making-any-sense tale from the King was actually ringing somewhat true to Hector's ears.

The idea of a magical artifact holding such power... sadly, that sounded perfectly reasonable now.

Agh.

Somehow, Hector felt like this was spoiling the entire tale of Atreya's independence for him. The notion that Bosliat Palace in all its splendor had wowed Ambassador Lobo so greatly that it changed the course of history? That had been such a beautiful and surprising thing to learn about. In retrospect, Hector loved it.

And now it was ruined by some kind of dark magic mind fuckery.

Goddammit."

"1932 -- CXCVIII.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Eight: 'Preparedness, be acquired...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It was a relief to be back at Warrenhold again. He hadn't even been gone a day, but it felt like weeks. As much as he had enjoyed catching

up with everyone at the Gala, it was still exhausting, and the media circus around it certainly hadn't helped, either. The sun had already started coming up by the time he'd finally left the palace, and he had naively thought that the media would've dispersed by then, but nope. They jumped on him the second they saw him and made that last stretch to his vehicle as uncomfortable as possible.

At least he'd been able to say goodbye to Lynn and the Queen before departing. Thinking back on it now, in the comfort of his own bed, he wished that he could've talked to them more. About what, he wasn't sure. Anything would've been fine, really. As he drifted off to sleep, he foggily wondered when he might see them again.

The warm embrace of sleep was fully welcome. Damn, this bed was cozy.

Only too soon, he awoke--and not on his own.

A dreadfully familiar voice was talking to him in a horrifically familiar tone.

""--up. If you don't get up in the next twenty seconds, a cold shower will be visiting you in your bed.""

Hector groaned but began to stir.

""It's time to train, Lord Goffe."" Whenever Zeff called him that, it didn't sound like a term of respect for some reason.

Much as he wanted to, though, Hector didn't complain beyond a few more grunts. There was nothing to be gained by resisting, especially because in the back of his mind, he knew perfectly well how important these training sessions were--and how lucky he was to have found an instructor as experienced as Zeff.

He got dressed, making sure to choose clothes that he didn't care too much about, in the likely event that they ended up utterly obliterated."  
"1932 -- CXC VIII.

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"1933

He was hungry, but he decided to forego a meal for now. Zeff had warned him before about training on a full stomach, and Hector didn't doubt him. With how demanding the Lord Elroy was becoming during these sessions, Hector could easily imagine himself puking his guts out afterwards.

And today was certainly no exception.

""How is your progress with mapping?"" said Zeff, as calm as if he were asking about the weather, despite the fact that he was currently trying to chop Hector's head off with a broadsword of solid ice.

Hector met the blow with his own iron sword, but the man's soul-strengthened ice still cut through it, though not without resistance. The icy blade was partially deflected and clipped the top of his iron helmet instead of decapitating him. ""It's going okay, I think,"" Hector managed to say through labored breath.

""Show me,"" said Zeff, not even pausing to let Hector do so. The flurry of slashes from his sword only seemed to grow more intense.

They were wild, though. There was more power behind them, sure, but Hector could tell that Zeff was really just trying to push him back now instead of actually hitting him. And that was why Hector decided to do the opposite.

Instead of losing ground, Hector gathered his concentration and moved toward the slashes--between them. His armor made him bulky, but he didn't mind if it took some shallow cuts. The Scarf of Amordiin helped him sense the path of least resistance, and he was able to get in close and do exactly what Zeff just asked for.

The mapping technique was something that Hector had been working on for a while, ever since Zeff and Asad had told him about it when their group had first entered the Undercrust. In short, it was a method of easing the cognitive load of complex materializations by ""mapping"" them to physical movements in one's body, such as hand signs.

It was a slow process to refine, since it required memorization, but Hector hadn't been slacking on that front. He focused and made a fist with his right hand, but not to throw a punch with."

"1934

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In an instant, thousands of iron spikes grew out of his armor--a tactic he had used several times before--but it didn't end there. With the basic spike defense mapped to his right fist, he was able to devote more cognitive power to adding complexity.

So the spikes grew faster than they ever had previously, granting them greater puncturing ability. But even more importantly than that, they branched off into more spikes--and kept branching.

Hector felt his spikes catch flesh briefly before Zeff backed off and covered himself in his own armor of solid ice, but this new spike technique was still not done, because he was giving it direction.

The spikes continued growing away from Hector and chased the Lord Elroy down--a feat which the man did not seem to expect, because they managed to catch up to him and enveloped him completely.

Not that it mattered too terribly much, of course. After a moment, giant icicles tore through the network of iron barbs and set Zeff free.

""Hmph."" The Lord Elroy dematerialized his ice armor and wiped a bit of blood from a gash on his cheek. ""Not bad. Simple, yet effective.""

Hector dematerialized his spikes but not his armor. ""Thanks...""

""Many a warrior look down upon little tricks like that, but in my experience, they might very well save your life, one day.""

Was that praise? Was Zeff actually in a good mood today? Hector was still waiting for the criticism.

""However, that particular trick won't help you much against an opponent who keeps their distance.""

Ah, there it was. Still not nearly as harsh as he'd expected, though.

""Have you put similar thought into improving your projectile capabilities?"" the man asked.

""Ah--yeah, I have."" His projectiles had been key in that fight with the worm, so of course he'd been thinking about different ways to iterate or otherwise modify those types of attacks since then."

"1935



~~Thanksgiving Special (page 1 of 6)~~

""Good,"" said Zeff. ""We'll go slow this time. Show me the simplest concept of what you have for a quick projectile--something that you can use to retaliate instantaneously at range. Then we'll see about amplifying its intensity.""

The simplest concept, huh? Hmm.

Hector actually hadn't put much thought into that. He'd only really been thinking about how to make things more potent, recently. Thus far in his ""career"" as a servant, he felt like his offensive abilities had always been his biggest weakness. It didn't help, of course, that he always seemed to be fighting uphill battles, but he also didn't expect that trend to change anytime soon.

He took a few more moments to think about Zeff's instruction here. A simplified version of what he had been working on. For purposes of instantaneous retaliation.

That definitely seemed like a useful thing to have in his arsenal.

Alright, then.

Hector made a hand sign that would be familiar to anyone in the world. A finger gun. He held off on pointing it at Zeff, though. ""Ready?"" he asked.

The Lord Elroy frowned, perhaps with disappointment. ""Your control over velocity states has improved, but I don't think you are quite at the point where you can use it as a replacement for real firearms. I've yet to witness you harness that kind of explosive power without first requiring at least a few seconds of prep time.""

That was true. Velocity states were fairly simple, all things considered, but they still had a high skill barrier when it came to achieving really potent speeds.

Hector already had a notion of how he might overcome that, though. He raised his finger gun in front of his chest. His question hadn't actually been answered, so he decided to ask it again. ""Are you ready?""

Zeff's brow lowered, but he seemed intrigued at least. He donned his

ice armor once more and took a bracing stance. ""Yes, I am.""  
"1936

~~Thanksgiving Special (page 2 of 6)~~

Even before the man had responded, however, Hector had technically already begun. Rather than simplifying his technique to the point where he no longer needed any prep time, Hector felt that he might be able to achieve better results if he could just make his prep time invisible to his opponent.

The orbiting technique that he had developed in the Undercrust had gone through several iterations since its inception, especially during the worm fight. Here and now, Hector was sure that it was his best idea so far for creating powerful attacks.

The problem with it, as Zeff had already mentioned, was the prep time. Anything that he put into orbit around himself required at least a few seconds to accelerate before becoming truly threatening.

But what if he didn't actually put something into orbit, and instead merely imagined that it was there?

Everything about materialization only functioned as a result of the imagination in the first place. The cognitive process would be identical. The only difference would be that there was no physical object there.

Until he put one there, of course.

So what would happen if he went through the entire cognitive process of putting an object in orbit, increasing its speed, and then, only materialized that object into reality at the moment he was ready to let it fly?

It would conceal his prep time, wouldn't it?

Hector hadn't actually had time to test this theory out, but it had been in the back of his mind for a while now, and he was fairly confident that it would work.

So when he pointed his finger gun at Zeff--having the cognitive process already ""loaded"" into his mind and made easier by the hand sign--he was able to instantly let rip an iron bullet.

It burst into existence with a deafening crack and tagged Zeff right in the chest. It didn't go cleanly through, but judging from the fresh red stain on the man's translucent armor, it at least managed to draw blood.

And considering that was just the proof of concept, that he hadn't even tried to soul-strengthen the bullet, Hector was pretty damn pleased with that outcome."

"1937

""Time out,"" said Zeff as Axiolis flew in to check his wound for him. The regeneration had been active for a while, so Hector knew that wasn't their concern. More likely, they wanted to see exactly how much damage the bullet had caused.

Axiolis in particular had been quite studious about these things whenever Hector and Zeff sparred. The aged reaper seemed especially interested in trying to measure every major wound they received and collateral impact points in the environment. Hector still wasn't entirely sure how observing these things so closely all the time was supposed to be of any use, but he wasn't about to doubt a four thousand-year-old reaper's expertise, either.

'This is fantastic,' the reaper was saying. 'Hector, this puncture is significantly more damage than anything you have previously landed on Zeff. The flesh wound is still relatively minor, of course, but this impact area where your iron connected with the armor--the diameter of this must be around, oh, five hundred percent larger than even your second most damaging blow was.'

Hector wondered if he would ever be able to share Axiolis' apparent passion for geometry. He certainly wanted to be able to share it. But math just sucked so hard. It had always been one of his worst subjects, and learning new concepts in it always felt like he was trying to chisel rock with his bare hands. Or even his bare face, sometimes.

'How were you able to muster such a profound increase in velocity with so little prep time? I was watching closely, and I didn't see anything.'

Hector explained what he'd done.

""Ah, so you cheated, then,"" said Zeff, carrying that familiar tone of disapproval again. ""I told you to do something with zero prep. Hiding your prep, while potentially useful, was not the point of the exercise. You need to be able to summon power like that on a moment's notice--to take advantage of fleeting openings in combat. If your prep takes two seconds, but your window of opportunity is only one second, then your technique is still useless.""

"1938

""No, I understand that,"" said Hector. ""My intent is to prep beforehand, and then just keep it 'loaded' in my head. Like an actual gun, y'know? So I'll still be able to react to that one second window.""

Zeff's expression was doubtful. ""You'll keep it 'loaded?' Hector, doing that is not free. You would be sacrificing some of your cognitive power for a technique that you may not even use, depending on how the rest of the fight goes. And because you have less cognitive power at your disposal, the rest of the fight is then more likely to go badly for you. You'll be distracted. Your reactions will be slower.""

'Trying to multitask so heavily like that in the heat of combat is highly dangerous,' added Axiolis. 'Your brain is already processing a million different things at once in those moments. Prioritizing a ""loaded"" gun, so to speak, means not paying attention to other things.'

They had a solid point, Hector knew. And he didn't want to go against their collective experience and wisdom, especially when compared against his own, but... he also felt like they were underestimating the blessing of Focus that Rasalased had given him.

He had explained it to them previously, but in retrospect, he couldn't tell if anything he'd said had actually made sense. It was difficult to explain something that he didn't fully understand himself.

""I get what you guys are saying,"" said Hector, ""but I, uh... I think I can manage it pretty easily with parallel thought processes."" He scratched his cheek. ""I mean, it's true that I could be using that extra thought process for something else, but... I think having a 'loaded gun' at all times during the fight might be my most powerful option, right now--even if I don't end up using it all that often. Especially because... well, that was the weakest version of it. I'm sure I can make it stronger without overextending myself.""

'Hmm,' was all Axiolis said."  
"1939

Zeff took his time considering what Hector had said. The

disappointment in his face seemed to diminish somewhat, but the sternness didn't. ""If you truly believe that, then there is little point in discussing this further."" He waved Axiolis away and took a readying stance. ""Your hypothesis is set. If you are to ever prove it true, then we will have to push you much harder than we have been until now.""

Aw, shit.

The sparring erupted anew, more brutal than ever. It soon seemed obvious that, despite what Hector might've previously thought, Zeff really had been going easy on him before.

It was like trying to fight a blizzard all of a sudden. The Lord Elroy had never bothered to use any visibility-reducing tactics against him, and the piercing cold that accompanied it couldn't be overlooked, either.

He tried to rely on the Scarf, but with all the snow, hail, and icy daggers flying everywhere, it was only so helpful. In fact, the Scarf might've even been making things more difficult, because there was just so much more sensory information swirling around him constantly. Choosing what to focus on was crucial, lest he lose a limb to a blade that he didn't see coming.

And if he didn't maintain a heated variant of his armor, then the cold would quickly begin to wear down his movements and render him even more vulnerable.

He tried simply escaping from the localized blizzard entirely, but that didn't seem like much of an option, either, because Zeff could just make it follow him.

After a while of getting smacked around, sliced up, and just generally humiliated, a period of calm arrived as Hector was still trying to pick himself up off the frozen ground.

""You're not thinking clearly,"" came Zeff's disembodied voice from somewhere in the blizzard. ""You must assess your circumstances quickly and efficiently. And prioritize. Determine your most pressing problem. Don't try to deal with lesser issues first. A man can't repair his house while it's still on fire.""

"1940

The most pressing problem...

To Hector's mind, that had to be the poor visibility. But how in the world was he supposed to overcome that? He'd already tried to escape the blizzard, and that hadn't worked at all.

Agh. Don't complain. Just focus. Figure it out or die trying. That was his job, when it came down to it.

Well, how about just big, fat chunk of iron? So big that it could disrupt the blizzard? Make the snow and wind break against its body?

Worth a shot.

He materialized an enormous cylinder all around him as a kind of shelter, making it far wider than it was tall. As it grew, he hollowed it out and gave himself more space to move around. It wouldn't be long before Zeff broke in, so he was already preparing for it. He had multiple bullets ""loaded"" into his finger gun, and they were larger than that test version had been. He was just waiting for Zeff to show himself.

That did not happen, however. Instead, a dozen giant spears of ice pierced the iron shelter and peeled it apart like so many can openers.

And Hector still couldn't tell where Zeff was. The blizzard was still there.

Hector expected another walloping, but that didn't happen, either.

""Better,"" came Zeff's voice again, ""but still not good enough. You're at least trying to solve the problem, now. Your solution was just incorrect. Try again.""

Huh.

Hector couldn't help being a bit awestruck at how much slack the man was cutting him. Maybe he really was in a good mood, today.

He focused on the task at hand.

A simple structure wasn't going to work. That much was clear. He could try a complex one, like the maze that he'd used against Karkash.

But no, that didn't seem right, either. The problem was locating Zeff. A

maze wouldn't improve his visibility. It would just help him hide-- essentially giving Zeff the same problem that he had, right now. And sure, maybe that would be useful in its own way, but he felt like he could do better.

In parallel, another thought process was thinking about wind. Could he generate wind with his iron? Yeah, probably. But could he generate enough to blow the blizzard away?

Hmm.

Time to find out, he supposed."

"1941

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Hector put a half-dozen big iron plates into orbit around himself, positioning them flat against the clockwise direction in which they were moving. He wanted as much air resistance as possible so that when he increased their speed, they would begin to whip up a nice little tornado around him.

And it worked like a charm. As he focused, pushing them for higher and higher speeds, the winds began to rise visibly amidst the blizzard. Snow and hail stopped touching him entirely, and then he began to notice something very interesting.

The Scarf of Amordiin was telling him all sorts of crazy new things that he'd never sensed before. Being at a center of a whirlwind changed everything. The flow of air immediately around him had become uniform, and as a result, it was suddenly very easy to sense any disturbances within that flow.

Like, for instance, a pair of icy spears flying at him from behind.

He launched himself out of their path on an iron platform, and the whirlwind moved with him.

This was so weird. Not quite disorienting, exactly--just very unfamiliar. He almost felt like he was in a video game all of a sudden, where there was a set radius of visibility around him while everything beyond it was just darkness--except in this case, that darkness a blizzard.

Unfortunately, that blizzard wasn't simply dispersing as he had hoped,



but his miniature tornado was still cutting into it like butter. It was progress, at least.

He was looking for Zeff, but the man must've been keeping his distance. He wondered why Zeff didn't seem to have any trouble seeing through his own blizzard. Was Axiolis just telling him where Hector was with soul radar? That seemed a little unlikely. So was there some other trick to it, then?"

"1942

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

He sensed more spears coming for him, a trio this time from the side. He simply stepped out of their way. They, along with the two from before, hadn't really been moving all that fast now that he was thinking about it. Zeff was going easy on him again, he figured.

And while he appreciated not getting gored through the chest or having another limb torn off, Hector wasn't sure he liked this sudden show of compassion from his teacher.

In fact, he was starting to find it kind of annoying in its own way.

He needed to find Zeff if he was ever going to give the man a reason to stop taking him so lightly, and Hector had a couple ideas of how he might be able to accomplish that.

The first was to make his tornado larger. More uniform wind meant more area for the Scarf to describe for him, and he still felt like he wasn't losing control of it yet.

His second idea was guideposts. At the edge of his vision, he raised temperature-manipulated iron pillars, making them hot enough to glow so that he could see them better through the blizzard. He would've liked to make the pillars more complicated, or even add orbiting whirlwinds of their own, but he was already worried about reaching the limit of his cognitive load. Between his warming suit of armor, his growing tornado, and his loaded finger gun, he already had plenty of things that required constant focus. The most he wanted to risk on anything else was single-instance creations like platforms or guideposts.

Plus, of course, he had to keep an eye out for Zeff. Where the hell was

he? Hector just needed--

There. A whiff of movement and shadow on his right. Hector let his gun rip, firing multiple shots this time. He thought he heard them make contact, but he couldn't be sure.

Until a few moments later, when Zeff came charging in with a slew of his own icy gunfire."

"1943

Rather than trying to dodge, Hector just relied on Haqq's shield in his left hand. The Lord Elroy's bullets left a few impressive dents in it, but that was all, and Hector kept 'loading' up more bullets of his own.

After having his ice armor pierced a few times, Zeff raised a full barricade for himself and took cover behind it.

Hector decided to do the same. He strengthened his iron barricade with his soul, as well. He knew it wouldn't help much with his weak soul-synchronization, but he wanted every bit of extra durability that he could get.

And then they had a shootout on their hands. Just straight up gun-blazing chaos, constant firing back and forth. The stream of deafening cracks in the air that accompanied each and every bullet soon became just background noise, like a waterfall raging in his ear, and Hector could hardly think of anything other than loading more bullets, keeping it going, not falling behind. He sacrificed his warming variant armor and devoted a second thought process to just making more ammo. He started adding heat to his bullets as well, just to give them that much more of an edge over ice.

The barricades on both sides were being shredded like cardboard, and they both just kept remaking them.

It probably wasn't even an entire minute of battle, but the sheer intensity of it made Hector feel like it was taking an eternity. At length, he felt like he might actually be gaining a slight advantage until he realized that most of his right hand was gone, blown off and spurting blood.

And suddenly, Zeff's gunfire seemed to grow even more furious. The

man's barricade was in shambles, but he didn't bother recreating it. He merely stood up and started marching closer."

"1944

This wasn't going to be good. Hector knew he had to do something, but not having a right hand in this moment was more than just an inconvenience. Ever since having his mind ""tempered"" by Rasalased, he'd been having trouble using his left hand for normal iron materialization. At first, he and Garovel had thought that he'd completely lost function with it, that he could only use his left hand to materialize Haqq's shield, but more recently, Hector had tried practicing with it anyway and discovered that he actually could still use it for iron--but only a little.

He'd been trying to regain more functionality with it and had made a bit of progress, but it still had a long way to go, he felt. And hell, even before the tempering, he'd been right-handed, so that might've been a factor, too.

Here and now, though, his left hand was already quite busy just holding onto his shield--the only thing currently keeping him from being turned into a bullet-induced meat-spaghetti.

So his options were limited. And Zeff was closing in. And Hector was starting to get really freaking cold again, too.

But he still had his orbiting iron plates left. This whole time, they'd never stopped moving. They'd caught a few stray bullets here and there, sure, but they were still whipping around him just fine.

Hector decided to use them and go all-in. He ramped up the speed of the plates while simultaneously modifying their shape and increasing their mass, turning them into big blocks. He leapt high up into the air with the aid of an iron platform, flipping haphazardly and unintentionally--yet still maintaining his focus enough to sense the spears of ice that Zeff was already raising up from the ground to skewer him. They broke upon his shield instead. Hector took a half-dozen bullets to the chest as a result, but in exchange, he was able to bring down two of the big iron blocks simultaneously--right where Zeff was standing.

The impact with the ground had the force of an explosion, and Hector

was sent flying backward, completely beyond the range of the blizzard. He hit the ground skidding and toppling on his half-busted armor.

A bit dizzy, he struggled back to his feet."

"1945

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

The blizzard was mostly gone, Hector saw. In its place was a cloud of dust and mounds of destroyed rock.

Perhaps that training session had gotten a little out of hand. He was glad that they'd decided early on to move these sessions quite far away from Warrenhold. This empty cavern on the other side of the lake below the castle provided plenty of space to test things out, and with the lamps that they'd set up to dispel the darkness, no one could approach without being spotted. Plus, Axiolis or Garovel was usually around to observe, and the reapers could easily sense any nearby souls thanks to how lifeless the rest of the environment was.

Axiolis hovered to Hector now. 'Not bad, my boy.'

Hector sensed Zeff approaching from his upper left and half-expected to get attacked again, but instead, the man came sliding down from an icy platform.

""Indeed,"" said the Lord Elroy. ""That was an admirable showing." His left arm was missing, and his clothes were dirty and torn in several places, but... was that a slight smile on his face? ""I'm proud of you.""

Wide-eyed, Hector didn't know what to say.

After a beat, however, the man's expression was wiped clean again, and he said, ""Don't be too pleased with yourself, though. You still gave me many opportunities to kill you.""

""I-I know that.""

Axiolis grabbed Zeff's shoulder, then addressed Hector. 'How's your regeneration? It should be starting to wear off now, no?'

The reaper was right. Hector could feel a familiar sensation, an oncoming wave of fatigue. Not quite there yet, but he'd felt it enough times now to know that it wouldn't be much longer. ""Yeah.""

'That's probably enough training for today, anyway. Let's go meet up with Garovel.'

"1946

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Zeff carried them both back over the lake on a mobile platform of ice while Axiolis kept apace.

Along the way, Hector was reminded of the buildings in the water there. He hadn't forgotten, exactly, but he wondered when or even how he might be able to restore them to use. It seemed like a waste to just let them sit there.

Zeff had more to say before they reached the other shore, however. ""Before I forget,"" he said, ""there is an important lesson I should teach you. Or perhaps you are already aware of this, the fact that you still have a critical vulnerability.""

Hector just listened.

""When you are fighting a materializer who is significantly older than you, such as myself, they can simply do this to you."" He flicked his wrist.

Hector's mouth and nasal passage felt suddenly and blisteringly cold. It was painful, and he couldn't breathe, but after a moment, it was gone.

""If that ever happens to you again, you're dead,"" said Zeff. ""They can grow a spike straight up into your brain--or worse, they could carve it out of your skull and capture you.""

Hector wasn't entirely surprised by this revelation. He remembered pondering similar techniques a while back.

Zeff seemed amused. ""This isn't a very common problem for most servants, which is why I hadn't thought to tell you about it sooner.""

""Er... what do you mean? Why wouldn't it be a common problem? Everybody's soul sync is weak when they start out, right?""

""Yes. I am saying that it is not a common problem, because most servants don't put themselves in such situations to begin with. But the

more I've come to learn about you, the more I've come to think that you and I are kindred spirits, in this rather unfortunate way." The man spared him a look. "We both always seem to end up fighting opponents well above our station."

Hector wished he could argue with him."  
"1947

"In any case," said Zeff, "if you think that such an attack is coming, then remember that you can block their materialization by doing it to yourself, first."

Hector blinked a couple times as he imagined that. Hmm. He hadn't thought there would be a solution, much less one so simple.

"Your armor may afford more help in that regard as well," said Zeff.

"The heart of the problem, of course, is your soul's field density being simply too weak. So even if you block the opponent from materializing a spike inside your head, they can still coat it from the outside and spike you that way."

"And you think my armor will protect me from that?"

"If it is fitted closely enough to your head, yes. Your eyes might still be vulnerable, however. They are a small enough target that, in the middle of combat, you may not need to worry about it, but it is still good to keep in mind, nonetheless."

"Hmm." With the Scarf, he actually didn't need his eyes all that much. Which reminded him.

He inspected the Scarf more closely, searching for tears or bullet holes, and indeed, he found a couple of the latter.

He and Garovel had been wondering about the durability of the Scarf for a while now. The item hadn't been bothered at all by face-melting heat of the Undercrust, so it had seemed reasonable enough to assume it was quite tough.

But that didn't mean it was invulnerable. And with how incredibly useful the Scarf was, Hector was afraid of it getting destroyed in battle, one day.

However, this wasn't the first time that he'd noticed damage to the Scarf. And he had since come to discover that the Scarf appeared to have a very slow regenerative capability of its own. These two bullet holes that he was looking at right now would probably take several

days to heal.

He had been quite relieved to learn that about the Scarf, and yet, it still didn't quite alleviate all of his concerns. It seemed very possible to him that the Scarf could become too damaged to repair itself--or just get completely obliterated by a strong enough attack."

"1948

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

He would just have to do his best to take care of it, he supposed. Much as it concerned him, Hector certainly wasn't about to stop wearing the Scarf in battle for its own protection. The whole point of it was to aid him in battle, and it had to hang freely over his armor in order to function properly. He'd tried tucking more of it in, but he found that it became less effective.

Which only made sense, he supposed. Its power was undoubtedly linked rather closely to its surface area. The more that was exposed, the more it could help him sense.

He parted ways with Zeff when the man's children came to greet him in Warrenhold's main plaza. Marcos and Ramira Elroy were strange kids, to be sure. Before departing with their father, Ramira offered Hector a high-five for some reason, and Marcos, a polite bow--which he found somehow even more weird.

But he was glad that they seemed to be in good spirits, at least. Ramira's foot injury all the way back in Dunehall was still mending, and unaided, she was largely immobile. Zeff seemed only too happy to have her in his arms or on his shoulders, and Marcos could often be seen pushing her around in her wheelchair or following close behind her when she was on crutches.

Marcos had worried him a bit, too. The boy's shyness was something that Hector could intensely relate to, and his apparent melancholy, even more so. Garovel said that the poor kid had been having nightmares ever since his mother's death.

They'd been through so much. Hector wished he could do more for them. They were his ""cousins,"" after all, via Garovel and Chergoa's relation.

How the heck were you supposed to cheer kids up, though? Toys? Food? He was pretty sure they already had plenty of those things.

Eh, he was being stupid. He knew perfectly well those things wouldn't actually help them. Superficial things only helped superficially. If there was one thing Hector knew in life, it was that."

"1949 -- CXCIX.

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He didn't want to just give up on the idea, though. He was the Lord of Warrenhold, now. There had to be something he could do for the Elroy kids. He just had to figure out what it was.

With his training for the morning over with, Hector returned to his chamber to change into clothes that weren't tattered, and then started making the rounds. Garovel had previously told him that he should make a habit of visiting all of Warrenhold's facilities every day.

'Even if it's just a brief check-in, the routine of it is important for a multitude of reasons,' the reaper had told him. 'As a lord, you have a responsibility to your subjects, and the more visible you are to them, the easier it will be for them to place their trust in you. But also, there's no telling when someone might use this routine as an opportunity to inform you of something that you didn't already know. A proper lord should try to know everything that happens on his land.'

Hector very much appreciated the advice. When it came to acting like a lord, he was basically just winging it.

As he was making his rounds, however, a familiar sensation acquired his attention, and he decided to interrupt his lordly duties for a more pressing concern.

The Shard of the Dry God was calling out to him.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Nine: 'The designs of the Disparate...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

'That's everything,' said Emiliana. 'Did you get it all?'



Hector's pen was still scribbling. 'What was that last one again?'

'Ridgemark,' she said. 'A sunken cave near the two-toned rock.'

He nodded as he finished transcribing her words. 'What's a two-toned rock?'

'I don't know. I am just telling you what it said.'

'Hmm. Do you know where Ridgemark is, exactly?'

'I do, actually. I looked that up, too. It's a city on the southernmost coast of Vantalay. Near the Gulf of Vantalay.'

He added that to his notes. 'Thanks.'

"1949 -- CXCIX.

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

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'I do, actually. I looked that up, too. It's a city on the southernmost coast of Vantalay. Near the Gulf of Vantalay.'

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"1950

'Do you really think you will be able to find all of these things?' Emiliana asked.

Hector put his pen down. 'Ah... no, probably not. I expect we'll run into a lot of dead ends before anything pans out.'

'I suppose it simply depends on how good my information turns out to be,' she said.

'Fingers crossed...'

'Yes.'

Hector paused, considering how to transition into his next query. 'Ah... have you, er, discovered anything about the other stuff I mentioned before?'

'Not yet. You said that those subjects were not as much of a priority,

did you not?'

'Yeah. It's just curiosity, right now.'

'...""Right now?"" Does that mean you expect your interest in them to eventually become MORE than curiosity?'

Boy, she sure knew how pick up on little things, didn't she? On impulse, he wanted to tell her that she was reading too much into his words, but... she wasn't, and he knew it.

'It's possible,' he told her. 'At this point, I honestly don't know what I expect the future to bring. It seems like a thousand different things could happen--or none of them.'

'I see. So in other words, this interest of yours in ancient gods and peoples is not merely academic?'

'Yeah.'

'...Dare I ask why?' she said.

'Uh. Well. If you really want me to explain, I will. But it's a long story--and probably pretty confusing.'

'Hmph. I have time, right now. And compared to the tomes I've been trying to read lately, I'm sure your tale will be much easier to understand.'

Tomes? Had she been reading physical books for all this research? Hector supposed that wasn't surprising. Abolish probably had loads of libraries. But considering how tight-lipped she'd been about her circumstances so far, that sliver of confirmation almost felt like a slip up on her part.

He didn't want to draw attention to it, though."

"1951

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'Alright, well, it started when we went to the Undercrust...'

And Hector told her all about his time in Himmekel. She had several questions, especially about Malast and Ettol, and he wasn't able to

answer any of them. That was why he had asked her to look into those names, after all. If nothing else, his story seemed to provide her with extra motivation to do so.

He told her about the ""tournament"" as well, and the mayhem that ensued during it, particularly at the end.

'Ah, so that was why you wanted to know more about worms,' she said. 'You were fighting one.'

Hector tilted his head as he thought back. 'I told you that at the time, didn't I?'

She gave a telepathic giggle. 'You were quite cagey about it at first, but yes, you did. You yelled it at me, actually.'

'Oh yeah...' He was about to apologize for that when he remembered something else. 'And you laughed at me.'

'Hehe.'

She'd already said once before that she was sorry for laughing at him back then, but hearing her tone now as she apparently recalled it, Hector wasn't so sure he believed that anymore.

Not that it actually bothered him, of course. If anything, he was a bit relieved to hear her laugh. Most of the times when they talked, she'd seemed rather somber. A few of those times, he'd even been able to feel her sorrow through the Shards.

Which was another subject that he was reluctant to bring up. So he chose not to.

'Well, I wish you luck with your search for money,' she said. 'I hope my research bears fruit. I will try to contact you again with more information in a few days.'

'Thanks for doing this.'

'Not at all. If I am not able to make myself useful, I fear I might go crazy in this place.'

At that, Hector was tempted to pry a bit more into her circumstances, but he resisted. It seemed like she was in a relatively good mood, and he didn't want to risk spoiling that for her. He got the impression that this strange relationship with her might be extremely important in the

future. So he really didn't want to fuck it up."

"1952

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

He was trying to think of something else to tell her that might make her happy. He'd never felt like the best purveyor of 'good news,' but there had to be something, right?

'...Uh. Y-your dad seems to be doing better.'

'Oh? How so?'

'When we were training earlier today, he was actually kind of nice to me.'

'Hmm. Is he not normally nice to you?'

'Ah. Uh. Well. Not exactly, no. Not that I mind. He's my teacher, so it's good that he's strict. It's just--er... He seemed like he was in a good mood today.'

'I see.'

Hector wondered if that had made her feel any better. He couldn't tell.

'By the way,' said Emiliana, 'have you ever heard of something called ""Sto?""'

'No. What's that?'

Apparently, it was a meditation technique that Gohvis, of all people, had taught her about.

Hector didn't know all that much about mutation, so he took the opportunity to ask questions. When Garovel had first described it to him, the mutation type had sounded like quite a horrible power to have, and judging from all that Emiliana had gone through--and was still going through--Hector's opinion of mutation didn't really change all that much.

But it was a relief to know that she was getting a handle on it, at least.

And a part of him did find it fascinating, to be sure. Altered states of

consciousness? Tapping into hidden areas or features of the brain? What a wild concept.

'I don't know if any of this will be useful for a non-mutator,' said Emiliana, 'but I thought that it couldn't hurt to tell you.'

'Hmm.' It was giving him ideas, to be sure, but after hearing her say that, maybe he shouldn't get his hopes up. After a moment, though, another thought struck him. 'Hey, uh... have you noticed anything different about your ability to concentrate, lately?'"

"1953

'Um, now that you mention it,' said Emiliana, 'I suppose I have. Why do you ask?'

'Malast told me that I was already in possession of a blessing called Focus. I'm not entirely clear on what it does--or what it MIGHT do in the future, I guess--but, uh... I'm pretty sure it helps me concentrate on multiple things at once.'

'I... see.'

'And I definitely got it from Rasalased. So I'm pretty sure you got it, too.'

'Um. I suppose that explains...' She paused. 'Wow. And here I was, beginning to feel like such a smarty pants, when in reality, my brain had been hacked.'

'That's... I mean... hmm. I don't know if ""hacking"" is the best way to think of it.'

'No? You don't think Rasalased hacked our brains and toyed around with them?'

'Well. Sure. But... a blessing sounds like a perfectly reasonable term for it, to me. I mean, has it been anything but helpful, so far? If not for Rasalased, I'm pretty sure I'd be dead by now.'

'You are very optimistic, aren't you?'

Hector's eyes widened a little, and he snorted. 'You'd be the first to think so.'

'Mm.'

'But that reminds me,' said Hector, 'Malast granted me a second blessing, which I know even less about than Focus. He called it Domain. If you could find out more about that--anything at all--I'd really appreciate it.'

There came a dainty sigh through the Shard. 'Despite no longer attending school, I seem to be acquiring quite a lot of homework...'

He breathed a half a laugh. 'Ah--sorry. It's not urgent or anything. I can probably figure it out on my own. You don't have to look into it if you don't want to.'

'It's fine. I'll tell Chergoa to remind me about it later. Domain, was it?'

'Yeah. And thanks. Again.'

'Mm.'

Hector felt a fleeting surge of embarrassment, and it took him a second to realize that it wasn't coming from himself but rather through the Shard.

'Oh no,' she said. 'I think I'm beginning to pick up Gohvis' mannerisms.'

Hector just kind of pursed his lips as he tried to imagine that."

"1954

Their conversation didn't last much longer after that. Hector went back to checking in on Warrenhold's facilities.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly, for the most part. The kitchens were bustling with cooks. Deliverymen were arriving with food and supplies. Children were playing in the central courtyard. All the underground lights were still working. No one was getting attacked by bloodthirsty monsters or murderers.

That was pretty much all Hector wanted, when it came down to it. Everyone safe and fed.

But there was more to it, of course. The reconstruction effort was

progressing at a remarkable pace now with so many of the Rainlords pitching in--and not just the ones who were servants, either. They had a few planners, organizers, and designers offering their expertise, as well. There'd been some disagreements a few days ago between the old crew and some of the Rainlords, but as far as Hector could tell, they'd sorted things out now, which was nice to see.

Either that, or they were just pretending to get along whenever he was around. That seemed quite possible, too. But maybe if he was around often enough, they would have to pretend to get along so much that they eventually would.

Whatever the case, they were already approaching the end of the renovations on the Entry Tower, and smaller teams had already branched off to begin working on the Bell Tower. Prevailing wisdom seemed to be that if Warrenhold ever came under attack, then a functional Bell Tower would be the next most valuable thing to have after a defensible Entry Tower.

Hector knew that he had one Rick Cortes to thank for much of the progress they were making. The man was a carpenter with some twenty years of experience under his belt, and being the husband of Zeff's sister, Joana, seemed to afford the guy an extra level of clout as well."

"1955

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Rick and Joana's six children had been of particular interest to Hector as well. Unlike him, they were the Elroys' actual cousins, and Hector occasionally saw them playing with Marcos and Ramira.

As of late, Garovel had been paying especially close attention to that family's circumstances and had since come to learn quite a lot about their history. Apparently, the reason they and the Elroys had so many kids was because they were trying to reinvigorate their bloodline after their near extinction some twenty-five years ago. It was a touchy subject, according to Garovel, but one that had obviously affected the Rainlords of Sair quite deeply. Hector had heard similar tales from the other houses as well, but that one sounded like it was perhaps the worst one in recent memory.

Beyond that, however, there was also the matter of Selena Cortes and



her reaper, Ojarea.

Thus far, Hector hadn't seen very many instances of a genuinely worrying servant-reaper relationship. Sure, there were plenty of reapers who talked loads of shit about their servants--hell, that even seemed to be the norm--but there was almost always a playful or affectionate undertone in their words.

Not so with Selena and Ojarea.

After he'd relayed his concerns to Zeff about the two of them, Hector had yet to see Selena and Ojarea together again. According to Garovel, both Houses of Cortes and Elroy were keeping them separate and under observation for the time being.

So when Hector happened to see Selena Cortes sitting on the steps of the Tower of Day with Ojarea floating over her, he was surprised. And somewhat concerned.

Garovel wasn't with him at the moment, so he informed the reaper of what he was seeing.

'Be right there. Let me find Joana first.'

Hector noticed Ojarea looking his way and decided not to just stand around until Garovel showed up."

"1956

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'Hello there, Lord Goffe,' said Ojarea as he approached.

Selena looked up at him with apparent surprise but didn't say anything.

""Hello,"" said Hector, very calmly. He didn't have much justification for taking a suspicious or accusatorial tone, nor did he think that would be especially helpful even if he did. ""How are the two of you doing?""

'We're doing very well,' said Ojarea.

""Y-yes,"" said Selena. ""Thank you for asking.""

Hector just looked between them for a moment.

Garovel's private voice arrived from afar with more information. 'Apparently, they're being granted a bit of time together, today. Joana's decision.'

Hector was glad he hadn't said anything out of turn. He didn't quite feel ready to leave them alone just yet, though. ""Is... there anything I might be able to help with?""

And to his surprise, they both seemed to hesitate. It looked like they might be exchanging words privately, but of course, there was no way to tell.

Selena's eyes darted between the floor and Ojarea, before finally landing on Hector. ""We have been having a--""

'Selena, don't trouble him.'

""He asked, didn't he?""

'As a guest, you shouldn't trouble your host. And as a Rainlord, you--'

Hector chose to interject. ""It's alright."" He was trying to smile but probably not succeeding. ""Please, ah... tell me what's bothering you.""

After another few moments of timidity, Selena said, ""We are having... a bit of a disagreement.""

Hector expected Ojarea to chime in again, but she just floated there, her hollow eye sockets seemingly devoid of emotion.

""I... hate fighting,"" said Selena. ""I don't... I don't want to do it anymore. But Ojarea says that I--that I have to.""

Hector looked at the reaper again, but she didn't say anything. He took a moment to mull over Selena's words.

Thinking back, something seemed strange to him. Certainly, he remembered the instance where she'd apparently frozen up in the middle of the fight with the worm on the train and been yelled at by Ojarea here, but he also recalled an encounter with her slightly earlier, before that had actually broken out.

""When we spoke on the train, you seemed pretty eager to fight,"" he said. ""A little too eager, I thought...""

She averted her gaze and looked at the ground. ""That was just--I was... I was being foolish. I'd never been in a real battle before, and I

thought--I was trying to... agh...""  
"1957

Hector frowned as he listened. In his peripheral vision, he noticed Garovel hovering toward them from the direction of the Tower of Night.

""That monster was... just... so terrifying,"" Selena said, and Hector could see her hands trembling slightly. ""I never thought real combat would be that frightening. I... remember being so scared that I couldn't even move--or think. I just... it was..." She broke for a sigh. ""And then, later, there was the fight with that man... and he overwhelmed everyone so quickly. I thought we were all going to die..." She touched a hand to her forehead and shut her eyes.

What man was she talking about? Oh, it must've been Leo, Hector realized. Hmm.

Ojarea was just staring at him, waiting.

Garovel was present for the conversation now, but he remained quiet, perhaps sensing that it wasn't a good moment to intervene with greetings.

Hector considered his next words carefully. ""You're not wrong,"" he said. ""Real fights can be terrifying, even for servants.""

Selena looked at him with big, despondent eyes. ""I'm pathetic, aren't I?""

Hector's frown deepened. ""No, you're not.""

""I am,"" she said with surprising calmness, as if stating an obvious fact. ""Everyone else is so brave, but I..." She hesitated again. ""I've always been clumsy and weak. I thought that would change once I became a servant, but it hasn't, really. And on top of that, I just... I hate violence. I don't want to get hurt, of course, but I also don't want to hurt anyone else, either. Even if--even if they deserve it, I'm not sure I could--ah..." Her gaze returned to the ground.

Hector scratched his cheek with one finger as he thought. ""Well... that's okay, too.""

Selena looked up again, surprised.

"What?" said Ojarea.

""You do need to be able to defend yourself,"" said Hector. ""You're a Rainlord, after all. But... I also think there's a big difference between training to defend yourself and training to fight on the front lines."" He motioned around the main courtyard, toward the throngs of people bustling to and fro behind him. ""This is a group effort. The important thing is to contribute. And there are a lot of ways to contribute besides just fighting.""

"1958

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Selena stared at him. And after a few more moments, when she still hadn't said anything, Hector began to feel uncomfortable.

Ojarea, however, was not quite so speechless. 'Lord Goffe, I appreciate your attempt to provide Selena with encouragement, but I must disagree with you rather strongly on this point.'

Hector just waited for the reaper to explain.

'You speak of Selena taking on a more supporting role,' said Ojarea, 'but as a servant, not having her fight on the front lines would be a profound waste of a precious resource. Servants are not easy to come by, you know. And we have many non-servants who are perfectly capable of taking on supporting roles.'

Hector bobbed his head admissively. ""What you're saying makes sense... and I do think that you should try to make use of all the advantages of being a servant, but at the same time, is that really all there is to it?""

Ojarea's skeletal form shifted a little beneath her black shroud. 'What are you saying? Servants have a responsibility to protect others. Rainlord servants, even more so. You may not be a Rainlord yourself, but I thought you, of all people, would understand that much.'

""No, I get it,"" said Hector. ""Believe me, I do. But if you want to talk about managing resources, then... I mean, what if Selena, as a servant, is able to provide higher-quality support than a non-servant can?""

Ojarea's hollow gaze seemed to twitch, and she glanced at Selena. 'I find that unlikely.'

Garovel decided to chime in. 'Why?'

But Ojarea made no response.

And Hector was left to wonder. With what little else he knew about their relationship, he couldn't help thinking that perhaps Ojarea didn't have much faith in Selena's overall competency--and that she didn't want to come right out and say so.

'I agree with Hector,' said Garovel. 'Take your time and look around Warrenhold--REALLY look around it, I mean. Every facility in this place is meant to provide support in one way or another. And yes, some of those facilities are in shambles or barely functional at the moment, but that doesn't mean they won't become important or valuable in the future. One day, perhaps the Book Tower over there or the Bell Tower next to it might become the difference between life and death for someone here.'"

"1959

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'Hmph.' Ojarea did not look pleased. 'What, are you advising her to become a librarian or a bell keeper?'

'I wouldn't presume to tell her or her family what path she should pursue,' said Garovel. His gaze became fixed upon Selena, who seemed to be hanging on his every word now. 'But I would also remind her and them that, once upon a time, long ago, the world was full of warriors and not much else. And it was an absolutely miserable place to live.'

Hector could all but see the gears turning in Selena's head. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. He hoped she would take Garovel's words to heart.

Ojarea was watching Selena's face as well. '...We shall take your words under advisement,' the reaper said. She turned to Hector. 'Both of you.'

'What is her ability, if you don't mind my asking?' said Garovel.

'Oxygen materialization,' said Ojarea.

Hector's brow receded a little. That sounded like it could be quite powerful, if harnessed well. And thinking about it like that, he suddenly understood Ojarea's point of view even more than he did before. Not putting a power like that to use in combat did seem like a bit of a waste.

But it didn't change his mind. He stood by what he'd said wholeheartedly.

Garovel elected to remain silent as well, which made Hector wonder if he was thinking the same thing.

As the silence drew out, Selena's eyes moved from Garovel to Hector, then lingered there. ""I'm sorry for taking up so much of your time,"" she said. ""Thank you for listening. You've given me a lot to think about."" She gave a small curtsy before turning and walking away, with Ojarea bidding farewell and following.

Hector just watched them go."

"1960 -- CC.

## Chapter Two Hundred: 'The Horror at Bellvine...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

...89 years ago...

The reports had been curious, to say the least. Livestock going missing. Strange lights in the night sky. Rumors of ""inhuman creatures"" skulking around the city.

But none of that was why Parson Miles had bothered to come investigate the quiet Stecatti town of Bellvine in person.

No, the only reason he was here was because of a report about an ""unidentified black goo.""

His peers in the Vanguard hadn't thought much of it, of course. A black goo? It was probably just a bit of spilled oil or some such thing, they'd said. Why was he even pointing it out? Everyone knew that worms from the Undercrust couldn't survive on the surface.

They all just assumed that that was what he and Overra had been worried about. Worms. Of course.

But Parson hadn't forgotten that encounter he'd had in Calthos, nearly forty years ago now. He was not the same man that he was then, but he still remembered it as clearly as if it were only yesterday. A strange man, appearing in a dust storm, identifying himself as ""Ettol,"" and then disappearing amid a disturbing fountain of black and slimy vomit.

Parson had tried his damndest to find out more about who that person was or what had happened there, but all he'd managed to discover was that ""Ettol"" was the name of an Ancient Melmoorian trickster deity. And that wasn't much to go on.

So after deliberating on it a bit further, he and Overra decided to keep this investigation off the Vanguardian record books--for the time being, at least.

Instead, they decided to rely on their other friends for help. ""Ettol"" had inquired about them, after all, so perhaps they were the missing pieces that Parson had never wanted to use. With so many years gone by and nothing to show for it, his questions had never done anything but burn in the back of his mind.

And now, for the first time since they were bratty little war orphans in Melmoore, all three of them were going to be in the same place again. Parson, Damian, and Germal."

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"1961

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

He entered the old diner in the heart of town and only began to realize how hungry he was when the smell of freshly baking bread and pasta hit his nostrils. The welcoming staff greeted him, but Parson could already see where he was going to sit and politely refused their



assistance.

The two men sitting at the far end of the room noticed him immediately, as did both of their reapers. With Overra following close behind, he walked right over to them. They had been playing cards while they waited, apparently.

Parson had last seen Germal only a few short years ago, but he hardly recognized him. That wasn't so surprising, though. Each time they'd met, Germal had always seemed like a different person. Some things never changed, Parson supposed. At least he wasn't trying to get them to call him by different names, anymore.

Damian, on the other hand, was the opposite in almost every respect. It had been decades since Parson had been able to meet him face-to-face like this, yet looking at him now, Parson could recognize him instantly. That strong chin and those thick, angular eyebrows were simply too distinct; and that perpetual scowl on his face might as well have been a signature.

""Gentlemen."" Parson tried to keep a perfectly stern face, as his mentor would, but it proved too difficult. Just seeing the both of them there, together, was more than enough to pull a smile out of him.

Germal flashed a grin in return. Were his teeth always so white? And that big, fluffy hat he was wearing--it was appropriate for the cold weather, sure, but Parson knew it was probably meant to conceal that horn on his head that always looked a little bit larger every time they met up.

Damian, however, scarcely even looked up from his cards. ""Germal's cheating.""

"1962

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

""And how, exactly, am I cheating?"" said Germal. ""You're dealing, aren't you? And it's your deck of cards, isn't it?""

Damian just grumbled at him.

Parson pulled up a chair. ""Poker?""

""You want in?"" said Damian.

""Sure, as long we can get some food, too."" Parson waved the waitress over, and they placed their orders.

At the end of his very first hand, Parson found himself staring at a straight flush. He managed to get both of the other men to raise their bets twice that round before taking their money.

""You're cheating, too,"" said Damian.

Parson and Germal shared a laugh.

The reapers weren't talking much, likely because their reunion wasn't quite as momentous. Overra, Feromas, and Nerovoy had been in more regular contact with one another over the years. Those three were often the means through which the servants communicated with one another--and that was mostly due to their concerns over security. Letters and telegrams could be lost or intercepted, and the reapers still didn't fully trust telephones, despite the technology existing for over fifty years already.

Parson wanted to enjoy the company of his old friends a bit more before letting the conversation turn more serious, but as he was eating, he began to notice something.

""Germal,"" he said, eyeing the man more carefully this time. ""Are you feeling alright?""

Germal returned another smile, as innocuous as the last, but he seemed even paler than usual and beads of sweat had been gathering at the edges of his face for a while now. ""Heh. Yeah. I'm fine. Why do you ask?""

Overra answered for Parson. 'You look a bit ill.'

""Oh, it's just the nature of mutation,"" said Germal. ""Nothing to worry about.""

""You're sure?"" said Parson. ""I thought you had stopped struggling with your power decades ago.""

""For the most part, yes. But it still acts up from time to time--often whenever I visit new places.""

"1963

That response only made Parson more curious. ""Why would a new location have an impact on your power?""

Germal's smile slackened somewhat. ""That is a tough question. Even after all these years, I'm still not sure I fully understand it, myself. But I have always... resonated with the land, so to speak.""

Damian cocked an eyebrow. ""What does that mean?""

Germal set his cards down. ""Well, in the beginning, it meant that I was utterly miserable all the time. Much of that was because I simply could not control my mutations and had all but destroyed my own body, but even after getting a much better handle on my ability, I discovered that there was more to it than mere physical pain. There was something psychological beneath it. Spiritual, even.""

Parson and Damian exchanged glances as they continued to listen.

""The land breathes,"" said Germal. ""Wherever you go, you'll find something distinct. Even in places still untouched by humans. But there are some places where... I am not sure how to explain it, exactly, but... there are some places where I feel such a strong resonance that it affects me physically.""

""Hmm."" Parson set his cards down, too, and leaned forward to place his elbows on the table. ""And you have no idea what causes this 'uncommonly strong resonance' of yours?""

""I didn't say that,"" said Germal. ""I believe I have some notion of what might be behind it.""

""Well, don't keep us waiting in suspense,"" said Damian.

""Ancient monuments, of a particular sort,"" said Germal. ""Statues or monoliths that, for whatever reason, have a power to them--a power which has seeped into the land over time, altering its breath. Its resonance.""

Parson had always known that Germal's power was odd, but hearing all this now was still fairly surprising to him, and he wasn't sure what to think.

""You tellin' me you're some kinda ultra-tree-hugger?"" said Damian.

Germal snorted a laugh. ""Of a sort, perhaps.""

"1964

Parson was too preoccupied with his thoughts to be amused by the other men's conversation. Germal's power resonated with the land and monuments of ancient power, eh? Thinking back to his encounter with Ettol, Overra had mentioned something about Ettol using a long-forgotten name for the region at the time.

And taken in combination with everything else Ettol had said, it seemed clear to Parson now that Germal must have been the one that the mysterious man had been searching for.

But what did that mean in regard to their present circumstances? In regard to this town? This whole area?

Parson was beginning to get a bad feeling.

But why, exactly?

Perhaps because he had only meant to come here in order to investigate. In the back of his mind, he'd hoped to encounter the mysterious Ettol another time and hopefully discover some answers to his long-lingering questions, but he still had a vague instinct in the pit of his stomach that was telling him that he shouldn't give Ettol what he wanted, that he shouldn't allow his friends here to meet him.

That could've just been paranoia, though. As a servant, he was getting old. That was becoming an increasingly greater concern.

And yet... something about Germal's explanation just now was really starting to bother him. If Germal's power was linked with the very land itself, then... wasn't that an unprecedented risk factor? Parson had never even heard of a servant ability working like that before.

...What if they had made a mistake? Could the mere act of coming here have been foolish? Sure, it had been forty years, but... what if this was a trap?

Looking at Germal's face now, though the man may have been laughing at the moment, the sweat droplets on his face only seemed to be multiplying. And that paleness...

Parson stood up from the table, drawing looks from both men and all

three reapers.

""Something wrong?"" said Damian."

"1965

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""I think we should leave,"" said Parson.

""Hmm?"" Damian sat back in his chair. ""We just got here.""

""I know,"" said Parson. ""But Germal's condition concerns me. And if it's because of the location, then let's quit this place for the time being and gather more intel, first.""

His old friends seemed uncertain, but they also began gathering themselves up to leave.

That was, until, Germal froze in place, wide-eyed and stuck like a statue.

Parson and Damian both stopped and stared at him, then looked to the man's reaper, Nerovoy.

'Germal,' the reaper tried, to no avail.

Parson touched Germal's shoulder and shook him. ""Hey.""

Still no response. And the sweat on the man's face was stronger than ever.

""Damian."" Parson's voice held the urgency of a command under it, and Damian seemed to understand.

Together, they scrambled to pull Germal out of his seat and carry him out of the restaurant. People were gawking at the scene they were making, but Parson was beyond the point of caring about that now.

""The hell's wrong with him?"" said Damian.

'I don't know,' said Nerovoy. 'I've never seen him react like this.'

Once they were outside, they started toward Damian's vehicle. Parson had brought a horse, still preferring them to automobiles, but he wasn't

about to argue when the vehicle was closer and roomier.

Before they could reach it, however, Germal spasmed violently and slipped out of both their grips. The man caught himself on the ground with all four limbs and just remained that way, his head swiveling around like an animal looking for something.

""What the--?! Hey!"" Damian was about to walk up to him when Parson held out a hand in front of him.

""Careful,"" said Parson. ""Be mindful of the reapers' safety, before everything else.""

And indeed, the three of them were crowding around Damian and Parson now.

'I am sensing something VERY strange,' said Feromas.

""No shit,"" said Damian.

'I sense it as well,' said Overra.

'Same here,' said Nerovoy. 'It's--it's quiet. Subtle. As if it's been here the whole time but I'm only now realizing it. And it's... it's...'

'Everywhere,' finished Overra."

"1966

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Parson hardly needed them to tell him that something was wrong here. He could sense it himself--physically, even. The air was different. Heavier. Thicker. And this sound. Like that of rushing water, perhaps.

Dark splotches began to appear on the ground, pools of black, as if the remains of a dark rain that had never come. They were small at first but spread quickly, staining the earth.

And from the nearest one, arrived something almost inexplicable to Parson's eyes.

A dark rainbow. Swirling and visibly confusing. But it seemed to have a shape. Like an arm reaching up out of the ground. It gripped the solid ground outside of the dark splotch and pulled itself up, retrieving more

of its shape, revealing a larger, more beastly figure--yet still fully covered in the rainbow.

Everyone backed away from it, even Germal who was growling like an animal now.

But much to their surprise, as soon as the beastly rainbow form finished clawing its way out of its murky pit, it collapsed onto the ground.

Was it breathing?

It seemed to be. And quite heavily, too. As if it were exhausted.

Germal, meanwhile, was still on all fours and growling.

Parson was so baffled that he didn't even know where to begin asking questions or who might even possess answers.

Then the rainbow moved, but the figure it was attached to did not. Its dark swirls slid down the beastly form like oozing paint, and the monster beneath it was revealed more clearly.

A giant wolf? Silver gray fur. It merely lay there, not moving, aside from its barrel-sized chest as it was panting.

Inexplicably, Germal started barking at it. Or was he barking at the rainbow ooze? Parson had no idea.

The ooze was still moving, though. Even after dripping off the dog completely, Parson could see it pulsing and twitching erratically on its own."

"1967

Germal was backing away from the scene, even as he continued barking. Parson was inclined to follow his lead on this one.

Without warning, the rainbow slime jolted straight toward Germal.

Damian, however, intervened. From too far away, he threw a punch with his right fist, and an invisible impact bridged the distance and blasted a massive chunk of the slime before it could touch Germal.

'Why is it going after him?' said Nerovoy.

The question went unanswered as a separate chunk of the slime leapt toward Germal from another angle.

Parson was the one to stop it this time, with a soaring blade of wind that he'd sacrificed the skin of his left forearm to create.

The different bits of ooze all bristled with seeming frustration for a moment, then started moving towards one another again, perhaps trying to recompile.

'Kill it,' said Feromas with commanding force, grabbing Damian's shoulder. 'Do whatever you have to do.'

Parson felt Overra grab his as well, and the regenerative vigor flowed through his body.

Perhaps sensing the danger, however, the ooze burrowed suddenly underground, causing cracks and tremors beneath their feet with increasing force.

Parson saw the cracks grow suddenly in the direction of the restaurant they had just left, and scarcely a moment passed before the foundation of the entire building shifted. A few shrieks rang out from the people still inside.

""Stay with Germal!"" shouted Damian. And without waiting for a response, he bounded into the building.

More shouts and even more violent tremors erupted, and the building shifted again, this time shattering all of its windows and causing the walls to buckle.

Parson placed himself in front of Germal, who for whatever reason had finally stopped barking.

Then Damian came crashing back out of the building through a wall. A young woman was in his arms, one of the waitresses, Parson recognized. Damian managed to land on his back instead of her."

"1968



And abruptly, the tremors stopped. Complete quiet arrived, save only for the panicked and terrified breaths of the woman in Damian's care.

Parson waited. A part of him wanted to just attack the ruined building with every blade of wind that he could create, but the thought of hitting the civilians inside stopped him.

But then those same civilians began to appear from the rubble, crawling out from under the collapsed roof or climbing atop it or emerging from behind a half-destroyed wall.

And they were not as they should be.

Even if he didn't pay attention to their abnormal movements or their too-still faces, Parson could sense something inherently wrong with their souls.

They were missing.

Whatever these creatures were, they were not the people who had been in that building a few minutes ago.

The reapers could tell something was wrong with them, too, and tried to warn their servants, but Parson was too focused on what these soulless husks were doing to listen.

The husks all lunged toward them in unison.

Parson and Damian smacked them all down without much difficulty, but they refrained from using deadly force. Whatever was happening here, these were still, seemingly, innocent people. Even if their souls were missing, perhaps they could be recovered in some way.

That was what Parson's Vanguardian instincts were telling him, and he was glad to see that Damian was apparently thinking something similar.

When the tremors returned, however, so did the rainbow ooze from beneath the cracks in the ground. And when it began to slather itself all over the soulless husks, everything that Parson had just been thinking went out the window.

The husks changed. Their bodies contorted impossibly. Grotesquely. And they grew. As big as gorillas. New limbs sprouted from their backs or even their necks. Their heads twisted and twitched, some splitting a part and becoming two or even three.

The rainbow's swirling colors seemed to melt away into nothingness, but in their wake, their work was apparent. New faces were there on the husks, but not on their heads. On their bulging stomachs. On their extra-jointed legs. Or their torn-open arms."

"1969

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For a few horrible moments, Parson could only stare, eyes wide with disbelief. This couldn't be real. It was impossible.

And yet, it was also somehow... familiar.

He had glimpsed similar forms before with his waking eyes. Forty years ago. In the infinite infinities of Chaos itself.

They had been only fleeting images at best, but he was recalling them clearly now.

Madness.

He remembered, too, being underwhelmed. He remembered thinking that such impossible things couldn't touch reality, couldn't affect it any way.

Ha.

He'd been a fool.

The distorted husks all began moving at once, completely unlike their previously human selves. They leapt or crawled or scuttled to and fro-- but it was clear enough that they were all coming for the trio again.

Parson and Damian did not hold back this time.

The nearest one exploded into meaty chunks as Damian pointed at it with a fist, and the one next to it was shredded to pieces by a flurry of wind blades. A dozen more were still coming as the two men stood back to back with only Germal between them on the ground.

Parson, for his half of the enemies, sacrificed most of his left arm in order to summon a small tornado. He didn't want to make it too large, else it would disrupt whatever Damian was doing. And the abominable

husks all had an obvious heft to them, so the tornado didn't have enough power in it to send them flying--but it did have enough to slow them down.

He could see them struggling to summon various counterattacks of their own--flames from one of their many mouths or bolts of crackling blue energy or even bubbling green acid.

He didn't intend to give them the opportunity to use any of that.

'Rozum,' he thought.

And Overra obliged."

"1970

The pan-rozum merge provided him with more than enough control to manipulate the tornado that he'd previously created. He was therefore able to dive headlong into it without having to worry about the winds slowing him down like the husks.

He blitzed cleanly through the roaring maelstrom as quickly as one might blink, and in rapid succession, he crushed each of the disfigured abominations into the ground with a bone-breaking blow straight to their skulls.

Within seconds, his work was done, and he and Overra separated again so as not to let pan-rozum keep draining their collective stamina.

It looked like Damian was just about finished as well, though his work was far messier.

Germal, meanwhile, was still on the ground and shaking his head.

Parson was just waiting for the rainbow ooze to reappear so that he could obliterate it with his most powerful attack. The Instant Air Burst. It would require sacrificing almost all of the flesh in his body, but pan-forma could fix that in no time, and Overra was still attached to his back, ready to activate it.

What happened next, however, completely disrupted his plans.

Overra gasped with sudden panic and activated pan-forma without asking. 'The Mad Demon!'

'Wh--?!'

That was all the warning the reaper managed to give him before the ground beneath everyone's feet erupted with the force of a volcano.

Parson was sent tumbling through the air, completely confused and disoriented. He thought he saw the rainbow again in all the mayhem. It wasn't until he transfigured oxygen all over his body that he managed to catch himself in midair and reassess the situation.

And indeed, it was true.

From his position in the sky, looking down on the smoldering crater where the restaurant and surrounding property used to be, Parson saw the man standing there amidst the smoke--the man whose face he had only ever seen in wanted posters among the Vanguard.

The Mad Demon himself. Morgunov.

The rainbow ooze was wrapped around his arm, thrashing wildly as if to escape his clutches, while Morgunov just seemed to be calmly inspecting it and smiling."

"1971

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Parson tried to think. The Mad Demon was here--quite possibly the most dangerous person on the planet. What was the best way to handle this development? Did Morgunov know who he was? That he was Vanguard? Would it be better to just flee?

Damian just ignored all of those concerns and called out to him. ""Morgunov! What the hell are you doing here?!"" Somehow, he sounded more like he was talking to a child than to his superior officer. ""Don't tell me you were following me again!""

""Okay, I won't tell you!"" said Morgunov, not bothering to remove his gaze from the slime.

Germal seemed to be regaining his senses, Parson noticed.

Parson was reluctant to get any closer to the Mad Demon, so he decided to move toward Germal instead.

""You can't keep doing this,"" Damian said, having walked right up to him. ""I told you. I need my space.""

""Aw, don't be like that,"" said Morgunov. ""I was just concerned for your well-being, my boy.""

""Yes, well, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine.""

""Hmm, I'm not so sure you are. You wouldn't have allowed me to follow you if you were in top form."" With his free hand, Morgunov touched Damian's forehead. ""You're not coming down with something, are you?""

Damian batted him away. ""Stop that. You're being ridiculous.""

""Silly boy. Just because you're a servant doesn't mean you're immune to sickness.""

""Um. Yes, it does.""

Morgunov just stared at him for a second. ""Oh, yeah, I guess you're right. But hey, you should still be careful. What if someone engineered a new disease that specifically targets servants, huh? Where will you and all of your certitude be then, huh?""

Damian's expression was flat. ""And who would do such a thing? Other than you?""

""What, I don't count?"" said Morgunov. ""I could betray you at any time, you know. Why, perhaps I'll use this technicolor puke here to achieve some nefarious end. You can never be too careful, Damian. Why aren't you wearing the mittens I made for you? They'll help keep the germs at bay, you know. Especially in this cold.""

"1972

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Damian ignored the question and asked his own. ""You say you were worried about me, but I was hardly in any danger. Why did you really decide to show yourself?""

Morgunov's smile became briefly manic in that infamous way. ""I was planning to just observe from afar, but when this little guy appeared,

my curiosity was piqued."" The rainbow slime was slapping him in the face with enough force to create ground-shaking impacts, but it didn't seem to be bothering him in the slightest. ""I'll admit, I was worried that you and your friends here were going to destroy it without even bothering to analyze it first! Which would've been so heartless of you! I mean, just look at how cute it is!""

The ooze manifested a sudden mouth and hissed at him.

""Ehehe. What should I call you? Binky? Slime-o? Stretchy McJeffy?""

Parson was helping Germal to his feet, finally, but he was still wary of moving any closer to Morgunov. Maybe it didn't matter at this point, but frankly, he was at a loss for what to do now.

Damian and Feromas seemed to be having a silent conversation, but it was again Damian who decided to speak up. ""That thing was trying to kill us.""

""You don't know that,"" said Morgunov. ""Maybe Slime-o just wanted some attention.""

It latched onto his face.

Morgunov grabbed it with his other hand and squeezed it like a balloon before yanking it off again. ""Some face-hugging attention. But isn't that what we all want, at the end of the day? I don't see what's so wrong about it.""

""It kept attacking us,"" said Damian. ""And I'm certain it was trying to touch my friend over there.""

And Morgunov's gaze finally turned to Parson and Germal. ""Mhmm. And just who are these friends of yours, by the way?"" Somehow, the man's smile only ever seemed to widen. ""Introduce me, why don't you?""

Did he really not know? Parson had to wonder. He certainly didn't know the Mad Demon like Damian did, but it didn't seem unlikely that the man might decide to play dumb on any number of different subjects."

"1973

Apparently, Damian had been thinking the same thing. ""Don't act like you don't already know. I'm sure you know exactly who they are.""

""Hmm."" Morgunov turned slowly toward Damian and, with an abrupt flatness, said, ""Perhaps I just wanted to know if you would try to lie to me again.""

At that, Damian seemed to lose most of his fervor, and Parson could feel a physical difference in the environment. The upturned earth all around them shifted beneath the extra weight in the air. Even the slime on Morgunov's arm settled down.

Without moving his head, Morgunov's silver-gray eyes shifted to Germal. ""You. You are one of the Monster's men, are you not?""

""I am."" Germal looked perfectly calm, at least.

Morgunov spared a glance for Parson as well but chose not to address him and returned to Germal. A morsel of his earlier cheer found his face again. ""What does Slime-o want with you?""

""I have no idea,"" said Germal.

""Hazard a guess, then,"" said Morgunov.

Germal opened his mouth but apparently didn't know what to say. He looked to Nerovoy for help, then to Parson.

Parson wished he hadn't done that, because it made Morgunov look in his direction, too.

""Do you know something?"" said the Mad Demon.

Parson clenched his jaw, trying to think.

The silence only seemed to amuse Morgunov. ""Come now, General Miles. Your hesitation does a disservice to the Vanguard's reputation.""

Parson struggled not to scowl.

""What would your Lawman think if he was here? I imagine he would be embarrassed by his pupil, hmm?"" The Mad Demon smiled wide again. ""Or do you think he, too, would be afraid?""

'Parson,' came Overra's private voice.

He didn't need her to say anything more. He knew what she was

warning him against. No matter how much he cared for Lamont as his mentor, he wasn't about to let this bastard goad him into reacting stupidly."

"1974

At the same time, however, Parson didn't know how he was supposed to avoid Morgunov's questions. He very much did NOT think it was a good idea to share his encounter with Ettol. There was no telling what the Mad Demon would do if he knew that Germal was supposedly ""a key unto Chaos,"" as Ettol had claimed.

""Not very cooperative, eh?"" said Morgunov. ""Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I suppose I could just force you to tell me, but..."" His gaze returned to the slime. ""How about you, Slime-o? Do you know anything useful?""

It shivered visibly.

""Don't be scared. Share with me all your secrets, and you'll see just how kind I can be."" He held the slime up to his head, right by his ear. ""Here. I'll make it easy for you.""

Still, it just sat there, shivering.

""Go on. I know you're tempted. Show me what a Primordial is really capable of, why don't you?""

The slime stopped suddenly, then bristled one more time. It launched itself against Morgunov's head and started struggling there.

Parson squinted as he watched, unsure what was happening until he noticed that the slime was slowly shrinking.

It was disappearing.

Into the Mad Demon's ear.

Into his head.

Morgunov looked far from concerned, however. His eyes were alight with as much excitement as Parson had ever seen. ""Oh, wow! I see! Yes! So that's what you were hiding! Ooh, and I feel quite ill as well! I could yack at any moment! Amazing!""



Parson found the scene so repulsive that he thought he might vomit at any moment, as well.

But it was all he could do to watch and wait, for whatever happened next--for whatever Morgunov decided to do.

The Mad Demon's head twitched grotesquely as he eyed his own hands.

Then, the rainbow gradually began to appear again, as if melting out of his skin. But it didn't quite look like ooze or slime any more. It was more like just a coating around Morgunov's body.

Or a shadow, perhaps. One of many colors."  
"1975

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

""Ehehe!"" Morgunov raised his hands towards the sky, and his laughter only seemed to heighten with each passing moment. ""Well, well, well! Isn't this just the greatest gift that a man of science could have ever asked for?! What have I done to deserve this?! Oh, magnificent God of All That Is Not! Have my sacrifices truly pleased you this much?! Rarely have I ever known humility in my life, yet even I can't help feeling unworthy of such love! Ehehe!""

Parson wished he were anywhere but here, right now. The man's laugh carried through the air, as if being amplified by the field density of his soul, and Parson could've sworn that the night sky was becoming even darker than it already was. The more he watched and the more he listened, the more he realized how terrifyingly accurate the moniker of ""the Mad Demon"" truly was.

""This wealth of knowledge is nigh unbearable!"" cackled Morgunov. ""Ignorant world! You leave me no choice! I must share it with you!"" He turned suddenly, and his gaze snapped to Germal. ""O, Heart's Trinket! I see your Path! Allow me to help you achieve Fulfillment!""

And in a flash of dark brown, Morgunov blinked out of existence, only to reappear with both hands already wrapped around Germal's head.

""What are you--?!"" The words died in Germal's throat and were replaced by a bloodcurdling scream.

""Yes! YES! See and understand, young one!""

Damian and Parson were both moving. Their friend's agony was proof enough that there could be no peaceful resolution to this situation, and it now seemed an insane notion to Parson that he ever humored the idea that there could be.

Whether they lived or died here--it mattered not. They could not stand idly by and watch."

"1976

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Parson loosed a surge of wind blades, but they broke harmlessly upon a sudden wall of red. And when the red vanished, Morgunov and Germal and Nerovoy were all gone, having blinked a dozen meters to their right.

Damian reacted first and attacked with an invisible impact. The red shade rose to Morgunov's defense again, but this time it buckled under the force of the blow.

Parson and Overra resorted to pan-forma once more and concentrated on increasing their speed. Multiple small jets of transfigured oxygen appeared on his back and behind each limb. He'd had considerable practice with this technique in the past and could now control it effortlessly even while being propelled along at speeds high enough to tear a normal body to shreds.

Parson launched another flurry of wind blades in advance as he dove straight toward Morgunov. They didn't do much, but they were just padding while he prepped a pressurized drill in place of his entire right hand. As soon as he was close enough, he would--

Morgunov caught him by the throat.

Parson found himself completely immobilized, though he couldn't tell precisely how. A swirl of colors flashed across his vision and when he looked at the drill that should have replaced his right hand, he instead found the limb replaced with something transparent.

Glass? He had a glass arm now?

He didn't get the opportunity to process what had happened before Damian barreled into the group, jostling Parson free of Morgunov's grasp but not Germal.

""Release him!"" yelled Damian with two voices.

""Ehehe! Calm down, dear boy! Your turn will come!""

""I said release him, Demon!""

Parson was on the ground, struggling to regain himself. Even with pan-forma making his regeneration almost instantaneous, the glass was getting in the way of his flesh regrowing properly--and even more of his body had been replaced by it than he'd first realized. Only his head, chest, and left arm were still flesh and blood. He had to break the glass to free himself."

"1977

By the time Parson was back on his feet, Damian was caught in Morgunov's shadowy grip as well. Most of Damian's body was glass, and Morgunov was holding his face with one hand and Germal's face with the other.

""Become as you were meant to be! See truth unlike you have ever known!""

Both of his old friends were screaming in agony, and so were their reapers.

Parson's most reliably powerful attack would require sacrificing most of his body, but the collateral damage might very well destroy the very people he was trying to save in the process. He had to do something else--and what came to mind in that moment was far riskier.

'Rozum,' he told Overra.

She melted out of his body for the briefest moment to deactivate pan-forma before returning to it and reactivating pan-rozum.

He wasted no time. His body divided in two, creating a second Parson.

But he doubted that would be enough. This was the Mad Demon they were dealing with. And they weren't likely to get another chance.

Parson demanded more. Difficulty be damned.

A third Parson. A fourth. A fifth. And finally, a sixth.

Six of himself. Six warriors of oxygen, manifested with pan-rozum.

It was so much information at once, overwhelming his mind even with Overra's help. But that hardly mattered now. He didn't need to know it all. He only needed to know his goal.

All six moved together. Three attacked the Mad Demon in unison directly. One grabbed Germal. One grabbed Damian. And the last stayed back, readying his most powerful attack--the same attack that he'd elected not to use with pan-forma a moment ago.

The Instant Air Burst.

As soon as the others were clear, the sixth clone would sacrifice its entire body to use it.

But Morgunov did not make it that simple, of course."

"1978

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 1 of 10)~~  
The Mad Demon teleported again, and half of the Parsons accompanied him--the two trying to free Damian and Germal, along with one other who was clinging to Morgunov's back and trying to drill into it. The remaining three Parsons gave chase.

Morgunov jumped several more times before apparently realizing that the three clones clinging to him were not going to be thrown off. In another shadowy flash, the clone trying to free Damian was turned entirely to glass, but the one trying to free Germal actually succeeded.

""So many new powers!"" said Morgunov, teleporting again. ""So much to play with! It's almost too much! Even for me!""

With Parson and Overra's consciousness now divided between five bodies, it was relatively easy to track the Mad Demon's erratic movements.

It was not so easy to do anything about the multicolored swamp that kept expanding outward all around him. Two of the clones became

quickly stuck, waist deep, and had to separate themselves at their torsos and retreat to the air with hovering tornadoes of oxygen. The clone on Morgunov's back had been swallowed almost immediately.

Germal and Nerovoy were both out cold, and one of the Parsons had to pick them up and carry them so that they didn't get swallowed by the swamp.

The four remaining clones all spread out, each finding a point of high ground to squat on--chimney, a pine tree, a tall boulder, and a rooftop. Parson and Overra's collective consciousness tried to reevaluate the situation as a sudden lull in the chaos arrived.

Damian and Feromas were still in Morgunov's grasp, but they were no longer screaming. Perhaps they had fallen unconscious like Germal and Nerovoy. What in the world had the Mad Demon done to all of them?

""Little Vanguardian!"" came the Demon's echoing call. He was high up in the air as well, propped up by a tower of rainbow shadows. ""Would you like to know the secrets of this world, too?! I am generous, but I am not sure I wish to share them with you, little Vanguardian! Perhaps if you show me that you are deserving, I might change my mind!""  
"1979

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 2 of 10)~~  
Parson didn't plan to take him up on that offer, but he was having trouble coming up with what to do, instead. Madly, he could sense Overra's thoughts humoring the idea. Perhaps whatever Morgunov had done to the others wasn't actually that bad. Perhaps Morgunov really was trying to help them in some strange way.

Those arguments only served to make Parson angry.

""Alas!"" shouted Morgunov. ""It seems our time together is at an end!""

Parson didn't know what he was talking about.

Then the rainbow shadows swirled one more time and vanished. Blinking? Teleporting?

When Morgunov had teleported every time previously, there had been

the briefest flash of brown, but Parson hadn't seen that this time. And none of the Parsons could see where Morgunov had jumped to, either.

""Improve thyself!"" came Morgunov's voice again, seemingly disembodied. ""I will be taking my silly boy back with me, but I hope you and I will meet again, one day! Little Vanguardian! Ehehe! Until then, farewell!""

And Parson waited. And kept waiting.

Nothing happened.

He didn't understand. Why had he just left like that? Had the Demon sensed someone else approaching in the distance? And if so, who? Parson wasn't sensing anyone, even after all this time waiting.

But at length, he knew that if he remained in pan-rozum much longer, he would begin to lose himself. Parson and Overra chose the clone nearest Germal as the location of their split, and the other three Parsons all disappeared into whiffs of dematerializing oxygen.

The fatigue hit him immediately and strongly, but he knew there was much work still to be done. And he was worried that something else might--

""Just kidding."" Morgunov's whispering voice was right in his ear this time.

Without even a moment to think, Parson tried to wrench himself away from the voice, but it was too late. The Mad Demon's hand found his neck, and the swirling rainbow shadow turned him around to face Morgunov.

""I apologize for lying like that. Lying is such a base form of trickery--I know. But hey! If it works, it works, eh?! Ehehe!""

"1980

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 3 of 10)~~  
Parson tried to speak, but the Mad Demon's hold on his throat was too strong. How did he have such strength? The man didn't have two voices. He didn't appear to be in a hyper-state. And his reaper, Bool, was nowhere to be seen.

Overra, however, could still talk despite her shadowy bindings. 'Explain yourself, Demon. What have you done to them, exactly? And why?'

""Hee-hee, so good of you to ask! Your curiosity speaks well of your worthiness! But that alone is not enough, I am afraid!""

'Then what must we do to prove ourselves?'

""A good question, hmm! Perhaps if--"" Morgunov cut himself off as his eyes locked with Parson's. He clicked his tongue before smiling in that horrible way again. ""No. You have already born witness, haven't you? To Chaos?""

He might've answered if his throat wasn't being crushed. For all this madman's ramblings, Parson felt as if he might actually know what Morgunov was talking about this time.

The Mad Demon laughed. ""Would you like to see it again?!"" Wide-eyed, he forced Parson to nod his head, treating him like a puppet. ""Oh?! Such courage! What's that, you say?! You aren't frightened at all?!"" He made Parson shake his head. ""My, my! Are you, perhaps, suggesting that you would like to do more than merely see it again?!""

Parson's mind was racing as Morgunov forced him to nod another time. He could of course transfigure his entire body at once, excepting only his brain. That was the one thing that a transfiguration user could not manipulate directly, and leaving Morgunov with his brain certainly wouldn't improve his circumstances--or Overra's, which was the real problem here. Even if he exploded his entire body and destroyed his brain in the blast radius, how would that help her? It could very well kill her.

Agh, and this fatigue. He could hardly think straight. What could be done? Were there truly no options?

""I admire your enthusiasm!"" Morgunov was saying. ""But witnessing Chaos is quite different from experiencing it, you know!"" He giggled and propped up Damian and Germal's limp bodies. ""Why, just ask them! When they wake up, of course!""

"1981

Parson tried to keep struggling against the shadow, but even that much effort was proving difficult for him. The energy just seemed to be draining out of him. Was his body being turned to glass again? He couldn't tell. Maybe it was just pan-rozum's aftereffects.

Whatever it was, he was losing hope by the second.

But Overra, bless her, was still trying.

"What is this Chaos you keep referring to?" she asked, sounding genuinely curious and quite calm somehow. Hell, maybe she really was both of those things, but Parson highly doubted it.

Reapers were like that, weren't they? Always desperately trying to talk their way out of a situation--and always trying not to sound desperate when doing so. Parson had learned that long ago.

""To attempt to explain Chaos would be doing it a profound disservice,"" said Morgunov. ""All that is not, all that may yet be--even all that should not be. Can you even begin to imagine that? I do not think--""

Morgunov's expression froze, and his mind abruptly seemed to be elsewhere.

Was he sensing something unexpected? Parson's own senses were too foggy to tell.

The Mad Demon turned around just in time to see a pair of open jaws, mere inches from his face. They had been halted by the rainbow shadow, apparently, and when they snapped shut, Parson recognized the silver fur of the giant wolf from earlier.

""Ah,"" said Morgunov, though he sounded considerably less jovial now. ""The Beast of Ardora. Still, you persist. But of course you do, hmm? The Prime Hunt must continue, mustn't it?""

The beast's growl had enough force behind it to make the surrounding shadows tremble.

""Do you even remember anything?"" said Morgunov. ""Or are you now a creature of instinct alone?""

The growl grew into a snarl, and this time, the shadows shuddered so strongly that the wolf was able to thrash itself free again."

"1982



~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 5 of 10)~~  
""Uh-oh!"" said Morgunov, too late but still smiling.

The beast's jaws found the man's shoulder and bit through it.

The attached arm had been holding Parson, and with it severed, he dropped to the rooftop below and rolled haphazardly down its wooden shingles, taking several with him. He tried to catch himself on the ledge, but the shingle that he grabbed just ripped free, and he went flying off.

He hit the already-broken ground with a thud and groaned as he tried to get his bearings back. The sense of urgency in the back of his mind spurred him on, despite his entire body protesting, and when he looked up, he saw Overra there. The wolf had freed her, too?

She melted into his body without a word, and he felt the hyper-state once more.

Not pan-rozum. They'd already stretched themselves to the limit with that one. But pan-forma was still doable.

Parson launched himself up into the air with legs of pure wind and reassessed the situation.

He was not prepared for what he saw next.

The wolf had grown to twice, or perhaps even thrice, its previous size. And its fur was even blacker than the night surrounding it. And moving. Almost like a shadow of its own.

The rainbow shadow raged even more wildly around Morgunov than it had before, but the beast was not being deterred. Parson could hardly believe his eyes, but it looked like the beast might've actually been pushing the Mad Demon back. Its hulking teeth and claws were tearing through the rainbow shade like so much paper. And... eating it?

Parson couldn't let himself remain awestruck, though. He may not have known the first thing about that monstrous dog over there, but he knew that he had to give it every bit of assistance possible."

"1983

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 6 of 10)~~  
Catching up with them proved rather difficult with how fast they were both moving, and as he got closer, Parson began to notice greater and greater changes in the environment. The air was thicker, making it harder to breathe, and it felt like there was an electric charge gathering around him, too.

And his vision.

The ability to see souls was decidedly not helpful here. Wisps of souls--or at least, soul-like energy--could be found all around him, like fragmentary embers escaping a fire.

At first, he was horrified, thinking they were all souls belonging to the hapless citizens of Bellvine--hundreds, if not thousands of people being killed.

But that couldn't be it, he realized. The battle between Morgunov and the Beast was certainly razing the land all around them and leveling buildings like they were sand castles, but they simply weren't covering enough ground to have killed so many people in so short a time.

Which begged the question.

Where was all this soul power in the environment coming from?

Parson had only ever seen this phenomenon twice before--and both times, it had been when two emperors clashed.

He didn't get the opportunity to dwell on it, however.

Morgunov vanished underground, and a moment later, a chunk of landmass as big as a city block was cast into the air. Parson had to stop and throw himself out of its path, but even while it was still in midair, he caught sight of the wolf running horizontally across its uneven body as easily as water flowing over a rocky riverbed.

Parson decided to follow the wolf's lead. It seemed like it still had a perfect bead on Morgunov's location, regardless of all the obstacles and debris in the way.

Attacking the Mad Demon head on was obviously a bad idea, but if he could provide covering fire for the wolf from a distance, then perhaps

that would be enough."

"1984

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 7 of 10)~~  
Parson loosed a barrage of wind blades from his hands as he soared around Morgunov. The Mad Demon's arm had not grown back after being ripped off by the dog earlier, but it didn't seem to have slowed him down at all. Parson kept up the pressure while the dog torpedoded closer.

Just before impact, however, Morgunov decided to simply take Parson's attack and spun around to catch the wolf by its open and salivating jaws. The Beast tried to bite down, but the man's horde of shadows had a hold on it as well, so even with one hand, he was able to check the Beast's advance.

The wolf wasn't exactly stopping, though. His massive bulk still pushed Morgunov backward, digging into the earth when the emperor's legs didn't budge and carving out a visible path of destruction through Bellvine.

Parson hadn't expected his wind blades to do much, but the fact that Morgunov just ignored what little damage they had done was a problem. He needed to go stronger.

He readied the Instant Air Burst again as he tried to move in closer. Maybe this time, he'd actually get the chance to use it.

He could hear the Beast roaring again, and he could see the emperor's shade wavering as well, but at the end of the exchange, it was the wolf who went flying backward from a one-handed punch from Morgunov.

And even among the increasing number of shrieks from innocent bystanders, Parson heard that familiar cackle one more time.

""Ah, this is so wonderful! I haven't had a fight this messy in ages!""

Parson thought he saw his opening while Morgunov was busy prattling on. He narrowed the distance a bit more and then launched--

Something blindsided him and clobbered through a line of trees.

""No, no, little Vanguardian! You'll have to be sneakier than that!""

The Instant Air Burst was dropped from his thoughts again, and he tried to pick himself up off the ground.

""Wouldn't it be better if we had more playmates?"" said Morgunov.

""We shouldn't keep all the fun to ourselves!""

"1985

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 8 of 10)~~

At that, Parson expected to see Morgunov start turning the innocent bystanders into disfigured monsters, like the slime had done before, but that was not what happened.

Instead, entirely new monsters were starting to appear.

They came from the ground--or more precisely, from the black pools that the Mad Demon seemed to be summoning.

To Parson's disbelieving eyes, they were entirely inhuman. Impossible creatures. And not very alike in shape, either. Some were bloated, some were gangly. Some had far too many eyes, some had none at all. Some had several arms, some were just blobs. They didn't even all have heads.

The only shared feature among them seemed to be their sickly pale and gray skin, but even that had a degree of variation with spots, stripes, blemishes, spare hair, and probably more that Parson couldn't even see.

He was without words.

Was he really going to have to fight all these things? What were they?

However, as he was preparing himself for wherever this new nightmare was going to take him, the circumstances changed yet again.

Before any of the pale monsters climbed fully out of their black portals--or whatever the hell those were--they all stopped, frozen.

As did the Mad Demon, Parson noticed.

After a moment, the monsters all began to slink back down into the

blackness below.

Morgunov clutched his head with his one hand. ""No!"" He dropped to his knees, trembling. ""Listen to me!""

By now, Parson's utter confusion had amplified a dozen times over.

But he wasn't about to waste an opening.

He readied the Instant Air Burst once more, trying to hurry while the Mad Demon just sat there, having of some sort of existentially psychotic breakdown.

And perhaps the fourth time was the charm, because to Parson's own amazement, the attack actually, finally connected."

"1986

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 9 of 10)~~  
Ninety percent of his body was sacrificed to heighten the attacks explosive power, but pan-forma's improved regenerative effects could take care of that problem in a matter of seconds.

When the dust cleared, a crater stood where Morgunov had been. He looked around for any trace of the man. And after a few more seconds of not finding it, Parson began to wonder.

Could it really be? Was the Mad Demon gone?

Parson hardly allowed himself to breathe. He wasn't sensing anything. Just more terrified people fleeing. And the dog approaching.

And the slime.

It was there in front of him--or what was left of it was, at least. Its movements were sluggish now. Tired, perhaps. Parson had to wonder if slime could even feel exhaustion.

He took a deep breath, finally, and let his legs buckle while he considered what to do. He wanted to run and leave all this madness behind. He wanted to go grab his two unconscious friends and never look back.

And a rather large part of him was still waiting for Morgunov to pop up

again out of nowhere.

But that didn't happen.

The Beast reappeared first, ambling nearer at a leisurely pace. Its hulking body had shrunk back to its comparatively smaller form, and its black fur had reverted to silver again.

Oddly enough, the dog's calm movements helped to confirm for him that Morgunov really was gone.

Not for good, of course, but Parson wasn't about to complain. It would've been downright incredible if he had been able to capture the Mad Demon's head at the end of that fight, but the more he thought back on how it had all gone down, the more certain he was that he had made the right call. If he'd tried to hold back even a little bit in order to prevent the Instant Air Burst from obliterating Morgunov's head, then there was a decent chance that the bastard might have lived it well enough to keep fighting.

Then again, maybe that was just his lack of experience talking. Lamont probably would have been able to capture him in that situation. Morgunov had all but offered himself up.

Parson sighed."  
"1987

~~The Christmas Day Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 10 of 10)~~

Overra melted out of his body, ending the pan-forma merge, and yet another wave of fatigue washed over Parson. The reaper must've been feeling it, too, but she wasn't showing it.

'Hello,' she said to the giant wolf. 'Thank you for your help. I suspect my servant and I would be dead now, if not for you.'

That was an understatement, Parson thought. All of Bellvine probably would've been annihilated, though perhaps the Demon would've taken his time with that.

The Beast made no response. It only walked over to the pile of leftover rainbow sludge and gobbled it up.

Parson frowned. He would've like to have captured that stuff for study later.

The wolf licked its chops, threw them both a look, then lowered its butt and sat down. If not for its size, Parson might've mistook it for a regular old dog now.

'...Do you have a name? Mine is Overra, and this is Parson Miles. We are with the Vanguard.'

Still, the wolf said nothing.

Overra tried talking to it a few more times, but to no avail, and Parson was beginning to think the whole thing was a fool's errand. After a while, he decided to interrupt her.

'Overra,' he said, eyes still on the wolf.

'What?' she said in the echo of privacy.

'Are you sure that thing can even understand what you're saying?'

'I suppose not. You think I should try different languages?'

He rubbed his sore neck as he stretched it. 'Go ahead, but that wasn't what I was getting at.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, is that thing even a servant?'

She hesitated. 'Of course it is. Why wouldn't it be?'

Parson didn't have an explanation for her. Just a feeling that he couldn't quite articulate."

"1988 -- CCI.

Chapter Two Hundred One: 'The house of the hushed...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It was nice to be out on patrol. Hector hadn't had much time for it over the last few days. Between all the meetings, training, and maintenance around Warrenhold, he had started to wonder if he would ever be able

to do this again.

Even now, he wasn't entirely on patrol. He was just sort of taking his sweet time as he went to look into something else. The fact that he was able to stop a burglary and a murder along the way was technically just a coincidence, though Hector had gone quite a bit out of his way to do so.

It was a bit annoying how every criminal just started running as soon as they saw him, but it also served as good practice for various mobility techniques that he'd wanted to try out. Flight, in particular.

Creating iron that could counteract gravity and support his weight was certainly doable, but exercising tight control over it was still rather difficult. And he was very hesitant about ramping up its speed in these situations. If he went too fast and accidentally barreled into someone while in full plate armor, that person would probably die.

When it came to dealing with normal human beings, he always tried to err on the side of caution, especially when practicing relatively new things. All of his really dangerous ideas, he intended to save for Zeff.

And possibly Asad.

The Najirs had left Warrenhold a few days ago now, but not without a promise to return soon. Hector got the impression that Asad's wife, Samira, had not found the underground castle to be a very pleasant place to stay. Whether that was because of all the Rainlords around or because all the construction going on was bothering her, Hector couldn't say.

Or maybe she just didn't like Warrenhold in general. It wasn't exactly a five-star resort.

Whatever it was, Hector tried not to take it personally. It was kinda hard, though. He hadn't been the Lord of Warrenhold for very long, all things considered, but he was already quite attached to it."

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"1989

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

As for the meetings regarding the tentatively titled ""Bank of Darksteel,"" those had been progressing a bit as well. Hector was able to get a better picture of the kinds of people whom Amelia Carthrace was planning to bring on board to help manage the project; and thus far, Hector hadn't seen anything that discouraged him.

Other than, of course, the whole problem with lacking the necessary funding. But that was a different matter. And he and Garovel were working on it.

Right now, Hector's biggest concern was what he was going to do with Leo. The day when he was supposed to meet with that man again was fast approaching, and the last thing that Hector wanted to do was go in without a solid plan.

He was hoping that his task this evening might be able to offer some help on that front, but Garovel kept telling him not to get his hopes up too much.

Apparently, the address that the reaper was leading him to was part of an ongoing investigation for the Gray Rock Police Department.

'There's been a string of rather mysterious deaths over the last several years,' the reaper had told him before they set out. 'And do you remember that guy whose drink was laced with potassium cyanide?'

'Yeah?'

'Well, he didn't die, thanks to you, so the police haven't quite put the pieces together on this yet, but I suspect that was meant to be another person along that string.'

'...Are you talking about a serial killer, Garovel?'

'Mm, possibly, but no, I don't think so.'

'Then what do you think is behind these mysterious deaths?'

'Well, I don't know, Hector. That's why we're investigating further. I think the police could do with some more clues on this one.'

Beyond that, the reaper hadn't been able to provide him with much more information. Hector was starting to worry that this whole ""case"" would ultimately turn out to be some kind of dead end or otherwise not worth his time, but at least it gave him an excuse to go out on the town

for a while.

When they arrived at their destination, Hector wasn't sure what to think. It was a large house surrounded by a tall gate, and in the pale moonlight of the late evening, the building had a bit of an ominous look to it."

"1990

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'This place isn't haunted, is it?' said Hector.

'About as haunted as Warrenhold is,' said Garovel.

'...I can't tell if that's a ""yes"" or a ""no.""'

'It's a ""no."" Ghosts aren't real, Hector. And therefore, hauntings aren't real, either.'

'I feel like I've heard this conversation before...'

The reaper phased through the gate's black bars, not waiting for him. 'Don't tell me you're scared of some old building without its lights on.'

Hector used an iron platform to leapfrog over the gate, then employed a descending platform on the other side to ease himself back down the ground without making a big thud.

The courtyard was more expansive than it had seemed from the other side of the gate, and the house, a bit farther away. The plants were overgrown, crowding the narrow walkway.

'So why did you pick this place to search?'

'It was where the first death on the list occurred, eight years ago.'

Hector quickened his pace to catch up with the reaper. 'And how are all these deaths connected, again?' He was pretty sure that Garovel had already told him that part, but he'd only partially been listening, since he'd been busy chasing an attempted murderer down at the time.

'Poisoning,' said Garovel. 'Remember? The potassium cyanide in the alcohol? Like I literally just mentioned?'

'Right, but, uh... are you saying ALL of them were killed with cyanide? 'Cuz that seems kinda, er...'

'No, no, the poisons themselves have varied. As far as I could tell, that was the first case of cyanide poisoning in Gray Rock in the last two hundred years.'

'Hmm.' That made Hector curious, though. 'What happened two hundred years ago?'

'Heh, I looked into that, actually. Apparently, it was a ""scientist"" experimenting with the stuff. His notes mentioned a hypothesis that cyanide might be the key to increasing human intelligence to astonishing new heights.' A beat passed. 'It killed him, instead.'

Hector just kind of pursed his lips together flatly as he imagined that."  
"1991

When they reached the main entrance, Garovel just phased through it, and Hector was left standing there. He tried the curved handle, but as expected, the door was locked.

Garovel poked his head back out through the door. 'Sucks being corporeal sometimes, doesn't it?'

'How do I get inside?'

'I mean, you could just break the door down.'

'Garovel.'

'What? Do we have to be law-abiding citizens ALL the time?'

Answering that question seemed like it would open up a can of worms, so Hector decided to ignore it and look around the front of the building another time. There were several windows, but they were all boarded up. He supposed there might be a chimney to he could go through somewhere.

'Can't you just do something clever with materialization?' said Garovel.

'Hmm. Like what?'

'Like make a key for yourself.'

'How would I--?' As he thought about it, though, he wondered if that might actually be possible.

He hunched forward a little and found the keyhole in the evening darkness. Relying on the Scarf of Amordiin, he focused on the air flowing through it, trying to get an image in his mind of what the space inside the lock was like.

Not knowing much about how locks actually worked, Hector wasn't sure if this would be as simple of a task as it seemed. He gave it a shot, though.

He pressed his gloved right hand against the keyhole and filled it with iron. He made a flat protrusion for himself to grab onto, and then tried turning it.

It resisted, but it turned, and Hector heard a low shunk.

He pulled his materialized ""key"" back out and stared at it, a little surprised with himself.

'There you go,' said Garovel. 'Easy, right?'

Hector was somewhat disconcerted by this revelation, however. 'Garovel, if all materialization users can pick locks like this, then this is a serious design flaw.'  
"1992

'Well, not all materialization users can use the Scarf of Amordiin to sense the inside of the lock,' said Garovel.

Hector remained unconvinced. 'I barely used it. In fact, I basically just filled the hole with iron, turned, and it worked on the first try. That seems way too simple...'

'Are you actually complaining because something went RIGHT for a change?'

'I'm not--I mean--that's not what I'm trying to say!'

'Then what ARE you trying to say, exactly?'

He took a breath and scratched his head, examining the house and the lock another time. 'How old is this place, anyway?'

'Pretty old, I suspect. By your standards, at least. Why? What difference does it make?'

Hector rubbed his chin. 'Er... was this particular lock just super old and shitty? But you said someone was living here eight years ago, didn't you?'

'I did.'

'Then the lock shouldn't be THAT old...'

'Hector. We didn't come here to examine locks.'

That was a fair point, but Hector felt like being stubborn. 'No, we came here to investigate the place. And I think this lock is suspicious. This is a form of investigation, isn't it?'

The reaper sighed. 'Technically. I guess.'

'You seriously don't think that was weird at all?'

Garovel just stared at him, not saying anything.

Hector persevered. 'Aren't locks supposed to have, like, tumblers in them or something?'

'Do you even know what a tumbler is?'

'No, but I'm sure I could find out.' He whipped out his phone.

'Please DO NOT start surfing the internet in the middle of our murder investigation.'

'It's research!'

'Is it, though?'

'Garovel, just... have a look around while I do this.'

'I need your flashlight, goddammit. It's too dark.'

Begrudgingly, Hector pulled out his flashlight with one hand while he tried to search the internet with the other.

Garovel just turned and shook his head as they both entered the building together."

"1993

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Hector only spared a quick glance around the dusty old antechamber before returning his eyes to his phone. After a while of silent browsing and considerable reading, he decided to share his findings.

'Hmm, I think that might've been what's called a "'warded"' lock.'

'And what is that?' said Garovel.

'Well, according to this website, it's a really old type of lock that doesn't get used much anymore because of a major design flaw.'

'Which is?'

'Skeleton keys,' said Hector. 'It says here that all you have to do is take a key that belongs to one warded lock, file down some of the bumpy parts, and then bam. It'll open any other warded lock you want. I think.'

'That's fascinating, Hector.'

'I can tell you really mean that and aren't being sarcastic at all.'

'Sorry,' said Garovel. 'I don't mean to be rude. I'm just a little preoccupied at the moment. Y'know, with trying to solve a case of multiple homicides.'

Hector put his phone away and started looking around more carefully. 'I still think that lock is weird.'

'Of course you do.'

'What if there's a reason why it's there?'

'A reason, huh?'

'Yeah. A reason it was never replaced with a more modern lock.'

'I dunno, Hector. Perhaps the owner just never got around to it.'

'But warded locks fell out of usage like 150 years ago or something.'

That would mean that EVERY owner since then never got around to it. And how many owners do you think this place has had?'

At that, the reaper actually stopped hovering and slowly turned to look at him. 'That is... a decent point, I suppose...'

'Right?' Hector couldn't conceal the smile that accompanied his sudden feeling of accomplishment. 'That lock might be an important clue!'

Garovel was looking more worried than intrigued, however.

Hector hadn't expected the reaper to share in his enthusiasm, but the expression on Garovel's skeletal face still caused him some concern. 'Something wrong?'

'...I hope not.' Garovel floated onward again. 'Let's just keep looking, for now.'

"1994

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Hector wanted to press further, but figured that Garovel would tell him in his own time if it was important. However, after a while of looking around the first floor and not finding much besides empty rooms full of dust, Hector's mind began to wander.

'I wonder if I would be able to pick a more modern lock with materialization.'

'Still going on about that, huh? What's with the sudden interest in locks?'

'I just feel like I should learn a lot more about locksmithing in general,' said Hector.

The reaper gave him a flat look. But then Garovel shook his head, laughed a little, and said, 'Y'know what? Good for you. I was about to try and rain on your parade, but if you're really so eager to educate yourself on a new subject, then I think that's great, Hector. I admire your enthusiasm--even if you DO have about a thousand other things on your plate, right now.'

'Well, we need to make sure that Warrenhod has good, strong locks,



right?'

'Oh my GOD. Is THAT what this has all been about?! Your castle fetish again?!'

Hector just kind of stood there awkwardly.

Garovel lowered his voice. 'Alright, maybe that was an overreaction on my part. Look, I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at myself. For not seeing that coming. Of course you would care about locksmithing, because it's tangentially related to castles. I just feel dumb, now.'

Hector gave a sympathetic chuckle. 'You seem a little high-strung, Garovel.'

'And YOU seem weirdly chill. It's making me uncomfortable.'

'Sorry. I'll try to freak out more often for you.'

'Hmph. Is this the effect of those few morsels of praise that Zeff has been giving you, lately?'

Ah. He'd noticed that, too, huh? Of course he did. Hector wasn't sure what to say now.

They found some stairs leading into a lower level and took them. This area was also empty, but Garovel stopped."

"1995

'Hmm. I think there's another floor below this one,' said Garovel.

'How can you tell?'

'Bugs. The way that their tiny little soul-masses are congregating below us--it's vaguely room-shaped. If it were just regular dirt down there, I would sense them filling the whole area.'

'I don't see any more stairs, though.'

'Mm. That's a big ""uh-oh,"" then.'

'What do you mean?'

'Let's have another look around the rest of the house first, but if we

aren't able to find a way down there, then guess what? That means it's a secret room. And maybe I'm just jaded, but when I think of a secret room, I start imagining some pretty fucked up shit inside it.'

Hector wasn't about to argue.

They returned upstairs and gave the house another once over. There were second and third floors to examine as well, but they were just as empty as the first, so it wasn't long before Hector and Garovel were back down in the basement again, reevaluating their circumstances.

'Looks like you're gonna have to break in there, chief,' said Garovel.

'I'd rather not destroy someone's property,' said Hector, scanning the cobblestone walls. 'Shouldn't there be like a hidden lever that opens a path somewhere?'

'Maybe. It might not even be in this room, though.'

'Well, let's just... look a little harder before doing anything dramatic.'

'That's less fun, though.'

'Garovel, c'mon.'

Hector used the Scarf again. He looked for any strange movement in the air as he walked along the basement's walls.

There. In the corner. The air was flowing just a little bit differently. He moved closer to examine the location, and sure enough, the crevices around one of the stones were noticeably deeper than of those surrounding it.

A button, perhaps?"

"1996

~~The New Year's Days Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 1 of 6)~~

Hector tried pressing it, but it didn't budge. He tried pressing harder, but still nothing.

Hmm. Had he been wrong?

'Try one more time.' Garovel grabbed his shoulder, and Hector felt the undead strength surge through his muscles.

He did as the reaper requested. The stone resisted still, but only at first. It sunk deep into the wall, and Hector heard a kind of a rumbling click.

Abruptly, an opening in the seemingly dirt floor appeared, popping up like the trunk of a car and throwing a large cloud of dust into the air.

'Well, shit,' said Garovel.

Hector had a pretty good idea why he was saying that.

'That right there is a room only accessible to someone with superhuman strength,' the reaper said.

'Yes, it is...'

'And combined with your clue about the lock, then it's suddenly looking like a servant used to live here.'

'Yeah...'

'It's not proof that they were responsible to the mysterious deaths, buuut...'

'Not looking good, is it?'

'Not one bit.'

They descended into the lower room.

As Hector shined his flashlight around in the pitch blackness, it quickly became apparent that this hidden chamber was not empty like the rest of the house.

There were tables and shelves everywhere. Piles of documents and books. An old, bulb-shaped lamp.

Hector tried flipping the switch on the lamp, but it remained dark.

'I'd be worried if that thing had turned on,' said Garovel. 'That would mean someone was paying the electric bill.'

Hector inspected the nearest table more closely and began sifting through the documents thereon with his flashlight. There were lots of

numbers and names, seemingly. Maybe street addresses as well. Hector couldn't really make heads or tails of most of it.

He tried another table, this one larger, and rifled through its drawers until he found a stack of small papers which seemed to have more substantial writing on them:

Citizenry still largely unaware of reaper presence. Recommend renewal of quarantine status.

Hector's eyes widened."  
"1997

~~The New Year's Days Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 2 of 6)~~

What the hell had he just read? His mind raced as he tried to process it, but there were still dozens more notes to go through:

Third cancellation this month. Possible leak. Think someone is scaring them off.

Garovel floated closer. Hector put his flashlight in his mouth and held up the notes that he'd finished for the reaper while he continued reading the others in the stack:

Asset missing. Unable to make contact. Will keep trying, but expect bad news.

The next one read:

Asset still missing. Friends and family uncooperative. Possible domestic dispute, but the coincidence is unsettling.

And the next:

Asset still not found. Expect never will be, at this point. Could have skipped country, but suspect foul play. Don't think it's A. Too quiet. Not

their style. Might be local.

Hector stopped to reevaluate those words, especially the last part.

""A, "" huh?' said Garovel, having apparently caught up to him in reading. 'Hmm.'

Hector was reluctant to say, but he had to. 'Please tell me that this isn't referring to Abolish...'

'Mm. Yeah. Wish I could, buddy, but I think it probably is.'

Agh.

'On the bright side,' said Garovel, 'the writer is saying that they DON'T think Abolish is behind this missing ""asset"" of theirs.'

'Except, Abolish DID come to Atreya.'

'Well, yeah, but given everything else we know about this house, these notes are at least eight years old. So I highly doubt this has anything to do with the group that attacked the Queen. Call me crazy, but they didn't seem like the type to make such long-term plans.'

'I guess you're right. But then... if whoever was writing these notes knew about Abolish, then... does that mean these were written by the Vanguard?'

'I'm thinking so. Could also be Sai-hee's group. Or even both.'

Hector blinked at that. 'Both?'"  
"1998

'I wouldn't say it was likely,' said Garovel, 'but Sai-hee has been known to work with the Vanguard in the protection of civilians. The Vanguard typically doesn't spare much personnel for regions with very low threat-levels. It would make a degree of sense if they both stationed some people here undercover in order to monitor things.'

'I got the impression that Sai-hee mostly just stuck to her own territory, though,' said Hector.

'She does. Monitoring isn't the same as actually intervening. Or, maybe she was considering expanding her territory to include Atreya.'

Hector had a hard time imagining that. 'You really think so?'

'No. But it's still a possibility.'

'What I really wanna know is what the hell happened to these people.'

'Looks like they might've just decided to leave on their own.' Garovel pointed at one of the several notes that Hector hadn't read yet. It was still half-covered by the others in his hand, so he brought it out to read it in full.

More trouble than this is worth. Potential value of intel here seems low. Recommend moving operations to Lorent.  
Hector cocked an eyebrow.

'Seems like there was someone in Atreya who was aware of their presence,' said Garovel. 'And that someone was making their job difficult.' He pointed at yet another note:

Another asset lost. Poisoned. Operations here are compromised. Recommend immediate withdrawal and mission value reassessment.  
'There's your poisoning,' said Hector.

'Indeed. Let's have another look around and see if we can find a name

attached to this room.'

'Okay.' Hector sifted through the last few notes first, and though they had different handwriting, they were more of the same. Reports of failure and recommendations to leave the country. There must've been several agents reporting to whoever was working out of this place, he figured.

He moved on to the bookshelves on the other side of the room and spent a while searching through the reading material there.

'It's strange that they left all this evidence behind,' said Garovel."  
"1999

~~The New Year's Days Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 4 of 6)~~

'Maybe they had to leave in a hurry,' said Hector.

'Maybe. But none of those notes mentioned direct attacks on the agents themselves. It sounded more like someone was sabotaging their attempts to cultivate a network of informants. And if these agents decided to leave because that task became impossible, then they should've either destroyed all this stuff or taken it with them.'

At length, Hector found what appeared to be some sort of logbook. It was filled with nothing but names and timestamps, to the point that only the last few pages were blank. He showed it to Garovel.

'These appear to be the comings and goings of various personnel over the course of... several months? Maybe years, even. This thing is quite thick, isn't it?'

'If they were undercover, why would they document all this?' said Hector.

'Only one reason, really. Security concerns.'

'The notes did mention a leak. And being compromised. Do you recognize any of these names from your time with the Vanguard?'

'Mmmm. Keep flipping pages.'

Hector did so.

'Stop.'

Hector did that, too.

'Yep. That one's pretty distinct.' The reaper pointed to the middle of the page at a hastily scrawled name. 'Eckard. It doesn't seem to appear much in this book, which suggests that the guy didn't visit this place very often.'

'So... he was a high-ranking officer checking on his subordinates?'

'That's what I'm thinking. And as I recall, Eckard was also the name of a Captain General of the Vanguard.'

'So this really WAS their hideout, then.'

'Looks like it. Keep flipping.'

Hector did as the reaper asked. He tried to keep an eye out for the name Eckard now, but he didn't see it all--until the last few pages, that was, where it appeared several times.

'Well, now,' said Garovel."

"2000 -- CCII.

~~The New Year's Days Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 5 of 6)~~

'So he showed up again in order to close down operations here?' guessed Hector.

'It's possible. I'm not sure why he would need to show up in person for that, though. And again, it doesn't explain why they would leave all these documents behind.'

It was then that Hector noticed another name near the very end of the logbook. It was a name he'd only heard a few times before, but seeing it now in writing, he knew at once that this was no coincidence.

""Garovel,"" he whispered as he pointed at it.



'Hmm?'

The name read: Pauline Gaolanet.

On the night of the Atreyan Gala of Royal Associates, Hector had received an invitation to meet with virtually every lord in the country. He had not had time to do so in a single evening and had been forced to reschedule the vast majority of them for later dates.

However, there had been one house of Atreyan nobility that had been noticeably absent from that list of invitations.

House Gaolanet, the Lords of Gray Rock.

Chapter Two Hundred Two: 'The Lion's insight...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Asad Najir was tired. His return to Sair had been rather turbulent, to say the least. At times, it felt like he was constantly being interrogated. The other Sandlords were constantly questioning him, wanting to know his intentions.

They had not been pleased to learn of what had transpired in the Undercrust and now seemed to think that he would soon bring more trouble down upon their heads.

He supposed he could understand their concerns. He was responsible almost entirely for the current predicament that the Sandlords found themselves in with the Vanguard.

Having met with Iceheart personally now, it seemed clear to Asad that the Vanguard was suspicious of him but lacked the justification to take any kind of action. The other Sandlords had covered for him during his absence, thankfully. An impromptu family retreat. Much needed after the harrowing attack on his childhood home of Dunehall.

Not to mention, Abbas Saqqaf had delivered Ivan's head to them on a silver platter. The Vanguard could hardly complain about that."

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"2001

~~The New Year's Days Special + Mon/Wen/Fri Double (page 6 of 6)~~

That particular development had overshadowed almost all others, it seemed. The Lord Saqqaf's fame had skyrocketed, along with that of the Sandlords as a whole.

With the Rainlords ""missing,"" the Sandlords had been forced to intervene in western Sair to prevent anarchy from taking over.

At least, that was what the Sandlords had been telling themselves. And while it was hard to argue with that justification, Asad couldn't help being quite uncomfortable about it.

He did not think it would go as smoothly as many of his brethren seemed to.

The Rainlords' subjects were not your average civilians. They were a hard, resilient people, as proud of their heritage and their history as perhaps the Rainlords themselves. And the loyalty that those subjects had for the Rainlords--Asad did not think that would be forgotten any time soon.

Not to mention that, from a historical standpoint, this event was not exactly unprecedented. The Rainlords had been driven from their land once before by the Mohssian Empire. They had been brought to the brink of extinction.

Yet it was the Rainlords who had persisted into the modern day, not

the Empire. And of course, having just spent considerable time among them, Asad knew perfectly well how much the Rainlords wished to return to Sair and reclaim their territory.

There was no telling when they might be able to accomplish that, however. Having raised an organized resistance against the Vanguard was no minor issue. According to the Sandlords' intel, the Rainlord Rebellion--as it was now being called--had sent shock waves through the Vanguardian ranks.

Which was no surprise. The Rainlords were renowned for their honor and virtuous ideals. It would be difficult for even the Vanguardian propaganda officers to paint them as wholly in the wrong.

Perhaps that was why the Vanguard, in spite of all the inquiries being conducted, still seemed quite eager to work even more closely with the Sandlords than ever before. While their reputation was faltering, the Sandlords' was swelling."

"2002

Asad sat down in his favorite chair and closed his eyes. It was finally the end of the day. All his meetings were either done or postponed, and he very much looked forward to getting a good night's sleep.

But a few things were still bothering him, and he wanted to take some time to sit here and think.

Not to meditate. He should probably do a bit of that, too, before going to sleep, but no, this was a ritual that he learned from his father. It was an opportunity to stop and take stock of things. To reevaluate them.

With so much going on around him, it was easy to become overwhelmed. To let things slip by, unnoticed.

He tried to focus his mind. To concentrate on what was bothering him.

There were actually more than a few things, he soon realized.

There was his family. Specifically, his wife, Samira. She was being... rather difficult to please, again.

When they had first gotten married, she was always so happy. And her happiness was his happiness. In retrospect, it was perhaps naive to

think that time would last the rest of their lives. Especially since they were both servants.

But still. The extent to which she had changed troubled him.

She was fearful of so many things, these days. That always seemed to be at the heart of whatever foul mood she might be in. Today, for instance, she had accused him--and not for the first time--of adultery.

She hadn't come right out and said so, of course. That wasn't her way. She had instead asked, ""Who are you trying so hard to look good for?""

He had smiled at first, thinking it to be a surprisingly sweet compliment. But the look on her face quickly killed that notion. And when he had tried to have a conversation about it with her and explain, again, that he would never be unfaithful, she had refused to say anything more.

It was difficult not to hate her, sometimes."  
"2003

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Asad supposed he should start scheduling appointments for marriage counseling again. He was reluctant to resort to it, but looking back, it had helped before. And the reapers were only so helpful to that end. Samira didn't seem to trust them to tell her the truth, either. And being members of the family, it was probably difficult for her to see them as genuinely ""objective.""

He truly had to wonder why she believed he might ever be unfaithful to her, though. Historically, yes, Sandlords had often taken multiple wives and mistresses, but Asad had only ever had eyes for her. How could she not know that?

He decided not to dwell on it further. He'd already resolved to return to counseling. It was time to move onto the next matter that had been bothering him.

And that was Abbas Saqqaf, the Lord of the Golden Fort, and the new de facto leader of the Sandlords.

Abbas had been the most powerful of them for some years already, but it was never more apparent than now. Having captured the

Salesman of Death single-handedly, the man's reputation was at an all-time high.

Which put him in a particularly precarious position, for several reasons--the first of which being the fact that Abbas Saqqaf was not a member of the Vanguard.

And boy, did they want him to be.

The other Sandlords who were part of the Vanguard were pressuring the Lord Saqqaf constantly. Asad, who was not a member either, hoped that the man would remain firm in his conviction to not join.

The second reason that Abbas' newfound fame was so dangerous was because of the potential for abuse of political clout. Asad didn't see eye-to-eye with him on several subjects, but he still trusted his judgment for the most part.

The same could not be said for all of his fellow Sandlords, however. Asad was quite worried that certain other Hahls would see Abbas' ascent as a threat to them in the long-term.

Because perhaps it was."

"2004

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Asad wanted to keep a close eye on his brethren in the days to come. Hopefully, none of them would do anything stupid and jeopardize their union. The lessons of the War of the Three Sands should still be fresh in the mind of many reapers, so Asad wanted to be optimistic, but it was also good to remain vigilant with these types of things. He had never personally experienced disunity with his kin on such a level as to provoke violence, and he hoped he never would.

The next matter on his mind was Abolish.

They had been quite thoroughly and brutally routed from Sair--and in large part, without the Vanguard's help. All of the Sandlords had been concerned about the Vanguard capturing Abolishers who were present at Dunehall--or in other words, Abolishers who might be able to tell the Vanguard that the Rainlords had been there.

And so the Lords of the Drylands had given no quarter in hunting the bastards down. Asad had even caught wind of a few Abolish prisoners who DID get captured by the Vanguard, only to end up dead anyway under ""questionable circumstances.""

Asad had little doubt that one or more of the other Hahls was behind it, and thankfully, the Vanguard hadn't been able to prove anything so far.

And this, combined with the Vanguard's simultaneous eagerness to win favor with the Sandlords? It made for a very strange state of affairs, to be sure.

And then, of course, there were the Rainlords back in Atreya. What manner of trouble might be brewing there, Asad had to wonder.

On the one hand, the Rainlords had not been in the best of spirits when he last saw them--as anyone would be, after having been repeatedly battered, trampled, robbed, and humiliated. Even their unity

might still be in question, he felt, considering the trouble that had transpired with House Blackburn.

But on the other hand, they were also now under the protection of the young Lord of Warrenhold."

"2005

When he had first met him, if Asad was being brutally honest, he hadn't thought much of the boy. A mere child, tagging along because of a tangentially-related reaper.

But now?

Now Asad found himself wondering if Hector might just be the most formidable of all his allies.

He knew how young the boy really was, but perhaps that didn't matter as much as he had previously thought. Hector's list of accomplishments spoke for itself. At Marshrock. At Dunehall. At Babbadelo. And apparently also at Himmekel and Capaporo, too. Even now, he still wasn't sure he believed half of what he had been told about those last two.

The accomplishment that was occupying Asad's thoughts the most, however, was the one that occurred at Babbadelo. Others who recounted the young lord's exploits might not even mention it, but to Asad's mind, the invention of that orbital materialization technique was no minor thing.

That technique had been bothering him ever since Hector first explained it to him and Zeff, but he had never been quite sure why. There was just something about it. Something subtle, yet still somehow fundamental, perhaps.

With everything else going on lately and all his other concerns weighing on him, Asad hadn't been able to give that technique the amount of analytical consideration that he wanted--the amount that it probably deserved. He'd discussed it a bit with Zeff, but the man had probably been even more distracted than he was.

But here and now, as he held his hand out in front of his face and practiced the technique for himself, watching a pair of quartz cubes



float around his open palm, Asad finally had the opportunity to really stop and dwell on it for a while.

And after a time, to his own surprise, he began to gain an inkling of what his problem with it might be.

So it was extra unfortunate that Qorvass phased through the wall and interrupted his train of thought. 'Hey, Haqq wants to talk to you,' the reaper said in Valgan."

"2006

Asad's tattooed face scrunched up a little as he tried to hold on to his thoughts. "About what?" he asked, not wanting to complain.

The reaper hovered there for a moment, looking at him. 'Ah... you were doing your thing again, weren't you?'

"My thing?"

'Your "not meditation" thing. Whatever you want to call it.'

"I believe it is called 'thinking.' Perhaps you should try it sometime."

'Ouch. Someone's grouchy.'

He took a breath, knowing Qorvass hadn't deserved that comment. "I apologize. I didn't mean that..."

'Yes, I should hope not. Would you rather be left alone, right now? I don't mind leaving. Or telling Haqq to go plow himself. In fact, I would enjoy that.'

Asad rubbed his neck and breathed a faint laugh. "No, that is alright. I enjoy your company, Qorvass."

'Oh. And now you're being nice? I'm getting some mixed signals here.'

Asad moved on to rubbing his forehead. "Well, maybe the signals in my head are mixed to begin with."

'Hmm.' The reaper floated closer. The flaming wings of Qorvass' scorpionfly form beat rapidly and constantly but still without making any noise, even as he moved. 'What were you thinking about, then?'

Maybe talking it through with me will help.'

He gave the reaper a look, considering. He supposed it couldn't hurt. "Do you remember that orbital materialization technique that Hector Goffe came up with in Babbadelo?"

'Um. Yes. THAT'S what you were thinking about?'

He decided to ignore that question. "Did you think anything was strange about it?"

'Ah. Sure. I thought it was strange that such a young servant could come up with something like that.'

"Anything else?"

The reaper hesitated. 'Are we turning this into a game? I would prefer you just tell me what you are getting at. Is there something YOU found particularly strange about it?'

Asad decided to oblige. "I think it might be impossible.""  
"2007

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

'What?' said Qorvass. 'What do you mean? How could it be impossible? You watched him do it. We both did.'

"Yes," said Asad, holding up a hand to perform the technique. "And I can do it myself. As can Zeff."

The reaper gave an insectoid shrug. 'So it's not impossible, then.'

Asad shook his head. "What I mean is, given our current understanding of materialization, this technique might be considered impossible. Or in other words, it should be impossible, but it isn't."

Qorvass' eyes bugged out slightly more than they did normally. 'You're saying... you think our understanding of materialization is flawed?'

He nodded. "Perhaps."

The reaper seemed a bit dumbstruck. '...That would be a really big deal, Asad.'

"I know."

'What do you think might be flawed about it?'

"That is what I was trying to work out."

'Okay... so talk me through it, then. What part of the technique seems impossible to you?'

"Well... I'm still trying to work that out, too."

'Ugh. Come on. You can't just tell me something like that and not go into anything specific.'

Asad frowned and made the pair of cubes hovering around his hand go faster. "This part seems sensible enough to me. The orbiting. These moving objects are merely extensions of the 'perpetually falling cube' trick that is simple enough for even rookie materializers to perform. That trick keeps the cube still, whereas this allows them to move by designating a point around which to orbit. It is, hypothetically, a complex cognitive process, requiring constant creation and annihilation around the edges of the object, but in practice, it is relatively easy to perform.

"I suspect this ease comes from the simplicity of imagining the object moving along a set distance away from the designated orbiting point. If I were to alter the distance of orbit like so--" He pushed the cubes farther away from him and tried to make their paths bumpy and irregular. "--it becomes significantly more difficult for me." He squinted a little while maintaining his concentration, watching the cubes tremble along their new, erratic orbits.

'Okay,' said Qorvass. 'So if the orbiting makes sense to you, then...?'

"It's the technique's ability to create explosive impact forces that I find baffling."

"2008

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'Hmm,' the reaper hummed. 'And why is that? My understanding is that it merely functions as a way to achieve exceptionally high velocity states at a lower skill threshold. Like a means of overcoming a mental

block, perhaps, by conceptualizing the problem in a different manner.'

"Yes... and also no. That may be what the technique is accomplishing, but it shouldn't be. At least, theoretically. Because the actual orbiting part that I just described... doesn't use 'velocity' states. It only uses 'position' states."

Qorvass just looked at him, perhaps waiting for elaboration.

Asad held the orbiting cubes up again. "Technically, these objects aren't actually 'moving' at all. They just look like they are. And I suppose you might argue that there's no difference. If they are going from point A to point B, then that is all that matters." Asad exhaled a long breath. "But it's not all that matters, at least on a technical level."

'I'm still not sure I follow your logic here...'

"It's more like... looking through a three-dimensional window into an alternate universe."

The reaper's head tilted at that. 'Excuse me?'

"These cubes that you see are not moving--not in the same way that a thrown ball moves or a planet orbiting the Sun moves. Rather, they're more like an image in a window. In some sense, it is the window that is moving, not the object on the other side. And we just can't tell by simply looking at it, because we ARE the window. This physical reality is the window."

'I'm not sure that's any easier to understand, Asad.'

He sighed another time. "I told you I was still struggling to figure this out, didn't I?"

'You did. But alternate realities? Really?'

"I'm not saying that it IS an alternate reality. I'm saying that it may be easier to conceptualize it as such, for the purpose of understanding that these orbiting cubes are not actually moving."

'Hmm.'"

"2009

Asad rubbed his chin with his free hand. "This is probably even more difficult to explain to a non-materialization user."

'Mm. Okay. Well, let's just say you've convinced me of that part, then. They aren't moving. Why is that so incompatible with the idea that the end result is some kind super-enhanced velocity state?'

"Because that would mean that materialization's own rules hardly even matter--that it's all ultimately just a trick of the mind."

'Well. Is it not?'

Asad's expression soured. "No. These sorts of tricks should only work to a certain extent. This is far beyond that, I feel."

'Hence why you think our understanding of materialization might be flawed.'

"Yes... there is something fundamentally off with this."

'Hmm.'

"It would almost make more sense if only Hector could utilize this technique," said Asad.

'How do you mean?'

"If neither Zeff nor I could perform it, then perhaps this could all just be chalked up to the young lord's encounter with Rasalased. A gift from the Dry God."

'Agh, don't even bring that up, please.'

Asad couldn't help smiling a little. "Are you still upset that they were able to meet him before us?"

'Intensely, yes. That entire scenario was just absurd.'

"At least we have confirmation that Rasalased is still there after all this time." His eyes went to the travel bag by his bed. Hector Goffe and Emiliana Elroy were currently in possession of two of the Shards of the Dry God, and the remaining two were in that bag there.

Asad and Qorvass had never made a big issue out of it in front of anyone else, but it had not been a trivial decision to allow Hector to keep one of the Shards. With Emiliana, the poor girl had been whisked away by the Monster of the East, so she had obviously never been

given an opportunity to return her Shard--and likely wouldn't for a very long time. And given Hector's--and ONLY Hector's--ability to converse with her through them, it would have been quite cruel to insist Hector return his."

"2010

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

The circumstances were extenuating, to be sure, but that didn't change the fact that those Shards were arguably more precious than any other artifact that the Sandlords as a whole possessed. And the power that lay dormant within them was no meager thing. One day, they could become very real weapons again. And that could prove to be either a great blessing or a great problem.

'I didn't require confirmation that he was still there,' said Qorvass bitterly. 'I remember perfectly well.'

Asad didn't doubt him. Qorvass was one of the oldest reapers among the Sandlords. Asad knew that Qorvass felt especially attached to the Shards. "Even so, a lot can change in seven hundred years."

'Hmph.'

"Anyway, we are getting off-topic," said Asad.

'Are we? It seems similarly possible that even if Rasalased didn't grant Hector this new ability, he could have still granted him the knowledge needed to discover it.'

The thought had occurred to Asad as well. "Maybe, but it makes little difference at this point."

'I disagree. If Rasalased granted him this knowledge, then who knows what else might be in that young man's head, now?'

"All the more reason to remain on good terms with him," said Asad.

'I wasn't trying to suggest otherwise. Rather, I recommend bringing him into the fold, if at all possible.'

Asad knew exactly what the reaper meant, as he had been considering it as well. "I'm not so sure that it IS possible, but yes, I agree in sentiment, at least."

‘Are you concerned that our Rainlord friends will not approve?’

“Oh, I’m certain they won’t.”

‘They are no doubt trying to find a suitable bride for him at this very moment. But even if Hector were to agree--and I’m not sure he will--I don’t imagine that Garovel will just sit idly by and watch his servant be married off to just anyone. He seemed a shrewd one to me.’”

"2011

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“I thought you liked Garovel,” said Asad.

‘Oh, I do. We haven’t known each other long, but I already consider him a good friend. But that doesn’t mean he will do as we wish, even if we ask nicely.’

""Heh. What a shame.”

‘But whether Rasalased granted him this knowledge or he really did come up with it on his own, it doesn’t change the fact that this technique SHOULD still follow the rules of materialization.’

“Hence why I said it makes little difference. I’m not sure that even Hector himself fully understands his technique.”

‘You think he invented it without realizing the full depth of its complexity?’

Asad deliberated silently for a moment. That notion seemed particularly absurd, somehow. While it was perfectly possible for someone to discover something accidentally or invent some kind of machine without understanding its full functionality, Asad had a hard time believing that such a thing was possible when it came to materialization. So much of materialization depended on the wielder’s understanding of the thing being materialized. Even someone of very high skill level would struggle to create something simple if they didn’t understand how it was shaped, what physical features it had, or how it was supposed to work.

It seemed very unlikely that Hector could have invented something unintentionally, and yet...

“...What if it’s not so much ‘the orbital technique’ that Hector invented, as it is something else?”

‘And what in the world does that mean?’

“The latter part of the technique,” said Asad, thinking back, “after the orbital acceleration, Hector said it requires the user to ‘lose control’ of it in order to launch. I hadn’t thought much of that before, because I was able to do it so easily, but... that is incredibly unlike most materialization techniques. Or ALL of them, really. Losing control? On purpose? Materialization is always about tightly concentrating and fully comprehending everything you are doing. Always being in control. Because when you are not, your work goes completely awry.”””  
"2012

‘Are you saying that merely allowing yourself to lose control is somehow the catalyst for the technique’s explosive power?’ said Qorvass.

When the reaper put it like that, it sounded stupid. “I don’t know if it’s the only reason, but it might play a role.”

‘Right. And what role would that be, exactly?’

Asad was getting a little irritated. “If I knew that, I would’ve told you by now!”

‘Well, believe it or not, I may have an alternate theory.’

“Oh? I’m inclined to not believe it.”

‘I may not be a materialization wizard like you, but I do have a few thousand years of observing servants under my belt.’

“Go on, then. Dazzle me with your insight.”

‘Okay, now you’re putting too much pressure on me. This theory might be complete hogwash, by the way. I’m just putting it out there, alright?’

“Just tell me.”

‘Alright, well, uh... what if I said that your suspected flaw in our



understanding of materialization went beyond just materialization?’

Asad raised an eyebrow at that.

‘Listen. Throughout history, I have occasionally heard of anomalous occurrences like this. Surprising displays of ability that were previously thought impossible. Many of those occurrences have since been explained, and the understanding of each corresponding servant ability-type has increased as a result.

‘However, a few of those occurrences remain mysterious even to this day. This could be an instance of that. Which would make it a flaw in our thinking that is not necessarily specific to materialization, but perhaps instead to all ability types.’

Asad stared past the reaper as he tried to wrap his head around that concept.

‘I know it’s not much of a theory, really, but I wanted you to broaden the scope of your thinking, at least.’

Asad gave a slow nod. “Well, you’ve accomplished that.””  
"2013 -- CCIII.

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))Chapter Two Hundred Three: 'Premonitions of a dark horizon...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Nere Blackburn was not herself. She hadn't been for many years, if she were telling the complete truth of things, but she could feel it now more than ever.

The instability in her thoughts. The erratic emotions that gripped her. Anxiety. Sorrow. But perhaps most of all, fear.

Fear of what? She could hardly tell anymore. Of everything, perhaps. Of all outcomes. All possibilities.

Ismael, her husband of forty years, was gone. Slain by the Salesman of Death. Ibai, her darling son, was missing. Taken by the Monster of the East.

Her two greatest ties to this world. Severed.

She knew she was broken now. She had known it for some time. These events only made it that much more clear to her.

Because more than anything, she deserved this.

She had never believed in the water god before, but now she did. This was divine punishment, surely.

For her deception.

She hadn't left her room in several days now. The other Blackburns, the kind and pure souls that they were, did nothing but try to help her, to provide her with any manner of assistance she required.

But they didn't know that their kindness, their perfection, hurt her now more than any cruelty she could think of.

If they knew the truth, they would hate her. They would turn. All that kindness would turn to wrath--and rightly so.

Look at all she had wrought.

Now, not only was her own family shattered beyond repair, but so many others were caught in the grip of the madness that she had begun so many years ago.

With her weakness.

Her love for Ismael had grown to such extremes as she had never even dreamt possible, far beyond what it was even when they were newly married. It had grown so strong, in fact, that the thought of ever living without him had become a thing more terrible to her than anything else. She could have lost anything else. Just not him. Not after all he had done. She would have gladly died in his stead, if she only been given the chance.

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"2013 -- CCIII.

Three: 'Premonitions of a dark horizon...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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"2014

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))It was the height of youthful folly. Understandable, perhaps, if one were to characterize the emotions that had motivated her actions as those of the unwise or the unlearned, but she dared not even give herself that meagerest easing of her conscience.

In her anger, in her disappointment, in her yearning to become a different person, she had been unfaithful to her husband.

And the result of that was Ibai. An aberration. A thing worthy of only death.

In truth, after that first incident with the dead cat, when it became clear that Parson Miles' warning had been the truth, she might have gone through with the killing of her only child if not for Ismael--if he hadn't been the greatest man she had ever known.

And to think. It had worked.

Ismael had actually succeeded in changing Ibai's nature.

She took no credit in that for herself. She knew it beyond doubt--that had all been her husband's doing. Someone as pathetic as her could not have been of any use to anyone. It was only too obvious where the goodness in Ibai had truly come from, even if he didn't have Ismael's blood in him.

Just thinking about it now made her want to start crying again. She might've allowed herself to, if she were alone, but her reaper, Sentsia, was present. And talking to her. As usual.

Nere was hardly listening, though. The reaper's moral pontifications and words of encouragement were without end.

Even though Sentsia knew the truth, too. The one person who should have been able to genuinely understand how worthless she was--but Sentsia didn't. Even her own reaper was too good for her, Nere knew.

How cruel Lhutwë was. To have her grow to love her family so much after betraying them so utterly, after having thought herself above them for so long."

"2015

When she had first met Ismael, the unimpressive nobleman from the backwaters of Luzo, she had thought him a puppy in the guise of a man. So innocent and meek. Not at all domineering like many of the other men of the Wetlands whom she had met.

She, on the other hand, had been so full of fire and ambition. Even from the beginning, she felt that she could wrap this silly, awkward man around her finger and get him to do whatever she wanted.

And she'd been right.

It had been so easy. A few teasing looks here. A few flirtatious words there. Ismael hadn't known what to do. Obviously, he hadn't had much experience with women before. In no time at all, he became so eager to please her.

The rest of his family probably would have been more wary of her if they weren't in complete tatters. They were in a state of mourning, all of them. At the time, she didn't know what exactly had happened to them, only that many were killed during some horrible conflict.

She could have inquired further. She should have. She didn't.

It didn't matter to her. Looking back, she wanted to think that if she had known more at that time, she would have acted differently, not tried to take advantage of Ismael the way she did, but that was probably just wishful thinking, she knew.

She was so selfish back then. Blind to the problems of others unless there was some way she could benefit from it.

Ismael was a means to an end. Nothing more.

The thought never even occurred to her that she might be the same.

Her mysterious benefactor had remained so for far too long. She had never given proper thought to why someone would just start mailing her money and instructions. She'd questioned it, certainly, but being in such dire need at the time, in a state of constant financial misery, she had been only too happy to take the help, wherever it came from."

"2016

When the day finally came that her benefactor revealed his true identity to her, the shock alone nearly destroyed her then and there.

Because it had occurred in two separate steps.

The first time he revealed himself to her, she had thought that everything was becoming clear, that this man was someone who truly loved her and cared for her--and most importantly of all, someone who was worthy of her. Obviously, she could never settle for a puppy like Ismael. No. This man, this "Bas" as he called himself at the time, was the real love of her life. And together, they would conquer the world.

Why had she been so lucky? Why had he chosen her out of all the other girls in the world? Well, because she was just that great, of course. What need was there to even humor any other notion?

Oh, how he was able to inflate her ego. To make her think she was deserving of so much more than she really was. To make her think that she, a girl whom he had raised up from nothing, was somehow above all these lords and ladies of Sair.

Looking back on it now, on how foolish she had been, she almost wanted to laugh. She must have been insane. That seemed the only explanation to her now.

But the charm of that man... of all people, how could he have wielded such charm? She had prided herself on seeing through people, manipulating them to her will. So why hadn't she been able to see through his lies? Just because she hadn't known his true name at the time? Had she really been that blind?

Perhaps if she had joined the Vanguard sooner, she might have seen his face before on a wanted poster. Or heard a description of him, maybe. Something.

No doubt, that was why he had instructed her to keep putting off joining. And that must've also been why he decided to reveal himself as "Bas" when he did. He would have been unable to do so if he had waited much longer.

It was just so absurd. How could she have ever fallen in love with someone like the Mad Demon?"

"2017

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

She must have been mad to have not thought anything was strange about him, but even all these years later, her memory of that night was still so clear. He had been so warm. So understanding. So ready to listen and admire and be the most wonderful human being she had ever met in her life.

He was everything she could have ever wanted in a man and more. That secret tryst in overgrown wilds of Steccat had been one of the best experiences she'd ever had.

And now it was the worst. Her most enduring nightmare.

The day she had first seen Morgunov's face listed among the others of the Vanguard's most wanted, everything had begun to crumble. Like the ground itself had somehow been ripped out from under her.

It should have come as no surprise to her then that "Bas" never contacted her again, but for some reason, being the stupid girl that she was, she hadn't expected that, either.

And then, of course, she discovered the pregnancy.

Ismael had been so happy. Seeing him that way broke her heart in ways she never thought possible. Such a betrayal of such a perfect man.

She nearly lost her mind completely then. If not for Sentsia, she would have. It was all a fog, but she felt certain, nonetheless. Sentsia was the only thing that had gotten her through that pregnancy.

And Ibai. Sweet, darling Ibai.

She'd thought him a monster for so long, but even he proved to be a better person than her in the end. Far, far better.

She didn't know how it was possible to be so proud and so sad at the same time.

If there was any sliver of hope or salvation to be found through all of this, it was him. It was Ibai."

"2018

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Nere had to imagine that Ibai's existence had been Morgunov's goal all along. He'd wanted to create an aberration. One of the very first, seemingly, but if Morgunov was hoping for a monster of madness like himself, then he would be sorely mistaken.

Nere had no idea why Morgunov had never come for him. She had feared that every single day since he was born. But whatever the reason was, she thanked Lhutwë for it. She only prayed now that Ibai would be able to remain safe. Somehow. Please.

If there was any goodness left in the world, that had to be so.

But.

That was the real question for her at this point, wasn't it?

Was there any goodness left in the world? Not for her, surely. She readily acknowledged that. She had no future now. But what about everyone else? Was there any goodness left for them, at least?

She wanted to think so. In the few times she had actually gone outside and seen the other Rainlords bustling about this underground fortress, this Warrenhold, she had seen the light of hope in their eyes. In their postures. In their intent.

They saw it. They saw goodness in the world. Somewhere.

Were they wrong? Were they just fooling themselves until the inevitable found them, as it had found her?



She honestly did not know.

What was the point anymore? Everything was so meaningless now.

But.

But perhaps...

Perhaps if everything was meaningless, then... perhaps she could do something that had never dared do before.

Perhaps she could tell someone the truth. Perhaps she could just... confess.

Could it really be that simple? All these years, that had seemed like a thing so utterly impossible that it hardly even bore thinking about.

But now...?

Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe nothing did.

And she was beginning to wonder what might come of it."  
"2019

As she sat there in the corner of her room, thinking over the idea more and more, Nere began to rock back and forth.

Yes.

Yes, perhaps telling someone the full truth of things would be for the best. Would it ease her conscience? Perhaps not. But it was a step forward, wasn't it? A step somewhere, at least? As opposed to just being lost in this dark fog forever? And if it didn't matter anymore, why should she be afraid to say anything? Because everyone would shun her? Because they would hate her?

She wanted them to. She deserved it. For too long, her sins had remained unknown, unpunished.

Maybe Sentsia would even release her soul.

She had never contemplated asking Sentsia to do that before. Why not? Perhaps it was selfishness. She had cared for her own life too

much. But what need was there to care now? What was there left to live for?

All these years, she had never really understood those stories about servants asking their reapers to release them. And with as often as she had heard such tales, it seemed a fairly common occurrence. How could that be, she'd wondered?

Now she knew. Or rather, she had some semblance of knowing, at least. Perhaps it was presumptuous at this juncture to assume she could know anything of value to anyone, but she felt an understanding like she never had before.

A silent epiphany.

All those servants who asked to be released--they knew then what she had only just now realized.

In the future lay only darkness.

It was all, ultimately, without hope.

Looking back, it seemed somehow absurd that she had ever had hope to begin with. Hope for what? To what end?

Which meant that, for her, there was really only one thing left to do at this point.

But who should she tell? Well, everyone, perhaps. But who would be the best person to reveal this horrific secret to first?"  
"2020

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))  
Now there was a dilemma.

The best person to tell. Or the worst. Those two concepts seemed intertwined to her now.

Well, the first person who came to mind was Sentsia, of course. Being Nere's reaper, it only made sense to tell her everything first.

But what if Sentsia decided to simply release her soul then and there? Wouldn't that be too quick an end to her suffering? Sentsia probably

would never do such a thing. She was too gentle and understanding.

But Nere still didn't want to take that risk. And more than likely, it just wouldn't be punishing enough. Sentsia might even try to comfort her, for some reason, and that was the absolute last thing that Nere wanted now.

No, she needed to pick someone who would hate her. Truly. Someone who would take vengeance on her.

And the more she thought about it, the more she could think of no better candidate than the Lord Zeff Elroy.

Of all people, his hatred for her would surely burn the most fiercely. He was one who sought vengeance. And he wouldn't make it quick, would he? He would make sure she paid for what she'd done.

Oh, but he probably wouldn't care all that much about Morgunov or Ibai, would he? Comparatively, at least. No, the thing that would make him hate her the most was a bit different, wasn't it?

Yes. He still didn't know about the role House Blackburn had played in the Elroy Massacre all those years ago. It had been Abolish's work, of course, but the Blackburns had let them into the country. Unwittingly, perhaps, but since when did ignorance alleviate one of responsibility?

She nodded to herself as she decided. Yes. She could tell him about that.

Finally, she could see the path forward.

Someone was talking to her. Oh, yes. Sentsia was still there, wasn't she?

'--important to attend these things,' she was saying. 'It will do the rest of the family good to see you there. They could use a morale boost, right now.'

"2021

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Morale? What was she talking about?

Oh, yes, there was some sort of family gathering today. Something to

do with... a birthday?

Yes, one of the children was turning thirteen today, and the family was celebrating.

How nice.

She might have liked to go to such an event if she wasn't sure that she would just bring the mood down. If it was to be a celebration, then her presence would ruin it for everyone.

Telling Sentsia that truth would probably just upset the reaper, however. Nere decided to ignore the subject entirely.

"I would like to speak with Zeff Elroy," said Nere.

The reaper just stared at her.

To her eyes, Sentsia had the appearance of a dim ball of light with a face vaguely outlined in ethereal fire that flickered silently. A fading star of sorts.

"What?" said Nere.

'You don't say a word to me in days. You don't speak to the therapist. You don't talk to ANYONE. And then you say THAT? Of all things?'

Why was she upset? Nere didn't know. "I wish to speak with Zeff Elroy," she said again.

'No.'

Nere blinked. "Why not? You haven't even asked my reason."

'I don't need to. The answer is no.' The reaper hovered closer.

"I wish to speak to him," was all Nere could think to say. She hadn't expected Sentsia to refuse her. Sentsia had almost never refused her in all the time they'd known each other, which extended all the way back to when her engagement to Ismael had been formalized.

'There is not a chance in lakefire that I will let you to talk to that man, right now.'

"Why not?"

'Don't play dumb.' The reaper's echoing tone was perhaps colder than

Nere had ever heard it before ‘Oh, but I guess you wouldn’t need to “play,” now would you?’”  
"2022

Nere was trying to understand and failing. “What do you mean?”

‘Forget it. You are in no condition to be talking to anyone outside the family. Not right now, at least. Once you’ve had time to properly grieve and get your mind in order, then we can revisit this conversation.’

Nere didn’t know what to say. No one outside the family?

Hmm.

Well, perhaps Melchor would do, then. In fact, now that she was thinking about it, he might be even better. Melchor was a man who had sought vengeance for House Blackburn many years ago--and found it.

That had happened after what came to be known as the Culling at Denya.

Nere had only learned of that horrible incident long after the fact, but her understanding was that it had been a Vanguardian stealth operation that went terribly awry. The Vanguardians were betrayed, their locations revealed, and Abolish turned what should have been an ambush against them into a slaughter in their favor.

Nere had occasionally wondered if Darktide’s subsequent terrorizing of Abolish had in some way impacted Morgunov’s decision to use her as a tool against House Blackburn the way he did, but if there was a connection there, she had never been able to find it. Surely, if the Mad Demon had wanted to destroy the Blackburns, he would have been more direct about it and not resorted to such subterfuge, no?

Well, she supposed that it hardly mattered now, anyway.

“In that case,” said Nere, “I would like to talk to Melchor.”

Sentsia just stared at her again.

Nere waited, shifting uncomfortably in her tall chair. The reaper seemed quite different today, and Nere found it very unsettling.

‘Why do you want to talk to Melchor?’ said Sentsia.”

"2023

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Should she lie? Once upon a time, she had been quite a skillful liar, but here and now, with so much uncertainty roiling around inside her, she didn't know if she could muster up even the slightest bit of cunning. “What does it matter? He would not be unwilling to speak to me, would he? I wish to see him. To hear his voice.”

‘No.’ Sentsia’s tone did not imply that her mind could be changed.

Nere wanted to ask why again, but she was afraid to now. What was Sentsia thinking? How much did she really know?

‘You seem confused,’ the reaper said. ‘As you would. You stupid girl. Even after all this time, you STILL haven’t learned to see beyond yourself, your own pain, your own worry. I can’t believe I ever thought you could change.’

Nere’s eyes were wide as she listened. She could feel tears welling up already. “What are you saying? How can you--?”

‘Oh, shut your mouth, you lying whore. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t keep trying to support you in spite of everything. I can’t keep trying to bring out the best in you. There’s nothing left to bring, is there? You are little more than an empty shell now, aren’t you?’

Nere had no words. Was this even the same reaper she had known all these years?

‘If only I had learned the truth sooner,’ said Sentsia. ‘I would have revealed your infidelity forthwith, and you would have been tossed aside by House Blackburn. And Ismael might have found a woman who was truly worthy of him. But no. For whatever reason, Lhutwë deigned not to allow that justice to come to pass, and now, here we are instead. Ismael, that wonderful boy, is dead. And I must continue to endure YOU.’

Nere could only listen. The reaper was far from done.”

"2024

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'Honestly, why do you look so surprised?' said Sentsia, still in the echo of privacy. 'Tell me. Do you remember when we first harnessed pan-moc, you and I? Hmm?'

Nere managed to shake her head.

'No. You must. Do you remember how it nearly killed us both? Do you have any idea why that might have been? No? Of course you don't.' The reaper sighed. 'That was precisely the time when I learned of what you had done. When I probed our shared minds. I couldn't believe what I found. I didn't WANT to believe it. The shock was so great, in fact, that I nearly lost control of the hyper-state and allowed it to kill us both.' She paused for a chuckle. 'Perhaps I should have.'

Nere was trembling. She couldn't look at the reaper anymore.

'I want you to think about the decision that I was faced with at that time, Nere. Really think about it. Ibai was already a teenager. Melchor had returned to us. He was his old self again. House Blackburn was more unified than it had been in generations. And this knowledge that I had just acquired would tear all of that apart in an instant. Can you imagine what was going through my mind then? Hmm?'

Nere clutched her head with both hands as if to shield herself from Sentsia's words, but there was no stopping them.

'Naively, I thought there was hope,' Sentsia went on, 'because you really DID come to love Ismael and Ibai and everyone else. I could see that in you as well. I saw it. But I was a fool. Something like this was always going to happen.'

Nere asked the only question that she could think of. 'Why didn't you tell me any of this sooner?'

'To what end? To shame you? What purpose would that have served, exactly?'

'I... I don't...'

'I have always tried to be above such base instincts,' said Sentsia. 'But damn if it doesn't feel good now. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I should have done this a long time ago.'"

Nere just shut her eyes and hung her head. Arguing was fruitless, she felt. She deserved all of this and more.

'I've never been a believer in punishment, really,' said Sentsia. 'I always thought that it was better to try to "rehabilitate" someone than to "punish" them. The desire to rehabilitate comes from a place of empathy. It's "nicer." While the desire to punish comes from a place of, arguably, anger. It's more brutalistic. It felt like something that only the unenlightened person would pursue.

'But thanks to you, I see now that I was wrong. I was too confident in my sense of moral superiority. I think, perhaps, my lack of awareness in this regard may have only served to make this situation worse. If I had thought to punish you for your actions sooner, to make you seek repentance as Lhutwë would want, then perhaps we could have begun on a slow road to betterment. Somehow.

'Now, of course, it is far too late for that. You are too far gone. Or perhaps I am. The hatred I feel for you is unlike any I have ever known in the last two thousand years. And that, I must say, is quite an accomplishment.'

Nere didn't move. 'Then just release me...'

'Ah, yes. I am considering it. This is what you desire?'

She chanced a frail look at Sentsia. 'Yes...'

'You don't wish to find a way to atone for your sins?'

Nere sat on that idea for a time. It had crossed her mind before, briefly, but it seemed so utterly impossible that she hadn't really given it much consideration at all. 'How would I be able to do that?'

'By helping me bring House Blackburn into a new, golden era.'

Nere's head reared back a little."



'You may think your life is in ruins,' said Sentsia, moving even closer still, 'and you may think that there is no point in living anymore, no future for you to look forward to. And you may be right. For you. But for the family? For all of House Blackburn? We are far from defeated.'

Was she right? Nere had a hard time imagining that she could be, but Sentsia did have two thousand years of experience and knowledge to pull from.

'You will likely find it difficult to believe in your current state of mind,' the reaper continued, 'but allow me to remind you that this family has endured worse circumstances than this in the past. You know our history. Our struggles. Even if you are ready to roll over and die, your kin--those who still consider you their family--are perfectly capable of seeing the dawn of a new and even more glorious age.

'But if you ever wish to see such a future, then you must first be punished. And as I am the only who knows the depths of your crimes, I must be the one to deal it out to you.' The reaper latched on to her arm and stayed there.

Nere did not resist. She could only think to ask one thing. 'If you do not intend to release my soul, then what do you intend to do?'

'I will have you abandon yourself.'

'W-what do you mean?'

'Any notions of your own well-being, your own desires--you will discard them. On the outside, you will pretend that nothing has changed, that you are still the same Nere that the family knows and cares for. But in private, between the two of us, you will submit to my will. Entirely.'

Again, Nere found herself without words.

'You are my servant no longer. Now, you are my slave.'"  
"2027 -- CCIV.

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It had been a long and frustrating day, to say the least. He sighed wearily as he flopped down onto his favorite bean bag, enjoying its soft and fuzzy coating in tandem with its familiar squishiness. Sour-faced and upset with himself, he allowed his eyes to drift slowly around the room.

As far as workshops went, his wasn't exactly what one might call "conventional." Old televisions lined one of the walls entirely, but most of them hadn't seen any use in twenty years or more. At one time, he'd been enamored with so many different daytime soap operas that he'd gotten into the habit of watching many of them simultaneously, but these days, he didn't have much love for the genre anymore. Looking back, it may've perhaps been a bad idea to mail in that threatening letter to the producers of Daily Love. Sure, the show had gone to hell, and everything he'd written in that letter had been one hundred percent accurate, but he hadn't wanted them and virtually every other producer in all of Bellvine to quit making daytime soaps altogether.

It had taken a few years before any new soaps had dared to start airing, but the industry had never quite recovered, he felt. The stories just didn't have the same kind of punch that they used to. True, they didn't infuriate him like before, perhaps because they no longer killed off his favorite characters--or any characters, for that matter--but they also felt, on the whole, much safer now. The writers were too afraid to take risks, he supposed. Which was a shame.

Then again, maybe it was for the best. Without so many soaps distracting him all the time, he'd been able to focus more on his creative work again.

Which was the source of his current frustration."  
"2027 -- CCIV.

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))  
Chapter Two Hundred Four: 'When an archdemon stirs...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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"2028

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Feldeaths were so obnoxious. It was unbelievable how stubborn they were. It was like they were somehow made of stubbornness. At first, he'd merely been curious as to whether or not it would be possible to supercharge an aberration by feeding a feldeath to one of them, but after a string of continuous and sometimes explosive failures, he'd resorted to merely trying to observe feldeaths more closely and hopefully learn something about the composition of their mysterious

bodies.

They were the only beings on the planet that could manipulate physical reality directly while having entirely incorporeal bodies--or at least, that was the commonly held belief. He'd begun wondering if perhaps they did have some physical component to them--a component which had simply yet to be discovered by any scholar in history. It shouldn't be possible, given everything that was known about how feldeaths were born, but Nibas Dimitri Aurelion Lotorevo Morgunov wasn't one for allowing his curiosity to be sated by the theories of other supposed scientists.

He'd learned long ago not to trust information he couldn't verify for himself. And boy, did feldeaths make that widely held theory difficult to verify.

They absolutely hated being observed. And the way they could change the composition of their bodies at the drop of a hat certainly didn't help, either. If they did have some hidden physical component to their bodies, he wondered if they might be able to phase said component in and out of reality at will. And in such a case, confirming the component's existence would require around-the-clock study using every observational instrument known to man--and perhaps some which were still unknown to it.

But accomplishing all of that meant capturing one of the bloody things, and there existed no material on this planet which could keep a feldeath caged for very long. Maybe if he took a break and studied up on quantum fluctuations, he would be able to figure out some new method of approach for these problems.

But.

Meh..."  
"2029

His fervor for the feldeath problem had diminished rather substantially, of late. He had always despised the idea of ""giving up,"" no matter what the experiment entailed, but living as long as he had, he'd slowly grown to have a different understanding of what that meant. To him, he wasn't so much giving up as he was just shelving the project for a while. He'd return to it whenever his interest in it was rekindled. True,

that could be a hundred years from now or more, but such was the nature of immortality.

On the other hand, though, a part of him didn't think he would actually last another hundred years. In truth, a part of him didn't want to--but not because he was so miserable or otherwise tired of living, as several of his contemporaries seemed to be.

Rather, it was just the opposite.

The idea that someone out there might finally punch his ticket for him?

That would be so exciting. Who could pull off such a feat? And how?

There was a time when he genuinely thought that Jercash might be the one to do it, but that sourpuss didn't seem interested in the idea, anymore. What a disappointing realization that had been. Jercash obviously wanted to lead Abolish, but apparently, he didn't much care about getting the credit for doing so. These days, the sly boy seemed only too happy to use his ""crazy"" boss as an excuse for all manner of things, whether it be scapegoating him or feigning an inferiority complex or some other underhanded thing.

There was no doubt in Morgunov's mind that Jercash had a hand in the untimely deaths of Gunther and Dunhouser. Sure, Jackson may have been the one that actually killed them, but Jercash probably manufactured the circumstances that had allowed that to happen."  
"2030

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

In a way, Morgunov was proud of him. The world hadn't started calling his sly boy the Devil's Knife for nothing.

Of course, Jercash probably didn't think that he could see any of that.

But he could.

Morgunov could always see.

If anything, his problem was that he could see too much.

It had always been that way.

There was a time, long in the past now, when he had hated that part of himself. When he had wanted to be normal. To have a regular brain like everyone else. The world had certainly tried its damndest to make him feel that way in his youth. Adults didn't like being seen through by a child, nor told what to do, even for their own betterment--even if they could tell that it was for their own betterment.

But perhaps that was merely human nature. Compulsive independence, even against demonstrable truth. 'Twas a matter of pride, he supposed.

It too often was.

Those times were so distant to his mind now that they felt almost as if they had happened to someone else--and indeed, he sometimes questioned if they did.

The mind was a funny thing, wasn't it? There was no more powerful object in the known universe than the human brain, and yet it was still so prone to errors. The philosophical problem of the unreliable narrator: summarized. How can a man trust his own thoughts when he knows his mind to be so deeply flawed? How can one think correctly when the act of thinking itself might be incorrect?

It was a dilemma that had always fascinated him--even to the point of dabbling in the treacherous technology of cerebral enhancement for a while--but he had yet to find a satisfactory resolution to it."

"2031

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This was why he had never had a problem with hubris and never would. Unlike certain others. He knew only too well how fine a line there was between intellect and delusion, genius and madness. It was as slippery a matter as the very struggle between Order and Chaos themselves. And that probably was not a coincidence.

Hmm.

Wait a minute.

Yeah. Now there was a thought. It probably wasn't a coincidence, was it?

So then... what was it?

Morgunov sat up suddenly.

Order and Chaos. Intellect and delusion. Order and Chaos. Genius and madness. Order and Chaos. Death and life. Order and Chaos, Order and Chaos, Order and Chaos...

Hmm.

Destruction. And. Creation.

Or?

Creation. And. Destruction?

It all made sense to him now. And yet, none of it did.

Was this, too, as it was supposed to be?

There was a grand separation between merely understanding something and manifesting that knowledge into reality. Understanding how to build a thermonuclear warhead, for instance, was one thing, but actually building one--now that was quite another thing, wasn't it? There were little differences here and there that came with the genuine experience. Philosophizing and intellectualizing were only good up to a point.

He wondered how well the ancient ""gods"" of this world had known that. Hmm. Perhaps they'd known it even better than he?

Well, if they hadn't known it then, they certainly knew it now, didn't they?

Eheheh.

He stroked his chin.

Whoa, there was a lot more hair there than he remembered. When was the last time he'd shaved? Two years ago? Ten? No telling.

'Hey, Bool, when was the last time I shaved?' he asked.

The response arrived so slowly that Morgunov thought Bool might've been giving him the silent treatment again. '...I have no idea,' the reaper said from elsewhere in the underground compound."

"2032

Morgunov probably could have located him more precisely if he concentrated, but he didn't really feel like it. 'Hey, are you mad at me again?'

'Always.'

'Aww.'

'Are you finally finished playing around with your toys?' Bool asked. 'The world is still in dire need of purging.'

'Eheh.'

There came a pause. 'What is that laugh for?'

'You sure love your purges, don't you?'

'You used to love them, too, as I recall. Before you got lazy.'

'I dunno. After the hundredth one, they got kinda boring, y'know?'

'Morgunov.' There arrived a familiar sigh. 'I know I might as well be talking to a tree at this point, but I shall keep trying, nonetheless. This is a serious matter. The Vanguard is at an advantage, right now.'

Morgunov picked his nose and inspected the booger. 'Oh, are they?'

'Yes. If you continue to do nothing, they may soon destroy the whole of Abolish.'

'Uh-huh...'

Another sigh. 'If you would take to the field but one time, I am sure that we could--'

'Eh, I'm sure my boy can handle it.'

'Jercash has his back against the wall, at the moment. If you care for him at all, then you should--'

'I JUST told you he could handle it.'

'Yes, but if Sermung or Jackson--'



'Hey, I had an idea I wanna run by you real quick.'

Another noticeable pause arrived. '...What is it?'

'You remember that time I went a little crazy?'

'...You will have to be more specific.'

'In Bellvine. With the whole rainbow slime situation?'

'I was not present for that. You deliberately left me behind, remember?'

'Oh, yeah. But you remember me telling you about it afterwards, right?'

'Yes. Why?'

'You know, that was one of the few times in my life that I've heard a voice in my head that wasn't you.'

'...I do not think that is true at all.'

'Hmm? Oh, yeah, sure, I've heard loads of other voices, but ultimately, I knew those were all still ME.'

'...I doubt that as well.'

"2033

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

'Okay, maybe I got a little muddled here or there,' said Morgunov, 'but I'm telling you, it's the truth. There's a nuance to it that I don't think you--or most people, really--can appreciate. When voices are just appearing in your mind from your very own imagination or subconscious, there is a difference. Compared to when someone is trying to invade your mind? Talk to you? Plant ideas in your head? Control you? You can feel the intent behind it. That's the thing that never changes. The will of the speaker.'

'I suppose you would be an authority on that subject, wouldn't you?' said Bool.

'Eheheh. Yeah. I wish another telepath would try to play with me again. The last time was so much fun.'

'After what you did to the Weaver, I doubt any of them would be so stupid.'

'Hey, she did that to herself. It wasn't my fault.'

'If you say so. Why are you bringing all of this up, anyway?'

'Because I had a thought. That time in Bellvine. I searched for so long afterward, but I never did find the source of that voice I was hearing.'

'Yes, I recall it causing you quite a bit of frustration.'

'That voice was so bossy. It really wanted my body.' Morgunov paused for a chortle to himself. 'It seemed very upset when it realized that my will was stronger than its own.'

'Didn't you say that you had an idea that you wanted to run by me? What does any of this have to do with that?'

'Oh, because I was thinking I might like to give that another go.'

'What? You want to try merging with a primordial ooze again?'

'Hmm? No, no! That would be boring! Merging is boring! But pets?! Pets never get boring! Everyone loves pets!'

'...Come again?' said Bool."

"2034

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'One of these so-called primordial ""gods"" would make for a great pet, don't you think?' said Morgunov. 'No, not just a great pet. The BEST pet. Right? You agree, don't you?'

'I am sorry,' said Bool. 'I must be misunderstanding something. You want to turn an ancient being of untold power into your PET?'

Morgunov's smile widened. 'Yep!' He bounded off of his fuzzy beanbag and onto his feet again.

'And. Um. Okay. How do you plan to pull that off, exactly?'

'That IS the question, isn't it?'

'You don't even have an idea?'

'Eheh. Didn't say that.'

The reaper sighed yet again. 'Were you not trying to turn feldeaths into your pets, also?'

Morgunov's expression soured a little. 'No. That was for aberration research. Feldeaths wouldn't make good pets. Don't be stupid.'

'Oh, but an ancient god would be a better choice?'

'Duh!'

'Why? You're not making any sense.'

'Because! A feldeath is just a creature of pure instinct. There's no rational mind there to converse with. There's no ego to be laid low. You can't humble a feldeath. They have no pride.'

'Ah... and what if you can't control whatever ""god"" you manage to find?'

'Eheh. Well, then, things will get fun.'

'Morgunov. This isn't--' But the reaper didn't finish.

And Morgunov was made to wonder why.

'Actually,' said Bool with a sudden spark of enthusiasm, 'you might just be onto something.'

'You think so?'

'I do. And of course, if you intend to find yourself a pet god, then I suppose you'll have to do some rather extensive traveling, won't you?'

'Hmm. Yeah, I suppose I will.'

'What could be more fun than that?' said Bool. 'Exploring the world for ancient secrets?'

'Yeah! It's been a long time since I went on a proper adventure!'"  
"2035 -- CCV.

'Make sure you bring plenty of your gadgets and tools. Never know when you might need something,' said Bool.

'Right!'

'And personnel, as well.'

'Oh. You think?'

'Of course. More people will help the search go faster. And besides, traveling in a group is always more enjoyable than doing it alone.'

'Hmm-hmm.'

'And we have many fantastic subordinates who are eager to help you. You have not even met some of them yet. Let us send out word for them all to begin gathering. We shall make a party out of it.'

'Okay! I mean, I know you're trying to trick me, but I don't care, because it just sounds so great!'

'That is perfectly fine with me.'

Chapter Two Hundred Five: 'O, light that shines from the darkness...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Ibai Blackburn never had so much to do. The Library of Erudition was unlike anything he had ever dreamed of. So much knowledge resided here, just waiting to be discovered--or rediscovered, perhaps.

The Library had a mind of its own. That much was quite clear to Ibai by now. And it was greedy, too. Despite how much it tried to tempt people into its clutches, the Library most certainly wanted to hoard all its secrets for itself.

Hopefully, it would like the book he was writing for it. Maybe then it would warm up to him a little.

He didn't have much experience with writing, really. It had always seemed like a rather boring thing to do, and the only reason he knew anything about sentence structure or grammar was because his

mother had forced him to learn at a very young age. Even now, he wasn't quite sure how she'd managed that feat. He remembered being quite the rambunctious kid, back then--not at all like his more mature and serious self today."

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"2036

Ibai's pen stopped moving for a minute. How was his mother doing, he wondered? Hopefully well. The rest of the family, too.

The news of his father's death had had a strange effect on him.

He supposed this was what people meant when they referred to being ""sad""--this oppressive feeling, deep in his chest and in his mind. Like someone had draped weights all over him.

Even though he was thirty-five years old, sadness was a thing unfamiliar to him. Sure, he'd known that horrible stuff could happen, that the world beyond his little ""cage"" in Marshrock could be cruel and unforgiving. Anyone who had watched a serious movie or read a sad story could tell that much.

But this?

Actually experiencing it?

It was absolutely awful. And the worst thing about it, Ibai thought, was that there was nothing he could do. Because in the end, it wasn't really about him, was it? It was about what had happened to his father.

In a weird way, sadness was a surprisingly selfish compulsion. It was like it wanted him to focus on himself, on this horrible feeling within him, instead of on his father--on the actual loss. And wasn't that what he was supposed to be focusing on? The object of his grief?

Was this what sadness was really meant to feel like?

It was confusing.

His body didn't always feel in perfect concert with his thoughts. Occasionally, there would just be tears in his eyes for no apparent reason to him, and he found himself thinking of the past a lot more as well.

That part, at least, he didn't hate. It felt nice to remember the past. It seemed like a better thing to do than simply dwelling on how terrible he felt. Less self-concerned, maybe.

He wondered if he would ever be the same again. Or if anything would, really."  
"2037

~((National Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day Special - page 1 of 6))~~

Ibair returned to his writing.

Despite his lack of experience, his pen moved without the slightest hesitation. The words just flowed.

He hadn't spent long agonizing over what to write about. At first, he considered just compiling and commenting on various reading materials that struck his fancy, but then he began to think that, no, he shouldn't use material that the Library already possessed. He wanted to give this book to the Library as a gift--to make it happy--and he figured that his best chance of doing that was to make something original.

So he resorted to fiction. A little novella. And at the rate he was going, it would probably be finished before long.

He just wrote. He had no idea where the story was going. Hell, he didn't even know where each new sentence was going. He just focused on keeping his hand moving and letting the words fall where they may.

It was surprisingly quite fun. He'd heard about the supposed difficulty of writing, but so far, it had been easy as pie. Almost like he wasn't even doing anything, like he was merely a vessel for the story being told, rather than the one creating it.

He hadn't thought of a title just yet, but thus far, his story was about a snake that could transform into a human. The snake enjoyed being a human so much that he began to question if he hadn't been a human all along and simply forgotten. Was he a snake that could become human? Or a human that could become a snake? Or did it even matter?

Oh, and there were robots. And flying camels. And two sentient bowls of chili that argued over philosophy.

All in all, he was eager to see how it would progress."

"2038

~((National Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day Special - page 2 of 6))~~

'Hey, Ibai,' came the voice of Chergoa.

Ibai looked up from his paper to see the reaper hovering over him. To his eyes, reapers were tiny things--little action figures that bobbed amusingly through the air as they moved. He had always enjoyed watching them, though they had not often enjoyed being watched. By him, in particular.

Chergoa, however, didn't seem particularly uncomfortable around him anymore. And he found that quite surprising. Even the reapers of House Blackburn, despite all that they had done to protect him, had still always carried a slight air of uneasiness in his presence. He had long since grown used to it. That was just how reapers were.

But Chergoa was different. She'd been going out of her way to spend time with him, lately.

It was really nice.

'How's the story comin' along?' she asked.

He looked down at what he'd written and discovered many more pages full of text than he'd realized. ""Uh. Pretty good, I think. Thanks for asking."" It was easy to give her a big smile. ""Is there something you need?""

'No. Just checking in with you. You've been writing all day, you know.'



""Have I?"" He blinked and scratched the middle of his forehead.

This little desk that he'd been using was wedged into one of the farthest corners of the Library's main chamber. Giant bookshelves surrounded him on all sides, save one narrow gap that led to a zigzagging path back to the middle of the room.

Cramped was one word for it, but he'd found it quite cozy. It was so quiet here, and the smell of books was its own kind of alluring.

'Have you eaten anything today?' Chergoa asked.

Ibai wasn't actually sure. ""Um...?""

'Alright, c'mon. You and me. We're going to the refectory right now.'

Ibai chuckled faintly and put his pen down again."

"2039

~((National Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day Special - page 3 of 6))~~

'You should really be more mindful of these things,' Chergoa was saying as they navigated their way through the maze of bookshelves together. Even as a reaper, she had to follow the path along with him. For whatever reason, she was unable to phase through any part of this building, even the books. 'What would you do if you collapsed from exhaustion, huh?'

For a change, Ibai didn't know what to say--nor did he particularly want to say anything at all. Somehow, he enjoyed listening to her talk to him like this. Her tone may have been a bit harsh or irritated, but it still made him happy, nonetheless.

Heh.

It was a rather long walk, and Chergoa inquired further into the details of the story that he was writing. Ibai was quite pleased to elaborate for her, but after a while, she asked about another subject.

'Still no luck finding any books about aberrations?' she said.

""Nope,"" said Ibai. ""I think our existence might be too recent for this

Library. It's tough to find any book that's less than two hundred years old.'"

'Shame. I bet Gohvis would know more about your kind, but good luck getting it out of him.'

Ibai flashed a quick grin. "'He does seem pretty tight-lipped, doesn't he?'"

'Ha. Good one.'

""Because he doesn't have lips.""

'Yes, I understood the joke, Ibai. You don't have to explain it.'

""Yeah, but I wanted to, though.""

'Well, it kind of kills the humor of it when you explain the joke.'

""Mm, I've heard that before, but I disagree. I think it makes it even funnier, actually.""

'You do, huh?'

""Yup!""

'Well. Uh. That's. Really weird, but alright.'

""Plus, I think it helps ensure that no one is left out of the joke--which is important, because that's never a good feeling, is it? Missing out on the thing that everyone else is laughing at? That's no fun.""

'You've given this more thought than I would've expected.'

""Here, let me tell you another joke.""

'Oh, okay, this oughta be good.'

"2040

~((National Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day Special - page 4 of 6))~

""Why did the chicken cross the road?"" said Ibai.

'To get to the other side,' finished Chergoa.

""Oh, so you've heard this one before?""

The reaper laughed. 'Yes. Crazily enough, I have.'

""Well, anyway, you see, the reason that joke is funny is because the punchline is so mundane that you don't expect it. And humor, at its core, is all about subverting expectations.""

'Uh-huh.'

""With that particular joke, you probably would've expected something sillier like, 'to get to his five-O'CLUCK meeting.'""

'...That's probably a better punchline, actually.'

""Hmm, maybe. And the reason that one is funny is because it's a play on words.""

'Yeah, I got that.'

""It's what they call a 'pun.'""

'Okay, please stop,' said Chergoa, though she was laughing again.

""Are you sure you don't need me to keep explaining?""

'I'm pretty sure.'

""Well, I think I've proved my point, anyway.""

'I'm really not sure you have.'

""Oh, so you do want me to keep explaining! In that case--""

'Oh, look, we've arrived!' laughed Chergoa. 'Why don't you go pick something out to eat?'

Ibai couldn't deny that he was famished, so he decided to do as she suggested.

The refectory was an interesting place in its own right. A huge, vaulted chamber--the selection of food here rivaled what he had known in Marshrock all his life. Which made very little sense to him, considering the Library of Erudition was located on the dead continent of Exoltha, surrounded by the impassable storm, the Dáinnbolg. It was certainly enough to make him curious about how they were able to maintain

such a luxurious stock, but he hadn't been able to solve that mystery yet.

He decided on chicken tenders. A simple meal, perhaps, but an old favorite. His mother had previously chastised him for his ""unrefined palate,"" not befitting a nobleman, but his father had never seemed to mind, so Ibai had never really taken her words in that regard to heart."  
"2041

~((National Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day Special - page 5 of 6))~~

Typically, when looking for a good spot to sit and eat, Ibai would join the nearest group of people and just start chatting away. He'd gotten to know several of Gohvis' subordinates much better as a result, but today, he wasn't feeling quite so sociable--and he already had Chergoa for company. He settled on a table in the far corner of the room.

'By the way,' said Chergoa as he was sitting down, 'have you found any neat books, lately?'

""Boy, have I!"" he said mid-bite. ""There was one I saw the other day called The Deadly Cantaloupe and the Five Rings of Mercy.""

'I... see. What did you like about it?'

""Oh, I haven't read it yet, but with a name like that, it has to be incredible.""

The reaper's tiny, plastic face seemed suddenly even more flat than it already was. 'Anything else?'

He took a minute to chew on that question and his chicken at the same time.

She'd been asking a lot about his reading list, lately, and the question as to why she was so interested had occurred to him a few times. He hadn't bothered to actually ask it, though, because he was a little afraid it might deter future inquiries. And he liked telling her.

Maybe she was honestly just curious, but Ibai had the feeling that she was looking for something. Maybe not something specific, though. Just something to latch onto. Something that might trigger a thousand-year-

old memory, perhaps, and present her with an opportunity to learn some phenomenal secret.

In the short time he had known her, Ibai had come to care very deeply for Chergoa, but he was also not blind to the ambition that burned quietly within her.

He kind of liked that about her, too, though. It was good to be so driven."

"2042

~((National Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day Special - page 6 of 6))~~

""Well,"" said Ibai after swallowing his food, ""I suppose there were a few other titles that also sounded interesting, like Emergent Phenomena, The Composure of Fate's Arbiters, The Theory of Empty Worlds, and The Hypothetical Evolution of Friendship.""

Chergoa needed a second to process all of those.

Ibai had more, though. ""Oh, or maybe The Little Grape That Tried His Best, Kaleidoscopes for Kaleido-dopes, and Little Jimmy and the Pear-Shaped Pear.""

'...That first batch sounded a little more to my tastes.'

""Hmm. Really? I also saw How to Climb the Ladder of Success by Only Cheating a Little Bit, How to Program a VCR, and Learning to Read Your Own Thoughts.""

'Yeah, uh. Still prefer the first ones.'

""Oh, but you might also like--""

'Have you actually read any of these books yet?'

""I usually just skim. Reading titles is super fun, though!""

'Uh-huh...'

""Truthfully, I'm always a little reluctant to actually sit down and try to get into a new book,"" said Ibai, ""because I can't tell you how many times I've ended up disappointed. I see a title that sounds super neat-

burrito, only for it to get boring really quickly. It's super unfortunate when that happens.""

The reaper paused. 'And how often DOES that happen for you, exactly?'

""Oh, I don't know, maybe ninety-three percent of the time or so.""

'I see...'

""Hmm. You think that's too much?""

'Maybe a tad, yeah.'

Ibai resumed eating.

'Well, I don't suppose you happened to skim through any of those first books you mentioned, did you?'

He thought back. ""Emergent Phenomena by Roberto del Otoy. That one talked about famous historical instances of emergence among servants. Apparently, it's a bit of a bad omen when lots of people find out you've achieved emergence, because in many of those cases, the servant and reaper pairing were either killed a few years thereafter or otherwise ended their relationship for some reason.""

"2043

'Interesting,' said Chergoa, looking around the refectory. 'What else did it say?' Her voice had noticeably lowered. While she couldn't technically ""whisper,"" since the radius of people who would be able to overhear her would always remain the same, she could still control her speaking volume, somewhat.

Ibai knew why, of course. The other people in the room were Gohvis' men. Members of Abolish. Ideally, she didn't want to share information with them needlessly. Chergoa might have come right and told him as much, but unfortunately, she could only speak privately with her own servant, Emiliana.

Ibai didn't know if that should be such a big concern, though. These Abolishers were quite different from the ones he'd met at Dunehall. He couldn't even tell if any of them actually wanted to leave this place. Many of them seemed perfectly content to remain in the Library with

Gohvis.

He'd asked a few of them why. They'd all given some variation of the same basic sentiments.

""Because we are safe here, and it is the Master's will.""

The loyalty that these people had for Gohvis was not to be underestimated, Ibai felt. Whether it was fear or adoration that motivated them, he couldn't yet tell, but whatever it was, it was strong. It seemed like some of these servants were even more loyal to Gohvis than they were to their own reapers.

But he understood Chergoa's caution, of course. Even if these people planned to stay here indefinitely, it was still a good idea to keep as much information between the two of them as they could. And given that notion, it might've been wiser to move this conversation somewhere other than the refectory, but Ibai felt like it hardly mattered, really. As far as he could tell, there was no location within the Library that could truly guarantee privacy. For all they knew, even the Library itself could've been listening to their conversation.

Technically, he also could've enveloped her with his muddy shadow to conceal her voice for her, but how suspicious would that be?

No, it was better for Chergoa to simply be careful with her words.

Ibai, however, being able to whisper, was quite happy to say whatever he wanted."

"2044

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

""Oh, it said lots of other stuff,"" said Ibai. ""Have you heard of something called the 'Breaking of Korgum?""

Chergoa was silent a moment. 'Yes.'

""And did you know that there were tons of famous people who achieved emergence during it?""

'Yes...'

""Like the Devil's Knife, the Man of Crows, Bloodeye, the Hammer, the

Gargoyle, the Surgeon Saint. And those are just the ones still alive. There were dozens more who are dead now, like the Red Tiger, Bug Boy, Darkhand, the Owl, the Mad Piper, and so on. There were loads of 'em.'"

'It is a trend I am familiar with,' said Chergoa. 'And it makes a degree of sense, of course. Those prone to achieving emergence in the first place are generally not the most safety-conscious. They keep throwing themselves into dangerous situation after dangerous situation. It only makes sense that, at some point, their luck runs out. Or the ungodly level of stress gets to them, and they just snap--at which point, any reasonable reaper would release them.'

Ibai had to frown. ""That's not a very pleasant way of looking at it.""

'Is there a way of looking at it that IS pleasant?'

""Hmm. Maybe not. But I also imagine that their undoings might not have all been their own fault. That kind of fame would place a target on your back, no?""

'Oh, of course. Your kin have a term for that, don't they?'

Ibai nodded. ""An astero.""

'That's an old Arman word, isn't it? Does it have a literal translation?'

""'Star that burns with the fires of all.' And the word 'all,' in this instance, is specifically meant to include oneself.""

'Bit of a mouthful, that. I can see why they wanted a term for it.'"  
"2045

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

""The book also mentioned instances of 'multi-emergence' and 'counter-emergence.' Battles between emergence-prone servants have historically been known for that type of thing, along with all the collateral damage caused.""

'Hmm, it doesn't sound like you only ""skimmed"" this book,' said Chergoa.

Ibai smiled as he took another bite. ""I skim very thoroughly.""



'That doesn't--y'know what? Alright. Anything else?'

He thought about it as he chewed. ""Mm, don't think so. It had a lot of dates and stuff in it. The author was a very detail-obsessed, I think. Which is cool 'n all, but I got kinda bored. The Hypothetical Evolution of Friendship by Kareem Rambata was able to hold my attention a bit better.""

'Oh? And why is that?'

""Because it was full of all sorts of crazy ideas!"" A bit of food flew out of Ibai's mouth, but he paid it no mind. ""Like, what if it was possible for normal people to sync their souls in the same way that servants and reapers can?""

Chergoa looked unimpressed. 'Is that what the title was referring to by ""Friendship?""'

""I think so, yeah. The writer theorized that a strong enough bond of friendship could make up for the lack of a reaper's presence in the relationship.""

'Uh-huh...'

""Wouldn't that be neat?""

'Sure. If it wasn't complete horseshit. Such an idea is demonstrably untrue. Thousands of years of servant-reaper history prove it. Honestly, that's one of the dumbest things I've ever heard.'

Ibai's mouth flattened. ""Well, if you're gonna be like that, then maybe I won't tell you about the other theories that the book talked about.""

'Doesn't sound like I'd be missing out on much,' said Chergoa.

""That's very rude, you know.""

'Look, not every book is gonna be a winner, okay? In fact, statistically speaking, most are gonna be stinkers. I know you're a curious guy by nature, and that's good--great, even. But you should really try not to get distracted by crackpot ideas that make no sense.'

""Hmph."" He went back to his tendies for comfort.

'Don't get me wrong. They're fun to delve into every now and again for a laugh, but c'mon.'

""What about the potential for a technological solution to the same problem?"" said Ibai, still chewing.

'What do you mean?'

""It's another idea put forth in The Hypothetical Evolution of Friendship--the concept that one day, perhaps, science and technology will be able to accomplish what only you reapers are currently capable of.""

Chergoa was silent.

""It makes sense, doesn't it? It might be a very long time, but given the steady march of human ingenuity, it seems all but inevitable, don't you think?""

'Hmm.'

""I think that book had a slight anti-reaper bias, though. The author seemed to take a certain level of delight in the idea that reapers might one day be rendered obsolete.""

'That's understandable,' said Chergoa. 'I would wager that reapers, in large part, could be blamed for many of the world's societal problems throughout history. We make for pretty easy scapegoats.'

""The book also discussed a kind of 'secret society' of reapers,"" said Ibai. ""The Andanatt? Or 'Sovereign,' in modern Mohssian? Ever heard of it?""

'I have.'

""And? What do you think of it?""

The reaper was quiet a moment, and she glanced around the room another time.

Ibai looked as well, but it didn't seem like anyone was paying them any attention at all.

'It's tough to say for sure,' said Chergoa. 'I've heard rumors, of course,

here and there. But decades go by, or centuries, until I hear something else, and it's hard to tell if it's anything more than someone's overactive imagination.'

Ibai's nose was itchy, so he scratched it. And kept eating. ""Well, Kareem Rambata seemed to believe it was real. He even said that Andanatt was the true enemy of all mankind and that it had been actively trying to suppress technological development all over the planet for millennia.""

'Yes, I've heard the like before,' said Chergoa."  
"2047

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))  
""But you don't believe it, I suppose,"" said Ibai.

'I don't know,' she said. 'It just seems a little counterproductive to obsess over it when there's no real proof to go on.'

""Hmm-hmm.""

'What about those other two books you mentioned? What were those about?'

""One was about shared qualities of famous historical figures,"" said Ibai. ""The Composure of Fate's Arbiters by Jara Hanseth. It has some pretty wild theories of its own, actually.""

'Oh, goodie.'

""It puts forth the idea that there's this super-secret 'bloodline of kings' that has existed since ancient times!""

'Uh-huh...'

""The author points to a bunch of ancient people like Rizo the Great, Arnel the Terror, and Makio the Immense, saying that they all emerged from total obscurity to build vast empires.""

'Okay, look, I hate to shit on reading, but this is why books are overrated. Comparing Rizo the Great to Arnel the Terror is the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard in my life. Good god.'

At her reaction, Ibai's eyes widened a bit, and he smiled. He had seen her get like this a few times before when they were discussing reading material, and he couldn't wait to hear more of her opinion.

'I lived through both of those men's eras, and Arnel was such a colossal douche and overall hate-filled bastard that I don't even want to mention his name any more than that. Rizo, meanwhile, was a visionary who actually worked to improve the lives of his subjects. Sure, in some ways he failed at that, but in many others he succeeded. Suggesting that those two guys had anything more than the most superficial qualities in common is utter nonsense. They could not have been more different.'

""Heh heh. You're very passionate.""

'Yeah, well. I know a lot of historians try their best, but I also know that a lot of others DON'T. And it pisses me off, because who's gonna correct them, huh?'

""Mm, reapers?""

'Theoretically, yeah. But what about when the reapers are the ones getting it wrong in the first place? We're certainly not perfect, either.'  
"2048

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Ibai nodded with understanding. ""I suppose that would be a problem, wouldn't it?""

'Yeah. But anyway, it sounds like listening to anything else that book had to say would just make me angry, so what about the other one you mentioned?'

""Oh, The Theory of Empty Worlds by Hamish Harundel,"" said Ibai. ""That one was kind of neat, but I have a feeling you might hate it, too.""

'Oh? And why is that? Does it include more crackpot conspiracies, pseudoscientific musings, or idiotic historical takes?'

Ibai pursed his lips and avoided looking at her. ""Maaaybe...""

The reaper gave a small laugh. 'Well, I'll try to keep an open mind this

time.'

""Heh, okay."" He took a second to consider how best to begin. It was a pretty weird thing to try and explain, he was suddenly realizing. ""Um. Basically, the book was trying to put forth this idea that the physical world as we know it is, in truth, comprised of many 'sub-worlds,' so to speak.""

'Hmm.'

""Another way of thinking about it might be alternate dimensions, but not in the sense of parallel realities. When I think of parallel realities, I think of alternate versions of myself and everyone else roaming around, living slightly different lives 'n whatnot, but that's not what the author was getting at. In fact, he went on a rather long tangent about how frustrated it made him when people mistook his theory as something like that. That part was interesting. You could really feel his exasperation. It seemed like his theory wasn't very well-received by his scholarly peers.""

'...Are you sure you only ""skimmed"" this book?'

""Yeah, why?""

'Doesn't matter. What made this theory of his different from more conventional ideas of alternate dimensions?'

""Oh, because his versions of alternate dimensions are directly connected to and affected by one another. And most importantly of all, our dimension is the only one with people in it. The only one that's not 'empty,' in other words.""

'Ah. So that's why he called it the Theory of Empty Worlds.'

""Yeah.""

"2049 -- CCVI.

'Well, it does sound pretty far-fetched, but at least it's not making me angry,' said Chergoa. 'How did Hamish Harundel think all these different dimensions ""connected"" to each other, exactly?'

""In a 'foundational sense,' was how he put it,"" said Ibai. ""So like, if there's a big rock in our dimension, then every element of that rock

might exist simultaneously in its own dimension. He suggested that we therefore live in what he called a 'higher dimension,' and these elemental ones would be considered 'lower dimensions.'""

'Hmm...'

""He also seemed to think it was linked with the use of servant abilities, particularly materialization and transfiguration.""

'Wait a minute. Was he trying to argue that servants are actually summoning their material from other dimensions?'

""Yes, I think he was.""

'That would be pretty nuts. And also rather difficult to disprove.'

""Ooh, then it must be true!""

'That's not how finding the truth works. But I think you know that, already, don't you?'

""Hehe.""

'How dare you tease me.'

Chapter Two Hundred Six: 'The advancing vista...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The past few days had been busy for the young Lord Goffe, but not in a particularly abnormal way. Daily meetings and training and overseeing things around Warrenhold--he was starting to realize that this was just how his life was going to be from now on. It probably wasn't going to let up anytime soon.

As he was becoming more accustomed to the routine of it, he was starting to find it slightly easier to squeeze in time for patrols or even for actual leisure--which was a thing he'd almost forgotten how to do. If not for Garovel's insistence that he occasionally take some time to just relax and decompress, Hector probably wouldn't have done it at all.

It helped that the underground hot springs were beginning to take

shape. There was still quite a bit of construction left to do on them, but they weren't all flooded anymore, and there were two small but functional areas."

"2049 -- CCVI.

'Well, it does sound pretty far-fetched, but at least it's not making me angry,' said Chergoa. 'How did Hamish Harundel think all these different dimensions "'connected"' to each other, exactly?'

""In a 'foundational sense,' was how he put it,"" said Ibai. ""So like, if there's a big rock in our dimension, then every element of that rock might exist simultaneously in its own dimension. He suggested that we therefore live in what he called a 'higher dimension,' and these elemental ones would be considered 'lower dimensions.'""

'Hmm...'

""He also seemed to think it was linked with the use of servant abilities, particularly materialization and transfiguration.""

'Wait a minute. Was he trying to argue that servants are actually summoning their material from other dimensions?'

""Yes, I think he was.""

'That would be pretty nuts. And also rather difficult to disprove.'

""Ooh, then it must be true!""

'That's not how finding the truth works. But I think you know that, already, don't you?'

""Hehe.""

'How dare you tease me.'

Chapter Two Hundred Six: 'The advancing vista...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The past few days had been busy for the young Lord Goffe, but not in a particularly abnormal way. Daily meetings and training and overseeing things around Warrenhold--he was starting to realize that this was just how his life was going to be from now on. It probably wasn't going to let up anytime soon.

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"2050

The heat was still a bit too intense for non-servants, Hector felt, but it was much better than it used to be. Soon, he would be able to open this place up to everyone and hopefully provide the current residents of Warrenhold with an extra bit of much needed comfort. He still had no idea what to call this place or who he should put in charge of it, but he could worry about all that later.

Right now, he sat alone in the hot water with his eyes closed, breathing in the steamy air and trying not to think about anything in particular.

And not succeeding.

There were so many different things vying for his attention that just keeping his thoughts organized between them all was beginning to become a tiresome task unto itself. Garovel had suggested that he hire a personal secretary, and while Hector had been very resistant to that idea at first, he was starting to come around. It certainly wouldn't solve all his problems for him, but if things kept up like this indefinitely, then it would probably be a huge help.

Who the hell could he get for a job like that, though?



Ugh.

He added that to the list of things he could worry about later.

At the moment, he felt as though there were three big issues that were more demanding than any others.

The first was House Gaolanet. After his and Garovel's little investigation in that empty mansion, the Gaolanets had been at the forefront of his mind. He knew he should probably talk to them, and he supposed that a simple courteous visit from one local lord to another would be a good enough excuse, but what would he say to them, exactly? It certainly didn't help that he suspected they might have been the culprits behind a string of mysterious poisonings over the last few decades.

And then, of course, there was his meeting with Leo tomorrow. Hector at least had a plan for that one, but thinking about it was still nerve-wracking in the extreme."

"2051

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It felt like the fate of the entire nation might be riding on his ability to deal with Leo. He didn't want to think that was actually true, but the more he allowed himself to dwell on it, the more he was becoming convinced of it.

Well, at least he wouldn't have to deal with Leo alone this time. That was the only thought that was providing Hector with any degree of comfort.

The third issue that was on his mind, however, was his meeting with the Rainlords tonight. All the heads would be gathering to discuss their plans moving forward.

And Hector had something quite important to tell them. He wasn't sure how they would react to his proposition, but he was trying to remain hopeful.

Not his forte, that.

He tried to enjoy his soak in the hot spring as best he could, but there was just no way he could relax. And the entire day seemed to drag on

and on as the anticipation for tonight's meeting continued to build in his mind.

Training hadn't been able to take his mind off it, nor had meditation, and now making the rounds throughout Warrenhold wasn't doing it, either.

Eventually, however, the time came. He made his way to the Tower of Night, to the largest conference room therein, on the floor just below his own chambers.

A couple of the heads were already there, he found. Dimas of House Sebolt and Horatio of House Blackburn, along with both of their reapers.

They exchanged courtesies and waited for everyone else to arrive.

'Nervous?' came the private voice of Garovel, who was of course there with him as well.

'Kinda,' said Hector.

'Don't be. It's a good strategy. I'm sure they'll be receptive to it.'

Hector hoped so.

Zeff of House Elroy appeared next. Then Evangelina of House Stroud, Diego of House Redwater, Joana of House Cortes, and finally Salvador of House Delaguna."

"2052

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Diego wasn't technically the head of his family, but he and Evangelina were the only representatives of their respective Houses, and no one else seemed to object to his presence here.

Garovel started them off. 'Thank you all for coming. Hector and I have something very important we would like to ask everyone, but before we do, please allow me to make it clear that we completely understand if you decide to refuse us. We know that we are asking a lot.'

'You're makin' me antsy,' said Mevox, the reaper of Salvador Delaguna. 'No need for all the preemptive politeness. Just tell us what

it is.'

Garovel looked to Hector, as did everyone else.

Honestly, Hector would have greatly preferred to just let Garovel handle everything, but they'd already talked this over and decided that they would both participate in the conversation. For some godforsaken reason, Garovel seemed to be under the impression that Hector had to be the one to tell everyone the basics of the idea. And if this group here were comprised of anyone else, Hector probably would've refused, but because it was the Rainlords--because it was these Rainlords, in particular--he felt like he could handle it.

It was still intensely uncomfortable with all their eyes on him, though.

""...We would like to start deploying small teams of servants on missions,"" said Hector, ""for the purposes of gathering both resources and intelligence.""

A few of the heads seemed surprised and exchanged looks with one another. However, Dimas Sebolt and Salvador Delaguna did not.

Those two, along with Horatio Blackburn, made up the most important three in this regard. More than ninety-five percent of the Rainlords currently staying in Warrenhold belonged to those three families. Perhaps some version of this idea had already occurred to them.

Dimas' reaper, Iziol, asked the first question. 'Start deploying them where, exactly?'

'Wherever we need them to go,' said Garovel. 'All over the world, potentially.'

"2053

'All over the world?' said Ezura, Evangelina's reaper. 'Is that not a bit excessive?'

'We have specific targets in mind,' said Garovel. 'Some are quite far away. And we will have more in the future.'

'What are these targets?' asked Axiolis.

'In short?' said Garovel. 'Legendary treasure.'

The whole room was quiet for a moment.

'Our escapades in the Undercrust reminded me of the absolute deluge of powerful artifacts scattered throughout the world. We encountered several of them while in Himmekel, due to the exploits of one particularly troublesome Hun'Sho. I wish we could have retrieved all that we saw down there, but given how heavily guarded that area was--and no doubt still is--I think our time would be better used pursuing the same goal in other parts of the world.

'And right now, while Hector and I are more than happy to have you all staying here at Warrenhold, we also understand that YOU don't want to stay here indefinitely, do you?'

""Of course not,"" said Zeff.

'And to that end,' said Garovel, gesturing broadly with a bony hand, 'what we require now is not just time to rest and recover strength. We require NEW strength, don't you think?'

""That is true,"" said Evangelina. ""And hunting down artifacts of power sounds much more appealing to me than trying to forge alliances with more people who might betray us later.""

Hector saw a couple nods of agreement.

'That's all well and good,' said Mevox, 'but the problem with treasure hunting isn't the usefulness of it. It's the IMPOSSIBILITY of it. If we don't know where to look for these treasures, then it doesn't matter how powerful they are. We'll never find them. Are you sayin' you guys have leads for us to go on?'

'Yes,' said Garovel. 'We do.'

Mevox tilted his skeletal head. 'And where exactly are you getting such valuable intel from?'

'It's not that I don't wish to tell you,' said Garovel, 'but operationally-speaking, the fewer people who know, the better.'

'Right...'

"2054

Hector could see Zeff and Axiolis both staring at him.

'Additionally,' said Garovel, 'it is important to us that we continue to keep a low profile on this one. And that means not sending out any of our most famous combatants on these missions. They would only draw attention.'

'I agree in sentiment,' said Yovess, the reaper of Horatio Blackburn. 'But while assigning these missions to young servants who have not yet made names for themselves out in the world would certainly be possible, such servants are also significantly less experienced, which would make things much more perilous for them without anyone around to help guide them.'

Dimas decided to chime in. ""And if we truly wish to operate discreetly, then even sending a reaper who is widely known would be a bad idea. And most of our reapers are widely known--at least insofar as being associated with the Rainlords.""

'Yes, that does present a problem,' said Garovel. 'I would therefore ask that you think very carefully about who to select for these assignments. Lesser known reapers are harder to come by, so if you have any in your family, then they might make for good candidates. Depending on how many we have available to us, we may wish to form teams without any reapers on them at all.'

'Your point is a valid one, but I dislike that idea greatly,' said Sentsia to Hector's mild surprise.

He had never heard the reaper of Nere Blackburn say anything at all--and not just in this meeting. He wondered briefly if she and Garovel had ever spoken before. Probably, he figured. Garovel seemed to spend the majority of his time lately just talking to all the different reapers around.

Ever since they'd first traveled to Sair, Hector had gotten the impression that Garovel was trying to collect as much knowledge from every other reaper they encountered as he possibly could--without seeming like that was what he was doing, perhaps.

But maybe every reaper was constantly trying to do that. He was beginning to see what Rasalased had meant about all reapers being hungry for power."

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""In that case,"" said Evangelina, ""perhaps we should also organize separate teams whose functions are purely to provide operational support for the servants we choose to deploy.""

""A good idea,"" said Dimas. ""And the reapers seem to be forgetting that we can still provide guidance over long distances with the use of technology.""

'Oh, please,' said Axiolis. 'We didn't forget. That method is simply inferior to having reapers onsite.'

'Yes, Dimas, that was quite rude,' said IzioI.

'And uncharacteristically foolish,' added Yovess.

'No, actually, I did kinda forget about that,' said Mevox.

The other reapers just looked at him.

Mevox did not seem fazed by all the attention, though. 'Anyway, how many teams do you think we should deploy?'

'Well, we have several targets in mind,' said Garovel, 'but I would prefer that we begin slowly and then see about creating more if-and-when things begin to go more smoothly. Perhaps four teams to start off? Three or even two would also be fine. It's more important that we only deploy as many servants as we have confidence in. While we do need young, unknown servants for this task, I'm sure there are many whom you all feel are TOO young for this level of responsibility, and I would prefer we exercise caution.'

Hector kept a stone face, but he also couldn't help feeling a little ridiculous as he listened to Garovel talk about servants being too young for these missions. He was just barely eleven months old as a servant himself, yet the people Garovel was talking about were probably twice that or more.

He was having another one of those moments where he felt like he really wasn't supposed to be here, like at any moment, the rug would be pulled out from under him, and everyone would laugh at how moronic he was for ever even humoring the idea that he might actually

belong in a place like this.

But that was alright.

He could deal with it. He'd dealt with worse. He just had to keep reminding himself of that fact."

"2056

'Overall, I think this is a fantastic idea,' said Sentsia. She shared glances with Yovess and Horatio. 'And given the... circumstances of our own House, I believe we may be especially well-suited to these tasks.'

'How do you mean?' said Garovel.

Mevox was quick to answer for her. 'She's referring to the fact that the Blackburns have been holed up in Marshrock for the last thirty years, barely ever setting foot outside Luzo. Y'know. That thing they did which caused pretty much all of our current problems? Everyone remembers that, right?'

'Mevox,' said Iziol.

'What? Was anything I said wrong?'

'It is true,' said Sentsia. 'We are at fault. But that is all the more reason that we, as a House, should work harder than any other to aid all of our kin here now.' She held Mevox's gaze steadily.

'Hmph. Nice words.'

'Thank you.'

Garovel took control of the conversation again. 'Well, in any case, there's no need to rush. I'd like everyone to take the next few days to evaluate potential candidates for both deployment and support. I want to be clear that the point of these missions is not to engage our enemies or to stomp out injustice wherever we find it. The objectives are strictly reconnaissance and, if possible, artifact retrieval. And that being said, those whom you wish to send should be capable of defending themselves if the need arises.'

'Makes sense to me,' said Mevox.

'Agreed,' said Yovess.

The meeting continued for a while longer as they moved on to other subjects, such as housing arrangements. Some of the Sebolts and Blackburns wanted to either swap rooms or move in to some of the recently renovated areas in the Entry Tower--which segued into the larger topic of Warrenhold's restoration.

It was proceeding well, by all accounts, but Hector knew that it wouldn't be able to continue like this indefinitely. Not without reliable funding."  
"2057

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

That was also one of the big motivating factors for these treasure hunting missions. It wasn't just about finding powerful artifacts. It was about finding valuable ones.

Garovel had already expressed some of his reservations about that to Hector in private. The idea of selling legendary artifacts for cold, hard cash apparently didn't sit perfectly with the reaper, and Hector could understand why. There was more to ""value"" than just money, of course. History and sentiment were important, too.

But with all the new financial demands being placed on them recently, Hector found it a little difficult to care that much about such things. Rebuilding Warrenhold and feeding all its residents were much greater priorities in his mind.

Then again, perhaps the so-called Bank of Darksteel would soon be able to help with that problem. After meeting with Lionel Carthrace at the Gala and not being very satisfied with how it had gone, Hector had decided to meet with a couple more members of House Carthrace, just trying to get a clearer picture of Amelia's true character.

Those brief meetings hadn't really gone much better, though. He met with Lionel's son, Kenneth Carthrace, who seemed entirely uncomfortable and rather like a frightened mouse the whole time. Kenneth did speak a bit more favorably about Amelia than Lionel did, going so far as to say that she had always been kind to him, but Hector's main takeaway from that meeting was just feeling sort of bad for the guy.



Which was really odd, because Kenneth, at least on paper, was supposed to be the vice president of his family's real estate company, the CPG, or Carthrace Property Group. Hector would've expected a bit more composure from the man.

His other meeting had been with Lionel's sister, Delilah Carthrace, who certainly had more fire in her than her nephew--that was for sure. She actually kind of reminded Hector of Amelia in some ways, if Amelia were about twenty years younger and about five times more angry-looking."

"2058

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Delilah had not had many nice things to tell him regarding Amelia, either, but the examples she provided had been similarly questionable to Lionel's. Things like Amelia ""acting disrespectfully toward her in the presence of guests,"" ""giving shameful gifts to her children without her approval,"" and ""promising her a job only to renege on it later.""

That last one, Hector remembered hearing about from Lionel.

He decided to ask Amelia about it directly, and lo and behold, the old woman's version of that incident turned out to be quite different.

""I never promised Delilah any job at all,"" she'd said. ""She just assumed I would give her the position and then became furious when she eventually found out that I had hired someone else for it. Oh, and she did not appreciate it when I explained the concept of nepotism and the corresponding problems with it.""

All in all, Hector had felt like he'd heard enough by now. He decided to give the Madame Carthrace the green light with the Bank of Darksteel, and now the whole thing was finally in motion. He'd already met with a few of the new people she wanted to hire, and he'd even given his approval for most of them as well.

Everything was moving a bit fast for his tastes, but he supposed the economic crisis facing Atreya wasn't going to wait for him start feeling comfortable. The sooner they were able to get things set up, the sooner the nation might be able to recover.

In theory, at least.

Funding the Bank was still a problem, of course, and while Roman's ten million troa in help was more than enough to meet the minimum threshold required for legally opening it, Hector and Garovel had decided to ask the Rainlords for their assistance as well."

"2059

That had been a much more difficult meeting than this current one. Understandably, none of the Rainlord families had seemed especially eager to lend him such a large sum of money, but in the end, they did agree to help--and to the collective tune of twenty-five million troa, no less.

Hector had to credit Garovel with the victory on that one. The reaper had been able to reframe their ""loans"" as ""investments""--which was true, Hector supposed. He fully intended to pay them back.

Assuming this bank didn't blow up in his face, that was.

Oh god, what if it blew up in his face?

One more thing he didn't want to think about.

Hector's current meeting with the Rainlords seemed like it was nearing its end until a new subject was brought up.

'Before we adjourn, there is one more matter that I would like to discuss,' said Sentsia, looking straight at Hector. 'Since it seems that we will be staying at Warrenhold for the foreseeable future, I would like it if we could organize a more rigorous training and education system for the children here.'

Hector's brow receded.

'I have been concerned about that as well,' said Axiolis. 'As I understand it, each of the families have taken on the rather burdensome task of homeschooling all of our own children, and I fear that is not the most efficient use of our available talent.'

'You might be right,' said Izio. 'Perhaps we should appoint instructors for all of the families and organize a formal schedule.'

'That is what I was thinking,' said Sentsia. 'This is a serious matter. The children's education is perhaps more important now than it has ever been.'

'I agree,' said Axiolis.

'Indeed,' said Yovess.

'Perhaps we should also be searching for highly-qualified teachers to hire during these mission deployments,' said Sentsia."

"2060

'That may be asking too much,' said IzioI.

'It may,' said Sentsia. 'But it can't hurt to be on the lookout, at least, no? We can figure out how to actually bring such people here safely and agreeably later. I imagine it will largely depend on the instructor-candidates' circumstances, anyway.'

'If we intend to go that far,' said Mevox, 'then we should just consider the project to be the establishment of an entirely new academy.'

'This is sounding more expensive by the second,' said Yovess.

'If we want well-qualified personnel from the outside world, we'll have to pay them,' said Mevox. 'Unless you want to kidnap them. Which I wouldn't be entirely averse to.'

'I would,' said IzioI flatly.

'Yes,' said Sentsia. 'But I do think that a formalized ""academy"" is a good idea as well. In fact, I would like to put forth Silvia's name as one of the instructors. She has experience with teaching, and--'

As Hector listened to the reapers' discussion, he didn't feel the need to interject. It sounded like they had things pretty well handled. And the idea of establishing an academy here at Warrenhold?

He didn't hate it. In fact, he kinda loved it. The kids here deserved a quality education for as long as they were being forced to remain here.

Though, as a high school dropout, maybe it was weird to be having an opinion like that.

Oh well.

The meeting lasted for a while longer, and he didn't say a single word more until the reapers eventually got around to asking if they had his approval to pursue this academy plan. And he certainly wasn't about to refuse them.

And with that, they finally dispersed, but the reapers' enthusiasm for the topics discussed remained apparent, and Hector could hear them continuing to plan amongst themselves as they left."

"2061

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Once he was back in his room and alone with Garovel, Hector flopped onto his bed. His body and his mind felt equally exhausted after such a long day of training, meetings, and constant anxiety.

'Sentsia sure surprised me today,' said Garovel privately.

Hector didn't bother to open his eyes, but he knew what the reaper meant. 'Yeah...'

'I've hardly ever heard her speak, but she seemed quite full of ideas and the motivation to make them heard,' said Garovel. 'I wonder what changed.'

Hector was only half-listening now. 'Hmm.'

'Maybe she's grown comfortable enough around us to come out of her shell a bit.'

'Mm.'

'It's good, whatever it is. We'll need that kind of fire, moving forward.'

'Mmhmm.'

'Are you even paying attention to me, right now?'

'Yeah, of course I am.'

'So you think it'd be a good idea to make Leo the principal of this new

academy the Rainlords were talking about, then?"

'Mm...' With effort, Hector's eyes unbolted themselves slightly, and he propped himself up on his elbows to look at Garovel. 'The fuck...?'

'Just checking,' said Garovel. 'You know I don't like it when you ignore me.'

'And you know I don't like it when you start spouting bullshit.'

'Heh. Well, in the event that our current plan for Leo doesn't pan out, it wouldn't hurt to have a backup strategy or two.'

'Uh-huh...'

'Obviously, I don't think he would be suited to being a principal, but then again, I'm not sure he'd settle for a job that doesn't carry with it a sense of importance.'

'Yeah, and I'm sure the Rainlords would just love that...'

'You seem surprisingly relaxed,' said Garovel. 'I thought you'd be more nervous for the meeting with Leo tomorrow.'

'I've been nervous all day long. I'm tired of it.'

'Well, that's one way to look at it, I guess. Want me to knock you out?'

'Don't think you'll need to...'

'Already drifting off, huh?'

'Mm...''

"2062

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

It felt like a bit of time passed as Hector teetered on the edge of sleep, sliding comfortably into its warm embrace, until Garovel's voice arrived again, still retaining the echo of privacy.

'Hey, uh, before you fall asleep, there's something I'd like your opinion on.'

'Mm?' was all Hector managed in response.

'It's something I've been conflicted about about for a while now. Ever since we were in Sair, actually.'

'Mhmm?'

'And it's... kind of a big deal.'

Hector's eyes slid open once more, but he didn't sit up to look at the reaper again just yet. 'What is it?'

'I've been putting this off for a while, since there have been so many other things that have been taking precedence. Repeatedly. And, uh... I'll be honest. Maybe I should've told you about this sooner. Try not to get upset with me.'

'Garovel. What is it?'

'Well, it's not the easiest thing to explain. Um. It has to do with the Rainlords.'

Hector decided to sit up now as he waited for further elaboration.

'You remember in Luzo, after the battle at Marshrock? When the Rainlords were discussing how to move forward peacefully?'

'Yeah?'

'Remember when Ismael Blackburn explained how someone had used Ibai's status as an aberration against them? Blackmailing them, essentially? And basically kicking off all of the events that ended up forcing the Rainlords to flee here from their ancestral homeland?'

'Uh-huh?'

'Do you remember the name of that person Ismael said was blackmailing them?'

Hector was struggling. 'Er... not really.'

'Well, it was a very powerful man named Parson Miles. He holds the rank of captain general in the Vanguard. That means he only takes orders from eight people: the seven field marshals and Sermung himself.'

'Okay...?'

'Zeff also has quite the beef with him, you may recall. He and Evangelina both claim that Parson killed Socorra Garza, the head of House Garza, in addition to ordering the capture of Zeff's family, which led to the death of Zeff's wife, Mariana.'

Hector didn't like where this was going. 'Why are you bringing all this up, right now?'

Garovel looked abruptly hesitant. 'Because... I've actually met Parson Miles before.'

"2063 -- CCVII.

Chapter Two Hundred Seven: 'In a time of crossings...'

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Hector's eyes were wide. 'What do you mean you've met him before?'

The reaper shrugged. 'What do you think I mean? I met him while I was working with the Vanguard. Him and his reaper both. Her name's Overra.'

'And you're only bringing this up NOW?'

'Like I said, there's been a lot of shit going on since that meeting in Luzo, and I've been trying to figure out what I should do with this information.'

'Well, you should probably tell the Rainlords,' said Hector.

'Yeah, I'm not sure it's that simple, buddy.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm mildly concerned that they'll try to use me to lure Parson Miles into a trap so that they can kill him. And that's not the kind of heat we need, right now.'

Hector's face twisted a little, confused. 'Why would they try to do that? It's not like you have any way of getting in contact with him, right?'

Garovel made no response.

Hector's jaw clenched. '...Right?'

The reaper's bony jaw opened, but it took him a few more moments to actually say anything. 'I might know of a way.'

Hector sighed and put his head in both of his hands.

'And there's another problem,' said Garovel. 'Parson and Overra, as I remember them, were pretty good people. So even though I understand the Rainlords' position, I'm not sure I want to help them ambush and murder the two of them. Assuming they even COULD, that is. Which is a whole other conversation, by the way.'

Hector still had no idea what to say.

'So, uh. As you can tell, I'm in a bit of an ethical pickle here. And maybe a philosophical one, as well.'

Hector raised his head a little. 'Philosophical? What do you mean?'"  
"2063 -- CCVII.

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Hector raised his head a little. 'Philosophical? What do you mean?'"  
"2064

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

'It's an ethical pickle, because while I want to help the Rainlords get justice for their kin, I also don't want to betray someone whose misdeeds I've only heard about secondhand--someone I have no personal vendetta against, as well.' Garovel hovered across the center of the large bedroom. 'And it's a philosophical pickle, because even if we presume that telling the Rainlords the truth is the most ""moral"" thing to do, there's still the question of whether or not it is the ""best"" thing to do--in terms of achieving the most desirable long-term outcome, that is.'

Hector just groaned and lay back down on his bed.

'Hey, these are real problems that I'm grappling with right now,

goddammit. Don't just lie there like a useless lump. Tell me what you think the right course of action is.'

'Didn't I already do that?'

'Really? So even after everything I just explained, you still think I should tell the Rainlords what I know?'

'Garovel... I don't fucking know.'

'Hector, I'm not expecting you to ""know."" I don't need you to tell me what to do. I just want you to give me your opinion. Help me make a decision. Y'know, like a friend would do?'

Hector took a long breath but didn't move. He tried to think. 'Okay, well, uh... I guess if we're talking broadly, then... yeah, I do think that the most ""moral"" thing is generally the ""best"" thing to do. Philosophically.'

'Yeah, sure, ""generally,"" I can agree with that. But what about in this specific case?'

'Do you really think keeping this information from the Rainlords will help you achieve a ""more desirable long-term outcome?""'

Garovel remained briefly quiet. 'Maybe.'

'And how would that work, exactly?'

'Well, I... I would tell them eventually. Just not right away.'

'Uh-huh...''

"2065

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'I feel like you're not appreciating the nuance of this situation,' said Garovel. 'The Rainlords are very emotional and vulnerable, right now. I could very easily imagine them trying to use this--to use US--against our will in order to pursue their revenge against Parson Miles. Does that possibility not concern you at all?'

'...You think they would, what? Take you hostage? To use as bait or something for this Parson guy?'

'More or less, yeah. Does that sound so ridiculous to you?'

'A little. I mean, the Rainlords are all about honor 'n everything.'

'Yeah. And we also witnessed some of them taking children hostage. Don't tell me you've forgotten that whole shitstorm, already.'

'I think you're worrying too much, Garovel. If you tell them, they'll understand.'

'That's very trusting of you, Hector.'

'No, it isn't. They already feel hugely indebted to us. To an annoying degree, even. They wouldn't do anything like you're suggesting.'

'I wish I could share your certainty.'

Hector exhaled heavily and had to sit up another time to look at his reaper directly. 'Alright, well. This isn't getting us anywhere. Give me the details. How do you know this Parson guy?'

'I briefly worked under his command.'

'...How briefly?'

'About ten years or so.'

'That is NOT brief, Garovel.'

'Eh. In reaper terms, it is.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Oh, uh... sixty years, maybe? Tough to recall exactly.'

'And what was the, uh... nature of your work?'

'Espionage.'

Hector's gaze hardened. 'For real?'

'I hated it,' said Garovel, 'but it was important work. We prevented a lot of deaths.'

'Where were you, er, operating?'

'Mostly in the eastern half of Eloa, but there were a few occasions

when we traveled all over the world.'

'Why did you hate it?'

'Lots of reasons, really, but the main one was probably the lack of transparency. Working in intelligence for one of the most powerful organizations on the planet, you might think you'd know a thing or two about the state of the world, the goings-on of nations. But we never really did. We knew what we were told and had to take a lot on faith.'"  
"2066

Hector found himself wondering something else--something he'd wondered on several previous occasions but never felt capable of asking about, for whatever reason. '...You had a servant, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Who were they? And what happened to them?'

Garovel took a moment to answer as he hovered back to the other side of the room. 'His name was Simon Karsh. He was another reason why I wanted to quit the Covert Intelligence Division.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's a long story.'

Hector crossed his legs and folded his arms, wanting to be at full attention now. 'Well, I'm interested.'

Garovel stared at him, then nodded. 'Alright, but you need to sleep soon. Tomorrow is a big day.'

'I haven't forgotten.'

The reaper took a second before continuing, perhaps considering where to begin. 'I met Simon through the Vanguard. I had been thinking about joining their ranks for many years, and I was already very well-acquainted with several reapers who were long-time members. I hadn't taken on a servant for over a century at that point, and it didn't really matter to me who they paired me with, so long as the person wasn't obviously a psychotic asshole. I wanted to keep an open mind. Foster a strong friendship. Build up to things slowly.

'Simon was about twenty-five when I revived him. He was the victim of a firebombing in Vantalay. And he was highly motivated to get revenge on those who were responsible for the attack that killed him. He was quite the soldier, you see. Very dutiful. Very serious. But it wasn't just that.

'In many ways, I feel as if he was what most reapers would consider to be an ideal servant. Already trained in combat. Well-educated. Quite knowledgeable of servants and reapers from the beginning. And incredibly charismatic--at least, when he wanted to be.'

"2067

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 1 of 12)~~

An ideal servant? That just made Hector even more curious as to why Garovel would've released him. He held his tongue, though, figuring the reaper was getting to that.

'I had high hopes for Simon--and so did many of our superior officers, I think. Even before completing the standard four years of training, he was often chosen for real missions, apprenticing under various veterans.'

Hector couldn't help himself now. 'So what happened, then?'

The reaper broke for a sigh. 'Simon was... Well, I could say he simply grew too arrogant and dangerous, and that would not be a lie. But it would also strike me as too dismissive. There was more to it than that.

'It was about six years in when our spy work first began, and he was incredible at it. Right from the start. Had a real aptitude for it. TOO much so, perhaps. Looking back on it now, I think his string of early successes might have caused more problems for him in the long-term than I realized at the time. For the longest time, he never really tasted failure. He was just THAT good right out of the gate.

'But it didn't last forever. Eventually, we did suffer a major loss. And because he'd never experienced something like that before, it just hit him that much harder. I'm not sure he ever fully recovered from that.'

Hector was reluctant to ask, but he felt compelled to. 'What exactly happened?'

'It was a mission in Palei. Infiltrating a weapons factory. Deep in Abolish territory. Extremely dangerous. I didn't want to take the mission, but that wasn't anything new. I'd tried to refuse many other missions previously, but he just went off and did them without me. And he'd succeeded every time previously, so why would he think this time would be any different? He had such confidence. It drove me crazy.'"  
"2068

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 2 of 12)~~  
'Why did the mission go badly?' said Hector.

'He went without me, so I don't know everything that happened, but my understanding of it was that his cover was blown from the very beginning. There was a huge information leak the previous day in a completely different country, and it compromised the identities of dozens of undercover operatives. So his whole team walked right into a trap.'

'Oh, man...'

'They were all captured, except for him. He just barely managed to destroy his own brain in time. Couple of their reapers were killed as well. I might've been one of them, had I been there.'

Hector's eyes went to the bed below him as he processed that.

'Oddly enough,' said Garovel, 'MY identity was never leaked, only his.'

Hector cocked an eyebrow. 'How could that be?'

'I think it was because of the way the Vanguard stores information. It's possible they do it differently now, but back then, they didn't keep records of servant-reaper pairings. They DID keep records of servants and reapers, but not together. Perhaps for this very reason. If one's identity is compromised, they didn't want the partner to automatically be compromised as well.'

'Huh.'

'It's particularly odd, because with undercover work, it's usually the reaper who presents the most risk of being outed. Our long lives make us much more likely to be recognized by enemy reapers. That was

why he was able to go on so many missions without me. Bringing a reaper along was often considered an unnecessary risk, anyway.'

Hector supposed that made sense. If spy work was more about gathering information than combat, then reapers were probably a lot more valuable staying behind and relaying intel back to HQ as the servants discovered it.

That seemed pretty potent, now that he was imagining it. No need for coded letters or encrypted phone calls or anything like that. Just tell your reaper what you find as soon as you find it, and bam. Mission accomplished."

"2069

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 3 of 12)~~

'If I'm being perfectly honest,' said Garovel, 'Simon was always a bit mysterious to me. He was such a remarkable actor that I could almost never be sure of how he truly felt about any given situation, but this was one of the few occasions when the facade dropped, and I think I was able to understand him.

'Simon liked to play it cool. Be aloof. Detached. For the good of the mission, seemingly. But when he lost his team that day, he was inconsolable. I'd never seen him so demoralized. I think, deep down, he really did care about them like they were his family.'

Hector wanted to say something, but he didn't have the words.

'Looking back on it all now,' the reaper went on, 'Simon really was a hero in the most "classic" sense of the term. He was strong, smart, adaptable, compassionate, and had a strong sense of justice. And he had no real weaknesses. He was kind of perfect. To an infuriating degree, sometimes.

'But that loss changed him. I think the worst part of it for him was the realization that... it didn't matter how perfect he was. He could do his job flawlessly. He could make the best possible decision every single time with the information at his disposal. And it still wouldn't guarantee success. Everything could still go to shit for reasons that were completely beyond his control.'

Hector knew a thing or two about feeling that way.

"When I finally convinced him to quit the spy life and return to normal duty, I thought things would be better for him, but they never were again. I think he just stopped seeing people as people. I think they just became ""objectives"" to him. Or ""tools,"" even. Save this person. Cooperate with that person. It was all just mechanical to him. Where before he would only pretend not to get attached, now he genuinely never did."

"2070

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 4 of 12)~~

Hector could see the wisdom in not getting too attached to people, but he'd always considered it a complete impossibility. He'd never felt like he had any control over that sort of thing. Whether he grew to like or dislike someone--for him, that had always been something that just happened on its own.

And quite frankly, he had considered that to be a weakness within himself. An inability to control his emotions, to prevent himself from being vulnerable.

It was strange to imagine struggling with the complete opposite problem, but he supposed it made sense. Especially for a servant.

'It was a difficult decision to release him,' said Garovel. 'It always is, when it's a matter of mental instability. Even now, I wonder if perhaps I pulled the trigger too early, if perhaps I could have brought him back around.'

'W-was there a final straw?' asked Hector. 'Something unforgivable he did?'

Garovel's skeletal expression twisted a little. 'Not exactly. It was a combination of lots of little things. Overall callousness. The way he talked to me and his supposed comrades. I had seen it before, and I didn't want to wait until he went so far as to actually kill some innocent person.

'And I'll admit, releasing him without such obvious justification might've actually been too callous on MY part, not his. I had grown to hate him over the years.'



Hector didn't know what to say.

The reaper wasn't done, though. 'And while I'm being brutally honest here... My relationship with Simon--I do think it colored my decision to choose you as my next servant.'

That didn't exactly sound like a compliment, but Hector also felt like he kind of understood what the reaper meant.

'To say that you've exceeded all my expectations would be an understatement,' said Garovel, 'but I think you know that by now. Or at least, I hope you do.'

"2071

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 5 of 12)~~

Hector scratched his cheek, thinking on all they'd been through together in about a year of servitude. It was crazy to imagine that Garovel had been doing this kind of thing for millennia.

And abruptly, he found himself wondering something anew.

'...How many servants have you had in total?' Hector asked.

'You are the twenty-second,' said Garovel.

Hector's gaze drifted away from the reaper as he tried to wrap his head around that number. On the one hand, that felt like a lot, but on the other, taking Garovel's three thousand years of life into consideration, maybe it wasn't at all. That was way less than one per century.

'Now you're wondering who they all were and why I released them,' said Garovel.

'Er. Well. Pretty much, yeah.'

'I'm sure I'll get around to it eventually, but to be very blunt with you, I don't generally like talking about them. It's painful.'

Hector frowned. 'Did ANY of them have a happy ending?'

'Happy endings are a myth. They don't exist.'

Hector's eyes bugged out a little. 'Fucking...! Wow, Garovel!'

'What?'

'That's... just... super fucked up. You really believe that?'

The reaper shrugged. 'I'm not trying to be a downer here. But what do you want from me? I'm a grim reaper, okay?'

'Emphasis on the ""grim"" part, I guess.'

'Hey, I can be plenty uplifting when I want to be.'

'Maybe you need religion, Garovel.'

'Oh, fuck you. We are NOT having this conversation, right now.'

'I'm just saying. If you really don't believe happy endings exist AT ALL, then there might be something wrong with you. I mean, fucking hell, man, that's dark as shit.'

'It's not like I don't believe goodness exists. I just think it's fleeting--and therefore, that much more in need of protection.'

'Uh-huh...'

'Whatever. I don't have to justify myself to you. I'm the boss in this relationship.'

'Yeah, okay.'

"2072

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 6 of 12)~~

'Good, I'm glad you agree,' said Garovel with false pleasantness.

'Anyway, do you have any more questions about Simon specifically? Because we've kinda gotten off track.'

Hector thought about it. 'What was his ability?'

'Oh, that's actually a good segue back to Parson Miles, because Simon's ability was oxygen transfiguration.'

'How does that make for a good segue?'

'Because Parson had the exact same ability. It was actually why

Parson first took an interest in Simon, even though he wasn't who we reported to directly. Our actual boss was a man named Dominique Rohdri.'

'What was his rank?'

'General.'

'Hmm. What was YOUR rank?'

'The members of the CID didn't have proper ranks, really. Once we left, though, Simon was a captain.'

'So like Zeff?'

'Yeah.'

'Was he as powerful as Zeff?'

'I don't know,' said Garovel with a tinge of exasperation. 'We're getting sidetracked again.'

'Sorry. So this Parson guy went out of his way to spend time with you two?'

'Yeah. We got to know him and Overra decently well, I think. They seemed to like Simon.'

'Did they like you?'

'Hard to say. Especially after what I've heard about them from the Rainlords. Seems like they were a bit two-faced. Parson, for his part, always acted like a bit of a goober.'

That hadn't been the word Hector was expecting. 'A... goober?'

'A goofball? A silly billy? He was a weirdo. Had a thing for ice cream. Didn't seem to take his job too seriously and drove a lot of people nuts, including Overra.'

'Huh...'

'And yet he always seemed to get the job done. Toward the end of our working relationship, I got the feeling that he was more cunning than he let on. I never thought he was an evil son of a bitch, though, which is what the Rainlords make him sound like. In fact, despite not liking the CID itself, I actually kind of enjoyed working for him.'

'Hmm.'

"2073

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 7 of 12)~~

'So do you still think I should tell the Rainlords what I know about Parson?' said Garovel.

'I don't know. Didn't you say you had a means of contacting him?'

'Heh, well, I'm not sure I should burden you with that knowledge, Hector.'

'Oh, but it's okay to burden me all this other shit?'

'Well, yeah. You're my servant. You're supposed to help me carry things. Physically and psychologically.'

Hector just shook his head and sighed.

'If I tell you how we might be able to contact Parson, then you could go behind my back and tell the Rainlords without my approval.'

'...I wouldn't do that, Garovel.'

'I believe you, but I still think it's better not to put you in that position in the first place.'

'I mean, I'm kind of in that position already, aren't I? I could still go to the Rainlords with what you've told me, and they'd be super pissed at you.'

'Yes, they would. They might even try to torture it out of me. Do you want them to torture me?'

'...How bad would this torture be, exactly?'

'Hector.'

'I'm kidding. Obviously, I don't want anyone to hurt you, Garovel. But I highly doubt that the Rainlords would do anything like that.'

'You really have a lot of faith in them, don't you?'

'You don't? I mean, we've... we've literally been through hell together.'

The reaper gave a mild laugh. 'You make a fair point.'

'And if they somehow end up finding out later that you had this information all along, they'll hate your fucking guts for it, Garovel. And mine, too, probably.'

'Tch, you might be right.'

Hector gave a fake gasp. 'Holy shit, are you actually listening to me for once?'

'Excuse me, but I listen to you all the time. In fact, that's probably why we keep getting mixed up in so much crazy shit.'

'No, that's definitely your fault.'

'Agree to disagree.'"

"2074

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 8 of 12)~~

Hector exhaled a small laugh and lay back down on his bed. 'So you're going to tell the Rainlords what you know, then?'

'Yeah, I guess so,' said Garovel.

'Good.'

'I think I'll leave out the part about having a method of contacting him, though.'

'Garovel...'

'I'll tell them about that when I feel the time is right. I don't want to run the risk of them trying to launch some half-cocked attack on Parson. In their current state, I'm quite sure he would obliterate them.'

'They'll be really mad if they find out later that you kept that information from them.'

'Yeah, well. I don't see how they would find that out, but even if they did, I'd rather they be angry at us than dead.'

Hector still didn't fully agree, but he could see where Garovel was coming from. 'Is he really powerful enough to take down Melchor and everyone else single-handedly?'

'Well, I doubt he would be alone, but even if he was, I'm not sure. Captain generals are nothing to fuck around with. They're among the most powerful servants in the world.'

Another question occurred to Hector, and he had to ask it. 'Do you think Leo could beat him?'

'Again, that's hard to say. At these levels of strength, it all becomes a bit muddled. I think once soul-synchronization reaches a certain point, you start getting diminishing returns.'

'What do you mean?'

'Like, for example, a servant who's fifty years old will have WAY stronger soul power than a servant who's only one. But a servant who's a hundred and fifty years old won't have as large of a gap in soul power compared to someone who's a hundred.'

'Hmm.'

'There's still a gap, of course, but the bigger issue is how much you've honed your ability. And your overall combat competency, of course.'"  
"2075

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 9 of 12)~~

'And how old is Parson?' said Hector.

'From what I was able to tell, he was at least a hundred, and that was sixty-ish years ago, so... do the math.'

'I see...'

'Oh, wait, you're terrible at math, aren't you? Maybe that was me asking too much.'

'I can do simple addition!'

'You sure about that?'

'Yes! You're saying he's at least a hundred and sixty!'

'Wow, good job.' The reaper almost sounded genuinely impressed, no doubt trying to enhance the obnoxiousness. 'I'm really proud of you.'

'Shut up,' laughed Hector. 'I'm not THAT bad at math. Agh.'

'Mm, I dunno. I recall an instance several months ago where I was telling you about how many languages I knew. I said three hundred, and then you pointed out that it wasn't very impressive, because I was three thousand years old, so that worked out to ""only like one new language every hundred years."" Those were your exact words, by the way.'

Hector's brow lowered as he thought back. 'I don't remember this at all.'

'Mmhmm. Three thousand divided by three hundred is ten, not a hundred. You added a zero there, buddy.'

'I'm sure that never happened. You would've roasted me if it had, and then I would definitely remember it.'

'The reason I didn't say anything at the time was because we were still getting to know each other, and I didn't want to hurt your feelings. But that's not a concern anymore, as I've come to realize just how much doing that brings me joy.'

'Well, I don't even recall what you're talking about, so no hurt feelings for you.'

'Damn.'

'But anyway, if soul power doesn't grow as quickly for older servants, does that mean that Melchor could fight Parson on an even level?'

'That's a very good question. And one that I do not have the answer for.'

'Really? Not even a guess?'

'I can give you a hard maybe.'

'Hmm.'"

"2076 -- CCVIII.

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 10 of 12)~~

'Oh, and regarding Parson vs. Leo,' said Garovel, 'I think even if Leo is a bit older--which I'm only ASSUMING that is he is--Parson would no doubt have a huge advantage over him as long as Leo isn't able to work with his reaper.'

'Oh, right.'

'But then again, Leo WAS able to capture Melchor and everyone else single-handedly, so it could be that he's got a few tricks up his sleeve that would net him a victory over Parson. The context of this hypothetical fight would play an enormous role.'

'Hmm.'

'In any case, you'd better get some sleep. All our preparations for tomorrow will be for nothing if you're too tired to think straight.'

'Okay.'

Chapter Two Hundred Eight: 'Go forth, and preside...!'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

By most standards, the trip south to Loxeville from Gray Rock didn't take much time at all, but it was still long enough for Hector's feeling of dread to build up over the course of it. As he sat in the back of the black SUV with Roman Fullister, Diego Redwater, and Melchor Blackburn, Hector couldn't help imagining the variety of ways that this meeting with Leo could potentially go wrong.

Aside from the four of them, there was also Matteo Delaguna, their driver and Hector's recent shadow. The young man hadn't said two words to Hector, but whenever he left Warrenhold, Matteo followed him as the Rainlords' designated bodyguard.

The reapers were all present as well, but they soon wouldn't be, apart from Melchor's reaper, Orric. No one wanted them around if a fight ended up breaking out. Hector was trying to convince himself that it wouldn't, but as they got closer and closer to Loxeville, he found himself resisting those attempts.



Leo just wanted a meaningful job. He just needed guidance. From someone he could believe in. And Hector had to be that person.

Oh, god..."

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~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 10 of 12)~~

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"2077

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 11 of 12)~~

Loxeville was a quaint little town. Hector had researched it a bit online, just wanting to get a sense of the place. It had a population of about eight thousand, and it was quite a young community. Its founding mayor was even still alive. Its primary tourist attraction was the so-called ""largest egg on the continent,"" which sounded quite weird to Hector's mind, though it did pique his curiosity a bit. Apparently, it was a fossilized ""titanosaur"" egg.

Hector didn't know much about dinosaurs, but he kind of wanted to go see it. Maybe some other time. When the fate of the nation wasn't hanging in the balance.

The agreed upon location was technically not in Loxeville itself, but rather on the outskirts of town. They were hoping to avoid a fight, of course, but Voreese and Garovel had thankfully still picked a place where they wouldn't have to worry about innocent bystanders.

If all went according to plan, however, they would not be staying here for long.

The vehicle came to a stop at a dead end in front of an empty lot. There was a warehouse on one side of the street, but on the other was just an endless landscape of tall, lush grass. It wasn't raining, but the scent in the air was that of recent showers, and the dark clouds hanging low in the sky certainly looked like they might start watering the ground again at any moment.

Hector saw the man sitting there on the bench by the road, but it took

him a second to recognize that it was Leo. The guy looked almost like a different person.

Leo was cleanly shaven, wearing a black suit and tie, and his black hair was perfectly coiffed. Gone were the dreadlocks and scraggly beard."  
"2078

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 12 of 12)~~

When Leo saw him approaching, the man smiled and stood up. He hardly even glanced at the four other men following closely behind Hector.

""Whew!"" Leo shuffled quickly closer and offered Hector a handshake. ""You're not late, but all the same, I was beginning to worry you wouldn't show!""

Hector saw no reason to be impolite. He took the handshake. ""You clean up well, Leo.""

""Oh! Aha! Yeah, thanks! Figured I should try 'n make myself presentable, y'know. Demonstrate my conviction 'n whatnot.""

""I appreciate it,"" said Hector. He motioned to the men behind him. ""I believe you've already encountered almost everyone here, but... I suppose introductions are in order. Matteo, Roman, Diego, and Melchor.""

Melchor stepped up next to Hector but said nothing, only folded his arms. Orric clung to his back.

""Heh, yeah, uh."" Leo offered Melchor a handshake now.

Melchor just looked at it, then at Hector.

Hector gave the man a small nod.

Thankfully, Melchor decided to take the handshake.

They had all discussed at length how they should conduct themselves in front of Leo. Everyone here had agreed to play along with the tale of Hector being the leader of the Rainlords.

Hector had been surprised when Melchor volunteered to join him for this meeting. He'd wanted to ask the man to come along anyway, but he hadn't expected such enthusiasm from him. It had worried Hector, at first, because he thought Melchor might be hoping to enact some manner of revenge on Leo, but as they'd discussed their plans more, it seemed like Melchor was mostly just concerned with ensuring Hector's safety.

Which was flattering, to say the least--not to mention comforting. Having Darktide, of all people, watching out for him? That was arguably the main reason why Hector was able to feel relatively calm, right now."

"2079

~~The Valentine's Days Special -- (page 13 of 12, because I miscounted, realized it too late, and now I don't feel like going back and rescheduling 100 pages)~~

""Listen,"" said Leo, ""about before, I'm real sorry about attackin' you like I did.""

""You sucker punched me,"" said Melchor.

""Well, yeah, I kinda had to, dude. Knew you'd be a big problem if I didn't take you out first. I was outnumbered like a hundred to one 'r somethin', y'know.""

""In that case, I suppose I can just consider myself flattered,"" said Melchor. ""And you should consider yourself lucky that the Lord Goffe here wasn't present at that time."" He flashed Hector a quick smile.

Holy shit, Melchor, seriously?

Hector's face just tightened up. He couldn't really say anything, but he wanted to tell him to relax. That kind of heavy-handed praise wasn't necessary.

Leo laughed. ""You're right, man! Things could be a lot worse for me, couldn't they?!""

""Indeed. But I look forward to working together with you as comrades-in-arms under Darksteel's guidance."" Melchor gave another smile.

""Oh, ah, me too, dude!""

Wait a minute. Was Melchor enjoying this? What the hell was going through his head, right now?!

""Have you already heard about his encounter with the so-called 'God of the Underworld?'"

""Oh, yeah, Roman over there told me a bit about that, but he skimmed on the details. You wouldn't--""

Hector felt compelled to intervene. ""Ah--that's enough of that. Save the small talk for later, please.""

""Look, he's getting embarrassed!"" said Melchor.

""Oh, wow! I think you're right!""

The two men chortled in unison this time.

Hector just stared at them, wondering if this meeting was already spiraling out of his control. He half-expected Roman to jump in as well, but when he looked over at him, the man looked more flabbergasted than anything.

When their laughter settled, however, silence arrived and threatened to become awkward.

Hector maintained his focus, though. He didn't intend to let it get to him this time. If anything, he wanted to use this awkwardness to his advantage."

"2080

Part of Hector's plan here today was minimizing how much he spoke--if at all possible. He didn't want to be needlessly rude or obtuse, but at the same time, he wanted to avoid saying anything that might accidentally give away his true age or lack of leadership qualities.

So even though he wanted to prod Leo about where his reaper, Ericoros, was, Hector chose to hold his tongue for the time being. Ideally, the man would realize what Hector was waiting for on his own, as meeting Ericoros was one of the primary purposes of this rendezvous.

And it required a bit more staring, but Leo did indeed figure it out.

""Oh! Um!"" Leo reached behind him toward the bench that he'd been sitting on and retrieved a black box, about the size of house cat. ""Here you go! As requested!""

Hector received the box with both hands.

""Just, er, be careful with that,"" Leo added, taking a few steps back and raising his hands a bit. ""I'm sure you wanna check to make sure he's really in there, so... eh, you ready?""

Hector understood what he was getting at. He glanced at the others, then gave Leo a nod.

Leo flicked his wrist, and the box of solid boron annihilated itself from the top down.

Immediately, the reaper within bolted out of it, but Hector was ready with a soul-empowered hand and caught Ericoros in his grip.

The reaper struggled, wriggling like an eel, but without a physical body to work with, there was really no hope of getting away.

Ericoros remained quiet, though, which Hector found surprising. Given all prior experience with reapers, he fully expected this one to complain loudly and often about his current circumstances, but that didn't appear to be the case.

Hector looked to Leo again. ""Have you already explained the situation to Ericoros?""

""Ah--yeah. More or less.""

"2081

Hector and Garovel had discussed the problem of Ericoros at length in private. Without a doubt, this was the most difficult obstacle for achieving any kind of long-term solution with Leo here in Atreya. Ideally, they would be able to win the reaper's loyalty, but they both doubted that would be easy. In fact, if it was easy, then that would be ridiculously suspicious. How were they to ever arrive at a point where they could trust Ericoros?

Baby steps, was what they'd decided on. It would be very slow going, and the first thing to do was simply get to know the reaper better. Any attempt at convincing a reaper to change allegiances was bound to fail without first acquiring knowledge about them.

And of course, it could all still be for naught. The notion that Ericoros simply could not be convinced to join them, no matter what they said or did--that concerned Hector and Garovel greatly.

What would they do in that case? Keep the reaper prisoner indefinitely?

Or, of course... they could just let Ericoros release Leo.

That was far from the ideal outcome, certainly, but it would at least neutralize the threat that Leo might pose to them.

And there was still the matter of Sai-hee's hatred of the Rainlords. If they simply let Ericoros go free, who knows what he might tell her? What if Ericoros' freedom somehow ended up causing Sai-hee to attack Warrenhold?

Perhaps that was unlikely, but given their current knowledge of the situation, they weren't yet prepared to take that chance.

As Hector eyed the helpless reaper in his grasp, he knew how careful he had to be with everything that he said now. Impulsively, he wanted to apologize to Ericoros for the circumstances, but Garovel had warned him against doing that.

If he was supposed to be playing the part of an emperor-class servant, then he should not act so apologetic or accommodating. He should do as he had done with Leo himself. He should project both power and understanding."

"2082

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""It is good to finally make your acquaintance,"" said Hector.

Ericoros merely held his gaze and said nothing.

Well, that was fine. ""I look forward to getting to know you."" Hector went back to Leo. ""In the meantime, you wanted me to give you a job,

no?"

Leo perked up a little. "Er--yeah, dude! You already have something in mind for me?!"

"How does working for a homeless shelter sound?" said Hector.

Leo blinked a couple times. "Uh..."

It seemed like the man was giving him a window to elaborate, but Hector just waited for his full reaction.

"That's, er... not exactly what I was expecting," said Leo. "It's not really 'servant' work, is it?"

"It's 'human' work," said Hector. "And important, too."

"Yeah, man, I mean, sure. I'm just kind of wondering what you are getting out of it. Do you own this homeless shelter?"

"No, I don't. And it wouldn't just be one shelter. It would be multiple shelters, all over Gray Rock. We've made arrangements for you." Hector nodded toward Roman. "Or rather, he has."

Roman gave a small wave and a flat smile. Oddly enough, he was actually dressed like a normal businessman today.

"Ah..." Leo still seemed confused, though. "But, er, how does me working at a homeless shelter contribute to your overall plans for the future?"

Hector found that question somewhat surprising. He'd expected Leo to only care about whether the job sounded enjoyable to him personally, but after a moment, he supposed this response made sense, too. Leo seemed to be a rather skeptical guy by nature.

"For now," said Hector, "it probably won't contribute much at all. Placing you somewhere you appreciate is all that matters."

"Huh..."

Hector felt like he should give the man a bit more. "However... it's my hope that you might be able to foster a network of reliable contacts during your time in these places."

Leo's expression shifted with sudden understanding. "I see..."



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Hector watched him closely. A lot depended on how Leo felt about this job offer.

Leo's nose twitched, and he gave an audible sniff. ""Maybe I'm just bein' paranoid here, but y'know... to me, it sounds a bit like you plan on exploitin' the underprivileged for your own political gain."" And he stared at Hector straight on.

Hector didn't look away. ""Why would you think that?""

""Well. Mainly just a gut feeling. A worry, I guess. I may not know all that much about this little country of yours, but I know that it's had some political trouble recently, no?""

""That's putting it mildly,"" said Hector with a bob of his head.

""Mmhmm. Then I guess I'm just concerned that you--a guy who seems to have come out on top after that whole mess--might be lookin' to exploit some less fortunate folks with your newfound influence. Know what I'm sayin'?"

""Sure, but how would a network of homeless informants be considered exploitation?"" said Hector.

""Depends on the nature of the 'informing' being done,"" said Leo.

""Seen this type o' thing before, daddy-o. Sometimes, when you invest so much effort into buildin' something, you end up forgettin' the human cost. You end up trappin' your own builders inside, ya feel me?"

Hector squinted at him and took a moment to consider his words. He felt like he understood what the man was getting at, but he wasn't sure. ""Are you worried that... such a network would make the problem of homelessness worse?"

""Mm, pretty much, yeah. When you've got power, you can throw someone who's drowning a lifeline, right? Seems like a good and noble thing to do, yeah? But then, if you feel like it, you can decide not to reel 'em into safety. 'Cuz maybe, for whatever reason, it's more beneficial for you if they stay out there in the brutal sea, while relying on you forever, unable to escape.""

"2084 -- CCIX.

Hector deliberated on what Leo had just said for a bit. And then, despite how much he was trying to maintain his composure, he couldn't help allowing a smile to creep onto his face, and a small laugh escaped his lips. ""You know,"" said Hector, ""I was a bit worried about offering you a position like this. Granting you responsibility over civilians. But now, after hearing that... I think you might just be perfect for it.""

Leo seemed confused again and blinked a few more times.

""It sounds like you really will have their best interests at heart,"" said Hector. ""That's exactly what I'm looking for.""

Chapter Two Hundred Nine: 'O, expanding venture...!'

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The next three weeks were blessedly peaceful. Busy, perhaps, but peaceful. Hector became more accustomed to his routine as Lord of Warrenhold, and remarkably, many of his worries seemed to be lessening--if only a little.

By all accounts, Leo appeared to be quite comfortable in his new role. Roman and a couple others had volunteered to work with Leo temporarily to help him get acclimated, and incredibly, the plan to gain informants around Gray Rock was already bearing fruit. Hector was starting to receive miscellaneous reports about various things happening around the city. They weren't especially helpful yet, mostly just mundane rumors, but it was something.

Ericoros had thus far proved completely uncooperative. The reaper hadn't said a single word to Hector at all, although he'd apparently spoken briefly to Melchor when it was the man's turn to hold onto him. Ericoros had asked Melchor about Hector, wanting to know why someone as famous as Darktide was following him.

And Darktide, team player that he was, had apparently talked Hector up as being some kind of great man, worthy of trust and respect.

When Garovel had privately relayed that information to him, Hector felt more uncertain than ever about this whole thing. Getting Melchor to lie for him like that was absolutely ridiculous, but considering how deep into this they were now, what other option was there?"

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"2085

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Regardless, Hector had a feeling that it was going to take some time to get Ericoros talking. He just wondered how long. Given the longevity of reapers, this shit could take years.

But oh well. There was no rushing something like this. For now, all they could do was try to show Ericoros the kind of people they were and what kind of operation they were running.

At this rate, though, they would soon need to come up with a more long-term solution for the reaper's captivity. They couldn't just keep handing him off between servants forever. Trapping Ericoros in a soul-empowered box seemed rather inhumane and counterproductive to the task of trying to win him over, but it might be necessary.

A few of the Rainlords had suggested that they shift some of the reconstruction effort to building a prison that could hold reapers, and Hector was considering it. Even if they didn't intend to use it for Ericoros, such a facility could certainly prove useful in the future.

In fact, he was a bit surprised that Warrenhold didn't already possess such a place, but after consulting Garovel and Voreese about it, he learned that it used to.

According to Voreese, the half-destroyed Star Tower was where the prison had been located.

Which brought up all sorts of questions to Hector's mind regarding Warrenhold's history. Was it merely a coincidence that, of all eight towers, the one with the prison in it had been the only one to incur such heavy damage? When had that tower been destroyed? And who

had caused it?

Voreese didn't have any answers for him, unfortunately. She may have been the reaper of the original builder of Warrenhold, but until recently, she hadn't even visited in over a thousand years."

"2086

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The reconstruction effort overall was progressing in new directions as well. After completing work on the Entry Tower and moving most of their attention to the Bell Tower, some of the Rainlords began expressing an interest in the problematic lake that sat below Warrenhold. Specifically, they wanted to start draining it so that they could get a better look at the ancient buildings therein.

Hector was more than happy to give his approval, but it apparently wasn't going to be a quick process. There was simply too much water down there and too few people to work on it. Theoretically, a materialization user could just push the water up and out with gigantic buckets, but where were they supposed to move all that water? The surface? That was a hell of a climb up the cave's winding staircase--and then also through the Entry Tower's dozens of flights of stairs as well.

And if they tried to cut corners or get reckless with their handling of so much water in one trip, then there was a very good chance that it would spill and flood Warrenhold itself. There were far too many non-servants around to risk something like that.

Instead, they'd decided that the better location to deposit all the water was the underground river. They still had to trek up those winding stairs, but rather than going through the Entry Tower, they had to go through the bathhouses and into a long tunnel that eventually led out to the waterfall--the same one that could be faintly heard from Warrenhold's main plaza.

It was still a considerable distance to transport so much water, so they considered rigging up a high-powered pumping system in order to at least automate the process, but in the end, they figured that acquiring all the parts for a large enough contraption of that kind would be a needless expense. They resorted to simply using a materializer for the pumping job instead, and occasionally, that materializer was Hector."

He created a long iron tube and snaked it all the way up the side of the cave, through the bathhouse doors, and down the tunnel to the waterfall. He would capture the lake water at the opening of the tube and then push it all the way to exit with a moving inner wall of iron.

It wasn't terribly difficult, but Hector still found it to be a somewhat interesting form of training--both because of the sheer volume of iron and water involved and because so much of his work had to be done without visual reference. He had to rely almost entirely on his imagination. Moreover, the total travel distance of the tube was greater than his sphere of influence with materialization, so he had to keep walking back and forth as well.

Tedious was certainly one word for it, though.

It no doubt would've been much faster to drill down below the lake and simply let the water drain out on its own, but the big concern there was that, with so much water in need of removal, the amount of drilling required would be too dangerous. The structural stability of the cave itself might become compromised--not to mention the possibility of encountering volcanic gases. Reapers could phase through the rock and locate lava, since it emitted light, but gases remained invisible to them.

It was a shame, too, because one or two destruction users probably could've taken care of that job in a few days.

This did, however, get Hector thinking about the local environment a bit more. He was starting to wonder if he should try to recruit a geologist. Maybe not right now but eventually, perhaps.

On the subject of recruitment, however, one other person had recently gained Hector's attention: a woman named Madison Reach."

about how she was in hiding from a group called ""Andalero,"" but Hector hadn't really spared it much thought. As far as he was concerned, she fit right in with all these fugitive Rainlords, and if Roman wanted her to be protected, then Hector was more than happy to have her stay here.

It was only very recently, however, that she had introduced herself to Hector directly.

And boy, could that woman talk.

She was quite nice as well, expressing her gratitude for her accommodations repeatedly and enthusiastically. But she also had some suggestions, apparently, regarding the overall decor of Warrenhold. She even went so far as to ask if she might be granted some funding in order to help pursue her passion for interior design.

Hector had been at a loss for what to say to that.

""I'm thinking some nice rugs would go a long way to making a lot of these rooms more welcoming and, just, 'homely,' y'know? And goddess knows this place could do with a bit more light. I'm thinking some lamps to hang along the top of each tower. Help brighten up the ceiling in particular, which I think will improve the already-gorgeous view from the main plaza. Oh, maybe some nice banners to drape down the side of each tower would be good, too, but I imagine you would want those to be custom made, eh? Do you have an insignia or crest? I could look into--""

And she had just kept going. If not for the Lord Dimas Sebolt's timely arrival, Hector wasn't sure what would have happened.

""Perhaps you should give him some time to think about your proposals,"" Dimas had said.

""Oh! Um, sure!"" Her eyes had seemed to light up even more when she'd noticed Dimas there. ""You're probably right! I'll do that! And you'll keep me company while I await his response, won't you?""

""...Not the entire time, but yes. I would be happy to.""

And the way she had wrapped herself around Dimas' arm--that was perhaps the most surprising thing Hector had seen in a while."

"2089

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The relationship between those two had quickly become a popular subject of discussion around Warrenhld. According to Garovel, they were quite the passionate couple--to the shock of basically everyone who knew Dimas. ""Passionate"" was one word that Hector did not think of when trying to describe that man.

Reportedly, most of the ""passion"" seemed to be originating from Madison's end, but the fact that Dimas never rebuffed her open displays of affection was still a bombshell in its own right to the other Rainlords.

Diego Redwater appeared to be taking this development especially hard, though Hector wasn't entirely sure why.

Hector kind of wanted to ask Dimas about the whole thing directly, but he didn't really have the time, and it seemed a bit rude, besides.

On the matter of treasure hunting, there had also been considerable progress. Three teams had been formed and deployed to different locations across the world. As the head Rainlords had discussed, they each consisted of servants with little or no renown, and three support teams had also been formed to help them, consisting entirely of non-servants who were multilingual and knowledgeable in both telecommunications and cartography.

Roman had been generous enough to provide transportation and false documentation for all of them, but they were still expected to operate stealthily whenever feasible.

Despite the whole thing being his and Garovel's idea, Hector had been rather nervous about sending them all out on their own like that, but after speaking with the chosen team members and getting to know them a little better, his concerns abated somewhat. They all understood their objectives and were taking their roles very seriously--as one might expect from Rainlords.

Thus far, none of the teams had reported back with especially good news, but with only the general location and artifact description to go on, it was expected that these missions would take quite a long time to find anything--assuming there even was anything left to be found.

Hector just hoped that Emiliana's intel was solid."

"2090



All of those developments, however, paled in comparison to what happened with the banking project during these three weeks. The final name of it was the Darksteel National Bank, and it was now officially open for business.

That first week of operation had been especially insane.

As the Madame Carthrace had predicted, new customers came pouring in. Much of it could be handled online, but they'd also leased an office building in downtown Gray Rock specifically for the purpose of receiving new customers. And every time Hector visited that place, it was absolutely packed with people, oftentimes with waiting lines that extended all the way out the door and around the corner of the building.

His appearances there always turned into a bit of a circus as well, since basically everyone in the country knew his face at this point. All the attention was certainly overwhelming and uncomfortable, but he found himself being less concerned about his own feelings and more so about all the people waiting in line. According to the news, many of them didn't even leave once the Bank closed. They simply camped out overnight, waiting for the doors to reopen.

They ended up renting another building a few blocks away to help alleviate the problem, but it still persisted--now in two locations instead of one. Amelia was now considering upgrading the second building from a rent to a lease. As Hector understood it, a lease here in Atreya required at least a three-year commitment, which was why she was reluctant to go through with it. This initial surge of customers was obviously not going to last for three years, and Amelia was doubtful that they would need two buildings in such close proximity to one another.

But then again, people were traveling to Gray Rock from all over Atreya just to open an account at the Darksteel National Bank, so maybe it would be worth it. Or maybe they needed to open a branch in another city.

It was all a bit too complicated for Hector's inexperienced mind, and he was glad to have the Madame Carthrace in his corner."

"2091

Overall, things were looking up, but funding for the Bank was still a concern. It would take time to process all of the new customers and begin earning revenue from them. Hector fully intended to reinvest everything back into the Bank itself in order to keep growing operations, but in the meantime, he wanted to do everything he could to secure more immediate funding as well.

Which was where the other Atreyan lords came in. Prior to the Bank's official opening, he had already completed all of the postponed Gala meetings, so now he was working on an entirely fresh batch of lordly meetings.

Some meetings, he pursued himself--at the recommendation of his newly-formed Board of Advisors, which currently included Amelia and everyone whom she had handpicked. Now that the Bank was officially operating and getting tons of free publicity on the news, their hope with this new round of meetings was to appeal to the other Atreyan lords as potential investors.

And it was still very early to be getting too optimistic, but the Board seemed to be in good spirits. The more reserve funding the Bank had at its disposal, the more new customers they could accept. As Hector understood it, according to state regulations, any new bank had to possess enough reserve funding to cover the potential loss of every single customer's assets--up to two hundred thousand troa each.

Therefore, taking on too many customers too quickly was tantamount to fraud--which would probably cause the Bank to collapse before it even got off the ground. These regulations would only begin to relax if the Bank continued to operate for several years with consistently proven ""solvency""--meaning, never failing to repay its debts or meet its other financial obligations.

That was part of the reason why they were having to put so many applicants on a waiting list. So every time Hector was able to secure new investment from a fellow lord, that waiting list could have a huge chunk removed from it."

"2092

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And besides all that, it was just good to have more domestic investors. The whole point of the Bank was to prevent foreign influence from taking over the nation, so any help that Hector could get from fellow Atreyans was a step closer to that goal.

For their part, though, the other lords often seemed a bit uncomfortable with the whole thing--in some cases, even when they agreed to invest millions of troa.

Hector couldn't be entirely certain what the source of their collective discomfort was, especially with how guarded many of them were in his presence, but he could imagine why they might be feeling a bit trapped by him.

With the current state of the economy and the very public commotion that the Bank was stirring up, there seemed to be a fast-growing cultural sentiment that helping Darksteel National Bank meant helping Atreya itself--and by logical extension, not helping Darksteel National Bank meant borderline treason. If the public found out about a lord's refusal to invest any troa at all, it wouldn't look good for them.

Hector felt kinda bad about that development. He hadn't intended to bully anyone into joining hands with him, but with the way some of these meetings went, it sometimes felt like that.

He didn't want to apologize unnecessarily, though. The purpose of the Bank really was to help Atreya, after all. It wasn't like he'd done anything wrong. And hopefully, all these lords would eventually be seeing huge returns on their investments.

On a more pleasant note, however, the Bank was also getting quite a few offers of investment on its own, without Hector having to go and meet with anyone personally. Business owners and lesser-known lords were apparently calling in every day, asking to get in on the action.

It was all just so very, very strange.

A few months ago, Hector would never have imagined that he might become a banker, of all things. And at the age of seventeen, too? What the hell kind of life was he living, exactly?"

"2093

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Hector had no idea what the future had in store for him, but in the back of his mind, he was immensely disturbed by the current level of comfort that he was enjoying. He was able to eat quite luxurious meals every day thanks to the passionate Rainlord chefs, and the supply team was able to get its hands on increasingly higher quality goods for everyone.

Technically, the job of managing supplies belonged to the castle's ""steward,"" which was the official title of Amelia Carthrace, but as she was often busy managing financial and legal matters with the Bank, the task of overseeing the supply team had largely fallen upon her recently-appointed secretary, a bespectacled Atreyan woman with dark hair and a face that fit in quite well with all these stern Rainlords around.

Her name was Mara Rogers, and while Hector hadn't interacted with her directly very much yet, he saw her around quite frequently. She only looked to be in her mid-twenties, but she didn't seem to be struggling much with her position, which he found impressive, considering she was basically managing the entirety of Warrenhold's day-to-day operations now.

So when a knock arrived at his door as he was preparing for bed after another long day, he couldn't be all that surprised when it turned out to be her.

""Lord?"" came Mara's voice from beyond the door. ""I know the hour is late, but might I have a few minutes of your time?""

Hector, already in his pajamas, looked at Garovel hovering there next to him.

'Well? Invite the lady in. I can't do it.'

Hector's expression flattened. Sometimes, he wondered why he bothered consulting the reaper at all. ""...Sure. Come in.""

She entered, still sharply dressed as usual and carrying a pen and clipboard. She remained near the open doorway. ""I wanted to speak to you on the matter of your chamberlain--or rather, your persistent lack thereof.""

"2094

Hector sat down on his bed. "It's not that I don't want a chamberlain," he said, "but it would be an unnecessary expense. I can take care of my own room. I'm not even here all that often, so it doesn't even get that messy to begin with."

"Your frugality is admirable, Lord, but a chamberlain would be able to provide you with many more services than just the cleaning of your bedchamber," said Mara.

That was news to Hector. It was true that he had only given the subject of castle staff a quick bit of research. "...Like what?" he decided to ask.

"A competent chamberlain could run your entire household for you," she said.

Hector cocked an eyebrow.

"I do not mean all of Warrenhold," she clarified. "I mean only you and your immediate family."

"...That's just me and my mother, then," said Hector. "I still don't really think it would be worth the expense, right now. Maybe in the future, when money is less of a concern."

"Begging your pardon, Lord, but in the future, you may have a wife and children to factor into the equation as well."

Hector did his best to not be taken aback by that statement, but it was hard. He didn't want to appear flustered in front of a staff member, but at the same time, what she'd just said struck him as so utterly inconceivable that he was struggling not to let it show on his face.

"And in such a case," Mara went on, "it would be ideal if your own chamberlain were already a long-serving and well-trusted person. They could have a significant impact on the lives of your children. And of course, if your wife happens to be a woman of means, then she may have personal retainers of her own who would be moving in and tending to your family as well. You might be a bit overwhelmed by them all, if you do not have any of your own. And forgive me if I am overstepping here, but I believe that such an imbalance between you and your wife could invite problems into your relationship that might otherwise have been avoided."

Hector just kind of sat there, blinking."  
"2095

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Mara shifted some papers on her clipboard. "'I have some candidates in mind who I think would be a good fit for the position. And not to worry, I have only considered lowborn individuals. Anyone with ties to the aristocracy would be riskier regarding information leaks, which I know you are quite concerned about. And regarding money, I believe--'"

"'Ms. Rogers,'" said Hector. "'I... appreciate your diligence, but I have no plans to get married.'"

"'I was not under the impression that you did, Lord, but it is still good to be mindful of the future.'"

He had to admire her determination. "'...You really want me to hire a chamberlain that badly, huh?'"

Mara adjusted her glasses. "'I do, Lord.'"

Hector took a deliberate breath. "'Will doing so make your job easier?'"

"'Ah--'" She hesitated for the first time that Hector had seen.

"'Perhaps, yes, but I assure you, that was not my--'"

"'Fine. Show me your candidates.'"

For a moment, she just stood there, staring at him.

Hector glanced at Garovel, who had been chuckling beneath their conversation the whole time.

It took a while, but they went through the résumés of Mara's candidates and eventually chose three to interview. As they were wrapping up, Garovel decided to chime in.

'I like this woman,' he said. 'You should give her a promotion.'

Hector paused, for two reasons--the first being because he wasn't sure

if Garovel was serious, and the second being because he'd actually been considering doing that himself. 'Do you really think so? Or are you just saying that?'

'When have I ever said something just to say it?'

'Only in every conversation we've ever had.'

'Promote her, dammit.'

Hector was watching her excuse herself and turn for the door. 'Are you sure? Because I will.'

'I bet you won't, you wimp.'

Hector gave the reaper a scrunched up expression, though accompanied by a smile. 'I'll do it right now.'

'Oho. Go on, then.'"

"2096

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""Ms. Rogers,"" said Hector aloud.

She stopped in front of the door and looked at him again.

""...Seeing as the Madame Carthrace has essentially handed off all of her duties as the Stewardess of Warrenhold to you,"" he said, ""I would like to officially grant the position to you.""

Mara stared. ""I... sir, I'm not...""

Hector waited for her.

Still, she was faltering. ""I don't know what to say, Lord...""

""So... you want the job, then?"" said Hector.

She held her clipboard close to her chest and nodded fervently.

That made Hector smile. ""Good. I'll tell Madame Carthrace in the morning.""

""Ah... you have not already discussed this decision with her, sir?""

""No,"" said Hector flatly.

""I see..."

""Why? Think she'll be upset?""

""Well, you are giving her job and title to someone else without consulting her first, sir..."

Hector gave an admmissive nod. ""True. But she already has another job and title to spare, so I'm pretty sure she'll understand."" He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. ""But if you're that worried about it, you could always just turn my offer down.""

""No, sir. I will gladly take it."" And there was a pause. ""It does come with a pay increase, doesn't it?""

""Yeah.""

""In that case, I am suddenly also certain that she will understand,"" said Mara.

That made Hector laugh a little, but his eyes remained shut, and he didn't move.

""I suppose I will let you rest, Lord. And thank you.""

""Keep up the good work, Ms. Rogers.""

""Yes, Lord.""

And with that, he heard her leave and close the door behind her.

Hector wedged himself beneath his bed sheets and was already half-asleep when Garovel decided to continue the conversation.

'Well, aren't you Mr. Cool?' the reaper said.

Hector rolled over. 'I don't know what that means, and I'm too tired to figure it out.'

'You're really taking to this whole ""Lord of Warrenhold"" thing.'

'Mm...'

'It's good. Weird, but good.'

"2097



The reaper let him go to sleep soon after that.

The next day was rather special, because Warrenhold would be hosting royalty. King William was visiting, unfortunately without the Queen, as she was still too busy and also believed that her attendance would turn the whole affair into a media circus.

So instead, Lynnette and Mehlsanz accompanied the King. The man's several other attendants were only allowed as far as the castle's main gate.

This would technically be Lynnette's second visit--the first being when she'd asked him at the Queen's behest to accompany her and Prince Meriwether to Sair all those months ago.

There was considerably more to see now, however, and her surprise was apparent even while they were still aboveground. The surface buildings of Warrenhold had been receiving a moderate degree of reconstruction as well, and now they all at least had four walls, a roof, electricity, and running water. They were nowhere near as impressive as the eight towers underground, though, and probably never would be, so when they started descending through the Entry Tower, the heightened amazement on all of his guests' faces put Hector in quite a good mood.

They of course made sure to provide everyone with an explanation of Warrenhold's anti-pest mechanism and its corresponding psychological effects. Ms. Rogers proved very helpful in that regard, since Hector still had a bit of trouble talking to Lynnette.

He wanted to get past that problem of his and soon, but it just wasn't that easy, apparently. Every rational thought in his brain was telling him that he didn't need to be afraid of talking to Lynn, that he'd already spoken normally to her before, that he'd been through way more difficult conversations with way more difficult people. Logically, it made no sense why he should still be struggling with her.

And yet he was, goddammit."

"2098

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Regardless, it was nice to show the three of them around. It was bit weird to see Mehlsanz traveling with two people who couldn't even see her, but the reaper didn't seem terribly upset about it.

'We have a fix for that, though,' Garovel told her. 'In part, at least.'

'A fix for what?' said Mehlsanz.

Garovel's skeletal grin seemed to widen. 'Hector, let's go talk to Roman.'

Roman and Gina had their own rooms in the Tower of Night, just below the master bedroom. They'd been coming and going from Warrenhold as they pleased, but lately, they'd been spending more time here than not. Roman had become fast friends with several prominent Rainlords, especially Diego Redwater.

Somehow, Hector wasn't surprised by that friendship.

Gina, by comparison, was more reserved around the Rainlords, Hector noticed. As soon as it became clear that she and Roman would be spending considerable time here, it had become her priority to ensure that Warrenhold had internet access--which was no small feat, since Warrenhold didn't have cable lines that she could create ethernet ports out of.

Hector wasn't too clear on the details of what she was working on, but apparently, she wanted to install some kind of super-extra high-speed fiber-thing. It sounded pretty difficult and expensive, but Hector decided to just leave it to her and the handful of like-minded young Rainlords she'd teamed up with.

Roman, Gina, Lynnette, and the King were all quite pleased to see each other again. For Hector, it felt like a lifetime ago that they had all been together in that underground bunker full of cars.

It was nice to see them all smiling and enjoying themselves.

Gina retrieved a box from beneath her corner desk and set it down in front of Lynnette. ""Here,"" she said. ""Take one. We've been collecting them.""

Lynn pulled out a pair of Hun'Kui-made goggles, obviously not sure

what she was looking at."  
"2099

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Gina took a pair for herself as well and donned it immediately. Her gaze fell instantly upon Mehlsanz. ""Unfortunately, this doesn't let us talk to them, but at least we're able to confirm with our own eyes that Hector and Roman here haven't been lying to us all this time.""

Lynnette's lone eye widened briefly, and then she put her goggles on, too. ""Oh my goodness...!"" A curt laugh escaped her lips as she stared at Garovel.

Garovel gave her a small wave.

""You didn't tell me they would be so horrifying-looking,"" said Lynn, ""but I guess they are reapers, so...""

""Oh,"" said Hector. ""Ah. What do they look like for you?""

""Umm... wait. What do you mean 'for you'?""

""They don't always look the same for everyone,"" said Roman.

""Oh..."" Lynnette still seemed a bit awestruck, and she turned to find both Mehlsanz and Voreese present as well. ""Well, I see skeletons in armor. With flaming skulls and long... dripping tongues.""

Voreese cackled inaudibly. 'That sounds pretty fuckin' gnarly!'

For a while, the conversation remained there as they all traded descriptions of what they saw. Gina saw reapers as hooded swordsmen, and the King saw them as spectral ghouls with glowing, bulbous eyes--and even Mara joined in as well, at Roman and Hector's insistence. She also saw reapers as skeletons, though hers were covered in blood and strips of rotting flesh.

Mara did not wish to put the goggles on again.

""Where did you get these things?"" said Lynnette.

""The Undercrust,"" said Roman.

When that did not answer the woman's question satisfactorily, everyone seemed to realize at once that this was going to turn into a long conversation. They decided to get breakfast together before going into it.

Even though she'd heard about it back at the Gala, Lynnette still looked mildly confused by the notion that there existed an entire civilization beneath the planet's surface, and she used this opportunity to ask more questions. The King also looked surprised, though perhaps less than Hector expected, which made him curious.

""...Did you already have some knowledge of the Undercrust, Your Highness?"" he asked.

""I wouldn't go so far as to call it knowledge,"" said the King, ""but I have read of such things in mythic tales.""

"2100

""I see,"" said Hector. There was something else he wanted to ask the King about, but not with everyone around like this.

""Truth be told,"" said Gina, ""we're still not entirely sure how these goggles work--or how they're made. We know that they're infused with ardor, but the process by which we might accomplish that feat for ourselves is still mysterious to us.""

""And even if it wasn't mysterious to us,"" said Roman, ""there could be more to it than just the infusion process. The Hun'Kui are a pretty interesting bunch. I've made a few solo trips back down to the Undercrust, trying to get to know them and their culture better. In theory, it seems like ardor-infused earbuds or headphones should allow you to hear a reaper's voice, but so far, I haven't been able to find anything like that. I'm also not yet sure why these goggles have become so widely used among the Hun'Kui.""

""What do you mean?"" said the King, still wearing his pair. ""Are they not being used for precisely this same purpose? To see reapers?""

""That's what I thought at first, too,"" said Roman, ""but the more time I spend down there, the less sense that makes to me. I haven't really seen that many reapers down there. They seem to be just as rare in the Undercrust as they are on the surface.""

Gina chuckled. ""You say they're rare, but we have three in this very room. And how many more are hanging around Warrenhold, right now?""

Roman put up his hands with a shrug. ""Yeah, okay, this castle is a bit of a reaper hot spot, but as far I've been told, there are less than a million reapers in the entire world. Maybe that seems like a lot, but it's really not, especially when compared to the billions of living people that they're supposedly watching over.""

'Shit,' said Voreese, 'you're making me feel guilty for not getting much reaping done, lately.'

"2101

That made Hector think. It was sometimes easy to forget how important reaping actually was. Alleviating the suffering of departed souls was a big responsibility, and it wasn't hard to understand why so many reapers chose to focus on that alone.

""But regardless of any of that,"" said Roman, ""I think the reason these goggles are so popular might just be because they're currently fashionable. I doubt they were developed purely for fashion, but it might be why they're so widespread among the Hun'Kui. Maybe I'll try to find an Undercrust reaper on my next trip and ask them what they think.""

Truthfully, Hector was actually a bit uncomfortable with Roman's recent solo trips to the Undercrust. He didn't want to doubt the man, but given everything that he'd personally experienced down there, it just seemed like such an incredibly dangerous thing to be doing.

But a useful thing, nonetheless.

Hector was certainly curious to learn more about the Undercrust, too, especially about its political climate. Thus far, Roman hadn't heard anything about anyone named Royo Raju or Malast making waves down there, but it wouldn't surprise Hector if that changed soon.

Their conversation continued for a while, and Roman gifted the goggles to Lynnette and King William. He made a point of warning them about how important these items were, about how problematic it

might be if they fell into the wrong hands.

And perhaps Roman warned them a little too well, because after hearing that, the King decided to politely decline the pair that had been offered to him. Lynnette, however, kept hers and expressed her gratitude.

Those goggles would be a huge boon for her, Hector knew. He certainly still remembered how potent she had been back when they were rescuing the King from Abolish's clutches. Her main weakness in that fight had been the fact that she couldn't see the enemy reapers, but that wouldn't be a problem now."

"2102

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The tour of Warrenhold continued and lasted much of the day, as the King wanted to meet all of the head Rainlords and talk to each of them for a while. Hector sat in on each one, mainly just observing and not saying much.

It seemed to go well, he thought. All of the Rainlords were appreciative of the asylum being granted to them, and the King was very welcoming and friendly.

His Majesty's primary interest seemed to be in Rainlords' plans moving forward. In every meeting, he asked about it. How long did they intend to stay in Atreya? Would any more of them be arriving? Where were the rest of their kin? What about their subjects in Sair? What were their intentions regarding Abolish? And the Sandlords taking over the Wetlands?

The King had a soft speaking voice, but he didn't pull his punches when it came to the subject matter of his questions. He could've just asked Hector all of these things, but he probably wanted to get his answers directly from the source.

Hector tried not to take it as a sign the King didn't trust his word. It was simply wise--not relying on only one person for all the answers to such an important subject.

That being said, though, the Rainlords didn't have that many proper answers for him to begin with. There was still so much uncertainty in

their future, and they all knew it, even if they were reluctant to say so like Dimas and Zeff. Mainly, they told the King about their current efforts to rebuild their power so that they could ""eventually"" go reclaim their kin from the Vanguard and retake their territory.

It was nearly evening already by the time the King finished meeting with everyone.

And it would be on this day that Hector did something that he had never done before--at least, not on this scale. Ever since being informed that the King intended to visit, Hector had been thinking about what this evening might be like. And he of course made sure to warn the kitchen staff several days in advance.

He invited everyone in the castle to come eat together with him, and he hosted his first proper banquet in Warrenhold."

"2103 -- CCX.

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Chapter Two Hundred Ten: 'O, engrossing revelry...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It wasn't nearly as luxurious as the Gala had been, but Hector didn't mind one bit. If anything, that level of opulence in his own home probably would've just made him uncomfortable. Good food and smiling faces--that was all Hector was looking for here.

And he got it.

Hector hadn't seen so many Rainlords laughing in one place since that visit to Luzo, just prior to the Siege of Marshrock. There had been quite a bit of merriment in their camp, thanks in large part to the Lord Salvador Delaguna. That giant man's boisterous laugh had been positively infectious.

Then the Blackburns had joined their entourage, and the tension between them and all the other Houses seemed to take precedence over everything else as they'd made their way to Dunehall. And then, of course, after being ambushed there and suffering so many horrible losses, the Rainlords as a whole had been in a seemingly constant state of grief, even while gritting their teeth and soldiering on.

So it was particularly good to hear Salvador laughing again. It wasn't as loud or as frequent as Hector remembered, but it was more than enough to help spread the cheer to the others in the banquet hall.

The Grand Hall of the Night, as it was apparently named according to Voreese, was the single largest chamber in the entirety of Warrenhold, and as its name suggested, it resided within the Tower of Night. It had become something of a ""common area"" for people to gather during lunch or dinner, but never had Hector seen it so packed like this.

Some people were eating outside in the main plaza or in one of the other tower's banquet halls, but Hector saw just about everyone present."

"2103 -- CCX.

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

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"2104

Rather weirdly, the King didn't want to sit in just one place while he ate, and he asked Hector to accompany him as they went around talking and eating with as many different people as possible. Lynnette moved to join as well, but the King told her to stay and relax with Roman and Gina. She seemed a bit reluctant to accept that order, but the man insisted, and she gave Hector a final lingering look before relenting.

Knowing how seriously she took her guard duty, that wasn't an insignificant gesture, Hector thought. She was trusting him to look after the King in her stead.

They'd been touring Warrenhold and meeting Rainlords the entire day, but the King had apparently not gotten his fill, because he went from table to table every few minutes. He would make introductions if he hadn't previously, then he would sit down and spark up a conversation, usually about history or medicine. Then he would politely excuse himself.

It was kind of amazing to witness, Hector felt. He'd always thought the King to be fairly charismatic, but seeing him now was something else. Granted, he hadn't really known King William all that well before, but still, Hector didn't recall him being this much of a conversationalist.

He decided to consult Garovel about it, privately. 'Was the King always like this?'

'Like what?' said the reaper, who was following close behind.

'Like, uh... er... actually, I'm not sure how to explain it...'

'Oh, do you mean how he seems to be channeling the God of Amicability, right now?'

Hector had to pause. 'God of Amicability?'

'I just made that up. It's not a real thing.'

'Oh... Well, shit, now I'm disappointed.'

The reaper chortled privately. 'Sorry.'

'But yeah, that IS what I was getting at,' said Hector. 'I never knew the King was so, uh... well, amicable is a good word, I guess.'

'Yeah,' said Garovel. 'He does seem a little different to me, too. In a good way, though.'

"2105

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'I'm glad he seems to be in such good spirits,' said Hector.

'I'm glad he's getting along so well with the Rainlords,' said Garovel.

'That, too.'

Hector listened to the King having a conversation with a member of House Garza, a young non-servant woman named Luciana Garza. They were talking about the history of her family.

Thanks to his daily routine of going around the castle and checking up on everything, Hector was finally getting to a point where he could remember all the Rainlords' names by their faces alone.

Luciana and her sister were the only two Garzas in all of Warrenhold, right now. Just like Diego Redwater, their House had been almost entirely captured at Rheinhal by one of the most powerful servants in the world, the Vanguardian Field Marshal Sanko.

And as Hector recalled, Luciana's sister was Elise, the non-servant woman who'd had the misfortune of ending up in Himmekel with him and the others. They weren't twins, but they looked incredibly similar to

one another, with Luciana being only a year older.

Their mother, however, had not been captured by the Vanguard. She had been killed by Parson Miles, as confirmed by Zeff Elroy and Evangelina Stroud.

And knowing everything he did about them, Hector was a bit curious about their House's history as well.

Apparently, their hometown was a small place called Entierr. Their family wasn't nearly as large as some of the others, but they had played a famously important role during the Redwater Uprising. They were some of the best scouts and intelligence-gatherers on the continent, and without them, the Rainlords as a whole might very well have perished completely instead of just being pushed to the brink of extinction.

""In fact,"" King William was saying, ""I remember reading that House Garza's actions single-handedly saved the Rainlord bloodline.""

""Whoa, whoa, whoa,"" laughed Carlos Sebolt, who was sitting adjacent Luciana. ""That's taking it a bit far, I think.""

""I don't know,"" said Luciana, who was all smiles. ""I think there might be something to that.""

""Yeah, sounds pretty accurate to me,"" added Elise."  
"2106

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""I remember reading an especially remarkable tale about a man named Benjamin Garza,"" said the King. ""Perhaps all of you here can speak to the veracity of it.""

""It's true,"" said Luciana.

The King laughed. ""You have not even heard the story yet.""

""Oh, but I have,"" she said. ""You're referring to the Tale of Nine Revivals, no?""

""How did you know?"" said the King.

""Every child of House Garza knows this story by heart,"" said Elise.

""We all know the heroism of our great, great grandfather.""

""I see,"" said the King. ""That is heartening to hear.""

""Please, do go on and tell it,"" said Luciana. ""We would be happy to check your version for errors.""

The King laughed again. ""Very well. I believe it begins rather harrowingly, yes? At the fortress known as Waterbreak, near the end of the Uprising?""

Both women nodded.

""All hope seemed to be lost,"" the King continued. ""The gates were broken down. The defenders were being overrun as the forces of the Mohssian Empire flooded into the castle. The famous Redwater Twins had perished months before, and by all accounts, this here was the last bastion of the Rainlords. The Empire sought their extinction.""

""Right so far,"" said Elise.

Given the heaviness of the subject matter, Hector would've expected the looks on everyone's faces to be a bit more somber, but it didn't seem to be fazing them at all.

""Benjamin Garza managed to escape from that madness through a secret underground passage,"" said the King. ""And with him, he brought thirteen children. Between them all, nine different Houses were represented. They were, each of them, the very last of their kin, and Benjamin went on to raise them all as his own. He became, in essence, the lone conduit through which the entirety of the Rainlords' legacy was preserved and passed on to the new generation.""

"2107

""Yeah, that sounds pretty accurate,"" said Luciana.

""You forgot the part where Benjamin slays a dozen enemy servants while carrying the children to safety,"" said Elise.

""That definitely didn't happen,"" said Carlos.

""It definitely did,"" said Elise.

""How could he possibly have carried thirteen children at once?"" said Carlos, still laughing.

""Easily,"" said Elise, glancing toward Hector. ""A powerful enough materializer wouldn't even need to use his hands for something like that.""

""Yeah, but as far as we know, he wasn't a materializer,"" said Carlos.

""Then, whatever, maybe he didn't physically carry them,"" said Luciana. ""Maybe he just cleared a path while they all ran together. Doesn't stop it from being any less amazing.""

""I'm not trying to say it wasn't amazing,"" said Carlos. ""Just a bit exaggerated, perhaps. It's also quite unlikely those thirteen children were genuinely the last of all our brethren. We have reason to believe that there were a few of us scattered elsewhere across the continent at that time.""

Luciana bumped shoulders with him. ""Oh, shut up, Carlos,"" she laughed.

""Yes, stop trying to spoil such a wonderful story,"" added Elise.

Carlos just shook his head and popped a couple grapes in his mouth.

""I see,"" said King William. ""So the veracity is somewhat contested, then.""

""Don't listen to him!"" said Luciana. ""If anything, I bet the story is underselling what really happened!""

The argument continued on for a little while longer, though everyone involved remained in good cheer. Soon, Hector and the King moved on to another table, then another, followed by still more after that.

Growing up, Hector had never really understood why so many people seemed to enjoy going to parties. To him, they were always horrible, nerve-wracking affairs where the only thing he wanted to do was not draw attention to himself. Even the Gala, despite how much he'd managed to enjoy it, had ultimately felt that way for him.

But this?

This was just pure fun."

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Among so many of his friends and comrades like this, Hector didn't really feel nervous at all. Sure, he was getting a lot of attention, but that was pretty normal at this point, and he knew that the Rainlords weren't looking to silently judge him or anything. There wasn't an oppressive feeling that he had to prove himself in their eyes.

They were just happy to see him. And he, them.

And the longer the banquet went on, the more he realized this.

Warrenhold truly felt like a home to him now, more so than any other place he had ever lived.

After a while longer of enjoying the festivities, the King finally began to slow down a little. He grabbed a drink for himself at the bar, and he and Hector made their way out into the main plaza together for some only-slightly-fresher air.

The King wasn't the only one slowing down, however. The crowd was thinning, and Hector could see a few people dragging themselves or each other up to their rooms.

Until just the other day, there hadn't been any alcohol in Warrenhold at all. Hector just hadn't considered it a priority, and neither had Ms. Rogers, apparently. He'd heard a few complaints about it here and there, but he hadn't intended to bother doing anything about it until hearing that the King would be visiting. So Hector had finally asked Ms. Rogers to have some hard drinks shipped in for the banquet.

Heh. And now that he was witnessing the results of that decision, he wondered if the alcohol was the real reason for everyone's good cheer this evening.

He hoped that was only part of it and not the primary cause.

Hector and the King were pretty much alone now. The few others that dotted the plaza were either unconscious or barely so, and even Garovel had wandered off a while ago.

The King offered him his glass of gin. ""Want a sip? I promise not to tell anyone.""

Hector held up a hand in refusal. ""I don't really like alcohol.""

That caught the man's attention. ""You've had it before?""  
"2109

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Hector wondered briefly if he should actually admit this, but he supposed there was no harm in it now. ""Yeah.""

""Ah,"" the King said. ""The prospect never occurred to me before, but could it be that you are one of those servants who is far older than he appears?""

Hector lost a bit of his mirth at that question. It reminded him of far too many other occasions where there had been much less enjoyment to go around. He considered his next words for a moment, contemplating if he should actually lie to the King of Atraya.

He didn't have the heart for it, he realized.

Instead, he explained about the sensitive nature of a servant's age.

""Are you saying that you cannot tell me your true age, then?"" the King asked.

""Ah... something like that,"" said Hector.

""How disappointing.""

""Sorry.""

""Are you sure you are not just making excuses for your past underage drinking?""

Hector squeezed his lips together and exhaled through his nose.

""Depends on if you plan to punish me for it.""

""Oh, I certainly plan that, yes. Your punishment shall be to tell me of this sordid event in excruciating detail. As your king, I command it.""

Hector scratched his head. ""Uh... okay, well... I don't know about 'excruciating detail,' since there's not really that much to tell, but...

basically, I was with a few friends who I've since lost contact with... and, uh... I drank so much that I puked.""

""Ah. And you lost all affection for alcohol due to that one experience? Not that I wish to encourage your misconduct, but that seems a hasty conclusion to reach.""

""When I puked, it made one of my friends puke, too. But his puke landed on me.""

That made the King pause and stare at him.

""It was just, like, being hosed down with barf. Got all over me."" Hector's expression twisted as he recalled that horror from his middle school days. ""It went in my mouth.""

""In that case... I retract my previous statement,"" said the King. ""That is the worst thing I have heard in some time.""

"2110

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Hector couldn't help chuckling a little. ""It was a long time ago. But yeah, I still don't really care for alcohol.""

The King just took another swig of his gin, and the two of them approached the cavernous outlook at the end of the plaza.

The lake below was still largely the same, apart from a few sections near the stone stairs on Hector's left. Four large areas had been segmented off from the lake with giant walls of iron. No water remained in them, and the previously sunken buildings therein were now almost usable. They hadn't yet bothered to move any furniture or equipment into them, but they soon planned to. Once more of the sections of the lake were drained and more walls put up, the risk of a leak would be basically nonexistent.

They'd decided that draining sections of the lake was a better idea than draining the whole thing. A couple of the planners wanted to keep part of the lake intact.

As the silence drew out, Hector remembered that there was something that the King might be able to help him with.



""Your Highness, do you know anything about House Gaolanet?"" said Hector.

As he was bringing his glass up for another sip, the King's hand stopped. ""Your fellow Lords of Gray Rock.""

""Yeah. I haven't been able to find out much about them, other than a few names.""

""Yes. They are notoriously reclusive.""

Hector decided to just come out and say it. ""I have reason to believe that they've had knowledge of reapers and servants for several years, at least.""

King William was quiet a moment. ""That... would not surprise me, now that you mention it.""

""Why do you say that?""

""House Gaolanet has long had ties to the Agency of Foreign Affairs,"" said the King. ""However, I believe in recent years their role was relegated to little more than consultation.""

"2111

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""The Agency of Foreign Affairs?"" said Hector, trying to place the name. ""I don't think I've heard of that before.""

""Its role in the government is, on paper, to advise the Crown on matters of foreign policy,"" said the King. ""In practice, however, it has been more akin to a headquarters for espionage. And most importantly, the AFA played a large part in the assassination plot against the Queen. Behind the scenes, of course.""

Hector's eyes widened as he listened.

""I imagine that Helen, Prince David, or my Aunt Jezebel would be able to provide you with the details better than I, but my understanding of it is that the AFA has since been completely reworked and is no longer a threat to the Crown.""

""Uh. Well, that's good to hear, I guess.""

""But as I said, House Gaolanet's role in the AFA is a shadow of what it once was. They once held tremendous influence within it, but I think that may have also been before the AFA developed into such an espionage-heavy organization.""

Hector was still trying to wrap his head around all this new information. ""So... all the spy stuff came after the Gaolanets left?""

The King bobbed his head. ""That may be oversimplifying how it all transpired, but yes, I believe that speaks to the core of what happened.""

""Hmm.""

""Nine or ten years ago now--perhaps you will recall--there was an international incident between Atreya and Rendon. At the time, we had another government agency called His Majesty's Royal Intelligence Bureau, or the RIB. It was caught red-handed bribing a Rendon ambassador, and so Rendon demanded His Majesty the King--Helen's father--shut down the RIB or risk war.""

That story didn't ring a bell at all, but Hector supposed that wasn't so surprising, considering he would've been about seven years old.  
"2112

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""Helen's father capitulated to Rendon,"" said the King, ""though not without considerable negotiation and concessions on Rendon's part. However, the RIB was not truly destroyed. It was merely folded up into the AFA in secret.""

""...That doesn't sound very legal,"" said Hector.

""Oh, no, it was perfectly legal. The King had full authority to do it and broke no laws. But yes, it was morally questionable without a doubt. And in retrospect? It was most likely an enormous mistake.""

""Because of the coup against your wife years later,"" Hector surmised.

""Yes, that was the main issue I was thinking of. But there was also the matter of the AFA itself. While its operations were greatly expanded by its absorption of the RIB, its original purpose also seemed to become

lost in the shuffle.""

""Original purpose?""

""To help the Crown in matters of foreign policy. To provide wise and knowledgeable counsel.""

""Hmm.""

""The AFA became embroiled in so many secretive things that I believe there was no longer any one person who knew everything that it was doing--no one person who could advise the Crown, in other words.""

All this information was making Hector curious about something else.  
""You sure seem to know a lot about this, Your Highness.""

The man smirked. ""Is that so surprising?""

""N-no, I just mean, uh. Er.""

""Heh. I am only, how you say, joshing you.""

Hector just pressed his lips together flatly.

""I am fully aware of my reputation,"" the King said. ""The man who stands by Helen's side and contributes nothing of value. A worthless king.""

""Whoa, whoa, I never said any of that. And I never thought it, either. What do you--?""

William held up his one hand. ""That is kind of you to say, but there was, and likely still is, a disconcerting amount of truth in that perception of me. Which is why I have been attempting to improve myself in these past months. To familiarize myself with the true workings of this nation and its history.""

Hector didn't know what to say."  
"2113

((The For-No-Reason-In-Particular Holiday Special -- page 4 of 8))  
""As for House Gaolanet,"" the King went on, ""they are a rather mysterious bunch. The head of their family is Hanton Gaolanet.""

Hector had already been able to find out that much just from browsing public records. He knew where the Gaolanet estate was located as well, and he was wondering if he should pay it a visit sometime soon.

""I have met him many times over the years,"" said William, ""and yet, to say that I know much about him would be a gross exaggeration. He possesses a nobleman's manners, to be sure, but he does not speak often or carelessly. Or at least, that has been my experience with him. In fairness, I understand that royals are perhaps not the type of people whom most would wish to pour their hearts out to. I am certainly accustomed to dealing with individuals who wear 'masks,' so to speak.""

Hector considered the King's words for a moment. ""Was Hanton at the Gala a few weeks ago?""

""He was, though I am not surprised that you didn't notice. He is not a man to make a spectacle of himself, and he seems to only make the bare minimum of public appearances, and the rest of his family is not much different.""

""So then if I dropped in on them unannounced, they wouldn't be very happy with me.""

The King gave him a briefly wide-eyed look. ""At their home? Yes, I imagine they would be incredibly displeased by that. Most nobles would, Hector. I would not recommend such an action.""

""It was just a thought. I wasn't actually planning on it.""

William chortled. ""I know you must still be acclimating yourself to your newfound status, but if you wish for a meeting with the Gaolanets, I am sure you could simply have your people contact them and schedule one. I highly doubt the Gaolanets would refuse to talk to a national hero and fellow lord.""

""Er, I-I know,"" said Hector. ""I just. Uh. I wanna be careful, y'know?""

""Dropping in on them unannounced is being careful?""

""That was just a thought, I said!""

""Right.""

((The For-No-Reason-In-Particular Holiday Special -- page 5 of 8))  
Hector was reluctant to say more about his suspicions regarding the Gaolanets. He didn't want to go throwing accusations around, but he also felt like the King should be made aware of what else he and Garovel had learned.

But then again, maybe it would be better to wait until he had more to reveal.

Agh.

He decided to go for it.

""There's something else,"" said Hector. ""I should, uh... I should make it clear that I don't currently have any proof of this, but... I suspect that House Gaolanet has been somehow involved in multiple murders via poisoning.""

The King's brow rose. ""That is a serious accusation.""

""I don't know if they're the ones doing the poisoning,"" he clarified. ""They could just be caught up in the middle of something. But I do have evidence that the Vanguard was also involved.""

""The Vanguard? Involved in what way?""

Hector explained about the secret room that he and Garovel had found with Vanguardian documentation. He also explained that it had been long abandoned and that the name Pauline Gaolanet had been found at the scene.

The King shut his eyes and held his forehead. ""Pauline... Pauline... Pauline Gaolanet... Where have I heard that before...?""

The man really seemed to be concentrating, so even though it was taking a little while, Hector just waited patiently.

""Ah!"" The King's eyes shot open, and he snapped his fingers. ""Yes! I met her once. Years and years ago. Before I even met Helen. It was a marriage interview, as I recall.""

Hector just blinked at that news.

""Very peculiar girl,"" said William. ""I remember her piercing silver

eyes, like she was attempting to look into my soul. Or she was on drugs. Honestly not sure."

Hector's expression scrunched up, but he also couldn't help laughing a little. ""Your Highness, uh..."

""What? It was true. She kept trying to predict what my next words would be. And she got very upset with me when I told her she was wrong.""

"2115

((The For-No-Reason-In-Particular Holiday Special -- page 6 of 8))

""That, er... sounds like an interesting encounter,"" said Hector.

""Indeed,"" said the King. ""She made quite an impression on me. I'm surprised it took me this long to remember her.""

""How old were the two of you at the time?""

""Hmm. I believe I was twelve or thirteen, and she looked to be a year or two younger than me.""

Hector couldn't conceal his shock. ""Twelve?! For a marriage interview?!""

For a moment, the King just looked at him. ""Yes. The families often like to get a head start on such things. To be clear, however, I should mention that even if that meeting and everything thereafter had gone perfectly smoothly between Pauline and I, we would not have gotten married until the younger of us was eighteen. At the very earliest.""

Hector settled down a little. ""Oh... hmm.""

The King lowered his voice. ""...You are not very old as a servant at all, are you?""

Aw, shit.

Maybe he could still play it off as just being unfamiliar with royal customs?

Agh...

Hector elected not to say anything at all.

After a time, the King patted him on the shoulder. ""You may not believe me, but I find that comforting, strangely enough.""

Still, Hector didn't say anything. He merely eyed the man curiously.

""Though she may be almost three hundred years old now, I feel that Atreya is still quite a young nation at heart. Unlike certain others, she has not often been forced to fight to preserve her culture. Even during the Continental War, she was able to remain neutral. It is fitting that her national hero should be similarly young.""

The man had been right: Hector didn't believe him. He decided to keep holding his tongue, though.

The King had more to say, though. ""It seems that good fortune is finally being tested, however. I fear Atreya has entered an era of great difficulty.""

"2116

((The For-No-Reason-In-Particular Holiday Special -- page 7 of 8))  
Hector could certainly understand where the King was coming from, but that viewpoint also reminded Hector of something else. ""...Do you really think it was just 'good fortune' that kept Atreya peaceful all this time?""

""What do you mean?"" said the King.

""I think the Vanguard was watching over Atreya until relatively recently,"" said Hector.

The King held his hand up to his chin, thoughtful. ""I suppose that might make sense,"" he said. ""But if that was truly the case, then why did they stop watching over us?""

""That's what I'd like to know,"" said Hector.

""...And you think the Gaolanets might hold the answer,"" the King surmised.

""Yeah.""

Approaching footsteps drew both of their attention, and then Hector saw Lynnette there.

""Everything okay?"" she said. ""The two of you have been out here for a while now.""

""We are just fine, Ms. Edith. We were simply lost in conversation."" He gave Hector a smile. ""It seems I've found the Lord Goffe's company even more enjoyable than I expected.""

""Ah--uh, same here, Your Highness.""

""Well, alright,"" said Lynnette, ""I'm glad you've been having a good time, but it's getting a bit late, Your Highness. And you have several meetings in Sescoria tomorrow, don't you?""

The King's expression soured significantly. ""Hmm...""

Hector and Lynnette exchanged looks.

""No,"" said the King. ""I don't think I do have any meetings tomorrow.""

Lynnette seemed taken aback. ""Uh... I'm quite sure you do, Your Highness..."

""No. I'm canceling them. I think I will be staying here at Warrenhold for another day or two."" He looked to Hector again. ""That is, if it is alright with you.""

It took Hector a second to find his words. ""Oh. Um. Yeah. Of course. You're welcome to stay as long as you like, Your Highness.""

""Wonderful!""

Mouth hanging open, Lynnette was apparently speechless."  
"2117 -- CCXI.

((The For-No-Reason-In-Particular Holiday Special -- page 8 of 8))  
Chapter Two Hundred Eleven: 'A grounded blade...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

There was no arguing with the King, it seemed. The man had made up



his mind, and after receiving permission from the Queen, Lynnette Edith ended up staying at Warrenhold as well. The King's personal attendants seemed a bit upset by the sudden change in plans, but their displeasure quickly vanished once they realized that they would be receiving the next three days off, along with free lodging at The Blue Star--one of the most prestigious hotels in the nation.

As for herself, Lynnette didn't particularly mind staying. It was unexpected, sure, and she'd been planning to spend most of the weekend with her family, but after one phone call, they were very understanding.

Just another perk of having such a royalist family. When the King or Queen made a request, all was forgiven.

But boy, this place was quite a bit crazier than she'd expected. And these Rainlords... she found herself increasingly fascinated by them.

In recent months, she'd gotten accustomed to strangers acting warily or uncomfortably around her, thanks to the unremovable half-gauntlet on her left arm, but these people weren't afraid of her at all. If anything, they seemed more intrigued by the gauntlet.

She wondered if she had Hector to thank for their behavior. Had he told them all about her situation beforehand? Or were the Rainlords just like this all the time?

It was almost a problem, actually. Many of them were so interested in talking to her that it became difficult to stick by King William's side. It bothered her at first, but the King kept telling her to relax.

So she did. Or tried to, at least.

Thankfully, she could always find him and Hector together. The King had not been exaggerating when he said that he enjoyed Hector's company, apparently."

"2117 -- CCXI.

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"2118

His Highness had been different, of late. Where before, the man had acted so reserved and hardly even visible in comparison to the Queen, now he was full of life and enthusiasm in virtually everything he did.

And he seemed increasingly given to making spur-of-the-moment decisions, as well.

Lynnette had started noticing this behavioral shift a while ago, but here at Warrenhold, it was more obvious than ever. This whole trip still struck her as a bit strange, honestly.

It wasn't her place to question these things aloud, of course, but given the turbulent times currently facing the nation, she felt that she should be on the lookout for any and all possible warning signs. That was why, at first, she'd had the dreadful thought that perhaps King William had decided to stay at Warrenhold a bit longer because he wanted more time away from the Queen.

Thankfully, however, that worry was promptly obliterated when she noticed the King talking to the Queen over the phone for over two hours straight before finally going to sleep. She'd only intended to check on him, not eavesdrop from the other side of his door, but that was exactly what she'd ended up doing.

And now she was confident. They definitely were not having marital problems.

Never in her life had Lynnette ever gone so quickly from feeling relieved to annoyed. It had been like listening to an adolescent couple talking over the phone for the very first time.

It did get her thinking, though. If the King wasn't trying to get away from his wife, then what exactly was the point of spending so much time here? Obviously, he was enjoying himself, but was that really all it was?

She considered just asking him directly, but for some reason, she found that difficult. She had a pretty good rapport with the Queen, but she'd never really found the opportunity to build anything similar with the King. It felt somehow improper to question His Highness like that, especially with so many people around.

At length, however, on their third day at Warrenhold, she finally came up with a workaround to that problem.

She could just ask Hector."

"2119

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

With as much as he'd been talking to the King in the past two days, Hector probably knew him better than she did now.

...Wait, really?

Yikes.

Was that a testament to just how much Hector had been talking to the King? Or a testament to how much she hadn't been?

Probably both.

Regardless, it bothered her.

When everyone was having breakfast together, Lynnette saw her opportunity. While the King was engrossed in a conversation with a giant Rainlord, she grabbed Hector by the arm and pulled him aside.

""I need to ask you something,"" she whispered. ""Has His Highness told you anything about why he decided to extend his stay here?""

Hector's eyes looked like they were trying to escape from his head.

Lynnette was just confused. ""What's wrong?""

Hector didn't say anything. His gaze went to her hands, which were still holding his arm.

She took the hint and decided to remove them. ""Ah... Sorry, do you not like to be touched?""

Still, he remained silent, though at least the expression on his face had returned to normal.

She honestly had no idea what he was thinking at all, anymore. Had his poker face evolved since he'd been out of the country? Granted, she'd never really been the best at reading people's emotions, but she at least recalled being able to tell when he was uncomfortable before.

""Hector?"" she prodded. ""Did you hear what I asked?""

""...The King,"" said Hector.

And that was it, apparently.

""Yes,"" she said slowly, nodding her head. ""Did you hear the rest of what I asked you?""

Hector just looked at her a moment. Then he shook his head.

Lynnette took a deep breath. ""His Highness. Did he tell you why he decided to extend his stay here? At Warrenhold?""

There arrived more silence as Hector stared at her blankly again.

She was trying to be patient and not succeeding. ""Hector...""  
"2120

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

""...Supporting the Queen,"" said Hector.

Well, that was something at least, but Lynnette was still confused.  
""What?""

""...Staying here. He's supporting the Queen. Is what he told me.""

""Okaaay... but how does that work, exactly? How is him staying here supporting Her Highness?""

Again, Hector was silent.

Lynnette just waited this time. She felt like he was probably trying to tell her. He would manage to do it, eventually.

Hopefully.

""...The King said... that he has more freedom than the Queen, right now. Because she's so, er, busy. Everyone's watching her every move. Trying to, uh, read her intentions. Politically.""

As she considered what she'd just been told, Lynnette turned back to the sight of King William sitting there, smiling and laughing in the middle of a bunch of Rainlords.

She felt like she understood. It was true that the media's interest in King William was significantly less than that of the Queen. It wasn't nonexistent, of course, but comparatively speaking, he definitely had

more flexibility. With only a little bit of cloak and dagger, they'd managed to make it all the way here to Warrenhold without alerting any reporters.

But Lynnette had to wonder if Hector didn't have something to do with that, too. His relationship with the media was probably just as volatile as the Queen's, if not even more so--especially with that new bank of his attracting so much attention.

Unlike the Queen, however, the Lord Darksteel of Warrenhold never gave interviews.

And Lynnette could practically taste the saltiness of the media over that fact.

As much as they loved him, they also seemed to resent him. Lynnette remembered a few months ago--before she and Hector had gone off to Sair with Prince Meriwether--the reporters had been crawling all over this place. But now, they were all gone. They'd all given up by now."

"2121

Of course, that had also made things easier for the King. It would've been quite obnoxious if they'd had to go through an army of cameras and microphones at Warrenhold's front gate.

"So the King is hoping to build a strong relationship with the Rainlords for the Queen's sake," said Lynnette.

"...Probably," said Hector. "But... I think he also just really likes spending time with them."

"Yeah, that's pretty clear. They're a wealth of historical knowledge, which is obviously relevant to his interests."

Hector just nodded and said nothing more.

Lynnette was not surprised by this.

By the look of it, however, the King was still quite deep into a conversation with the giant Rainlord. They didn't seem like they would be wrapping up anytime soon.

Which left her and Hector just standing there together. Observing. In

silence.

Should she try to come up with another topic of conversation? It certainly didn't seem like Hector was going to.

Agh, and why the hell was that, anyway? From what she'd seen in the past few days, he didn't seem to be having much trouble starting conversations with other people, anymore. She'd watched him get along perfectly well with loads of different Rainlords by now.

And okay, sure, maybe they were a special case for him since they'd all apparently been through so much together. Fine.

But he was also getting along super well with the King, and those two definitely hadn't been through that much together--certainly not more than Hector had been through with her, at least.

Why was it only with her that he was still going all quiet?

What sense did that make, huh?

What possible... reason... could there be...?

Hmm?

No.

No, that was ridiculous. There was no way.

What kind of arrogant thinking was that, anyway? The idea that Hector might be...?

No.

Impossible.

Right?"

"2122

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

But what other reason could there be? If Hector was acting normally with everyone except her, then...?

These questions were not helping the atmosphere at all.

Lynnette was suddenly feeling so intensely uncomfortable that she was beginning to wonder how Hector could stand there looking so calm and collected.

Wasn't he supposed to be the awkward one here? What, was he just accustomed to it now or something?

No, she must've just been overthinking it. Hector was a lord now. If anything, he was probably looking down on her.

No, wait, he wasn't like that. She knew that much about him, didn't she? What the hell was going through her head, right now?

Her brain was just trying to come up with excuses for why Hector... for why Hector...

Agh, she could hardly even articulate it to herself.

This was absurd. She was a member of the Queen's Guard. She was the White Sword of Atreya. How could she allow herself to be getting flustered over such a trifling thing? Was she a child?

She recalled the Queen teasing her about this very subject. And she recalled Hector running away from a conversation soon thereafter. And she also recalled Hector telling her later that it had been because of an upset stomach...

And now...

Wow.

She felt really stupid all of a sudden--and for contradictory reasons, somehow. It seemed obvious that Hector felt some sort of way about her, and yet, it also didn't. Like she was just being full of herself, expecting something when she shouldn't.

Well...

It might've been true that, for all the composure that Lynnette tried to exhibit outwardly, she didn't really have much experience with... this sort of thing.

She'd experienced a couple brief crushes in middle and high school, perhaps, but she'd never pursued them or even given them much real thought. She hadn't had the time. She'd known since she was ten years old that she wanted to join the Queen's Guard. Well, okay, back



then it had technically been the King's Guard, but still. She had devoted herself utterly to that end."

"2123

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

While her time in high school certainly hadn't been as irregular as Hector's, it would be inaccurate to say that it had been normal. Unlike many other countries, Atreya didn't have any military academies that Lynnette could have enrolled in, so instead, she had often missed school in order to attend various ""training regiments.""

That was the only term that really suited them, because they were all so different--both in subject matter and in general quality of instruction. Karate, jujitsu, wrestling, swimming, endurance training, cross-country running; and then, of course, there were all the different types of weapons training--swords, firearms, pole arms, knives--even bow hunting and nunchakus, briefly.

She had dipped her toe into just about everything she laid her eyes on in the last ten years. That was not to say that she was truly proficient in all of those things, however. A single weapon could be studied for decades without ever achieving mastery over it or its kind. She had primarily just wanted to expand her martial knowledge base while searching for a discipline that she felt suited her best.

Firearm training was a no-brainer. Lynnette was of the opinion that every woman should know how to handle a basic pistol, at the very least. There was no greater equalizer between the genders than that, she felt. So, of course, she had ended up devoting considerable time to learning the in-and-out of many different types of guns.

However, nothing else had ever resonated with her quite as well as swords did. There was just something about them that she loved. Perhaps it was the myriad of ways that they could be used. Some were small; some were huge. Some were for slicing; some were for poking. Some were elegant; some were beastly. And there was an artistry to them, both in their use and in their craftsmanship. Not to mention their history."

"2124

Were she to look back on that first encounter with Abolish at Belgrant Castle, when she had fought Desmond Grantier and met Hector for the first time, Lynnette might have liked a gun on her waist instead of her sword--or preferably, in addition to her sword--but back then, the regulations of the Queen's Guard did not allow for the carrying of firearms. Such weapons were only to be distributed by the Master of the Royal Armory after receiving permission from either the Steward of Belgrant Castle or the Queen herself.

Lynnette had always thought that to be a rather insane policy, but rules were rules. She'd heard that the intent behind it was to make the Queen's Guard appear friendlier to the general public and not like some sort of hit squad, but even so, Lynnette was only too glad when the Queen had finally changed that rule. Now everyone in the Guard had to carry their assigned service rifle with them whenever they were on duty.

Not that it mattered terribly for Lynnette, now. This aberration gauntlet of hers was far deadlier than just about any gun she had ever seen.

Regardless, all of this was to say that Lynnette Edith had experienced a rather abnormal school life, even when compared to the other members of the Queen's Guard. Most of them were sons or daughters of lesser nobles, and they had received their training from more formal sources.

Assuming they actually had received training, that was. For a few of them, that had been quite questionable.

Thankfully, however, ever since she'd been promoted to the Queen's personal bodyguard and become the White Sword of Atreya, Lynnette had gained enough clout to actually go around and ensure that all Guardsmen truly were qualified for the positions they occupied. That certainly hadn't earned her any new friends, but she didn't much care. She'd already been on fairly bad terms with most of them, anyway.

Which was, perhaps, another reason why she didn't have much romantic experience."

"2125

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

And so, with her mind currently swirling with uncertainty, Lynnette felt simultaneously as if she should say something to Hector and also as if she was incapable of doing so.

Was this really happening, right now? Well, no, it actually wasn't, judging from the way Hector wasn't even paying attention to her at the moment. He was still just observing the King, calm as could be. He probably wasn't giving her presence a second thought.

In fact, now that she was thinking about it, he'd been that way during most of this visit--focusing on the King so much, never really talking to her.

If she were an insecure person, she might've suspected that he was purposely avoiding her.

Yeah. If she were insecure.

Very much if.

...He was definitely avoiding her, wasn't he?

That jerk.

Ugh, what was wrong with her? Her head was all over the place. She needed to organize her thoughts. And her feelings, apparently.

Was she really flustered? Why? For what purpose? Because of Hector? He was three years younger than her. And he was a lord now. Oh, and he lived way out here in Gray Rock. How would they even be able to...? Long distances were... She didn't know if...

Wow, she was getting ahead of herself.

Did she even like Hector in that way?

Honestly, did she?

She just kind of stared at the ground as she thought about that. All the excuses in her mind, while still present, took a back to seat to that one, singular question.

And she didn't have an answer.

She liked him as a friend, certainly. She liked him as a friend a lot. He might've been one of her favorite people, truthfully.

But...

Beyond that?

It was just... hard to picture. This whole time, it had been, she realized.

She couldn't really imagine herself and Hector being together romantically.

Was that... bad?

Because it didn't seem good."

"2126

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Lynnette was only growing more uncomfortable by the minute. If Hector really did harbor such feelings for her, then she had no idea what she should do. What if he actually asked her out on a date? Should she turn him down? But he was so nice... and... the last thing she wanted to do was hurt her friend's feelings.

But maybe that would be even worse? Pitying him like that? Wouldn't she be the one looking down on him, in that case? The very opposite of what she'd been worrying about a minute ago?

Agh! Why was this shit so stressful?!

""Everything alright?"" came a familiar voice, making Lynnette snap to attention and see the King standing there in front of the two of them.

When the hell had he walked over here? Dear goddess, had she been that lost in thought just now? Even Hector was looking at her with apparent concern on his face.

""Yeah, everything's fine,"" said Lynnette. She was a bit surprised at how calm she was able to make herself sound.

The King gave her a lingering look but said nothing more of the matter. After another moment, he smiled and placed his lone hand on Hector's shoulder. ""Well, in any case, I had an idea. You are still concerned about House Gaolanet, no?""

Hector gave a hesitant nod.

""Then, I say the three of us pay their estate a visit,"" said the King.

Hector's eyes widened a little. ""Uh. Didn't you tell me that was a bad idea?""

""Ah, yes, well, perhaps you misheard me,"" said the King.

Hector's brow depressed a little. ""I'm pretty sure I didn't, Your Highness. You said that dropping in on them unannounced would be really impolite and upset them.""

The King's smile broadened. ""I am not proposing that we go there unannounced. I will give them ample warning... of an hour or two.""  
"2127

Lynnette felt compelled to interject. ""Your Highness, I'm not sure that would be wise.""

""Oh, don't be a stick-in-the-mud, Ms. Edith.""

Lynnette just kind of blinked as she tried to comprehend the fact that the King, of all people, had said that to her.

Hector spoke up again. ""So if we called the Queen and told her of your intentions here, then--""

""You would be needlessly bothering her,"" the King said. ""She is incredibly busy with matters in Sescoria.""

""...And you don't think she'd be worried about the danger that you'd be putting yourself in?"" said Hector.

""Danger?"" said King William. ""What danger would that be?""

""Well, there's the whole thing about how I suspect House Gaolanet might be murdering people..."

""And I am being accompanied by two of the nation's most powerful warriors,"" said the King. ""Besides, do you honestly believe that the Gaolanets would harm their rightful king? How would that make any sense at all?""

""...I don't know,"" Hector admitted, ""but that's also kinda the problem. We don't know that much about them.""

""I have to agree, Your Highness,"" Lynnette added.

The King took a deep breath. ""Listen, you two. There are times when bold action is necessary. We have here one such occasion. If we allow this opportunity to slip by, if we play it safe and take our time, then we will be giving the Gaolanets the chance to prepare. And they have a long history of skillful concealment. If we do not catch them unawares, then I fear the truth of things will remain forever in the dark.""

Lynnette exchanged flat looks with Hector.

""Call the Queen,"" he said.

""On it."" And Lynnette whipped out her special-issue cellphone.

The King just groaned.

It took a bit of time for the end-to-end encrypted signal to go through, but soon enough, Lynnette had the Queen on the line and was explaining the situation to her."

"2128 -- CCXII.

<""I see,""> came the Queen's voice after having been put on speaker.  
<""Hmm."">

The three of them just waited for her to think it over. The King looked like he wanted to say something, but if he did, he kept it to himself.

<""William...">

""Yes, darling?""

<""Why do you wish to go personally?"">

The King held his hand to his chin for a moment, apparently considering his next words carefully. ""I have three reasons,"" he said. ""The first is that, if the request for a meeting comes from me, the Gaolanets will not be able to refuse or delay. If it comes from Hector, they might turn him down, reschedule, or otherwise give him the

runaround.

""Secondly, it would be disrespectful to House Gaolanet if I sent someone in my stead. We do not have proof of their wrongdoing, and they may in fact be perfectly innocent. For the moment, I believe they are still deserving of honor and courtesy as a noble House of Atreya.

""And my final reason, is that I genuinely do wish to meet with Hanton Gaolanet. Knowing all that I do now, of servants and reapers and the wider world they inhabit, there are many questions I would like to ask that man, because I suspect he may have answers--or at least, an interesting perspective.""

For a time, the Queen was silent, until at length, she said, <""Very well. You have convinced me. Lynnette, Hector. Please take good care of my husband."">

## Chapter Two Hundred Twelve: 'A nest of Elders...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The Gaolanet's estate struck quite an imposing figure in the twilight of the evening. According to the research Hector had done, this place was called the Sparrow's Roost, and seeing it now, Hector could understand why. It sat atop a tall hill overlooking much of Gray Rock.

And the birds.

They were all over the place--perched atop the front gate, in the trees, in the bushes, and on the various surrounding buildings."

"2128 -- CCXII.

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"2129

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

They had decided not to bring any of the King's attendants with them, so Lynnette was the one driving. The central courtyard was so large



that the car was necessary to traverse it, and as they passed giant bird statue after giant bird statue on their way toward the main house, Hector was beginning to see a pattern. Even the large water fountain at the end of the road was of a flock of birds mid-flight.

The five of them exited the vehicle, along with the four reapers who accompanied them.

Apart from Hector, King William, and Lynnette, the final two members of their party were Matteo Delaguna, who accompanied Hector whenever he left Warrenhold, and Diego Redwater.

Hector still wasn't quite sure why Diego had decided to tag along, and he suspected that Diego didn't know, either.

They'd been somewhat concerned about bringing someone with such a famous last name, but Diego promised to be discreet. Apparently, that meant wearing sunglasses and a fedora.

Matteo, whom Hector still didn't really know all that much about, was wearing a butler's uniform for some reason.

The Gaolanets' own butlers were waiting for them on the steps of the main entrance, and one of them took their car for them as they proceeded into the enormous mansion.

Beyond the most minimal pleasantries, no words were exchanged.

Hector had to admire the building's architecture a bit as they walked. He didn't recognize the style at all. There were so many hard angles in the woodwork. The front hall's ceiling rose to a very high apex, and metal bars hung halfway out from the walls near the top. Some of the ceiling's windows were open as well, and after a moment, Hector noticed more birds hanging out up there.

Geez.

It was a wonder there weren't white poop stains all over the floor's jet black limestone, Hector thought."

"2130

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As they proceeded on, it soon became clear that this place was even

bigger than Hector expected. It couldn't rival Warrenhold or Bosliat Palace, certainly, but there could easily be hundreds of people living here comfortably. Maybe not in just this one building, but across the entire estate? Definitely.

Hector decided to consult Garovel. 'How many souls can you sense around here?'

'Quite a lot,' the reaper said privately.

Another question occurred to Hector, and he realized that it was something he'd been wondering about for a while. 'Can you pick out reapers in a crowd? Like, do their souls have a different aura to them or whatever?'

'Not exactly,' said Garovel. 'As far as my senses go, reaper souls and normal are identical. However, it is sometimes possible to tell when one is nearby based on context clues. Usually regarding movement. If the soul is flying, for instance. That's usually a good indicator--though not always, of course.'

'Hmm.'

'Another indicator is when I sense a soul that's very ""floaty."" That one's less conclusive and requires me to really concentrate, but it can work. When normal humans walk, they bob up and down a little--or side to side, sometimes. But reapers just float.'

Hector found that odd. 'You can't sense a person's legs moving? I remember you saying before the body is like a vessel that the soul conforms to the shape of. Or something like that.'

'Yes, but movement is a bit... blurrier, I guess. And my ability to sense souls is not exactly like sight. It's not a perfect analogy.'

The party arrived in a spacious chamber with a gigantic rug that filled it almost entirely. There were several sofas and chairs along the walls, though the largest grouping of them sat in front of an enormous fireplace at the far end of the room.

""Please, sit and make yourselves comfortable,"" said the head butler. ""My lord shall be with you shortly.""

They congregated near the fireplace, which was only meagerly alight at the moment. No doubt, it could've held a roaring bonfire, if necessary."

As they waited, the King and Diego struck up a conversation, but they spoke softly enough that Hector couldn't really make out what they were saying.

While the relative silence drew out, Hector's mind returned to Garovel. 'So, uh... you really can't tell if the Goalanets have any of their own reapers around?'

'That, I cannot,' said Garovel, again with the echo of privacy. 'The souls all seem pretty normal to me.'

'And no aberrations, right?'

'Not that I can tell,' said Garovel, 'but those are difficult to sense at all until they're right in front of me. Then they're obvious as shit.'

'Oh yeah. Hmm.' Then a thought struck him, and he knew at once that he had to ask one more question. 'Hey, what do reapers look like to you?'

Garovel regarded him for a moment with that hollow gaze of his. 'Care to guess?'

Hector's mouth flattened. 'Not really.'

'You sure? Honestly, I've been wondering when you would ask me that for the longest time. Seems a shame to just come right out and tell you.'

'Garovel...'

'C'mon, just take one guess. It'll be fun.'

Hector mulled it over for a second. '...Giant pandas,' he said for no particular reason.

'What? No. Why would you guess pandas, of all things?'

'I dunno. It was just the first thing that popped into my head.'

And somehow, the reaper looked positively disgusted with him. 'What

about my personality or my history made you think that I would see my fellow reapers as giant pandas?'

'Garovel, I really didn't think about it that much.'

'I can tell.'

'Hey, you never said my guess had to make sense.'

'Doesn't matter. Your guess sucked so hard that I want a do over. Take another crack at it.'

Hector had to hold back a sigh. 'This is getting annoying...'

'Guess one more time. And think about it a little harder.'

'I don't want to know that badly, Garovel.'

'Guess. Again. As my servant, I order you.'

'Wow.'"

"2132

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'Think about it carefully,' said Garovel. 'I bet you can get it right.'

Hector's eyes drifted over the room another time, looking for an excuse to leave this conversation, but everyone was still just waiting for Hanton to arrive. 'I really don't know, Garovel. Could you give me a clue or something?'

'Hmm, alright. What do I like to do best?'

'Uh...' As Hector thought about that, only one answer came to mind.

'Fuck with me?'

'Yes, exactly!'

He was still confused, though. 'How is that a clue?'

'If I told you that, I'd be giving it away.'

Hector shook his head. 'I don't understand. Do you see reapers as, like, visible manifestations of sarcasm or something?'

'That's an interesting thought. What would sarcasm look like, exactly?'

'Hell if I know. I give up. Just tell me already, please.'

'Okay. Well. Don't be mad.'

'When you say that, it makes me want to get mad.'

'The truth is, it was a trick question.'

'Are you fucking kidding me?'

'Nope. Heh heh.'

Hector didn't even know what to say and stared blankly at the crackling fireplace.

'Reapers all see each other the same way. We don't see a bunch of weird personalized shit like you dirty corporeals do. We just see normal human beings, albeit with a slightly ethereal tinge to them.'

'...That's it?'

'Mmhmm.'

'...You're an ass.'

'I know. But I had to spice it up, right? It's kind of a boring reveal, y'know?'

'Whatever.'

'Though, I suppose there IS one aspect to it that's slightly less boring, if you're interested.'

'I'm not.'

The reaper laughed. 'C'mon, don't be like that. It's kinda neat. I promise.'

'Right, because you're so trustworthy.'

'No need to be hurtful. Here, I'll just tell you. No games, this time.'

'Oh, boy, lucky me.'"

"2133

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'Our appearance is based on what we looked like when we were alive,' said Garovel.

And Hector waited, but when Garovel said nothing more, he had to say, 'Um... so what? That's exactly as boring as I imagined.'

'No, but if you think about it, isn't it curious how reapers are able to perceive a physical likeness that we have no personal frame of reference from?'

'...I guess so.'

'Your lack of enthusiasm for this ancient mystery is very disappointing, Hector.'

'I mean, what's so mysterious about it? You can apparently see light even though you don't have eyeballs, so... this shit seems pretty easy to believe compared to that. Maybe your physical likeness, as you imagine it, is just preserved in your soul or whatever. And then that gets projected onto what other reapers see.'

'Alright, Mr. Fun-Killer. Geez. Just rip my heart out and stomp on it. That's fine.'

Hector exhaled a laugh under his breath. Then he heard the door behind him open, and everyone in the room turned to look.

""Good evening, all. I am Hanton Gaolanet."" The man's voice was a wondrous thing, deep and smooth as butter. There were a few silver streaks in his otherwise brown and feathery hair, and his white suit with dark red stripes was certainly eye-catching. ""Welcome to my home. You, especially, Your Highness.""

The King was already standing to greet him. ""Thank you for having me, Hanton. And I do apologize for the short notice.""

""Not at all. It is a pleasure to host royalty."" The man glanced in Hector's direction before returning to the King. ""But you have made me curious? Is this purely a social visit? Or is there some matter in particular that you wish to discuss?""

""Purely social,"" said the King with a smile. ""I know how irregular this

is, but I have come to think that, now more than ever, it is important for the nobility of this country to spend time together. Strengthen our bonds, if you will.""

""I see."" Hanton returned a smile of his own as his pitch black eyes lingered on the King for a long moment."

"2134

While the two men were exchanging pleasantries, Hector had to consult Garovel again. 'What do you think? Sense anything weird about him?'

'Not in the slightest,' the reaper said privately. 'But I didn't sense anything strange about Malast, either, and we both know how that turned out.'

'You're not seriously suggesting that this guy is another fucking god, are you?'

'Of course not. I'm just telling you to stay on your toes.'

Hector appreciated that reassurance, but he also couldn't completely put that concern out of his mind, either. There was just something about Hanton. As he observed the man, Hector kept trying to figure out what this strange feeling was in the back of his mind. It wasn't soul pressure. It was just... unease. A feeling like something obvious was being missed.

He hated it.

The King began making introductions. ""This is my bodyguard for the evening,"" he said, motioning to Lynn, who was standing by his side now. ""The White Sword of Atreya, Lynnette Edith.""

""I have heard of you, of course,"" said the Lord Gaoalanet, shaking her hand. ""It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, young lady.""

""Thank you, sir. It is good to meet you as well.""

""And over here,"" said the King, motioning to Diego, ""this is my new manservant, Dietro.""

Diego stepped forward without missing a beat and shook Hanton's

hand. ""It is an honor, sir.""

Hanton's gaze lingered on him. ""Quite.""

Hector was a bit surprised by how easily the King and Diego had pulled off that lie. Had they discussed it beforehand?

""And finally,"" said the King, ""we have the young Lord Darksteel of Warrenhold, Hector Goffe, and his man, Matteo.""

Hector stepped up for his turn to shake Hanton's hand, as did Matteo immediately thereafter. He returned his gaze to Hector with another smile. ""What good fortune. When the King sent word of his arrival, I had no idea that you would be accompanying him, Lord Goffe.""

"2135



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""It was a bit of a surprise on my end, as well,"" said Hector. ""But I hope it's not too much of an inconvenience. There are a few things that I'd like to talk to you about.""

""Ah."" Hanton's smile diminished somewhat. ""Looking for more investors for that bank of yours, perhaps?""

Hector wasn't surprised that this man knew about all the visits he'd been paying to the other Atreyan nobles. ""No,"" he said plainly.

""Oh?"" said Hanton, looking around at the others before settling back on Hector again. ""Then perhaps you could enlighten me as to the motive behind your visit.""

Hector glanced toward the King, who was just observing with a raised brow. Perhaps it was a bit soon to just launch right into the heart of the conversation, but Hector didn't want to waste the opportunity, either. ""I was wondering... if House Gaolanet has ever had any relationship with an organization called the Vanguard.""

For a time, it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. It seemed as if even the flames in the fireplace stopped crackling.

Hector observed the man closely, and still, he was feeling uncomfortable for some reason.

Hanton's expression remained exactly the same. ""Why do you ask?""

Hector tilted his head. ""Why don't you answer?""

""Several reasons,"" said the Lord Gaolanet. ""I am not in the habit of simply giving out information about my family. Confirming or denying anything, without reason, is typically unwise, I feel. I hope you will not think my caution suspicious.""

""I am certain Lord Goffe did not mean to offend,"" said the King.

""Offense was not taken, Your Highness,"" said Hanton, eyes still on Hector. ""I only wished to clarify my position.""

Hector thought carefully. On the one hand, he didn't want to just come right out and start talking about reapers and servants. If this guy genuinely didn't have prior knowledge of them, then Hector would just be carelessly spreading some rather sensitive information.

But on the other hand... this guy had to know about them already, didn't he?

Agh, what was this weird feeling about? Why wasn't it going away?"  
"2136

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""The reason I'm asking,"" said Hector, ""is because it is relevant to the security of the nation.""

""I see,"" said Hanton. He turned to William. ""This hardly seems like the subject matter that one would encounter during a 'purely social' visit as you claimed earlier, Your Highness.""

""I said I was here for purely social reasons,"" said the King. ""I said nothing about the young Lord Goffe's reasons.""

Hanton did not look pleased. ""A distinction without a difference. This hardly seems appropriate, given the hospitality that I have--""

The man kept talking, and the King kept responding, but Hector was only partially listening.

In a background thought process, he was still trying to pinpoint the source of this persistent unease that he was feeling. There was something about Hanton's presence...

There was some kind of... emptiness to it.

And then, thanks to the Scarf of Amordiin, Hector realized what the problem was.

He'd been thinking metaphorically about the feeling of emptiness. It was actually literal.

While Hanton was still talking to the King, Hector stepped forward and placed his hand on the man's chest. And he felt it there, too. The texture of his suit's cloth was as clear as day.

But Hector pushed forward anyway, and his hand went through Hanton's body.

Everyone stopped.

Hector swished his hand back and forth like there was no resistance. Like it was just thin air.

Because it was.

That was what had been bothering him. Even though he could see Hanton with his eyes, even though he could feel the man's hand when he shook it, Hector hadn't been able to sense the shape of Hanton's body with the Scarf of Amordiin. The air in the room flowed right through Hanton like he wasn't even there.

With half of Hector's arm stuck through his chest, Hanton looked around at his speechless audience before settling on the Lord Darksteel again. ""My, my... this is rather awkward, now isn't it?""  
"2137

Hector wanted to say something, but each question that popped into his head felt like it might betray something about himself--some critical lack of information or understanding. And with whatever was happening right now, Hector thought he should keep his cards close to his chest for the moment.

The King was apparently less reserved, however. ""What is happening here? Hanton?""

""My apologies, Your Highness,"" said the Lord Gaolanet, still not bothering to move away from Hector. ""This is not how I envisioned this conversation going.""

""Hanton, please explain this situation,"" said the King.

""I am afraid I must refuse,"" said Hanton. ""In fact, I believe it would be for the best if everyone here simply forgot that this ever happened.""

""What do you--?"" The King did not finish.

An overwhelming sensation washed over Hector, heavy and unlike anything he had ever felt. An invisible blanket, perhaps. Smothering him. Weighing him down. Slowing him down. His thought processes. Suffocating him. Shutting down his mind.

Or at least, that was what it felt like for his frontmost thought process.

Because of the others, in the back of his mind, Hector was still perfectly aware that nothing was happening to him. His body was fine. The room was unchanged. Nothing was truly altered, except perhaps for the way that Hanton was staring at him.

Hector looked around at the others in the room, suddenly worrying for them. They were all still there, seemingly unharmed, but none of them were moving even the slightest bit. The King's mouth was still half-open, stopped in the middle of a word.

Lynnette, Diego, Matteo--even the four reapers were frozen in midair. Garovel, Melhsanz, Yangéra, and Ernivoc. All stuck there. Silent. Unmoving.

Hector tried to stay calm, but it was difficult. If anything happened to them--

""Do not be alarmed,"" came Hanton's voice again. He had finally moved away from Hector's immediate grasp and was walking toward the same door through which he'd entered earlier. He stopped and turned to face Hector again. ""I have no intention of hurting them. It would be no end of trouble if such famous individuals were to disappear.""

"2138

This was a lot to take in. Hector knew he had to remain calm and think carefully. He had no idea what this man was capable of. Attacking him seemed unwise, especially since the guy's ""body"" wasn't even real.

This didn't seem like the power of a servant, but he didn't want to just assume that Hanton Gaolanet was another god, either. He needed information.

Hector recalled what Hanton had said just before everyone else had stopped moving. ""Are you trying to erase our memories?""

""That was the plan, yes,"" said Hanton. ""I chose to spare you, however, because I wanted to talk first.""

Hector squinted at him, anger rising. He could still feel the oppression of his frontmost thought process. ""Don't lie to me, Hanton. You're already on thin ice, and I'm not in a very forgiving mood, right now.""

Immediately, Hector felt the oppression in his mind vanish, and he watched Hanton take a single step backward, though the expression on the man's face was unchanged.

The others all remained frozen where they were, however.

""So you really are that dangerous,"" said the Lord Gaolanet. ""I thought it was perhaps some fluke that you were able to resist me--that you might not be aware of my attempt to penetrate your mind. But I see now that I was wrong. I apologize for underestimating you, Lord Goffe.""

Hector made no response. He merely kept staring at him.

""Tell me,"" said Hanton. ""How were you able to see through this illusion? I am certain that I covered all of your senses completely. Even your reaper should not have been able to tell the difference.""

""...If you're still hoping to talk this out,"" said Hector, ""then I suggest you release my companions. Now.""

""Ah..." Hanton deliberated silently for a moment. ""You are quite intimidating. I will grant you that. But I am not convinced that you can truly harm me. You do not even know where my real body is.""

""...Do you want me to come looking for it?"" said Hector."  
"2139

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Again, Hanton fell briefly quiet. ""I am not seeking a fight here, Lord Goffe.""

""Neither am I. You're the one taking hostages.""

""I told you that I do not intend to harm them.""

""And you've already lied to me once.""

""You misunderstand. I am only concerned with keeping the presence of my family a secret. We have no quarrel with you. We are a peaceful flock. We merely wish to be left alone.""

Hector took his time considering his next words. If that was really true,

then what about the trail of poisonings that had led him here? Should he bring that up now?

He felt like he'd gained ground in the conversation, but he also didn't want to push his luck while everyone was still locked in some sort of... mind prison or whatever the hell it was.

""Okay,"" Hector said slowly, ""but if secrecy is so important to you... then why are you one of the most famous families in the country?""

""The degree of privacy we require is not something that can be obtained without considerable wealth. And wealth, unfortunately, is accompanied by                      notoriety--and in the case of my ancestors, noble lineage as well.""

Ancestors, huh? Hector didn't know if he could trust that new sliver of information, but he took note of it nonetheless. ""...And what is the reason you require that much privacy?""

Hanton deliberated for another moment. Then he exhaled a long breath. ""It seems that if we are to resolve this situation without violence, then I must show you the truth."" His expression darkened. ""But I warn you, Hector Goffe: if word of what you are about to see ever reaches the outside world, then I will hunt you down and extract my toll--if not from you, then from those you care about. There will be no place in this world that is safe from me. Any pain that I suffer as a result of your indiscretion in this matter, I will visit upon you tenfold. This, I vow.""

Well, goddamn. Hector wasn't sure what to say to that."  
"2140

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""Do you understand me?"" said Hanton.

""...Yeah, I understand you,"" said Hector.

""Good."" Hanton turned, and the doors behind him flung open on their own. ""Then follow me.""

""And my companions?""

""I say again: no harm will come to them. But if you are still so

concerned, then bring them with you. I am sure you are capable of that without my help, no?"

He certainly was.

In an instant, Hector clapped full suits of iron armor around everyone and added his soul to them. He didn't know if his soul would help protect them from whatever telepathic horseshit Hanton was capable of, but he figured it wouldn't hurt.

Hector pulled them all closer on mobile platforms beneath their feet, and for the four reapers, he made soul-empowered iron orbs to capture them and put them in orbit around himself. The orbiting was probably unnecessary, but at this point, it was a force of habit.

Hanton was waiting for him in the hall--and staring with wide eyes.

For good measure, Hector decided to add a few decorative flourishes to everyone's armor, helping to distinguish them at a glance. Diego's helmet got stubby horns; the King's helmet got a crown; Matteo's pauldrons got spikes; and Lynn's faceguard was given a T-shaped eye slit. And he may've added a few embossed swirls for everyone's breastplate, gauntlets, cuisses, and greaves.

Yeah, that looked a little better.

As he moved to catch up with Hanton, Hector decided to armor himself up as well, making sure to let the Scarf flow freely as always.

"There is no need for this intimidation," said Hanton. "We will not attack you."

"I wasn't trying to intimidate you," said Hector, the metal of his helmet accenting his voice. "But it never hurts to be prepared."

"Indeed..." Hanton frowned and started walking again.

Hector and his armored entourage followed. He concentrated as much as he could on what the Scarf could tell him. He pushed for its limit, trying to sense as far away as he possibly could--around corners in the intersection ahead and even through the cracks beneath the doors in the hallway.

Some of those doors weren't even real, he realized. And that intersection ahead? There were only two other paths, not three.

More illusions."

"2141

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Hector wondered briefly what the point of such subtle deception was, but it wasn't hard to think of a reason. This place would be a hellish maze for any normal person to navigate. For any invaders, in other words.

They walked for a long while, and Hector wanted to ask Hanton where they were going. Where were all the people that Garovel had sensed earlier? Had they been illusions, too? He supposed that wouldn't be surprising.

At length, he finally sensed something that wasn't just another empty room or corridor.

In a distant chamber at the limit of the Scarf's range, Hector sensed a hulking shape, something not immediately recognizable to his imagination. It was the size of a truck. And it was breathing. He could sense the flow of air in and out of its mouth.

No.

Its beak. Yeah. And the way the air moved around its body--those were feathers, weren't they?

A giant bird.

Hector didn't know what to think.

Hanton led him to the room that the bird was waiting in, and sure enough, the man showed him inside.

To his eyes, the enormous bird was invisible, but Hector knew exactly where it was. And this room. It looked like any other, but he could sense that the ceiling was fake. It was actually one big window, currently sitting half-open--perhaps in case the bird wanted to fly away.

""As a show of good faith,"" said Hanton, ""I will now show you my true form.""

Hector held his tongue.



The way in which the bird became suddenly visible to his eyes was as if a paper veil were being quickly burned away.

There arrived a briefly silent intermission.

""...You are not surprised?"" said Hanton--or the human projection of him, rather.

""No, I am,"" said Hector. Sure, he'd sensed it coming at the last minute, but that didn't change the fact that he still had about a billion questions. ""What are you, exactly?""

"2142

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""I am a Wrobel,"" said Hanton, still speaking from the illusion's mouth while the bird merely observed him. ""The few of you who already know of my kind also call us Sparrows. I find that term acceptable, if you prefer it.""

""...You're not a servant,"" Hector surmised.

""No. I am not.""

""Are you a descendant of one, though? An ancient mutation user, maybe?""

The bird's giant head twitched at that question. Its darkly red-and-brown plumage bristled slightly, and it stood up fully, briefly revealing talons the size of Hector's entire body.

'A common and very crude question,' came another voice.

And Hector was bewildered, because that had definitely been in his mind, and Hanton's mouth hadn't moved at all.

But then, Hanton's human body wasn't actually real, was it? Therefore, the ""voice"" that Hector thought he had been hearing with his ears--that hadn't been real, either.

That huge Sparrow there was the real Hanton Gaolanet. Hector understood that, and yet it was still somehow difficult to come to terms with.

Perhaps Hanton could tell that Hector was confused even through his armor, because the human illusion vanished into thin air, and only the Sparrow remained.

'Why is it that servants always wish to trace the origins of our noble race back to themselves?' said Hanton.

Sounded like he'd touched a sore spot. ""That wasn't my intention,"" said Hector. ""I'm just trying to understand why there's a giant, talking bird in front of me.""

'Hmph.' Hanton's plumage flared up again, and he looked away from Hector.

Was he... pouting?

Maybe it was just a result of the Sparrow's head shape. A trick of the eyes, in some sense. Despite being so large and probably having a wingspan comparable to that of a commercial airplane, Hanton didn't actually look like a bird of prey.

Rather, he really did look like a plump, little sparrow that had just been scaled up to gargantuan proportions. His beady eyes, short beak, and fat head made him look... oddly cute, honestly.

Hector didn't let that distract him, however, from the fact that this guy was dangerous as shit."

"2143

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 5 of 14))~~

""...Would you care to share a bit of your origin story with me, then?"" said Hector.

'Do you know the origin story of servants?' said Hanton. His tone wasn't one of genuine curiosity, but rather one of a counter argument. 'Or how about that of the entire human race?'

""Alright, no need to get so defensive. I was just curious.""

'I was not being defensive. I was enlightening you about your own biases.'

That rubbed Hector the wrong way, and he wanted to make a retort, but he focused on maintaining his composure, instead. Allowing himself to get pissed off wasn't going to be productive.

But what was?

Now that he was standing here in front of this giant and surly bird, what was he supposed to say? For whatever reason, Hanton wasn't saying anything now, so how was this conversation supposed to progress?

From the sound of it, Hanton didn't actually know for sure that his race wasn't descended from an ancient mutation user, but bringing that up again would obviously be unwise.

He wanted some kind of context, though.

""What can you tell me about your race's history?"" he asked.

'That we are peaceful.'

""Yeah, you already said that.""

'We were once persecuted and hunted to the brink of extinction.'

Hector wasn't exactly surprised to hear that, but it did make him curious. ""With powers like yours, it seems to me that you could take over half the world, if you wanted.""

'...I suppose I should have assumed that you would know of that,' said Hanton. 'No doubt, you have long been a student of ancient history.'

Wait, what?

'I was not attempting to deceive you again,' the Sparrow said, sounding suddenly more conciliatory. 'That is a period of our history which we have grown to regret. It is a thing we would prefer not to think about.'

Huh?

Hold on just a minute here.

Hector kept his poker face, but what the fuck kind of assumptions had Hanton just made about him, exactly? How old did Hanton think he was?

And more importantly... the Sparrows really did try to take over half the world at some point? When the hell did that happen? Sure, he hadn't

paid much attention during history class in school, but he was fairly certain that he would've remembered it if one of his teachers had ever told him that a race of gigantic super-birds had once attempted to conquer humanity."

"2144

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 6 of 14))~~

Hector was reluctant to say anything more now. If he picked the wrong thing or phrased it the wrong way, then Hanton might realize his mistake.

'I assure you,' said Hanton, 'the only thing we care about now is maintaining the peace of this small haven that we have created for ourselves.'

""...How many of you are here?"" Hector asked.

'Five.'

""So few?"" Hector cocked an eyebrow. ""My reaper sensed many souls earlier.""

'Ah, yes, well... we employ numerous humans here. And my children often make multiple avatars for themselves to play around with.'

Avatars, huh? So that's how they thought of their human illusions. ""Do your employees know the truth about you?""

'Some, not all. Those who have been with us the longest, who have gained our trust.'

""And I guess you just wipe their memory if they ever find out accidentally, eh?""

Hanton made no response.

Another thought occurred to Hector, and even though it didn't seem immediately relevant to the situation, he just had to bring it up. ""The King mentioned... that he once had a marriage interview with a girl named Pauline Gaolanet some years ago.""

'Ah. Yes...'

""...What was the plan there? I'm assuming she's a Sparrow, too, right? Why would you try to have her marry a normal human?""

'That was... a delicate situation.'

""How so?""

'In her youth, Pauline was quite the little troublemaker. She created an avatar identical to my own and visited Joseph Belgrant to organize a marriage interview with his son, William.'

Hector's eyes widened, and he glanced at the still-frozen King in his suit of iron armor. ""She really wanted to marry him?""

'It was a game to her. A childish one. She did not understand the full implications of her actions.'

""But she understood well enough to fool Joseph Belgrant?""

'What can I say? She has always been a bit too clever for her own good.'

Somehow, Hector couldn't help snickering a little. ""You must've been relieved when it didn't work out.""

'Oh, you have no idea.' Surprisingly enough, Hanton actually seemed to share a bit of Hector's amusement."

"2145

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 7 of 14))~~  
After that, however, a lull arrived in the conversation.

Hanton thus far seemed largely agreeable, and Hector felt like they could probably come to terms here.

But the more he thought about it, the less certain he became.

No matter how well they managed to get along, the well-being of Garovel and Lynn and everyone else was paramount here. And there was still the matter of the poisonings, of course. As long as Hanton was holding hostages, it didn't seem like a good idea to broach that subject.

""...I want you to release your hold over my companions now,"" said Hector.

'And I want you to keep my family's secret,' said Hanton.

""I can agree to that,"" said Hector.

'The question is: can I trust you to keep your word?'

Hector leveled a stare right into Hanton's beady eyes. ""Yes. You can.""

'You are a national hero. I would like to believe you.'

Hector could hear a contradictory point coming.

'...But I hardly know you. I require more convincing.'

Hector sighed. ""Even if I tried to tell someone, who would believe me?""

'Hmm, I fear many people would. If you were truly of a mind to do so, with your credibility, you could convince all of Atreya of our existence.'

""What would be the point? You could just go wipe all their memories, anyway.""

Hanton was quiet again for a time. 'Perhaps I should not tell you this, but... in the interest of building trust between us, I will.'

Hector just tilted his head, waiting for elaboration.

'Given the current state of your associates, I am sure that my abilities seem rather impressive to you. And frankly, they are. You are right to fear me.'

Hector's expression flattened a little.

'However, I am not without my limits. Manipulating minds and souls, projecting illusions, concealing myself. These things all have their tolls. Wiping so many memories would be an impossible feat. News of our existence would doubtlessly spread far faster than we could ever hope to contain it.'

"2146

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 8 of 14))~~

""Well, Atreya doesn't know much about servants and reapers, either,"" said Hector.

'Yes, but if that were to change, no one would come to hunt you down,' said Hanton.

Hector wasn't quite so sure of that, but saying as much didn't seem like it would be very useful at the moment. ""Who do you think would come to hunt you down?""

'There are several groups who might appear. The Morgunovs, the Andanatt, the Bloodmen, the Potrzask, the Andalero--and certainly the Old Wardens, if they still exist. And perhaps others, as well.'

Wow, that was a lot. ""Why would they all want to hunt you?""

'Some would want to study our biology via dissection. Some would wish to sell our biology, instead. And others might simply harbor old grudges.'

Agh. Hector wanted to ask exactly how long ago these ""old grudges"" were, but that would probably give away too much information about his age, wouldn't it? But then again, maybe he already knew all he needed to about that. Hanton had called their attempt at conquest ""ancient history,"" so it was a fairly safe bet that it was at least a thousand years ago, Hector figured.

""...You really think anyone has been holding a grudge against your kind for that long?"" asked Hector.

'Hmph. Reapers have long memories.'

""That, they do. But the world moves on, and so do reapers.""

'Do they really? That is what they may claim, but I do not trust their words--nor should you, even if you are their thrall.'

""...I won't try and argue that,"" said Hector. ""They can certainly be deceptive. But these reapers with me are worthy of your trust.""

'Ah. You vouch for them, do you?'

Impulsively, Hector almost just said yes right away. But the way Hanton had said that... and the way Hanton was looking at him now...

He reconsidered his response. Vouching for Garovel was one thing. But the other three reapers? Could he honestly say that they were all so trustworthy?

Hmm."

"2147

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 9 of 14))~~

""...Actually, no,"" said Hector. He brought forth Garovel's orb and dematerialized it to reveal the reaper. ""This is the only one I can honestly vouch for. The others... while I do trust them, I still don't really know them that well yet.""

'...I see,' said Hanton. 'And what of the other humans? Would you vouch for any of them as well?'

Hector didn't take quite as long to deliberate about that. Sorry, Diego. Sorry, Matteo. ""Lynnette and King William,"" he said, bringing their suits of armor forward.

'I find that somewhat surprising,' said Hanton, ruffling his feathers for a moment. 'Do you truly believe that you can trust royalty, of all people? They can be treacherous in a manner of their own. As a fellow student of history, I am sure you are aware of that as well.'

Hector wondered how they had gotten onto this subject, but it was something he had actually thought about before. ""I understand why you would say that,"" said Hector. ""The most famous royals throughout history--or the most infamous ones, I guess--typically had a reputation for... treachery, like you said. But you're talking about outliers. Exception case.""

'Oh? Are you saying that royals are deserving of our trust by default, then?'

""...Of course not. But I don't think they're inherently untrustworthy, either. I think that... almost any ruler's success or failure can be determined by how much support they have. Not from the general public, necessarily, but from those close to them. Those who really do support them. Real cooperation beats fear every time.""

'Mm. I agree to an extent. There is some truth in what you say. Royalty



will not be royalty for very long if it must constantly worry over daggers in the back.'

""...Exactly.""

'But what makes you think a Belgrant is worthy of your trust?'

The way Hanton said that caught Hector's attention. A Belgrant? Not ""the King"" or ""His Highness?"" Just a Belgrant?

Hector was suddenly reminded of the tale that King William had told him at the Gala. The tale of his ancestor, Charles Belgrant."

"2148

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 10 of 14))~~

""...It sounds like you're harboring some resentment for the Belgrants,"" said Hector.

'Resentment, no. It is more akin to a general wariness.'

""And why is that?""

'It is a rather long and old story,' said Hanton.

""...It wouldn't have anything to do with a man named Charles, would it?""

The Sparrow shifted his body a little and bristled his feathers. 'How much do you know about Charles Belgrant?'

Hector didn't feel like answering that. ""How much do you?""

'Hmph. He swindled my ancestors.'

Wait, seriously? Charles managed to trick a group of psychics? Or were they just telepaths? Or were those the same thing? Hector wasn't too sure.

""How did he pull that off?"" Hector asked.

'First, he gained our trust. He aided us during a time when we were having difficulty maintaining our concealment.'

""Hmm."" The conversation was getting off track again, but Hector also

felt that if he didn't inquire further now, he might never get another chance. ""What kind of aid did he provide?""

'He was in possession of an artifact that could, supposedly, predict the future.'

Hector blinked. ""Are you serious?""

'That is how the tale goes. Do not ask me if it is true. I have no idea.'

Holy shit. Could there really be an artifact like that? Even Rasalased had only ""kind of"" been able to predict the future. But then again, perhaps that just meant that it was actually possible.

The more he learned about this Charles character, though, the more Hector felt like he shouldn't take the stories about him at face value. Charles could've had some other kind of ace up his sleeve and just been lying about the artifact to make himself seem more powerful than he really was.

Heh.

What kind of idiot would do a thing like that, though?

Oh, man...

""...If he really had something like that, then why didn't your ancestors just take it from him and wipe his memory?""

'My noble brethren would never resort to thievery,' said Hanton.

Mm, Hector wasn't so sure he believed that, especially if the Gaolanets were still bitter about it all these years later. Maybe they couldn't take it from him for some reason. Maybe Charles had been able to resist their weird mind powers, too."

"2149

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 11 of 14))~~

""Okay, so after gaining their trust, how did he 'swindle' your ancestors?"" said Hector.

'He used their abilities to help him gain political power--and even to help create this very nation. And during that time, he promised them

that, once he was crowned king, he would appoint them to various influential positions, thereby ensuring the continued protection of our kind in this newly established kingdom.'

Charles had wanted to become king himself? That hadn't been part of the story. ""But the Gaolanets were already nobles back then, weren't they?""

'Yes, but the Mohssian Empire was faltering, and so too was our influence within it.'

""Hmm. You still haven't told me how he swindled you.""

'With my ancestors' support, he intended to become the very first King of Atreya. But as I am sure you know, that never came to pass, now did it? And the reason for that, if the tale is to be believed, was absolutely absurd.'

Hector just listened.

'He had a change of heart,' said Hanton. 'Charles simply stopped pursuing his ambition. After years of supporting him, he gave up halfway and helped Domitrus Lumenbel to be crowned king, instead. Complete madness.'

That didn't sound that crazy to Hector, honestly.

'Supposedly, he became convinced that Domitrus would be a better king. And all of his promises to us went unfulfilled and forgotten.'

Hector supposed he could understand why that would upset them, but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking that it was rather petty on the Gaolanets' part, especially considering that they obviously did gain political power later on. He remembered King William telling him about how the Gaolanets were a big part of the AFA.

With the way this whole conversation was going, Hector's opinion of these Sparrows wasn't improving much. Or at all, really. While he appreciated Hanton's willingness to talk, pretty much everything the guy said made Hector's doubts increase in one way or another.

At this point, Hector almost would've preferred it if Hanton attacked him. At least that would've simplified things."

"2150

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 12 of 14))~~

Well, whatever. Right now, the only thing Hector really cared about was making sure everyone made it out of this place alive. He could figure out how to deal with Hanton later.

""In any case, I'd like you to release my friends now,"" said Hector.

'Very well,' said Hanton. The giant bird disappeared again, and the human illusion reappeared and began speaking with a seemingly real voice again. ""However, I still do not wish for them to see my true form. Nor do I intend to reexplain everything that I have already told you. As far as they will remember, we all enjoyed a perfectly pleasant and uneventful meeting.""

Hector furrowed his brow. ""So I have to tell them the truth myself, is what you're saying.""

'That choice will be up to you, of course. Tell them whatever you like. I cannot stop you.'

Yeah. Nevermind how difficult it'll be to explain that they all have false memories. It seemed clear that Hanton was hoping Hector would decide to just keep this entire encounter to himself.

Hector was not pleased. ""If you're just going to replace all of their memories, then what was the point of asking me to vouch for any of them?""

""I never claimed that there was any great reason. I was merely curious as to what you truly thought of them.""

Hector had stop himself from scowling. Even if Hanton couldn't manipulate Hector's thoughts directly, the Sparrow could obviously still play mind games.

But again, Hector held his tongue. He just waited for everyone to be freed.

And kept waiting.

An awkward silence arrived before Hanton broke it.

""...If you would not mind removing their armor, then I shall release them all in unison.""

As a matter of fact, Hector did mind removing their armor. ""Why?""

""They were not wearing it when they arrived. They will notice that something is amiss if they are suddenly wearing it when they return to consciousness.""

Hector's eyes narrowed slightly. Currently, Garovel was the only one not covered in soul-empowered iron. So instead of dematerializing everyone else's protection, he remade Garovel's orb and brought the reaper back into orbit around him with the other three.

""What are you doing?"" said Hanton."

"2151

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 13 of 14))~~

""You're already replacing their memories, right?"" said Hector. ""Just include the metal in there, too.""

Hanton stared at him for a long moment. ""...And how would I justify such an inclusion?""

Hector shrugged. ""Feel free to get creative.""

Hanton's illusory face tightened. ""I told you that their new memories are supposed to be uneventful.""

""That sounds like your problem,"" said Hector. ""And one of your own making, as well.""

""You are being unreasonable.""

""I don't think I am.""

There was more silence, and the air was noticeably tenser this time.

Hector knew he was pushing it, but frankly, he didn't trust Hanton very much. And most of all, he wanted to know if Hanton could affect the others' minds even through the soul-empowered iron. Acquiring that knowledge was crucial.

The Lord Gaolanet sighed and cast his eyes down to floor. ""...I cannot release them while you are shielding them with your aura.""

Aha. And his 'aura', huh? Hmm.

""But you already knew that, didn't you?"" said Hanton, frowning at him.

Hector elected to say nothing.

""If you truly wish for me to release them, then you must allow me to,"" said Hanton.

And again, Hector found himself doubting the Sparrow's words. ""Is that so? It seems to me... that if you aren't able to access their minds anymore, then whatever you've done to them should eventually just wear off on its own.""

Hanton was quiet.

""Well?"" pushed Hector. ""Are you going to tell me I'm wrong?""

""If I did tell you that, what would you do?""

""Why do you ask?""

Hanton scowled. ""You are not wrong. The effects will wear off in about an hour. Perhaps less, considering how long we have been talking.""

""You know, if you really want me as your ally, then continually trying to deceive me is not a good strategy."" Yeah. That was pretty hypocritical of him, Hector knew. But then again, it wasn't technically wrong, either. He didn't consider his own strategy to be 'good.' Sure, it hadn't blown up in his face quite yet, but he certainly wouldn't recommend it to others."

"2152 -- CXIII.

~~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 14 of 14))~~  
Chapter Two Hundred Thirteen: 'The Lords of Gray Rock...'

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Hanton lowered his gaze. ""I apologize for the omission.""

Hector could sense the shape of the invisible bird making a similar

gesture.

There was a decision to make now, Hector knew. If he didn't need Hanton to release them anymore, then the power dynamic of their conversation had suddenly shifted. No doubt, that was why Hanton had been holding back that little piece of information this whole time.

Hector didn't want to get too confident, though. Hanton could still be-- and probably was--hiding other things from him, things that could potentially shift things back in the Sparrow's favor. Hector wanted to be careful, but at the very least, he now felt that he was in a position to ask the question that he'd been wanting answered since the beginning.

""...Did you run the Vanguard out of Atreya?"" said Hector.

Hanton's human illusion looked up at Hector and then remained perfectly still. His true body, however, was shifting beneath its shroud of invisibility.

The Lord Gaolanet was taking a while to answer, but Hector just waited.

""Yes,"" Hanton finally said.

""Why?"" said Hector.

""That is a rather long story.""

Hector materialized an iron chair for himself and sat down. ""I don't mind.""

""I... do not currently have time for this, Lord Goffe. I have other matters to attend to. Perhaps you can return at a later date, and we can finish this conversation then.""

""And what if I return, only to find that you're no longer here?"" said Hector.

""I would not flee over something so trivial,"" said Hanton.

""I wonder about that.""

For the first time, anger flashed across Hanton's illusory face. ""Why are you so interested in the Vanguard, Lord Goffe? Please do not tell me that you have been taken in by their lies.""

"2152 -- CXIII.

~((The National Puppy Day Special -- page 14 of 14))~  
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"2153

That was not the response Hector had been expecting, and he exhaled half a laugh. ""If that's what you're worried about, then don't be. I'm... fairly skeptical of the Vanguard.""

Hanton blinked a few times, and his posture shifted, as did that of the invisible bird. Then, after a moment, Hanton's human form disappeared again, the Sparrow's true body became visible once more. 'You... you are?'

""Yeah,"" said Hector.

'I must say... I am quite relieved to hear that, Lord Goffe.'

Hector cocked an eyebrow beneath his helm, not sure what to make of Hanton's sudden change in tone. ""I take it that Sparrows aren't on very good terms with the Vanguard, then.""

'Oh, on the contrary, many of my kind work with them.'

It was Hector's turn to blink. ""Really?""

'Indeed. It is quite the symbiotic relationship. We are very capable assistants in a variety of fields, especially regarding propaganda and intelligence work.'

Hector could certainly believe that. ""And what do you get out of it?""

'Ah. I do not get anything. To be clear, I do not work for the Vanguard and never have. My brethren, however, get the Vanguard's brand of ""protection"" for their efforts.'

""And what brand is that, exactly?""

'Our abilities are deemed too volatile to go unmonitored. My kin, therefore, rarely enjoy the same level of privacy and freedom that my family does. Unlike us, they are ""caged birds,"" one might say. Little better than pets.'

Hmm. Hector sympathized, but he could also understand where the Vanguard was coming from on this one. The ability to manipulate people's minds was no fucking joke. The potential for abuse there was just ridiculous. ""I can see why you wouldn't want the Vanguard sniffing around Atreya, then.""

'Yes. However, if ""sniffing"" was all that they had been doing, we could have dealt with that easily enough--as we had been, for generations.'

""You're saying they escalated their work here?""

"2154

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

'Indeed,' said Hanton. 'If left unchecked, they would have sunken their claws into Atreya as they have done countless times before in other nations.'

With the evidence of what happened in Sair still quite fresh in his mind, Hector found it hard to argue with what Hanton was saying here. But he mistrusted the Sparrow's words, nonetheless. He decided to play devil's advocate a little. ""If the Vanguard had been here, then I doubt Abolish would've been able to take over the country the way it did.""

'Ah, yes, Abolish. The catch-all excuse that the Vanguard likes to bandy about at every conceivable opportunity. Perhaps what you say is true, but first and foremost, we should consider what actually happened, no? Abolish was driven out of Atreya, and peace was restored.'

Hector kept his expression still, but he didn't much care for how Hanton was portraying those past events. ""Are you aware of the contributions made by a man named Harper Norez?""

'I am, of course. I understand that his role was pivotal, but let us not

fool ourselves. That man is an outlier. He is hardly even a member of the Vanguard at all. As I have heard it, he aided us in spite of the Vanguard, not because of it.'

""...What were you doing during the Abolish occupation, by the way?""

Hanton fell quiet again.

""Abilities like yours would have been a big help,"" said Hector.

'I am no warrior,' said Hanton. 'I was working to drive Abolish out of Atreya in less direct ways. Ultimately, however, my efforts proved fruitless when you accomplished the task long before I could.'

""What 'less direct ways' are you referring to?"" said Hector.

'Gathering intelligence,' said Hanton. 'Especially with regard to their funding and planning.'

""And once you had finished gathering all of this intelligence, what would you have done with it?""

'Sabotage their operational support behind the scene. A direct confrontation was impossible, but weakening them until they had no choice but to leave was still a viable pursuit. Until you came along and crushed them all, of course.'"

"2155

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

""Did you learn anything useful about Abolish while you were gathering intel?"" said Hector.

'Nothing that you do not already know, I imagine. They intended to lead the nation into war with Rendon and were actively suppressing the media.'

""I can't help thinking that you could have simply made yourself invisible and frozen all their minds without them ever realizing you were there.""

A long breath escaped from the nostrils on the Sparrow's beak. 'You sound like my daughter.'

""She wanted to intervene?""

'Indeed. I fear she soon would have, had you not resolved the matter when you did.'

""...So why'd you stop her?""

'It was simply too risky. I will admit that, yes, that plan might very well have worked. But if, for whatever reason, it did not, then it would instantly spell the end of my House. If the Abolishers noticed us--or goddess forbid, took one of us captive--then the revelation that independent Sparrows are nesting here on Atreyan soil would bring far more attention and trouble to this country than a handful of psychotic murderers in the palace could ever create.'

Hector was doubtful. ""More trouble than a war?""

'Yes! You may not believe me, but yes. A war would not be the end of the world, Lord Goffe. Wars can be very short--and even bloodless. If Abolish left after starting one, I am confident that I could have ensured a swift peace thereafter.' Hanton paused. 'Unless, I suppose, the Vanguard decided to stick their noses in our business again. That would have complicated matters.'

""So let me get this straight. You think... that if word got out about your presence here, then... a bunch of people would show up to capture you?""

'Or kill us, yes. While relatively few know of my kind, those who do are generally very powerful.' Hanton's huge body shifted a little, and he leveled a beady-eyed stare at Hector. 'And I tell you now: if they do ever come for us, we will not go quietly.'

"2156

Hector could feel a sudden heaviness in the air. It wasn't quite the same as that of oppressive soul pressure from an extremely powerful servant, but there was a similarity there, nonetheless. This felt somehow more concentrated on his mind, like the weight didn't extend to the rest of his body.

It also felt different from earlier, when Hanton had been attempting to freeze his thoughts like everyone else. This seemed less deliberate.

More emotionally charged, perhaps.

Whatever this was, it made Hector curious. ""I thought you said that you weren't warriors.""

The weight in the air promptly vanished, and the Sparrow's posture appeared more relaxed again. 'We are not,' said Hanton. 'But so long as I still draw breath, my children will never be enslaved by the Vanguard or anyone else. All who would seek to harm my family will come to know firsthand why my ancestors were so feared in their time. And though I would prefer to avoid it, you are no exception, Lord Goffe. I do not care how powerful you are.'

Unlike some of the other things Hanton had said, Hector could actually believe that. And he could respect it, too. ""I understand,"" he said steadily.

Hanton said nothing.

And in the ensuing silence, Hector felt as if there was one question that he could hold back no longer. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe he should keep his mouth shut. But he just had to ask it now. ""...Have you been poisoning people in Gray Rock in order to keep your secret from getting out?""

The giant bird shifted his feathers again. 'No. Why would you ask such a thing?'

""Because a case of serial poisonings is what led me to you,"" said Hector.

'Hmm.' Hanton paused, perhaps simply to think. 'That is very strange. But you have witnessed my abilities. What need would I have to poison anyone?'

Hector had to admit, that was a fair point."  
"2157

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

'What made you think that this trail of poisonings led to my family?' said Hanton.

Hector considered whether to answer that or not. He couldn't see

much harm in it, but he was still reluctant, perhaps because he'd already been fairly forthcoming and didn't wish to overplay his hand. ""Why does that matter?"" he asked.

'I want to know if you might simply be mistaken or if someone is attempting to frame us.'

Hmm. Were those the only two possible options? Off the top of his head, Hector could think of at least one more in which Hanton was guilty and lying about it.

But he didn't want to say that. All he had was a name in a ledger. That was evidence of a connection but not proof of wrongdoing.

'...Does this have something to do with the Vanguard?' said Hanton. 'Is that why you asked about our relationship with them?'

Actually. Wait just a second here.

Hanton could actually be telling the truth here, couldn't he? Hector suddenly felt like a bit of a dumbass, because those two questions just now had caused him to think of a good reason why the Gaolanets were very unlikely to be responsible for the poisonings.

The Vanguard had been run out of Atreya almost a decade ago, right? So, essentially, the basic theory was that the Gaolanets had been poisoning the Vanguard's informants in order to cripple their information network.

But there had been a poisoning only about a month ago. In fact, that case was what had put Hector and Garovel onto this trail in the first place. So if the Gaolanets were responsible for that poisoning, too, then what the hell had their motive been? The Vanguard wasn't even here, anymore.

He supposed that line of reasoning still didn't exonerate Hanton and his family entirely, but it was a decent strike in their favor, he felt.

Agh, so then who else could be behind these goddamn poisonings? Could they really be unrelated?

Man, Hector felt like kind of an asshole all of a sudden, like he should've thought of all this before even coming here."

"2158

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'I suppose your silence is answer enough,' said Hanton. 'I hope that you continue to maintain a healthy skepticism of the Vanguard going forward.'

""...You really don't like them, do you?"" said Hector.

'They are an invasive species. They pretend they are not, but they are. Once they have you in their clutches, they will never let you go.'

Hector immediately thought of Garovel, who used to work for the Vanguard and managed to leave it just fine. But then he thought of Mehlsanz. And the Rainlords. He didn't think he could just dismiss Hanton's perspective as wholly wrong.

Hector mulled over his next question carefully. While he was more inclined to believe Hanton now, he still wasn't prepared to let the Goalanets off the hook yet entirely. ""How did you finally convince the Vanguard to leave Atreya?""

'I am... reluctant to say, but I suppose there is no sense hiding it. Once we were able to locate where the Vanguard was operating out of, my daughter, being her usual self, decided to take rather drastic action. She walked right into their base and told them all to leave.'

Hmm. Well, that tracked with what he'd found in that abandoned house. It had been Pauline's name there, not Hanton's. ""It was just that easy, huh?""

'We can be very persuasive.'

""Mm. Then why'd you wait so long to do it? The Vanguard had been monitoring Atreya for ages, hadn't they?""

'Up until that point, we believed the Vanguard were content with merely monitoring the country. When we discovered that they intended to increase their presence here... well. My daughter made a dramatic decision. I am merely grateful that it did not bring ruin down upon us.'

""Did she erase all their memories?""

'She replaced them with ones of utter frustration and futility in their work here. Which was not far from the truth, frankly. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she ""exaggerated"" their memories, instead.'"

The more he learned about this bird lady, the more Hector was curious to meet her.

Hanton was not yet finished. 'However, in the interest of full disclosure, she also... may have been spurred to action by another factor.'

""Oh?"" said Hector.

'I had recently been dismissed from my position as the Director of the Agency of Foreign Affairs,' said Hanton. 'She was incensed by this decision and was perhaps looking for some manner of retribution.'

Hector was confused. ""How did that qualify as retribution?"" A thought occurred to him, and he blinked. ""Are you saying that the Vanguard was involved in the AFA?""

'No, but it was trying to acquire influence in our government. I had long been an obstacle to that endeavor. And not just me, in fact. That has been House Gaolanet's mission for centuries. The preservation of this kingdom's sovereignty in the face of overwhelming foreign power.'

It sure sounded noble when Hanton described it like that. Hector had to wonder if it was really so simple, though.

But it did make a degree of sense. After all he'd seen and done during his time outside the country, Hector had thought it was a bit strange that Atreya and the nations around it could be so insulated from what was going on in the world. The Vanguard had clearly played a part in that to some extent, but it seemed evident now that House Gaolanet had been a factor as well.

Hector was still full of questions. There was so much more he wanted to ask Hanton, especially about how the Sparrows conducted themselves--if they abided by any kind of rules or ""code"" regarding the usage of their abilities.

But it was at this time when a knock arrived on the double doors behind him, and without even waiting for a response from Hanton, they opened."



The butler who had showed everyone into the building earlier appeared. This time, he had very little of his prior composure, eyes wide with urgency. ""Lord, I--!""

The man stopped moving entirely at the sight of so many suits of armor standing there--one being Hector with iron orbiting around him. For a moment, the man stood so still that Hector thought Hanton might have frozen him, too.

Hanton, however, did not seem fazed by the new arrival. 'I do not wish to be disturbed, Jessup. Can this wait?'

Jessup twitched back to attention, then cleared his throat and steadied himself. ""I do not think so, Lord."" He didn't seem particularly surprised that his master was a giant bird who could speak directly into his mind. ""It is the news, sir. There has been... an unthinkable development abroad. I am honestly at a bit of a loss how to explain...""

'If it is so important, then speak, man. Quickly now.'

""Five different wars have just broken out within the last hour, Lord.""

Hector wasn't sure what he'd just heard.

And neither was Hanton, apparently. 'What did you say?'

""Five nations,"" said Jessup, walking over to the corner of the room where a large television was sitting. ""Without warning, they each began invading one of their neighbors.""

What the hell?

Jessup wasn't done, though, even as he was presumably searching for the remote control. ""They are calling it a coordinated assault, Lord. They are calling it the outbreak of a second Continental War.""

Chapter Two Hundred Fourteen: 'The encroaching Storm...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Even as he was staring at the screen and listening to the report,

Hector could hardly believe his eyes or his ears.

Could this really be happening? Maybe the reports were exaggerated. Maybe everyone was just freaking out. Overstating things.

A second Continental War? Now, of all times? Why? How?

Everyone knew about the Continental War. Or, the first one, at least. How strange it was, to think that they might have to start making that distinction now. It wouldn't just be the Continental War, anymore. It would be the First Continental War.

Insanity."

"2160 -- CCIV.

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Insanity."  
"2161

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

It had been well over a hundred years since the great war that had spanned the entire Eloan continent. Hector may not have been a very good student, but with how much schools had focused on that subject and how much the war had influenced books and movies and television, it was impossible to be completely ignorant of it.

His understanding was that the First Continental War had been the result of several decades of build up, wherein many countries formed military alliances due to a pervasive fear of being attacked by one or more of their neighbors. And when one of them finally did get attacked, it created a chain reaction of war declarations that consumed all of

Eloa.

The first aggressor had infamously been the nation of Dozer--though, it might've been called something else at the time. Hector wasn't too sure on that part.

Knowing what he did now of Abolish, Hector might've expected Dozer to be one of the aggressors this time as well, but according to the news report, that wasn't the case.

The five invading nations were Ostra, Corrico, Kavia, Calthos, and Vantalay. There were currently only four nations on the defense, because Ostra and Corrico were attacking Melmoore in unison from the north and south, respectively. The other three defending nations were Hoss, Sair, and Czacoa.

The one that stuck out the most to him, of course, was Sair.

The Rainlords were not going to be happy about that. It was still way too soon for them to head back there, and he felt like they knew that, but...

They were going to be super fucking pissed off when he got back to Warrenhold, weren't they?

""Hanton,"" said Hector, only half-conscious of what he was saying, ""please tell me this news report isn't real. That's it's just another one of your illusions...""

'If only that were so,' the Sparrow said grimly. 'I could never have come up with an illusion like this. And if I had, I would not have considered it believable.'"

"2162

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Jessup flinched suddenly. ""Ah! Lord, I nearly forgot! I apologize, but there was something else! With everything happening so quickly, I--'

'What is it, Jessup?'

""It is Lady Pauline, Lord! As soon as she saw this report, she disappeared!""

Hanton's massive wings flapped suddenly, and his avian body popped up off the ground briefly. 'What?!'

""O-of course, it is not so unusual for her venture out on her own without warning, but given the circumstances, I thought--""

A low rumble escaped from Hanton's huge form, creating a sound unlike anything Hector had ever heard before. Was that a growl? Could birds growl?

Hanton settled himself. 'Thank you for telling me, Jessup. I shall retrieve her. Lord Goffe, I am afraid I really must insist that we conclude this meeting here. There is more I would discuss with you, but my daughter takes priority.'

""I'll help you look for her,"" said Hector.

The Sparrow's head reared back a little. 'A kind offer, but an unnecessary one. My children and I are psychically bound. Even if I do not know her exact location, I will always know in which direction I must go in order to find her.'

""Uh... I see,"" was all Hector could think to say.

Hanton gave a mental sigh. 'On the matter of secrecy, I ask that you tell no one of us, but I also understand that I may be placing you in a difficult position by doing so. For now, please do what you think best. I shall visit your Gray Warren soon so that we may speak again.'

And without waiting for Hector's answer, the Sparrow shifted his posture and then launched himself off the ground, creating a wind so furious that it pushed Hector in his full armor back a step and caused all the decorations in the room to tremble in place.

Hector watched as Hanton flew up through the half-open ceiling and then disappeared entirely. He couldn't tell if that was because of Hanton's invisibility or if he'd simply been flying that fast."

"2163

Hector looked over to Jessup, whom he'd shielded from the wind with a quick wall of curved iron. He dematerialized his work, and the man was standing there, hands out in front of his face but eyes wide open.

""...You okay?"" said Hector.

The butler required another moment to find his composure again.

""Ah--yes, sir. Th-thank you for... whatever you just did.""

""Sure thing.""

There wasn't much point in sticking around, so Hector moved to leave, and Jessup offered to guide him back to the entrance. Hector didn't really think he needed the help, but he accepted, anyway. A part of him wanted to wander around the Gaolanet's estate and see if he could find any other Sparrows to talk to, but he figured he should get back to Warrenhold.

His small army of iron-clad human statues followed close behind, and he could tell that they unsettled Jessup. He tried to reassure the poor guy, but he wasn't sure how much it helped. The butler kept asking--rather shakily--if there was anything else he could do before Hector left, such as providing refreshments, but Hector politely declined.

By the time he made it all the way back to the car, everyone was still frozen. Since he still didn't actually have a driver's license, he decided to wait. It wouldn't be long now.

Hopefully.

He pulled out his phone to check the news, but there wasn't much to go on yet.

The more he thought about it, the more easily he could believe that Calthos had attacked Sair. As he recalled, the Abolishers who attacked Dunehall had, supposedly, been biding their time in Calthos beforehand; and he remembered the Sandlords being concerned about tensions with that country, too.

He'd also gotten a brief update from Asad about two weeks ago regarding the state of things over there. The Sandlords had been working hard to keep the peace, and the Vanguard showed no signs of leaving anytime soon, apparently trying to court Abbas Saqqaf."

"2164

met him, of course, having witnessed him take down the Salesman of Death single-handedly with that crazy suit of mechanized armor.

Was Abolish really attacking again so soon, though? Even after losing Ivan?

Oh, wait, perhaps it was precisely because they'd lost Ivan. They probably wanted to get him back, didn't they? And it certainly made sense to attack while the Rainlords were gone.

Aw, fuck, Ivan being set free was the last thing he wanted to imagine, right now. The conversation he'd had with the Salesman of Death was still burned into his mind, and somehow, he doubted that Ivan would just forget about him and leave him alone.

Hector had already intended to keep a close eye on Sair moving forward, but now that seemed more important than ever.

Honestly, though, after what he'd seen Abbas do, Hector was fairly confident that the Sandlords would kick the shit out of Abolish. And with the Vanguard there as well? According to Asad, the one they called Iceheart was in charge of operations in Sair right now, and while Hector didn't know much about him, he knew that the guy was a Field Marshal.

Hector might've liked to meet him, but supposedly he was some kind of ultra hardass. What would you expect from someone named Iceheart, though?

As he mulled the news over again in his head, he began to wonder if he shouldn't actually be more concerned about the war between Vantalay and Czacoa.

One of the treasure hunting teams that they'd dispatched from Warrenhold had been sent to Ridgemark, a coastal city in Vantalay. According to their early reports, they hadn't made any progress in tracking their target artifact down, and a war certainly wasn't going to make it any easier for them."

"2165

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Perhaps it would be best to recall that team and send them

somewhere else. It was a shame that so much time will have been wasted, but it was better safe than sorry.

The biggest worry of all was no doubt if Atreya would somehow get drawn into this larger conflict. At the moment, that didn't seem likely, since there were only nine nations involved in total, but Hector had a feeling that more would be joining in soon. He didn't consider himself to be very knowledgeable when it came to geopolitics, but he doubted that all the other countries in each region were just going to sit back and watch.

'...H-Hector?' came a silent and familiar voice.

'Garovel,' he said calmly. 'Welcome back.'

'What... what the hell happened?'

Before Hector could even answer, the others all began to stir as well. He didn't annihilate all of his iron immediately, but he did bring the orbiting to an end and made holes for the reapers to let them out. He wasn't sure if they would feel safer inside their iron confines, so he felt that this was a decent compromise.

As expected, everyone was terribly confused.

And Hector, being the only one who could explain, did not have a very easy time of it.

""What in lakefire are you talking about?"" said Diego Redwater.

""Check your phones. News of the war is all over the internet.""

""H-hold on,"" said Diego. ""I mean, that's--agh, that's insane, too, but I'm still trying to wrap my head around the part where you met a giant telepathic bird.""

Hector sighed. ""I know how it sounds. But that's why you have a gap in your memories, and that's why you're wearing armor, right now. I made it and infused it with my soul in order to shield your minds from him. The effects took a while to wear off.""

'And where is this Sparrow now?' said Diego's reaper, Yangèra.

Hector did his best to explain again.

This continued for a bit longer, with even the reapers apparently having trouble understanding what he was saying, until at length,



Lynnette chimed in.

""He's telling the truth,"" she said. ""I remember as well. I couldn't speak or move, but I saw and heard everything just as Hector did.""

Wait, what?"

"2166 -- CCXV.

""I thought it was the same for all of you, but apparently not."" Lynnette held up her half-gauntled hand, though it was currently somewhat concealed beneath a glove. ""I can only imagine that this thing somehow interfered with Hanton's abilities.""

Hector stared at her in disbelief.

Everyone else was apparently speechless as well.

She took the opening to keep talking. ""Honestly, is it so difficult to believe? This is Hector we're talking about. Do you think he'd make something like that up?""

Diego tried to scratch his neck, but his armor was in the way. ""Er... hmm.""

Hector was grateful for his own armor as he felt his face grow hot with embarrassment.

""In that case, I should very much like to meet Hanton again,"" said King William. As he spoke, however, his gaze continued to search up and down at his own armor. He hadn't actually mentioned anything about it yet, but he seemed somewhat transfixed by the suit Hector had made for him.

""Well, he said he would drop by Warrenhold soon,"" said Hector.

The King perked up at that. ""Ah, is that so? Then perhaps I have reason to extend my stay again!""

Hector could hear Lynn sighing inside her helmet.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifteen: 'O, flittering interloper...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

It felt good to fly. The wind beneath her wings was the most natural thing in the world. She could hardly believe that her siblings used to fear this so much when they were younger. Birds afraid of flying? How absurd.

No doubt, it had been due to the consistently terrifying stories that their father used to tell them about... well, everything. He'd obviously been trying to instill a wariness of the outside world in his children.

And Pauline Gaolanet couldn't help resenting him a little for that. He'd always made her out to be the troublemaker of the group, but to her mind, she was the only normal one in the family. Living in constant fear--that was abnormal."

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"2167

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

She knew perfectly well that her father would chastise her later for what she was currently doing, but she was honestly quite tired of listening to him. Did he really have their family's best interest at heart?

Well, yeah, he probably did, actually.

She would've liked to use his incompetence or his lack of care as an excuse for her decision to go to Sescoria right now, but even she had to acknowledge how unfair that would be. Her father was no fool, and he meant well. Of course he did.

But she was already in her thirties, and she still felt aimless in her life. Sure, Sparrows had slightly longer life spans on average than humans did, but that was no justification at all, as far as she was concerned.

With as much as her father talked about maintaining their freedom and privacy, Pauline couldn't help feeling like she was sorely lacking in both, most of the time.

Even now, she could sense that he was already beginning to chase after her.

At least she'd managed to get a good head start. Flying at her top speed, it wouldn't take long to reach Sescoria at all, and she knew exactly where she wanted to go.

Bosliat Palace. Or Belgrant Castle. Wherever the Queen was.

More than anything, Pauline wanted to know how that woman was reacting to the news of a supposed second Continental War. What would she do? Anything at all?

Maybe not. 'Wait and see' was a perfectly viable plan, especially considering none of the countries in question were their neighbors.

Pauline wasn't eager to participate in a war, by any means, but she did think it was better to know in advance if one was coming their way. Surely, even her father wouldn't be able to protest that logic.

Oh, what was she thinking? Of course he would be able to. Somehow."  
"2168

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

The capital of Atreya was already coming into view. This was one of the reasons Pauline loved flying so much, the sights from the air. Humans could build such remarkable things with their fidgety little fingers, couldn't they? She might've been jealous if not for her ability to make up the difference with her mind.

They were fun to observe, humans. In her youth, she'd often played with them without her father's knowledge. It was so tempting to toy with their minds a bit. Many times as a chick, she hadn't been able to resist that temptation, but she knew better now that she was older. Humans often appeared helpless against the power she could wield.

But that wasn't so. Not entirely.

Humans were dangerous, if you weren't careful. And maybe even if

you were.

It was easy to look down on them. To think that her intelligence made her superior. But intelligence was a fickle thing. In some ways, she felt that the humans were much smarter than her kind. They cooperated better, for one thing. And they seemed to understand the necessity of risk in pursuit of greatness.

Her kind could definitely learn a thing or two from them.

She spotted Bosliat Palace and reached out with her mind, searching for the Queen.

Ah, yes, there she was in her office. Perfect.

This was not Pauline's first visit. She'd made this trip several times before, though not as often as she might've liked.

She knew that it was rude to eavesdrop, of course--and that in this case, it might even be illegal--but her intentions were pure, and that was what really mattered, wasn't it? She only wanted to help, and besides, no one would ever know she was here. Her ability to conceal her presence even from reapers meant that she probably wouldn't even have to bother wiping anyone's memories."

"2169

Memory manipulation was a tricky thing to pull off, anyway. It was hugely useful, of course, so her father had made sure she learned how to do it at a very young age, but she'd never liked using it, even in her more reckless days.

It felt wrong, in a lot of ways. She was taking something that didn't belong to her. Sure, they wouldn't miss it as long as she did it correctly, but that didn't change the essential nature of the act. Thievery.

She much preferred just remaining invisible. No mess to clean up afterward. Or guilt to deal with.

Of course, a Sparrow's ""invisibility"" was not truly so. That, too, was a mental trick. They weren't manipulating light or altering the physical composition of their bodies. Instead, it was simply a matter of tweaking the ""perception"" of their presence.

That was why it worked even on reapers. It didn't rely on fooling anyone's eyesight. It was about fooling their mind. And reapers--even if they didn't have physical bodies--still had minds.

It wasn't that hard, either, especially with all the practice she had. It didn't matter how many people were looking at her. As long as she could touch their naked minds, the simple desire to conceal herself was all she required to make it so. As easy as flipping a switch that controlled a thousand light bulbs.

Cameras, however, could still be a problem. She wouldn't be able to block the perception of someone watching television five hundred miles away, and she couldn't alter a camera's perception of her, either.

She could, however, simply avoid them.

A Sparrow's eyesight was certainly remarkable, but it was more than just that. When she concentrated, she could see through eyes that were not her own. She could listen with ears that did not belong to her. She could touch with fingers she'd never had."

"2170

A mind was, among other things, a vessel for interpretation. Physical senses funneled into it and needed to be understood. Ultimately, it was just information.

Therefore, it was possible for her to sneak a peek at that information for herself, to reinterpret it with her own mind simultaneously with the person who was actually receiving it. It could be a bit messy, since there was so much information being received, but all she really needed to focus on was sight and hearing--and occasionally touch and smell, if she wanted.

That simplified matters greatly. Not worrying about other senses like taste, balance, or proprioception meant that the amount of information she received was greatly reduced. Plus, other senses could be a bit difficult to reinterpret.

Every mind was distinct in one way or another. Perhaps that was because of the soul. Or perhaps it was the opposite. Perhaps that distinctness was what generated the soul.

Whatever the case, it made each mind slightly different, which meant that each one required a slightly different reinterpretation in order for her own mind to understand.

That was also why reading thoughts directly was so hard--if not impossible. People may have interpreted information from their senses in slightly different ways, but people crafted their own thoughts in very different ways.

It was like the difference between a combination lock that required three numbers versus one that required twenty. It was theoretically possible to discern the pattern, but it was far too impractical to be useful.

She'd learned that at a young age, too.

But reinterpreting senses was certainly manageable, and after years of practice, sight and hearing were by far the easiest. So much so, in fact, that she could now do it on an enormous scale.

Sescoria may have been far from the largest city in the world, but its population density was the highest in the nation, and in this area around Bosliat, there were thousands of people. Pauline could see what they all saw, hear what they all heard. And it wasn't overwhelming, either. Mildly difficult, perhaps, but certainly not overwhelming. With a bit of effort, her mind could collect all of that information, reinterpret it, organize it, and even convert it into a mental map for herself."

"2171

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 1 of 24?!))~~

Unfortunately, even with all of those advantages at her disposal, the royal palace was still quite the danger zone as far as cameras were concerned. Even on normal days, there were likely to be visitors taking pictures or videos in front of the main gatehouse, and on days like today--days when huge news gripped the nation--reporters with camera crews were everywhere.

And even if those weren't problems, there was also the ever-growing threat of security cameras. When she was young, those hadn't been nearly so prevalent or obnoxious, but these days, she had to be

mindful of them all the time.

Yes, she could sense the security guards who were observing the video feeds and thereby prevent them from seeing her on screen, but that didn't stop the footage from being recorded. If someone decided to go back and watch that footage while she wasn't around to alter their perception, then they would see the giant bird there as clear as day.

Wiping the footage was technically possible, if rather tricky, but even if it wasn't, that could arouse suspicion, too. The absence of security footage was just as likely to be noticed. It was far better to simply avoid the cameras entirely, but that was also growing more and more difficult as time went on. The humans did love improving their technology, didn't they?

No doubt, this was one of the main reasons why her father insisted on maintaining a reclusive lifestyle. How many times had he told her about another instance of a Sparrow being outed in some other country? He never missed an opportunity to make his children even more fearful of the outside world.

Pauline was of a different opinion, however. She felt that they should meet these challenges head on. Hiding away at home wasn't going to prepare them for anything. The looming threat of technology was scary, sure, but that was exactly why they needed to stay informed about how it was developing."

"2172

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 2 of 24?!))~~

Thankfully, her father at least seemed to partially agree with her on that point. He made a habit of keeping up with the latest technological developments in a variety of fields, and the number of online tech blogs and journals that he followed was reaching a level bordering on absurdity.

Pauline, of course, much preferred to see the technology for herself. There were too many rumors and exaggerations on the internet for her taste, even from supposedly credible sources. Making outrageous claims about their works-in-progress was just one tactic that people used to procure investment--or goddess forbid, government funding.

Those ones were typically the most egregious, in her experience. Tech



companies who wanted to make money off of the government always seemed to take delight in the extra bureaucratic bloat that allowed them to squeeze every last troa that they possibly could out of their governmental liaisons.

That was another reason why Pauline quite liked Queen Helen, actually.

Well, the new Queen Helen, at least--the Queen Helen that had returned from abroad and retaken the country from the Abolish halfwits who'd chased her out.

Before that whole ridiculous circus, Pauline hadn't thought very highly of the Queen at all. In fact, she'd kind of despised her. Pauline had thought her ill-suited to the task of ruling a nation, never taking care to foster a strong base of political support for herself. The woman would always just do things as she saw fit, and sure, some of those things were basically good decisions, but they also alienated people who could have probably been her allies with a bit of compromise and persuasion. Thankfully, she seemed to have matured over the last year.

Honestly, at the time of the late king's passing, Pauline would've most liked to see Prince David take the throne. That man had always been able to play the game.

When he felt like playing it, that was."

"2173

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 3 of 24?!))~~

She sometimes wondered what would've happened if, somehow, Prince David's father had chosen him for succession. Pauline would've certainly been pleased, but there was a fair chance that Prince David would've simply abdicated and ruined the whole thing, anyway.

It had all happened in such slow increments over the years, but with the benefit of hindsight, the last decade had been an absolute mess for this nation.

If only her father hadn't been removed as the Director of the Agency of Foreign Affairs. To Pauline's mind, that seemed to be the inciting incident that allowed all of these other things to follow.

If only Hanton Gaolanet had remained an advisor to King Martinus III.

Even now, nine years later, Pauline still wasn't sure why that had happened. Her father rarely spoke of it. And as she wasn't one to shy away from awkward questions, she had of course tried--multiple times by now--asking him about it directly, but he never really gave her a straight answer.

He just told her that Martinus had stopped listening to him, that their relationship had been damaged beyond repair.

Pauline hadn't really understood how that could be the case. Her father could manipulate minds. Surely, if there'd been a problem like that, he could've simply made Martinus forget about it.

But apparently not. Her father told her that things weren't always so simple. That relationships were complicated.

And that some memories couldn't be erased.

She'd pressed him for more details, of course, but he hadn't provided them.

In a broad sense, her father was obviously correct. There were certain types of memories that Sparrows could not remove from a person's mind. In general, the older a memory was, the harder it was to wipe away. Memories over time became a tangled web of interlocking images, ideas, emotions--and perhaps more. Removing all of that was incredibly complicated. If you missed any part of it, the smallest fragment of the memory, then the whole thing could be regrown, one day. Randomly, perhaps. The entire memory could rush back to the person in an epiphany-like moment--or *deja vu*, even.

But Pauline didn't think that was what her father had meant.

Because there was one other type of memory that was very difficult to get rid of. The type that was deeply etched into the mind, usually by way of powerful emotion."

"2174

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 4 of 24?!))~~

Pauline had to wonder what exactly had transpired between her father

and the late king, but she doubted she would ever find out. With one of them dead and the other an impenetrable fortress of secrets, there was little hope.

She put it out of her mind.

Her mental map was revealing a handful of safe zones around Bosliat's inner buildings. There were surveillance cameras all over the rooftops, but they primarily targeted the areas around the skylight windows. She wasn't trying to break into the royal palace, so it was simple enough to stay outside their view as she fluttered closer.

The Queen's mind was in the Royal Office at the top of the Royal Tower, the palace's centermost turret. That building was, rather understandably, the most heavily surveilled, but Pauline didn't need to get that close, so she landed gingerly on a much safer tower several dozen meters away. Plus, this spot shaded her from the bright sun, thanks to the tall roof in front of her.

She concentrated, focusing on the Queen.

Who was with her? What was she seeing? What was she hearing?

Several people were there. The images and sounds coalesced in Pauline's mind.

""--should not keep delaying, Your Highness,"" came the voice of a short woman in front of the Queen's desk. ""The people will want to hear from you.""

""I will delay as long as I please. This matter, while grave, is of no immediate importance to Atreya. I will not act in haste when there is no need.""

""With respect, Your Highness,"" came the voice of a bearded and bespectacled man standing farther away, ""I do not think that my esteemed colleague here is suggesting that you should present the public with a detailed plan of action this very evening. She merely meant that it would help put the people's hearts at ease if they were to hear a few words of encouragement.""

"2175

""Perhaps,"" said the Queen. ""Or perhaps making a statement when I have nothing of substance to say would only serve to unsettle the public further. I imagine many would see it as an admission that I do not know what to do.""

""I believe you may be overthinking it, Your Highness,"" said the same man from before.

Wait a minute. Pauline recognized him. That was Arthur Vollier, eldest son of the wealthiest man in the nation, Domitrus Vollier. So he was serving as an advisor to the Queen now, was he?

""It does not need to be a complicated matter,"" Arthur went on. ""A short, simple statement to clear the air and ensure the people of your attentiveness to the situation. That is all it would be.""

""My attentiveness? You believe the people might be questioning my attentiveness?""

""I do not see why you are trying to pick a fight,"" said Arthur. ""This would be an easy way to score points with the general public. Points which you may soon be in need of, no?""

A rather weighty period of silence arrived, until another voice broke it.

""Arthur, what do you mean by--?""

""Enough,"" said the Queen. ""I will only address the nation when I see fit to do so. And I believe this meeting has gone on for too long, already. Everyone is dismissed.""

Well, she seemed stressed.

Understandable, Pauline supposed.

When the advisors were all gone, only two minds remained. The Queen and her reaper.

Pauline was not surprised. The Gaolanets had known that the Queen was a servant for many months now. Her father had learned of it shortly after Abolish had been routed. The Queen's grand return to the capital had been cause for celebration, and every lord in the nation had attended the subsequent banquet.

Every lord, that was, save the newest one.

The young Lord Hector Goffe of the Gray Warren had been notably

absent from that event, though only a handful of people had even been aware of his newly granted title at the time."

"2176

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 6 of 24?!))~~

Her father had been very reluctant to meet with Lord Goffe for some reason, but Pauline hadn't been able to curb her curiosity and had actually visited the Gray Warren once already.

Sadly, the entrance didn't lend itself well to stealthy infiltration--which was no doubt the point--so she hadn't been able to see the underground fortifications with her own eyes.

But she hadn't needed to enter it in order to realize that there was most definitely something very strange about that place.

For one thing, she couldn't sense inside it. She wasn't sure how that was even possible. Had Hector Goffe actually infused the entire castle with his ""soul power"" or whatever it was that servants used? That notion seemed utterly ridiculous to her, considering how enormous that underground barrier seemed to be.

And for another thing, she'd felt incredibly uncomfortable while she was near that place. Some unexplained sensation in the back of her mind pestered her the entire time she was there, and though she couldn't tell what the cause of it was, she knew for a fact that it was no natural thing. Some kind psychic security system? Or a warding mechanism, perhaps?

Whatever the explanation, she hadn't been keen to go back there a second time. She might've disagreed with her father a lot of the time, but this was one of those instances where she could very much see the wisdom in his type of thinking.

That place was dangerous. Whatever the hell was going on there, she was no longer curious enough to find out. Compared to that, the royal palace's security cameras were positively comforting.

'You may want to listen to your advisors on this one,' said the reaper with the Queen.

""Hmph. What makes you say that?""

'Because the outbreak of a second Continental War would be a very serious matter.'

""You think I do not know that?""

"2177

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 7 of 24?!))~~

'On the contrary,' the reaper said, 'I think you know it very well, and it scares you.'

""I did not ask for your opinion.""

'Ah. Well, if I am bothering you so much, then you should be glad, because I suspect that Harper and I won't be able to stick around for much longer.'

There was notable silence.

Pauline was confused. Harper? Her father had mentioned that name to her. A member of the Vanguard who was currently protecting the Queen. So did that mean this reaper wasn't the Queen's partner, but Harper's?

""...Have you received orders from your superiors?"" the Queen asked.

'Not yet, but if this war continues to escalate, then it's a virtual certainty that we will get the call quite soon.'

""I see...""

Oh.

Hmm.

Pauline had little love for the Vanguard, but that was still unsettling news to hear. According to her father, this Harper fellow seemed like quite the valuable warrior--and possibly even trustworthy, as well.

Extremely high praise from Hanton Gaolanet.

The idea that the kingdom might soon be losing one of its most valuable protectors...

Pauline was glad that she'd thought to come here today. This was exactly the kind of thing she wanted to know about as soon as possible.

'If you have any lingering questions for me,' said Harper's reaper, 'you should ask them soon. This may very well be the last time we speak for quite a long while.'

There was more silence, and Pauline could see the Queen staring at an assortment of papers on her desk. What did they say? The woman's eyes weren't really focusing on them, so they were difficult to read. Was that Prince David's signature?

""What do you make of Intar's role in all of this?"" the Queen asked.

'Ah, yeah, that is the big question mark. Intar isn't technically at war with anyone right now, but it maintains quite good political and economic relations with several of the involved nations.'

"2178

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 8 of 24?!))~~

""If Intar decides to step in, it would completely change the war,"" said Queen Helen.

'Most certainly,' said the reaper. 'Conventional wisdom would say that, at the moment, Intar could probably end the war single-handedly, if it really wanted to. Wouldn't be pretty, but it could. The war is still relatively small.'

""Mm. Conventional wisdom, is it? Then do you perhaps have some unconventional wisdom for me?""

'Heh. Well, Intar may be the most powerful nation on the continent--or perhaps even on the planet--but it is also in the midst of an ideological war of its own, right now. Between interventionists and pacifists, of all things.'

""Yes, I have heard as much,"" said the Queen. ""Do you think the pacifists are influential enough to prevent Intar from joining the fight?""

A long pause arrived. 'As a reaper, this is where I would usually say something non-committal. You know. About how the world is complicated and difficult to predict and blah blah blah. But honestly, I'm

tired of doing that all the time. I could be wrong, obviously, but to be quite frank with you, Your Majesty... I don't think Intar will send a single soldier to anyone's aid.'

""I appreciate your candor, but what makes you sound so confident?""

'Years of immersing myself in modern Intarian culture. The majority of Intarians won't see this as their problem. Which, in fairness, it isn't. Plus, the Intarian Congress has been in a state of complete deadlock for nearly a decade now. They can barely pass even the simplest of legislation. Unless that somehow changes, I don't see them suddenly agreeing to go to war on some other country's behalf.'

""I see.""

'And of course, there's the Vanguard as well. We generally try to stay out of politics, so even though we have a significant presence in Intar, our higher-ups don't hold much influence with the government there. In fact, I imagine the politicians there will believe that they don't need to intervene, because the Vanguard will take care of it. As usual.'

"2179

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 9 of 24?!))~~

""Is that bitterness I hear?"" said the Queen.

'Perhaps a bit. More and more, I've begun to feel that Intar is exploiting the Vanguard's goodwill so that they don't have to bother protecting their own borders and allies.'

""How can that be? I was under the impression that the Vanguard does not participate in conflicts in which Abolish is not involved.""

'Mm, yeah, that's the intention. On paper. But in practice, how do you know Abolish isn't manipulating a conflict from behind the scenes? Not all Abolish sects are as overt in their actions as the one that came here. It's foggy, at best. And a sufficiently motivated Vanguardian officer might very well use that as justification for sending troops to ""investigate"" a conflict which is exhibiting no obvious signs of Abolish involvement.'

""How worrisome...""

'Yeah.' A beat passed. 'But in fairness, I should also mention: it's not



like such suspicions are completely unfounded or otherwise indicative of corruption on the Vanguard's part. Over the last few decades, there have been plenty of instances where Abolish has been caught trying to stealthily stoke civil unrest and incite violence.'

""That is not more comforting,"" said the Queen. ""In fact, dwelling on that possibility sounds like a recipe for paranoia.""

'Oh, absolutely. I don't envy my superiors' positions at all.'

Pauline could sense her father's presence quite strongly now from the east. She exhaled through her nares and prepared herself for the inevitable argument.

The Queen and the reaper were not done talking, however. Pauline must've missed something while she was distracted, because their conversation seemed to have shifted topics slightly.

'It is particularly frustrating, considering how wealthy Intar is. It shouldn't be relying on a force of only a few thousand servants for all the heavy lifting.'

""Does Intar not commission its own servants?"" the Queen asked.

""Those without ties to the Vanguard?""

"2180

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 10 of 24?!))~~

'I've never met any of them personally,' the reaper said, 'but yes, as I understand it, the Intarian military does retain a few of its own servants, still.'

""Only a few?"" said the Queen. ""Surely, such a large nation would have more than that.""

'Maybe three hundred years ago. These days, though, the Vanguard has a bit of a monopoly on that type of manpower in Intar.'

""Why is that?""

'Many reasons, I imagine--but all of which result in one reoccurring problem. That being, it is very difficult to control people who wield such power.'

""Ah.""

'In order to work for the Intarian Armed Forces as a servant, you must pass number of ""loyalty tests."" And you must also agree to live under constant observation.'

""...I find that very odd. Any normal military would offer enormous benefits to such valuable officers.""

'Oh, I'm sure they get paid quite handsomely. But the IAF takes the rule of law extremely seriously when it comes to servants. Which is wise, in my opinion. Historically speaking, servants and reapers who don't possess a deep respect for something higher than themselves--like the law, for instance--are often the ones who pursue the path of violent rebellion and conquest.'

Pauline's head twitched as she suddenly realized that her father was right there behind her. She'd gotten so caught up in the last bit of that conversation that she hadn't even noticed him landing.

She turned and looked at him. She waited, but he didn't say anything.

That was weird.

Why wasn't he saying anything? Wasn't he mad?

Hey, maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was pleased.

And maybe that was wishful thinking.

She checked on the Queen again.

""--sounds like you are victims of your own success,"" the woman was saying with a surprising amount of amusement in her voice.

'Heh. Perhaps. The Vanguard has bailed Intar out so many times that it does seem like they've begun to take our presence for granted. I'm not sure whether to be happy or sad about that.'

"2181

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 11 of 24?!))~~

""Might you have any insight for me regarding Steccat, as well?"" the Queen asked.

'A bit, perhaps. I am not nearly as confident in my appraisal of that country as I am with Intar, however. Harper and I often travel to Steccat to visit a couple of his adopted children, but the Vanguard has comparatively little presence there.'

""Is that so? But is there not a Vanguardian Field Marshal who is known as the Hammer of Steccat?""

'There is, yes. Field Marshal Kane. But I did say ""comparatively."" And while Kane does have fairly strong ties to that country, so does Sai-hee.'

""Ah.""

'Her people's presence there creates something of a bubble, through which reliable information is difficult to come by.'

""I thought she had a preference for peacekeeping.""

'She does.'

""Then that should ease the flow of information, no?""

'In trade and culture, perhaps, but not in matters of state. They're a rather reclusive bunch, those Steccati aristocrats. They like to hide behind their art and speak little of politics. Or, perhaps, they just don't care.'

Pauline was not surprised to hear that in the slightest. Steccat was the haven of another group of Sparrows, and according to her father, they were even more influential in their country than the Gaolanets were here in Atreya.

'All that being said, though, I doubt Steccat will be getting involved in the war, either. As you said, Sai-hee DOES like her peace. It would surprise me if Steccat decided to jump in without direct provocation.'

""I see...""

Pauline had to agree with the reaper's assessment, though for different reasons. If her brethren in Steccat were anything like her father, then they would doubtless be wanting to avoid conflict as well.

'I suppose it's good that two of Eloa's three juggernauts are probably not going to get involved in the war,' the reaper went on, 'but I unfortunately can't help feeling like their isolationism will actually serve

to make things worse in this instance, not better."  
"2182 -- CCXVI.

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 12 of 24?!))~~

"If that is truly the case," said the Queen, "then perhaps their isolationism is precisely the reason why the invaders have chosen to act now."

'I fear you may be right about that,' the reaper said. 'The timing does seem a bit convenient to me. And that may also mean that whoever orchestrated all of this has been biding their time for quite a while.'

"Well, I cannot imagine that such a coordinated set of offensives could have been a spur-of-the-moment decision."

'True enough. It just concerns me that our opponent may be more than a simple opportunist.'

"...Our' opponent?" said the Queen.

'Our, as in the Vanguard's.'

"Of course."

A knock arrived at the Queen's door, and she bade them enter. It was an attendant, informing the woman that a number of the local lords around Sescoria had arrived at Bosliat, wishing to speak with her. The woman stood up from her desk and moved to receive them in another part of the palace.

Pauline wanted to keep listening, but her father's voice finally arrived in her head.

'That is enough, my dear,' he said with discomforting calmness. 'It is time we return home.'

Chapter Two Hundred Sixteen: 'Thy sharpening edge...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

By the time they made it back to Warrenhold, more unsettling news

was arriving.

The four defending nations of Melmoore, Hoss, Sair, and Czacoa had all formally declared war against their invaders. Additionally, the three nations of Lyste, Naos, and Yena Maria had collectively declared war on Vantalay.

And most recently, the nation of Dozer--which had already been at war with Korgum before this whole thing kicked off--had declared war on Lyste.

That last bit of news seemed to have a particularly negative impact on all of the reapers present.

Hector could understand why. It all but confirmed that Abolish was somehow behind these invasions. Or if they weren't, then at the very least, they were trying to take advantage of the chaos.

And that prospect, while unsurprising, didn't seem much better."  
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~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 12 of 24?!))~~

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"2183

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 13 of 24?!))~~

Just browsing the internet on his phone, Hector noticed that a lot of media attention was being given to the still-undeclared nations of Intar and Steccat. There appeared to be considerable international pressure

on them to get involved, and just about every news outlet was anticipating them to issue an official statement about their position very soon.

The reapers, however, all seemed to think that neither of those giants would join the war.

'It might be different if Intar and Steccat were enemies,' Garovel explained privately. 'In such a case, they would each be feeling the pressure to support their allies against one another. But they're not enemies. They're on pretty good terms, last I checked.'

And many of the other reapers around Warrenhold had more things to say about this subject. The persistent reaper chatter in his head was at an all-time high. It got so bad, in fact, that a lot of the servants decided to leave the main area and go hang out in the lower caves just to get away from all voices in their heads.

Hector, for his part, could just kind of tune them out if he wanted, but he felt like he had to listen as best he could. Whatever decision they eventually arrived at would be enormously important to all of their futures.

Overall, the Rainlords were pretty clearly in a state of confusion and anger. They needed time to sort their thoughts out. The war between Sair and Calthos was obviously their greatest concern, but there was no consensus among them regarding what they should do about it.

Some, unsurprisingly, wanted to depart immediately and go join the Sandlords in battle this very moment, but thankfully, there were many voices in opposition to that idea--more voices than Hector might've expected, actually."

"2184

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 14 of 24?!))~~

Hector sat with Lynn and the King of Atreya while they observed the commotion in the Grand Hall of the Night. They couldn't hear the reapers talking, of course, but there were plenty of corporeal Rainlords discussing the subject as well. The other non-servants apparently had plenty to say, too.

After a while of chaos, the heads managed to gain everyone's attention

by standing together in the middle of the chamber and rising up on a giant platform of ice made by Zeff.

From there, the debate became more formal and organized. The heads split everyone up into two sides, and they cleared the middle of the Grand Hall to make space for speakers to come forth and present their arguments. None of the selected speakers were reapers, presumably so as not to exclude any of the non-servants.

Hector listened carefully to each person who spoke. The crowd listened, too, though they were occasionally more vocal whenever someone made a point that they agreed or disagreed with.

He obviously agreed with those who were calling for everyone to stay, to have patience, to leave the fighting to the Sandlords for now; but he had to admit, he did find some of the arguments from the other side somewhat compelling.

They had a responsibility to their subjects, they said. The people of Sair were living in fear, they said. The Vanguard couldn't be trusted, they said. And as Rainlords, whether the danger came from Abolish or the Vanguard or anything else, it didn't matter.

""The rain fears not the torch,"" they said.

Hector wished he could say that he completely disagreed with that sentiment. He wished he could say that it was foolish. But honestly, if he were in their position, he wasn't really sure what he would do. And if they did decide to go, he was tempted to go with them, even though he knew he probably shouldn't."

"2185

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 15 of 24?!))~~

In fact, now that he was thinking about it, he'd been in their position, hadn't he? More or less? When Abolish had taken the capital and planned to destroy the town of Harold. Hadn't he wanted to do something just as reckless as this?

Garovel had stopped him, of course, but they'd still ended up doing something pretty damn reckless anyway with their plan to ""kidnap"" the King.



In retrospect, that plan probably would've gone to absolute shit, if Lynn hadn't showed up to help him out when she did.

Agh. He was torn.

And so were the Rainlords, it seemed. Even after it was time for dinner, no agreement had been reached. Food was prepared and served, and everyone ate together in the Grand Hall while the debate just kept going. Speaker after speaker, counterargument after counterargument.

It was going to be a long evening.

After another few hours, when Hector could see that many of the participants were beginning to tire, a familiar woman stepped into the center to speak.

It was Nere Blackburn, Hector realized after a moment, making his heavy eyelids perk back up again. She hadn't said anything all night long. Her reaper, Sentsia, was hovering beside her.

""Perhaps we can arrive at a compromise,"" said Nere. Her voice was rather flat, lacking the passion of most of the previous speakers, but perhaps that wasn't surprising, given the late hour. ""Instead of committing ourselves fully to either attacking or staying behind, we could send a team to monitor the situation in Sair and report back.""

A few whispers and mutters ran through the crowd of listeners.

""We have already dispatched two other teams abroad,"" said Nere. ""What would be the harm in sending one more?""

Hmm. It didn't sound like the worst idea in the world, Hector thought."  
"2186

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 16 of 24?!))~~

Apparently, the other Rainlords thought similarly. It took a little while longer of debate, but soon enough, an agreement was reached between the two sides, and the crowd of listeners finally began to disperse from the Grand Hall.

The heads, wanting to continue discussing the details in private, moved to the conference room higher up in the Tower of Night. Hector

sat in on that meeting as well, curious to know who they might choose for this mission to Sair.

The two teams that they had dispatched on treasure hunts had each consisted of three lesser known servants and one reaper for guidance. However, the reason they hadn't dispatched one more team to find a third treasure was because some of the heads hadn't been fully confident in the remaining candidates' suitability.

The heads' collective standards appeared to be quite high, and there had been various concerns that kept getting brought up, ranging from the candidates' levels of fame to their levels of maturity. Even the trio that they'd sent to Vantalay had almost not made the cut.

Which reminded Hector of an earlier thought he'd had.

""Ah--excuse me for interrupting,"" he said, standing up from his chair at the end of the long conference table.

The heads and their reapers all looked at him, perhaps a bit surprised since he'd been quiet this whole time.

""I was thinking that maybe we should recall the team we sent to Ridgemark in Vantalay,"" said Hector.

There was a brief silence.

""That was the team of Blackburn triplets, was it not?"" said Salvador Delaguna, eyeing the family's representatives seated across from him.

""Yes,"" said Horatio Blackburn. His cousin, Nere, sat next to him, and his reaper, Yovess, hovered behind him along with Sentsia.

'The decision ultimately falls to you, then,' said Mevox, Salvador's reaper. 'Personally, I'm inclined to agree with our Lord Darksteel here. The risk in Vantalay has obviously been compounded to a greater degree than we could have anticipated, and if we bring them back now, we could instead dispatch them to Sair. Or elsewhere, if we prefer.'

"2187

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 17 of 24?!))~~

'Is Sair any less dangerous than Vantalay?' said Sentsia. 'It seems a

bit premature to say that.'

Axiolis chimed in next. 'Maybe so, but we have already decided that a team must be sent to Sair, regardless of the danger. This is not the case for Vantalay. It is less a matter of risk and more a matter of necessity. To my mind, the mission in Ridgemark is unnecessary, given all we have learned today.'

Sentsia was silent a moment as everyone looked at her, waiting for her response. 'Your reasoning is sound,' she said. 'However, the Ridgemark team has been there for over two weeks now, and their last report was a rather optimistic one. It seems a shame to waste that progress.'

Zeff Elroy leaned forward in his chair. ""What 'progress' has there been, precisely?""

'They have heard rumors of the artifact in question among the locals.' Sentsia leveled her gaze toward Hector now. 'They also mentioned that the Tuning Orb of Karugetti has been lighting up more frequently.'

Hector's eyes widened a little, and he couldn't help glancing at Garovel.

The Tuning Orb Of Karugetti was one of the few objects he'd managed to snag from Himmekel, the Paradise Vault. He hadn't even known the name of it when Garovel told him to pick it up during his battle with that worm, and he might've even forgotten about it entirely if Garovel hadn't reminded him of it just prior to dispatching the two teams.

According to Garovel, the Tuning Orb of Karugetti was an item that could locate ardor-infused materials. Or something. Apparently, it was a little weird and unreliable. The whole time he'd been in possession of it, Hector had never once seen it light up like Sentsia had just said, even in the presence of the Scarf of Amordiin and the Shifting Spear of Logante that he'd given to Mr. Easton."

"2188

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 18 of 24?!))~~

He also remembered grabbing a mirror during the worm fight, but sadly, Hector had no idea what happened to it. He must've dropped it at some point in all the confusion. He didn't recall having it during the

rather bumpy ""flight"" back to Warrenhold from Rathmore's Gate, so he figured that it probably hadn't even made the trip back to Atreya in the first place.

""If they are getting close to their target,"" said Horatio, ""then I would like to give the boys more time. Perhaps another week, and then we can reassess their progress. If it seems as if they have hit a wall, then I will recall them.""

Evangelina Stroud folded her arms. ""Like Mevox said, it is your decision. If you truly have faith in that silly little frat party of yours, then so be it.""

Hector remembered the Lady Stroud being one of the two most vocal opponents to sending the Blackburn triplets to Vantalay. And her stance had not been without justification, either. Those three dudes had been... an interesting bunch, to say the least.

'Well, ""faith"" may be a strong word for it,' said Sentsia, 'but if nothing else, I think this is a good opportunity for them to prove themselves. When it comes down to it, they are reliable.'

""For their own sake, let us hope so,"" said Zeff. He'd been the other opponent.

Horatio nodded. ""It's settled, then. The Ridgemark team will stay on task for one more week."" He breathed a long breath and settled deeper into his chair. ""Which means that they cannot be assigned to the Sair team.""

Grumbles of acknowledgment rolled across the conference table, and the discussion returned to exactly the same place it had been before Hector interrupted.

After a while, Hector began to have trouble keeping his eyes open. It seemed like the heads were going to keep discussing this well into the morning, if they had to.

Not having anything else to say, Hector decided to leave them to it. He wasn't about to argue with whoever they ultimately chose for the job, anyway."

"2189

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 19 of 24?!))~~  
He wanted to check on Ericoros.

The problem of Leo was far less threatening than before, but Hector knew that he couldn't just move on. He'd tried to speak with Ericoros multiple times over the last three weeks, but the reaper had only recently even begun to respond to him at all.

Mainly, Hector wanted to hear Ericoros' thoughts on Leo. He wanted to know about their relationship from Ericoros' perspective. Of course, he also wanted to know more about Sai-hee, but he felt that asking the reaper about her would only serve to create more distrust, not less. Given everything Leo had told him about Ericoros' sense of loyalty to her, it seemed likely that Ericoros would not respond well if Hector ever gave off an impression that of wanting to disrupt or otherwise harm her operations.

Regardless, convincing the reaper that he could be trusted was quite a tall order. Frankly, Hector wasn't sure if it was even possible. The starting point seemed clear enough, sure: he had to get to know Ericoros better. But what came after that? What would he do if he came to conclusion that Ericoros simply couldn't be swayed? Or trusted?

That seemed like the most likely outcome, in fact. The more Hector tried to imagine himself in Ericoros' position, the more convinced he became that the reaper's plan would be to say whatever it took to get himself released and then just bail.

Which, of course, Hector could not allow. If Ericoros managed to escape, the threat thereafter was immense. No doubt, he would return to Sai-hee and tell her all about Leo and the Rainlords and Hector, and then who knows what she would do?

Hector knew how careful he had to be, which was why he only trusted a handful of people to look after Ericoros when he wasn't doing so himself. Oftentimes, the chosen person was Melchor Blackburn, and today was no different."

"2190

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 20 of 24?!))~~

Hector grabbed some late night snacks from the kitchen on the first

floor, then made the trek all the way back up the Tower of Night and across one of the interconnecting nightrock bridges near the cavern ceiling. His destination the Star Tower, which could only be entered from the top floors, because the bottom half of the structure was still missing.

The restoration effort had not yet made any progress on the Star Tower, as it was the most daunting project by far. The other towers just had to be renovated and updated, but the Star Tower's foundation had to be completely rebuilt.

How the Star Tower was managing to hang there in midair like that with only its connection to the rocky ceiling to support its weight, Hector still had no idea. A part of him thought that it would collapse any day now. And why anyone would choose a room in the most unstable tower in all of Warrenhold, Hector also wasn't too sure about.

But that was exactly what Melchor had done. For whatever reason, the man known as Darktide preferred this place.

Hector had been meaning to ask him about that decision. Maybe he'd do that today, too.

From the inside, though, he supposed the Star Tower didn't feel that unstable. The stone floor felt perfectly solid under his feet, if a bit uneven due to the dangling building's slight tilt. There were large cracks in the halls as well, but the area with nightrock was of course perfectly pristine. The special material crafted by Stasya Orlov in an age long past did have the ability to regenerate itself, after all.

Melchor's chamber was within the Star Tower's large subsection of nightrock. Hector knocked on the hefty stone door, though the act was done more out of courtesy than need, since he knew that Melchor and Orric would have sensed his approach long beforehand.

""Come in, Lord Goffe,"" came Melchor's familiarly penetrating voice."  
"2191

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 21 of 24?!))~~  
Hector opened the door and observed the scene before him.

Melchor sat cross-legged on a large rug in the middle of the floor. Had

he been meditating? Perhaps not. Ericoros was in his right hand, and Orric floated behind him.

The man's tilted bedroom was a sparse affair. A bed, a lamp, one bookshelf, and one cardboard box summed up the entirety of its furnishings. A couple pillows here, a blanket there. That was it. The man didn't have a television or even a computer, despite those implements having been made available to everyone who wanted them.

Hector wasn't even sure if Melchor had a phone. He never saw the man using one. But he must've, right? For emergencies, if nothing else.

""Welcome,"" said Melchor with a faint smile. ""We were just discussing the nature of captivity.""

Hector cocked an eyebrow. ""That so?""

""We have all had experience with it at one time or another,"" Melchor went on. ""It gives one a certain opportunity for reflection that the hustle and bustle of normal life tends to take for granted."" He looked to Ericoros. ""Wouldn't you say?""

As usual, the reaper remained silent.

""Lost for words again, hmm?"" Melchor's gaze returned to Hector. ""Apologies, my lord. He seems to grow a bit shy whenever you are around. I'm sure he doesn't mean any harm by it.""

Hector had to consciously avoid reacting to that. Melchor was probably just teasing the reaper, but that word choice had still taken Hector by surprise. Shy, huh?

Ericoros, for his part, was a bundled up form of glowing and only-vaguely skeletal energy. Whenever reapers were being held or holding onto someone themselves, their usual appearance slowly shifted and condensed into something a bit more spherical.

""You may find it difficult to believe, but Ericoros here has actually been quite talkative lately,"" Melchor went on. ""All things considered, I would say that he is taking his admittedly difficult circumstances in stride.""

"2192

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 22 of 24?!))~~

Hector closed the door behind him as he stepped into the room, not yet sure what he wanted to say--if anything.

In some ways, Melchor's attitude still surprised him. It had been weeks now, but Darktide had never really eased up with this performance of his, pretending to be subordinate to the Lord of Warrenhold.

And for the life of him, Hector wasn't sure why. At this point, Hector was confident that Melchor Blackburn was the absolute last person who needed to keep pretending. Having observed Melchor sparring with a few different people now, Hector was of the opinion that Melchor probably could fight Leo on even footing, if he really wanted to. In fact, with Melchor having access to hyper-states and Leo not, the battle might even be in Darktide's favor.

So why was he still bothering with this whole charade? Hector appreciated it, of course, since he certainly wasn't looking for a fight to break out among potential comrades, but it was hard to deny that Melchor seemed to take a certain delight in the deception being played here.

'Do you have new orders for us, Lord?' said Orric. Melchor's reaper had been quite obviously on board with it, as well.

Hector wasn't as surprised by that. Most reapers seemed to have a mischievous streak in one form or another. ""No. Just thought I would drop by.""

'Ah. Well, it is always a pleasure to see you. In fact, it's a pleasure to see just about anyone around here, sometimes. But I suspect that's why Melchor chose this place for his sleeping quarters.'

That remark piqued Hector's interest, and he regarded Melchor another time. ""You like the isolation of the Star Tower?""

Melchor bobbed his head to the side briefly. ""Oh, I don't know if it's that, exactly."" He scratched his scruffy chin. ""I've always had a soft spot for unloved things.""

"2193



~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 23 of 24?!))~~

""Hmm,"" hummed Hector. ""Then does that mean you'll stop liking this place after it gets renovated?""

""Heh, perhaps,"" said Melchor. ""I guess we'll find out.""

Would we? Even if the renovation continued to proceed as smoothly as it had been over the last few weeks, Hector figured that it would probably still be a while before they reached the Star Tower.

Considering how much more work it needed done and how low of a priority it was when compared to some of the others, the Star Tower might very well be the last one to get worked on.

Would Melchor still be staying at Warrenhold by then? Would any of the Rainlords?

Those questions bothered him, but Hector didn't want to dwell on them too much. With Ericoros here, he felt like he couldn't just ask whatever he pleased. He had to choose his words carefully.

""Ericoros,"" said Hector. ""Have you spoken to Leo at all yet?""

Still, the reaper said nothing.

'Hey, now,' said Orric, sounding genuinely perturbed. 'The Lord Goffe asked you a question. Don't be rude.'

Hector held up a hand. ""It's fine."" He already knew that Leo had been trying to speak to Ericoros and that it hadn't been going anywhere. Hector would've liked to get a bit more information from the reaper's side of things, but this silent treatment was going to continue for a while longer yet, it seemed.

Certainly, Hector could understand why the reaper was reluctant to say anything to him. Hector was an unknown quantity in Ericoros' eyes. If Melchor really had managed to converse with him--and Hector wasn't entirely sure of that, either--then that was probably because Ericoros had at least heard of Darktide before.

Hector was beginning to feel like Ericoros was doing more than just silently judging him this whole time. Perhaps the reaper was waiting for him to try something. To try to torture or coerce him in some way--or maybe to use that weird ability that could compel people to talk. Obviously, Hector couldn't do the latter, but even if he could, he felt like that would seal Ericoros' opinion of him for good."

~~((The 7th Anniversary Special -- page 24 of 24?!))~~

As for Leo himself, Hector felt like the guy had been making some real progress. Thus far, Leo had been performing his new job with enthusiasm--so much so that Hector even had to tell him to relax a bit and taking things a bit slower.

That had devolved into a minor argument, with Leo seemingly questioning Hector's commitment to the homeless problem, but they'd hashed it out before it became too serious.

Another time, Leo had also grown a bit irritated when Hector asked if he had made any new friends, and Leo had taken that as an implication that Hector was already seeking to exploit said new friends.

That one hadn't turned into an argument, but it probably could have.

Certainly, Leo was not the easiest guy in the world to work with, but his heart appeared to be in the right place, at least.

Hector had to wonder if that was enough, though. According to Roman, Leo had been a victim of some type of mental manipulation, much like the people of Babbadelo and Himmekel had been.

In retrospect, that was probably no coincidence. Leo had been the guardian of that territory in the Undercrust. It made sense that Ettol--or whoever was behind it all--would've wanted to neutralize Leo before sowing the seeds of all that chaos that had unfolded down there.

Which was a whole other subject that Hector had been thinking about.

Clearly, that had been Ettol's objective. To create chaos. That made him sound like an agent of Abolish, but the way he'd gone about it didn't seem like their typical method of operation. And the presence of Malast had obviously been an enormous factor, too. Had Ettol caused that whole mess in hopes of leading someone--anyone--to the God of Boredom?

Garovel seemed to think so, though the reaper also believed that the so-called Supreme Will also played a role in things, as well."

And now there were these Sparrows who could manipulate minds as well. Were they in some way related to Ettol? Hector intended to ask Hanton Gaolanet about that the next time they spoke, but he had a feeling that even if the Sparrow did know something, he wouldn't be inclined to reveal it.

The notion that the Sparrows might be able to assist with this whole Leo situation had crossed Hector's mind, but he didn't much care for the multitude of different ways in which he could imagine that going horribly wrong. And while it was certainly tempting, thinking that Hanton might be able to just fix everything for him with a simple 'mind tweak' or whatever, it also seemed... like a pretty fucked up thing to do to someone, regardless of the reasoning behind it.

'Lord Goffe.'

Hector's eyes perked up. He hadn't allowed himself to become so lost in thought that he stopped paying attention to those in front of him, but a protracted silence had drawn out while he considered what else he might be able to say or do here tonight.

All such concerns were shoved to the back of his mind, however, when he heard Ericoros address him for the very first time since they'd met.

'I do have one question,' the captive reaper said.

""I'm listening,"" said Hector.

'What is the overall objective of this little empire of yours?' said Ericoros.

And there arrived more silence, heavier than before as Hector thought about his response carefully. His ""little empire,"" huh? Why was Ericoros asking about that kind of thing now? It was a bit late, wasn't it? Three weeks of cold, silent observance--and now this?

Well, whatever. Hector had pondered that question for himself many times, already. Maybe he hadn't fully articulated it to anyone else yet, but he didn't think it was that difficult to answer.

""It's pretty simple,"" said Hector. ""The protection of civilians and the preservation of knowledge.""

"2196

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Again, Ericoros said nothing.

Hector waited for him, though. Surely, the reaper had something to say in response, right? He must've just been taking some time to think.

...Right?

No. The answer to that was no.

Hector could see why Leo had warned him about Ericoros being difficult to deal with.

Orric, however, decided to chime in now. 'Ericoros, do you have a request that you would like to make of Lord Goffe?'

Hmm?

Still, though, Ericoros remained silent.

Hector was abruptly uncertain. A request? He looked between Melchor and Orric, hoping for an explanation.

'C'mon, now,' Orric prodded. 'Isn't there something about all this news of war that has been bothering you?'

Hector had to ask. ""What are you talking about?""

'Apologies, Lord,' said Orric. 'I didn't intend to keep this from you for so long, but everything just worked out so beautifully that I wanted to enjoy the simple secrecy of it for a bit.'

'You really never told him?' said Ericoros.

'Of course not. Why would I lie about something like that?'

'Hmph.'

Hector was lost, but he remained patient.

'The truth is,' said Orric, 'Ericoros and I happen to be very old acquaintances.'

Hector blinked. ""Is that right?""

Orric returned a nod. 'That is one of the reasons why Melchor and I have been so happy to look after him for you all this time. We had a lot of catching up to do.'

""To be clear,"" added Melchor, ""I had never met Ericoros before. These two knew each other from a thousand years ago and hadn't spoken since.""

'More like two thousand,' said Orric.

""Why were you keeping that a secret?"" said Hector.

'To manipulate me, I suspect,' said Ericoros. 'To try to use our old friendship as a means of gaining my trust.'

'Ah, so you DO admit that we were once friends, then?'

Ericoros just growled."

"2197

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'I wasn't trying to manipulate you,' said Orric. 'If anything, it's rather bold of you to assume that supposed manipulation would be enough to make me trust you.'

'What?' said Ericoros.

'We're at an impasse, old friend.' Orric shook his skeletal head. 'As things currently stand, I honestly don't know if there is a way forward from here. We Rainlords are an untrusting bunch by nature--and lately, even more so.'

'Hmph. What is your point?'

'My point, old friend, is that this stalemate is not going to change anytime soon, so there's no harm in making your request of Lord Goffe. The worst he can say is no.'

Hector would not be distracted, however. ""Before that, Orric, answer my question. Why did you keep your past relationship with Ericoros a secret.""

'Ah...' Orric's hollow gaze lingered on Hector for a moment, then glanced back toward the other reaper. 'As I mentioned, it was not my intention to hide it from you for so long. But perhaps I was afraid that you would no longer allow me to speak to Ericoros, if you knew.'

Hector made no reaction. He could see that Ericoros was watching him again, so after another intermission of silence, Hector simply said, ""Ask.""

The reaper took his time. '...There is a certain place in Vantalay that I am concerned about. A village called Miro.'

Vantalay? That was obviously no coincidence.

Hector wasn't surprised that Ericoros had caught wind of their missions abroad. No doubt, there was plenty of loose talk about them going on all over Warrenhold, and in order to keep that secret from Ericoros, Hector would've had to imprison the reaper completely, which he didn't want to do.

It was a bit of a risk, of course, but the whole point of this difficult situation was to build a rapport with the reaper, to let Ericoros see exactly the kind of people that Leo was getting involved with. And imprisoning him wouldn't accomplish that."

"2198

'I know that asking you to protect Miro would probably be overreaching,' said Ericoros, 'but if you could at least send someone to check on it, I would be grateful.'

""...What is this place to you, exactly?"" said Hector.

'It is where Leo grew up. And where he and I met.'

""I thought Leo was born in Kahm,"" said Hector. Roman had mentioned Leo telling him that. It was a small detail, but one that Hector had wanted to remember since it seemed like something that could end up becoming important.

'Yes,' said Ericoros. 'He was born there, but he spent much of his young and adolescent life in Vantalay. He and I both grew to love Miro during our time there. No doubt, it has changed considerably since

then, but I would see it kept safe during this war, if possible.'

Hmm. That was a new detail. ""So you've been with Leo since he was a teenager?""

'That's right.'

It was somehow difficult to imagine. After constantly being made aware of how bad their relationship was, how Ericoros would release Leo's soul as soon as he had the chance, Hector had trouble picturing their relationship in different, happier circumstances. How much had the passage of time compounded their problems with one another?

Could that happen to Garovel and him?

Hector didn't even want to think about it. But then, perhaps not thinking about it... would be what allowed it to come to pass. He needed to be attentive, didn't he? Even for things like this. No, especially for things like this.

""...How long ago was this?"" asked Hector.

And Ericoros hesitated.

Understandably so. It was a more important question than it perhaps seemed, Hector knew. He'd essentially just asked for Leo's age as a servant. Hector wondered if Ericoros would tell him the truth--or anything at all, for that matter.

But at length, Ericoros finally said, 'It was 223 years ago.'  
"2199

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It was useful intel on Leo, to be sure, but that wasn't really why Hector had asked. ""And you're still attached to this place after 223 years?"" said Hector.

'...Yes,' was all Ericoros said.

Hmm. He had to be careful how he responded here. ""Why is your affection for Miro so strong?""

'I told you, already. It is where Leo grew up.'

""That's not good enough,"" said Hector calmly. ""Convince me that you're not trying to make me send my people into a trap.""

'A trap? How would I...?' Ericoros drifted off, perhaps realizing on his own.

Hector waited in silence. It was true that the team in Vantalay could probably check on this village easily enough, but what if it was a key location for Sai-hee's forces? What if the Blackburn Triplets ended up being taken hostage and tortured for information? What if they revealed Ericoros' whereabouts?

Admittedly, it was an extreme hypothetical scenario, but Hector didn't want to underestimate Ericoros' capacity for cunning.

'Well,' the reaper finally said, 'you can ask Leo if I'm telling the truth or not. He won't lie to you.'

Hector had his doubts about that as well, but he kept them to himself. ""I'm asking you,"" he said. ""I do sympathize, but 223 years is quite a long time to hold on to feelings of affection for a place. I'm sure you've lived elsewhere over the years, no? Why not ask me to send people to any of those places? What makes Miro so special?""

Ericoros gave an inaudible sigh. 'I see you have the paranoia of an older servant, as well...'

Hmm? Oh.

Hector kept his poker face, though he could see Melchor cracking a smile.

'If you must know,' said Ericoros, 'Miro was a village that suffered numerous tragedies during our stay there. A flood, a plague, constant attacks from cannibals. Our trials there forged a bond with the villagers that we shall never be able to forget.'

Stone-faced, Hector still had to blink a couple times. ""...Cannibals?""  
"2200 -- CCXVII.

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'That's right,' said Ericoros. 'A string of unrelated misfortunes led to the



further misfortune of a famine. And a famine led to cannibals.'

"I see," said Hector. He remembered Garovel telling him a similar story regarding a now-extinct Hahl of Sandlords in Sair. The notion of eating human flesh was certainly repulsive, but at least servants could regrow body parts. In that respect, he could imagine a moral argument for resource efficiency being made.

He doubted that was the kind of cannibalism that Ericoros was referring to, though.

'Though the friends we made there are gone,' Ericoros continued, 'their descendants remain. Our last visit was more than thirty years ago now, so there may not be many there who remember Leo personally, but the stories about his deeds have survived from generation to generation.'

Hector supposed that he would just have to ask Leo about this story. If Ericoros really was lying, though, then he didn't think it would be so easy to prove it.

'Please, Lord Goffe. Please send your team to check on Miro for me. I would like to know that it is safe.'

Hmm. And what if it wasn't safe?

"...I'll think about it," said Hector.

'Thank you.'

Chapter Two Hundred Seventeen: 'Thy confounding colloquy...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

What an absolutely insane day it had been. Lynnette still hadn't really processed it all. Honestly, she was ready to retire to her guest room and plop down on the wonderful bed she'd been sleeping in the past few nights, but the King was still chatting it up with the Rainlords like there was no tomorrow. Perhaps he was trying to make up for lost time, due to that big debate they all had earlier.

Telepathic birds and a second Continental War. The world was much stranger than it was yesterday.

She'd spoken to the Queen earlier over the phone, but only briefly. No doubt, Her Highness was having a hell of a day, herself. The woman had told Lynnette that information was still coming in but that Atreya would be pursuing a plan of neutrality for the time being--and that she should remain vigilant in her role as the King's bodyguard.

Lynnette didn't think she would be getting to that bed for a while yet."  
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((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

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"2201

""Um, hi there,"" came an unfamiliar voice, making Lynnette turn to see a blond woman standing there.

""Hello...?"" Lynnette felt like she recognized her, but she couldn't put a name to her face.

""I'm Madison."" She extended a dainty hand. ""Madison Reach.""

Lynnette blinked. The movie star? Sweet Cocora, it was her!

""Hehe. You've heard of me, I take it?""

Uncertain, Lynnette managed to nod and shake Madison's hand.

""Whew, that's a relief! I was starting to get a little self-conscious, you know. You wouldn't believe how many of these Rainlords have no idea who I am! The nerve, am I right?""

Lynnette had no idea what to say. What the hell was this woman doing

in Warrenhold of all places?

""Oh, um, I'm not bothering you, am I?"" said Madison with sudden puppy dog eyes.

""Ah--no, you're not,"" said Lynnette stiffly.

""Whew, good. You're a little intimidating, you know that? Not as intimidating as some of these other folks around here, but you're up there. A few months ago, I probably would've been too scared to talk to someone like you.""

Lynnette just kind of nodded again. What the hell was happening, right now? She glanced over at the King, who was still happily conversing with that one red-haired Rainlord who talked a lot.

Madison just kept going. ""Honestly, I think it's my boyfriend's influence. I mean, yeah, I've always been what you might call a social butterfly, but thanks to him, I feel like I've ascended to a new level of butterfly-ing. He's a real introvert. And kinda scary. But like, in a hot way, y'know? Anyway, talking to him has given me some insight into people who are the strong, silent type. Before, I would just, kind of... avoid you guys. But now I see how wrong that was! You guys are great! I bet we could be good friends!""

Lynnette wondered if this was what Hector felt like all the time."  
"2202

Another voice arrived, this one more immediately familiar. ""Madison, are you cornering my friend over here?""

Lynnette turned and saw Gina approaching now.

""I have no idea what you're talking about,"" said Madison with that movie star smile of hers.

""Uh-huh,"" said Gina. ""Listen, Lynnette is no one to mess around with. This is the White Sword of Atreya you're talking to.""

""Yeah, I know,"" said Madison. ""I've heard the Rainlords talking about her. And it's pretty obvious that she's the bodyguard for Mr. Kingy over there.""

Lynnette had to pick her up on that. ""That's His Majesty King William, to you,"" she said.

""Ooh, excuse me,"" said Madison. ""That's a bit of a mouthful, though, don't you think?""

Lynnette just glowered with her one eye.

""Okay, okay,"" giggled Madison. She took a step back and put up her hands in apologetic defense.

""I told you you shouldn't mess with her,"" said Gina. She came over to stand next to Lynnette and purposely bumped into her. It was a friendly gesture, of course, lacking in power, but Lynnette hardly budged at all, while Gina practically bounced off of her. ""Holy crud. Have you put on some extra muscle?""

""...A little,"" said Lynnette. She'd been regimenting her nutrition and exercise more strictly, lately. She didn't have much free time to spare on full-blown bodybuilding, nor did she want to take it that far, but she was pleased with her modest results.

Gina took the liberty of feeling up her arm and torso. ""Damn, that white cape of yours hides it well, but you're built like a brick under there, aren't you?""

""It's a cloak, not a cape."" And Lynnette frowned and furrowed her brow. ""And I am not shaped like a brick, thank you very much. It's not

my fault that you have the body mass of a twig."

"Okay, wow--I meant, like, a brick in terms of the solidness of your muscles, not in the shape of your body. Geez. No need to get personal. I'm sensitive about being so tiny, I'll have you know."

"2203

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"Oh, is that right?" said Lynnette, and she returned the favor by giving Gina's upper arm a quick squeeze. "Hmm."

Gina didn't back away. "Don't say a word. I already know."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"Then don't think anything, either."

Lynnette just laughed. It was true that compared to her, Gina really was just skin and bones. "Are you sure you're getting enough to eat?"

"I've always been a light eater," said Gina. "It's hard to make myself eat more. I don't like feeling too full."

"Mm," hummed Madison, who had wandered closer again to help with the apparent body inspections, "sounds like a pretty good problem to have."

"Yeah," Lynnette agreed, "I wouldn't say that out loud too often, if I were you. You're liable to make your fellow women resent you."

"I--ah... hmm."

Madison held an index finger up to her own chin while she poked and prodded Gina's face and neck. "If you exercised more, I bet you'd build an appetite faster."

Gina groaned. "I hate exercising..."

"That's the wrong mindset," said Lynnette. "There are lots of different types of exercise. I'm sure you could find something you enjoy."

""And when you start seeing results, you'll enjoy it even more,"" added Madison, still prodding.

Gina finally batted Madison's hand away. ""Agh, you're both into fitness?""

Madison gave a light shrug. ""Well, I haven't had much else to do lately, so..."

That was something Lynnette wanted to know more about. ""Why are you here, by the way?""

""Oh, that's a long story,"" said Madison, ""but, um, well--""

And with Gina's approval and occasional assistance, Madison explained her unique circumstances. She was in hiding from something called ""Andalero""--a mysterious group of highly influential people whom she had apparently pissed off badly enough to want her dead. Roman had rescued her in Steccat and brought her here to Atreya--and ultimately, to Warrenhold."

"2204

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Lynnette found all of that rather hard to believe, but then again, after a few more moments of thinking about it, she supposed that sounded exactly like something Roman Fullister would get mixed up in. He often played things off like they were unintended, like he had never planned to do anything crazy, but by now, Lynnette knew better. This was the same man who snuck into Belgrant Castle dressed as a guardsman and jumped into the middle of a fight with Abolish.

Which was to say nothing of the time that she and the Queen had spent with him in Korgum, searching for military aid. Looking back, it seemed insane to her now that she had gone into that war zone as a normal human person, without the enhancements that were now afforded to her by the aberration gauntlet on her arm.

Oh, how little she'd understood, back then.

""So you still have no clue why the Andalero group was trying to kill you?"" said Gina.

""Not at all,"" said Madison.

Gina made a doubtful face. ""You sure about that?""

Madison tilted her head. ""Uh. Yeah. Why? You think I'm lying?""

""No,"" Gina laughed, ""but I was thinking that, maybe, you'd talked to a certain tall Rainlord about it and learned something.""

""Oh. Well, yeah, I told Dimas about it, but he didn't say anything. Should he have?""

Gina shrugged. ""I don't know, but... how long ago did you tell him?""

""A few weeks ago now. Like as soon as we started dating.""

""Maybe you should remind him,"" said Gina.

Madison squinted. ""Why? Gina, are you trying to imply something here?""

""Mm, kinda. It's just a hunch, though. Andalero wanted you dead for overhearing them talk about something, right?""

""Yeah. Some kind of ""black song"" in a place called Ridgemark. I think it was a code for a meeting or something that was supposed to happen there, but beyond that, I have no idea.""

""Ridgemark is a city in Vantalay,"" said Gina. ""And Vantalay is one of the five countries that just started the Second Continental War.""

Madison's face paled a little."

"2205

""Now, that might just be a coincidence,"" said Gina, ""but if I were to think up some reasons why someone might've been trying really hard to assassinate you after overhearing something so seemingly benign... well, a planned war doesn't seem outside the realm of possibility.""

Madison's eyes hollowed, and her mind seemed to be elsewhere.

Lynnette was growing more confused by the minute. This famous actress was involved in the war?

""I've been trying to look into Andalero, too,"" said Gina, ""but the



internet is only so useful. It might be better to ask Lord Dimas about it. I'm not so good at in-the-field investigations, but if anything, the Rainlords seem to prefer that."

Madison regained herself and eyed the various Rainlords around the Grand Hall. "'You might be right,'" she said. Then her gaze settled back on Gina. "'But why are you asking me to talk to Dimas? You seem pretty close with the head honcho, yourself. Why don't you just ask him?'"

Gina tilted her head. "'The head honcho?'"

"'Yeah,'" said Madison. "'Don't act like I'm more influential around here than you are. I've seen you talking to him a bunch of times.'" She glanced at Lynnette as well. "'You, too, actually.'"

Lynnette tried to think. "'Are you referring to the King?'"

"'What? No. I... though, well, I guess he would work, too, if you wanted to talk to him. I was talking about Lord Goffe.'"

Lynnette watched Gina's mouth open, then close again.

"'You two seem way closer to him than I am,'" said Madison.

Lynnette and Gina exchanged looks with one another. Somehow, they both wore knowing expressions on their faces that were simultaneously mixed with utter uncertainty. In that silent moment between them, it felt like a thousand words were exchanged.

"'Ah...'" tried Gina.

What was she going to say? Lynnette had no clue.

Gina scratched her cheek. "'I... I guess you have a point.'"

"2206

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"'Yeah, I know I do,'" said Madison, like she was saying the most obvious thing in the world and didn't understand why they needed it explained to them.

Staying here over the last few days, meeting all these Rainlords, and

seeing how they all treated Hector--it hadn't escaped Lynette's notice what was going on. Roman and Gina had provided a bit more context and detail to her in private, but by that point, she wasn't terribly shocked by it all.

Hector was not the same person she'd left in Sair a few months ago. She'd heard about some of his exploits, though even now, she wasn't sure how much she believed, and it seemed almost rude to ask him about it directly, especially with so many people and reapers around who could overhear.

She was under the impression now that the so-called Lord Darksteel of Warrenhold was in a bit of a difficult position. He was obviously being very careful in how he spoke and how he presented himself. He dressed more sharply and was often followed around by that Rainlord bodyguard of his.

Which was to say nothing of this whole banking situation. It wasn't just the Rainlords putting mountains of pressure on him, Lynnette knew. The people of Atreya and their economic crisis were arguably even worse, in that regard.

It was hard not to worry about him. At a glance, he seemed to be handling everything pretty well, but he'd never been one to wear his emotions on his sleeve. And within the last year, he'd skyrocketed to perhaps the second most famous person in the country. She didn't envy his position politically, right now--and she was certain that many other people did.

Gina seemed somewhat lost for words, so Lynnette picked up the conversational slack.

""Well, how about we agree to talk to Hector about it, and you agree to talk to Lord Dimas?"" she said."

"2207 -- CCXVIII.

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Madison smirked. ""Ooh, you call him Hector, huh? I guess you really are close, then, aren't you?""

Lynnette gave a small shrug. ""We've been through a lot together. He wouldn't want me to start addressing him as 'lord' anything.""

""Hmm,"" mused Madison. ""In that case, should I start calling him Hector, too?""

Lynnette and Gina exchanged looks again.

""I'm sure he wouldn't mind it,"" said Lynnette, ""but I get the impression that the Rainlords probably would. And you're more concerned about not pissing them off, aren't you?""

""Ah..."" Madison lost a bit of her enthusiasm. ""Good point...""

Chapter Two Hundred Eighteen: 'The incendiaries of the dark stream...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Raul Blackburn was enjoying himself, as were his two brothers. They'd never even left Sair before, but in these last few months, their whole lives had changed.

Not entirely for the better, of course, but such things were inevitable.

The Blackburn Triplets had learned years ago from Cousin Ibai that one's outlook on life could make even the worst situation much more bearable. And similarly, they'd learned from Cousin Melchor that honoring their ancestors and their kin didn't mean that they had to display their sorrow and determination to the entire world.

It was enough to keep those things in their hearts.

They knew their mission. They knew the importance of it. The last thing they wanted was to neglect their task and let everyone down.

But that didn't mean they had to be all uptight and stuffy about it, either. Ridgemark was a remarkable place, and Vantalay, a remarkable country. Seeing the sights and taking in the local culture were valuable experiences, too--and part of their intelligence-gathering mission.

Just because they were spending much of their time gambling, shopping, talking to fine ladies, and sampling extravagant cuisine didn't mean that they weren't still on task."

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((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

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"2208

The seaside city of Ridgemark was a veritable metropolis of luxury. In many ways, it reminded Raul of Rheinhal, only much larger and with an oceanside view.

But then again, from what he'd heard, Rheinhal might well have been leveled by Sanko since his last visit, so perhaps that comparison wasn't even remotely accurate, anymore.

It was a bitter thought, that.

He knew that his family was partly to blame for the loss of Rheinhal. If they hadn't kidnapped the Elroy children and thereby divided the Rainlords' forces, that battle might have gone quite differently--especially if House Blackburn had joined the fight, as well.

It was a shame upon his family.

One that he and his brothers hoped to somehow rectify.

If they could discover more about the Vanguard's operations, if they could locate their captured brethren--the Houses Redwater, Garza, Merlo, Stroud, and Zabat--surely, then, their honor could be redeemed.

Surely, then, the Rainlords of Sair might truly be united as one again.

They just needed information.

And if anything, Ridgemark seemed like the place to find it. The city was absolutely awash with people from all over the world. Even the news of war seemed to have hardly put a dent in the city's feverish energy. If he hadn't been stationed here a couple weeks before the news arrived, he might not have even thought anything had changed.

But there were differences, to be sure. They were simply quieter, probably too subtle for the average tourist to notice. A few more guards here. Some back alley meetings there.

And the reapers. They were everywhere.

Without a doubt, there was a major force of servants operating somewhere in this city. Raul, Adan, and Esai had begun the arduous task of trying to identify as many servants as they possibly could--without being noticed, of course. Remaining hidden among the crowds was far more important than gaining intel on random enemies. In hindsight, it had certainly been the correct decision to leave their own reapers behind."

"2209

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Surprisingly and frustratingly, it had thus far proven rather difficult to confirm which side all the servants in the city belonged to. Whoever they were, they were keeping a low profile while their reapers scoured the city.

That information alone, however, suggested that it probably wasn't Abolish, as they had a tendency to be rather loud and obnoxious wherever they went, but that was no guarantee. Raul had heard of certain Abolish sects with more self-control than the typical rabble.

But then again, given Ridgemark's reputation as a land of debauched excess, self-control seemed like a thing unlikely to be found here. Indeed, the triplets' strategy was to not employ that very much at all.

Mid-morning, Raul found his brother Adan sitting at yet another slot machine, chatting happily away with the rather buxom brunette in a sequined dress who was sitting at the adjacent machine.

The woman did a double take when she noticed Raul approaching, which made Adan turn to look at him.

""Hey! Mornin', bro. Sleep well?"" Adan's bright smile had charmed many a woman over these last few weeks.

But of course, Raul had the same smile, himself. ""Oh, yeah, man. Like a log."" He slapped his hand down on his brother's shoulder and

turned his attention to the woman next to him. ""And who is this gorgeous creature you're talking to? Introduce me, bro!""

""Bro, no way. I found her first.""

Raul ignored him and put his hand forward. ""I'm Raul. Great to meet'cha.""

She still seemed a little awestruck by the sight of them both there, but after a moment, she smiled and shook his hand. ""I'm Carla.""

""Ooh, are you Intarian?"" said Raul.

""You could tell?"" she said.

His smile widened. ""An educated guess, based on your name and that beautiful complexion of yours.""

That earned a dainty blush from her.

Adan stood up and wrapped his arm around Raul's shoulder, still all smiles as usual, though. ""So what brings you here, bro? Anything I can help with?""

"2210

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""Ah, yeah,"" said Raul, ""the reason I was looking for you was because I thought we could get breakfast together--and maybe have some bro talk.""

""Oh! Bro talk?""

""Bro talk.""

""Hmm. Yeah. It has been a while since our last bro talk, hasn't it?""

""Yep.""

Adan's easy smile didn't change, but Raul knew that look in his green eyes. He understood. Of course he did. They all knew what bro talk meant.

Raul had received new orders late last night from his reaper all the

way back in Atraya. No doubt, Adan and Esai had received the same orders from their own reapers as well, but they had yet to discuss them among one another.

With so many reapers about--and potentially hostile servants--they had to be careful with what they said aloud. Thankfully, it was no difficult adaptation for the Blackburn Triplets to speak in code. They'd been doing it in various forms ever since they were little boys terrorizing Marshrock together.

Adan turned to Carla, his smile having become abruptly more apologetic. ""I'm sorry, darling, but my less handsome brother here is right. Bro talk is a sacred tradition in our family. I'm afraid our lovely conversation will have to end here.""

Carla looked bewildered, yet also somewhat amused. ""I see...""

Raul wasn't about to let that jab slide, however. ""Bro, we have the same face. No matter how you slice it, we're equally handsome.""

Adan shook his head. ""Bro, bro, bro... truly spoken like the youngest and most naive of us. Handsomeness is about more than just the structure of your face, my dude. It's also about how you carry yourself. It's about having a deeper, inner dignity and projecting that outwardly in everything that you do.""

""And do you suppose that your 'deeper, inner dignity' is negatively affected by all the bollocks you talk?"" said Raul.

""I sure hope not,"" said Adan."

"2211

Carla's machine interrupted their conversation, lighting up and playing triumphant music. She'd barely even been paying attention to the thing, but she'd just won big, it seemed. Not the jackpot, perhaps, but certainly still cause for celebration. The excitement on her face was obvious, and the brothers were eager to congratulate her--though Adan's expression was noticeably relieved, probably because he'd been momentarily worried that she actually had scored the jackpot just now.

Adan was probably the least proficient gambler of the Triplets, despite



spending the most time in the casino. He preferred the slots over things like blackjack or video poker, since he didn't have to concern himself with odds or strategy, and that disposition of his lent itself well to the task of information gathering. He could just plop down next to someone and start chatting them up without having to focus on the game he was playing.

Raul did notice, however, that Adan had been favoring this particular group of machines, lately. When he'd asked why, Adan had told him that the jackpot had caught his eye.

And indeed, the Revenant cruiser sitting on a glass-encased platform in the middle of all the slot machines was hard to miss. It was a handsome motorcycle, the latest model according to the information sticker on the side, but Raul knew that wasn't why Adan was interested in it. They'd all heard that rumor a while back about the Lord Goffe's affection for motorcycles. No doubt, Adan was hoping to win it and gift it to him in order to earn the Lord of Warrenhold's favor.

Thus far, none of the Triplets had had much interaction with the guy, but if they performed well on this mission, then who knows? Perhaps that would change. Earning reputation among their Rainlord brethren was important, too, of course, but right now, the real prestige came from working with the man who'd saved everyone not once, but twice. The mysterious hero of both Dunehall and Capaporo."

"2212

Among the Rainlords, rumors about Lord Goffe only seemed to be growing, and honestly, Raul had a hard time believing a lot of them. Apparently, he'd slain a fifty foot worm single-handedly and won the loyalty of the Bull Leech.

They hadn't known the man's moniker before that disastrous fight in Capaporo went down, but they certainly knew it now. That was one of the first things that the Rainlords had done upon arriving at Warrenhold: find out who the hell Leo was. According to the intel Raul had heard on the subject, the nickname was a result of Leo's reputation for incredible stubbornness and parasitism.

Not the most comforting bit of information Raul had ever heard.

But if Lord Goffe had truly managed to acquire the aid of someone like

that... well...

Raul wasn't the only one impressed, that was for sure.

Carla's sudden winnings must have reordered her priorities, because she soon excused herself to go cash out. Adan tried to get her number before she left, but she turned him down.

Adan's shoulders slumped a little as they picked their way through the crowded casino floor. ""Damn, dude, I really thought she was into me.""

""You came on too strong, bro. It's good to go after what you want, but sometimes, you've gotta just leave things to fate. Now, even if you're lucky enough to run into her again, you've probably ruined your chances.""

""Hmph.""

""If you'd played it cooler, like me, you could've at least maintained an air of maturity and mystery.""

""Yeah, yeah...""

They didn't need to discuss their next destination. They both knew where they would find Esai. Being keenly aware of one another's whereabouts at all times was critical to the mission, and they would always text each other first if they were venturing somewhere else solo. Sticking together didn't really help them blend in so well, but caution was often warranted in this place."

"2213

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

When he was on his own, Esai was almost always at the pool. Supposedly, it was because he loved swimming so much, but they all knew the real reason.

Not that Raul could blame him. It was a beautiful day outside, and beautiful days attracted beautiful women.

Ridgemark was a far cry from the perpetually cloudy skies of Luzo, to be sure. In his twenty-four years of life, rarely had Raul Blackburn even seen bikini-clad women in person like this.

He liked the view so much that, somehow, his feelings almost looped back around to disliking it. Was this really part of the mission?

Eh, of course it was.

Blending in was a vital part of gathering information. En route to Esai, Raul recognized a few gorgeous faces and had to stop and say hello. Adan didn't seem to mind.

Eventually, however, he and Adan did make their way over to Esai and pulled him away from the pool. Together, the three went to have breakfast in one of the casino's several restaurants. They ate well, as usual. Their funds for this mission had been rather generous. Sentsia told them to spare no expense and do whatever it took to get the job done. She was the one who made it clear to Raul how important this mission and the future ones like it would be toward the goal of reclaiming House Blackburn's lost honor.

Something had changed about that reaper, Raul thought.

But she wasn't the only one.

After all they'd been through, the whole House was in a strange mindset, right now. A feeling of quiet danger permeated everything, a feeling like standing at the precipice of a cliff. They could fall. They could jump. They could flee. They could fly. What would it be?

""So,"" Esai was saying with a mouthful of blueberry pancakes, ""either of you guys managed to bag any hot babes, lately?""

In this instance, a ""hot babe"" was part of their code. Esai was asking if they'd found any new leads on the artifact that they were searching for."

"2214

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

""Not me,"" said Adan, leaning back in his seat. ""Been rejected more times than I can count, bro. I did meet a few uggos, though. More than a few, actually.""

""Bro, that's pretty rude,"" said Raul. ""All women are beautiful.""

""Yeah, yeah. You know what I mean, though.""

In fact, he did. Adan was talking about servants now, not just women specifically. He must've clocked a few more of them since yesterday. Oftentimes, servants were difficult to identify, but there were a few telltale signs here and there. Most obviously, the reapers. They tended to spend the most time around their servants, so if you just kept an eye on them, the servant could eventually be deduced via process of elimination.

Some reapers were smarter about that than others, though, so it was no guarantee. The Triplets' own reapers had warned them about that tactic. If a reaper suspected they were being observed by their enemies, they could deliberately hang around a normal person in order to throw off any spies.

Which was what they were now, Raul knew. Spies.

""Hmm."" He took a sip of his orange juice. ""Maybe we should try searching for some small town honeys, instead.""

""Oh, bro, I would be so down for that,"" said Adan. ""A nice, wholesome girl might be just what my wounded heart needs, right now.""

Esai chuckled. ""Maybe you could take her back to meet Ma.""

""That's the dream,"" said Adan.

""Sounds like a plan, then,"" said Raul.

That was confirmation, as expected. They'd all received orders to check out the town of Miro. Their objectives were merely to observe the place and report back on the status of the town, but Miro wasn't all that far from Ridgemark. It was possible that they might find clues about this mysterious artifact there."

"2215

Now that the decision was made, there was no point in wasting time. They wolfed down the rest of their breakfast and headed out immediately. Raul had plugged Miro's location into his phone last night, and they could go straight there in the cherry red sedan they were renting.

With any luck, they would be back in Ridgemark before nightfall. That was where the really good intel probably was. As much as he was enjoying his time in the lap of luxury, he was also beginning to feel a little impatient. They'd been in Vantalay for two weeks now, and yet they hadn't even been able to confirm if all those reapers haunting Ridgemark were with the Vanguard.

And that was more important to Raul than some magical artifact of dubious existence. He might've been more excited about that part of the mission if they knew what the damn thing was capable of--or even a physical description of it for that matter--but all they had to go on was a name.

The Sword of Unso.

Oh, and supposedly, it could be found in ""a sunken cave near the two-toned rock.""

That little detail had somehow proved even less helpful than it sounded. Prior to their arrival in Ridgemark, the Triplets hadn't even been sure what a two-toned rock was, but now they knew. Oh, boy, did they know.

Half the bloody rocks in this region were of two colors. Because they'd been painted. It was a cultural thing. The locals did it to honor the ""eternal dichotomy of Order and Chaos."" That was a big aspect of one of the religions around here, apparently.

Thankfully, the locals at least didn't bother to paint every tiny pebble in the country. It was only for sufficiently large boulders, at least the size of a grown man. And yes, they even painted those underwater. The diving industry here was booming, thanks to all the casinos and tourism."

"2216

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 1 of 10))~~

Esai had gone diving in search of the ""sunken cave"" several times over the last two weeks, but he'd all but given up on it by now, because he'd simply found too many. There was an enormous network of underwater caverns up and down the coast. Esai seemed to think that many of them were manmade, though he wasn't sure what their

intended purpose had been.

Theoretically, the Tuning Orb of Karugetti should have been immensely useful here, but that damn thing only ever seemed to work whenever it felt like working. That, and they still weren't even sure what the different colors meant. Sometimes the little orb between the two metal prongs would glow blue, sometimes red, sometimes green, sometimes nothing. If only it had come with an instruction manual.

One time, however, the Tuning Orb led the Triplets to an ardor-infused rifle that someone had stashed inside a storage locker in the Ruby 88 Hotel & Casino. They left the weapon where they'd found it, of course, as they didn't have much use for it, nor did they wish to alert whoever it belonged to; but that did at least confirm that the Tuning Orb really could work.

They'd also kept an eye on that rifle for a few days, even going so far as to set up a tiny camera to observe the locker. They'd discovered that it belonged to one of the casino's dealers, a bald man with black-rimmed glasses, and they'd since removed the camera and shifted some of their observational focus to him. They'd found out his name easily enough from the tag on his uniform, but the reapers back in Warrenhold hadn't been able to do anything with that information.

Raul wasn't terribly surprised. In all likelihood, the guy was an undercover servant using an alias. They'd found several other such suspicious people all over the city, but the Ruby 88 and the hotels immediately around it seemed to be something of a hot spot."

"2217

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 2 of 10))~~  
En route to Miro, the three brothers were uncharacteristically quiet.

Despite their typically jovial dispositions, Raul could tell that his brothers were a little on edge, today. The sudden change in their orders was abnormal enough on its own, but it had also been accompanied by a rather vague warning to be wary of traps.

They decided not to approach Miro in the same way that they had approached Ridgemark. If there was any chance at all that they were heading into an ambush, then trying to hide in plain sight was not the right strategy. An ambush implied that the enemy might possess intel

on them, so they might just be recognized on sight and attacked immediately.

That didn't seem likely, of course, given House Blackburn's reclusion over the last thirty years, but they wanted to exercise extra caution, nonetheless.

But they couldn't just sneak into the town, either. If there were any reapers around, three unfamiliar souls skulking in the shadows would arouse immediate suspicion.

Raul pulled the car over in order to let Adan and Esai out. Miro was still a few miles away, but they weren't heading directly toward it. Their task was to find good vantage points from which to observe the town at a distance.

He bumped fists with each of them before they left. They both had a pair of binoculars in the survival kits they took with them, and their wilderness training from when they were younger would surely be helpful if things got bad, so Raul wasn't worried about them.

He took a breath as he watched them disappear into the thick forest that flanked both sides of the road.

He didn't start the car back up yet. His task now was to wait for them to get into position. They would text him when they were ready.

So Raul was left with considerable time to himself, waiting in the driver's seat of the rental car with nothing but his thoughts.

That old wilderness training kept popping into his head for some reason. Perhaps it was the sight of all these trees. Various elders of the Blackburn household had served as their instructors, but the trip with Uncle Ismael and Cousin Ibai was, without a doubt, the most memorable one."

"2218

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 3 of 10))~~

That had been the first time in which Raul and his brothers had really gotten to know Ibai. Right away, they could tell how different he was. Raul knew now that Ibai must have already been in his twenties by that point, but it didn't feel like a memory with someone eleven years their

elder at all. Ibai had always treated them like peers. Like equals.

But he wasn't. Without even realizing it, they'd learned so many new things from him by the end of that trip.

And Ismael.

Agh.

Thinking about him hurt. Raul had loved him as much as he'd loved his own father--maybe even more, terrible as that was to admit.

The Triplets had loved to play pranks, and that trip had certainly been no different. But Ismael had never gotten upset at them for it. In fact, he actually seemed to enjoy them.

One time, they filled his water bottle with coyote urine. The look on the man's face when he drank from it--Raul could hardly remember anything funnier than that.

They'd expected to get punished severely for that one. Time out. An ass whooping, maybe. But no. Ismael just laughed. And hard, too. And then he cried, for some reason.

Raul hadn't understood why at the time, but in retrospect, he wondered if that didn't have something to do with Ibai, also. As he understood it, Ibai had been even more of a little hellion in his day than the Triplets had. Perhaps to Uncle Ismael, that prank was tame by comparison.

But when they saw him crying like that, their attitudes toward the man shifted dramatically. They'd never seen a grown man break down in such a way. It was confusing and saddening. Esai tried to comfort him.

Then Ismael shoved the bottle in Esai's mouth and made him drink, too.

Even to this day, Raul had never laughed so hard in his life."

"2219

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 4 of 10))~~

He'd been thinking about that little camping trip a lot, lately. The lessons learned during it hadn't been especially relevant so far in Vantalay, thanks to the many luxuries of Ridgemark, but this was still



the first time that he and his brothers had gone anywhere for this long without constant supervision.

That, and he just missed Ismael and Ibai.

Ismael had been like a father to the entire House, in many ways. Despite House Blackburn's rather large head count, that man had always tried to make time for everyone--even to a fault, perhaps. Raul remembered trying to compete for his attention with children from the other branch families.

However, in an odd way, Raul also felt a little guilty about missing Ismael so much.

House Blackburn hadn't suffered nearly as many casualties during the Abolish attack on Dunehall as some of the other Rainlord families, but among those few had been the Triplets' own father, Lucio Blackburn.

The Triplets were something of a special case within the House. Their parents, Lucio and Aria, were non-servants. In terms of the overall family hierarchy, they were fairly low. ""Uncle"" Ismael hadn't actually been their uncle directly, but rather the uncle of most of House Blackburn.

Normally, that wasn't an issue. Those with higher ""status"" within the family like Melchor or Horatio never treated those with lower status differently, and in the everyday life, the disparity was all but nonexistent.

But when it came to choosing servants for reapers... well, that was another story.

With so many members of the family and so few loyal reapers to go around, Raul could appreciate that it would not be an easy decision to make, choosing which child among the many can become an immortal, superpowered warrior. Rather than trying to work out some vague, supposedly ""meritocratic"" system for deciding, it was simpler to just give that ""privilege"" to the branch families with higher status."  
"2220

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 5 of 10))~~  
Of course, it was debatable whether servitude truly was a privilege. In

many ways, the Rainlords regarded it more as a responsibility. A duty. It certainly had its perks, but did those outweigh the downsides?

There was a reason why there weren't very many truly old reapers left within the family. It was widely known that Rainlord reapers had a higher mortality rate than others who took servants. That was one of the great obstacles to recruiting new reapers to their side, in fact.

So perhaps it was understandable that those of lower status in the House's hierarchy weren't clamoring for that privilege. Loyalty to their kin was one thing, but it was quite another to allow their children to be ""killed"" and then subjected to the will of beings whom they couldn't even see or talk to directly.

And additionally, it was arguably better to further narrow down which parents would have to take on the difficult task of raising children who would eventually be granted superpowers. Their education, training, and moral conscientiousness were that much more important when so much strength might one day be at their fingertips.

So it was highly irregular for the Triplets to have been chosen. Normally, the reapers themselves would take their pick from the higher status children, of which there were many, but the identical nature of the Triplets had apparently sparked an immense curiosity among the reapers.

After all, the most famous Rainlords who had ever lived were the Redwater Twins. Identical brothers with identical abilities. Perhaps the reapers had been hoping for the three of them to manifest the divine Water Dragon ability as well.

Raul had actually been chosen first, as a kind of trial run. Sacrificing three reapers was an enormous commitment of the family's resources. Adan and Esal would only receive reapers of their own if Raul manifested a powerful enough ability.

And lo and behold, he did."  
"2221

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 6 of 10))~~  
For this reason, Raul was about ten months older than his brothers as a servant. Considerable time had been needed for him to not only

manifest his ability, but also to develop it to a perceptible and manipulable degree, because for quite a while, Raul's ability to alter friction had been extremely weak and difficult to use.

And living a life of relative isolation in Luzo, not venturing out into the world very often at all, Raul had thus far found no opportunities to achieve emergence. He couldn't even imagine what that might feel like.

But in the end, the elders of House Blackburn agreed that this could one day become a remarkable power. It was an alteration-type, after all.

Unfortunately, even now, Raul wasn't sure when that day would be. The rarity of this power meant that no one in the House could instruct them in its usage. Alteration-types were usually like that, apparently. Unless you had a teacher with the same or very similar ability, learning to hone it was quite a slow process. In fact, for those first few years, some debate persisted among the House's reapers about whether their ability truly was friction and not something else, like particle vibrations or pressure manipulation or even gravity control.

This was also why the Triplets had been able to go on that camping trip with Ismael. Raul hadn't realized until relatively recently just how much special treatment he and his brothers had been given over the years. Even this very mission, dangerous though it was, might qualify as an example.

It seemed clear to him now why there had been tension between Ismael and his father Lucio--as well as between Lucio and some of the House's other non-servant parents. The man had been sandwiched between abnormally high expectations from his elders and quiet resentment from his peers.

No doubt, that turmoil had influenced how Lucio had treated his sons."  
"2222

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 7 of 10))~~

Raul wished that he'd understood that about his father sooner. He might not have been so bitter towards the man all throughout his teenage years.

And now, it was too late. Lucio Blackburn was dead, killed by falling debris, apparently. Raul hadn't even seen it happen. The Triplets had only been informed of it by Horatio, who'd led one of the teams that sifted through the rubble for missing people.

He was sad, of course.

But not sad enough, he thought.

Perhaps that was a strange thing to chastise himself for. What was the appropriate level of sadness that he should feel at the death of his father? Trying to quantify emotions was a foolish endeavor, surely.

But... it wasn't that simple, was it? He couldn't ignore the fact that he was more broken up about Ismael's death. The proof was self-evident.

He was a bad son.

Maybe if he'd loved his father more, been more attentive, he would've been there when it happened. Maybe he would've even saved him.

He rubbed his forehead, then his eyes, trying to clear his mind. The mission. Focus on the mission. Just because there was downtime didn't mean he should allow himself to get distracted.

He waited, keeping eye on the narrow road. It remained empty the whole time. He hadn't seen a single vehicle this entire time, he realized.

Sure, this wasn't exactly a main road or anything, but it was still the primary means of reaching Miro from Ridgemark, one of the largest cities in Vantalay. Shouldn't there have been more traffic?

Hmm. Didn't bode well, did it?

The first text finally arrived. Esai was in position. Shortly thereafter, a text arrived from Adan as well. They were both ready.

Raul still had to wait, though, for them to observe the town and give him the go ahead. If there was anything obviously wrong with Miro, they would be able to give him a heads up."

"2223

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 8 of 10))~~  
His brothers were certainly taking their time. That meant, at least, that there was nothing as obvious as smoke or annihilated buildings. A part of Raul had been worried about that.

Before the next text could arrive, however, Raul spotted another vehicle on the road, approaching from the direction of Miro.

It was a large truck, an eighteen wheeler, but it bore no markings that Raul could see. No company logo, even.

He caught a glimpse of the driver as it passed.

Maybe Vantalay was just different, but that didn't look like a typical truck driver to Raul. Skinny, harsh facial features and piercing eyes. No sunglasses or hat, despite the sunny day today.

And what was that truck transporting?

Right now, Vantalay was at war with four different countries. Lyste, Czacoa, Naos, and Yena Maria. According to the news and various people Raul had talked to over course of their stay in Ridgemark, battles had broken out all across Vantalay's borders. The only reason that the region around Ridgemark had thus far been spared was because the terrain rendered the city quite easily defensible from an assault by sea. The high cliffs on which Ridgemark was perched allowed only two paths for incoming ships to approach, and even then, they would still have to deal with the massive amount of artillery that the city had defending it as well.

Taking Ridgemark wouldn't be impossible, Raul thought--Uncle Melchor would've told him that only a fool would consider any location to be truly impregnable. But at the very least, it would require either an enormous commitment of resources on the attacker's part or saboteurs on the inside. The Triplets had been lucky enough to get into the country before the borders were shut down, but Vantalay's enemies obviously wouldn't have it so easy.

It therefore made sense that Ridgemark would want to ship in as many resources from domestic locations as possible, rather than relying on its ports too heavily. Foreign agents were much more likely to arrive by sea or air.

But even despite all that, Raul still couldn't help being suspicious of that truck. Something about it bothered him."

"2224 -- CCXIX.

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 9 of 10))~~

If Miro was sending crops or some other product to Ridgemark, then shouldn't it be in trucks with some kind of company logo on them? It was important for branding--and free advertising, besides.

Who would use an unmarked truck and why?

Bah.

He was overthinking it. The truck probably just belonged to an independent contractor. Or to a company that valued discretion for some reason. It could've been empty, for all he knew.

He shifted in his seat and tried to relax. All this waiting was getting to him. He'd never been the most patient person. He and his brothers were all like that. Human interaction was their bread and butter, and whenever they had to go without it for very long, they got antsy.

But he wasn't a child, anymore. He couldn't keep using that as an excuse. Professionalism had to come before his whims and wishes.

His phone dinged.

Finally, another text. From Adan this time. Hmm? It was only one word.

slaves

Raul's eyes held on that word for a long moment, widening slowly at the dreaded realization. Slaves?

He awaited clarification, but he had a feeling that he already knew everything that he needed to.

It was a group text, so Esai had seen it, too. His response was not comforting. It, too, was only one word.

yes

A rare scowl formed on Raul's face as he began texting back.

Chapter Two Hundred Nineteen: 'A lord's decision...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

Hector was going to be sad to see the King leave. After multiple extensions to the man's stay here at Warrenhold, it seemed that he was finally going to return to Sescoria today.

He would miss Lynn, too, of course, though that parting would also be accompanied by a sense of relief. As much as he enjoyed being around her, it was a bit exhausting to have his attention constantly split on her. These last few days, he couldn't help devoting an entire parallel thought process to just her."

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"2225

~~((The National Jelly Bean Day Special -- page 10 of 10))~~

He hadn't intended to think about her so much, of course, but when she was within such close proximity all the time, he could sense her presence with the Scarf of Amordiin even when he wasn't looking directly at her.

That had to be a new level of creepy. Staring at someone without actually staring at them. He hated himself for being so preoccupied when there were so many other things going on, but it was all but impossible to stop.

He supposed he should just be grateful that he could concentrate on multiple things at once. Though, he did wonder if the ease of his multitasking was actually making it worse. It gave him an excuse. He



wasn't really letting himself be distracted, right? He had attention to spare, right?

Nevermind the fact that Zeff noticed a drop in his combat performance during their sparring sessions.

Thankfully, the Lord Elroy didn't seem to pick up on the cause. Instead, he attributed the drop in ability to the fact that Hector had missed a few training sessions due to the King's visit. Zeff didn't appreciate that much, but he also seemed to understand the importance of the King's time here.

That first meeting between Zeff and King William had been an interesting one. Zeff had been his usual stern self as he tried to express his gratitude for allowing his kin to stay in Atreya during this difficult time, while King William mainly just seemed interested in asking questions about Rainlord history. The King had a lot of questions about trees, for some reason.

Admittedly, Hector had been a bit distracted at that time, himself. Lynn had been talking to him directly--which somehow required more than just one parallel thought process from him.

""So when are we going to spar?"" she'd asked, poking him in the shoulder."

"2225

The prospect of training with Lynn again had certainly crossed his mind, but there were multiple reasons why he wasn't eager to give that a go. And frankly, he was a bit surprised by her apparent enthusiasm. ""Ah... you really want to fight?"" he'd asked.

""Of course! It'll be fun to gauge each other's progress.""

Hector had nodded at that point. It did seem fun. In theory. ""But, uh... the problem with that is... well, most of my 'progress' has been in the usage of killing techniques.""

Lynn had just kind of stared at him for a time, her expression as unreadable as always. ""So... you're saying that you think you can pierce this purple shield of mine, is that it?"" And she summoned the violet shadow, making it bubble up from her gauntlet and hover in front

of his face.

He hadn't seen her make that kind of shape with it before. It was like bubbles connected together by a blanket, constantly rolling over one another. Boiling, perhaps. It was a little gross-looking, honestly, but kinda cool, too, in its own way.

He hadn't been sure how to respond to her question, though. Would it have been too cocky to say that he was confident that he could pierce it? He hadn't thought so, but he hadn't wanted to upset her, either.

She'd ended up a little upset with him, anyway, though. ""Well? You were implying that you were worried about killing me, weren't you? That means that you think you can pierce this thing, doesn't it?""

""Ah... well, er..."" Agh, why had she looked at him like that? Was she actually mad? Or just messing with him? What should he have said?

They were interrupted when Ms. Rogers arrived to inform him of some rather mundane but necessary banking paperwork that the Madame Carthrace was in need of.

And now, on the last day of the King's visit, Hector had nearly forgotten that conversation, but Lynn apparently had not."

"2227

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Above ground and in the middle of a rocky clearing, Hector and Lynn stood by themselves, a good distance away from the recently constructed buildings. They had a handful of spectators, including Garovel, the King, Matteo and his reaper, as well as Roman and Gina.

Hector scratched the back of his head. ""...Is this really necessary?"" he whispered.

""Yes!"" Lynn exclaimed.

He should've known that it was already too late to back out, he supposed.

Lynn drew her sword and pointed it at him. ""How's your swordsmanship? Have you honed it at all?""

""As a matter of fact... no, I haven't."" Hector just gave her a flat look.

Lynn seemed briefly disappointed. ""Well, that's okay. I can give you a few more pointers later. First, show me your most powerful stuff.""

""...I don't think that's a good idea. ""

""Oho. Big words, Lord Goffe.""

""That's not what I--""

""C'mon. I can take it."" She began closing the distance between them.  
""Show me before I get mad.""

He sighed. ""Alright, fine, but before this goes any further, let's do a test. I don't want to risk--""

The violet shadow lashed out at him, and he narrowly sidestepped it, ending up with a scratch across his chest instead of a hole through it.

""Good dodge,"" said Lynn. ""Little slow, though.""

Hector's expression hardened. ""Aren't you being a bit too aggressive for just a sparring match?""

""Yeah, well, maybe I'm working out some frustration."" She twirled her sword in her hand. ""Besides, you can heal, so what difference does it make?""

He could tell for certain, now. She was definitely annoyed.

But increasingly, so was he.

""Let's do a test, first,"" Hector said again. ""We can see how well your shadow--""

""Mm, don't feel like it."" She bolted toward him and swung her sword wide."

"2228

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

It was an obvious strike, far more obvious and flashy than Hector remembered her attacks being. She probably intended for him to block

it, as a kind of warning attack.

So he did. A suit of iron armor clapped around his whole body instantaneously, and he caught the blow with Haqq's shield.

""See?"" she said. ""I'm holding back. I didn't coat my blade in my shadow.""

She wasn't aware of the properties of Haqq's shield and probably thought it would be as easy for her shadow to cut through as his iron was.

Hector didn't feel like correcting her.

Lynn pulled her sword back and relaxed a little. ""Nice armor, though. You couldn't make that so quickly before, could you?""

""Er. Yeah. Listen, just--hold out your shadow for a bit. Away from your body.""

""Like this?"" Lynn launched a long string of purple out from her hand and let it hover there.

Hector ""loaded"" up an iron bullet in a parallel thought process. ""Yeah, that'll--""

Her shadow twitched and leapt toward him at a right angle.

He stepped out of the way, having expected her to try something again. The shadow bent in midair and tried to skewer him another time, but it splashed against his shield.

Lynn had gotten behind him. ""Don't you think this scarf of yours is a liability? I could just grab it, you know.""

Thanks to said Scarf, however, Hector had sensed her there beforehand. He'd been able to tell from her movements and posture that she wasn't trying to attack him, so he hadn't done anything to repel her, instead wanting to know what her intentions were. It seemed like she'd just wanted to spook him, though.

He didn't turn around to face her. ""Do you really want to spar?"" he said through the metallic tinge of his helmet. ""Or do you just wanna keep trying to sucker punch me?""

""Heh, I'm just testing your reactions. You don't think our enemies will take it so easy on you, do you? It's important to keep your guard up,

Hector.""

Ugh, she was reminding him of Zeff all of a sudden."

"2229

""What's with the silent treatment?"" said Lynn. ""This is supposed to be a friendly bout, you know.""

What the hell was she saying now? She really didn't understand what an awkward situation she was putting him in, did she? And had she forgotten that the King was watching this, as well? That just compounded things.

In a parallel thought process, he was focusing only on what the Scarf was telling him. Since they were outside, the wind played a bit of havoc with Scarf--in both a good and bad way. It ""blurred"" things a little in his mind, but it also extended the range of what he could sense by quite a bit. The treeline in the distance was fairly clear to him, at least in terms of general shape, whereas Lynn's figure was faintly ""smeared.""

He could still sense her movements with immense precision, however. He noticed her posture shift suddenly, her arm raise, and the aberration shadow extend from her hand. She was about to attack him again.

So he materialized an iron platform beneath her feet, taller than himself and with enough force to pop her high up into the air like a bouncy ball.

It took her a second to get her bearings, but she caught herself on a swirling bed of violet shadow, landing in front of him. Hector had been prepared to catch her with an iron slide, but he could tell with the Scarf and with his own eyes that it wouldn't be necessary.

""Ho ho!"" said Lynnette with a smile as the purple dissipated around her. ""That was fast! Good job.""

Hector frowned, though she wouldn't be able to see it through his helmet. ""Lynn, this is a bad idea...""

""Why?""

""I tried to tell you--""

""Well, there's your problem,"" said Lynn. ""Don't tell me. Show me."" And she lunged toward him again, her white cloak wreathed in smoldering purple.

Y'know what? Fine, he decided. Maybe there was a safe way that he could show her."

"2230

Just as he'd done before, Hector launched Lynn up on an iron platform--but he didn't stop there, this time. He materialized more blocks of iron in midair and added velocity states to them. He knocked her to and fro, ping ponging her back and forth with increasing speed. Over and over and over again, not letting up.

The shadow would protect her from injury, he knew, but it wouldn't prevent knockback--or at least, not by much. He could neutralize her completely so long as he kept her pinned down and disoriented.

Unsurprisingly, however, she seemed to grow quickly irritated with this strategy, and the purple shadow exploded out of her in all directions, catching the iron blocks before they could hit her and reorienting herself into an upright position.

Hector exhaled heavily and dematerialized the last of his blocks. He supposed he should've known that it wouldn't be that easy. And judging by the look on her face, he'd only served to piss her off.

With the shadow surging around her, she seemed almost as if she were stuck in a massive purple tree. But of course, she was in control of it, and she wasn't allowing the shadow to dissipate this time, either. She kept it out, bubbling and swirling around her, as she dove headlong toward him again.

Weirdly enough, though, this was now reminiscent of that fight with a worm. Lynn's shadow wasn't quite so large, of course, and she wasn't trying to kill him--at least, in theory--but this sight of a hulking, amorphous body lunging toward him was certainly familiar.

A flurry of purple tentacles shot out in advance, trying to flank Hector from both sides.

That would be a lot of shit to dodge. He could try, and with the Scarf, he might even be able to do it. But he had an idea he liked better.

He'd do the exact same thing again. But bigger."

"2231

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

He raised another iron platform beneath Lynn, just as fast as before but the size of a small house by itself. She and her shadow went flying, and Hector followed up again, too. Giant blocks in midair, ping ponging her back and forth. The shadow struggled and flailed, trying to grab on to each block, but they were too large to catch.

He heard Lynn scream in frustration, which was almost enough to make Hector stop, until he saw her shadow flex and focus into a dozen different blades.

Still toppling through the air, Lynn started slicing through the blocks of iron instead of trying to catch them. The iron slabs parted around her, allowing her to right herself again amid a storm of swirling purple blades.

Lynn was taking angry breaths. ""That. Was. Extremely annoying, Hector.""

""Good job breaking through,"" he offered her.

She scowled. ""Don't condescend to me.""

Hector tilted his head. ""I wasn't.""

She steadied her breath, then reeled her shadow in as she walked closer. ""Hector... I don't understand. I've been training like mad since you've been gone. I've sparred with Harper Norez dozens of times now. I'm sure he was taking it easy on me, but I'm far stronger than I was before we went to Sair. But you... you're able to just toy with me like that..."

Ah.

Suddenly, Hector felt a little bad. He hadn't really considered things from her perspective. And he should've. Agh.

Too self-absorbed, as usual. Shit. What an idiot, he was. And he still didn't even know what to say to her.

""How did you improve this much?"" asked Lynn. ""No offense, but I'm confident that I could've whooped your ass before.""

In spite of the previous tension, Hector couldn't help chortling at her bluntness. ""Yeah, you probably could've...""

""Right? So what the hell changed so much?""

He wondered how to explain. ""Well, uh... lots of things, I guess.""  
"2232

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Lynn's expression flattened. ""Be more specific. This is serious. I want to know if there's anything else I can do to grow stronger, too. I don't know if you've noticed, but the world just got a whole lot more dangerous, and the kingdom could come under attack again at any time.""

""Okay, well... do you know what emergence is?"" said Hector.

She thought for a second. ""Roman mentioned that, once. In Korgum. It's how servants can increase their ability by leaps and bounds, right?""

""Yeah.""

""You're saying you achieved emergence in Sair?""

""Well, in the Undercrust, actually. On the way back from Sair."" On second thought, had he achieved emergence in Sair, too? With all the fighting he'd gotten involved in, it was a bit difficult to remember, but he didn't think so.

""And that's it?"" said Lynn. ""Emergence has created this much a gap between us? Roman's power grew in Korgum, but still... this seems like too much of a jump compared to that. Because you were holding back on me, weren't you?""

""Ah... well, I also achieved emergence when I fought Harper. And you and I haven't sparred since before that, so...""



"Hmm," was all she said.

"And there's my training with Lord Elroy, too," said Hector. "That's been... unbelievable helpful, honestly. He's taught me tons of things about how to use materialization more intelligently."

"I see..."

"And then, there's also, um..." He stopped himself. This was Lynn he was talking to, but would it really be okay to just tell her? He glanced toward Garovel, who was still observing with the King and the others. 'Can I tell Lynn about the Scarf?' he asked.

The reaper took a moment to respond. 'No,' he said privately. 'It's better if no one knows.'

'But we can trust her, can't we?'

"2233

'It's not about trust, Hector. Telling her would just be an unnecessary risk. How would it help anything, if she knew?'

'Because... then she'd... I don't know...'

'Exactly.'

'She wants to get stronger, Garovel. And items like this could help her.'

'You are NOT about to give the Scarf to her.'

'What? No, I mean... if she's just... if she becomes aware that items like this exist in the world, then maybe she'll...'

'Maybe she'll what? Go hunt them down? She's rather busy protecting the Queen and her husband.'

'Sure, but still...'

The reaper gave a silent sigh. 'If you want to tell her about magical artifacts, then fine. Just don't go into detail about the Scarf specifically.'

He could be satisfied with that. 'Okay.'

Lynn was staring at him expectantly, perhaps already guessing that he was conversing with Garovel.

He dematerialized his armor and unconsciously reached into the Scarf to rub his neck. ""I can't really... go into detail, but let's just say... there are certain objects in the world which are similar in nature to that aberration gauntlet of yours.""

She blinked. ""Similar in what way?""

""As in, they harbor supernatural powers,"" said Hector. ""You were there when I told the Queen about the Undercrust--and Himmekel, too. There was a lot of crazy treasure there, and I suspect there's even more, elsewhere in the world.""

""H-hold on,"" said Lynn with furrowed eyebrows and a raised gauntlet. ""On top of everything else, you're telling me that you've also gained an item of power comparable to this thing?""

Hector gave her a shrug. ""Pretty much.""

She looked incredulous.

His mind went to the Shard and also the Tuning Orb of Karugetti. ""More than one, actually."" Then his mind went to the Moon's Wrath, and he frowned. ""I lost one to a giant worm, though. That... sucked.""

""Hector, I need more details.""

He shook his head. ""Can't.""

""Why not?""

Impulsively, he wanted to panic, but then he realized there was a perfectly acceptable scapegoat standing right over there, and he pointed. ""Garovel won't let me. Blame him.""

'Argh, great!' said Garovel privately. 'Thanks for that, O brave Lord Darksteel!'

'No problem.'

"2234

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Lynn put her goggles on to look at Garovel directly. ""Does he not trust me with sensitive information?""

""He said it's not about trust, but just minimizing risk,"" said Hector.

""Hmph."" She returned her gaze to Hector.

He noticed her lone eye fall upon the Scarf of Amordiin.

She squinted at him. ""Is this item--?""

Hector's own eyes bulged as he realized what she was about to say, and he clapped an iron muzzle around her mouth. ""No, no,"" he said, shaking his head urgently. ""No guessing. Never know who might overhear.""

She touched the muzzle with her hand, perhaps in disbelief that Hector would've actually done such a thing to her, but before she could get too mad, Hector annihilated it again.

Then she just stared at him. She was free to talk now, but for whatever reason, she was choosing not to.

Hector tried to hold eye contact, though it was difficult. He remembered Garovel telling him that a lord shouldn't apologize carelessly, so he was hesitating to do so now, but the more seconds transpired and the more time he had to reflect on what he'd just done... the more he came to realize that, yeah, that was kind of a fucked up thing to do someone.

""Ah... sorry about that,"" he eventually said.

Lynn's stern expression didn't change, but she averted her eye from him, at least, looking around again.

What he wouldn't give to know what was going through her head, right now.

Thankfully, the two of them were far enough away from their observers that they most likely couldn't be overheard, especially with this much wind, but he still had to wonder what they were all making of this situation.

""...Who, exactly, were you worried might overhear my 'guess?'" said Lynn.

That was a good fucking question, considering what he'd just been thinking about. He did have a good answer to it, though. ""A giant, invisible bird,"" said Hector.

Lynn blinked at him. After a moment, she seemed to understand and nodded. However, the frustration in her face did not completely diminish. ""Hmph. Out of context, that would be one of the dumbest answers I've ever heard.""

It was Hector's turn to blink. Was she...? Was she pouting?"  
"2235

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Hector was at a loss. He couldn't tell if she was genuinely upset or just playing around. Or maybe a little of both? He'd never seen her act this way before.

""It's very discomfoting,"" said Lynn as she looked around another time, ""thinking that one of them might be watching us, right now without our knowledge.""

""Yeah... but I think the underground portions of Warrenhold are pretty safe from them. The entrance alone would be a tight fit for their huge bodies. Plus, they'd have to make it through the entirety of the Entry Tower.""

""Hmm. But they could still be above ground with us, right now, couldn't they?""

Hector nodded. ""I'm actually expecting Hanton to show up any time now. He said he would visit Warrenhold.""

""Oh yeah..."" Lynn scratched her cheek. ""But you can sense them somehow, can't you? How close do they have to be for you to pick up on their presence?""

Hector frowned at her, knowing that he couldn't tell her that.

Lynn smacked her lips. ""Right. Details.""

In the end, they decided to keep sparring for a while longer, though it was a bit more relaxed this time. They resorted to basic swordplay, with Lynn providing instruction more than competition. She was even

gracious enough not to cut any of his limbs off--which honestly surprised him a little.

The observers pulled up some chairs and fetched lunch for everyone, and it wasn't long before they were paying more attention to their own conversation than they were to Hector and Lynn.

At length, however, an interruption arrived.

The wind picked up briefly, and the spare thought process that Hector was using to monitor the Scarf's intel suddenly noticed a distant fluctuation in the air.

A large, blurry shape was gliding toward them on the northerly wind. When Hector looked toward it, he saw nothing with his eyes, so even though he hadn't been able to sense it with perfect clarity, he knew at once that it was a Sparrow."

"2236

Hector took precautions. He instantly made soul-empowered iron suits for everyone, and pulled Garovel close to him in an iron orb, informing the reaper of the situation privately.

Everyone else was surprised as well, especially as some of them were still eating, and a sudden iron helmet didn't make that task easier. But thankfully, Hector didn't have to explain what was going on, because the cause revealed himself.

'There is no need for that,' arrived Hanton's voice. His avian visage melted out of thin air--or appeared to, at least--as his enormous talons touched down on a large gray boulder mere meters away from Hector and Lynn. 'I assure you, I come in peace.'

""Happy to hear it,"" said Hector. ""But peace isn't maintained through goodwill alone.""

That left a momentary silence in its wake.

Hanton's beady eyes moved to the group of onlookers farther away. 'King William. I assume that the Lord Goffe already informed you of my true nature the other day. I hope my appearance does not come as too much of a shock to you.'

The King was already stepping closer, apparently unafraid. ""I would be lying if I said it set my heart at ease, but nonetheless, I am glad to see you here now.""

'Alas, I fear we have much more to discuss now than me and my family.'

""You're right."" The King pulled back the faceguard of his helmet.

""Come. Join us while we finish eating.""

'I will. Thank you.'

From there, the meeting became a bit less tense than the first one with Hanton, but Hector remained on edge. Clearly, the King wanted to be diplomatic here, and that was great, but Hector still didn't know the full limit of what Hanton might be capable of. If Sparrows could pause people in their tracks and wipe their memories, there was no telling what other ways they could manipulate minds.

He earnestly hoped that Hanton could be trusted, but he intended to remain vigilant as he listened to their conversation."

"2237

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 1 of 18))~~

""This is not the first time you have played advisor to the King of Atreya,"" said William, a whiff of a smile on his face.

'Yes,' said Hanton. 'I was once quite close with your father-in-law.'

""I remember it vividly,"" said the King. ""When I was a teenager, just beginning to dip my toe into matters of the royal court, you were a star. And one that burned quite hotly, as I recall.""

Hanton ruffled his russet feathers but said nothing.

""Many in the court were jealous of your relationship to Martinus,"" said the King. ""I remember it even being said that, at one point, your influence was comparable to the King himself--for that was how much he seemed to trust you.""

Still, Hanton remained quiet.

""It makes one think,"" the King went on. ""With abilities like yours, it

must have been a trivial matter to obtain that relationship with him.""

'That was not the way of it,' said Hanton. 'Martinus and I had been friends since we were both children.'

""Ah, and am I to believe that was a coincidence? The Gaolanets have been a noble Atreyan House for many years. Gathering intelligence and advising the Crown has been your family's role throughout this nation's history.""

'Yes. That is also true.' And Hanton made no further comment.

The King eyed the last bit of his tuna melt for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not he wanted to eat it. ""The thing I find most intriguing, however, is the timeline of events."" He leveled his gaze back up at the giant bird. ""In one form or another, House Gaolanet advised the Crown for the better part of three centuries. That was, until about ten years ago. And now, here we are. Within just the last year, Atreya has experienced not one but two crises--the likes of which this country has never seen before.""

"2238

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 2 of 18))~~

'Are you looking to blame us for Atreya's ill fortune in these matters as well?' said Hanton.

""I don't know,"" the King said. ""Blame seems unproductive at this juncture, but the coincidence does strike me as strange, nonetheless. Because, well, the way I see it, there are only three possibilities. First, it truly is all a coincidence. Second, House Gaolanet is somehow responsible for these horrible events. Or third, the opposite. Perhaps it is precisely your absence as royal advisors that has been the damnable catalyst.""

Hanton's avian head reared back a little.

Everyone else seemed a bit perplexed as well.

Hanton made a noise that Hector didn't recognize--a kind of rumbling chirp from deep within the giant bird's chest. A laugh? 'My daughter would be ecstatic to hear you even mention that last possibility.'

""Ah, Pauline. How is she doing, by the way?""

'As spirited as ever. Or perhaps even more so, if you can believe it.'

""I can. My memories of her are few, but I can. In fact, I'm surprised she didn't accompany you here.""

'Oh, she wanted to. Thankfully, she still listens to me, from time to time.'

""I should like to meet her again,"" said the King.

'Truly, Your Highness?'

""Yes.""

'Then... I suppose that can be arranged. Another day, of course. I fear we are beginning to get sidetracked.'

""Of course.""

As Hector kept listening, a part of him was in quiet awe of this conversation--of the King, in particular. That was the first time that Hanton Gaolanet had referred to him as ""Your Highness"" so far. Maybe Hector was reading too much into it, but that struck him as significant.

""Before we move on to more current matters, however,"" said the King, ""I would like to know more about your falling out with Martinus.""

'Ah...'

""Why did he strip you of your position?""

"2239

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 3 of 18))~~  
'What have you heard?' said Hanton.

""You wish to comment on rumors and speculation?"" said the King.

'It may help me to contextualize my response.'

""Very well..."" The King took a moment to think. ""I have heard that you and Martinus butted heads rather strongly on the matter of militarization. And to be quite blunt with you, I have heard that you



were quite the warmonger, which was what ultimately made him decide to relieve you off your advisory role."

'Ah.'

Hector found that a little surprising. Thus far, Hanton Gaolanet hadn't struck him as the warring type at all. From their previous conversation, that seemed like the last thing that Hanton would want.

Unless he'd been lying, of course.

'The truth, then, may confuse you,' said Hanton. 'Militarization is not a simple process--or even easy to define, necessarily. There are many methods of waging war, and not all of them involve building tanks and munitions factories. On the whole, I was actually AGAINST militarization. Martinus was much more interested in pursuing it than I was.'

""Excuse me?"" said the King. ""Are you trying to claim that it was Martinus who was the warmonger, not you?""

The Sparrow paused for a long sigh. 'Well... yes. While I would not say that I opposed every aspect of militarization, the basic sentiment is the same.'

The King's expression spoke of doubt, and he shook his head. ""Pardon me, but that flies in the face of virtually everything that I have heard about both him and you.""

'Oh? I am relieved to hear that, then. Because that, too, is as I intended it.'

The King was certainly no longer alone in his apparent confusion now. ""What in the world do you mean by that?""

'After Martinus fired me, I... took fairly dramatic action. It would have been a problem if the rest of the world perceived the King of Atreya as an aggressor.'

"2240

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 4 of 18))~~

""What did you do, exactly?"" asked the King.

'In short? I redirected perceptions of his policies and ideals onto myself. Since I was already ousted from his inner circle, I could be safely regarded as an outlier whose opinion no longer held any power.'

""Yes, but how did you do that?""

'Oh, it was not easy. The endeavor consumed my life for several years. Following members of the royal court, tweaking their memories, their perceptions. It was a constant project, and it pushed me to the brink of exhaustion. I was sure that I had missed some, but if you really had no inkling as to Martinus' true views, then perhaps I did a better job than I thought.'

""You freely admit to tampering with the minds of your fellow lords?""  
said William.

'Do I ""freely admit"" it? You say that as if to accuse me of some crime. As far as I am aware, there are no laws in this nation regarding the erasure of memories or the use of telepathy.'

The King just returned a frown.

'Perhaps there should be,' said Hanton. 'I will leave that matter to Your Highness' wisdom.'

King William shook his head and sighed. ""If the other lords knew of this...""

'It would be enormously problematic, yes.' Hanton's marbled eyes went briefly to Hector. 'But we are past the point of dancing around difficult truths, I feel. You must decide for yourselves whether my actions were unjust.'

Hector had some questions of his own, now. ""Why didn't you just manipulate King Martinus' mind directly? Why go through so much trouble working on the people around him? And was it really necessary to take the flack for his views upon yourself? Why not just erase them entirely and avoid blaming anyone?""

'Mental manipulation is an imprecise art,' said Hanton. 'If it were as simple as you were making it out to be, then yes, I would have had a much easier time and been able to avoid many sleepless nights.'

"2241

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 5 of 18))~~  
That was... actually kind of a relief to hear, Hector felt. The Lord Gaolanet's powers were terrifying enough already. It was nice to know that he had his limitations.

""Could you elaborate on this 'art' of mental manipulation?"" said King William. ""What difficulties did you run into, specifically?""

Hanton took a moment to think. 'If I am being perfectly honest with you, Your Highness, I would rather not share that information with anyone. I believe I am already taking quite a large risk in telling you as much as I am.'

""I understand that concern,"" said the King with a nod and a brief glance at Hector, ""but I feel that I must press you on this, nonetheless, Lord Gaolanet. Amicable though this meeting may be, we are still in the nascent stages of building trust between us. Sharing sensitive information such as that would go a long way toward improving our relationship, I think.""

Hanton was briefly quiet again, and his eyes returned to Hector. 'And do you feel that way as well, Lord Goffe?'

""...Yeah, I do,"" said Hector. ""Your abilities are quite... frightening to the imagination. A better understanding of how they work might dispel some of the unease about them."" Or it could make them worse, Hector thought, though, he kept that to himself.

Hanton sighed. 'Very well, then... Where to begin?' He took another pause for deliberation. 'Generally speaking, the older a memory is, the more difficult it is to erase. When a memory--or any idea, really--has time to become entrenched in the mind, it invariably acquires emotional connections. This is what is commonly referred to as ""sentimental attachment."" Typically, that term is used to express an emotional connection to physical objects, but the concept is essentially the same. This persistence of ideas can make the task of mental manipulation prohibitively difficult, if not impossible.'

"2242

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 6 of 18))~~  
""So this was why King Martinus was resistant to your manipulation?""

said King William. ""You wanted to change something in him that was too old?""

'I... suspect that was the reason, yes, but I do not know for certain.' Hanton ruffled his feathers. 'That was the first time I had ever attempted to influence him telepathically. All throughout our childhood, I never once tried it. He was my friend. Even if he would never find out about it, I still felt that doing that to him would have been a betrayal.'

William held his one hand up to his chin, thinking. ""Then are you saying that there could have been a different reason why he resisted you?""

'Well, yes. Some people are simply resistant by nature. Or even... immune.' He eyed Hector again. 'I know not why.'

He didn't know? Hmm. Hector considered that morsel of information a bit further. During that first encounter with Hanton, Hector had gotten the impression that it was his ability to think in parallel thought processes that allowed him to ignore the Sparrow's attempts to freeze his mind, but considering what Hanton had just said, Hector couldn't imagine that the blessing of Focus was particularly common. He'd be surprised if someone had even heard of it, much less possessed it.

Hector had to ask. ""How many people have you met who were immune to your telepathy?""

'Including you? Only four.'

Hector tried not to seem so surprised, but it was difficult. ""Over the course of your entire life?""

'Yes. People who are merely resistant are less rare. Regardless, cautionary tales regarding such individuals have been passed down through my family's generations. It is a foolish Sparrow indeed who disregards that possibility and instead tries to solve every problem with such an invasive method. One might even argue that it was precisely such carelessness that caused the downfall of my ancestors.'

"2243

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 7 of 18))~~  
Hector supposed he could understand Hanton's wary nature a little

better now. At any time, Sparrows could stumble upon someone who could expose them, someone who could threaten their entire way of life.

Someone like Hector.

He didn't know whether to be more worried or less by this information. If nothing else, it certainly provided Hanton with motivation to want Hector out of the picture.

'But in any event,' Hanton went on, 'I feel we have spent long enough dredging up the past. Let us speak on more pressing events now.'

""Very well,"" said the King. ""I can only assume you are referring to this new continental war going on.""

'Yes. Thankfully, it does not currently involve Atreya, but I fear that could change if adequate measures are not taken.'

William's posture stiffened. ""What measures would that be?""

'Well, first things first. If, for whatever reason, Atreya did somehow end up joining the war, I think it should be clear which side we would wish to be on.'

""The defending side, of course,"" said the King.

'Yes. Whatever other politics might be at play, we simply cannot work with any of the nations that instigated this conflict. The military invasion of another sovereign land is too great of an obstacle on moral grounds alone. The public would never support it--and rightly so. In the long-term, such an alliance would risk destabilizing Atreya from within, which is to speak nothing of whatever the immediate consequences of winning or losing the war might be.'

""You are getting a bit ahead of yourself, no?""

'I am, but that is also the point. To have forethought regarding our more immediate decisions. A lack of adequate forethought has historically been the great folly of statesmen. They make judgments that seem sound in the short-term, perhaps on the promise of riches, only to later find that things have spun wildly out of their control. I believe this could be one such instance, if we are not careful.'

"2244

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 8 of 18))~~  
""The 'promise of riches?'" said the King. ""Why do I get the feeling that was not a random example you were giving?""

'Naturally, if the aggressing nations come to Atreya seeking aid or allyship, then make no mistake: they will make their offer as sweet as can be. They may promise us the moon--and possibly even deliver it. That is how important these negotiations can be. When the tide of a war is beginning to shift, foreign help can become the difference between victory and defeat.'

""As we well know,"" said Lynn, drawing everyone's glance.

It was rare for her to speak up like that during a formal meeting between lords, Hector knew. She must've felt quite strongly about that point.

'...Yes, I suppose you do,' said Hanton. 'And much the better. That experience and the wisdom that came with it will be invaluable in the days to come.'

Lynn said nothing further and merely held the Sparrow's gaze with her one eye.

The King was visibly pensive again. ""Returning to the point you were trying to make previously: what 'measures' are you recommending be taken?""

'In the interest of ensuring that we do not get unintentionally tangled up in this mess, it would be wise to reevaluate every Atreyan ambassador currently deployed to each of the warring nations.'

""Ah..."

'Sometimes, the individuals appointed to these positions are... shall we say... not given as much consideration as perhaps they should be. Double-checking those choices now would certainly not hurt.'

""That can be arranged,"" said the King. ""Anything else?""

'Yes. Informants. They are now more valuable than ever. This is perhaps the biggest reason why competent and trustworthy ambassadors are important.'

The King blinked. ""Are you saying we should employ spies in the

middle of this war?"

'I understand that it would be a rather large commitment of resources for a nation as small as ours,' said Hanton, 'but I do believe it would be worth it.'

"2245

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""Would that not run the risk of worsening the situation?"" said the King. ""I highly doubt that these nations will appreciate us sticking our noses in their business. Not to mention, these are war zones you're talking about. Sending anyone to them, trained or not, would be playing with fire.""

'Your concern is understandable, but with the right agents, that should be a non-issue. Those with proper espionage training will know the importance of avoiding exactly what you are talking about. It is a harsh reality, but spies know what they are signing up for. If they are caught, the likelihood of rescue is virtually nonexistent, because their homeland cannot risk acknowledging their mission.'

The King just frowned.

'Even in this modern age, there are many political prisoners all over the world for this very reason. Many of them will die in captivity unless their governments manage to strike deals for them--which is unlikely when those governments cannot confirm their association to them without inviting war.'

""You are not making your recommendation sound any more appealing,"" said the King.

'I am simply telling you the truth. Sugarcoating it would do us no favors. Skilled spies are an invaluable resource, Your Highness, and if ever there was a time to make use of them, it would be now.'

The King exhaled a long breath. ""Do you have anyone in mind for these tasks?""

'Well... it pains me to admit it, but yes. My own children would be well-suited to such missions.'

Everyone was surprised to hear him say that.

'Believe me--I do not make that recommendation lightly. Knowing the danger as well as I do, I have been instructing my children for years in the finer points of discretionary operations. They are all highly qualified.'

There arrived a period of persistent silence."  
"2246

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 10 of 18))~~  
When no one else said anything, Hanton decided to continue.  
'Additionally, we Wrobels have our own network of contacts to call upon. Our brethren who are also in hiding could prove enormously beneficial in the gathering of intelligence. To that end, only my family will suffice.'

""I see,"" said the King. ""That does sound quite helpful. I will speak to my wife about this matter for you. I will make no promises, however. This is quite an important position you are seeking to occupy.""

'I understand. And thank you. Allow me to say one final thing in the vein of self-promotion. In matters of espionage and intelligence-gathering, trust can be a difficult and very sensitive issue, but in the end, the results will always speak for themselves. Given the chance, we will not disappoint. I assure you.'

The King smiled that familiar smile of his. ""I admire your confidence.""

'Thank you.'

The King's postured shifted somewhat. ""That being said, this all seems like a rather large endeavor for just a handful of individuals. As I recall, you do not have that many children. Even if the Queen grants your request, I imagine that we will still have need of other agents. Might you have any recommendations to that end?""

'I do,' said Hanton. 'A number of individuals come to mind. I will draft a list for you.'

""That would be appreciated.""

The giant bird paused, beady eyes shifting briefly between listeners.  
'There is... one man I wish to recommend above all others. His list of



accomplishments was unlike any I had ever seen during my time as Director of the Agency of Foreign Affairs. However, there is one major problem.'

""Well, don't leave me in suspense,"" said the King.

Hanton still seemed reluctant. 'He is one of those unfortunate individuals I mentioned earlier. A political prisoner.'

"2247

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""What is this man's name?"" the King asked.

'His true name is Donald Elias, but the alias he used while undercover was John Wright.' Hanton allowed a beat to pass, perhaps in thought. 'To be clear, his capture was not his fault. He was meeting with Intarian agents who were also undercover, but their operations were already compromised. When the authorities arrived and apprehended them, Donald was caught up in their mess and imprisoned along with them.'

'Hmm,' mused Garovel privately to Hector. 'Elias, huh?'

The conversation kept going, however, and Hector didn't have the opportunity to inquire further. Perhaps he could've talked to Garovel in a parallel thought process, but he didn't want to split the reaper's attention. It would be better to just ask later, if he could remember.

'It has been over fifteen years since then,' said Hanton, 'but Donald was of such incredible caliber as an agent that there is a very good chance that even to this day, his captors still do not know that he is an agent of Atreya, not Intar.'

""And who are these captors of his?"" said the King.

'The VMP. The Vantalay Military Police.'

At that, Hector's poker face faltered a little, though thankfully no one was looking at him. Vantalay, of all places? Really?

The King was nodding. ""That is indeed a major problem, then, as you said. Are you truly suggesting that we should attempt to parley with their government in order to secure his release? And after all this time,

no less?"

'I admit, the situation is difficult. And after fifteen years in a foreign prison, he is unlikely to be the same man he once was. But all the same, I wanted to at least bring it to your attention. The man was the finest spy I have ever known.'

The King made no response."

"2248

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'I will of course defer to the Queen's judgment,' said Hanton. 'I may be allowing sentimentality to interfere with my reasoning. Donald was a good friend, which was rare in our line of work, and his imprisonment was one of my greatest regrets.'

""Is he a Wrobel, too?"" said the King.

'No, he is a normal human.'

""Does he know of your secret?""

'No. Or at least, I do not believe so.'""

""What action are you hoping for my wife to take on this matter?""

'To be quite frank with you, I am not entirely sure. If I had a clear plan of action that I thought would work, I would have formally spoken about it years ago in the royal court. I suppose I am merely hoping that the Queen or one of her ambassadors is able to take advantage of the chaos that is currently embroiling Vantalay and... ""shake something loose, "" let's say.'

""I see. What else do you know of Vantalay? Anything that might help?""

'Ah. Vantalay has been a rather volatile nation for over half a century now. You already know of the Vanguard and Abolish, yes? It frequently changes hands between them. Today, it is difficult to tell who truly holds power there. And even disregarding those two forces, Vantalay is still fraught with many dangers, not the least of which is terrorism. Only a handful of the major cities can be regarded as safe, and that is largely due to the private security forces employed by certain

companies that operate there. They have a vested interest in maintaining tourist appeal.'

Hector was paying even closer attention now than to anything else that had thus far been said.

Hanton was far from done. 'It is a divided nation in many respects. Though its government has enacted many socialistic policies over the years, the aforementioned companies have maintained enough influence to resist the enforcement of such legislation. The country has been going through quite a long-standing ""economic civil war,"" of sorts.'"

"2249

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 13 of 18))~~  
""That sounds like quite the mess,"" said the King. He broke for sly grin. ""Which is saying something, coming from the likes of us.""

That earned another laugh from Hanton in that low-yet-chirpy cadence of his. 'Indeed. There have been many occasions over the years when I would not have been surprised if Vantalay had simply fractured into multiple smaller nations.'

""If it is so bad there, then how has the government maintained sovereignty for so long?""

'Because it is an ideological war as much as it is an economic one,' said Hanton. 'Much of the public supports the government. But a similarly large number of them support the companies as well. They do employ many people, after all--and provide better protection in their territories than the government does. But the companies also control considerably less land, which makes that job much easier. It is a complicated situation.'

""I see.""

Hector had to to interject and ask a question of his own. ""How do you know so much about Vantalay?""

'While I may no longer work for the government as an intelligence operative, keeping abreast of world news has always been a hobby of mine. I didn't tell you anything that you couldn't have learned from

publicly available resources.' He allowed a beat to pass. 'Assuming you had been keeping up with said resources for the last thirty years or so.'

The King chortled. ""And this is merely your 'hobby,' is it? I fear you will only end up making the rest of us look like fools if you continue to undersell yourself, Lord Gaolanet.""

Hanton returned another laugh of his own. 'Your ability to weave together a compliment is something I have always admired about you, Your Highness.'

""Heh. In any event, might you have any information for us that is not publicly available?""

Hanton took another moment before responding. 'That would require me to have informants in Vantalay, Your Highness.'

""I am aware,"" said William. ""So? Do you?""

"2250

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'Well,' said Hanton, 'I may have caught wind of a peculiar rumor regarding Vantalay's reason for invading Czacoa. But it is only a rumor, Your Highness. You should not consider it fact.'

""Let's hear it,"" said the King.

'Mm, very well. Supposedly, the Vantalayan government felt that the Czacoan government was poaching their most valuable citizens and so decided that simply conquering Czacoa through military action would fix that problem.'

""Ah...""

'Again, I cannot speak to truth of this claim. As far as I am aware, the Vantalayan government has yet to make an official statement regarding its reasons for declaring war.'

""I see. Thank you for the information.""

'You are welcome. And if we may return to the subject of Donald Elias, there is more I would say.'

""I'm listening.""

'I cannot be sure, but it may be better to try to parley with the companies for his release. Even if he is not currently in their possession, they may have a means of acquiring him for us. But of course, meeting with them openly might also serve to irritate the Vantalayan government.' Hanton gave a deep sigh. 'But then AGAIN, the government there is quite busy with the war, so perhaps it would be easy to negotiate with the companies unnoticed.'

""You are presenting me with many options,"" the King observed, sounding mildly exasperated.

'An advisor's role is not to decide for you, Your Highness.'

""Heh. Eloquently said.""

Hector's attention was abruptly diverted when the Scarf informed him that his recently appointed Stewardess of Warrenhold, Mara Rogers, had ascended the steps of the Entry Tower and was now approaching their group at a noticeably brisk walk. He made some soul-empowered armor for her as she got close, which seemed to surprise her quite a bit, as she stopped in her tracks."

"2251

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 15 of 18))~~  
Hector excused himself from the meeting table and stood up to walk over to her.

""Lord!"" she whispered urgently. ""This is--! What did you--?!""

""Sorry,"" he said, ushering her farther away from the others. ""It's for your own protection."" He nodded sideways toward Hanton. ""Against that guy.""

Her wide eyes stuck on the Sparrow sitting there, and she said nothing.

Hector wasn't sure how good a Sparrow's hearing was, so he kept leading Mara all the way back to the double doors of the Entry Tower.

She was still staring when they got there, however.

""Ms. Rogers?"" pushed Hector.

""Y-yes, Lord?""

""I assume you came up here to tell me something.""

""Ah! Yes, Lord."" She leaned in closer and lowered her voice even further. ""Word has just come in from the team in Vantalay. And it is grave news, sir. They are reporting a humanitarian crisis. They've discovered a location where human trafficking is being conducted.""

Well, shit.

One question came to mind first. ""Is it the town of Miro?"" he asked.

""Yes, Lord. It is.""

Of course it was. Had he even needed to ask?

'Hector,' came Garovel's private words.

The reaper was still encased in iron and orbiting around Hector's body. Hector had left a small hole in it when he first made it--not for air, of course, but rather so that Garovel would be able to overhear their conversation with Hanton. Without doing so, the soul-infusion would have blocked all telepathic thoughts from reaching him.

Hector hadn't been too concerned about leaving an opening for Hanton's abilities, because the suits of iron armor that he'd made for everyone else obviously weren't air tight, either, and they'd still provided mental protection.

'What?' said Hector.

'As much as I would like to ignore this problem, we can't,' said Garovel. 'For multiple reasons, that is.'

'Yeah, I think you're right...'

"2252 -- CCXX.

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 16 of 18))~~  
Mara was not done talking. ""The report mentioned one other thing.

Apparently, the team was also able to identify someone there named 'the Killer of Krohin.' Do you know who that is, Lord?"

Hector shook his head.

"Neither do I," she said, "but the Rainlords do. The Blackburns are already talking about sending reinforcements to Vantalay."

"Who are they talking about sending?"

"The Lord Melchor Blackburn, I believe."

Hector's eyes widened.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty: 'O, makeshift stratagem...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Thankfully, the meeting between Hanton and the King did not last much longer. Perhaps they could tell that Hector had other matters to attend to now but nonetheless still felt obligated to keep an eye on King William. Whatever the case, Hector was grateful that he could get back down into Warrenhold and meet with the Rainlords directly about the report from Vantalay.

The details he learned were even less encouraging than those provided to him by Mara.

As one might've expected, this "Killer of Krohin" was a famous member of Abolish. Not in the same league as Ivan, perhaps, but still potent enough that the Rainlords felt that they would have to send someone of incredible strength in the event that a battle broke out.

There was discord, however.

Not everyone agreed that reinforcements should be sent at all. A strong constituent of Rainlords wanted to simply abort the mission and call the Triplets back to Warrenhold.

And indeed, Hector could see the wisdom in that decision. Whatever the Sword of Unso might be capable of, it probably wasn't worth this level of risk. There were other locations they could send the Triplets.

But this crisis in Miro was a problem. This was exactly the kind of thing that Hector had been worried about. And now there was Donald Elias

to worry about, too? Suddenly, Hector had several reasons to keep this mission active.

Agh.

What a mess."  
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~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 16 of 18))~~  
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"2253

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 17 of 18))~~  
Hector was considering sending Leo, but would that really be wise? Leo seemed to be making progress and fitting into his new job rather well. It seemed a shame to disturb that relative peace so soon after finding it. Plus, this mission was supposed to be covert. Sending someone as powerful as Leo--or Melchor, for that matter--would increase the risk of drawing attention to their operations.

Not to mention, sending Leo without Ericoros' help could also prove problematic. Sure, Leo was strong, but any servant without a reaper would be significantly handicapped. The Triplets didn't have their reapers with them, either, but they were working undercover.

Could Leo do the same?

Hector was having a hard time imagining that. Leo? Being stealthy?

No, if he sent Leo to Vantalay, then he should expect things to escalate to full-blown combat. Leo's attachment to Miro was too big of an issue, as well. It would probably turn into a huge fight to free the town.

But maybe... that would be for the best?

They were talking about human trafficking here. Hector could hardly imagine a more worthy reason to pick a fight. Trying to be stealthy at this point--what would that accomplish, exactly? How could they possibly rescue Miro without a fight?

Maybe through negotiating with the government? Or those influential companies that Hanton mentioned?

Eh... that seemed like a foolish hope, honestly. Maybe it was a bit premature to be thinking that, but Vantalay was in a state of chaos, right now. Did the government have time to worry about a single town?

And hell, it was unlikely that this problem was afflicting just Miro. Something like human trafficking? It was probably a regional problem, at the very least.

'That, or it's government-sanctioned,' said Garovel privately. After a long evening of listening to heated discussions in the Grand Hall of the Night, everyone had finally retired to their chambers, but Hector and Garovel were still talking about it."

"2254

~~((The Totally-Not-Random May 1st Special -- page 18 of 18))~~  
'Sanctioned?' said Hector. He didn't want to humor the notion that the government itself could be behind the human trafficking going on in Vantalay, but he wasn't so naive as to think it impossible. 'Really?'

'Sure,' said Garovel. 'Vantalay is one of the invading nations in the war. I can't say I have much faith in their moral values, at the moment.'

Hector frowned as he took a deep breath. And not for the first time that evening, he asked the reaper, 'So what do we do?'

Garovel was silent, perhaps not caring to repeat that he didn't know.

This stalemate was getting them nowhere. Hector needed to say something to push the conversation forward, even if he already had a fair idea of how Garovel would react.

'Maybe I should go to Vantalay myself,'

'No,' the reaper said flatly with no discernible surprise. He'd been expecting that suggestion, hadn't he?

'I know it's not exactly ideal, but--'

'It's a bad idea, Hector.'

He shook his head. 'I'm not saying it isn't, but I can't let Melchor go, either. He's the most reliable warrior in Atreya, right now. If he leaves, this war gets a whole lot scarier. Leo gets a whole lot scarier.'

'You are a stabilizing force in this country, Hector. And not just in terms of the economy. In terms of Leo as well. You leaving would be much more dangerous for Atreya than Melchor leaving. Hardly anyone even knows he's here.'

'That's just public perception, Garovel. I'm talking about actually protecting the country from potential invaders. Or from Leo. Melchor is way more valuable in that regard than I am. No question. We NEED him to stay. And the attention he would draw in Vantalay...'

'Hector. While you're not as famous as him internationally, you're nuts if you think no one would notice you suddenly showing up there. And we have to consider the greater context of the continental war. Above all else, we can't allow this mission to look like an act of aggression from Atreya. YOU would represent Atreya. Melchor would not.'  
"2255

'I could take steps to conceal myself,' countered Hector. 'In fact... that's something I was already thinking about doing here in Atreya, even before the war started.'

'What are you talking about?' said Garovel.

'We've got loads of servants here in Warrenhold now, and some of them are getting pretty antsy, right?'

'Yeah, and?'

'And I'm known for wearing a full suit of metal armor when I'm out on patrol,' said Hector. 'Sure, everybody in Atreya knows my face at this point, but I don't have to actually show it in order to still show up in the

media.'

'...You're talking about letting someone else wear your armor?' said Garovel.

'That's right. Maybe even more than one person. I could leave tons of backup armors behind, just in case.'

The reaper was hesitant. 'Yeah, okay, that might work for the media, but it won't work with Leo. He listens to you, not the person wearing your armor.'

'Well, I could just tell him what I'm doing. Part of this is for his and Ericoros' sake, after all. Keeping it a secret from them would be dumb.'

'And you think he won't want to go to Vantalay with you?'

'That... I don't know. If I tell him to stay, though, then I think he will. Like you said, he listens to me.'

Garovel sighed. 'None of this addresses the core concern of remaining hidden while in Vantalay. You represent this nation, Hector. If anyone recognizes you while you're there, your actions could inadvertently destroy Atreyan neutrality.'

'I get what you're saying. That's really important. But I could wear a disguise while I'm there. It would be a lot easier for me to keep a low profile than it would for Melchor.'

'There are other candidates. It doesn't have to be either you or Melchor.'"  
"2256

At that, Hector had to shake his head. 'I'm not so sure that's true, Garovel. If I'm going to win any amount of trust from Ericoros on this, then... I need to go personally. To show him how serious I am about it.'

'Maybe, but that's a huge gamble,' said Garovel. 'Even if the mission succeeds in every conceivable way, there's no guarantee that it would move Ericoros' heart--or that we could trust him if he claimed that it did.'

'But it would be a big step in the right direction,' said Hector. 'I know it's

a risk, but I can't just sit on my ass and expect Ericoros to fall in line. I've gotta do something to prove myself, and how many other opportunities do you think we'll get? Especially with how stubborn reapers are? Another chance like this might never appear, Garovel.'

'Okay, first of all, that's stereotyping, and I resent the implication. And second of all, the problem isn't that it's ""a risk,"" in the generic sense of the term. If you slip up, it's not just YOU that you're putting in danger. It's all the citizens of Atreya. Can you really tell me that you're okay with that? Especially when we could just send someone else? Impressing Ericoros isn't that important, Hector. In fact, doing something so reckless might even have the exact opposite effect on him.'

Agh.

Hector sat down on the edge of his bed. That was a really good point, he felt. As much as he wanted to keep arguing with Garovel, it was difficult.

Was there even a good decision to be made here? It seemed like both options came with huge downsides.

'And besides,' Garovel continued, 'the Killer of Krohin is no joke. That motherfucker is internationally famous for a reason. In the event that you had to fight him, you shouldn't assume that you could handle it.'

Hector breathed and tried to be rational. 'How much do you know about this guy?'

"2257

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

'I don't know much more than what you already overheard the Rainlords mention earlier,' said Garovel.

Indeed, the Killer of Krohin had been a big subject in the Rainlords' discussions that evening.

Apparently, his real name was Thaddeus Croll, and the ""Krohin"" part of his moniker referred to a city in Lyste that had been slaughtered at his hands. It was unclear, however, if the Killer was single-handedly responsible for every death or if he had merely been the one to issue

the order. Either way, the man's reputation was for his utter barbarism and mercilessness.

The Rainlords had also said that the Killer was famous for using blades of all kinds, supposedly being deadly with virtually any type of sharp object.

That seemed an odd descriptor for a servant, Hector felt. Perhaps whatever the man's ability was didn't lend itself very well to conventional means of combat. Like integration, maybe.

'Not much more is still more, Garovel.'

'Well, it's just some old rumors. Who knows if they're true or not? And giving you false information could be just as bad or worse than giving you no information.'

'I'll keep that in mind, then. Tell me.'

Garovel took his time answering. 'Okay... ah... do you remember when I told you about my last servant? Simon?'

Hector blinked. Oh shit. 'Yeah?'

'Remember how I told you that Simon's entire team walked into an ambush and got killed?'

Hector could see where this was going. 'You're saying Thaddeus Croll was involved in that?'

'Like I said, it's just an old rumor. I don't know for sure. I didn't go with Simon on that mission, and he hated talking about it. But yes, I think it's likely that he was involved.'

Hector wasn't sure how to respond. He could see why Garovel was reluctant to tell him about it, though. Fuck."

"2258

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

'Which means,' said Garovel, 'that the Killer of Krohin is at least sixty years old as a servant by now--probably more, if he was involved in such a deadly operation even back then. I think the Rainlords are right to believe that Melchor is the safest person to send against such a foe.'

And there's no telling who else might be in Vantalay, right now. It's a big country. I doubt Croll is the only major threat there. The Triplets have already reported seeing scores of reapers haunting Ridgemark.'

Hector rubbed his forehead. 'When you tell me all that, I feel like we shouldn't send Melchor alone.'

'Of course. The Blackburns intend to send a supporting team with him.'

Hector eyed the reaper. 'I know. That's not what I mean.'

Garovel paused. 'You think we should send another one of our best fighters with him?'

'Melchor is our best check against Leo,' said Hector. 'If Melchor leaves, then Leo becomes a much bigger threat to Atreya. Unless...'

'We send both of them?' said Garovel.

Hector gave a reluctant nod.

'Your reasoning makes sense, but... that also sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.'

'All of our options sounds that way, right now, Garovel. Hell, even if we pull the Triplets back and do nothing, that could piss off Ericoros and potentially Leo.'

'Hmm.'

'Maybe we should even send a third or fourth strong fighter, too,' said Hector. 'Someone powerful enough to directly assist Melchor in case Leo goes out of control again.'

'This is getting messy.'

Hector bobbed his head to side a little. 'Well... you're not wrong about that.'

--++--++--

It seemed like things were going start moving very quickly very soon, but for the moment, the Triplets still had some downtime to work with.

And they were spending it in Ridgemark.

They didn't want to make a move on Miro by themselves, but they

could still pursue the Sword of Unso in the meantime."

"2259

It was hard to look at Ridgemark the same way, though. The utterly miserable and inhumane conditions in Miro lingered in Raul's mind. Knowing that there was such suffering taking place within such close proximity of the city left a bad taste in his mouth, even as he filled it with another extravagant meal.

He didn't have much of an appetite. And his two brothers were much the same, he noticed. The three of them were all lingering over their half-eaten dinners, prodding their food or staring at it while obviously lost in thought.

He'd never seen slavery in person before.

He knew, however, that the term ""slavery"" lacked certain important context and could, in truth, refer to very different circumstances to what one might imagine. He remembered how the reapers of House Blackburn had made a point of teaching all of the family's young servants--and even non-servants, indirectly--about slavery throughout history. Their Arman ancestors had fought against the slave-hordes of the Lyzakks, after all. The subject was very near to their hearts, on a cultural level, even if the practice was comparatively rare in the modern day.

In the ancient world, slavery had often been used as a form of legal punishment. It provided criminals with a path to redemption, if they agreed to become a slave for a designated period of time to the person whom they had wronged. Steal from a shop owner? You could pay him back through slave labor.

And slave owners, supposedly, were held legally responsible for the well-being of their slaves. Physically abusing them was outlawed and could even result in the early termination of their slave-contracts.

Raul could understand such practices, especially since those people didn't enjoy the same level of prison infrastructure as they did today. Hell, a part of him could even see that system as being, in some ways, better than simply throwing criminals in a box and leaving them to rot. The opportunity for penance was invaluable as a means of reintegrating criminals back into civilized society.



It made sense to him.

But not all slave trades had been conducted that way, of course. Far from it, in fact."

"2260

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

The slavers that had taken control of Miro were perhaps the worst kind. The kind associated with Abolish.

Raul had only observed the town for a few hours, at most, and he hadn't even gotten that close. He'd found a vantage point atop a rocky cliff and spied on the inhabitants with binoculars. But in that short time, he'd witnessed public beatings and people being branded like cattle. He'd seen groveling and weeping in the streets. And he'd seen forced labor as well. A large field of orange trees sat on the western edge of the town, and a handful of people were being forced to pick the fruit.

It didn't seem like slave labor was their chief motivator, however. The number of slaves they had on the job was small when compared to how many were being tormented in the rest of the town.

No, Raul suspected that they were mainly being rounded up and shipped off to be sold elsewhere. And indeed, those suspicions soon turned out to be accurate when he witnessed a big truck being loaded up with people who had been freshly branded by their captors.

Kidnapping for the purpose of the slave trade obviously had enormous historical precedence as well, but as far as Raul knew, the practice had all but disappeared in the modern day. Most forms of slavery today were variations on wage slavery. Not this.

Only real monsters could get away with this.

Esai broke the silence of their dinner, stirring Raul from his thoughts. ""If they're still branding them, then the take over must have been pretty recent.""

Neither Raul nor Adan responded.

They were in the privacy of their own hotel room, but Esai was still purposely leaving some identifying words out. No mention of Miro, nor

what the ""branding"" specifically referred to. Perhaps it was an unnecessary precaution, but you never did know who might overhear, even in places of seeming seclusion."

"2261

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Esai's gaze didn't lift up from his meal, though he didn't seem like he intended to eat the rest. ""There's a chance that they won't stick around for much longer,"" he said.

""More than just a chance,"" said Adan.

Raul knew what they were getting at. The slavers were traffickers. As soon as they'd moved the residents of Miro, there would be no reason to stay. And the reinforcements from Warrenhold still needed time to organize. Even if they got on a plane right now and made the flight today--which was unlikely--they might still miss their window to rescue the remaining townsfolk.

And those Abolish bastards might get away.

But their reapers had made it clear. This mission wasn't about getting involved in the problems of the local residents. They weren't on a mission to stomp out injustice or protect the innocent. They were just here to observe. To gather intel. And locate the Sword of Unso, if possible.

Raul understood that. Esai and Adan did, too. They had priorities. And reinforcements were on the way. They could just wait. They could go diving, looking for that ""sunken cave near the two-toned rock"" again. If all three of them went together, maybe they'd actually find it this time.

Raul heard himself say something. ""What if...?"" He didn't finish the sentence, but he suddenly had his brothers' undivided attention.

""What if what, bro?"" Adan urged.

Raul struggled for the right words. It was a dumb idea, still half-formed in his mind. ""What if... we just... delay some stuff?""

His brothers eyed him steadily, then glanced at one another.

""Harassment,"" summarized Esai.

""They won't like that,"" observed Adan.

""Who won't?"" inquired Esai.

""Everyone,"" answered Raul. ""Going against the grain.""

""Yeah, bro, true,"" concurred Adan.

And there was silence.

""So should we do it?"" said Esai.

""Hell yeah, bro,"" they both said."

"2262 -- CCXXI.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-One: 'Fears not the torch...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Boy, it sure did suck, not having access to his undead strength or endurance at times like this. Sure, at least the recuperative ""hangover"" later wouldn't be nearly as bad, but it sure would've come in handy during all this hiking.

Raul hadn't realized just how rugged the terrain was. These wooded mountains weren't even that big. The Wares Mountains back home easily put them to shame. But Raul's only interaction with those giants had been occasionally looking at them on the horizon.

As he put one foot in front of the other and tried not to dwell on how heavily he was breathing or how much he was sweating, he found himself wondering if perhaps that pride in his homeland had blinded him to the difficulty of this task.

Maybe just a tad.

The little mountain here wasn't tall, but it was certainly steep. The road below was one of only two paths in or out of Miro. The other one was on the opposite side of the town. Adan and Esai were handling it. Raul would have to make do on his own.

He stopped to catch his breath. The sun was almost finished setting, already. He had a flashlight in his bag, but even so, this wasn't going to get any easier at night.

Not to mention, the longer he took, the more likely it was that one more truck full of slaves would make it out of Miro.

He had to block the road. And preferably, he had to make it look like a natural occurrence. If the enemy realized they were being sabotaged, everything would become more complicated.

And god knew, things were complicated enough already.

He finally pulled out his flashlight and shone it up ahead, searching the jagged rock faces there.

Hmm. No clear path for him, it seemed. He'd have to climb straight upward if he wanted to keep going this direction.

Well, maybe he didn't need to. Maybe this was high enough."  
"2262 -- CCXXI.

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"2263

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Raul searched around for any large, loose boulders. He spotted a couple candidates, though they were stuck into the ground more deeply than he would've liked, and it was also difficult to tell if they alone would be enough.

He'd never started a landslide before.

Hmm. Yeah, those rocks wouldn't do the job, he decided. He might have to use more of his power than he first thought.

In that case, this could get very tricky. If he wasn't careful, he could easily kill himself here. If he lost his footing, he would go tumbling down the side of this mountain along with everything else and probably

end up buried alive or simply crushed to death.

Well, this was characteristic of plans that were made on such short notice, he supposed. High risk. There would be no telling how long it might take his reaper to locate his corpse way out here in the wilds of Vantalay. Hell, depending on how the war developed, that could take years.

So he didn't want to slip and fall. He needed to make sure that he could maintain solid footing.

Perhaps his alteration power over friction could solve that problem for him, too. This awkward, uneven ground added some uncertainty to the equation, but he felt like he could manage it.

Hopefully.

He positioned himself with his back against the rocky wall that he'd found. He checked directly above his head, wanting to make sure there were no obviously loose boulders up there that would fall and crush him, and when he was satisfied with where he was standing, he crouched down, and dug his fingers into a patch of dirt at his feet.

He needed to two things. First, he needed to create a kind of ""increased friction bubble"" for himself--something to prevent the ground directly beneath him from moving.

Secondly, he had to decrease the friction just about everywhere else."  
"2264

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

A sudden thought struck him, and Raul hesitated.

He pulled his right hand out of the dirt and grabbed his phone out of his pocket. He texted his brothers, informing him that he was in position and waiting on them.

If they were to be discreet, then it would be best if both roads were blocked simultaneously. Two landslides happening at the same time might instead seem like one incident. Which would be less suspicious.

He didn't bother to articulate all of that in his text just now, but he doubted he would need to. They'd understand.

So he waited a bit longer for word from his brothers. They were taking a while, which was unsurprising. They had farther to go than he did.

He pulled out his binoculars and spied on the town. This wasn't a very good vantage point compared to the one he'd used earlier in the day, but it let him see a few of the buildings at least. He could see a handful of apparent guards on duty.

Hold on.

Was that someone using binoculars, too?

They turned this way.

Raul turned off his flashlight.

The guard was still looking in this direction. They weren't using binoculars equipped with night-vision, were they?

He hunkered down a bit lower, enough to let the treeline block his line of sight.

Hmm. These Abolishers were more vigilant than he thought. The Killer of Krohin had a reputation for brutality, not competency, but perhaps in this case, they went hand-in-hand. You couldn't maintain such notoriety without at least a little bit of the latter, Raul supposed.

The text arrived from his brothers. They were in position, too. Good.

He was tempted to pop his head up another time and look toward Miro again, but he resisted. He sent his response text, telling his brothers to go ahead, and then dug his fingers back into the dirt.

He tried to go deep with his friction. He needed to shift a lot of ground. Moving the topsoil would be easiest but probably not enough."  
"2265

Nothing was moving yet, so he pushed harder, removing more and more friction. His ability was a bit difficult to work with insofar as it doesn't offer much mental or visual feedback for him. Was it working? Was it not? Friction could be a little obtuse, at times.

But then, all at once, the earth shifted and heaved. The entire side of the mountain fell away from him in the darkness, taking trees and boulders with it. The rumbling roar was so loud and intense that he certainly would've been knocked off his feet if he hadn't already been crouching.

Dirt and rock and splintered wood flew up in all directions, creating a cloud over the road below.

For a time, Raul just kind of stared.

Well, it worked. Better than he'd expected, honestly. It was a bit hard to tell through the darkness and the debris, but the blockage on the road was maybe a quarter-mile long or so. At least.

Not too shabby.

And the mountain. Wow. It looked like it had been sheered clean by a giant razor. Now that he'd released his power, he stepped off of his safe little island and set foot on the smooth, sloping rock that was left.

It was almost slippery now. He'd have to be careful going back down.

Oh crap, he hoped he'd parked the rental car far enough away. He hadn't expected the landslide to be quite so huge. Perhaps he'd underestimated his own power a bit. Well, he supposed that would make sense, considering his family's isolation all these years. Training was one thing, but testing his capabilities out in the field like this was quite another.

He was all but surfing by the time he made it down to the bottom of the slope. He used his ability to help slow his descent, making sure not to be too abrupt, lest he throw himself off balance and topple forward face first.

He'd made that kind of mistake many times as a teenager."

"2266

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 1 of 14))~~

He started toward the direction of the car. He sent another quick text to his brothers, informing them that he was done. Thankfully, the reply arrived soon thereafter. They were heading back to the car, too. It would take them a bit longer to get back to it, so he'd have to wait for



them again.

First, he had to find the thing, though. With all the dust and debris everywhere, he was becoming increasingly worried that the car really had been a victim of the landslide.

He kept searching.

A sudden noise acquired his attention from the direction of Miro, and he turned to look. It was difficult to tell through all the lingering particles in the air, but he thought he could see headlights in the distance, and as he listened more intently, he realized it was an approaching truck.

He hunkered down again.

This was both good and bad, Raul thought. He'd managed to prevent another truck from leaving Miro, so that was great. But now they were close. There were probably hostiles in that truck, as well as slaves.

And the rental car was still nowhere to be seen.

He tried to pick up his pace as he sent off a warning text to his brothers, telling them to be wary of enemies in the vicinity.

Gah. There was so much debris. Uprooted trees, shattered boulders, splintered wood--everywhere he looked, there were more things to be careful of. If he tripped and injured himself, he couldn't regenerate.

He heard yelling behind him, then turned to see specks of light moving over the top of the wrecked land. Flashlights, most likely. Nothing to panic about. He had a good distance on them.

Then he saw a pair of blackbirds high up in the night sky. Despite the darkness, they didn't blend in, instead having ethereal auras around them that made them glow in that all-too-familiar way.

Reapers, no doubt."

"2267

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 2 of 14))~~

They were far away but not that far. And Raul was all alone out here. If the reapers hadn't sensed his soul already, they soon would.

He needed to pick up his pace. He concentrated and stamped the uneven ground with his foot. A path ahead of him appeared in the ground as the topmost layer of wreckage slid away, down a gentle slope in the direction of the car.

The path that he'd just created for himself wasn't steep, but he knew perfectly well how dangerous it would be to walk on it haphazardly. With as much friction as he'd removed, it would be like ice now.

But of course, Raul had considerable experience with this tactic.

He dove straight onto the path and went flying down it, feeling the evening wind rush past him. He kept his balance perfectly. He could go much faster than this, if needed, but as the speed increased, so did the accompanying risks, and he wasn't yet convinced that such drastic measures were necessary.

When he looked back, the reapers were little more than specks in the distance.

Excellent.

He still had no idea where the rental car was, but the fact of the matter was that he and his brothers didn't actually need it. With their power, they could make it back to Ridgemark in no time on their own.

The ground began to even out as he arrived at the edge of the landslide, but Raul hardly slowed at all. He extended his friction-reduced path onto the flat pavement of the road and just kept going, though he did start pumping with his legs as if he really was ice skating in order to help maintain his speed.

Still skating, he whipped out his phone to text his brothers another time. It was a shame that they had to abandon their vehicle, but oh well. Helping those poor folks in Miro was more than worth the lost money."

"2268

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 3 of 14))~~

If he'd known how big the landslide would be, he could've saved the car. That was a result of his own lack of field experience, Raul knew. Hopefully, the project leaders back in Warrenhold wouldn't be too

upset at him for allowing such a waste.

His brothers were taking a while to respond to his text, Raul noticed.

The road ahead was straight and clear, so he turned around and started skating backwards. He pulled out his binoculars again.

It was too far and too dark. He couldn't make anything out.

He allowed the friction on his path to regather, and his pace slowed.

""C'mon,"" he said under his breath. ""Respond, bros.""

He waited.

It seemed like that was all he was doing, lately. Waiting on his brothers. He normally didn't mind. They were one unit. Always had been. That unity was what made them effective.

But this was agonizing.

They knew that they were supposed to send confirmation. This wasn't carelessness on their part. And the text looked like it had gone through. He typed it out a second time and sent it again, just in case.

He was fully stopped now, just standing there in the middle of the road, continually checking the binoculars in vain. He watched the clock on his phone, growing more tense with each passing second.

Three minutes went by without word. Then five. Then eight. Ten.

This was certainly too long. No one was chasing him, it seemed, but given the seriousness of the situation, with hostiles having been in the vicinity, ten minutes of silence was cause to start thinking the worst.

Which he was. Had they been captured?  
Finally, a response arrived.

ok

ok

Relief washed through him. Both of them had answered, almost in unison. Another text from Adan came through.

meet up comprised. need new location. closer by  
Raul's prior sense of relief diminished as quickly as it had come. And  
another text arrived, this time from Esai.

agreed

And a set of latitude and longitude coordinates appeared.

Raul's green eyes went hollow as he stared at the screen."

"2269

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 4 of 14))~~

Those texts weren't from his brothers. Or if they were, then they were  
being sent under duress.

Raul knew this because he had discussed the subject of secondary  
rendezvous points with them before the mission. There should have  
been no need to send coordinates. They both should have already  
known where to go.

Damn those Abolish snakes in lakefire.

They were trying to lure him into a trap. No doubt, if he actually went to  
those coordinates, he would soon find himself surrounded.

He checked those coordinates anyway, making sure that he didn't  
accidentally head toward them, and then started skating his way back  
to Ridgemark.

He put his phone away. There was one other thing he needed to  
confirm.

Oh, boy, he wasn't looking forward to this conversation.

'Arumoro,' he called.

'Raul,' came his reaper's private response from all the way back in  
Warrenhold.

There was no dancing around it. '...Have Adan and Esai been  
captured?'

'Why in damnation are you asking that?!' yelled Arumoro, no longer in the echo of privacy.

Raul explained.

'You did all that without permission?'

'We needed to buy time for our reinforcements to arrive,' said Raul.

'You still should have told us about it!'

'You would have just forbidden us from doing it.'

'You're damn right we would have!'

Raul's expression remained steadfast in the darkness. 'I don't regret it. And neither do they, I'm sure. The operation was successful. Abolish won't be able to move anyone out of Miro for a while.'

The reaper sighed at him.

'Would you mind yelling at me later?' said Raul. 'I need you to confirm for me that Adan and Esai are actually captured and not just lost or dead.'

Arumoro growled at him, but said, 'One minute.' And presumably, he went to go talk to their reapers."

"2270

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 5 of 14))~~

The forest was beginning to thin, and the taller hotels of Ridgemark were coming into view. Despite his lack of access to undead vigor, Raul still wasn't even breaking a sweat.

He meant what he'd said about not regretting his actions. But he also wondered how long that landslide would truly last. There were obviously servants there in Miro. Depending on what abilities they had, removing the blockages might be trivial for them.

But they had to be spooked now, also. Even if they did manage to clear the roads, they might think twice about trying to move any more slaves. The Triplets had wanted to make their dual landslides look like a natural occurrence, but perhaps it was better for the hostages this

way.

Or maybe he was just trying to rationalize his failure away.

Arumoro returned with the news he'd been expecting. 'They are indeed captured,' he said, speaking privately again. 'However, their captives haven't frozen their heads yet, because they're trying to figure out who they are.'

Ah. That was good news.

Partially.

'...Are they being tortured?' said Raul.

'Yes.'

Raul's jaw clenched. His brothers could handle it. They were servants. Part of what made torture effective was the threat of death. Without it, Adan and Esai would be all but impossible to crack.

But the pain that they were going to go through...

And other forms of torture existed, too, of course. It depended on how creative their captors were.

'Also, it's unclear if Abolish realizes that they're servants yet,' said Arumoro.

'They should at least suspect as much,' said Raul. 'It would've been difficult for non-servants to cause those landslides.'

'Yes, well, this is Abolish. They might be morons.'

Considering how they had tried to trap him, Raul doubted that. And he didn't think a bunch of idiots would have been able to successfully capture his brothers."

"2271 -- CCXXII.

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 6 of 14))~~

'I think it would be a mistake to underestimate these enemies,' said Raul.

'I'm not underestimating anyone,' said Arumoro. 'I'm just trying to be optimistic.'

Raul found that amusing. 'Heh, really? That must be hard for you.'

'Extremely.'

Raul wiped his mirth away again. 'I assume Adan and Esai are unable to destroy their own brains?'

'Yeah. I asked. And their reapers would've already started regenerating them by now if they could.'

Then the Abolishers were indeed being cautious. They must've had his brothers tied up or otherwise bound such that they couldn't move much. Destroying their own brains wasn't the easiest trick to pull off with their power, but they did have compact explosives in their bags. They must have not been able to use them in time. Unfortunately, a simple knife or gunshot wound to the skull was not damaging enough to constitute regrowing the brain from scratch.

'This a real mess you've gotten yourselves in,' said Arumoro.

Raul understood why the reaper felt that way, but frankly, he disagreed. It was far from ideal, true, but in the end, the mission hadn't really changed. There were just two more people in need of rescue, now.

And he was a Rainlord.

This was nothing to be growing demoralized over. It was just providing more motivation.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Two: 'O, inimical ambassador...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The tension in Warrenhold was much more noticeable over the next few days. The Rainlords were uneasy with all of these sudden developments, and Hector couldn't blame them. The team they dispatched Sair was quick to start sending back news, and while it wasn't necessarily bad, it wasn't good, either.

Apparently, the fighting on Sair's eastern border was already incredibly fierce. Iceheart was thankfully still there and supporting the Sandlords'

defense of the nation, but on Abolish's side, there were two men causing problems who were called Bloodeye and the Man of Crows."



~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 6 of 14))~~

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"2272

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 7 of 14))~~

It was worrisome news, to be sure, but Hector still had a fair amount of confidence in the Sandlords--and the Sunsmith, Abbas Saqqaf, in particular. He'd been the only person to actually witness that man take down the Salesmen of Death, so perhaps it was only natural for no one else to share his opinion on this.

Hector didn't bother trying to convince anyone else. He was still new to this whole ""superhuman war"" business, so he figured it wasn't really his place to be tossing his inexperienced opinions around, no matter how strongly he felt about that.

However, just because he wasn't worried about Sair being conquered by Abolish didn't mean that he wasn't concerned about the situation there at all. According to their team's reports, the intensity of the fighting there was causing the Vanguard to send more and more resources there, which meant that once this conflict was over, they would probably have an even greater foothold in the region than before.

Assuming Abolish didn't win, that was.

Needless to say, that notion was also troubling the Rainlords immensely. Thanks to this war, their hope of reclaiming their land was beginning to look further away than ever.

And of course, the news from Vantalay hadn't helped anyone's nerves, either.

Two of the Blackburn Triplets captured. What a rotten development.

After hearing about that, there was no way in hell that Hector could have possibly prevented Melchor Blackburn from departing immediately. He abandoned that notion entirely.

But he hadn't allowed Melchor to go alone.

Leo had indeed gone with him, as well as Evangelina Stroud and Diego Redwater.

Hector had been worried about that conversation with Leo, but when Hector explained the situation to him, Leo had agreed almost immediately. It seemed that Ericoros hadn't been exaggerating when he talked about how much the town of Miro meant to both of them."

"2273

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 8 of 14))~~

There were, however, some delays. All of the people making the trip were fugitives in one form or another, so they couldn't just waltz through airport security without any concerns. Leo already had his own fake credentials and passport taken care of, but Roman Fullister had been gracious enough to lend a hand for the others. The Rainlords had a few of their own people who could craft those kinds of things for them--as they had done for the previously deployed teams--but Roman's assistance let them get it done in half the time.

The actual trip to Vantalay was still a problem, though. While the region around Ridgemark wasn't technically a no-fly zone, there were barely any planes going to it. The general sentiment among the Rainlords was that it was too dangerous, so instead, the reinforcement team flew to Palei first, then took a boat the rest of the way.

By now, they should have arrived, but they had yet to report any progress on the liberation of Miro. Hector certainly didn't mind them taking their time. He'd made sure to tell them that it would be ideal if they could somehow manage to free the town without drawing too much attention, and they all seemed to agree with that opinion, even Leo.

But Hector wasn't really expecting that to happen, quite frankly. He

was expecting the mission in Vantalay to turn into an absolute shitstorm. He just hoped for a positive overall outcome.

This whole thing was so strange. Being so invested in events that he wasn't even participating in. Events that were taking place thousands of kilometers away.

Sure, on some level, it was nice to not be in imminent danger himself, but he was finding this far more anxiety-inducing. Sending people he cared about into danger was horrifying, even when he was confident that they could handle themselves.

He fucking hated it."

"2274

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 9 of 14))~~

And there was more bad news as well. Harper Norez was no longer in the country. As expected, the man had been recalled by the Vanguard. He hadn't specified where he was being sent to--or perhaps he hadn't been allowed to specify--but Garovel seemed to believe that it was Melmoore.

Harper's reaper, Darsihm, had told them during the Gala that Harper's direct superior officer was one Captain General Frederick. And since that little revelation, Garovel had learned quite a bit more about that person.

Fen Frederick was the man's full name, and he was widely known as the Surgeon Saint. He had a reputation as being something of a miracle worker. Supposedly, he had saved countless lives that were previously believed to have already been lost. Where other doctors failed, the Surgeon Saint somehow found a way.

Or so the claims went.

It seemed pretty weird that such a famous man of medicine would ascend to the third highest rank in the Vanguard, beneath only the Field Marshals and High Commander Sermung himself. And apparently, the guy performed life-saving surgeries all the time, despite all his other responsibilities.

'They say,' Garovel had told him, 'that Frederick always seeks out the

bloodiest war zones in the world, not just to put an end to the fighting there, but also to provide topnotch medical care for the people with the most urgent need of it. I've told you before about how I think saints are overrated, but... after all I've heard about this guy, it's hard not to admire him. Even the Rainlords seem to like him, and their love for the Vanguard is at an all-time low, right now.'

Hector could only imagine what a doctor who had studied medicine for two hundred years or more would be capable of. If circumstances were different, Hector might've liked to meet him."

"2275

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 10 of 14))~~

The reason Garovel thought Harper Norez would be sent to Melmoore was because he'd heard that the Surgeon Saint was currently operating there. And if everything else the reaper had heard about Frederick was true, then that meant that Melmoore was one of the deadliest war zones in the world, right now.

Which unfortunately made sense.

That country had been invaded on two different fronts, north and south. Technically, Vantalay was much worse off, as it was fighting four different countries simultaneously, those being Czacoa, Yena Maria, Naos, and Lyste. However, Vantalay had also been the aggressor in that conflict, while Melmoore was simply defending its own borders. Plus, Czacoa, Yena Maria, and Naos were all tiny nations, not much larger than Atreya.

But then again, perhaps it was wrong to judge their military strength by the amount of land they possessed. Garovel mentioned as much. Historically, larger nations held far more power, having access to a much greater pool of resources. But in the modern age, it wasn't always so cut and dry, anymore.

By all accounts, that little country called Czacoa was putting up quite the fight. Everyone seemed to think--given Vantalay's comparative size and first strike advantage--that Czacoa was doomed, but so far, it was apparently holding firm.

But of course, the war had only just begun.

As for Atreya itself, Hector was observing some interesting developments in the situation here. Clearly, the general public was uneasy with so many terrible things going on abroad, but it hadn't slowed the growth of the Darksteel National Bank.

In fact, that unease might've actually been increasing it.

That was what Amelia Carthrace seemed to believe, anyway. In this time of great turmoil, the people were looking for stability wherever they could find it. And many of them were hanging their hopes squarely upon Hector's shoulders.

It was almost becoming a problem of its own, actually, because the Bank had begun to draw attention from Atreya's neighbors."

"2276

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 11 of 14))~~

Amelia showed Hector a news report from Lorent about him and the Darksteel National Bank. It seemed to just be a fluff piece of some kind, expressing vague praise and a bit of confusion, so Hector mostly just wondered why the Madame Carthrace was bothering to show it to him.

But then she showed him another one. And another. And another. And then still one more. They weren't all about him, per se, as some were just about the generally insane circumstances that Atreya had been through in the past year, but Hector did appear in all of the reports at one point or another.

He had no idea why Lorent had taken an interest in him, but he was prepared to write it off as just some kind of strange foreign fad that he lacked the cultural context to fully understand.

He didn't want to ignore it completely, though. Lorent was an important neighbor. It was the country on Atreya's northern border, which meant it was practically on Warrenhold's doorstep. Hell, maybe that had something to do with it. The region around Gray Rock was almost entirely enveloped by Lorent.

Still, that seemed unlikely. Lorent was much larger than Atreya. They probably wouldn't have any lingering attachment to a tiny bit of land that had been independent for three hundred years.

Whatever the reason was, it was fucking weird.

And it certainly didn't get any less weird when he received a call from Queen Helen, telling him that the Lorentian Ambassador wanted to meet with him.

Hector had blinked a few times in disbelief when he heard that.

<"Apparently, you have gotten quite famous there,"> the Queen told him. <"However, I suspect that he does not wish to meet with you merely because of your notoriety.">

"You suspect?" said Hector. "You don't actually know what he wants?"

<"Oh, no, he claims that your fame alone is the reason,"> said Helen. <"I simply do not believe him.">  
"2277

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 12 of 14))~~  
"Why would he lie about that?" said Hector.

<"Because he does not wish to tell me the truth,"> said the Queen.

Hector's expression flattened a little. "Well, yeah... I meant, like, what would he want to hide from you?"

<"Oh, any number of things. Perhaps he means to make you an offer in hopes of stealing you from Atreya.">

Hector blinked, and his head reared back. Seriously?

<"Or perhaps he hopes to conduct business with you discreetly, behind my back. Or he could simply be trying to plant an idea in your

head and use you to help persuade me of something in the future. The possibilities are only limited by one's imagination, Hector."">

He scratched his head. ""Uh... okay. Are you sure I should meet with this guy, then? Because this is sounding like nothing but trouble.""

<""Yes, it probably will be. However, our relationship with Lorent is vital, now more than ever. This could be an easy way to improve--or to at least gain some insight into what their government is thinking. I have no doubt that the ambassador requested this meeting at someone else's behest."">

Damn. She was really trusting him with some major shit here, wasn't she?

Hector was honored. And also pretty fucking uncomfortable.

""...Alright,"" he said. As long as Garovel came to the meeting with him, Hector figured he wouldn't screw things up too badly. ""When will this meeting take place?""

<""He will be at the royal palace tomorrow."">

""Tomorrow?!""

<""I am aware it is short notice,""> said the Queen. <""I can postpone it, if you prefer, but the sooner, the better. The ambassador seems quite enthused to meet you, but he is also a busy man, much like yourself. It could be quite some time before both of your schedules line up perfectly."">

""Ah..."

<""I understand if you have more important matters to take care of, but I ask that you make time for this, if at all possible."">

"2278

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 13 of 14))~~

And so it was that Hector found himself visiting Bosliat Palace again. The crowd wasn't nearly as crazy as it was during the Gala, which was nice, and yet somehow, he still felt like he was drawing even more attention than before. The Gala had been so busy and full of big name lords from all over the country, but now, it seemed like every single



person he passed by paused to stare at him.

Maybe the Bank had something to do with it, too. He hadn't opened it before the Gala, and it had only increased his fame further.

Man.

This was just life now, wasn't it?

In the back of his mind, he'd kind of been thinking that this fame would eventually die down or normalize a little--that fifteen minutes or whatever would be up. He'd been looking forward to it, actually.

But he was starting to realize that this really wasn't going to just go away. Thanks to the Bank, it seemed like his fame within Atreya's borders had reached some kind of critical mass. It was now totally self-sustaining.

Was there a term for being both flattered and horrified at the same time? Mere ""embarrassment"" didn't seem like it quite captured the depth of what he was feeling, these days.

Well, at least he could relegate his utter confusion on that subject to a background thought process.

And it sure was nice to visit Bosliat again, if for no other reason than to admire the architecture as his designated guide led him down the tall corridors to his meeting.

The Lorentian Ambassador was a man named Edgar Stoutamire, but thanks to the short notice of this meeting, Hector hadn't been able to learn much more about the guy.

When he finally saw the man, Hector couldn't help being a bit surprised. He'd never seen someone quite so... square-shaped."  
"2279

~~((The Mother's Day Special -- page 14 of 14))~~

""Ah,"" the man said, his flat face about as expressive as a wall. ""Lord Goffe. There you are. Thank you for meeting me. I know how busy you must be during these turbulent times.""

Hector returned a nod. ""Ambassador Stoutamire. Pleased to make

your acquaintance." Behind him, the woman who'd guided him through the palace bowed and excused herself silently. Hector might not have even realized she left if not for the Scarf.

"Not as pleased as I am, I'm sure." The surly look on his face didn't match his words, nor did his tone. Maybe he just had one of those faces, though.

But that did strike Hector as a little odd. The man was an ambassador, an official representative of an entire nation. You'd think a person with that kind of job would have a friendlier disposition.

Then again, Hector supposed he was in no position to judge something like that. "Why is it that you requested to meet with me?" he asked.

"Straight to the point, then." Stoutamire adjusted the silvery cuffs on his black-and-red suit. "I am unaccustomed to such earnestness, but I must say, it is a welcome change. My peers often tell me that I am too blunt by a half."

Earnestness? Hector wasn't even sure what he meant.

Stoutamire looked him square in the eye. "I have come here today in hopes of enlisting your help, Lord Goffe."

Hector did not react. He just waited for elaboration.

"I do not know if this is the... 'proper channel' to go through for such a request, but all the same, I hope the unusual circumstances of this meeting have at least made clear the severity of what I am about to say. My... superiors do not wish me to use the word 'desperate' to refer to our situation." The man allowed a pause. "So I will not use it."

"...Why didn't you inform the Queen of this request for aid?" said Hector."

"2280

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

"To be very frank with you," said Stoutamire, "I feared the Queen would blankly refuse us."

Hector allowed himself to frown.

"You are highly valued by your nation," the ambassador went on.  
"This much is obvious. My concern was that the Queen would flatly tell me no and then never even inform you of this request in this first place. I know this may cause you to think me a duplicitous snake, but the matter is grave enough that I felt I had to appeal to you in person. Please, Lord Goffe, I only ask that you hear me out. Innocent people are dying."

Holy hell. At the start of that little speech, the guy hadn't been emoting much at all, but by the end of it, his passion could be heard in every word. It was still a bit subdued compared to most people, perhaps, but it was there.

The Queen wouldn't be happy to hear most of what the man had just said, Hector figured, but she'd also expected that Stoutamire had been lying to her. What would she want him to do in this situation?

Hmm.

She'd probably want him to do whatever he thought was right, wouldn't she? Reflecting on what she'd told him of this meeting, that was the impression that he was now getting.

Stoutamire seemed to be growing uncomfortable with the protracted silence.

Hector finally sat down in the chair next to him. "What exactly is the problem?"

Stoutamire followed suit and sat down as well. There was no table between them, but the window in the ceiling allowed a solid beam of light to pour into the middle of the chamber where a small table might go. "It is a monster. A savage beast. It has slain over fifty citizens of Lorent in the last six months, and the frequency of the killings has only increased."

"2281

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

A monster? Hector hadn't known what to expect, but that answer still surprised him. As far as he was aware, Lorent was about as peaceful as Atreya.

Well, as peaceful as Atreya used to be.

It therefore seemed strange to him that there would be anything blatantly supernatural in the country. There were probably a few hidden servants hanging out there, sure, but a monster? A real one?

And the government there wanted him to hunt it?

He had a lot of questions, and he was silent for a time as he mulled them over in his mind. Garovel wasn't saying anything, either, which struck Hector as unusual.

Eh, the reaper probably just didn't want to interrupt. Hector had little doubt that Garovel would have plenty to tell him later.

""...You don't have anyone in Lorent who can kill this monster for you?"" said Hector.

""It would seem not. Several hunters were previously contracted to kill the beast."" The ambassador's stern face became abruptly more so. ""None have succeeded.""

Well, shit.

""In fact, I am understating it,"" the man continued. ""Not only have none succeeded, but none have even returned. Which is particularly troubling, I feel. One would imagine that the more cowardly among the hunters would have been quick enough to flee and save their own lives, but apparently not. Even merely retrieving their bodies has often proved too difficult. The beast is extremely territorial.""

Geez. Hector cocked an eyebrow. ""How many hunters have you lost, exactly?""

""Forty-three in total,"" said Stoutamire. ""That is in addition to all of civilians who have been killed.""

Hector blinked. ""That practically doubles the number of victims.""

""Yes, you see, at beginning of this... problem... we did not realize the full extent of the danger, and so a call went out for volunteer hunters. Open to the public."" The man shook his head grimly. ""I heard it was a festive gathering, at first. Full of confidence and optimism. Until it became a slaughter.""

"2282

Hector touched his chin as he considered the man's words. ""If the monster is territorial, then shouldn't it be relatively simple to avoid more casualties?""

""By closing off its territory to the public, yes,"" said Stoutamire. ""We tried that. It seemed to work for a time, but the damned thing keeps getting around our barricades. Or breaking through them, in some cases.""

""Does this creature have a name? And what does it look like?""

""At this point, it has acquired several names. The Beast of Lorent is unfortunately becoming the most popular, I fear. As for its appearance, the rarity of living witnesses makes describing it difficult. However, before you ask: we do indeed have confirmation it is a monster and not... ah, one of your kind.""

Hector knew perfectly well what he meant, but he couldn't help wanting to press him a bit on that. ""My kind?""

""A human with supernatural abilities,"" said Stoutamire.

Hmm. Not using the term servant or mentioning reapers. As Hector expected.

""I... hope I have not caused offense,"" said the ambassador. ""That was not my intention.""

At that, Hector cracked a slight smile. ""You didn't. I appreciate your concern, though. More importantly, how were you able to confirm that it's a monster?""

""A couple witnesses yet live who saw the creature from afar. But primarily, it is satellite imagery that we have to thank."" The man reached into a briefcase that had been on the floor this whole time and pulled out a small stack of photographs. He handed them to Hector for inspection.

They weren't the clearest things in the world, but he could make out the gist. One was of a sprawling forest, viewed from above. Another, a small town. Then, a field of some kind.

And at the center of each shot was a dark blot. At first, it didn't really look like much, probably because of the angle, but as Hector

compared it against the other objects in the photographs...

It was gigantic."

"2283

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In the photo of the town, there were numerous buildings--or the remains of them, at least--and this Beast of Lorent, whatever the hell it was, looked comparable in size to most of them.

It made him think of the worms in the Undercrust.

But it couldn't be another one of those. He could make out an occasional limb in some of the shots. And while it did leave some noticeable trails of destruction in its wake, there were no obvious signs of sludge.

Plus, he wasn't even certain that worms could survive on the surface. It might've been too cold up here for them.

'Hmm,' mused Garovel privately as he examined the photos from over Hector's shoulder. 'Yeah. I can see why they think this thing isn't human.'

'Could be some kind of crazy mutation user,' said Hector.

'Or something else,' said Garovel.

That made Hector curious. 'Do you have any guesses?'

'A few. But large monsters on the planet's surface are rare, especially in the more civilized regions of the world like this one. Historically, extremely dangerous creatures were often hunted to extinction by one group of servants or another. In retrospect, it's enough to make modern scientists or environmentalists cry, but it was for everyone's safety. In my view, that is. I'm sure it's difficult for many modern people to relate to the experience of being forced to live in constant fear of horrific monster attacks.'

'I never learned about any of that in school,' said Hector.

'Really? Hmm. Well, in fairness, I'm talking about VERY ancient history, here. Probably aren't too many physical records of this stuff

left.'

'Damn. So... this monster REALLY shouldn't be here, then.'

'Pretty much.'

'Where could it have come from?'

'Good question. Let's hear what else the ambassador can tell us.'

"2284

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Ambassador Stoutamire appeared to be waiting on him to finish his examination of the photographs before saying anything else, so it was up to Hector to revive the conversation.

""...Where did this creature come from?"" he asked.

""That, too, is unknown,"" said the ambassador.

'Figures,' muttered Garovel.

""You don't have any ideas at all?"" said Hector. ""No theories, even?""

""We do not."" Stoutamire shook his head. ""Perhaps if we were able to study the creature up close, we could gain some insight into that subject, but as things stand, that is impossible. It is difficult enough to observe from afar. The Beast likes to conceal itself, usually in the forest--of which, Lorent has many.""

The forest, huh? Many of the photos did seem to be taken there.

Another question occurred to Hector, one that was perhaps more important than any other he had yet asked. ""Have you sent any other hunters like me after it? Ones with supernatural powers?""

For a moment, Stoutamire only looked at him. He had been quite straightforward thus far, but now he seemed to be considering his answer. ""...Yes. We have.""

""I see."" Hector maintained his composure. ""And still, none of them returned, you said.""

""Yes.""

'Well, this just keeps getting better and better,' said Garovel. 'Ask him why he's contacting us instead of Intar. They have loads of servants.'

""Why are you coming to the Atreyan government and not the Intarian one?"" said Hector.

Stoutamire frowned. ""We did go to them. And they sent help. Three times. After that, they said they could no longer spare the resources to assist us.""

'Holy shit,' said Garovel.

""Perhaps they were telling the truth,"" said Stoutamire. ""With this war going on, the Intarians are very wary of invaders. And even if they are not officially involved in any of the conflicts, they may still have their fingers in quite a few of the related pies, so to speak.""

"2285

'Ask him about the dead Intarians,' said Garovel. 'Who were they and how many were sent?'

""What do you know about the Intarians who were sent to fight the monster?"" said Hector. ""You said that their government sent help three times, but what does that mean, exactly? Three hunters? Or three groups of hunters?""

The ambassador required a moment to think. ""The Intarians were rather protective of their operational details. No doubt, they were afraid of us learning something from them and then being able to increase our own military strength as a result.

""However, I do recall that in the first failed attempt, Intar sent a single hunter. On the second, it was again only one. But on the third, they sent three. I'm afraid their names were kept a secret.""

Hmm.

Hector had a question for Garovel, though he knew that the reaper obviously couldn't know the answer. 'Did those servants who were sent actually die? Reapers included? Or does Stoutamire just think that they're dead, because he doesn't know how our powers work?'



'Hard to say,' said Garovel. 'You could ask him, but you'd have to reveal some rather sensitive information about servants in order to do so. I don't think it's worth it.'

'Yeah...'

'But if he doesn't even know their names, then the first and second attempts might've actually been from the same person. Possibly the third as well, just bringing two buddies along.'

""Lord Goffe?"" said Stoutamire, having perhaps grown uncomfortable with the silence. ""So what do you say? Will you help us?""

He still had another question, though. ""Did you say that you sent superpowered hunters who were not from Intar?""

""Ah--yes. Only one. A local man named Frank Bishop. He was something of a hero, though he was notoriously reclusive. Time and again, he was offered a formal position as a protector of the nation, but he never accepted, ostensibly due to concerns over his privacy. His loss was felt by the entire country. Even now, many still hope that he is alive.""

'Sounds like he might be,' said Garovel.'

"2286

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Hector thought carefully. He wanted more details, but it seemed like the ambassador wouldn't be able to provide them.

Perhaps he was getting spoiled by the kind of intel that Gina, the Rainlords, and now perhaps even the Gaolanets were able to provide him with. It sure was nice, wasn't it? Knowing shit about the enemy before going into battle.

He still recalled a time when he hadn't had that luxury, and he wondered now if it was about to make a return.

Hmm.

""Please, Lord Goffe,"" said Ambassador Stoutamire. ""The situation is dire. Only three days ago, seven people were killed. That is the highest

single-day body count since that doomed gathering of hunters half a year ago. We fear that the creature is growing more bold and trying to expand its territory. Evacuations have already been going on for months, and now it seems they will only increase. People have had to abandon their homes without any idea of when they might be able to return.""

Hector sympathized--perhaps a little more than he should've, even. It was like the man was speaking straight into Hector's heart.

He tried his best to remain cold and logical, though. He wanted to ask the ambassador why Lorent was coming to him of all people when there were so many other servants out there who were way more famous than him. Even if Intar had failed, there still plenty of other candidates to ask.

But as he thought about it more, he supposed he already knew the answer. No doubt, it was because Warrenhold was so close to Lorent. Not to mention, many of those super famous warriors out there were now quite busy fighting a war.

Even a few of his own. Leo and Melchor probably would've been able to make short work of this monster. If they were here.

Would he have even wanted them to go, though? Sending them to Vantalay was one thing. That country was far away. If they made a big splash there, there was a comparatively low risk of it getting traced all the way back here to Atreya.

Either way, he supposed it hardly mattered now."  
"2287 -- CCXXIII.

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"I need some time to think about this," said Hector.

The ambassador nodded. ""Of course. I understand. But please decide soon. The Beast could attack again at any time. I fear the longer we wait, the more innocent people will die.""

Hector returned a nod of his own.

However, Hector had just told a lie. What he actually needed was not more time to think. He only needed time to talk to the Queen and the

Rainlords.

The truth was, he had already made up his mind.

## Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Three: 'In the land of disorder...'

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Evangelina Stroud would have much preferred to simply sneak into the country in the dead night. If stealth was their goal here, then it was better to forego all of these pretenses with disguises and fake identities. To her mind, proper stealth didn't mean hiding in plain sight like this. It meant never being seen in the if first place.

But sadly, that wasn't an option. The Vantalayan Border Guard was everywhere--and for good reason, of course. They were watching for enemy forces. And they appeared to be well-equipped as well. Fences, cameras, drones, dogs, watchtowers--and probably more. Vantalay had obviously been prepared for this war of theirs.

Much of that observational intel arrived via Raul Blackburn, who'd had a much easier time getting into the country since he'd arrived before the lockdown.

So they were blending in--or were trying to, at least.

Evangelina wondered how long this would last. Ridgemark was one of the only open ports in the country, and just like the Triplets had reported, it was absolutely inundated with reapers.

On the bright side, that made it a bit easier for their own reapers to blend in. Unfortunately, it also dramatically increased the likelihood of running into someone they recognized, and concealing themselves from a reaper who had memorized one or more of their souls would be quite the difficult feat indeed.

But not necessarily impossible."

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((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

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"2288

Primarily, their team consisted of Evangelina Stroud, Diego Redwater, Melchor Blackburn, and Leo. However, they had also brought along two more members of House Blackburn: Dino and Rafael.

Those two were young enough that they would likely be of no help in an actual fight, but there was also zero chance of running into any reapers who had memorized their souls. So the plan was to have those use their soul power to infuse everyone else's clothing.

Which was why Evangelina was so heavily garbed, at the moment. Her modified cloak had a thick hood that even extended halfway around her face, allowing only her eyes to be seen.

Could this even be considered a "cloak" anymore? She'd never worn anything so concealing. It was dark blue instead of black, but she still felt like one of those Sandlords who rarely ever saw the light of day.

Not exactly to her tastes.

Maybe that Atreyan guardian girl would've liked it, though. She seemed to have a thing for cloaks.

Diego, Melchor, and Leo were all similarly dressed, to the point where even she might've not been able to tell them apart if not for their slight variance in colors. Diego was in dark red, while Melchor was in black, and Leo was in dark gray--all appropriately chosen, she supposed.

Their heights were also somewhat telling, since Diego was taller than the other two, but Melchor and Leo were so similar that she still had a bit of trouble differentiating between them.

The two young ones were heavily clothed in black as well, but they were short enough that Evangelina could differentiate them easily enough. Plus, they always walked together in a little pair. Aside from hiding their souls, however, this rather heavy-handed precaution came with one other major advantage.

It allowed them to bring their reapers along by hiding them under their clothes."

"2289

Leo's reaper had remained at Warrenhold, but everyone else had brought theirs along. If they were to be confronting the Killer of Krohin, it was likely that they would have need of hyper-states.

Hopefully, that would be all they needed their hyper-states for.

Here in Ridgemark, the potential danger was obvious. Just walking the street, she could feel the presence of powerful people in this city. Precisely how powerful, she couldn't tell, but with all the unknown reapers she saw flying around, any obvious conflict that broke out would either be quickly put down or immediately escalate to city-destroying levels.

According to some last-minute intel that Lord Goffe had provided for this mission, the major players in Vantalay were not just the Vanguard and Abolish but also the local companies. Apparently, Ridgemark's ""peace"" was being maintained by powerful business owners, primarily the hotels and casinos.

Which was why Ridgemark was still allowing foreigners into port, much to the chagrin of the Vantalayan military.

It was honestly amazing how this city could still have so many tourists when it was so close to several active war zones. However, it was thanks in part to all these tourists that their plan to conceal their souls was at all viable here. The city's patrolling reapers would've had a far easier time noticing their little group of repeated souls, otherwise.

And even now, that was still a risk, Evangelina knew. They needed to get out of Ridgemark as soon as possible.

Raul Blackburn was not there to greet them at the docks, but he did hire a driver for them and left a code word that confirmed it was his doing. After the capture of his two brothers, Evangelina was actually somewhat relieved to see that he was taking extra precautions. She had not been the most confident in the Triplets' suitability for this mission, and thus far, her fears had not been proven unjustified."

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Granted, she had expressed her disapproval of the Triplets before the war began. She was now inclined to cut them a modicum of slack for having to deal with such an unexpected development in their mission.

And as tempting as it was to blame them for their recklessness, a part of her felt as if she would have done exactly the same thing in their shoes.

They may have been young. They may have been a bunch of goofballs.

But they were not meek.

They had put themselves in danger just to increase the odds of their mission's success. To save those poor townsfolk.

Just because their plan hadn't worked out perfectly for them didn't mean they hadn't acted like true Rainlords.

Regardless, she was still planning to give Raul a piece of her mind when she saw him.

The limousine came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the road, and the passengers all looked around in order to figure out why. It didn't take long to noticing the line of people standing in front of the car-- followed by a few more who appeared at the vehicle's flanks.

Their driver muttered something in Valgan. Evangelina didn't speak it, but the timbre of his voice made his fear apparent to her, nonetheless.

Shouting arrived from one of the men standing in the road. More Valgan.

Ezura, Evangelina's reaper, was kind enough to privately translate for her. 'They said, ""Come on out of there, whoever you are.""'

Hmm. Evangelina didn't recognize any of their faces, but she almost didn't even need to. The expressions on those faces... she'd seen them countless times before.

The smiles of madmen.

And their behavior? Standing in the middle of the road? Just for a chance to talk to a few people whom they apparently knew nothing about?

It was a fair bet that this was Morgunov's side of Abolish here."

"2291

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Melchor Blackburn didn't sit around to discuss what to do. He immediately got out of the car, and everyone else soon followed suit.

""Aha!"" came the same voice from a moment ago. ""Good listeners, these ones! How nice to encounter someone with a bit of courtesy for a change! This town is chock full of so many rude and vulgar people, you know!""

Melchor said nothing, nor did anyone else.

Evangelina eyed the apparent hostiles from beneath her hood. She counted twelve in total. Three on each side of the car. The ones behind them had appeared last.

Double their number. Not exactly good odds, but it was far too early to be worried. She knew most of the faces of the truly threatening members of Abolish, and none of these fools resembled any of them. It was possible that there was an unknown threat here, of course, but it was highly unlikely.

She'd seen more than her fair share of overconfident jackasses in her day.

""Why so quiet?"" said the same man, having walked a bit closer so that he no longer had to shout. Perhaps he was the leader of this little troupe. He was quite tall--comparable to Diego and maybe even Dimas--and with that long black hair of his, Evangelina might've mistaken him for a woman if not for his deep voice. ""Ah! Could it be that you don't speak Mohssian? My bad. I'm still not accustomed to all these Valgan-speakers.""

The man motioned to someone else, who began saying something in Valgan, but Evangelina decided to interject.



""What do you want?"" she said. She wasn't kidding herself. This was probably going to escalate to violence any moment now, but if there was any hope of avoiding all the attention that a fight would bring, then she had to at least try."

"2292

""Oho!"" came the loudmouth's voice again. ""So you did understand me! Well, now! Don't I feel foolish! Here I was, paying you compliments, thinking you were polite, and the whole time, you were actually being quite rude. It's not nice to leave people hanging when they're talking to you.""

Yeah. This man was almost certainly from Morgunov's side of Abolish.

Evangelina elected not to respond, and she was rather pleased when no one else in their group did, either.

""Hmph! Our intentions were purely academic, you know. We were merely curious as to why the lot of you were attempting to hide your souls. Why, a more suspicious person might think that you were up to no good--but not me. I'm very trusting. I'm sure I'd be content if you would only tell me your names and show me your faces. Sounds reasonable, right?""

Evangelina could see the twitchiness among some of the Abolishers. The talkative one seemed calm and collected, sure, but his friends were pretty obviously just waiting for an excuse to fight.

They were about to get it.

Melchor decided to speak up first, though. ""You are about to bite off more than you can chew, friends. I suggest you rethink this strategy of yours.""

That was far more diplomatic than Evangelina wanted to be, right now.

Oddly enough, however, it did seem to give these lunatics pause, and the apparent leader looked around at his group. ""...Is that right? Well, we appreciate the warning, friend, but with all due respect, I don't think you have any idea how much we can chew.""

The main problem was that Evangelina couldn't see any of their reapers. She could see a few observing from a distance, but there was

no way to know if they belonged to Abolish, so wantonly attacking them might just bring down a completely different group of servants on their head."

"2293

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 1 of 20))~~

No doubt, that was why these Abolishers were acting so boldly despite having no clue who they were going up against. So long as their reapers remained hidden, they weren't in any real danger. The worst that could happen to them was being taken captive, and if they were low enough level, their superiors might even consider them expendable enough to be worth that risk.

The Rainlords, on the other hand, had more to worry about. Evangelina was confident that they could stomp these chumps into the pavement, but engaging in open combat in the middle of the road would also risk exposing their identities. Ideally, they wanted to avoid that. They had only just arrived in Vantalay, after all.

No one said anything. Even the noise of the vehicles passing them on the road seemed to fall away.

The same nameless Abolisher decided to speak up again. ""Say... you folks wouldn't happen to be on your way to a little town called Miro, would you?""

Evangelina's breath caught. How did they know that?

Still, no one said anything.

It had to be an educated guess. Whoever this man was, he must've known enough about the situation in Miro to suspect that the two men they captured the other day might attract reinforcements.

It was either that or... Adan and Esai Blackburn had talked.

More than anything, Evangelina didn't want to believe that. Rainlords wouldn't tell the enemy anything. It was a matter of honor. And if they had, then they would have at least informed their own reapers of what they had done so that the reinforcing team could be told that the enemy was expecting them.

Unless... their brains had been frozen immediately after confession. Then they wouldn't have had the opportunity to tell their reapers anything.

Evangelina's jaw clenched. The more she mulled over the possibilities in her mind, the more she wanted to kill these bastards and be done with it."

"2294

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 2 of 20))~~

"Your silence strikes me as a tad suspicious," said the loudmouth. "Got something to hide, do ya? I know a few people who might be able to get you talking. Why don't we go and--?"

"Yo, this is getting real tiresome, my dudes." Leo's voice cut through the other man's like a hot knife through butter, and everyone turned to look at him. "I dunno about any of you guys, but I'm in a bit of a hurry."

The loudmouth remained undeterred. "It's rude to interrupt people, friend."

"It's more rude to block the road, daddy-o. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's illegal."

"That's a fair point. What say we all go some place quieter and have a nice chat?"

Leo whipped a phone out of his cloak. "What say I call the police? I'm not feelin' too chatty, myself, but I bet they would be able to help you out, don't you think?"

The loudmouth's smile disappeared for the first time. "Don't play dumb with me. It's obvious that you don't want any cops sniffing around your business. Just look at all of you."

Leo wasn't even looking in his direction. "Hey, what's the emergency number in this country? Anyone know?"

Evangelina noticed a few discontented rumbles among the Abolishers and couldn't help being surprised. Were they actually afraid of the civilian police showing up? Why?

Leo hadn't gotten an answer out of anyone yet, but he'd started dialing, anyway. ""Well, maybe I can just guess it.""

""Stop your bluffing,"" said the loudmouth. ""There's no way--""

""Yes, police? Hi there. Oh, you speak Mohssian, too. That's convenient. Hey, I'm not too sure where I am, right now, but could you, like, figure out my location or whatever and send someone over here? Like, someone really strong, I mean? There are some hooligans blocking the road and harassing me and my buddies.""

"2295

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 3 of 20))~~

""Pretend all you want. It's obvious that you're just--""

""Cool. Yeah, I'll wait right here. Hmm? No, I'm not too worried about that. They seem pretty toothless, honestly. All bark, know what I mean?"" He broke for a laugh. ""Really? Wow. Okay, awesome. Thanks so much. Yeah, I'll stay on the line.""

The loudmouth was no longer loud. Instead, he was red in the face with visible veins around his temples.

Leo was just tapping his foot as he waited. His face was still mostly obscured by his hood, but he looked in the direction of the most talkative Abolisher again. ""I'm not sure what local response times are, but if you plan on attacking us, you'd better get on with it.""

The other man just scowled.

""Or could it be that you were actually trying to goad us into attacking you for some reason?"" said Leo. ""Heh. Afraid of the law around these parts, maybe?""

And abruptly, Evangelina understood. It seemed odd at first that any servants--especially those of Abolish--would be wary of conventional law enforcement, but Ridgemark was no normal city, was it? Somehow, it was maintaining order despite harboring seemingly huge numbers of both Abolish and the Vanguard.

So who were the peacekeepers around here?

If the nervous looks on the Abolishers' faces were any indication, then Leo had hit the nail on the head.

They still weren't down, though. The loudmouth had apparently run out of tough talk, but none of them were budging.

And so they had a silent standoff, of sorts, as they waited for the authorities to show up.

Supposedly. Even Evangelina wasn't sure if Leo had actually called the police or not. He could've just been acting. Perhaps that was why Abolish wasn't leaving. They wanted to see if he'd been bluffing or not."

"2296

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At length, the loudmouth began to look more smug again. As the time ticked, he was no doubt starting to believe that Leo had indeed been acting.

Until the sound of sirens arrived.

It was an unfamiliar noise to Evangelina's ears, unlike the sirens they used back in Sair. These were more piercing and whistle-like. But the sudden frowns on all of the Abolishers faces told her everything she needed to know.

Without another word, they dispersed like cockroaches, with only the loudmouth lingering a moment longer to spit on the ground in front of them.

Once they were all gone, Leo started chortling.

""Why are you laughing?"" said Melchor. ""The situation may have been diffused, but the police will still be quite inconvenient to deal with. I'm not even convinced that simply crushing them wouldn't have been the wiser course of action.""

Leo only laughed harder, however. He stuffed his phone into his pocket and got back in the limousine.

Everyone exchanged confused looks before joining him.

Once all the doors were closed, he explained, ""I didn't actually make the call. Those sirens were just a coincidence!"" And he kept laughing. ""Talk about timing, eh?!""

Evangelina had no words.

Nor did anyone else, apparently.

Their driver started the car back up.

But before they could get rolling again, someone else appeared in the middle of the road.

From above. Evangelina's view was partially blocked by the roof of the car, so it looked as though a man had dropped down from seemingly nowhere and then was suddenly leaning on the hood of the car, peering through the windshield.

A man in a policeman's uniform.

Leo's laughter cut off, instantly replaced with a confused grunt. ""What the frick?!""

Everyone looked at him again as he double-checked his phone.

""Dudes, I swear I didn't call nobody!"" he said."

"2297

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 5 of 20))~~

Melchor opened his mouth to say something, but he was interrupted.

""Hello in there,"" came the apparent officer's voice. It was rather soft yet still masculine, and his Valgan accent was faint.

Now that Evangelina was looking, the police officer actually had a bit of a babyface.

""Sorry to trouble you,"" the officer went on, ""but would you mind exiting the vehicle? I have a few questions. I promise I won't take up too much of your time.""

They were more than a little reluctant to do so, but none of them were eager to get into a fight with the local police, either. They all stepped out of the limousine one more time.

Evangelina saw a reaper floating just behind the man, observing them all from over his shoulder. If his unusual entrance hadn't been enough of a clue, this was confirmation. But the fact that he had actually brought his reaper along was interesting.

Taking that kind of risk meant one of two things: either he was very confident in his ability to protect his reaper, or he was trying to be courteous and diplomatic. In some circles, keeping one's reaper hidden was a sign of ill-intent and distrust. Allowing the reaper to be seen, therefore, was sometimes regarded as an extension of good will and openness to discussion.

""Thank you for your cooperation. I am Officer Brand of the RPMP.""

That was the Ridgemark Private Military Police. There was no government-run law enforcement in this city. The RPMP was instead jointly-funded and operated by the largest companies in Ridgemark.

Evangelina had known this, yet it was still somehow difficult for her to wrap her head around the idea of local law enforcement being powerful enough to keep the peace between Abolish and the Vanguard. Surely, there had to have been other players involved, right? Foreign influence of some kind?"

"2298

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 6 of 20))~~

Hopefully, this peacekeeping effort wouldn't turn out to be Sai-hee's doing, but that would at least make more sense to Evangelina than all this strength being concentrated into the hands of the locals.

""Could you please present your passports and accompanying documentation to me?"" said Officer Brand. He even gave them a smile--a pearly white one, no less.

Ah. Their papers had already been checked and double-checked at the port, so there was no reason to expect them to suddenly fail here. Diego moved to retrieve the items in question from a briefcase in the

car.

While they waited, Evangelina eyed this Officer Brand up and down.

Quite well-built. And handsome, in that youthful way. There was almost no chance that he was as young as he appeared, though.

Evangelina couldn't sense any kind of overwhelming soul power from him, but that didn't mean anything conclusive. The Lord Goffe never exhibited such oppressive pressure, either, and he was obviously very dangerous in a fight.

Plus, there was just something about this man, something about the way he carried himself. Calm, yet attentive. Speaking clearly and with confidence.

She wondered if all members of the RPMP were like this. If so, what kind of training did they receive?

Documents in hand, Brand took a moment to look them over, and his reaper joined him.

""Excellent. Thank you."" The policeman offered them back to Diego, who returned them to the car. Brand regarded his small audience again with his bright blue eyes. ""I'm sorry for the inconvenience. You see, the people who were just hassling you are on an active watchlist, of sorts.""

Melchor was the first to respond. ""You were observing that encounter? From where, exactly?""

""That, I cannot say,"" said Brand. ""I can, however, offer an apology for not stepping in immediately. Things are a bit tense in Ridgemark, at the moment. I have orders to only intervene directly when a situation escalates to violence.""

"2299

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 7 of 20))~~

He couldn't say? Evangelina found that very odd. Why would the location that Officer Brand had been observing the situation from be a classified subject?



""Did those people say anything to you that you would like to report?"" said Brand. ""Any information you could provide regarding their activities or plans would be greatly appreciated.""

""Unfortunately, they did not tell us anything like that,"" said Melchor.

""Are you sure?"" said Brand. ""I should add that there is a financial reward for actionable intel on these people.""

A reward?

Truthfully, that did pique Evangelina's interest a bit. Too bad the mission came first.

""We are quite certain,"" said Melchor.

Diego decided to chime in. ""Would you mind if we asked you a question, Officer Brand?""

""Of course. Feel free.""

Diego adjusted his crimson hood and cloth mask. ""How far does the RPMP's jurisdiction extend, precisely?""

Ah. Good question, Evangelina thought.

""The city limits,"" said Brand.

""I see,"" said Diego. ""So the town of Miro is of no concern to you, then?""

And for the first time, Officer Brand's easy smile turned into a frown. ""I'm afraid so.""

""Hmm?"" Diego's head perked up a little. ""Is that remorse I hear in your voice, Officer Brand?""

The policeman made no response.

""Could it be that you know what's happening there?"" said Diego.

""Not exactly, but the rumors aren't pleasant. But the same can be said for the rest of the nation. My job is to prevent those same things from happening here.""

""I see,"" said Diego again.

And there was silence.

Evangelina expected more questions from the policeman, but he didn't offer any. Perhaps he was expecting more from them.

She decided to seize the lull in the conversation for herself. ""Perhaps I shouldn't be asking this, but you've been very amicable thus far, and I would like to trust you, if only a little. Why have you not asked us what we are doing here?""

""It is not my business to interfere with yours,"" said Brand."  
"2300

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 8 of 20))~~

Wow. Evangelina could hardly believe her ears, especially after the policeman had just mentioned people being on a 'watchlist.' She almost wanted to push her luck and ask him why he didn't seem to be concerned that they were all concealing their faces, but she held her tongue.

Officer Brand took a moment to check his phone before addressing them again. ""In any case, I hope you all enjoy your stay here in Ridgemark."" He handed a card off to Diego. ""If you think of anything regarding those men who were bothering you, please give me a call. Or you can just dial 883, and the operator will help you.""

""Thank you, Officer,"" said Diego.

""You are welcome. And before I go, a word of caution: Ridgemark is safe, but everywhere around it is a lawless zone. You people seem like you intend to leave the city, and while I obviously don't intend to stop you, I strongly recommend that you reconsider. You will be taking your lives into your own hands, if you do.""

""A 'lawless zone?"" said Diego. ""That's a strange way to put it. Isn't everything within Vantalay's borders subject to the laws of the Vantalayan government?""

Evangelina was fairly certain that Diego was playing a bit dumb with those questions. He'd received the same briefing that the rest of them had with regard to Vantalay's unique political circumstances. He probably just wanted to hear Officer Brand's take on the situation.

""Ah, well, being foreigners, I suppose it's to be expected that you wouldn't know about that,"" said Brand. ""The truth is, you can't rely on the Vantalayan government for anything. Whether it's protection, funding, food, or healthcare--it's always in flux. Occasionally, they'll help you. Most times, they won't. Even before this war, that was the case, and now it's just doubly so.""

Diego gave a small laugh. ""Those're some pretty strong opinions you have there, Officer.""

""Not really. You should hear some of my coworkers.""  
"2301

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 9 of 20))~~

Diego gave a second laugh. ""Your Mohssian is very good, by the way.""

""Thank you.""

""Are all RPMP officers as fluent as you?"" said Diego.

""Being multilingual is a prerequisite for the job, yes.""

""Ah, because of all the tourists Ridgemark gets?""

""Indeed. In truth, I speak six languages.""

""Oho! Impressive. I only know a bit of Valgan, myself. Trying to learn more, you know. What are all the languages you speak?""

""Valgan, Mohssian, Lhugian, Vaelish, Yenish, and Ghisi.""

""And which is your native tongue?""

""Ghisi, technically, but I spoke Valgan for most of my adolescent life, so my accent probably sounds more akin to that.""

""Aha. You, sir, sound like you've had an interesting life.""

""And you, sir, sound like you are buttering me up in order to ask another question. You can simply ask. I shall answer to the best of my ability.""

Diego snickered.

Evangelina merely listened, but she was hardly surprised by the initiative Diego was taking here. He'd always been a bit of a conversationalist, and while this might've seemed like an inappropriate time to be engaging in small talk, Officer Brand was clearly a valuable source of information.

""You got me,"" Diego admitted. ""I suppose what I'd really like to know is who those people who were bothering us were. Do you know?""

""I'm not at liberty to say, I'm afraid. My apologies.""

""I figured as much. Shame. Then can you at least tell us if there are any other people we should watch out for while we're in Ridgemark?""

Officer Brand was quiet a moment as he met Diego's gaze, perhaps trying to take the measure of him in some way. ""As I said, Ridgemark is safe. You don't need to 'watch out' for anyone while you are here. The RPMP will protect you perfectly.""

Diego nodded. ""Of course. I did not mean to imply otherwise.""

""I'm sure you didn't."" Brand's sky blue eyes drifted between everyone. ""However, there are a few names you may wish to be mindful of. In the off chance you hear of any of them.""

""Oh?""

"2302

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 10 of 20))~~

""Risto, Orma, and Voss,"" said Brand. ""If you encounter anyone with those names, I recommend you walk the other way. They're liable to get you into trouble.""

Evangelina was familiar with all of those names. They were all infamous Abolishers. On par with the Killer of Krohin, arguably.

She wasn't afraid of them. If not for their mission, she would've relished an opportunity to take each and every one of their heads. The amount of misery that they were collectively responsible for over the years

beggared belief.

Officer Brand wasn't done, though. ""Those are the ones you should probably avoid the most, but I would also recommend staying away from anyone named Jun or Graves. You'll find nothing but trouble from them as well, I suspect.""

Evangelina didn't react, but she sure wanted to. Having been a member of the Vanguard herself for over twenty years, she knew that last name particularly well.

Field Marshal Graves.

She'd never had the opportunity to meet him--which was perhaps to her benefit now, since it meant that his reaper wouldn't have her soul memorized--but all of the Field Marshals had their own mythos surrounding them. The lower ranked Vanguardians loved to talk about them, to swap fantastic tales of questionable veracity.

No one was ever quite sure what to believe when it came to the Field Marshals--and she'd heard that was by design. The legendary stories about them served to muddy their actual histories and thereby protect any innocent people who might've been connected to them.

One of Abolish's favorite pastimes was raiding a place that a Field Marshal once called home. In addition to enjoying the slaughter and destruction, they no doubt hoped to bait the associated Field Marshal into a trap.

Even among the Field Marshals, though, Graves was regarded as perhaps the most mysterious. Supposedly, he'd once fought Dozer to a standstill, yet that was the only story Evangelina had ever heard circulating about him. Beyond that, his past was a complete blank."  
"2303

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 11 of 20))~~

Jun, on the other hand, Evangelina had never heard of. It could've been someone who had only recently made a name for themselves, but whoever it was, if they were being mentioned in the same breath as Graves, then they were bound to be extremely dangerous.

Bah.

She'd hoped that none of the Marshals would be here in Vantalay--or at the very least, not in Ridgemark--but it seems that wasn't to be.

They'd just have to be that much more careful, she supposed.

Diego and the policeman continued their chat for a while longer, but Diego didn't manage to get any other useful information out of him. And thankfully, Officer Brand did indeed leave them alone as he said he would.

Finally, they all got back in the car and resumed their journey out of the city.

No one said anything aloud for a long while. Perhaps they were afraid to.

'That policeman worries me,' said Ezura privately. She was still attached to Evangelina's torso, hidden beneath her cloak.

Normally, Evangelina saw reapers as quite large birds--storks, to be precise. Their black-and-gray feathers smoldered like fire while their eyes glowed white or sometimes yellow or even occasionally red. When they were hidden like this, however, their large size made no difference whatsoever. That was what happened when reapers attached themselves to someone else's soul. Their usual appearance melted away, and they became little more than an amorphous blob stuck to the person's body.

'I thought he was surprisingly well-mannered and unintrusive,' said Evangelina.

'I thought so, too,' said Ezura. 'His personality isn't what concerns me. It was the way he showed up like that out of the blue. He said he'd been watching us the whole time, but I still didn't sense him until he was basically on top of us already.'

'Well, your senses are hindered by my cloak,' said Evangelina.

'Sure, but it wasn't like I was blind. I was paying close attention to our surroundings in case any more Abolishers showed up.'

'Hmm.'"

"2304

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 12 of 20))~~

'The more I learn about this town, the less I like it,' said Ezura. 'If Graves is really here in Ridgemark, then why the hell hasn't he gotten rid of Abolish?'

Evangelina could tell where she was headed with that question. 'Officer Brand didn't name any Abolishers who can stand up to a Field Marshal.'

'Exactly. So why's he dragging his feet?'

'Maybe he is worried about collateral damage. There are plenty of innocent tourists still in the city. And if the casinos refuse to evacuate civilians, then I imagine Graves' job becomes much more difficult.'

'You might be right,' said Ezura, 'but even if that is the case, the question remains: why doesn't he just strong-arm them into evacuating the city?'

Evangelina tipped her head to the side a little, considering that thought. 'Technically, the Vanguard is supposed to respect local sovereignty.'

'Hah!'

'I am aware that we represent a rather potent counterexample.'

'An understatement if ever there was one. I don't believe for a second that Graves is just sitting around like a good little boy. This country is at war. Local sovereignty, collateral damage--these things are already in flux, at the moment, even without the Vanguard's input. If he hasn't run Abolish out of here, it's not because he doesn't want to. Someone really strong must be getting in his way.'

Evangelina almost didn't even want to say it. '...The RPMP?'

The reaper sighed. 'I don't want to entertain the idea that they could have someone that powerful on their payroll, but right now, it's looking like the only explanation.'

A worrisome thought, to say the least. But Evangelina could also see a potential bright side. 'Well... if that really is the case, then perhaps that is to our advantage.'

'Maybe. But I've never been much for optimism.'

A faint smile crossed Evangelina's lips. 'Believe me, I know.'

"2305 -- CCXXIV.

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 13 of 20))~~

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Four: 'O, crusading champion...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The trip to Lorent happened quickly. Hector had expected more pushback from both the Queen and the Rainlords when he told them about what the Lorentian Ambassador said, but they all seemed to understand. In the Queen's case, she actually sounded somewhat pleased about the idea, telling him that his victory would help to improve relations between Atreya and Lorent considerably.

Why she was assuming that he would succeed, Hector wasn't quite sure. He didn't want to dampen her spirits, though. Apparently, there had been some trade disputes with Lorent going on in the last few weeks, and it was hindering some kind of building project that the Queen was working on. She promised to tell him more about it when he returned.

The Rainlords were not quite so enthused by his departure--which, admittedly, warmed his heart a little bit--but they were still very supportive and of course insisted on sending strong warriors to help him.

In fact, if he hadn't said anything, half of their remaining forces might've ended up accompanying him. It was the Babbadelo-situation all over again.

However, who to actually bring along proved to be a difficult decision to make. Most of their strongest warriors were in Vantalay at the moment, so the most powerful servants in Warrenhold currently consisted of Zeff Elroy, Joana Cortes, Salvador Delaguna, Dimas Sebolt, Horatio Blackburn, and Nere Blackburn--in no particular order.

But all of those people were the heads of their respective families. They had the most responsibility and would therefore be the most



sorely missed. Hector didn't want to bring any of them along.

For some reason, though, Salvador Delaguna wouldn't take no for an answer. All the other heads seemed to understand Hector's perspective, but not him.

""You think I'm too important?"" the giant man had said. ""Boy, you're more important than any of us. And I'll be damned if I let you go off and face some mysterious beastie all on your own.""

"2305 -- CCXXIV.

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 13 of 20))~~

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"2306

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 14 of 20))~~

It wasn't just Salvador accompanying him, though. Matteo Delaguna, Fidel Blackburn, and Carlos Sebolt had either volunteered or been selected to come along, too.

And much like the treasure hunting teams, they weren't taking their reapers with them. The fact that the so-called Beast of Lorent had already ""killed"" multiple other servants was an unsettling notion. Perhaps that bit of information was mistaken or exaggerated, but either way, caution seemed like the wisest course of action.

It would be weird to be away from Garovel for so long, and Hector wasn't looking forward to it, but at least he'd still be able to talk to him whenever he wanted.

Unlike the trip to Sair, however, word had gotten to the media about the Lord of Warrenhold's trip to Lorent, and now there was a crowd of reporters camping out at Warrenhold's main gate. Thankfully, the aboveground walls had already been repaired or completely rebuilt, so at least there weren't camera crews all over the castle grounds like there were last time, but it still made leaving more difficult.

He didn't want any of the Rainlords to be caught on camera, especially Lord Salvador, so Hector had to leave first on his own and draw the

media away so that the Rainlords could meet up with him later.

Hector couldn't help thinking that this might not have been such a hassle if he'd managed to explore more of the cave network that Warrenhold was part of. He'd done it multiple times previously when searching for the location of the underground waterfall, but after finding it, the exploration effort had lost most of its fervor. Plus, he'd had about a million other things distracting him, lately.

Those caves, though, were something else. They were an absolute labyrinth, and Garovel even mentioned that there was a good chance that they extended beneath most of the city, perhaps even connecting to the subway system. And if that were true, then there were bound to be other routes back up to the surface elsewhere.

That sure would've made it easier to leave the city without drawing so much attention."

"2307

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 15 of 20))~~

In this case, though, those caves alone probably wouldn't have been enough. There were more reporters waiting for him at the airport concourse. By then, the Rainlords had rejoined him, and he was faced with a difficult decision. Split up again? Or just encase all the cameras in iron? He'd done the latter before, and it certainly hadn't won him any points with the media.

He was more concerned about the reporters noticing the four Rainlords in his company. He doubted any normal person would recognize them, and if they acted casual, they could just pass as normal bodyguards, but it was still a risk that Hector preferred not to take.

Hmm. Maybe he could just armor the Rainlords up.

No, wait, that would freak the media out even more, wouldn't it? They might think there were suddenly five Darksteel Soldiers or some shit.

""Having problems?"" came a deep, yet oddly familiar voice.

Hector turned to see that it belonged to a uniformed pilot. Then he did a double take when he saw that it was Roman Fullister. ""What're you

doing here?"

"You didn't think I'd let you go to Lorent without me, did you?" The base in his voice was so much heavier than usual.

"...Are you using vibrations to modulate your own voice now?" said Hector.

Roman chuckled. "Yeah. Pretty neat, right? I should've tried this out ages ago. Once I get the hang of it, I feel like I might be able to pull off some killer impressions."

Hector exhaled half a laugh. Roman had been staying at Warrenhold with everyone else, so him showing up at the airport like this was highly unnecessary.

Carlos Sebolt was the first to point that fact out. "If you wanted to come along, you could've just accompanied us when we left the castle."

"Where would be the fun in that?" said Roman, returning his voice to normal.

"2308

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 16 of 20))~~

Salvador chortled and slapped a meaty hand on Roman's shoulder, making the man's whole body shake. "You are a strange one, Mr. Fullister!"

"Do you have some way around those reporters for us?" asked Carlos.

"It just so happens that I've got a spare plane that we can use. One that our media friends over there don't know about."

Hector was reminded of something. "That isn't the same plane that you stole from the Vanguard, is it?"

The Rainlords all snapped to attention in unison at that question.

"Oh, no, don't worry," said Roman. "I got rid of that thing a long time ago. Can't just leave a loose end like that hanging around. Even if it is

worth millions of troa."

"So you bought a whole new plane, then?" said Hector.

"Nah, I only chartered this one," said Roman. "Less expensive this way. I do want to get another one eventually, though."

Roman guided them to the hangar where it was being kept. It was a handsome machine, painted white-and-silver and bearing the black insignia of a sword with wings--the logo of the Gray Rock International Airport.

"How long ago did you charter this thing?" said Hector.

"Oh, it's been a good while," said Roman. "Almost twenty-four whole hours."

Hector just shook his head and laughed as he boarded the plane.

It didn't take much longer for the small crew to finish preparations. Hector also discovered that Fidel Blackburn was a certified pilot, and with Roman's permission, he was allowed into the cockpit with the aircraft's otherwise lone airman.

Soon enough, they were in the air and leaving the country.

With Lorent being so close, Hector had at first thought that an airplane wouldn't be necessary, but after a quick geography lesson on the internet, he realized that Lorent was actually kind of huge--and their destination was the Imara Forest, deep in the heart of the country. This way, it would only take a few hours to reach instead of all night."

"2309

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 17 of 20))~~

This was Hector's second time seeing Lorent from the air. The trip to Sair had afforded him the opportunity once before, but he'd been considerably more distracted by Lynn's presence during that flight.

He was able to get a better look now.

Ambassador Stoutamire hadn't been kidding when he'd said that Lorent had a lot of forests. That was all Hector could see across the

entire horizon. Were there even any cities in this country?

Ah, yeah, he managed to spot an occasional building peeking up among the trees here and there. Wow, did they really just build their towns in the middle of the forest like that?

Suddenly, he felt a little bad. He probably should've known a lot more about this country, considering how close it was to Warrenhold.

Well, hopefully, this trip would help change that.

""Is Garovel complaining to you?"" said Roman, who was sitting next to him.

""Hmm?"" said Hector. ""Ah. No? Complaining about what?""

""About not bringing him along, "" said Roman. ""I just left, and Voreese already won't shut up.""

""Ah... well, now that you mention it, I'm sure Garovel will get around to it, eventually.""

""I'm tempted to tell her to go bother Garovel instead of me, but if he's not annoying you already, then I'm afraid she might infect him with her whining.""

""Heh. Oh, uh, by the way, thanks again for your help with the Bank.""

""Don't sweat it."" After a beat, Roman bobbed his head to the side.

""Well. Okay, maybe you can sweat it a little bit. That's ten million troa I've got riding on you.""

Hector's laugh was a moderately nervous one. ""I'm sweating it plenty, I promise...""

""Seems like it's going pretty well, though, yeah?""

""So far.""

""Well, even if it all goes pear-shaped, don't worry. I'll bail your bank out for you.""

Hector blinked and looked at him anew. ""Really?""

""Hell no! Are you kidding? Do you have any idea how much money you're talking about?""

Hector's expression flattened, and he went back to looking out the window. ""Suddenly, I'm starting to miss Voreese.""

Roman snorted a laugh of his own."  
"2310

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 18 of 20))~~

A question occurred to Hector, and it made him smile, so he couldn't help asking it to Roman. ""Does Voreese have any theories about what this monster might actually be?""

""Oh, sweet Cocora, does she ever,"" said Roman. ""You don't actually wanna hear all of her crazy ramblings, do you?""

Hector returned a slight nod, as if to say that he kind of did want to hear them.

Roman groaned. ""Did Garovel not bombard you with any wild theories of his own? He must've, surely.""

""Oh yeah, he definitely did,"" said Hector, smile widening. ""That's what gave me the idea to ask you about Voreese.""

""Ah, I see. So you're amused by the thought of me suffering through the same sort of thing that you did, is that it?""

""Pretty much.""

""Alright, well... I guess I can give you the abridged version. Heh, but only if you tell me some of the crazy shit that Garovel said, too.""

""Deal.""

Roman took a moment to think. ""She mentioned something called a Ceese. Apparently, it's a type of 'evil spirit.'"" He made air quotes with his fingers.

Hector asked the obvious question. ""Evil spirit? What does that mean?""

""That's what I said. She couldn't provide details. Probably because it's a mythological creature and never actually existed. I asked some of

the Rainlords' reapers, and they were a bit more forthcoming with the truth. She was just trying to scare me, I think. She's like a little kid sometimes, I swear."

"Ah." Hector was still curious, though. "...So what's so scary about a Ceese, then?"

Roman breathed a partial laugh. "Well, it's supposed to stalk you from the edges of your peripheral vision, always staying just outside of your view, somehow. And as it gets closer and closer, it begins to laugh at you--or at least, that's what it sounds like. Might just be its breathing, since it's not actually supposed to be human."

"Huh..."

"2311

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"It's supposed to do all this because it feeds off of your fear or some shit," said Roman. "And it only tries to kill you when either your fear reaches a critical point or it becomes dissatisfied with the amount of fear you're exhibiting."

"Wait, so it tries to kill you no matter what you do?" said Hector.

"Guess so."

"Shouldn't there be, like, a special rule or something to help you stay alive? That's how these mythological stories usually go, isn't it?"

"I dunno, man. Like I said, Voreese didn't offer anything in the way of proof--even anecdotally. And the Rainlords said it wasn't real."

Hector spared a glance at the other passengers and lowered his voice. "The Rainlords didn't know about Sparrows, either."

Roman opened his mouth, then perhaps thought better of whatever he was about to say and closed it again.

"And besides... I've met two gods in the last six months--one of which, even Garovel thought never existed. So you'll have to excuse me if I try to keep an open mind about these things."



Roman scratched his forehead. ""Well, when you put it like that..."

Hector let the silence linger for a moment longer before saying, ""So did Voreese mention anything else?"

""Yeah. She said it could also be something called a Wamp--which is another mythological creature, by the way."

Hector's brow depressed a little. ""A Wamp? Doesn't exactly sound scary..."

""Right? Apparently, it's an Old Mohssian term that doesn't really have an accurate translation."

""Hmm. So what does the Wamp do, then?"

""Sucks your soul out of your body and tortures you in a hellish nightmare of your own imaginings."

Hector's pressed his lips together flatly. ""Oh."

""Yeah. Doesn't sound too fun."

""Does it have a particular reason for doing that to you? Or is it just an asshole?"

"2312

~~((National Rescue Dog Day - page 20 of 20))~~

""Not sure,"" said Roman. ""I think Voreese said it's supposed to eat you afterward."

""So it's like tenderizing your soul by torturing you?"

""Maybe."" Roman shrugged. ""But like I said. Mythological. Probably not real."

""Right... and I don't suppose you know if servants are immune to its soul-sucking powers, huh?"

""Why would we be immune?"

""Because our souls don't even belong to us. They belong to our reapers."

""Mm. That's one way of putting it, I suppose. I don't see why that would make us immune, though.""

""Well, I know for a fact that we're immune to certain aberration abilities.""

""You do? How do you know that?""

""Because the first time I fought Geoffrey Rofal, he tried to consume my soul. Didn't work.""

""Oh, right. Him. I'd almost forgotten about that little bastard.""

Hector made no response. He wished he could forget. He knew he never would.

Roman took the opportunity to change the subject. ""So what were Garovel's theories about this monster, then?""

""Were those two the only ones that Voreese brought up?""

""No, but I'm tired of talking about them. It's your turn.""

That was fair. ""Ah... he told me about something called a Yigorosk.""

""Scarier name than Wamp, at least. What's its deal?""

""Basically, it's a giant tentacle monster.""

""...Is that it? Maybe I'm just jaded at this point, but if all it's got going for it is a bunch of tentacles, then I doubt it would stand much of a chance against six servants. Or even one, for that matter.""

""Well, it can also camouflage itself. And it's supposed to be pretty durable. Kinda like the worms in the Undercrust, was what Garovel said.""

""Hmm. Still not impressed.""

""It stalks its prey while camouflaged and then springs on them when no one is looking and drags them back to its gooey lair--which it made from its own bodily juices, by the way.""

""Okay, well, that's fuckin' gross.""

""Mmhmm.""

""So is this actually real?"" said Roman. ""Or is it mythological like the ones Voreese was talking about?""

""Garovel said it really existed like two thousand years ago,"" said Hector.

""Hmm. Doesn't really sound like a forest-dwelling monster, though, so why does he think it might be this 'Beast of Lorent?""

""Supposedly, it could goo-ify almost any kind of environment to suit its needs. And it was known to migrate to new regions when threatened by hunters.""

""Did you look this Yigorosk up on the internet?""

Hector hesitated. ""Y-yeah...""

Roman cocked an eyebrow ""And? What'd you find?""

""Uh... not what I was looking for.""

Roman seemed confused.

Hector considered how to explain. ""...Tentacle monsters are really popular online.""

Roman no longer looked confused. A smile flickered across his face as he attempted to maintain his composure, but it didn't take long for him to start laughing outright.

""It's not that funny,"" said Hector.

Roman settled himself. Mostly. ""Sorry. Heh. So, I guess, the term Yigorosk didn't help to, heh, narrow your search?""

""No."" Hector frowned. ""It sure fucking didn't.""

Roman snorted again. ""That's still a little strange, though. If it really does exist to this day, then you should've been able to find some actual academic articles about it.""

Hector scratched his chin. ""Maybe I'm just bad at searching for stuff

online.""

""You think so? I thought all young people these days were well-versed in using the internet.""

Hector smiled. ""Hey, maybe you should look it up.""

Roman just stared at him a moment. ""I see where this is going, and I don't like it.""

""I'm sure you'd be better at it than me.""

""Alright, y'know what?"" Roman pulled out his phone. ""I'm willing to walk over this land mine if we do it together.""

At that, Hector's enthusiasm waned a little. ""Eh...""  
"2314

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""I'm not doing it by myself,"" said Roman. ""You can back out, but so will I.""

Hector's mouth scrunched up. ""Fine.""

And so, for the next several minutes, the two of them braved a world of pretty fucked up shit. Unfortunately, even Roman couldn't find any ""academic"" articles, per se, but at length, they did happen upon a website that was full of words instead of artwork.

Which was something of a relief, at least.

The site itself seemed quite primitive, though, so Hector impulsively figured that they would soon move on from it, but Roman actually started reading that giant wall of text on the front page.

Hector decided to give it a go as well.

The text did indeed mention the Yigorosk by name and even described it as a creature first mentioned in ancient Luughian mythology. The Yigorosk supposedly emerged from the depths of the Luthic Ocean and laid countless eggs, which then hatched and terrorized the western coast of the Luughian continent for a hundred years.

It also stated that most modern scientists believe the Yigorosk to be either fictional or extinct due to the fact that no fossilized remains of it have ever been found--and because the only ""historical record"" that even mentioned it belonged to Harundel the Elder, who was apparently a notoriously unreliable and eccentric figure in ancient history.

Then the author of the website said that modern scientists were fools and claimed to have not only personally seen a Yigorosk, but also killed it and used its remains to create a powerful aphrodisiac.

Then the text started getting weirdly sexual.

""Who wrote this shit?"" said Roman.

They scrolled down and found a link to a credits page.

""Harundel the Younger,' apparently,"" said Hector.

""I want the last few minutes of my life back,"" said Roman."  
"2315

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They spent the remainder of the flight discussing more hypothetical monsters that their reapers had mentioned. The only thing they knew definitively about the Beast of Lorent was that it had managed to avoid being identified despite Lorent's best efforts, so most of their proposed monsters were ones that could operate stealthily in one form or another.

At length, however, the conversation became more obviously about entertaining one another than it did about actually trying to discern what the creature might be. Among others, Hector brought up something called a jajarith, which was a kind of man-eating frog-beast that supposedly came from Qenghis, while Roman brought up something called a tomokooni, which was a freaky badger-like humanoid-creature that crept up on people while they slept and flayed them alive in order to wear their skin as its own.

They hadn't been competing, exactly, but after that, Hector decided that Roman had won. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to be so open-minded about the possibility of all these things existing, after all.

""Apparently,"" Roman was still saying as they were getting off the

plane, "the jury is still out on whether or not a tomokooni can pass for a human being. Voreese wasn't too sure on that part. But regardless, I have to imagine that the Lorentian authorities would've noticed a bunch of flayed corpses lying around and told us."

"Y'know," said Hector, "everyone likes to talk about how great the power of the imagination is, but sometimes, I think it might be the most horrific thing in the world."

"Could very well be."

A small group of people were waiting for them on the tarmac--which Hector found a little surprising, considering how they'd changed planes at the last minute, but he supposed the pilot must've radioed ahead."  
"2316

It was a bit difficult to make out their faces in the darkness of the late evening, but as they got closer, Hector realized that the one on the right was Ambassador Stoutamire. The man was not first to step forward and speak, however. Instead, it was a middle-aged woman in a long red coat with feathers along the collar.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Lord Goffe," she said, holding up a rather archaic-looking lantern for illumination. "Welcome to the Imara Province. I am Larissa Karr, the Secretary of State for the Lorentian Federal Government." She offered him a gloved handshake, and Hector took it.

The Secretary of State? Didn't that make her super important? Or did it? Hector wasn't too familiar with the structure of foreign governments. Hell, he was still learning about Atreya's government.

Ambassador Stoutamire shuffled forward to shake hands with him as well. "Apologies for the lack of warning, Lord Goffe. Had I known, I would certainly have informed you that Secretary Karr would be here to meet you. Oh, you must think us terribly unorganized."

"It's no trouble," said Hector.

"Things have been especially hectic around here, you see," said Stoutamire. "Why, just yesterday, the power--"

The Secretary decided to interject. "That's enough, Ambassador. Lord

Goffe didn't come all this way to hear us complain."

"Ah--yes. Forgive me." Stoutamire stepped backward with a stiff bow.

Secretary Karr regarded Hector again, this time lingering on his companions. "Who is this that you have brought with you?" she asked. "Your hunting party?"

"That's right," said Hector, figuring that was as good a term as any. With the Scarf, he could sense that Salvador Delaguna was fidgeting a bit more than the others.

Hmm, perhaps he was worried about being recognized. Hector had made iron masks for all the Rainlords, so that wouldn't be a problem, but Salvador was the head of House Delaguna, which made him quite an important political figure in Sair. Maybe that was making him uncomfortable unconsciously or something."

"2317

Hector had offered an iron mask to Roman as well, but the man refused--"on principle," he'd said. Apparently, he took his disguises even more seriously than Hector thought. Either way, it wouldn't be quite as big of a deal if someone recognized Roman, since he was at least Atreyan, so Hector didn't press the issue.

"I did not expect you to bring such a large group," said Secretary Karr, "but this is encouraging to see. If there is any way in which we can help, you need only to ask. You are doing this country a great service. Come, let us walk."

The two parties became one as they moved toward the airport terminal together. Normally, it might not have been so easy to chat on the open tarmac like this, but there were no other airplanes either coming or going. It didn't escape Hector's notice how empty the place looked.

"Have you already evacuated this area?" said Hector.

"For the most part, yes," she said. "There have been a number of anomalous events in this area that suggest the Beast may be closer than we first thought."

Hector kind of wanted someone else to take the lead in this conversation, but that obviously wasn't going to fly, since he was the

only person in their group who wasn't trying to keep a low profile in one way or another. ""Events like what?"" he asked.

""Frequent changes in weather, for one thing. This place was covered in snow three days ago, but you wouldn't know it now. Then it was blisteringly hot, and just yesterday, there was an electrical storm that knocked out most of our electronics.""

""Oh,"" said Hector. ""That would explain your lantern, then.""

""Hmm? Oh, yes. We found a few of these in storage. Thankfully, we at least managed to get some of the radios back up and running.""

Hector found that concerning. ""Sounds like this area is pretty dangerous, then. Should you even be here, right now?""

"2318

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""Frankly,"" said Secretary Karr, her voice suddenly wavering, ""ah... no, I probably should not be here at all. I only meant to greet you upon your arrival. I did not think that once I came here, I would be trapped.""

Hector blinked. ""Trapped?"" And he noticed her gaze as well, going back and forth, as if watching for something.

""As I said, the storm yesterday knocked out most of our electronics. We lost all ability to communicate with the outside world until only a few hours ago. It was quite a frightening ordeal, I must say.""

Stoutamire chimed in again. ""Oh, indeed! We were worried that the Beast would attack at any moment! So you can be sure that I am not exaggerating or merely being polite when I say that we are quite pleased to see you now!""

Damn. Hector eyed the distant treeline in the darkness. The airport was fairly large, but it still seemed to be surrounded by forest. The monster could literally appear from any direction, in that case.

So far, these people didn't sound that scared, but maybe they were just trying to remain professional and not panic their subordinates.

If he were in their shoes, he would probably be pretty fucking terrified. He could only imagine what they must have gone through in the last



day.

""Is someone coming to pick you up?"" said Hector.

""Yes, we received word that a Special Operations team was being deployed here over two hours ago,"" said the Secretary. ""They have... yet to arrive.""

Hmm. Hector eyed their small group another time. It was just the Secretary, the Ambassador, and three apparent attendants. ""Did you not have a security team escort you here?"" he asked.

""We did,"" she said. ""However, they went missing about ten hours ago. We have no idea where they are.""

Holy shit.

Hector stopped walking, which made everyone else do the same. ""Well, we have an airplane and a spare pilot,"" he said, very calmly. ""Why don't you take them both and go somewhere a bit safer?""  
"2319

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Secretary Karr was visibly taken aback. ""That is an incredibly generous offer, Lord Goffe! You would be leaving yourself with no means of escaping this place. Are you sure that would be wise?""

Before answering, Hector glanced toward Roman. He was the one actually paying for that plane, after all.

Roman merely returned a slight nod, apparently not feeling the need to actually interject into the conversation personally.

""We'll be fine,"" said Hector. ""Please, take it and go.""

The Secretary of State looked around at her people for a moment, then gave Hector a nod. ""Thank you. We will do as you ask. But before we go, do you have any other questions for us concerning the Beast? Or anything else?""

Hector mulled it over. If this was really going to be the last chance he got to talk to any of the Lorentians before the hunt was on, then he probably shouldn't waste the opportunity. But what should he ask

about?

""...Have you learned anything new about the creature since I last spoke to Ambassador Stoutamire?"" said Hector.

It was her turn to think. ""I already mentioned the abnormal weather. We were not previously aware that the Beast possessed any such capabilities. I suppose it could be unrelated. We have no actual proof that it is causing these strange disturbances in the environment.""

It was good to be skeptical, Hector supposed, but he highly doubted that it was just some freak coincidence.

The masked Carlos Sebolt leaned in to whisper something into Hector's ear. ""Lord, ask her where she last saw her security team.""

""Your security escort,"" said Hector. ""You said they went missing ten hours ago?""

""That's right.""

""Where was the last place you saw them?""

""Ah... they were not all in one place together,"" she said. ""They went missing around the same time, but I remember seeing them surveying the area in pairs. The most alarming moment was when my two personal bodyguards disappeared. Unlike the others, they were not supposed to leave my side at all.""

"2320

Carlos whispered to him again. ""Lord, that is highly alarming. Please ask her for more details.""

Hector didn't need to be told either of those things. ""How exactly did your two bodyguards disappear?""

""Ah--well, one moment they were there, and the next they were not,"" she said. ""We looked all over the airport, but we were unable to find them.""

""Okay, but--"" Hector hesitated. He wanted to be careful with what he said, but he needed better clarification. Was she actually talking about people vanishing before her eyes? Probably not, right? And broaching

the subject of invisibility was more likely to alarm everyone in the group. He decided to rephrase his question. ""...So let me make sure I understand. One moment, they were there, then you turned away? And then when you looked back, your bodyguards weren't there anymore?""

""Yes, that is correct."" The Secretary sounded mildly confused, perhaps wondering why he was asking for clarification on something so simple.

Okay, so probably not invisibility, then. For a second there, he'd gotten flashbacks to both Dunehall and the Gaolanets' Estate. In a background thought process, he wondered if the Scarf would work as well on detecting invisible aberrations as it did on invisible Sparrows.

""Lord,"" came Carlos' voice again, ""ask her how well she knew her bodyguards.""

Hmm. Hector could see where he was going with that question. ""How well did you know these two bodyguards of yours?""

The Secretary looked suddenly even more confused. ""I... not very well, I suppose."" And she blinked. ""You're not suggesting that they..."" For whatever reason, she left that sentence unfinished.

Hector, however, had another question for her that she might not like very much. ""Is it possible that the Beast didn't get them? That they just left on their own?""

Her posture stiffened somewhat. ""What are you implying, Lord Goffe?""

Hmm? Was he approaching a sore spot? ""I'm just trying to understand the situation here.""

"2321

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The Secretary did not look pleased. ""You think they may have betrayed me.""

Hector cocked an eyebrow. Was she getting upset at him? ""Do you think that they may have betrayed you?""

She looked like she wanted to say no, but she only frowned, instead.

""...Can you think of a reason why they might leave you here?"" said Hector.

She glanced at Stoutamire, then at the three attendants. ""I... have my enemies. As any public figure does.""

""...But is there something more specific?"" said Hector.

She exhaled. ""Ah... you're looking for what you would call a 'credible threat,' no?""

Was he? It just seemed like a sensible thing to ask about, Hector thought.

""There was an incident a few months ago,"" she went on, ""wherein three members of Congress were convicted of treason.""

That was certainly news to Hector.

""I was... tangentially involved, you might say,"" she said.

""How so?"" said Hector.

""I bankrolled the lead prosecutor when all of his other funding had mysteriously dried up. I tried to keep my name out of it, but I suspect my efforts only went so far.""

Hector couldn't help feeling like he'd just heard a secret that he might've been safer not knowing. It was quite a familiar feeling, actually.

""It is unlikely that those three were the only conspirators,"" she said. ""If they wanted me dead, then I suppose it would be quite convenient if the Beast of Lorent took care of it for them. No need to risk an assassination attempt. My death would not look suspicious at all this way, would it? How could I have been so blind?""

Hector held up a hand. ""Alright, well, let's not jump to too many conclusions yet. It was just a thought. We don't actually have any proof that your bodyguards betrayed you. It really might've just been the Beast that got them.""

"2322

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The Secretary's frown remained exactly where it was. ""But if it was the monster, then why did it not come for us as well? I was wondering that previously, yet now I feel foolish for not having realized it sooner.""

Stoutamire chimed in again. ""Sadly, I think you may be right, ma'am. And if that's so, then might it not be safer to remain here? With Lord Goffe?"" He addressed Hector directly. ""Your offer to give us your plane is incredibly kind of you, but now I can't help worrying that the real danger for the Madame Secretary may not come from this mysterious Beast at all.""

Hector cocked an eyebrow. ""Just like that, you think the monster isn't real?""

""Oh, no, it may well be,"" said the Ambassador, ""but so may the threat on the Secretary's life be. I cannot speak for the rest of us, of course, but I feel much safer now that you are here, and to be quite blunt, I would rather not leave your side just yet. What if the Beast is somehow able to bring down the aircraft?""

That pulled a couple of disquieted whispers out of the man's unnamed associates.

Hector made no response, though. He supposed the guy had a point. They didn't actually know what the monster was capable of. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that it could attack the airplane, especially if it could alter the weather.

But Hector still couldn't help mistrusting Stoutamire's words a little. There was something in his mannerisms that Hector found slightly unsettling. Perhaps it was the lack of genuine fear in the man's eyes. The Ambassador somehow looked happy about having an excuse to stay.

Hector tried not to rush to judgment, though. He probably shouldn't base his decisions off of things like ""the look in someone's eyes,"" eh? The fuck did that even mean, anyway? He may've been a lord now, but it wasn't like he'd suddenly gained lie-detecting powers or anything."

"2323

A suddenly cold gust of wind interjected in their conversation, causing everyone to brace themselves against its biting touch. Then in the distance, a bolt of lightning flashed across the night sky, followed very soon afterward by its accompanying boom.

The others all looked briefly in the direction the bolt had been in, and Hector did the same, but his mind was simultaneously elsewhere.

Because that gust of wind had showed him something through the Scarf.

Quite far away from the group, on one of the grounded airplanes, Hector had briefly sensed the foggy outline of a figure. And a large one--familiarily large. It had only been for a fleeting moment, but he was pretty sure of what he'd just sensed.

A Sparrow.

Impulsively, Hector wanted to look over in that direction immediately, but he resisted. He was pretty sure that they would just be invisible, anyway, and they might suspect that he was onto them if they saw him looking right at them.

Was it Hanton? Hector doubted it. The Lord Gaolanet would've known better than to try to hide from him.

Whoever it was, this was a problem. Before anything else, Hector needed to know if they were hostile. Because if they were, then he couldn't trust anything that his eyes were telling him, right now. Everything was potentially an illusion.

""Excuse me,"" said Hector, drawing everyone's attention. ""I know this may seem odd, but could you all wait here one minute? There's something I have to take care of. I won't be long.""

Understandably, they were all confused, and it took him a little while to ""explain"" without actually explaining. He told that he knew he was being a little weird but that everything was fine. And even after he'd convinced the Lorentians, the Rainlords tried to come along, too, so he had to tell them to stay and guard the Secretary.

They didn't say much, but he knew they weren't very pleased by that."  
"2324

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Roman seemed curious as well, but even though he already knew about the existence of Sparrows, Hector still couldn't explain the circumstances without alerting the Sparrow who was probably listening to their conversation at this very moment.

He would have to be quick. Now that the wind had died down again, he couldn't actually sense the bird anymore. It was almost definitely still there, but Hector was sure that it would fly away as soon as he got close. He would've liked to be more diplomatic in his approach, but he highly doubted that an unknown Sparrow would stick around and talk to him, even if he asked nicely.

So he did it all in an instant. Simultaneous materializations. He domed everyone in with soul-infused iron and also launched himself straight in the direction in which he'd sensed the bird.

And yes, it was definitely still there.

He bolted across the tarmac in the span of a single breath. The Sparrow barely had time flap its wings once before he'd clapped its entire invisible body in iron, save only the beak.

Immediately, he could feel the psychic assault on his mind, the same oppressive sensation as when he'd first met Hanton Gaolanet.

""That won't work on me,"" said Hector. ""Just calm down. This doesn't have to turn into a fight. I only want to know who you are and what you're doing here.""

'Then why did you attack me first?!' The telepathic voice was somehow feminine. Hector didn't know how he could tell that. He just could.

""Only to prevent you from fleeing. Here."" And he annihilated the Sparrow's iron coating to demonstrate that he was telling the truth.

The Sparrow remained invisible to his eyes but not the Scarf. She flapped her wings with seeming disorientation and kicked up a few new gusts of wind on her own, but she didn't start trying to fly, and after a few more moments, she settled back down.

There was tense silence, but given her body language, Hector was hopeful.

""...Tell me who you are,"" he tried.

'My name is Pauline Gaolanet.'

"2325 -- CCXXV.

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Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Five: 'Emissaries unto the Gloom...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Aw, fuck.

'I believe you've already met my father,' said Pauline.

""...Yeah,"" said Hector. ""I have. Did he tell you to follow me?""

'Aha... No.'

""Then why are you here?""

'Curiosity, primarily.'

He frowned. ""This place is dangerous.""

'No kidding.'

""You should go home,"" he clarified.

'Heh. I'm a big girl. But I appreciate your concern. How long have you known I was following you, by the way?'

He ignored that question. ""Do you even know what's going on here?""

'Do you?'

This was getting obnoxious. ""Ms. Gaolanet, please just--""

'I'm not going home, no matter what you say. You might as well get that silly notion out of your head, right now. Do you have any idea how difficult it was to keep up with a freaking airplane? I'm flesh and blood, okay? After all that trouble, I'm seeing this little adventure through with you to the end.'



Hector was getting the distinct impression that Pauline was going to be even more difficult to deal with than Hanton.

'In fact, perhaps it's better that you noticed me. I was considering revealing myself to you eventually, anyway. Once I'd observed you for a bit longer. So maybe we can think of this as just speeding things up a little.'

He stifled a sigh. ""Why are you so interested in this?""

'Oh, multiple reasons, really. But let's just say that I'd like to know more about Atreya's very own Lord Darksteel. Seeing you in action is reason enough, I think.'

This time, he really did sigh.

'By the way, not to sound too conceited, but I think you could probably use my help. I mean, it's impressive that you were able to get the jump on me the way you did, but I've been listening to your conversation long enough to know that you are in dire need of good information. And gathering intel is what Sparrows are best at.'

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((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

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"2326

Hector couldn't deny that her abilities might prove useful here, even

just judging from what he knew Sparrows to be capable of. He doubted he even understood the full scope of what they could do.

But still.

""Your father--""

'Isn't here, right now,' said Pauline.

""But he can find you no matter where you are, can't he? Because of your psychic bond?""

'Oh, you know about that, do you? Well, not to worry. He has to actively be looking for me in order for that to work, and right now, he has no reason to think I am anywhere out of the ordinary. Not to mention, he's been quite busy lately, himself. He probably won't even have time to worry about little old me.'

""But if something were to happen to you, he'd never forgive me,"" said Hector.

'And if something were to happen to YOU, our country would suffer tremendously.'

Flattery now? Hector wasn't buying it. ""I'm a little more durable than you are.""

'I know how to keep myself safe. And maybe you, too, if you're nice to me.'

Agh. What the hell was he supposed to say here? Or do, for that matter?

Maybe... just roll with it? For now, at least?

Hmm.

""...Alright, well, how would you even go about gathering intel on this monster?""

'First, I'd go observe it.'

""...That would be insanely dangerous for you.""

'Well, I wouldn't waltz up to the thing and poke it with a stick, if that's what you're thinking. I'd scout it from a safe distance.'

""How would you locate it, though?""

'Hmm? Oh, I already know where it is.'

Hector couldn't help blinking at that bit of news. ""What?""

'It's emitting a powerful aura. I can sense what direction it's in from here. Sorry, I forgot that you adorable humans can't sense auras. Or at least, not very well. That must really suck. No offense.'

"2327

""What do you mean by 'aura,' exactly?"" said Hector. ""You're not referring to its soul, are you?""

'No,' said Pauline. 'Souls and auras are linked, but they're not the same thing. They can have profound effects on one another.'

Profound effects?

Hector wanted to ask for further explanation, but everyone was waiting on him, and he felt like this could turn into a rather long conversation if he allowed it to.

""Well, if you insist on helping, I won't try to stop you,"" he said. ""But I want you to stay close by. If something does happen, I'll try my best to keep you out of harm's way.""

'Oh my. So gallant.'

""That's not--what I--agh...""

'Hee hee. Are you embarrassed?'

Aw, shit.

Hector turned and started walking back to the iron dome he'd made for the others. ""Just don't go off on your own, please.""

'That's fine. I can scout pretty far away without moving at all. Oh, and hey, should I reveal myself to your friends, too?'

Hector stopped and half-turned. He didn't need to look, since she wasn't actually visible, but he at least wanted to talk in her direction

again. ""Do you want to?""

'Mm, I don't know. It'll be a little awkward if you're the only one who knows I'm here, won't it?'

""There are Lorentian politicians over there, you know. My people would be fine, but they'll probably freak out if they see you.""

'Yeah, but I'll be lonely if I can't talk to anyone!'

Hector just looked at her.

'Alright, fine, I'll stay hidden. I guess you'll just have to talk to me enough for everyone.'

""...How? If I respond to anything you say, they'll think I'm crazy.""

'That sounds like a YOU problem.'

He couldn't tell if she was joking or not. ""Just... we'll talk later, okay?""

'I'll hold you to that, Lord Darksteel.'

"2328

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Hector annihilated his dome and rejoined the others. The Rainlords remained quiet, but the Lorentians had questions. Hector apologized for being secretive and told them that it was too difficult to explain.

They didn't seem to care for that response very much, but perhaps they felt like they didn't have much choice, because it didn't take long for them to stop asking him about it.

The worsening weather and growing tension in the air apparently took priority.

From there, things actually proceeded a bit more smoothly, though Hector was even more uncomfortable than usual. There were far too many variables in play right now for his liking, and knowing that Pauline was secretly listening to every word being said made him second guess almost everything that was coming out of his mouth.

But he wasn't showing it, thankfully. He was able to relegate his

worries to a background thought process and thereby mitigate most of his visible hesitation.

That was important. He knew he needed to be calm. These people were relying on him.

He asked Secretary Karr if there were any other personnel in the airport right now, and he was unhappy to hear that there were.

The first order of business, then, was getting everyone together so that they could be protected. He may have been here to hunt down the so-called Beast of Lorent, but these civilians took priority.

The booms of thunder were becoming both louder and more frequent. The terminal's very large windows that overlooked the tarmac shuddered harder each time, to the point where everyone began to stay away from them in the fear that they might simply break.

It took a little while to gather everyone together, but Hector was at least relieved that, according to one another, all of the airport's personnel were accounted for. It also helped that there weren't very many of them, due largely to the fact that the airport was currently closed to the public. Apparently, the only people here were the ones who'd been needed in order to maintain essential operations for his arrival here."

"2329

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Once the civilians were taken care of, though, Hector was faced with a decision.

The hunt was still on, but he couldn't very well leave these people here unprotected. And at the same time, trying to take them somewhere safer was also risky.

He took his time to think it over. He brought Garovel up to speed on the situation and asked for his opinion, and the reaper told him to rely on the Rainlords for not just their strength but also their opinions.

So he did. He found a place where he could talk to Roman and the Rainlords in private while still keeping an eye on the Lorentians, and then they held an impromptu strategy meeting.

It didn't take long for the general consensus to become clear. Rather than splitting up their forces to protect the civilians and hunt the Beast separately, they believed it would be wiser to pool all of their power to ensure the Lorentians were taken to safety, and then they would go hunting afterwards.

When pressed on the subject of the potential assassination of Secretary Karr, they only had one thing to say.

""We'll protect her while she is with us, of course, but doing anything more than that would be unreasonable."" It was the Lord Salvador Delaguna who actually uttered those words, but Fidel Blackburn and Carlos Sebolt both agreed.

Roman seemed less certain, though he did nod in approval.

Hector could see why they felt that way. Getting involved in Lorentian politics without any knowledge of what was really going on--that did seem like it could spiral out of control and bite them on the ass, even if their intentions were pure.

However, they were still leaving the final decision in Hector's hands. They told him that they would go along with whatever he chose to do.

Which was rather surprising, Hector felt."  
"2330

Appearances aside, he wasn't actually their leader. They didn't have to listen to him, especially when they were all speaking in private like this.

But then again, Pauline was no doubt eavesdropping on their conversation, wasn't she? In that case, he supposed it was good that they were still playing the part of his subordinates.

The thing was, though, that he hadn't yet told them about her presence. He'd been waiting for the right time, and then it slipped his mind until just now.

They were doing this unprompted.

Phew. That was a nerve-racking realization, somehow.

He had to relax. The Rainlords were just following his lead because he

was the one that Lorentian government had asked for. This was his mission. That was all this was.

Or so he kept telling himself.

Zeff's words rang through his mind.

""Do you even realize how many people look up to you now?"" he had said.

That was quite a while ago, yet it seemed more accurate than ever now as Hector deliberated on what their next move should be.

With the weather the way it was, leaving the airport with the non-servants seemed like a bad idea, but if the cause of the weather was supernatural, then it might not stop any time soon.

For now, at least, everyone was safe. He could hear the wind howling outside and sheets of rain buffeting the windows, but it wasn't like the building was crumbling or anything. It was just a scary storm.

Ultimately, he decided to wait a while longer to see if the weather cleared up. If it did, he planned to do as the Rainlords said and take the Lorentians to safety as a group.

Hector also took the opportunity to privately inform Roman and the Rainlords of the allied Sparrow's presence, which of course prompted more questions that he didn't have the answers for."

"2331

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'Oh, so you're just gonna casually rat me out like that, huh?' came Pauline's telepathic voice. 'And after you told me not to reveal myself, too? I'm not sure I can forgive this betrayal, Lord Goffe.'

He couldn't respond to her, but judging from her tone, she was joking.

Probably.

Hector hoped his understanding of avian psychic inflections was accurate.

The group gathered in the airport's food court while they waited out the



storm. None of the shops were open--or even staffed, for that matter--but there were a few places with prepackaged food on display. Hector wasn't hungry, but apparently some of the Lorentians were. Secretary Karr didn't stop her people from taking anything, but she did insist that they leave the appropriate amount of money behind for whatever they chose. She even paid for a few things herself.

Hector observed the civilians closely, wanting to gauge how well they were handling the pressure of the situation. On the whole, they seemed like they were doing alright, but he could occasionally spot their hands trembling or their shoulders shaking.

Hector admired their courage even more, somehow. They were true professionals, showing up for work at a place like this and not visibly panicking, but in the end, they were still normal human beings.

""Hey, bird lady,"" said Roman suddenly, addressing the empty air in front of him. He was sitting with Hector, a good distance away from everyone else. ""You can hear me, right?""

A beat passed, and Hector wondered if she would respond.

'Yes, I can. What do you want?'

""Aha. Cool. I was just wondering something. You can make incredibly lifelike avatars of yourself, right?""

'Indeed. And now I'm sure you're wondering why I haven't made one in order to talk with you.'

Roman chortled. ""Actually, I was wondering if you could make an avatar of yourself that doesn't look human.""

'...Excuse me?' said Pauline.

""Like a dog or something,"" said Roman. ""Could you make your avatar a talking dog?""

"2332

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'...I suppose I could,' said Pauline. 'But why would I do that?'

Roman shrugged. ""Because it'd be fun?""

'I'm already a talking bird. Is that not enough for you?'

""What can I say? I want to experience all of life's great wonders.""

'Are you telling me that a talking dog is better than a talking bird?'

""Hmm. That depends. Would saying that piss you off?""

'Quite possibly.'

""Ah, so you Sparrows are proud of your heritage, then? That's cool. I can respect that.""

'And I suppose I can appreciate your affection for talking dogs. I'm sure they would be much more interesting than talking apes.'

""Oho! On behalf of the entire human race, I take offense to that.""

'No, you don't. I'm psychic. I can tell.'

Roman laughed again. ""Alright, so what am I thinking right now?""

'It doesn't quite work that way.'

""Oh? Then how does it work?""

'Thoughts are generally too complicated to read. Emotions are a bit easier. And physical senses are easiest.'

""Ah, I see. So what am I feeling right now, then?""

There arrived a pause. '...Nothing in particular?' she said.

""Wow, you're right! Good job.""

'You are a very strange man, Roman Fullister.'

He perked up at that. ""How do you know my last name? Did you pull that out of my brain, too?""

'Didn't I just tell you that thoughts are too difficult to read like that?'

""Yeah, but a single word probably wouldn't be so hard, would it? That, or you could've been lying. Trying to get me to let my guard down so that you could rifle through my head and learn all of my juicy secrets.""

'Heh. Unfortunately, the 'size' of the thought makes little to no

difference.'

""Mmhm. You didn't deny that last thing I said, I noticed.""

She gave a silent laugh. 'Do you even have any juicy secrets that I would be interested in?'

""Sure, loads. ""

"2333

'Somehow, I doubt that,' said Pauline.

""Tch. That's a very rude thing to say, you know. I have hidden depths."" Roman looked to Hector for some reason, then cracked a goofy smile. ""Very hidden, maybe, but they're there. Right, Hector?""

""Er... yeah...""

""C'mon, man, you've gotta agree with more enthusiasm than that. She'll think I'm full of shit, otherwise.""

Hector couldn't help laughing now, too. ""Are you full of shit?""

""Dude...""

'Perhaps your depths are too hidden for you own good,' said Pauline.

""Alright,"" said Roman, ""forget I said anything. And you never answered my question, by the way. If you didn't pluck it out of my brain, then how do you know my last name?""

'I overheard it.'

Roman raised an eyebrow. ""When? I'm pretty sure no one has said it during this trip.""

'Yes. This isn't the first time I've seen you.'

Roman blinked. ""Say what?""

'A billionaire servant living in Atreya? You may be good at fooling people with your disguises, but you'll have to do better than that in order to remain under the radar of Sparrows. In truth, I've known about you for a few years.'

And for a moment, Roman looked genuinely unsettled.

Hector could hardly blame him.

'Sorry,' said Pauline. 'I didn't mean to disturb you like that.'

""I'm not disturbed,"" said Roman.

'Yes, you are. I can tell.'

He frowned. ""Right..."

'If it makes you feel any better, I don't know everything about you.'

""What else do you know about me?""

'You're not affiliated with the Vanguard. Your reaper's name is Voreese. You live in Walton. You are quite close with your personal secretary--who is also rather fascinating, by the way. Your relationship with her is somewhat--'

""Alright, alright. That's already more than I wanted to hear.""  
"2334

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'Really? I didn't think it was that much,' said Pauline. 'You must be a very private person.'

""Hah. That's rich, coming from a Gaolanet,"" said Roman.

'Fair point.'

Roman put a smile back on as he changed the subject. ""So would you mind making an avatar for us to speak with? It's kinda awkward just talking to thin air, you know.""

'I could, but would it not be difficult to explain to our Lorentian friends why a new person suddenly appeared?'

""Mm, not if your avatar was a dog,"" said Roman.

Pauline gave a telepathic sigh.

Hector decided to offer her some help. ""Or you could just make it so that only the Atreyans can see your avatar, no?""

""Agh. Hector, buddy, you're killin' me here.""

'No offense, but I don't see much point in making an avatar that can only be seen by those of you who already possess knowledge of Sparrows. That would be like me asking you to do a handstand purely for my own amusement.'

Hector just shrugged. He didn't much care, either way.

Roman sure did, though. ""So a talking dog it is, then!""

'Sorry, but that's not happening, either.'

""Aw, c'mon, really?""

'It's not that simple. Creating new avatars is a long and arduous process.'

""Oh yeah? How come?""

'What do you mean how come? How long would it take YOU to create an illusory avatar for yourself? Oh, that's right, you can't.'

""Hey, hey, I didn't mean that as an insult. I was actually asking why it would take so long. What makes it so difficult?""

'Well, every perceivable detail must be accounted for in order for it to be truly lifelike. It requires considerable planning and building. And if my knowledge of the subject that I am trying to replicate is in some way lacking, then it will undoubtedly show in the finished product.'

"2335

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""I see, I see,"" said Roman. ""So the problem isn't that you literally cannot create an avatar quickly. It's that you're a perfectionist.""

'Excuse me?'

""I'm right, aren't I? You can make an avatar whenever you want, but it'll just look janky as hell. You're like an illustrator or painter obsessing

over their craft, too embarrassed to show anyone your work until it's exactly to your liking.'

'...That's not accurate at all. It has nothing to do with a sense of artistry. It's for the purpose of making the avatar actually ""pass"" as lifelike, undetected.'

""Yeah, yeah, sure, but we already know that it'll be an illusion, so in this case, the lifelike part is superfluous, don't you think?""

'Ah...'

""C'mon, I dare you to make a super primitive avatar for yourself, right now. In like one minute.""

'Eh...'

""We won't be bothered if it looks weird. In fact, the weirder the better, I say. Right, Hector?""

Hector had no idea why Roman was trying to bring him back into the conversation. ""Er. Sure.""

'I don't think so...'

""Just do it! It'll be great!"" Roman started pumping his fists as if sitting at a dinner table. ""Avatar, avatar, avatar, avatar...!""

'Okay, fine. One minute, you said.'

""Yeah!""

And so they started waiting.

""I'm gettin' excited,"" said Roman. ""I wonder what it's gonna look like. Is it gonna be like a flat, 2D drawing floating in front of us? That'd be pretty neat. Oh, or do you think it'll be some kind of horrific, uncanny-valley-style mutant abomination? I'd be cool with that, too, honestly. Maybe even more so.""

Hector just listened quietly, the majority of his attention being paid to the non-servants on the other side of the cafeteria. He was glad Roman was able to enjoy himself, though, even in these strange circumstances."

"2336

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'...I changed my mind,' came Pauline's voice again. 'I don't want to do this, after all.'

""What?"" Roman's grin only widened, however. ""You finished it, didn't you?""

'N-no...'

""Yes, you did! I can tell! I'm psychic, too!""

'You most certainly are not.'

""Just show it to us. We won't be mean. If anything, it'll help endear you to us.""

'Is that really true?'

""Of course it is.""

'What do you think, Lord Goffe? Is Mr. Fullister telling the truth?'

Oh shit. ""Uh. Look, I don't know. Maybe.""

'Hmm...'

""Here. Hector will put a little barrier around us so that other people won't be able to see. Won't you, Hector?""

Hector was beginning to see a pattern with Roman. ""Sure."" He materialized a waist-high iron barricade.

'Fine, I'll show you. But you better not be mean.'

""We won't. We're the nicest guys you'll ever meet.""

'Oh, shut up.'

And right before their eyes, a cluster of lines appeared in midair. They were all rather disjointed and rough, as if hastily scratched with a pen on paper.

Roman's first prediction had been spot on, Hector realized. It really did look like a 2D drawing, though Hector couldn't really tell what it was

supposed to depict.

Roman was barely containing his laughter with a hand over his mouth. His chest and shoulders were trembling with each breath. ""It's great!"" he barely said.

'Mrgh...'

Hector couldn't stop himself from asking what was probably a rude question. ""What is it supposed to be?""

'A dog!' she said. 'You said you wanted a talking dog, didn't you?'

""Oh, ah--yeah, I see it now,"" said Hector.

Roman, however, just exploded with laughter, drawing attention from everyone else in the cafeteria. ""That's great! It's so good! Thank you for showing us!""

Despite his words, those didn't actually sound like compliments, Hector felt.

And perhaps so did Pauline, because her avatar promptly vanished into nothingness again."

"2337

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 2 of 20))~~

""Aw, come on, bring it back!"" said Roman. ""Let me see that again!""



'Lord Goffe, it's okay if I erase his memory, isn't it?'"

"No," said Hector, though that question did pull a small laugh out of him, too.

Roman's cackling was cut short when a sudden rumbling arrived.

It didn't last long, but the entire cafeteria shifted, toppling chairs and even a few tables. And it certainly caught everyone's attention. Where before there had at least been a low murmur of discussion, now there was nothing as everyone was simply listening, waiting.

Had that been the storm, Hector wondered? Surely not. Yeah, it had enough strength to make the windows shake, but not the whole building?

Right?

He dematerialized the little barricade he'd made earlier and stood up in order to go check outside. They'd deliberately moved their party far away from all windows, so it was a bit of a trek to find some again.

When he did, however, he was not comforted to see that they were broken--not shattered, since they were presumably designed to be shatter-proof, but certainly in crumbling pieces, nonetheless. And the wind outside was howling even louder than before. It wasn't flowing inside, thankfully, but that was probably just because this area was sitting in a favorable direction. Hector could see the treeline in the distance bending deeply and losing scores of leaves by the second.

"Pauline, where are you?!" said Hector, having to speak louder over the wind.

'I'm safe in one of the hangars,' she said. 'Don't worry about me.'

He did worry, though. With winds like those, he doubted she would be able to fly away if she were put in danger.

But he had others to worry about, too, and another bout of rumbling made sure to remind him of that when it pulled a few screams and shrieks out of the Lorentians."

"2338

This time, the rumbling didn't dissipate immediately. It sustained itself for much longer, and even after it was gone, Hector began to hear even more unsettling noises coming from all directions. Cracking and groaning from the building itself--especially from above.

And seeing those winds out there, he couldn't help thinking that the roof might be coming off.

He rejoined the others and was glad to find the Rainlords already surrounding the Lorentians. Secretary Karr was trying to say something to him, but the rumbling returned again, louder and more violent than ever before.

Hector felt his feet move suddenly out from under him, and he was on the tiled floor before he even knew it. Disorientation reared up on him, compounded by all the noise and quaking, and all he could think to do was panic.

But that was only one thought process.

In another, he hadn't let go of what the Scarf was telling him.

That, too, was plenty confusing in its own way, as the roaring winds had apparently found their way inside and were running amok, tossing objects to and fro, swirling around everyone, and buffeting everything with punishing force.

But it wasn't that chaotic. True, it was perhaps the heaviest wind he'd ever sensed, but it was at least flowing in one general direction. He'd sensed much more confusing air currents sparring with Zeff. Compared to that, this wasn't so overwhelming.

So it took him a few moments to get his bearings, but he was able to figure out where everyone was--even while he himself was tumbling across the floor, crashing through tables, and toppling over counters.

He armored up and caught himself on the cafeteria's eastern wall. Then he started reaching out with his imagination to the Lorentians and armoring them up as well, ignoring the intensifying whirlwinds of chaos around them--ignoring even the fact that the ceiling and floor were both beginning to bend upwards."

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The whole building was coming apart. Hector could sense it more clearly with each passing second. The wind's fury was extending throughout the entire buckling structure.

But there was worse news. The Scarf was telling him about something particularly horrible outside, something that wasn't yet fully formed but that seemed like it soon would be. A gigantic, swirling funnel descending slowly from the cloudy sky.

A tornado.

And it was far too close to the building. The airport terminal was already barely holding together. That thing was going to rip through it like a drill.

Hector didn't have much time to think. He'd never sensed a fucking tornado before with the Scarf, but this one seemed absolutely gigantic and probably unstoppable. He just did whatever he could to prepare everyone, thickening their armor and strengthening it with his soul. Through the mayhem, he could vaguely sense some of the Rainlords doing similar work. Copper from Fidel Blackburn was even occasionally mixing in with his iron, adding layers on top of layers and providing walls for everyone.

By now, the roof and ceiling were both gone, replaced only by open sky and a storm of dust and rubble. The floor was threatening to go as well, but for the moment, it was holding together.

More concerning to Hector's mind was all of this highly conductive metal in the area. The wind and debris were the primary problems, of course, but there was still lightning to worry about, too. So he set to work simultaneously, trying to create large towers outside in order to attract any stray bolts, but the winds out there were so furious that his work could hardly even finish forming before being shredded to pieces.

He did hear a crashing boom, though, and promptly sensed the explosive dispersion of an already-crumbling iron tower. So maybe it had worked, after all."

"2340

The Rainlords seemed to have the others covered pretty well now, so Hector shifted more of his focus to creating towers. His first attempts hadn't held together very well, but that was because they hadn't been solid enough. He'd instinctively made them more porous in design--like radio towers, perhaps--but in this case, thicker might've been better.

And more than anything, he needed an extremely heavy foundation, lest the winds would immediately launch them into the air, so he started with a giant block of solid iron on the airport's tarmac, as large as the plane they'd arrived in. He added multiple spires to it, and also kept expanding out the base to give it extra grip on the ground.

The spires began to buckle almost immediately, so he had to annihilate and remake them. And it didn't stop happening the second or even third times, either. He just had to keep rebuilding.

But they were catching lightning alright. Which was all that mattered, he supposed.

It became a constant effort to maintain, but that was fine. He gave it its own thought process while he reassessed the situation.

The tornado had fully touched down, but it wasn't coming toward them, thankfully. Not yet, at least. The Rainlords were ushering everyone to another location and trying to catch his attention, so he gave an acknowledging wave and started following, bringing up the rear of their procession.

Behind him, the walls were coming down and chunks of the floor were flying up into the sky. He could even feel his feet beginning to catch a bit too much air with each new step he took, so he added more weight to his armor in order to help anchor himself.

He pushed onward through the punishing wind, each step becoming a task unto itself as he tried his best to maintain full awareness of the situation. The status of the lightning rods. His own armor. The location of the tornado. The location of the Rainlords and Lorentians."

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 6 of 20))~~

So much to keep track of. Even with multiple thought processes, he was struggling. If he let up on his concentration, it would all just become a chaotic blur.

He could sense that the non-servants were being led down a flight of stairs. Getting everyone underground did seem like a good idea, but there was considerable rubble in the way. Roman and Salvador were digging through it while the others were preventing any new debris from falling on the group.

Before Hector could catch all the way up to them, however, the Scarf warned him about something much more important.

The tornado had turned around. It was heading straight towards them now.

He stopped walking, his mind racing. The others couldn't sense it. And with all this noise and chaos, he couldn't warn them. So what could he do, then?

Could he stop a tornado?

Probably not, he felt.

But he was about to find out for certain.

He eliminated some of his armor to lighten it and let himself get swept away by the wind. This was quite possibly the stupidest idea he'd ever had, but he didn't see any faster way of getting up close to the tornado.

He tumbled through open air, leaving the terminal behind completely and doing his best to keep his bearings.

It almost impossible. The roaring winds were louder now than he could've ever imagined, and the constant movement--being tossed around like a rag doll--would've surely been one of the most disorienting things he'd ever experienced if it hadn't been the air itself that was doing it.

The Scarf of Amordiin was saving his ass here, and he knew it.

As he flew around the vortex, he could sense the full of the tornado and all of the streams of air flowing to and from it like a thousand tendrils destroying everything in their path. A gargantuan monster in its

own right, connecting land and sky. Magnificent. And terrible."  
"2342

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 7 of 20))~~

There was so much loose debris in the air. Clusters of leaves, splintered wood, busted concrete, glass shards, metal scraps, and clouds of dust obscuring everything--Hector knew he couldn't just ignore it all. Garovel wasn't here to regenerate any injuries. If that metal pole flying toward him gored him through the chest, that would be the end of this mission.

It broke upon Haqq's shield without even so much as denting it, but there was more all around. The shield could probably stop just about anything the tornado wanted to throw at him, but doing that required constant attention and concentration.

He wanted a more streamlined solution, like maybe a giant orb of meter-thick iron, but he knew that if he did that, then the Scarf would be cut off from the wind, which would render him blind.

No. He was thinking too defensively. He was always like that, wasn't he? Perhaps that was just his natural state of mind. But that wasn't what was needed. He couldn't bring down this tornado by just protecting himself.

He had to be aggressive.

Right about now, he was seriously regretting not devoting more of his materialization studies to aerodynamics. No time to dwell on it, though. It seemed obvious enough disrupting the cyclical flow of air would hurt the tornado. How to go about it, though?

First ideas first. A big ass wall. He materialized in midair on the side of the tornado that was opposite to himself, and he started growing in both dimensions, making it as tall and wide as he possibly could.

More debris kept threatening him, though. He had to twist his body around to bat away a splintered tree trunk before it could skewer him, then a block of crumbling concrete, and then--oh shit, a truck."

"2343

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 8 of 20))~~

He knew instantly that he didn't have enough weight on his side to stop something that size, so Hector didn't even try. Instead, he materialized a dozen iron appendages from his armor and grabbed onto the truck, deciding it was better to hitch a ride than get clobbered.

Even that still had a jarring impact, though, and he narrowly avoided getting squished against the enormous vehicle's undercarriage. When he found his grip, he started annihilating and recreating his iron appendages in order to help him move along the outside of the truck. He spidered his way around to the topside, and once he was there, he used his iron arms and legs to counteract the vehicle's aerial spin and keep himself steady. The appendages needed to be destroyed and remade constantly in order to pull that off, but that wasn't too difficult for him.

The wall he'd made earlier had buckled in several places, and its pieces were now circling the tornado just like he was.

Shit.

He tried to think. Should he try to fight wind with wind? Maybe create a whirlwind that could counter the flow of the tornado?

A nice thought, but it seemed flatly impossible. He didn't see how he could built up that the necessary momentum in all this chaos. Surely, the tornado's cyclical flow would just swallow anything he made and turn it against him.

He looked down and regretted it. He'd never considered himself particularly afraid of heights, but holy fuck, he was high up now. And this wind. Constantly howling in his ears and pressing against his armor. If he wasn't already moving in the same direction, it would've certainly thrown him off the truck by now.

Hmm. Maybe this here was the right idea, though. The truck. The way he'd latched himself onto it. Looking around again, he could countless other objects swirling within the tornado.

What would happen if he started collecting them?"

"2344

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Worth a shot, he figured. He started using his iron to catch anything that flew close to the truck. Farther objects were more of a problem, though. He couldn't just propel an iron fishing line out and reel back in, unfortunately. Even if it were possible for him to ""shrink"" his iron back toward him like that, he doubted that these furious winds would allow him to pull that off.

But the iron wall that he'd made earlier was still flying around the tornado--in big pieces, maybe, but it was there. He decided to use those pieces to accumulate more things, catching more objects with thick iron nets and tentacles.

There was so much stuff. It took all his concentration, all thought processes. Those lightning rods from earlier? Ignored. The non-servants should've been underground by now, anyway.

But wait, wouldn't that mean that all this iron in the tornado would attract the lightning, instead? And none of it was touching the ground, either, so where would the electricity go?

Shit. He couldn't worry about that, yet. He had to focus on finishing his work here. He could sense the tornado bending and squirming, losing some of its shape--and the truck, it felt like it was slowing, if only a little.

Was this actually working? Or was the tornado just fading naturally?

He couldn't really tell one way or the other, but he didn't intend to stop. He'd amassed several giant clusters of debris already, and there was almost nothing else left. Just a few things here and there, too far away from everything else to catch. But not too far from each other. He attached them together with iron shackles and created one last little cluster.

Things were definitely slowing now, but the situation was still dangerous--perhaps even more than before, Hector suddenly realized. Sure, the tornado was no longer drilling through the airport like it was paper, but now there half a dozen house-sized wrecking balls of debris flying all around him."

"2345



~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 10 of 20))~~

His still-spinning truck was losing altitude as well. It wouldn't be long before it crashed into the ground, and the impact alone would probably be enough to kill him if he didn't do something about it.

He tried attaching the wrecking balls to one another, but it was futile. The debris was too massive, and the iron connectors, too thin, even when he added dozens more links.

And the ground was getting awfully close.

Well.

The only thing he could think of was to push his materialization volume to its absolute limit. He hadn't tested the maximum amount of iron he could create in quite some time, but he supposed now was as good a time as any.

From the ground up, he started materializing an enormous iron cylinder, leaving it hollow in the center so that it could fully encapsulate the dwindling whirlwind. He could sense his work trembling against the raging winds, and he rushed to add more weight to it, making it taller and thicker.

He devoted everything to that end. Nothing else mattered. More mass. More weight. More iron.

It grew at a speed unlike anything he'd ever materialized before, and soon enough, he was looking down at a true tower of iron as it was rising up to meet him--to meet the wrecking balls, as well.

The goal wasn't to let them barrel into the side of it, though. He wanted it to catch the giant chunks of debris from below and thereby slow their descent. He wasn't expecting it to be easy or smooth.

And boy, was he right.

His truck was the first to crash down on the iron tower, and he leapt off it just as it was about to hit. The impact sent scraps of metal flying in all directions as the entire tower shuddered, but the truck's horizontal momentum helped to mitigate some of the damage, making it scrape diagonally down through the tower instead of straight through it."

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 11 of 20))~~

For a few moments, Hector was tumbling through open air again, loose iron appendages dangling freely as he struggled to maintain his bearings. Where was he in relation to the wrecking balls? It was hard to--

There. Above him. About to pass him by.

He hooked onto the nearest one at the last second, and it yanked him forward with enough force to knock the breath out of his lungs and leave him feeling light-headed. He teetered on the brink of passing out before regaining himself with only seconds to register the fact that the wrecking ball he was attached to was about to collide with the tower, too.

No time. He pushed for more iron. More weight to the tower. And some quick links--spindly attempts to bridge the gap between the tower and the ball. To soften the blow, maybe.

He let go just before impact again, but this time, he couldn't even tell what happened to the tower, because he went sailing straight onward and completely overshot everything.

The wind wasn't circling anymore, he realized. The tornado had fully dissipated, and now he was just in freefall with the remaining wrecking balls. One was close to him, but the others were far away, flying off into the forest or toward the tarmac.

He had to concentrate on landing safely. That was the priority. The mission depended on it.

Flight. He could fly, couldn't he? That would soften any landing, but for the life of him, he couldn't summon to mind how he'd managed to pull that off before.

Simplify.

That was what was in his head--or at least, that was what one of the thought processes was telling him. What were the others saying? Nothing? He couldn't tell.

Didn't matter.

Velocity states were simple enough. An iron plate between him and the ground. Pushing him upward with enough force to ease his descent. But not by enough. So he added another. And another.

Layers.

Then a few more to slow his horizontal speed as well."

"2347

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 12 of 20))~~

Hector could barely hold onto a single thought between choked breaths. Where was he? How fast was he going? Where was the ground? What was the Scarf telling him? Hopefully, this would be--

He hit pavement, thick armor scratching and kicking up visible sparks as he toppled over himself. The iron layers he'd made all went clattering in various directions and as he finally skid to a halt, face down.

Agh.

That hadn't felt good. He wanted to groan in pain, but he was still struggling to catch his breath, too, so he ended up just coughing into his faceguard for a while longer.

Gradually, he tried to take stock of his body parts. He could still move everything, at least. He felt pain all over, but it was dull and not that bad. He'd certainly had worse.

He groaned as he tried to crawl back up onto his feet. Plate armor didn't make that task any easier, and it was battered and dented in several places, locking some of his limbs at awkward angles. He ended up just annihilating it.

He was prepared to remake his armor immediately, but he noticed that the winds had died down significantly. Not only had the tornado disappeared, but the rest of the storm had settled as well.

Where the hell was everyone?

That wrecked building over there could only have been the airport terminal, though it was almost unrecognizable now. He started toward it as he tried to reassess things.

He could see the tarmac from here. One of the balls of debris was there, but he didn't see any airplanes anymore. Had the tornado swept them away, too?

Oh.

Yep.

He saw half of an aircraft buried in the nearby treeline. He was fairly certain that was the same plane that had brought them here to Lorent. It was missing its tail and also a wing."

"2348 -- CCXXVI.

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 13 of 20))~~

Hector wasn't sure if he felt worse for Roman or for the company he'd chartered the plane from. He considered informing Garovel that their ride back to Atreya had just been chewed up and spit out by an angry sky, but he wasn't sure what that would accomplish other than making the reaper worry. He planned to tell him eventually, just not yet. The priority was locating everyone. He jogged back toward the airport as he reached out with the Scarf, trying to sense human figures among all the rubble.

Instead, he sensed an enormous bird approaching, and he slowed down just before feeling the gust of wind from her landing.

Before even saying anything, however, she revealed herself to his eyes. She wasn't quite as tall or bulky as Hanton had been, but her plumage was similarly red-and-brown, though she had a bit of gold around her eyes and along the tips of her wings and tail.

""What are you doing?"" he asked. ""Someone might see you.""

She didn't answer him. She only stared at him.

""Pauline? Are you okay?""

'Yes. I'm fine.'

He took a breath. ""Good. We need to find the others.""

'That we do.'

He couldn't help squinting at her. Something in the tone of her psychic voice was bothering him. ""Are you sure you're okay?""

'Lord Goffe... you're the only human I can sense here now.'

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Six: 'O, avatar of clarity...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector didn't understand. ""What?""

'The others have all disappeared,' said Pauline. 'You're the only one left.'

She wasn't saying that everyone had been... killed. Right?

""What are you talking about?"" Hector walked past her and continued toward the terminal. ""I saw them heading underground. I'm sure they're fine.""

'Perhaps they are,' she said, 'but something happened to them when they went down there, and I don't know what it was. They simply vanished from my sight.'

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'Perhaps they are,' she said, 'but something happened to them when they went down there, and I don't know what it was. They simply vanished from my sight.'

"2349

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 14 of 20))~~

Hector's jaw clenched, but he didn't stop walking. Waiting around wasn't going to resolve anything.

Pauline hopped up and glided to keep pace with him. 'Are you alright, by the way? Your aura has changed.'

He wasn't much in the mood for questions--asking or answering them--but he felt like he'd regret it later if he didn't inquire further on that point. ""My aura?""

'Auras are sometimes reflective of one's emotional state, though it's not a direct link. Your soul and your will are more likely to have an effect on it.'

His will, huh? ""I'm still not even sure what an 'aura' is.""

'Hmm. How to explain? It's like your 'presence,' I suppose. It can't normally be felt with purely physical senses--though there are certainly exceptions.'

""Are you talking about the field density of my soul?""

'Ah. Servant terminology. I'm less familiar with how your reapers describe things, but I believe a soul's field density is only one aspect of an aura. It's the aspect that links souls and auras together, I believe.'

""Then I still don't understand.""

'Agh. It's difficult to explain to someone who lacks strong psychic abilities.'

Hector climbed through a gaping hole in the terminal's southern wall. He touched it as he passed, and more of it came crumbling down, prompting him to remake his iron armor. Nothing fell on him, though.

Pauline flew up above the building and began circling. 'An aura is like your own little... energy space. It goes wherever you go. It shifts and changes as you do, growing more powerful or more weak as you do.'

Hector had to push a few boulders aside. ""You mentioned 'profound effects' before, didn't you?""

'Yes. A powerful aura can make a soul... more resilient in certain ways, though not all. And the opposite is true, as well. A powerful soul will almost inevitably emit a stronger aura.'

This sounded vaguely familiar, Hector thought."

"2350

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 15 of 20))~~

'I should admit, however, that auras remain somewhat mysterious even to us Sparrows. We can perceive them far more clearly than you can, but it is difficult to identify what is influencing them in each specific case. One aura might be enhanced by an uncommonly strong soul, while another is enhanced by an uncommonly strong will. Or by emotions, as I mentioned before.'

That put a question in Hector's head. ""And what about this Beast of Lorent? You said it has a powerful aura, didn't you?""

'Yes. Monsters are among the more mysterious specimens. They don't generally have strong wills, since they are typically driven by instinct alone, and emotions are not really a factor for them, either. I'm less familiar with how soul power works, but as I understand it, most monsters cannot wield it.'

""Then are you saying that the Beast can?""

'I think that is quite likely. If not, then there must be some other explanation for its imposing aura.'

""Like what?""

'I have no idea, but I cannot imagine it would be anything good.'

Hector had more he wanted to ask, but he arrived at the staircase that he'd seen the others use. It was partially clogged with debris, so he materialized iron in between the gaps and then pulled it all out at once.

Before he completed the task, though, he ran into a problem. As much as he tried, it wouldn't budge. At first, he was confused, until he realized that he couldn't materialize any more iron.

So this was his current volume limit. He'd almost forgotten about that



problem, but he could hardly be disappointed with himself. He'd left enough iron outside that he probably could've built a brand new air traffic control tower for this poor airport.

Not that it would've been a good idea to make a building entirely out of iron.

He annihilated all of the iron he'd left outside. It took a couple solid minutes to get it all."

"2351

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 16 of 20))~~

Hector stared down the open stairwell and saw only pitch darkness waiting for him. It wasn't so surprising that the electricity wasn't working anymore, considering the state the rest of the airport was in, but that rationalization didn't make that big black hole in the floor look any less menacing.

'You sure you want to go down there?' said Pauline.

Scary though it might've looked, the Scarf was telling him that it was just an empty room. No movement other than the air itself. Only a bunch of large boxes and maybe some debris. He didn't sense any other way out, either, but he was sure that he'd seen the others heading down there.

""Do you sense the monster's aura down there?"" he asked.

'No. I don't sense anything.'

Hector sighed. There was no helping it. 'Hey, Garovel, is Voreese with you?'

'Not at the moment,' came the reaper's echoing response, 'but I can go get her. Why? What do you need from her?'

'Well, I don't mean to alarm you, but... I need to know if Roman is still alive.'

'Ah.'

'And also, where he is. We've gotten separated.'

'...Hector. I have a lot of questions.'

'I figured. Can you ask Voreese about Roman first, though?'

'Alright. One second. Just need to... eh... hmm.'

Hector waited, but the silence went on a little too long. 'Garovel?'

'Uh... I swear, I sensed her somewhere around here like thirty minutes ago...'

Hector's eyes widened. 'Please don't tell me she's missing.'

'No, of course not. I'm just. Having trouble locating her. I'm sure she's... aha... oh shit. Yeah, okay, I think she's missing. Or she's playing a killer game of hide-and-seek, right now. How unfortunate would that be, huh? Talk about bad timing.'

'Garovel, that's not helping.'

'Okay, so how fucked up is your situation, right now?'

"2352

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 17 of 20))~~

'Well, the Lorentian Secretary of State is also missing,' said Hector.

'Oh. Fantastic,' said Garovel.

'And so is everyone she was with. As well all the Rainlords who came with me.'

'Holy shit, Hector. You're alone, right now?'

'Well, Pauline Gaolanet is with me.'

'What?!'

'Look, uh, let's focus on what's important here. What about the Rainlords' reapers? Can you sense Mevox? Or any of the others?'

'Ugh. One second.'

Truth be told, Hector actually kind of appreciated Garovel's attempts at levity, because his imagination was already running wild in the worst way. How could Voreese be missing? She was in completely different country. Surely, it was impossible for--

'Yeah, I can't sense any of them, either,' said Garovel.

'Fuck,' said Hector.

'I'm gonna have to tell the other Rainlords about this,' the reaper said. 'And sooner rather than later. Assuming they haven't noticed already, that is.'

Hector could see where this was going. They were going to send reinforcements. It was only a matter of time.

That could complicate matters significantly. But it could also help significantly.

Well, he had bigger things to worry about, right now. If Voreese and the other reapers had somehow been brought here against their will, then everyone was in much more danger now. He wanted to believe that they would be fine, considering how strong they all were, but this situation was just so weird.

'Do whatever you've gotta do, Garovel. I'm going to look for everyone.'

'Alright. Try to be careful. And maybe give me a warning if you're about to do something that might make me mysteriously go missing as well.'

'Okay. Um. I'm about to do that right now, actually.'

'Excuse me? What're you about to do?'

'Go down into the hole where everyone else disappeared.'

'Agh. Okay. Well. Good luck, I guess.'

'Thanks.'

Much to his dismay, however, the short trip down into the airport's underground area proved fruitless. It really was empty, just as the Scarf had told him."

"2353

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 18 of 20))~~

Hector half-expected to be attacked or to be teleported somewhere or to at least find a hidden escape route, but he combed the place quite thoroughly and found nothing.

He returned to Pauline outside. ""You said you could find the monster, didn't you?""

She was perched atop one of the few remaining portions of the terminal's roof. 'I did. The creature's aura is like a lighthouse to me.'

""Well, we've already wasted too much time here. Lead on.""

'I admire your proactive mindset, but are we even sure that this so-called Beast of Lorent is responsible for everyone's disappearance?'

""No, but do you have any better leads?""

'I do not. However, if the monster has truly abducted them, then it seems especially strange to me that I never sensed its aura at the location where the abduction occurred.'

""Hmm."" Hector thought about that new piece of information. ""I'm new to auras, but as I understand it, they only go wherever the body they're attached to goes, right?""

'Yes. Why?'

""Maybe the monster abducted them from a distance,"" said Hector.

She ruffled her feathers. 'How could it have done such a thing?'

""Teleportation.""

'Excuse me? Such a power does not exist, does it?'

""Oh, it definitely exists. I've personally witnessed two different forms of it. This seems different from either of those, though.""

'You're joking, surely...'

""Believe me or don't. It doesn't matter. Please, just point me in the right direction. I can go find the monster on my own, if you want to head back to Atreya. I certainly wouldn't blame you.""

'Oh, please. Things are just getting interesting.'

Hector frowned. ""This is serious, Pauline. We have no idea what this thing is capable of.""

'I am aware of the severity of the situation.' She bounded off the roof and began gliding northward. 'Follow me, Lord Goffe.'

"2354

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 19 of 20))~~

Hector started after her. She was flying pretty close to the ground and at low speed, presumably for his benefit, so he figured he should pick up the pace. And what better opportunity would there be to practice flight?

He'd refined a bit with Zeff's help since he'd first discovered it, and it was significantly easier when he only had to worry about keeping himself aloft and no one else.

Where before it had just been a platform to stand on, now he'd made almost a full pod for himself, keeping only the top open so that he could see. There were grips for his hands as well to help maintain his balance.

The outer layer of hovering iron--or the ""holster,"" as he'd come to think of it--was what actually allowed him to go against gravity. It was a constant mental effort, requiring the continual reapplication of velocity states and the annihilation of any iron that would have fallen away from the holster.

All in all, it was still a bit rough, Hector felt. There was probably still room for significant improvements to be made--like making it somehow more aerodynamic, perhaps--but it was certainly more stable than that haphazard platform he'd used before. Plus, he was more experienced. Turbulence wasn't quite so worrying, anymore, though he doubted he would've been able to handle that tornado.

'You can fly?!' came Pauline's silent voice.

The rushing wind was too noisy to talk over, so Hector merely responded with a simple look. He couldn't even say anything with his

expression, either, because he was armored up again.

Instead, he just flew up higher and faster than her, hoping that she would get the message.

She certainly did. Her huge wings flapped, and she soared into the lead again.

Hector did his best to keep pace, but holy crap, she was fast. She ended up having to slow back down a little for him."

"2355

~~((National Yo-Yo Day - page 20 of 20))~~

The Imara Forest was truly sprawling. It filled the entire horizon, save only for a few distant mountains. He'd already seen it from the airplane, of course, but now that he was a bit closer, the sheer scale of things was coming even more clearly into perspective. The notion that the Beast could be anywhere in this place was truly unsettling--as was the notion that he might've had to wander around aimlessly if Pauline wasn't here.

She turned invisible again. 'We're almost there,' she said. 'I'm curious. Can you sense the monster's aura at all? Oftentimes, humans can pick up on the particularly strong ones, if only a little.'

They were descending now and slowing down. Hector concentrated on his senses. They weren't telling him anything especially abnormal, nor was the Scarf.

But... there was something. A vague discomfort, of sorts. As if his whole body were only a step or two away from shivering. He didn't know how to describe it. If she hadn't mentioned anything, he probably would've just chalked it up to the forest's natural atmosphere--or to the understandable unease that came with hunting an unknown creature with unknown powers.

On second thought, maybe it really was just because of that last thing.

When they were landing, he answered her. ""Sort of. Feels like my senses could just be playing tricks on me, though.""

'A rational thought,' said Pauline, perched amid the verdant canopy

over Hector's head. 'You may be right to not trust your senses in this place. Some auras can have very disorienting effects.'

""Which way now?"" he asked.

'That, I don't know,' said Pauline. 'We've entered the nucleus of the aura. The creature could be anywhere nearby.'

Hector frowned. ""You can't sense its exact location?""

'As I said, some auras can have very disorienting effects.'  
"2356

Great.

Hector looked around. They were well into the middle of the night now. Thankfully, there was a very bright moon out tonight, and the canopy wasn't so thick as to block all light from it. The contrast was incredibly stark, however--pitch blackness interrupted by visible bars of moonlight, each only able to illuminate a small patch of the forest with its pale white glow.

It was beautiful, Hector thought. And a bit haunting, perhaps. Almost like a painting. He'd never seen anything quite like it before.

He was again grateful for the Scarf of Amordiin. With it, so much more of the surrounding area was perceptible to him. However, he still decided to materialize a hovering cube of red hot iron above his gauntleted hand. The extra light wouldn't hurt.

As long as he didn't accidentally start a forest fire, he supposed.

Even with the Scarf, though, he couldn't yet tell where the monster was. This 'nucleus' that Pauline spoke of must've been pretty huge, still.

He decided to just pick the same direction that they'd been going in earlier. If he somehow ended up leaving the nucleus, then he figured she would warn him.

Man, it sure was quiet. The only noise seemed to be coming from himself. The clink of his armor. The rustling of leaves and branches as he brushed past them. The subtle hiss of his iron cube.

Even Pauline was completely silent. Was she masking the sound of her own movements? Or did her feathers just allow her to be that quiet naturally?

He supposed it didn't matter. He needed to stay on task, attentive with all thought processes. No distractions.

But as he thought about it more, he still had some questions for her that might prove relevant to the mission."

"2357

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

""So what are some of these 'disorienting effects' that we should be watching out for?"" said Hector.

Pauline took so long to respond that Hector stopped and looked toward her. 'Oh. Ah. There are various things, but a skewed perception of the passage of time is perhaps the biggest one.'

""Hmm."" He didn't like the sound of that, but he started walking again. He still wasn't sensing anything other than plants in the areas. Not even any wild animals.

'Spatial awareness as well can easily become compromised,' she said. 'My father believes that this is because auras themselves are a component of spacetime. So if spacetime is like a blanket, then an aura is like a liquid soaking that blanket through, making it much heavier than you are accustomed to.'

""I think I understand. Anything else?""

'...Ah. Sorry, did you say something?'

He stopped again. ""Are you feeling okay?""

She glided down closer to him. 'Frankly speaking, no. This aura is very uncomfortable. But I will manage.'

""Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?""

'Heh. Actually... your own aura seems to be helping.'



He blinked. ""What?""

'I mentioned it before, didn't I? Your aura is different from a while ago. Come to think of it, you never did explain why that was.'

""That's because I had no idea what you were talking about. And I'm still not sure I do, even now.""

'Well, in any case, I think I will stick a bit closer to you from now on, if you don't mind.' She was still invisible, but Hector could sense her there on the ground next to him now. 'I sense something ahead, by the way. I think it's a building.'

That information acquired his full attention, and he tried to reach out farther with the Scarf. If it was there, he couldn't sense it yet."

"2358

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

They trudged on together with Hector clearing some of the underbrush for her hulking avian body. He figured the trail they were leaving behind would at least help them to not get lost.

After a while of walking, Hector still didn't sense this building that Pauline was talking about.

But he saw it.

A modest structure, it looked to be little more than a single room. Beams of moonlight illuminated its rusted metal exterior.

Yet the Scarf couldn't sense it there. Air flowed right through it.

He stopped a few meters short of the building, and so did Pauline.

""...It's an illusion,"" said Hector.

'It is?'

Slowly, he began moving closer. ""Can you not tell?""

'Hmm. Hold on a minute. No, I see the issue now. You're half-right. It's only partly an illusion.'

He stopped again. ""What do you mean?""

'Technically, this building is not here. But it used to be.'

""...What are you saying?""

'It's the aura. Messing with our perception of time. On the other hand, though, you might call this building a kind of ""memory""--one that has even been preserved in physical reality. It's quite special, when you think of like that, no?'

What the hell? A memory?

'I'm going to try touching it,' she said. 'There may be historical information I can discover by doing so.'

""Uh. You sure that's safe?""

'Nope.' She shuffled past him. 'Please make sure nothing springs out and attacks me. Also, if I begin violently convulsing, make sure I stop touching the building.'

""Pauline, this doesn't seem--""

'I know. I'm a little scared, quite honestly, but we're in need of direction, and this is our best chance, right now.' She was very close to the building now. She puffed her feathered chest up and exhaled deeply. 'So just. Keep me safe, please. And I'll do my best, too.'

Well, shit. ""Okay...""

"2359

Pauline reached out with one of her wings and touched the illusory building.

Hector could see that the structure was slowly shifting in a strange, ethereal way. One moment, it appeared old and rusted, and the next, it became significantly less so, merely a bit dull and weathered-looking. Then the next, it looked almost new. Then back to rusted.

Hmm.

He felt like he understood. The perception of time. That was what

she'd said, wasn't it? He was seeing the building over the course of the many years, compacted into only a minute or two.

How odd. Was it really just this monster's ""aura"" or whatever that was causing this phenomenon? He had to wonder what Garovel would make of this situation. He considered asking him, but he wasn't even sure how he would begin to explain. Maybe later.

More importantly, he wanted to know how much longer this would take.

Because nothing was happening.

Hector waited but did not see, nor feel, nor sense any changes in the environment or in the Sparrow herself. At length, he had to say something. ""Pauline? Are you okay?""

'Hmm? Ah. Yes, I am fine. I understand now. This place is a reservoir of psychic information. And also a minor point of geographic resonance. There seems to be... perhaps a hundred years or so of knowledge preserved here.'

""A hundred years?"" said Hector, surprised. ""That sounds like... quite a lot.""

'Well, not every moment in time has been kept. Only moments of ""psychic significance,"" you might say. But yes, there is quite a lot to go through.'

Hector had questions, though he wasn't certain which to start with. Just how deep did all this psychic stuff go?

'By your silence, I assume you are still confused. I could share with you what I am able to see. I believe that would explain much better than I ever could with words. But you will have to either take off your helmet or place your bare hand on my back.'

"2360

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Ah. An extension of trust, was it?

Well, Hector didn't think Pauline would try to do him harm. In the back of his mind, though, he supposed she could've been somehow deceiving him this whole time and that perhaps she was in some way

responsible for everyone's disappearance, but...

Nah. It was one thing to be cautious. It was another to be paranoid. Plus, even if she did try to assault his mind like her father did, it wouldn't work. Probably.

He went up to her, removed his right gauntlet, and put his hand on her avian body. Her feathers were huge, yet still quite soft and fluffy, almost like that of a stuffed toy.

'Okay,' she said. 'Brace yourself.'

And that was all the warning he got.

The night melted away, replaced by a world of swirling and ethereal grays. Everything had a soft glow, not entirely unlike the moonlight from earlier, but now there were images playing all around him. Movies, of a sort. All unfolding simultaneously.

And yet, it wasn't overwhelming. So much was happening all at once, but he wasn't struggling with any of it. He couldn't tell if that was because of his Focus or if it was somehow Pauline's doing, but either way, it was less like actually watching a film and more like the information was just being poured directly into his mind.

This place. This little building. It was much more than it appeared to be. In truth, it was the entrance to an underground facility.

One that was being run by the Lorentian government.

Or no. Not being run. Not anymore. It was long gone now. Only a collapsed hole remained. That was just the strange perception of time playing havoc with his thoughts, Hector supposed.

Time was...

Hmm. Suddenly, Hector felt like he understood Rasalased a little better.

But that was neither here nor there. He concentrated on the vision--or whatever this was."

"2361

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

This government facility was being used for a multitude of things, it seemed. This little entrance here was only one of many, and it served primarily as an emergency escape route.

Hector could see it being used on several occasions. People with indecipherable faces flowing out of it. Rushing. Running. The only thing clear about them was their panic.

He wished he could understand the timescale better, but it was foggy, at best. One thing was evident, though. It ended with an explosion.

That was why this small building wasn't actually here anymore. It had been blown to smithereens.

And not everyone escaped that time. He could see people on fire rolling in the grass. Smoldering corpses among burning trees and underbrush. The whole forest around was aflame.

And roars. Piercing, guttural roars.

He couldn't actually hear them with his ears, yet he could perceive them through the vision nonetheless. There were so many of them. And not all were angry. Some were more pained. Some were whimpers.

Vast rooms with cages lay deep underground. Empty one moment, then filled to bursting with animals of all sorts, then empty again, then filled again. And perhaps there were also some creatures that... weren't animals at all--or at least, none that Hector recognized.

And there were people moving between them. Prodding them. Antagonizing them. Sticking them with needles. Tranquilizing them. Taking them out and tying them down.

And dissecting them. Opening them up. Then stitching them back together, different from before.

With the help of reapers.

Those were somehow less clear, so it had taken Hector longer to recognize them. They'd been there all along, he realized. Murky specters, always in the background, sometimes indistinguishable from shadows. He couldn't tell how many there were, though. It could've been two. It could've been twenty."

"2362

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 1 of 10))~~

This was a place of experimentation. He could hear it in silent conversations among the lab workers. Entire dialogues fell into his mind at once like buckets of water, too much information to process normally, yet he was still mostly able to understand. Calm discussions. Loud arguments. Cold observations. Angry diatribes.

They spoke on many subjects. Philosophy. Biology. Ethics. Law.

So many words. Over the course of years. At times, they blended together. Muddled. Insignificant. Becoming little more than routine.

Until some catastrophic event or another shook everything up again. Reestablishing significance.

Experiments getting loose. Tearing lab workers limb from limb. Requiring violent suppression. This happened multiple times. Difficult to tell how many. The cycle just kept repeating.

Until a certain creature arrived.

This one was more distinct. More significant. The vision made sure that Hector could tell it apart from all the others.

At first, it was small. A puppy. Then a kitten. A lizard. A scorpion.

Its form seemed to shift by the day, baffling its captors. If not for the direct insight of the vision itself, Hector might've misunderstood what he was seeing with his eyes alone and believed them all to be different creatures.

But no. They were one. And it grew. Both in size and in intellect.

A sly tentacle discovered how to unlock its own cage.

But it did not flee. It stayed. Why, the vision could not make fully clear. Perhaps it knew that merely escaping its immediate confines would not be enough to truly get away from this place. Perhaps it had seen what had happened to the other creatures that rebelled unsuccessfully.

But during its time here, the creature was subjected to numerous flesh-

rending experiments. In time, it suffered more than any other captive. The ""researchers""--if they could be called that--were fascinated by its mysterious body and by its resilience."

"2363

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 2 of 10))~~

Time and again, they cut the creature open. Time and again, they stitched it back together, oftentimes with limbs or organs that previously belonged to other animals. On many occasions, they thought it dead and tried to revive it with reapers.

But it was never necessary. It lived through everything they did to it.

And its form continued to shift in new and grotesque ways, perhaps attempting to conceal its excess of new body parts. A horse with seven legs. A crocodile with three heads. A lion with an eagle's wings and a scorpion's claws.

It only ever grew larger. The experiments continued for years. Countless conversations took place among the researchers, expressing all manner of concerns and curiosity. They did not understand. The beast seemed docile.

Until one, final experiment. More abominable than all the rest.

A severed human head. They attached it to the creature.

And just like every time previously, it absorbed it into its body.

The researchers celebrated their triumph. Few expressed reservations, mostly because they never thought it would work. They spoke of what a tremendous leap forward this would be, of what new ""legitimacy"" this might mean for government funding.

The fools did not realize what they had done.

But the creature told them. It spoke in a guttural, twisted voice that struck every listener dumb with terror as soon as they heard it.

""You have finally listened,"" it said. ""My will has been done. Now let me share with you... my joy.""

The slaughter that followed was unlike anything Hector had ever witnessed. Which was saying something. The creature tore through them like paper, its claws and tentacles and hands appearing from seemingly nowhere all the while.

But it was more than just that. It made them turn on one another, as well. It forced them, against their will, to rip each other apart with their bare hands, screaming but never stopping until breath no longer filled their lungs."

"2364

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 3 of 10))~~

And it didn't end there. The creature triggered a series of explosions that were designed to bring the facility down, to bury it and conceal everything that had transpired here in the case of imminent exposure to the outside world.

Only a handful of people escaped that fiery doom, and none made it out unscathed.

But the facility was not fully destroyed--or rather, the creature did not allow it to be so. Instead, it began gathering up sundered bodies of its victims and stacking their corpses upon one another, seemingly organizing them into piles.

It took Hector a while to understand what it was doing. Dragging them each onto the same table that it had been dragged to so many times before. Cutting them open, digging through their flesh like it was looking for something. It wasn't until it started stitching them back together that Hector realized.

It was conducting experiments of its own.

Whether it was because it was genuinely curious or because it merely wanted to revisit the same torture it suffered upon its captors, Hector could not tell. The vision did not seem to understand the creature's mindset terribly well.

With some of the lab workers and even some of the lab specimens, the vision had been able to impart emotional states, at least to a degree. They were often foggy, but occasionally, such as during arguments or



periods of great stress, the emotions flared up and became quite clear.

But not with the monster. It was always subdued. Its emotions, if it even had any, were hidden.

And once or twice, Hector thought he caught a moment where it was... looking at him. Through the vision. But how could...?

Hector focused. The vision wasn't done.

The creature's experiments continued for some time. Never succeeding, of course. Perhaps it didn't comprehend that its victims were already dead or that their bodies were not like its own."

"2365

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 4 of 10))~~

But eventually, the monster stopped experimenting.

Instead, it fell still and silent. For long period of time, months or perhaps even years, it did not move. It merely sat there among the wreckage of the facility, alone.

Hector could only guess what it was doing. Contemplating its next move? Or...?

Meditating?

That thought sent a shiver down his spine for some reason. Just how intelligent was this thing? He had to wonder. In some ways, it seemed naive or even childish, but in others...

Hector almost didn't want to know.

When it finally began to stir again, it was not the same. The beast was shapeshifting again--only this time, it was transforming into people. It struggled because of its bulk, its overabundance of limbs, but it was working on that problem. It would compress its body down to shocking levels, smaller and smaller with each new attempt. Other times, it would actually transform into two people and try to conceal the linked flesh between them with camouflage.

It could camouflage itself? That was another new thing.

But where was its ability to control the weather? Hector still hadn't seen any sign of that yet. And he was growing a bit impatient, too. All these details about the monster were certainly important enough that he didn't think he should ask Pauline to skip to the end of the vision--assuming she even could--but he sure wanted to give it a shot, anyway. It was impulsive of him, he knew, but he wanted to ignore everything that didn't have to do with where Roman and the others might be.

Were they even going to be at the end of this vision? He was afraid of the answer.

Or. Wait a minute. His perception of time was all wrong again, wasn't it? This vision wasn't really taking long. It just felt like it was. It was all there, already in his head.

Agh."

"2366

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 5 of 10))~~

Well, if the entire vision was already in his mind, then perhaps he didn't need Pauline to control it for him. Perhaps he could skip to the end himself. He hadn't yet seen how the monster acquired had acquired weather powers--and possibly teleportation powers--but he figured it wasn't a priority to know that information, right now. It would be good to know more about how they worked, sure, but Roman and the others had been missing for hours already. There was no telling what their situation was like, right now.

And hell, maybe he could go back and rewatch these parts of the vision later.

He concentrated on what he wanted. To see further along the timeline. To see his friends.

The vision responded. Time distorted and warped before his eyes, before his mind.

He saw them.

They appeared in a cloud of smoke, all seemingly confused and even

having trouble keeping their own balance.

But they were not in the underground facility like Hector might have expected. They were somewhere in the forest. Somewhere very strange-looking. Giant mushrooms that glowed in the dark were almost as numerous as the trees, and a slight mist filled the area. A thin layer of water splashed with each stumbling footstep, and more strange creatures began to appear.

What in the hell was he even looking at? How many more were there now? How much time had he skipped?

He saw the Beast, though. It was different again, but the vision made it somehow clear that it was the same creature. And these weird critters all around it, were they its children?

It had created a little empire of its own.

And Roman and the others had been sucked right into the middle of it. Hector could see the reapers with them, too."

"2367

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 6 of 10))~~

None of this made sense. Where the hell were those glowing mushrooms? It wasn't that long ago that he and Pauline were flying through the air, overlooking the vast reaches of the forest. An area that glowed in the dark so much should've been like a beacon to them, but he didn't recall seeing anything like that.

Not to mention, wasn't this vision supposed to be a ""memory"" of the building? This part obviously wasn't taking place anywhere near this building.

...Or was it?

If all those glowing mushrooms hadn't been visible from the air, then... could it be that they were underground? Mushrooms could definitely grow in such a place. But there were trees there, too--and a lot of them. They couldn't grow underground, right?

The vision made it difficult to tell, since it was nighttime. He couldn't see the moon. Or any beams of moonlight among the trees. But that

could've just been because the light from the mushrooms was washing them out.

Agh.

""Pauline,"" he said. It was his first word aloud in what felt like ages, and it was somehow strange to hear the sound of his own voice again. ""Where are those giant mushrooms?""

The vision was still going on, but it was faltering, either because the events were now too recent or because he'd fractured it by speaking up. Hector could see everyone, though, and that was all that mattered. They were just standing there, surrounded by so many of those unknown creatures.

Were they talking? Hector thought they might be, but it was too hard to tell.

Why wasn't Pauline answering him yet? Argh, this fucked-up-time shit was so annoying.

'I think they might be underground,' she finally said.

Really? But what about the trees? Ah, whatever, that wasn't important, right now. ""Can you guide me to it?"" he asked."

"2368 -- CCXXVII.

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 7 of 10))~~

The vision was barely holding together now. The Beast of Lorent and its army of children were inching closer to everyone.

'I don't know,' came Pauline's reply. 'The aura makes everything more difficult.'

Well, if they were underground, then maybe he wouldn't need her to guide him. He could just start digging.

This vision wasn't yet done, though.

The crowd of monsters were rushing everyone like a flood. But at the last moment, everything seemed to slow, and Hector could see the Beast of Lorent looking back at him again.

Its form was shifting constantly between that of a rather average-looking human man and that of an almost indescribable abomination of meat and bone.

"I know you are watching, aura warrior," it said in a deep, unfamiliar voice. The sound wasn't twisted and horrible like the last time he'd heard it through the vision. It sounded much more human. Normal. Almost pleasant, even.

Which was somehow even more horrible, Hector felt.

"Find me quickly," it said, "or I shall break your toys before you get here."

Hector's jaw clenched. Toys? Did this fucking thing really just say that? And how could it possibly know--?

The vision returned to its previous speed. The fighting that broke out was immediately furious--so much so, in fact, that Hector couldn't even make sense of what he was seeing.

He put his questions out of his mind. This wasn't the time to agonize over details. He knew more than enough already.

Hector summoned all his concentration.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Seven: 'O, avid Seer, witness prime conviction...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Pauline could hardly believe her eyes. The Lord Goffe's aura had shifted again. And this time, it was expanding outward at a rate she had never personally seen before. Granted, she was still fairly inexperienced with these sorts of things, but she couldn't help staring in awe, nonetheless.

That metal of his was appearing and swirling all around him in a fury. What was he doing? Did he even know? She suspected not."  
"2368 -- CCXXVII.

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 7 of 10))~~

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"2369

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 8 of 10))~~

The aura that seemed to pervade the entire forest was being melted through by the Lord Goffe's, carving out a much larger area for the two of them.

This had two immediate effects that were of great use for Pauline.

First, it further lessened the oppressive disorientation that she had to constantly fight against. While the Beast's innate hostility towards them was present in its aura, Lord Goffe's welcomed her as an ally. And as it grew in size, the aura's nucleus also grew more potent.

The feeling of protection washing over her now reminded her of her own father. When Lord Goffe had said earlier that he would do his best to keep her safe, those had not been empty words. She had known that even then, but never was it more evident than now. The strength of his intent, his will, permeated his aura, draping her in a metaphysical sense of safety was difficult to articulate, even to herself.

Secondly, she could sense farther into the forest than ever. The friendly aura pushing back the oppressive one was like a psychic amplifier for her abilities. While she still couldn't sense as far away as if there had been no hostile aura at all, this was certainly a dramatic difference.

It even extended underground, though with diminished results. The ground was a naturally more difficult medium for auras to penetrate, but there were many cracks in the earth here that led into the

collapsed cave beneath their feet.

Perhaps it also helped that this area was a minor point of geographic resonance. Where before it had resonated with the Beast's aura and allowed her to extract that vision of its psychic history, now it was beginning to resonate with Lord Goffe's aura instead."

"2370

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 9 of 10))~~

She was tempted to try to extract a psychic history from him, too, but this was hardly the time for it, and she wasn't at all sure that it even would work. Not to mention, she doubted he would be pleased by such prodding into his past.

She didn't get much longer to deliberate on it, either, because Lord Goffe scooped her up in a metal cradle and raised the both of them high up into the air. Before she could even ask what he was doing, one of the metal chunks that had been swirling around him shot back toward the ground and impacted with explosive force.

Plumes of dirt, shattered rock, and splintered wood shot up into the air, high enough even to pelt the metal barricade that had been made for her. An entire section of the forest shifted visibly around the explosion as well, bending outward from the force, then back inward with the distortion of the ground.

Wide-eyed, Pauline wondered if Lord Goffe cared that he had just obliterated a location of geographic resonance.

Probably not, she decided. Perhaps he didn't know how rare they were. Or perhaps he did know and was simply more concerned about his people. She couldn't exactly fault him for that, but wow, if her father were here, he would not be happy, right now.

With so much debris in the air, she couldn't even see what had become of the site, but that didn't last long, either. A gigantic metal wall appeared in midair and swept almost all of it away before disappearing again.

A not-so-small crater was visible where the two of them had only recently been standing, and at the center of it, she could see a hole



leading down into what was presumably the wrecked facility from the psychic history she had extracted.

""How about now?"" said Lord Goffe. ""Can you sense anyone down there?""

Pauline, however, could still only stare at him, dumbstruck."  
"2371

~~((National Corn on the Cob Day - page 10 of 10))~~

Lord Goffe had to press her. ""Pauline.""

She snapped back to herself. 'Ah. Give me one minute.' She reached out with her mind and surveyed the hole.

Her ability to monitor areas that she couldn't physically see was limited insofar as it required, at the very least, life to be present in said area. Technically, she could sense ""souls"" as they were often called, but only through process of elimination, because souls, minds, and auras all overlapped in various ways.

As far as she was aware, every mind had a soul attached to it, and every soul emanated a very weak aura. So while she couldn't exactly sense souls themselves, she didn't need to. Plants had their own distinct little auras, though it often required a bit of concentration to actually notice them.

But that hole down there, it seemed quite deep and quite devoid of life. So she kept going. Farther and farther.

The Beast's aura wasn't growing any weaker, which was a clue. If it were aboveground, then its aura would've surely diminished the deeper she went.

But that was also curious. If the Beast truly was underground, then the earth should've still been serving as a dampener against its aura, just in the opposite manner. So why was it still so strong up here, then? Was it just so powerful that the dampening didn't matter?

A worrying thought.

But the Beast must've also had some other route up to the surface.

Given all the reports about its murderous activities, it wasn't sealed harmlessly away underground. Perhaps that other route was large enough that its aura could pour out over the rest of the forest, undiminished.

At length, she sensed it. A crowd of minds. Full of hostility. Clashing violently.

'I sense many beings down there,' she said.

""Okay,"" was all the Lord Goffe said.

But she could sense his aura flaring up again."

"2372

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Clearly, the Lord Goffe was not bothered by the nighttime darkness that should've made the hole difficult to see for any normal human's eyes, because he launched them both downward on a metal rail.

If not for that reassuring aura of his, she might've thought he was trying to kill her.

Then it became truly dark. Even her eyes couldn't see anything, and she had to rely entirely on her mind for guidance. She might've expected him to ask her for directions again, but at the rate they were moving, that was apparently not necessary. The musty underground air rushed past her feathers at a speed that felt similar to flying through the open sky, and more than once, she flinched at an approaching rock wall that she barely sensed before being instantly veered away from.

It was a literal roller coaster ride.

Which was particularly strange for her, because she'd never actually experienced such a thing. Amusement parks didn't make seats big enough for her. If this was what it was like, she could suddenly understand why so many people screamed their heads off while riding them.

They shot into a cavern that was so huge, she nearly thought they'd somehow returned to surface and were outside again. Light had returned as well, but it was different. It was a ghostly blue and gray

color, and it came entirely from the field of gigantic mushrooms below them--the same ones from the psychic history.

There was precious little time to admire them, though. She could already see the battle taking place in the distance, and the Lord Goffe was veering them toward it.

Pauline tried to prepare her heart. She'd never gotten involved in full combat before, but she'd experienced it in training with her father and in psychic constructs many times.

This would not be like any of that, she felt."

"2373

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

First and foremost, she needed to maintain her invisibility. That was any Sparrow's most valuable tool, and while it was obviously possible that this Beast of Lorent could sense her presence regardless, she didn't yet have confirmation on that one way or the other. It had spoken to Lord Goffe, not her.

She would have to be cautious.

As they drew closer to the fighting, she had to say something. 'Let me fly on my own, Lord Goffe.'

He didn't respond, but he did as she requested and dematerialized the metal that he'd been using to carry her.

The freedom was both welcome and terrifying. She allowed him to shoot ahead of her and join in the battle first.

She maintained her altitude as she observed the underground field. She recognized the Lorentians easily enough, but she still didn't know who any of Lord Goffe's companions were other than Roman Fullister, who she noticed was also zipping around the air--and at quite high speeds, too.

They were obviously servants, though. At least one of them besides Lord Goffe seemed to be materializing another metal, and the largest human there seemed to be a transfiguration user, bulldozing dozens of little monsters at once with metallic arms.

But they were struggling. The monsters weren't staying down, regardless of if they were crushed or slice or skewered or even hit with explosions. The multi-legged little creatures just kept scurrying back into the fight.

They were a horrible sight, Pauline thought. Scores of them, maybe even hundreds. They were all vaguely spider-like, but the more she examined them, the more she realized that they had shapeshifting abilities like their progenitor.

Along with other powers.

But they weren't all the same. Some were spitting fire. Some were clearly electrified. Some were spewing acid. And it didn't end there, either. The chaos made it difficult to differentiate between what was caused by the monsters and what was caused by the servants, but Pauline was certain that there was more she wasn't seeing."

"2374

And then, of course, there was the Beast itself. That one, at least, was much easier to tell apart from all the others--and not just because of its size.

It wasn't engaging in the fight. It was letting its offspring do all the work--for now, at least.

Pauline was the most mindful of that creature. If it looked in her direction, she wanted to know immediately. She needed confirmation regarding whether or not it could even see her.

Thus far, it seemed like her invisibility was holding up, but she was wary of growing too comfortable.

As for the Beast, its form was currently that of an enormous horse. Mostly. Instead, it had two heads and eight legs, and all four of its eyes smoldered with red fire. Its hulking, muscular body was also wreathed in black-and-orange flames.

Pauline noticed, however, that those flames were not emitting any light upon their environment, which suggesting that at least part of the creature was an illusion. Not exactly surprising, but that did speak a little to how it was conducting its ""shapeshifting.""

She tried to penetrate the illusion with her mind, to see its true form, but that wasn't as easy as perhaps it should've been. Maybe it was the Beast's aura protecting it, or maybe the creature just had some kind of natural psychic defense. She could've pressed harder, but a more forceful or invasive approach ran the risk of exposing her own presence.

She wanted to bide her time. The humans were having difficulty bringing down the little monsters, but they were at least holding their ground and protecting the Lorentians. And with the Beast itself hanging back, Pauline had a feeling that the true fight had not yet begun.

The tide of battle soon started to change when metal boxes began clapping around all the little monsters."

"2375

At first, they were breaking out almost immediately, but then the offspring struggled more and more, until they seemed to be truly captured. And the metal boxes flew over to Lord Goffe and started orbiting around him.

The chaos of the battle slowed as the enemy's numbers steadily dwindled, and at length, the Beast stepped forward--but not to attack, seemingly.

It let out a low, grumbling roar, and in unison, its remaining children pulled back and huddled around it. There were still dozens of them.

""Aura warrior,"" came the Beast's human-sounding voice. ""You wish to speak with me, no?""

There arrived a long silence as Pauline continued circling the battlefield from above. Lord Goffe was at the front of the party, eyeing everyone at his back, no doubt making sure that they were okay.

A few had sustained injuries, Pauline noticed, but they were healing. One of the Lorentians had fallen and twisted his ankle, and another had a gash on his arm, but someone was already bandaging it up.

More worryingly, the four reapers were all wounded. To her eyes, they were small, phantasmal skeletons gripping short spears. Their eye sockets glowed softly with a dark gray light, and they had long,

ethereal chains wrapped around their necks.

She hadn't seen very many of them over the course of her life, but she knew that they weren't supposed to emitting that black-and-white smoke from the cuts on their "bodies."

Everyone was frightened. Pauline could sense their fear, both psychically and just relying on her eyes. Several of the Lorentians were trembling and uttering hushed reassurances to one another.

Pauline didn't fault them.

The Lord Hector Goffe stepped closer to the Beast. "How did you know I wanted to talk?" he asked.

"Your kind always wishes to talk," the Beast said. "I rarely wish to listen."

"2376

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"You've encountered many humans before," said Lord Goffe.

"Yes," said the monster.

"And you killed them all?"

"Yes."

"...Why?"

"They would have killed me and my spawn."

"...But you just said that they wished to talk."

"They wished to lie. Or to convince me to spare their worthless lives."

"I see."

More silence drew out as neither side anything, perhaps considering their next words. Or perhaps considering if they should simply start attacking again.

One might have thought that the cessation of battle had at least partially defused the situation, but Pauline could tell from the two auras

that this was not the case. They were both growing, not diminishing.

The Lord Goffe and the Beast of Lorent.

Pauline could hardly imagine two more opposing auras. One was gentle and warm, reassuring and sturdy. The other was furious and cold, clawing and wild.

And the way they clashed with one another. It was like an ocean crashing against a cliff. Equal, yet unrelenting.

Even the humans could probably sense the clash, to some extent. No doubt, that was playing a role in their apparent deference to the Lord of Warrenhold's handling of the conversation, right now--including that big human, who had a bit of his own aura boiling around him.

""...In that case, why is this time different?"" said Lord Goffe. ""Why are you interested in what I have to say?""

""You are holding my spawn hostage,"" said the Beast.

Lord Goffe relinquished a nod at that, perhaps admiring the monster's honesty.

""And I saw you,"" said the Beast. ""You looked at me. At my life. You've seen me. Perhaps you understand me.""

""Is that what you want?"" said Lord Goffe. ""To be understood?""

""In part. Yes. That is why my spawn is numerous. They are my children, as you might say, no?""

"2377

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""Hmm."" Lord Goffe folded his armored arms. ""What else do you want, then?""

""To flourish,"" said the monster. ""To prosper. And to share the fruits of my labor with all.""

""With all? Does that include us humans?""

""Of course.""

""...What exactly are the 'fruits of your labor' that you wish to share with us?""

""In short? The primacy of being.""

""...And what do you mean by that?""

""Most creatures do not understand the value of their own existence. I think that is a terrible shame. To live without the realization of the miracle that is yourself.""

Lord Goffe made no response, perhaps because he didn't know what to say.

If so, Pauline wouldn't blame him. What the hell was that thing even saying? She had no idea. It sounded oddly optimistic, but she also still remembered what the Beast considered to be sharing its ""joy.""

""You do not understand after all, do you?"" The Beast's enormous body shifted somewhat, bubbling beneath its skin in grotesque fashion. Was it preparing to transform again?

""...Where are you from?"" said Lord Goffe. ""Originally, I mean. Before you were brought here.""

""A truly silly question,"" said the Beast. ""I come from the same place as everyone and everything.""

""Which is?""

""You know it.""

""...Pretend I don't.""

""You fear to utter it? I find that quite pathetic, aura warrior.""

""You're the one who's avoiding the question.""

""Hmph. Chaos. I am of Chaos. As are we all.""

What the hell? It wasn't talking about that Chaos, was it? The imaginary 'nothingness' from which all thought supposedly emerges? According to certain religions, anyway. This thing wasn't religious, was it?

She was so confused that it was almost difficult to continue listening.



""...Okay,"" said Lord Goffe. ""But how did you get here? In Lorent? Where were you born? And who brought you here?""

""Trivialities. Details that only humans obsess over.""  
"2378

""Be that as it may,"" said Lord Goffe, ""I'd appreciate it if you answered my questions.""

The Beast took its time responding. Perhaps it was considering whether or not that had been a threat just now. The Lord Goffe hadn't exactly phrased it like one, but there was also an undeniable firmness in his otherwise soft speaking voice. ""...I was summoned into this world by one of your kind,"" it said. ""A man called Lozaro.""

Pauline recognized that name, though only vaguely. It belonged to a famous scientist of some kind, she was fairly sure. Agh, but she should've been able to recall more than that. Her father would've known.

""...What do you mean by 'summoned into this world,' exactly?"" said Lord Goffe.

""How else would you like me to explain it? I was pulled forcibly into existence.""

""Okay, but how?""

""If I knew that, I would not have to create so many of my own spawn. I only know that the Carlan Point was somehow involved. Perhaps in time, I will return there and attempt to learn more, but I currently do not think it is worth the risk.""

Whoa, whoa, whoa. The Carlan Point was a famous location, though only among Sparrows. It was a place of major geographic resonance, one of only handful in the entire world.

And this thing came from there? Like from another dimension or something? Pauline had never heard of such an occurrence. Who the hell was this Lozaro person, to be able to pull off something like that?

""What risk would that be?"" said Lord Goffe.

""The risk of being returned to Chaos, of course,"" said the Beast.

""That is why so many of you do not appreciate what you have. You fail to grasp the hellish nature of nonexistence--of the Infinite Current.""

""...The what?""

"2379

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""You do not know of it?"" said the Beast. ""Well, of course you don't. I thought because you are an aura warrior, you might be less ignorant than the rest of your kind, but I see now that I was mistaken.""

""Y'know, for someone with so many children, you're surprisingly childish yourself,"" said Lord Goffe.

Pauline's beady eyes widened a little at that comment.

""...In what way am I childish?"" said the Beast.

""Mocking people who are earnestly trying to learn--that's a hallmark of immaturity,"" said Lord Goffe.

The monster didn't say anything.

Pauline honestly thought it might just start attacking again, but the Lord of Warrenhold didn't seem too concerned. Was he just that confident?

Well, it wasn't like he had no reason to be, but still... she might've liked it if he took a more delicate approach here. But then again, it wasn't like she knew how someone was supposed to converse with a violent interdimensional hellbeast.

""So what is this Infinite Current you mentioned?"" said Lord Goffe. He sounded as though he were asking about something as typical as the weather.

The Beast took its time responding. ""...I do not know how to explain it to one who has never experienced it.""

""Ah. Wait a minute. Is that why you feel the need to kill people? So that they can experience this Infinite Current for themselves?""

""Yes. Perhaps you do understand.""

""How do you know they'll end up in the Infinite Current when they die?""

""It is what all of existence is reduced to in the end.""

""Alright, but how do you know that?""

""Because it is where I come from.""

A beat passed as Lord Goffe mulled that over. ""But according to you, we all come from this Chaos, right? So why don't I have this knowledge, too?""

"2380

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The Beast fell quiet again. Lord Goffe waited a while, but it didn't say anything.

Pauline was beginning to get the impression that this manifestation of Chaos might not be a very rational being. She could only imagine what was going through Lord Goffe's head, right now.

The Beast's aura was not diminishing, however. The Lord of Warrenhold may have struck a blow in the name of reason, but it had not deescalated the situation, as far as Pauline could tell.

At length, Lord Goffe decided to change the subject. ""...How were you able to summon these reapers here?""

And again, the monster was quiet. It took so long to respond that, for a while, Pauline thought it was simply fed up with the conversation.

""They were already here,"" it said.

Lord Goffe apparently needed a moment to process that statement.

""No, they weren't. They were in an entirely different country.""

""You are mistaken.""

Mm, Pauline wasn't so sure he was. And her reverence for this creature's knowledge was severely lacking.

Lord Goffe kept pushing, though. ""What do you mean? How could they have already been here?""

""You disappoint me again, aura warrior.""

""You're not scoring many points, yourself. Tell me what you meant by them already being here.""

Pauline was starting to wonder why he was even bothering. It seemed fairly evident now that this Beast of Lorent was quite the confused creature.

""You see two distinct beings,"" said the Beast. ""And yet, surely, you must realize that they are as one, yes? Is your aura so pathetic that you cannot even see that which you already know to be true? How can you allow the obvious to escape your notice?""

More chastising. Pauline was growing weary of this.

Lord Goffe, however, tilted his head and unfolded his arms. ""I should... be able to 'see that which I already know,' huh? Because of my aura?""

"2381

""A true aura warrior would be able to see such things even without first knowing them,"" said the Beast.

""Oh yeah?"" said Lord Goffe. ""Interesting. But even if you can 'see' the connection between reaper and servant, that doesn't change the fact that the reapers aren't actually there. But you still managed to pull them here from very far away.""

""Hmph. You are not a true aura warrior, are you?""

""Well, maybe not. Maybe I'm still learning."" Somehow, Lord Goffe managed a small laugh in this situation. ""Have you met many 'aura warriors' before?""

""Met? No. Seen? Yes.""

""How did you come to know so much about them, then?""

""Through the Great Echo, of course,"" said the Beast.

Agh, another term that Pauline didn't recognize. She was tempted to believe that this was something significant, but she also had to acknowledge the very real possibility that the Beast of Lorent was completely mad and just speaking utter nonsense. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more likely that seemed.

""And what is the Great Echo?"" said Lord Goffe.

""The immense division between realms,"" said the monster. ""It is where whispers of the past propagate beyond themselves, perhaps for eternity. A true aura warrior would know of it. Your predecessors would surely be ashamed.""

Oh? Wait a minute. Was it talking about geographic resonance, Pauline wondered?

""What can you tell me about these aura warriors of the past?"" said Lord Goffe.

""Hmph. Have I not told you more than enough already? Return my spawn to me.""

""If I do that, will you attack us again?""

""Yes.""

Lord Goffe laughed outright at that. ""You might be a little too honest for your own good, y'know that?""

""I despise liars.""

""I've noticed.""

""Return my spawn.""

""Give me your word you won't attack.""

""No.""

"2382

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""Why not?"" said Lord Goffe. ""Why do you refuse something as

simple as not attacking us?"

"Because you wish to destroy me," said the monster. "If I promise not to attack you, then I would be giving you free reign to attack me without reprisal."

"...Wow."

"What? Are you confused again?"

"No. It's just... I think most people would not consider it to be breaking your promise if you attacked us in self-defense only."

"I do not care what most people would think. A promise broken is a promise broken."

"Sure, but context is important, no?"

"No."

That left a flat silence in its wake. Pauline could only wonder how Lord Goffe intended to respond to something like that. The more she learned about this creature, the less she felt she understood it. It made more sense to her when she thought it was just a mindless beast driven only by violent instinct.

"You really do hate lying, don't you?" said Lord Goffe.

"Yes."

"Why is that, exactly? I mean, sure, it's perfectly natural not to like dishonesty, but, uh... you seem to take it to the extreme. Is there some reason for that?"

"Yes."

"...Please tell me that reason, then."

"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to understand you."

"Why?"

"Because you interest me."

"Why?"

""Okay, stop saying that. It's really annoying.""

For a moment, Pauline expected it to ask why again, but it didn't.

Instead, the Beast took a moment, and then said, ""Lying is evil. Is that not obvious to you?""

Hector took a moment of his own, now. ""...But what if your lie protects someone?""

""A lie upon a lie.""

""You don't think it's possible for a lie to protect someone?""

""No. Lies only lead to destruction. Of the self. And of the world.""

Lord Goffe made no response.

""Again, I should not have to tell you this, aura warrior. Did you learn nothing from the foul deeds of the Deceiver?""

"2383

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""The Deceiver?"" said Lord Goffe. ""Who is that?""

""You do not even know of the Deceiver? Your ignorance truly knows no bounds.""

""So enlighten me, then.""

""Skapa the Deceiver. The First Traitor. The man who should have served as a lesson to your kind for all eternity, but I see now that is not the case.""

""How long ago are you talking about here?""

""He betrayed you all for power and sought to subjugate the world.""

""That wasn't what I asked, but okay...""

""How could you not know of him? But if you truly believe that lies are not evil, then I suppose your ignorance in this matter only makes sense. How saddening for you.""

""I'm getting the impression that this guy lived a really long time ago..."

""Truly, your predecessors must be looking upon you and weeping. I would pity them, if they did not wish me dead as well.""

""You're not even listening to me anymore, are you?""

""You sadden me, aura warrior. When I saw you, I thought you a formidable and familiar foe in this dreary, stagnant realm. But I see now that you are just as lost as the rest of these soul riders. Perhaps it is even doing you too much honor to call you aura warrior, though I can hardly believe I am saying such a thing. How lamentable and backward must this world have become for me to feel remorse at the loss of my enemy?""

Pauline could hardly even follow what it was saying, anymore. So this creature was from the distant past? Or believed it was, at least? But then how...?

She didn't even know where to begin asking questions.

Lord Goffe managed to come up with a couple, though. ""Oh, are you done now? Can we get back to having an actual discussion?""

""What else needs to be said? At this point, I feel as though I could learn more from a rock.""

"2384

Lord Goffe ignored the insult. ""Do you have a name?""

""A name...?""

""That's what I said, yes.""

""I have been called many things.""

""But is there something that you call yourself? Something you would like others to call you?""

And the Beast of Lorent fell quiet for a time. ""Chortomolengoth.""

""...Sorry, would you mind saying that one more time?""



""Chortomolengoth.""

The Lord of Warrenhold nodded. ""That seems a little difficult to remember. Can I just call you Chort?""

""It makes no difference to me.""

""Alright, Chort. You can call me Hector.""

""I fear your attempt at familiarity is wasted, Hector. I do not foresee this conversation going on for much longer.""

Pauline could sense movement among the Beast's offspring. They seemed to be getting antsy, inching closer to the group of humans. Still, none of them appeared to have noticed her presence, though, which was good.

""Well, stranger things have happened,"" said Lord Goffe. ""And I have a lot more questions for you.""

""But I have none for you. Return my spawn and let us end this charade.""

""How much do you know about blessings?""

Chort made no response.

""How about Primordials?"" said Lord Goffe. ""Do you know about them?""

Still, it said nothing.

""Do you know about a being named Malast? Or the Hun'Sho, maybe?""

Chort's children were beginning to settle back down again, Pauline noticed, though she didn't understand why.

Primordials? Pauline was familiar with the term, though only vaguely. Cocora was sometimes regarded as a Primordial, wasn't she? What did that have to do with anything? What was Lord Goffe thinking?

""These words you are using,"" said Chort, ""I am not familiar with them. And yet... I sense that you are referring to something... significant. Your aura tells me so.""

What the hell?

"That's one word for it," said Lord Goffe."

"2385

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Chort's equine form bristled, and its eight legs shifted positions--nervously, perhaps? Pauline couldn't say she understood the mysterious creature's body language.

"You are... an archiver?" said Chort.

Lord Goffe deigned not to answer this time.

"Yes," said Chort. "That is why you demand knowledge from me, no? I did not think an archiver would have such an aura, but... yes, it must be so."

Lord Goffe was still remaining quiet. Thinking about his response? Or consulting his reaper?

The other humans were all still watching with rapt attention, the Lorentians in particular. The way they were ever so slightly leaning forward, the way their eyes moved back and forth between Lord Goffe and the Beast--Pauline wondered if they even realized what they were doing.

That older woman there was the Lorentian Secretary of State, wasn't she? Politicians sometimes had unusually strong auras of their own, especially the charismatic ones, but hers was almost imperceptible now, swept up as it was in Lord Goffe's aura.

But that man next to her. Ambassador Stoutamire. His aura was not quite so completely smothered. It still flickered faintly, though the man's body language was no different from those around him.

In fact, now that she was focusing, the only other auras that she could clearly sense belonged to him and that mysterious giant man among Lord Goffe's companions.

She would have to keep an eye on them in the future.

"You're right," Lord Goffe finally said. "I am an archiver. How were you able to tell that just from my aura?"

""I... do not know how to explain. It may not have been your aura. It may have simply been... intuition.""

And Pauline was surprised. It was slight, but Chort's aura was diminishing.

Was it... afraid? Of what?"  
"2386

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Perhaps Lord Goffe could tell that something had changed in the Beast as well, because he asked, ""Are you okay? You seem different all of a sudden.""

""I am... fine,"" said Chort.

But that was all.

Lord Goffe tried again. ""Are you sure?""

""Yes."" The monster's body began to shift. Slowly. It no longer looked like a horse, but Pauline couldn't yet tell what it was transforming into-- if anything. ""What is it that you want from me, archiver? Beyond mere questions. You came here to hunt me, no? To destroy me and my spawn?""

""...I want you to stop killing people,"" he said bluntly.

""That makes little sense to me. Why would an archiver care about such things? That is the work of aura warriors.""

""...I think you may be talking about how things were in the distant past. You have a false perception of who I am and what I should want.""

""The distant past?"" said Chort. ""No. The passage of time should make little difference. Archivers are archivers, and aura warriors are aura warriors. You are all too stubborn to change.""

""...Sounds like projection, if I've ever heard it.""

""An insult. How dare you.""

""You've insulted me a dozen times.""

""I have only ever spoken the truth.""

Pauline had to wonder if Lord Goffe really did have a handle on this conversation. From his composure, he seemed as calm and collected as could be, but some of these things being said still managed to worry her. She could only imagine how the other listeners must've been feeling. If not for Lord Goffe's protective aura, some of them probably would have been trembling from anxiety alone.

""Alright, look,"" said Lord Goffe. ""Is there any way that I can convince you to stop attacking humans?""

""No,"" said Chort plainly."

"2387

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""...Yeah, I figured you would say that. But I have to ask: why not? Tell me your exact reasons for attacking us, because I still don't understand.""

""That does not surprise me,"" said Chort. ""My spawn must continue to grow. Both in number and individually. You ask me to stop attacking your kind, but how then am I to feed them? How then am I to make more? These things would become impossible.""

""...Wait a minute,"" said Lord Goffe. ""Chort. That's a very different answer from what you gave earlier. You said you wanted to 'spread knowledge of the Infinite Current,' didn't you?""

""Yes, that is also true. Teaching humans of their own ignorance is similarly important.""

""So it's just like a two birds, one stone situation for you, then?""

""It sounds as though you understand. Finally.""

""No, Chort, I don't. You could just hunt regular animals and feed those to your children. Like we do. You don't have to kill people for that. Plus, it would be safer for you, too. Normal animals won't send hunters like me after you.""

""Hmph. Incredibly, there is a modicum of sense in what you say. It would indeed be safer to feed on less volatile creatures. But you ask the impossible. My spawn require more than mere flesh. They need the sustenance of souls in order to transform, grow, and flourish.""

""...Excuse me?""

""It is impossible to create even a single new spawn from the lesser souls that inhabit other, lower creatures. One human, however, can sometimes equal two of my spawn.""

Pauline could sense the monster's aura growing again as it spoke, regaining rigidity. Certainty. Conviction.

But she could also sense a change in Lord Goffe's. His was twisting in places, not unlike swirls of steam. Growing heated. Angry."

"2388

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""Why do you have to kill people for their souls, though?"" said Lord Goffe. ""There are plenty of humans dying of natural causes every single day.""

""Ah. You would have me be like your reapers?"" said Chort. Its form seemed to finally be coalescing into that of a giant toad. It, too, had far more legs than was normal, but instead of two heads like the horse, the toad had a half-dozen eyes and multiple tongues.

""Not exactly,"" said Lord Goffe. ""I'm just... trying to understand.""

""How could I possibly teach humans of their ignorance if I am not the one taking their lives?""

""...Is that it?"" said Lord Goffe. ""That's your only justification?""

Pauline could feel his aura grow still hotter.

""You speak as if I need more,"" said Chort.

""You do."" And the Lord of Warrenhold's voice as he spoke those words was abruptly more grave than anything he had yet said. They seemed to resonate with his aura, carrying more heavily through the

air and even making Pauline's avian bones tingle slightly.

Surely, the Beast of Lorent must have felt that as well, no? Unless its own aura was shielding it too much.

Whatever the case, the monster took another moment to respond. At the very least, it must've been able to sense the fluctuation in the opposing aura, even if it couldn't personally feel the effects.

""...In truth, yes, there is more,"" said Chort. ""A soul that has already been rent from its accompanying flesh cannot serve as a yolk for my spawn. As the shell of an egg, the body is also necessary."" And when Lord Goffe made no immediate response, the Beast continued, ""I cannot see why such details should matter to you, but that is also characteristic of an archiver. The end result is the same, either way. Humans dying. You would be upset with me regardless, would you not?""

"2389

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""...So let me get this straight,"" said Lord Goffe. ""Are you telling me... that you consume souls and then give birth to your children later? Or... are you telling me... that you transform people into your 'spawn' while they are still alive?""

""Again, the end result is the same, no?"" said the Beast. ""Why must you pursue such inconsequential details, archiver?""

""Answer me, Chort.""

""Hmph. There is no 'birthing,' as you put it. It is closer to the second method you described. Humans become vessels for my spawn to hatch out of. In some sense, you may consider them 'reborn' as such. More powerful and less ignorant than before. It is a happy thing, though I am sure you will not see it as such.""

That was already more detail than Pauline wanted, quite frankly. Just imagining deceased human bodies ""hatching"" was enough to make her feel sick.

And she wasn't even human. What must Lord Goffe have been feeling, right now?

""...I guess you're right,"" said Lord Goffe. ""The end result is the same. The details don't make that much difference, either way.""

His aura was telling a different story, though. It was twisting and heating to such a degree that it almost seemed to be boiling now.

Chort must've noticed it as well. ""You clearly do not speak truly to your feelings, archiver. I do not consider that a lie, but it is reprehensible, regardless.""

Abruptly, the metal boxes swirling around Lord Goffe sped up. Pauline couldn't say that she understood how his power worked, but that metal was moving fast enough that the children of the Beast sealed therein would no doubt have begun feeling pressure from the immense G-forces.

""Maybe we should just get on with this, then.""

""Stop. You are hurting them. Return my spawn to me.""

""...Okay.""

"2390 -- CCXXVIII.

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Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Eight: 'The Battle of the Sunken Forest...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector had thirteen spawn-filled cubes whirling around him. He kept increasing the speed, bringing them to verge of what he was capable. He had to flirt with losing control in order for this technique to work, after all.

That limit was higher now than ever before, though. The wind that the boxes whipped up was strong enough to threaten his footing a little, even in his full suit of armor.

He loosed the first one at rocket speed, straight toward the Beast of Lorent.

The impact threw up so much dust and rock that, at first, Hector

couldn't even see what had become of the monster.

But then a giant, bulging hand wiped the cloud away like a fan.

And Hector saw.

The Beast had caught it.

Two enormous hands had emerged from its frog-like form, and one was now holding the iron cube. The force of the catch had pushed the creature back a few meters and torn up some rock around its giant feet, but no damage appeared to have been done.

""Thank you,"" said Chort. ""Now, the rest. But a bit gentler, please.""

Certainly, Hector hadn't expected that one blow to end things straight away--not after what he'd seen during that vision--but still.

Just how strong was this fucking thing?

Well. First things first.

Hector raised his right arm and made a fist.

Every single iron box was immediately filled with spikes, skewering their contents.

""No!"" cried the Beast, apparently able to sense what he had just done, and it bounded forward.

Its other children followed immediately after it, spitting fire and acid at the party.

Iron and copper walls rose up in their defense, shielding everyone from the vomited projectiles, but the creatures clambered over the structures like spider monkeys."

"2390 -- CCXXVIII.

((The Father's Day Special -- page 6 of 24))

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"2391

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Hector was sure that his friends could keep the spawn at bay, but he felt like if he didn't keep a close eye on the Beast, it would disrupt their formation and tear through everyone.

The spikes that he'd materialized inside the cubes made things more difficult, throwing off their shape and making them more awkward and unwieldy to launch--but also more dense and impact-heavy.

Without a doubt, Chort did not expect the second cube to be any different than the first, because when it tried to catch it, the force sent its huge frog body flying, as if it had tried to catch a baseball that instead turned out to be a bowling ball.

Hector didn't let up. He lobbed two more right afterward.

With a spare thought process, he was relying on the Scarf to keep track of the chaotic battlefield around him. Salvador Delaguna was on his left, clobbering spawn with his huge, cobalt-infused arms. He'd merged with his reaper, Mevox, in what was presumably pan-forma.

The spawn weren't dying, though. They would get flattened like pancakes and even spew blood or have their limbs knocked off their bodies as if they'd barely been attached in the first place, but they didn't stay down. Their scattered body parts were scrambling back to one another and reassembling themselves.

It was like each piece of flesh had a mind of its own. Not entirely unlike the worms of the Undercrust, Hector realized, though this was far bloodier.

Fire wasn't doing much to them, either. Roman was soaring through open air, causing the creatures to burst into flames purely through particle-induced combustion, but it barely slowed the little bastards down at all.

Fidel Blackburn wasn't managing much better with his copper

materialization, but he was at least keeping them away from everyone, shoving the critters back or just straight up flinging them away on platforms. He was buying everyone precious room to breathe, which was no meager contribution."

"2392

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The remaining two servants, Matteo Delaguna and Carlos Sebolt, were working together in support of Lord Salvador.

This was actually the first time that Hector had seen either of them fight. If circumstances were less chaotic, he might've liked to assess their combat prowess a little more, but he was only able make out so much in the unfolding mayhem. He already knew that they both used transfiguration, and he could sense them relying on it now to create soul-infused smokescreens and acid attacks.

Matteo was surprisingly agile, however. Hector wanted to warn him not to go so deep into the enemy's front line, but he was handling it well, bobbing and weaving between claws and flaming acid, only catching the occasional scrape here or there as he pummeled the monsters with fists that were quite literally on fire.

Carlos, meanwhile, was the only servant relying on firearms at all, but he was making interesting usage of them. He had multiple pistols on him, but the one he was currently using did not seem be a normal gun. Its loading chamber was very large, and Hector could sense him loading small chunks of his left arm into it instead of standard ammunition.

The resulting shots seemed to have different effects as well. Sometimes, they would drill through the monsters like tissue paper, and other times, they set the creatures ablaze or exploded on contact.

Carlos was also the first one to to start changing up his tactics, Hector noticed. He stopped trying to use fire and explosives and instead tried using bullets that froze on contact.

It didn't entirely work, since the bullets were small and only managed to freeze parts of the monsters, but it seemed clear to Hector that tactic was at least successful in slowing the little bastards down."

"2393

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All in all, they were holding their ground quite well.

Hector was able to keep his primary focus on Chort while the others kept the little ones at bay, and all the while, Hector continued scooping up Chort's spawn to add to his collection. He wanted to outpace himself, to gather the spawn into orbit faster than he was shooting them back at Chort. That way, their numbers would constantly be reducing while the Beast of Lorent was busy dealing with an endless barrage attacks.

His plans were prematurely ended, however, when he noticed a dramatic shift in the air.

In the back of his mind, Hector had been wondering about the Beast's ability to manipulate the weather, but given that they were in a giant cave, he thought that perhaps that ability had been rendered unusable.

This was not the case.

Dark clouds were gathering at the roof of the cave--and quickly, too. The airflow was changing so rapidly that he hardly even needed the Scarf of Amordiin in order to sense it.

Hector decided not to let that continue.

He added extra mass to one of the cubes and lobbed it up toward the gathering clouds. It cut right through them, of course, but his real objective was to have it hit the ceiling with explosive force--which it did.

That was enough to disrupt the airflow, somewhat. The clouds shuddered, threatening to disperse but not quite following through. All too soon, they were re accumulating--and sparking with electricity, by the looks of it.

More of the others were resorting to freezing tactics, now. Salvador's oversized hands were trailing with icy mist, and instead of just slamming down on the monsters like before, he was grabbing them and holding on until they froze solid--even while they belched fire right onto his face and torso."

"2394

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Pan-forma's enhanced regenerative properties would keep Salvador in fighting shape, but Hector didn't know for how long. If this battle became one of attrition, Salvador's fatigue would become a rather large problem.

They needed to make sure that didn't happen.

But Hector didn't intend to resort to temperature manipulation himself-- not in this case, at least. Even if it did help slow the creatures down a little, it would also make his metal more brittle, which would definitely be counterproductive.

Plus, he could sense that even the frozen spawn were not truly stopped. Their bodies were shaking and steaming, trying to melt or otherwise break free from their icy confines. Even when Roman flew down and shattered a couple frigid monsters into pieces with a visible pulse of particle vibrations, the scattered remains were still wiggling and trying crawl back together.

Whew.

There was so much information streaming into his mind. The Scarf was describing so many things to him simultaneously.

And yet, he didn't have to ignore most of it in order to maintain his focus on the main objective.

His parallel thought processes allowed him to keep track of the whole battlefield, maintaining awareness of everyone's status and positioning. For the most part. Little details might've been slipping through the cracks here or there, escaping his notice, but he didn't quite feel overwhelmed. Almost, but not quite.

It was a crazy feeling. Like reading four books at once and comprehending them all.

Comprehending chaos.

It felt impossible.

But maybe that was all chaos really was. Just more information than one's perception could accommodate.

Wait, was he philosophizing in the middle of all this, too? He didn't have time for that shit.

Those clouds up there needed dispersing again.

He launched another cube at them, which crashed into the ceiling of the cave. Somehow, it seemed to have even less of an effect on them this time, but the impact did accomplish something else.

The cave began to crumble."  
"2395

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Everyone else seemed surprised by the sudden threat of falling debris, no doubt because there was already so much chaos going on around them that they weren't prepared for something to take priority over it all.

So Hector helped them along.

""Hold on!"" he managed to shout, more out of courtesy than actual instruction.

All of his orbiting cubes were dropped as he instead shifted all of his focus to shoving everyone out of harm's way. It was a split-second that he couldn't second guess. He could've tried to shield them all from the falling debris, but this cave was huge, and that was an unknown volume of earth that was about to come down on their heads.

What was known, however, was the way out of the cave. The airflow was more than a little muddled now, but he still remembered which way it was going earlier, when things were calmer.

So he grabbed everyone with iron--even Pauline--and practically launched them out of the cave's exit. It was a difficult balance, because he knew he had to be fast yet still gentle, especially with the non-servants. The actual technique he employed--or improvised, rather--was like a sudden swarm of primitive trains. They weren't on actual wheels and instead just slid along the top of flat, iron platforms that hugged the ground.

Each ""train"" carried only one or two passengers, and they all ramped

up to speed quickly but certainly not instantaneously. He made sure to add protective domes and pointed noses to each construct, for the sake of both aerodynamics and shielding from the debris.

It was still a damn close call, though. The entire cave came crashing down behind them like a forty-story building, and the debris didn't stop ricocheting and flying towards them even after they'd cleared the fall zone.

And the dust. It was like a tidal wave of its own."

"2396

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Hector kept the trains running until the dust was well behind them. When he let everyone go, the very first thing they all did was look back at the devastation they had just escaped.

The Lorentians were all obviously shaken and stumbling, apparently having difficulty standing upright. None of them were vomiting, though, so Hector figured he'd done something right. A few of them were electing to stay inside the little iron train cars that he'd made.

All the Lorentians, that was, save the ambassador. Edgar Stoutamire was much calmer than the others, Hector noticed--perhaps even calmer than some of his own party members.

Curious. Hector wasn't sure what to make of it, though.

Fortunately, no one else seemed to notice the train car that had been flying through the sky, and Hector was able to annihilate it without drawing attention to Pauline. Maybe that didn't really matter at this point, but it was one less wrinkle to worry about--for the time being, at least.

Chort was not dead, Hector knew. He couldn't sense any of the monsters anymore, but there was no way in hell that a bunch of rubble would be enough to kill them.

They could've been trapped, though, unable to move under that small mountain of debris. He could hear Salvador and Mevox openly discussing that very subject behind him, having apparently ended their pan-forma merge.

'If it's stuck under there, should we bother trying to dig it out and finish it off?' said Mevox.

""If it can survive that, what makes you think we can finish it off?"" said Salvador. His breathing was somewhat labored, but he still looked like he was ready for more, despite his words.

'Don't psych yourself out,' said Mevox. 'We were handling business just fine.'

"2397

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""We could hold our own, yes,"" said Salvador, ""but we still have no idea how to actually kill the creature. Or even its spawn.""

'It's not the first monster I've seen with the ability to regenerate unaided,' said Mevox. 'With things like that, you've just got to stay the course. The biggest obstacle is just not getting discouraged. It can feel like you're losing when it heals back all the damage you just did to it, but if you keep hammering away at it, it'll eventually stop regenerating and die.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' came the silent-yet-familiar voice of Voreese. She flew down with Roman, attached to his shoulder as he descended from the moonlit canopy over their heads and landed softly next to Hector. 'Sure, we have a lot of power and stamina on our side right now, but it's not endless. We don't know if we'll be able to outlast it in a drawn out battle.'

'Maybe, but it's far too early to be getting demoralized,' said Mevox. 'Lose heart, and all we'll accomplish is making it easier for Chort to kill us.'

'Of course,' said Voreese. 'I wasn't saying we should give up.'

'You sure? Wouldn't surprise me if you turned out to be a big ol' chicken.'

'Hah. And it wouldn't surprise ME if YOU turned out to be a big ol' dumbass. Oh, wait, that's already been confirmed. My bad.'

'Yeah, yeah, hearin' a lot of shit talk,' said Mevox, 'but haven't seen much to back it up so far.'



'Heh. Well, what can I say? Shit talk is my favorite pastime.'

""It really is,"" added Roman.

They kept talking, but Hector was only half-listening, because he could feel the ground shaking--though only slightly. It wasn't violent enough to alert everyone, and it could've just been some lingering tremors after the cave's collapse, but he still wanted to pay it due attention. Because unless he was mistaken, it seemed to be fluctuating."

"2398

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He annihilated his right gauntlet and knelt down to feel the ground with his hand. Honestly, though, he wasn't entirely sure what he was doing. Man, it sure would've been nice if he could sense forms through the earth like he could through the air.

The vibrations in the ground were definitely fluctuating, though. And not in any kind of pattern that he could determine. What could be causing that, he wondered? The tremors should've abated by now, surely. And if the monsters were somehow tunneling their way toward them, then the vibrations should've been growing steadily stronger, right? Not fluctuating like this?

Unless, maybe, they were tunneling somewhere else? If they were trying to escape, then the shaking should've been getting steadily weaker, but that wasn't the case, either.

So what else could it be, then? If they weren't attacking, and they weren't running, then...?

They were preparing.

That thought made Hector stand back up and turn to Voreese, who was still talking to Mevox. He had to interject. ""Can you sense the monsters' locations at all?""

'Uh. Not really. It's all kind of foggy down there. Like a soul-empowered haze.'

""...Or an aura,"" said Hector.

'Whatever term you like,' she said.

Hector concentrated harder on what the Scarf was telling him. Specifically, he tried to pay attention to how the air was flowing over the ground. It was pretty hard to discern specifics with all the foliage around, and the collapsed cave was far enough away that he couldn't really sense in between the cracks in the rubble, but maybe he was thinking about it in the wrong way.

Maybe he needed to look at the bigger picture that the Scarf was describing to him. Was the flow of the air affected by the shaking in the ground? Even just a little?

...Yes, he realized. It was extremely faint, but it was there. A slight shiver here or there in the air currents."

"2399

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It required pretty much all of his concentration, but Hector could sense it: a pattern.

The shivers in the air formed a ring around the party, with short lines pointing inward. And if each shiver represented a monster tunneling underground, that meant only one thing.

They were surrounding them.

There wasn't much more time to deliberate, Hector knew. They must have been pretty deep underground if the tremors were so faint, but the ring was nearly complete.

He could use his multi-train technique again. Move everyone out of harm's way again. But to what end? Where would they go? Back to the airport? That was far, and there was no guarantee it would be any safer there. Plus, it was unclear how Chort had pulled them all the way here from the airport storage room in the first place.

He could hunker down and fight. That was obviously dangerous. They still had no idea how to actually bring the monsters down. And the civilians would have to be protected again, of course. Plus, Hector was certain that the Beast of Lorent still had a few unknown tricks up its sleeve, too.

Twin thought processes allowed him to assess those two options simultaneously and arrive quickly at the conclusion that they both sucked equally.

But he had to choose.

""Everyone!"" he called out, motioning wide with his hands. ""Gather up! Come in close! They're coming!""

They all looked at him, some seeming confused and sluggish, but the iron barricades materializing around the party seemed to spur them closer. The Rainlords' faces were all still hidden behind their iron masks, so he couldn't gauge their reactions, but they were all clearly listening to him, at least, and Carlos and Fidel positioned themselves on different sides of the non-servants.

Roman looked like he wanted to say something, to ask a question maybe, but he held his tongue. And Voreese was the same."

"2400

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This didn't seem like the time to inquire into their thoughts, Hector felt. There would be time for that later if and when they made it out of this mess.

As expected, the trembling in the ground grew more violent as the monsters were no doubt tunneling up towards the surface. Hector had to wonder if they had all shapeshifted again so as to dig more efficiently.

What was not expected, however, was how long the enemy was taking. The shaking kept increasing, threatening everyone's balance, but a full minute must have transpired, and the monsters still hadn't popped up yet.

What were they waiting for?

Abruptly, Hector sensed a heightening of the wind. When he looked up, he could already see clouds appearing in the night sky, blotting out the moon. These ones were much farther away than the ones in the cave had been, which would probably make them trickier to disperse from a distance, Hector figured.

He might have an easier time if he flew up there, but he had a feeling that they would just keep trying to come back. And he was still pretty new to flying, besides. He didn't think it would be very easy for him to keep going back and forth between the ground and the sky throughout the battle.

But someone else probably could.

""Roman, can you stop those clouds from gathering?"" said Hector, pointing.

""Sure, but I feel like I'll be needed down here,"" he said.

Hector wondered if the man wasn't underestimating himself. From what he'd seen, Roman's speed and control over his flight had improved dramatically since the last time Hector had witnessed it. Maybe it wasn't quite on the level of someone like Dimas Sebolt, but it was still way better than what Hector was currently capable of.

There was no time to explain all of his thinking, though.

""You're fast enough to do both,"" Hector told him.

Roman just blinked at him."

"2401

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""But the clouds should be your priority,"" Hector went on. ""The last thing we need right now is another storm like the one at the airport.""

Roman exchanged glances with Voreese who was still attached to his shoulder, and then he gave Hector a nod. He crouched down a little, and when he leapt away from the ground, the force he left in his wake was strong enough for Hector to feel it through his armor but not enough to push him back.

Hector watched him zip off into the sky and puncture the clouds like a bullet. Roman immediately curved around for a second pass, then a third, and just kept going. The moon was fighting to become visible again, and the porous clouds were fighting to keep it hidden, but Roman was clearly making progress.

Why those clouds seemed so resilient, Hector didn't know. He'd

noticed that before, too, back in the cave. Maybe there was more to Chort's ability to control the weather than he'd realized.

But with the clouds neutralized for the moment, Hector had a feeling that the monsters would now attack. They'd probably been waiting for a storm to provide them with cover or something, so now that it wasn't going to happen, they would have to adjust their strategy. They could do something completely different, of course, but Hector suspected that they would go after Roman in order to start building up their storm clouds again.

And he wasn't going to let that happen.

So when the shaking earth became more violent than ever and the monsters finally started popping up out of the ground, Hector was ready. And so were the Rainlords.

Fidel Blackburn's copper was right there alongside Hector's iron, bisecting the creatures with metal blades as they were appearing."  
"2402

((The Father's Day Special -- page 18 of 24))

Salvador wasn't yet resorting to pan-forma again, but Mevox was holding onto his back while the man grabbed the thrashing monsters as if they were no more unwieldy than beach balls and started freezing them again. He managed to keep their faces pointed away from him, so they weren't spewing fire and acid on him this time.

The monsters themselves had indeed shapeshifted, however. They were furrier now and more mole-like, though they still had far too many legs to look anything like normal animals.

But Hector didn't see Chort. Was it still underground? Trying to weave that storm together while its children distracted them?

Yeah, that seemed likely. And the spawn were as resilient as before, of course, being difficult little bastards.

But they weren't impossible to deal with. Hector started collecting them again, and the others were quickly beginning to overwhelm them with freezing tactics.

It was the Beast who was at a disadvantage, right now. If Chort didn't

do something soon, all of its spawn would be captured.

In a spare thought process, Hector was just observing their densely compacted battleground with the Scarf and waiting. The Beast of Lorent might've been an insane, otherworldly monster with an almost unrecognizable value system, but Hector hadn't gotten the impression that Chort was actually stupid.

He was certain that Chort would make a big move soon.

Wait a minute.

How many of it spawn were up here, right now? It was difficult to count exact numbers in the midst of all this mayhem. Most of the monsters up here kept digging back into the ground and then popping up again elsewhere, which confused things even more. No doubt, they wanted to make it as difficult for Hector to target them with his orbiting boxes as possible--and it was kind of working, though he was still able to occasionally snag one here and there."

"2403

((The Father's Day Special -- page 19 of 24))

Hector stopped trying to collect the spawn so that he could instead focus on just counting them. Between keeping track of the non-servants, the Rainlords, Roman up in the sky, and fighting and capturing the dozens of spawn that were swarming them, Hector couldn't spare yet another thought process for counting, too. Something had to be sacrificed to make room for it, so the collection was put on pause.

And as he counted, Hector became increasingly certain that there were fewer spawn here than there had been in the cave. Not a lot, though. Only a handful, maybe.

But that begged an important question. Where were they? They weren't in his collection. He'd made sure to count them, too.

They must've been with Chort underground, right? But doing what? Why would Chort be holding any of them back? If its objective was to overwhelm them so that he could summon another storm, it should've been sending all of its spawn. So why wasn't it?

Well, there was one answer that Hector could think of.

He didn't have long to dwell on it, though, before it was confirmed for him.

The ground heave up from beneath everyone's feet, then plummeted immediately back down--and it didn't stop. It kept falling.

The entire section of the forest lurched and slid down, sinking scores of trees into a freshly dug pit.

That was what Chort had been up to. Trying to destroy their footing. What better way to throw them off balance than to eliminate the very thing they were all standing on?

If Hector hadn't seen it coming at the last moment, they would've been down there with all those uprooted trees and shattered boulders. Instead, a hovering iron platform was keeping everyone aloft where the ground had just been.

And man. This was not easy. There were more people here than he'd ever supported on a hovering platform before. And there were several spawn still leaping and spitting at them.

Agh."

"2404

((The Father's Day Special -- page 20 of 24))

The platform began to tilt under the frantic, scrambling weight of six more spawn all trying to claw their way onto the eastern edge. And the Lorentians--they were panicking, stumbling, flailing.

Hector struggled. The balance was way off. He had to adjust it. Fix the problem.

Iron spikes shot out along the eastern edge to deal with the stowaways. Some were skewered; most were knocked off. He quickly obliterated the spikes regardless, knowing they would just screw up the balance worse if he didn't.

There were more spawn on the northern and southern sides, but the Rainlords were dealing with them already. He was closest to the western edge, so he had it covered. He just needed to focus on--

A group of five spawn flew up in front of him, no longer mole-like. They had wings. Big ones. And they were coming straight for Hector.

With only a split second to react, he managed to clobber two with haphazard pillars materialized up from his feet, but the other three reached him.

They tackled him in unison, clawing his armor, puncturing the iron in deeply enough to nick his flesh beneath.

Pain. In his right side. His back. His left shoulder.

The frenzy of it stole all of his concentration, and before he could even retaliate, the hovering platform wobbled and dipped sideways. It was enough to toss two of the bastards off him, but Hector was only thinking about the civilians.

Where were they? If they fell off the platform, they wouldn't--he had to make sure they--

Agh.

This last monster on him would not let go. Its claws were like knives, and its feathers like razor blades. The flailing and scratching and growling and shrieking were more than just obnoxious. And they were tumbling together all the while, too.

Full spike defense, he decided."

"2405

((The Father's Day Special -- page 21 of 24))

Hector instantly became an iron porcupine. The spikes were both numerous enough and carrying force enough to shred the lone monster into meaty chunks and send them flying away from him.

He kept tumbling, unable to get his bearings. He hit a tree, and his spiked armor added so much weight to him that he felled it on impact instead of bouncing off. The trunk snapped in half, exploding into splinters.

The second tree he hit was able to stop him, though, and Hector had regained just enough situational awareness to wrap his iron around the



tree and latch onto it so that it didn't fling him away. The wood groaned and bent under his weight, but it held, and Hector had a chance to annihilate enough of his iron for the Scarf to flow freely in the air again.

And so, sitting there in that metal cocoon at the top of a tree, Hector took a second to reassess the situation, to concentrate and absorb everything the Scarf of Amordiin could tell him.

The hovering platform was no longer so. It was stuck sidelong in the giant crater that Chort had made, but Hector's worst fears were thankfully not realized. He didn't sense any people at the bottom of it.

They'd gotten out somehow.

He sensed human figures among the treeline at the edges of the pit. Some were still fending off the spawn, but some were simply huddling together in apparent fear. A small building seemed to be there as well. A materialized structure from Fidel, probably.

Hector breathed. The civilians were safe, still.

Damn, he loved the Rainlords.

They needed help, though. He could sense more stirring from the rubble in the crater. Chort's doing?

Hector didn't intend to wait around to find out."

"2406

((The Father's Day Special -- page 22 of 24))

Four of the five winged spawn from earlier were soaring toward him again. Hector was ready this time, but he didn't need to be, because Roman zoomed down and barreled through like bowling pins, sending them all careening back down into the forest. Then Roman flew back up to the clouds, which were already attempting to regather.

The last winged spawn, the one that he'd shredded to pieces with his spikes, was almost fully reassembled on the ground, and it was already scratching at the base of Hector's tree. Its wings were still only half-formed and disjointed, but it seemed determined to get at him.

Hector launched himself up and away from the tree and glided over to the others, but in a background thought process, he was still evaluating the behavior of those winged monsters. They were all clearly gunning for him more than anyone else, probably at Chort's direction.

Did they have some kind of psychic link with their parent? It seemed likely. Hector hadn't seen the Beast giving any of them orders at any point, yet they always seemed to operate as Chort desired.

He might've expected Chort to go after Roman with those winged spawn, since Roman was the one actively sabotaging its efforts to create a storm, but no, it was sending them after Hector, instead. Why?

As if to answer that very question, Pauline's voice arrived in his head.

'Be careful,' she said. 'Your aura is greatly diminished. The others are more vulnerable now.'

His aura? Why would his aura--?

Wait, they were more vulnerable? What did she mean by that?

He would've asked her for more details, even in the midst of all this chaos, if he could've.

Instead, he just refocused on what he was doing, on dealing with that stirring in the crater."

"2407

((The Father's Day Special -- page 23 of 24))

Unsurprisingly, Hector had dropped all the monsters he collected when the platform fell, so he didn't currently have any of the Beast's spawn to launch at the ground.

But that was an easily remedied problem.

Iron materialized in orbit around him and quickly increased in both speed and mass. By the time he was directly over the crater, it was already the size of a person.

That would have to do. Making it any bigger would require more time, and the if it was too large, the impact would hurt his own allies.

He launched it down into into the rubble as he finished sailing over the crater and caught himself on another tree.

Rocks flew up up and out of the hole like a bomb had just gone off, and Hector could even sense a few more spawn mixed in there, toppling through air with the debris.

But where was Chort? Hector was searching for it, but the monster was still--

Ah, there it was. Latched onto one of the bigger rocks headed northward. Hector might not have noticed it if the boulder's trajectory hadn't been so substantially different from the others. It flew higher and farther than all the others.

Chort had wings now, too, along with squid-like tentacles wrapped around its rock. What was the point of that, though, Hector wondered?

Was it trying to hide from him? If so, that had been some frighteningly quick thinking on Chort's part. Had it really come up with that strategy as a reaction to his attack?

Hector maintained pursuit as those questions were relegated to a background thought process, but he didn't intend to attack again just yet. He only wanted to stay close enough to keep Chort within range of the Scarf of Amordiin. First, he wanted to make sure the others were truly okay."

"2408

((The Father's Day Special -- page 24 of 24))

Hector didn't like what he found. Everyone was indeed accounted for, but they were clearly not doing so hot. The spawn were all around them, crowding closer and dodging attacks left and right.

Which was strange.

The Rainlords' movements were abnormal. Carlos was missing shots. Fidel's copper was slow to formulate itself. Matteo and Salvador were fighting in barehanded unison, but they were sluggish, and their swings with their fists were far too wide.

They looked exhausted, but that didn't make any sense. They were servants, and their reapers were right there with them. They shouldn't have been running out of stamina this soon. And the non-servants--the ones that hadn't yet made it inside the makeshift copper building--could barely even stand. A few were on their hands and knees, seemingly uninjured, yet still crawling.

It made no sense.

Until, that was, Hector remembered what Pauline had told him before. About auras. About the disorienting effects they could have.

The Rainlords weren't tired. Their senses were being suppressed. Dulled. Why now? Because Hector's own aura had diminished? If so, then how the hell was he supposed to fix that?

These were the questions in the back of his mind as he flew to their aid, trying to subdue as many of the monsters at once as he could. Big iron blocks slammed down and flattened some, while others were boxed in and put into orbit around him.

Restarting his collection yet again was perhaps an exercise in futility, considering how many times he'd had to suddenly drop it already, but he still felt like it was their best bet. Thus far, capturing the little bastards had been the only way to actually remove them from the fight. And right now, reducing their numbers was the most important thing."  
"2409

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Hector could sense the winged ones approaching again from above

the trees, and this time, they had even more help. Half the swarm turned its attention to him and him alone.

But Hector was ready for them. Without a giant, hovering platform weighing down his concentration, he could sense them all quite clearly and was perfectly content to pull them away from the other servants. Hopefully, that would give everyone some breathing room.

He was still keeping track of Chort, too, in a thought process all its own. The Beast of Lorent was keeping its distance for the moment but not actually trying to flee, which told Hector that it was cooking up something else.

Roman was still up in the sky, seemingly in better condition than the Rainlords had been. Hector wondered if that was because the Beast's aura wasn't reaching him up there or if Roman had a strong enough aura of his own.

Hector bounded from tree to tree, relying on his iron to assist with each jump. Even in the moonlight, this area was a bit too dark and dense with foliage for him to rely on just his eyes, but that wasn't a problem for him, of course.

As he'd hoped, half the swarm was indeed following him, and once he had enough space to work with, he turned to face them.

He intended to add all of them to his collection this time.

But he knew that they were agile little buggers and that they had grown wise to his tactic of trying to capture them. Whenever they noticed him resorting to that strategy, they countered by scurrying underground again, which made them almost impossible to keep track of.

He had to disrupt their movement, prevent them from digging. And he had an idea in mind.

He could just send them all flying, first."

"2410

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Amid the treetops, Hector stopped and waited for the spawn to close in a bit more. It would make his job easier if they weren't quite so spread out.

But to his surprise, they hesitated.

They'd just been chasing him like bloodthirsty animals a moment ago, but now they were keeping their distance.

He still seemed to have their full attention, though. Hector could sense that their heads were pointed in his direction. They hadn't lost track of him or gotten distracted by something else.

So what the hell was going on?

Were they... scared of him? Because he'd suddenly stopped running, and they didn't understand why?

They suspected he might up to something? Were they really that smart?

Well, Chort probably was, even if they weren't.

Hmm.

Hector kept waiting, wanting to be patient, but he knew this couldn't go on for too much longer. If they didn't make a move soon, then he would have to.

Slowly, they began surrounding him. They formed two lines, one closer and one farther, before the front line finally converged on him.

How cautious. And annoying.

But oh well. He decided to take what he could get.

When the front line drew near enough, Hector summoned iron all the way up from ground, filling the whole area with one enormous platform that shot the entire line of monsters high up into the air, far above the trees.

And Hector launched himself after them. He intended to capture every single one before they could hit the ground again.

They toppled and spun and thrashed helplessly in midair, even spitting fire and acid onto each other, but none of that could prevent him from adding them to his collection. In rapid succession, iron walls clapped around each of them and were drawn into orbit around Hector."

"2411

It was already a lot to keep track of, forty or so cubes in orbit around him, all carrying deadly monsters inside them. And there were still more waiting down below, not to mention all the ones who were attacking his companions.

He stayed up in the air on a small, hovering platform. It was a bit precarious, but the wind wasn't disrupting his balance. The Scarf informed him that the wind was breaking on the enormous cluster of moving cubes around him.

Unfortunately, that cluster was also reducing the Scarf's range. The chaotic swirls of air around weren't blocking his sense completely, but they were definitely having a deleterious effect on the Scarf's ability to detect things farther away. Hector had to move northward before Chort's location disappeared from his mind.

And there was another problem, wasn't there? If he descended back down into the forest again, the orbit of his cubes would undoubtedly be obstructed by the sheer density of the foliage. It hadn't been so bad when it was only a few cubes in orbit, but now he required quite a bit of space to move around.

The spawn down below were transforming, Hector sensed. More and more of them were growing wings, and he figured that he would soon have company up here.

Hmm.

He decided to head toward Chort. The spawn would give chase, and he could deal with them on the way. It was actually better if they attacked him in the air, he thought, since it meant that he wouldn't have to deal with the forest.

But he was expecting a new tactic from them, too. They'd been adapting nonstop to the fight, both physically and strategically, so he doubted that dealing with the next wave of them was going to be as simple as the first.

And indeed, he was soon proven right."

"2412

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Their wings were larger than the previous iteration of flying spawn. They were faster now and seemingly more organized as well. They snaked up into the sky in a spiraling formation, arching toward Hector-- with the ones in front spewing acid for good measure.

Hector narrowly avoided them on their first pass, and they still clipped a couple of his cubes, disrupting the flow and his concentration for a moment, throwing him briefly off balance. He could sense the giant flying spiral curving back around for a second try, too.

But there was even worse news.

In a background thought process, he was trying to keep track of everyone else, including Roman, who'd been quite busy this whole time trying to keep those damn clouds from regathering. And he'd been doing a good job, as far as Hector had been able to tell, even managing to occasionally zoom down and help the others. He was even coming to help Hector now, for which Hector was grateful.

The problem was that there was a second group of clouds forming to the north, closer to where Chort was currently located.

And Roman obviously didn't know that. Voreese probably couldn't sense it, either, thanks to the Beast's aura.

So when Roman flew in and shattered the enemy's formation like a brick through glass, the first thing Hector tried to do was direct him north, but the wind at this altitude was howling too greatly. The monsters were still hounding them. And forty cubes were still orbiting Hector.

It was all too crazy. Roman battered a few more winged monsters and zipped off again, going in completely the wrong direction.

Hector saw no choice.

It was far away, but he had to try. He summoned all his concentration and launched a monster-filled cube at the second grouping of clouds. Then he launched another. And then a few more.

They all missed. They did, however, attract a few lightning bolts from the previously dark clouds."

"2413



((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

That was not what Hector wanted to see. The first group of clouds had never developed lightning at all, so these must have been even further along than he'd feared.

Hector had to get closer, but the swarm of spawn around him weren't making it any easier. It had quickly become apparent that he could not outmaneuver them up here. His aerial movement was not up to snuff for this fight, he knew. Not only was it almost impossible to box these new winged spawn in, but even just coating them in iron was too difficult.

He could at least deal with it when they tried to surround and overwhelm him, though. After having their formation broken by Roman, they were chaotic and tried to simply rush him, which was nothing that a few giant walls of outward-moving iron couldn't handle. It didn't stop them, of course, but it kept them at bay while he progressed toward Chort.

That didn't last long, though, and he found trouble again when they resorted back to that same aerial drill technique. As expected, a simple wall couldn't stop that. It barely put a dent in their formation before they came barreling through.

He managed to slide out of the way again but not without losing even more of his cubes this time. He growled under his breath, beginning to wonder if it wouldn't be better to just ditch his collection yet again and return to the ground.

Or maybe that wouldn't be necessary. He was close enough now. He could clear a path through forest for himself. A path to Chort.

A hulking iron plate materialized and fell, with him and the flying spawn in pursuit.

It crashed into the ground with the force of a meteorite, causing a large chunk of the Imara Forest to flex and depress under its weight."

"2414

Hector hit the iron ground running, having added a slightly grainy texture to it so that he wouldn't slip.

Chort was straight ahead and clearly saw him coming, because somehow, the creature had managed to lob a truck-sized boulder directly at him.

With the Scarf, though, Hector had the spatial awareness he needed in order to know the perfect timing for this problem. Instead of dodging out of the way, he raised an equally large column of iron up from the path he'd already made--and he did so at the precise moment that the boulder passed over it.

The giant rock was batted cleanly away to the west like a baseball, and Hector could keep running forward without slowing down.

Those dark clouds above were still on his mind, too. They were looking more dangerous than ever. He could sense the wind bending around them, forming the beginning of a twister, and there were visible electric sparks brewing near in the center.

Hector stayed the course toward Chort, but he felt like he could spare another cube along the way and decided to launch without even looking, using only the Scarf for guidance.

His aim was dead on this time. It would've hit, if a sudden crowd of five winged spawn didn't get in the way. The cube had enough force behind it to reduce them all to chunks of flesh falling out of the air, but their sacrifice indeed managed to knock it off course.

Electricity leapt from the cloud again to strike the cube as it passed. The thin blue bolt fractured into a dozen smaller ones and fried the sundered monster chunks, crackling loudly even at this distance.

If those sparks developed into full blown lightning, it would be a serious problem. This wasn't like his fights with Karkash. Garovel wasn't here to heal him. Hector didn't know if he would be able to take a direct hit and keep going afterward."

"2415

that lightning did arrive later, but with so much going on around him--Chort in front, dozens of spawn in pursuit, over thirty cubes swirling around him, and the wind picking up like crazy--Hector honestly wasn't sure if those rods actually got materialized or not.

Chort melted in the forested background, disappearing from normal sight, but Hector was hardly using his eyes, anyway. Whether it was camouflage or true invisibility didn't matter. Hector could still sense the bastard.

And most importantly, he could sense that the Beast of Lorent was not trying to use this tactic to hide.

Rather, it was charging him. Hoping to take him by surprise, perhaps.

The only thing that surprised Hector, however, was how stupid that strategy seemed. Did Chort really not yet realize that it couldn't hide from him that way?

Hector didn't want to launch a cube at the Beast, though. It may have been his most powerful technique, but it hadn't worked on Chort thus far, and Hector didn't think this time would be any different. Most of all, he didn't want the impact to knock Chort away again. He'd had enough of this chase.

So he tried a cage, instead, combined with an iron coating.

Unfortunately, the coating didn't quite take. Only a few specks actually managed to materialize on Chort's body, and the cage was barreled through like it was made of cardboard.

And Chort had more electricity for him, this time spewing forth from its gaping maw as it closed in on him.

That proved about as effective as Hector's cage did, though. Instead of catching him, the sparks caught on the cubes and bounced between them harmlessly before ultimately discharging into the ground.

Huh.

Hector wasn't too sure what to make of that, and neither did Chort, by the look of it.

They had a kind of awkward staredown for a moment as they both considered their next move. Even Chort's spawn decided to pause, apparently also affected by their master's confusion."

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 2 of 10))~~  
In the downtime, Hector dematerialized the broken cage, not wanting to worry about hitting volume limit again.

He could see now why a cage had been a dumb idea. In order to a keep a big monster like Chort in captivity, the whole cage would have to be extremely sturdy. There was too much opportunity to break through.

Perhaps something smaller and sneakier was the ticket.

Like chains.

Those could obviously be broken, too, but if he managed to snake them around just the right part of Chort's body at just the right moment, they could become disproportionately effective, couldn't they? And if he used a lot of them, then... hmm.

It seemed like the offspring were ready to move again, getting antsy, but Chort took the opening to speak. ""I fear this battle may never end, Hector.""

""Well, you could always surrender.""

Chort's body was bulging and growing--transforming again. The Beast was bigger than an elephant now, maybe even two. ""And what would that look like? What would you do with me and my spawn?""

Interesting questions, but there was something more pressing on Hector's mind. ""Stop those clouds from gathering, and we can talk about that.""

""I think not.""

Hector didn't intend to humor this any further. Chort was just buying time. Hector materialized iron shackles around each one of Chort's six amphibious legs and chained them to trees or the ground.

Chort immediately struggled and began breaking them, so Hector added more. More shackles. More chains. And even more layers of iron to the chains that hadn't immediately broken.

He materialized a big iron block above Chort's body, too. He didn't expect it to do much, but even if it only managed to stun Chort for a moment, that would be enough. He just wanted to seal the Beast's movement.

Unsurprisingly, the spawn were all over him now."  
"2417

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 3 of 10))~~  
The monsters were clambering through the orbiting cubes like monkeys trying to tumble over an obstacle course. Some had shrunk down to a smaller form and lost their wings, perhaps in an effort to better slip through the openings.

Hector wasn't trying to smash them with the cubes, though. Just the opposite, in fact. Any time one of them made contact with a cube, he made the iron morph around their body and absorb them. The cubes were already occupied by other monsters, and Hector didn't mind doubling up the occupancy. He had to make some of the cubes larger than the others, but they could be split up and equalized later. And for now, it wasn't that much more trouble to keep track of in his head, he felt.

The fleet of orbiting metal around him was quickly growing. And these cubes weren't exactly small, either. Sure, he'd practiced this technique quite a lot, recently, but even still, Hector didn't know how many of these he would be able to maintain before things would begin to crumble.

In his training, he'd been able to keep upwards of four hundred little iron satellites before losing track of them, but those cubes had been no bigger than mice. These ones were the size of ponies, or even full-sized horses some of them. He had to be approaching that limit soon, right?

And of course, there was still Chort to worry about. The Beast of Lorent clearly did not appreciate the iron chains that kept materializing and latching onto it. Chort's body was shifting again, its limbs becoming slimmer and bonier, perhaps in an attempt to help it wriggle free without having to break all that iron.

Then it did something Hector hadn't seen it do before. A huge, gangly hand with long claws appeared from its portly body--seemingly out of its back--and slashed the air.

And the air shuddered visibly."

"2418

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 4 of 10))~~  
A pitch black sliver appeared there in midair, darker than even the night around it. Hector didn't get long to wonder what the hell it was for, because Chort's spawn came pouring out of it.

They hopped onto Chort's body and scuttled across it, tugging at the iron chains, trying to remove them. These spawn were smaller than the one currently assailing Hector, looking more like the group that had been fighting Salvador and the others. And indeed, Salvador himself came bulldozing through the apparent portal as well.

The big man fell on the bigger Chort like a sack of bricks. He was obviously confused as what was happening, but that didn't stop him from thrashing around like a wild bull, swatting spawn from atop Chort's and wrestling with the giant claws that were there, too.

So Chort really did have some kind of teleporting capabilities. If Hector's attention wasn't already so thoroughly occupied, he might've wondered if that was thanks to the Chort's aura or just an innate ability--or perhaps some combination of the two.

The portal wasn't closing. More spawn came through, along with Matteo Delaguna.

Hector was almost done clearing a path for himself through the crowd of spawn around him, and he would soon be able to provide much better assistance to his two allies over there, but for now, it was all he could do to keep adding chains to the flailing pile that already covered Chort.

It was like watching the world's most insane rodeo show. Chort tried to buck the two of them off, but somehow, they were both able to hold on, even when some of the Beast's spawn went flying away instead.

Then Salvador's fist glowed brighter than even the moon, lighting up

the whole area around him, and he punched a hole straight through Chort's back."

"2419

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 5 of 10))~~  
Chort's whole body heaved more violently than ever, and the Beast of Lorent rolled over, iron chains yanking up dirt and rocks and even entire trees in the process.

Salvador and Matteo toppled off its back and landed hard on Hector's iron pathway. A surprising amount of Chort's blood splattered off of Salvador's still-burning hand, which left a sizzling imprint in Hector's metal as the man pushed himself back onto his feet.

Chort just kept rolling, though, having apparently decided that it was a good strategy. It kept growing in size, too, and Hector was reminded of those satellite photos that had shown a creature as big as a building. He didn't get long to dwell on it, though.

And that was when the lightning began to arrive.

It was so fast, bright, and loud that Hector didn't even realize what had happened at first. It wasn't until he turned and saw a smoldering iron pylon, still trembling after the strike.

Ah, so those lightnings rods did actually get materialized after all. There were four of them, and they were about three times as tall as the trees around--which was important, because the height mattered much more than the fact that they were metal. The lightning would go for whatever the tallest structure was.

Hector could only hear ringing now, but he was fairly certain that his eardrums hadn't ruptured. He'd felt that before. Hopefully, the civilians were okay.

He sensed, however, that one of his allies was not.

Pauline Gaolanet was falling out of the air. Her wings limp, arching upward. She wasn't moving at all.

Fuck!

He feared the worst as he blasted away from the ground to go catch

her. Through all the chaos of the fight, he'd completely lost track of where she'd been. He told her he'd keep her safe. And now she was--

He caught her with an iron cradle and pulled her close. He had to widen the orbit of the cubes in order to make space for her huge body, but he didn't really give a shit about the added difficulty, right now. He had to set her down somewhere."

"2420

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 6 of 10))~~  
He needed to concentrate. There was no time for frustration or insecurity. These were the moments that determined life and death. Hector knew them well. His decisions now were critical.

Her invisibility was entirely gone, but she was still breathing. Hector could sense that much, at least. Air was flowing in and out of her beak.

Was she just unconscious?

He had no real idea of how durable Sparrows actually were. From his conversations with Hanton, it had seemed like they were fairly vulnerable, but that was only in comparison to servants. Compared to regular humans, they could've still been much more resilient, right?

He hoped so.

Why was there nowhere to fucking land?!

The iron pathway that he'd made earlier was crawling with spawn, not to mention Chort, so he didn't want to go back there.

Fuck it.

He materialized a second iron plate and dropped it straight down. The forest made way with crashing force, and Hector descended again, raising another lightning rod behind him as his armored feet touched the iron floor.

He set her down and dematerialized the cradle around her.

Now what the fuck was he supposed to do?

She was safe for the moment, but did she need medical assistance?



And if so, who the fuck could provide it? Agh.

The fight was still raging out there. He sensed it. Salvador and Matteo were clashing with dozens of spawn, and Roman seemed to have taken notice of the second group of clouds now. The lightning strike must have tipped him off.

Chort was closing in, rolling through the forest like a giant bowling ball, headed straight for him.

Good.

Right now, Hector was more than fine with that.

He had over sixty of Chort's spawn in orbit around him, at the moment. And they all began speeding up in unison."

"2421

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 7 of 10))~~  
Thus far, this technique hadn't been having the desired effect on the Beast of Lorent. Every time previously that Hector had used it, Chort had either caught it or recovered from the impact shortly thereafter. Hector had to step his game up somehow.

And he had an idea.

Temperature manipulation was still a fairly tricky thing for him, but he'd been getting a lot of experience with it in his more recent training sessions with Zeff. While he suspected the colder temperatures would have more of an effect on Chort in terms of slowing it down, he also knew from trial and error that his iron would become structurally weaker when frozen.

On the opposite end of the heat spectrum, though, Chort and its spawn hadn't seemed particularly affected by higher temperatures--at the beginning of the fight, at least. Some of them had even been breathing fire. But that most recent strike from Salvador had clearly achieved something. Maybe that had just been the result of the Lord Delaguna's undead strength, but Hector was prepared to give it a go.

Heat was all relative, anyway. If their previous attempts to burn the enemy hadn't been effective, then maybe they just needed to go even hotter.

Molten iron was something that Hector had wanted to do for a long time but had only recently had the both the skill and opportunity to test out. It hadn't exactly gone well. He'd scorched his right arm and neck, and he'd dealt with stinging pain there for days after Garovel had healed him. He had technically pulled it off, though. Just not elegantly.

Maybe it was a bad time to be conducting tests like this, but that wasn't what was going through his head, right now. He just wanted to do as much damage to Chort as he could possibly imagine."

"2422

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 8 of 10))~~  
For Hector, temperature required a kind of 'emotional command' to be given to his iron. An impassioned demand in his mind, merged with his materialization. And fortunately, he did not need to try very hard to summon that emotion.

But he tried hard, anyway.

The anger was already there, just waiting to be used, but he wanted more. He wanted true heat. The melting point of iron was a staggering 1,538 degrees Celsius. And in order for his iron to come out fully melted and not just all weird and bendy in the process of melting, he wanted to surpass that number by a good margin. So he didn't hold back.

With all of his concentration, he gave that command. And every single cube began to fill with iron as their speed increased more and more. He could see them already beginning to glow. He could feel the heat already surrounding him, clashing with the cool nightly wind.

Chort was close enough.

Hector launched them all in rapid succession, fired off like gigantic rounds from a minigun.

Chort took the first one straight on while rolling, but that was all Hector got to see before the stream of molten cubes began explosively colliding with the monster. Dust filled the darkened area in an instant, though it was quickly joined by orange, gooey iron spewing high up into the air and all around with volcanic fury.

The explosions just kept going. The cubes were the cars of a freight train, unrelenting for a solid minute straight until they were finally all spent, leaving Hector standing there alone, looking over the obliterated scene before him.

The forest was on fire on both sides of the path, and scores of trees had been felled by sheets of molten iron that splashed over them."

"2423

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 9 of 10))~~  
Hector could still sense Chort's spawn across the battlefield, but they had all stopped moving and were looking in Hector's direction. The other servants weren't wasting the opportunity and had started pummeling them or shredding them or freezing them, but Hector had to wonder if any of that was even necessary at this point.

Through the persistent cloud of dirt, he couldn't tell what had become of Chort yet. He was reluctant to believe that the Beast of Lorent was dead, just because of how much of a resilient bastard the thing had been up to now, but on the other hand, that attack would've killed most things that Hector could imagine.

He annihilated the scattered remnants of his metal, including the molten parts, wanting to get a better look, and as the dust began to clear, Chort's hulking, unmoving body came into view.

Hmm.

According to the Scarf, Chort wasn't breathing, but now that he was thinking about it, Hector wasn't sure that Chort had been breathing beforehand, either. It was a being of Chaos or whatever, wasn't it? Did it even need air? Eh, maybe it did. Maybe he was worrying for no reason.

'Agh...'

The voice in his head was familiar, and Hector's attention was drawn to the fallen Sparrow behind him who had begun to stir.

Hector divided his focus again and went over to her, keeping part of his mind concentrated on what the Scarf was telling him about Chort-- which at the moment, was nothing.

Pauline moved slowly, attempting to ease herself back onto her feet already.

Hector wanted to help her, but he wasn't sure what to do or even what to say, for that matter.

Her feathers ruffled as she shook her head and turned her avian gaze toward Hector. 'What in the world happened...?'

"2424

~~((The National Chocolate Pudding Day Special -- page 10 of 10))~~  
"'I'm not entirely sure myself,'" said Hector, "'but I think you were struck by lightning.'"

'Ah...'

""...How are you feeling? Can you still move everything?""

She let out a kind of chirpy groan and began testing all of her limbs. 'Bit groggy. Slight headache. But everything still seems to be in working order.'

""Really?"" Hector was not able to conceal the surprise in his voice. ""I don't think a normal human would be able to walk away from a lightning strike that easily...""

She stood up more rigidly, perhaps to demonstrate her wellness. 'Worry about me later. What happened to the Beast?'

Hector thumbed back behind him, toward Chort's motionless figure. The woods were still on fire around it, but Roman had arrived and was dampening the flames with his ability. The Rainlords were slowly coming closer, too. They seemed to have captured the remaining spawn and were pulling them along, but they were clearly still wary of being attacked again. 'Is it dead?' said Pauline.

""I can't really tell,"" said Hector. ""Can you?""

'Hmm.' Pauline started waddling stiffly over to it.

Hector made sure to stay in front of her. He was still paying close attention to Chort's body via the Scarf, wanting to discern anything he

could. The flow of air around it was a bit confused, perhaps due to lingering heat distortion, but Hector was fairly certain that he could sense several large holes that had not previously been there.

Holes about the size of the cubes he'd launched at it.

Given the many explosive impacts he'd witnessed, Hector would've imagined that Chort's body would've been more shredded than this, but it looked more like some of the cubes had gone straight through.

As they got closer, Hector was able to use his eyes more, and indeed, he could see the steam rising off of the creature in the moonlight, as well as the scorch marks all over Chort's body.

Hmm."

"2425

Considering how hot that molten iron was, the fact that it had only left scorch marks was a testament to how resistant Chort was to heat.

What a tough bastard.

Pauline was being awfully quiet, though, Hector thought. ""So? Sense anything?""

'Ah. Yes, the Beast's aura is almost entirely gone now,' she said.

Hector found that answer unsatisfactory. ""Almost?""

'It is still dwindling,' she elaborated. Her eyes went to some of the smaller monsters that were currently being dragged closer by Salvador and Matteo. 'But I suspect that its aura will never truly disappear so long as its spawn remain.'

Salvador and Matteo seemed to have heard what she said as well, because they both turned to eye the critters, too. Then they went back to staring at the Sparrow.

No doubt, they had questions, but they weren't posing them yet.

Mevox was less reserved, though. 'What the fuck is goin' on around here, huh?! Someone please explain, because I am confused as shit, right now!'

Salvador began talking to his reaper, who was still attached to his shoulder, but the man didn't even get a full sentence in before Roman flew down and landed on the other side of Chort's charred corpse.

Which, of course, allowed Voreese to join the conversation. 'I second that motion! Someone tell me that this shit is finally over! Because that fight was all kinds of fucked up, and I hated every second of it!'

Hector did his best to do so, but he couldn't fully confirm that the matter was indeed settled without reiterating what Pauline had just said. The reapers didn't seem to know what he meant by 'auras'--and hell, neither did he, really--but now didn't seem like the best time to try opening that can of worms.

'Okay, okay, so what you're basically saying is that's it's dead, but not really,' said Mevox, 'and that we need to kill its stupid murder-babies in order to finish it off, right?'

'That is one way of putting it, yes,' said Pauline."

"2426

'Well, great,' said Voreese. 'Let's get to it, then. Kill away. And then we can get the hell out of this horrible place.'

Matteo's reaper, Ernivoc, who rarely ever spoke up in these group conversations, decided to do so now. 'Would that be the wisest course of action?' he said. 'We have the creatures subdued. Would it not be better to take them back to Warrenhold for further study?'

There arrived a brief silence.

The reapers looked like they were about to launch into a debate, but they didn't get the chance, because Fidel Blackburn and Carlos Sebolt soon arrived with the Lorentians--all of whom looked shaken and exhausted.

Hector turned to his head slightly and noticed that Pauline had rendered herself invisible again. Probably for the best, he figured. The Rainlords, Hector had at least informed about Pauline's presence back at the airport, but the Lorentians would no doubt be utterly confused if they saw her.

Fidel and Carlos made way for Secretary Karr and Ambassador Stoutamire to come forward, apparently to speak to Hector again.

The Secretary's gaze lingered beyond Hector, on Chort's corpse.  
""...The deed is done, then? We are safe?""

All eyes were on him again, Hector knew. He wanted to be careful with his words. ""We're still deciding what to do with the remains, but yes, you're safe now.""

The woman breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't quite have the same composure now that she'd had when Hector had first met her, but that was certainly understandable.

""Thank you, Lord Goffe,"" she said, the sincerity clear in her voice.  
""And company. You saved our lives. And slew the Beast of Lorent. Every single one of you is a hero to the nation.""

And Hector felt abruptly like he would've a year ago, having zero idea how to respond. He was sure that he'd been getting better about handling conversations, but heartfelt compliments were still like daggers in the gut to him."  
"2427 -- CCXXIX.

Thankfully, Hector was still wearing his armor, so no one would could see how dumbstruck and embarrassed he was all of a sudden.

It still left a gap in the conversation, though, as everyone seemed to be waiting for him to say something. When he didn't, Secretary Karr picked things back up herself.

""I assure you that your efforts here tonight shall be well-rewarded once we return to P.J.,"" she said.

At first, Hector wasn't sure what she was talking about and nearly asked who P.J. was. He caught himself, though, when he recalled his recent study of Lorentian geography.

The Imara Forest filled much of the country and encompassed several large cities, one of which was the capital: Riverton, P.J.

He remembered thinking what a strange name it was for a town, much less the capital of the nation. P.J. stood for Pori Johari, which was the

town's original name before it became the capital and started attracting many politically important residents. Why ""Riverton"" had been added to the name, Hector hadn't been able to discern, but given what the Secretary just said, the locals were still referring to it as P.J. for short, anyway.

And apparently, that was where they were headed next.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Nine: 'O, guardians from afar...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Raul Blackburn was looking through his binoculars again. That was pretty much all he'd been doing, lately. It was hard not to be discouraged or distracted after hours of seeing literally no changes whatsoever, but he didn't intend to slack off now. This mission had already gone wrong in too many different ways. He wasn't about to add to their problems due to his own inattention or laziness.

Their raid on the little town of Miro had turned into a veritable siege. Which was a particularly strange situation, considering there were only seven of them here, not including the reapers."

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"2428

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Their initial hopes of going in there hard and fast and freeing all the hostages, including Raul's two brothers, had not panned out. Their first battle with the Abolishers in Miro had developed into a true battle of attrition. Even with Cousin Melchor, Leo, Diego Redwater, and the Lady Evangelina Stroud working together, the Abolishers currently residing in Miro had proven to be quite the pain in the neck to deal with, and after nearly an entire twenty-four hours of fighting with not a single servant being taken down on either side, the Rainlords decided to withdraw and rethink their strategy.

Now they were playing the waiting game, watching for any sign of movement or change in that little town over yonder.

If any of the Abolishers tried to flee Miro, the Rainlords would pounce

on them. Even if one of their reapers tried to escape underground, they wouldn't be able to get away.

The Rainlords hadn't set up a soul net to catch them, but with Raul's power, digging was exceptionally easy, and now Diego, the Lady Stroud, and the two younger Blackburns, Dino and Rafael, were all down there in a huge cavern below Miro, just waiting for a reaper foolish enough to try to slip past them.

That left Raul up here with Cousin Melchor and Leo. If needed, they could join the others underground very quickly, but Raul had a feeling that Abolish wasn't going to make a move any time soon.

If he were in their position, right now, he would probably just try to stall long enough for reinforcements to arrive. No doubt, there were plenty more members of Abolish here in Vantalay who could show up any day now.

Which meant that the Rainlords were at a disadvantage now. If they didn't launch another attack soon, then the next battle would only get harder."

"2429

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

The real problem, though, was the hostages. The entire point of storming the town in the first place was to rescue them, and Abolish seemed to know that. In fact, the battle had at first been going in the Rainlords' favor--slowly, but surely--until the Abolishers started bringing out hostages and using them as distractions and meat shields.

After that, it gradually turned into a stalemate.

Now, Raul honestly wasn't sure what their next move was. Logic dictated that they had to be the ones to instigate, but what was the best approach?

If they could just pick one of them off... or isolate them, maybe. That might free up some new angles of attack. There were only eight total Abolishers in the town, but they were all quite powerful, it seemed. And worse, they weren't stupid.

As for their own little trio here, they were taking turns observing the town, two at a time with one person allowed to take rest. For the past few hours, it had been Raul and Leo together with Cousin Melchor sleeping.

Orric was assisting as well, though his job was mainly to keep an eye on their immediate surroundings with his soul sense. If someone was approaching, the reaper would likely be their first warning.

It was a bit strange having only one reaper here between the three of them. Raul had heard that Leo was having certain difficulties with his reaper at the moment, which was unfortunate, and Raul's own reaper, Arumoro, was still all the way back in Warrenhold.

He might've appreciated his input and observational support right about now, but the others had decided that bringing him all the way to Vantalay was simply not worth the risk. And Raul couldn't really argue with that. Without the ability to enter a hyper-state with him, it truly would've been exposing him to danger needlessly."

"2430

Additionally, it was hypothetically helpful for Arumoro to remain at Warrenhold so that the reaper could relay any new information from his brothers' reapers.

The reason that was hypothetical was because their reapers had not received any updates from them in several days, which suggested that their brains were most likely frozen somewhere

Leo, for his part, wasn't much for conversation--which shouldn't have been surprising, Raul supposed. He'd heard through the grapevine that Leo was actually a bit of an oddball, but Raul hadn't seen it. Thus far, the man had been all business.

And of course, that fight with Leo in Capaporo was still on Raul's mind. Having witnessed that horror show firsthand, seeing all of his brethren cut down and taken captive by this man--that was sort of thing that left a lasting impression.

But then again, Leo did look like a different person, now. What a difference a clean haircut and suit could make.

Honestly, it still boggled Raul's mind how a person like this--who'd been such a terrifying enemy not so long ago--could have been recruited to their side.

Lord Goffe really was incredible.

All the more reason not to let him down, Raul thought.

Leo's turn to rest soon arrived, and Raul moved to wake Cousin Melchor. As they were transitioning, however, Orric spoke up.

'I sense someone is approaching from the southwest,' the reaper said. 'Six souls. Three are reapers, I think. I don't recognize any of them.'

Miro was to the north, and if Orric didn't recognize them, then they couldn't have been any of the enemies that they'd already fought.

It could've been a group of Abolish reinforcements, though. In fact, that seemed the most likely.

""Are they on foot?"" said Cousin Melchor.

'No, they're flying. And at a very low altitude, so I don't think they're in a plane, either.'"

"2431

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""They're headed straight for us?"" said Leo. ""Like they can sense our location?""

'Hmm, no,' said Orric. 'Look like they're closing in on the westernmost fortress you built first.'

Leo had materialized ten different boron structures around the outskirts of Miro.

Nine of them were decoys, all empowered with his soul to throw off the enemy, and whenever the soul infusion began to where off, he would simply destroy his work and recreate it from afar. The man's range was absurd.

The one they were currently using was probably a bit more spacious than the three of them needed it to be, but it was fairly comfortable as

far as impromptu encampments went. And most importantly, it was wedged between two higher-rising hilltops, offering cover on either side while still providing a clear view of the whole town to the north.

'They're going from fortress to fortress,' said Orric. 'They're definitely looking for us.'

Raul couldn't help growing tense as he waited. If it really was Abolish reinforcements, then this was probably going to get very ugly very quickly.

'...But they're not destroying any of the buildings,' the reaper went on. 'And they have a fairly clear path to the town now, but they're not going for it. These people might not actually be Abolish.'

That would be fantastic news, but Raul had his doubts, to say the least. They could've just considered the buildings too time-consuming to take down, and if they were in remote contact with the other hostiles, then there was no reason they would need to go into Miro in order to link up with them.

'Oh? They've stopped. I think they're doing something. Hmm. Can't tell what, though.'

Agh, this waiting was nerve-racking.

A new sound arrive before the reaper said anything more, and the three servants looked around. It was a kind of mechanical hum."  
"2432

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Raul bolted up a boron staircase to the rooftop in order observe the early morning sky over their heads. The sound was growing louder, becoming gradually easier to locate with his binoculars.

He spotted a drone.

It didn't look like a military model, though. And it was coming closer but not in a straight line. It looked more like it was surveying the area.

With their little fortress wedged between two hills, they were probably a bit difficult to see. The drone would have to turn its camera at just the right angle. Even if it was one of those models with a 360 degree view,

then whoever was looking at the footage would still have a hard time finding them.

If it had infrared, though, then that might be a problem.

Raul reached out with his right hand and touched the rocky face of the hillside there. He concentrated, and a baseball-sized stone came free as he pulled his hand away.

As a teenager, most school sports had been off limits to the Triplets, because their power made it so easy to cheat. The House didn't want him or his brothers making a scene and drawing too much public attention to the Blackburns--or worse, killing someone.

But they'd still played as a form of training with other servants. Their best games, though, had been the ones they played in secret among the three of them. And yeah. They'd accidentally killed each other a few times. Damn, if it hadn't been fun, though.

Raul could easily throw a pitch that would break the sound barrier, but that might be a bit overkill here. The resultant sonic boom would draw more attention to their position, not less.

Cousin Melchor's hand arrived on Raul's shoulder. ""Hold on.""  
"2433

Raul just looked over at him, uncertain.

Melchor wasn't taller than him, and yet it sometimes felt as though he was. Something about the man's presence was always mildly oppressive. As a child, Raul had been terrified of him. It wasn't until he grew older and understood the side effects of very powerful souls that he began to reconsider how he felt about the fabled Darktide.

Also, it didn't help that Melchor was quiet as a mouse when he wanted to be. Someone with that kind of oppressive field density to his soul shouldn't have been able to sneak up on him so easily, and yet it had happened more than a few times.

The drone was still up there, seemingly looking around still.

""Orric,"" said Melchor.

The little ethereal blackbird just nodded and seemed to understand. Reaper and servant moved toward each other, but they were interrupted by the additional arrival of Leo.

""Allow me to check it out,"" the man said.

Melchor's gaze lingered on him. ""It's fine. You should continue keeping watch.""

""No,"" said Leo. ""You shouldn't waste your hyper-state, pal. A materializer can check out that drone more easily than you can.""

Hmm? Was that what Cousin Melchor had been about to do? Use a hyper-state to go investigate that drone up close? That seemed a bit risky to Raul, but then again, knocking it out of the sky with a stone would've probably drawn a certain amount of suspicion, too.

Melchor still had a counterargument, though. ""You're more recognizable than I am.""

""Dunno about that,"" said Leo with a shrug. ""But they've already sensed my soul in the buildings, anyway. It should be me.""

Melchor made no response and merely frowned.

Leo returned a smile. ""Alright, how about this?"" In an instant, black sheets of boron materialized around him, covering his whole body in armor.

Armor that looked... noticeably familiar."  
"2434

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It did seem slightly off, though. Leo pulled up the faceguard on his helmet, but it got stuck halfway and only revealed his mouth. ""Huh. This is a little trickier than I expected. It's my first time making this, though, so. It's pretty close, right?""

Raul, Melchor, and Orric just stared at him.

He took their silent judgment in the wrong direction. ""Okay, look, I'll do a better job next time. I'll have to pay closer attention to how Hector does it.""

He called Lord Goffe by his first name? That was awfully familiar of him. Raul wasn't sure if that was as a good or bad thing.

""We're supposed to be undercover,"" said Melchor. ""You shouldn't be imitating Lord Goffe here in Vantalay.""

""Why not? Oh, you think he'd get mad?""

""I'm more concerned about someone mistaking you for him and then thinking Atreya is involved in this war.""

""Hmm, but he's not that famous yet, right? He's one o' them quiet ones who've been playin' it cool for ages, ain't he?""

""Even so--""

""C'mon, Melk-o, you worry too much. It'll be fine!""

""Don't call me Melk-o.""

""I said it before, didn't I? Whoever's out there has already sensed my soul. Hiding my face at this point is just, like, spitting on a house fire 'r something, so who cares if I have a bit of fun with it? The world could use a bit more fun, don'tcha think?""

Okay, Raul could see now where those rumors about Leo had come from.

""This is serious, Leo,"" said Melchor. ""The mission--""

""I know how serious things are, Melkeesey. That town over there means more to me than anyone else here. Just relax. I got this.""

And without waiting for another word from Melchor, Leo carried himself away on a serpentine column of materialized boron, cutting a path through the air toward the drone."

"2435

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Raul, Melchor, and Orric could only watch.

As soon as Leo got close to it, the drone whirled around to look at him.



Raul expected it to immediately attack or sound an alarm or to hear Orric tell them that the new arrivals were now headed this way.

But none of that happened.

Instead, Leo merely sat there cross-legged on a hovering platform of boron in front of the drone, seemingly inspecting it. He had already dematerialized the column that he'd used, apparently not wanting it anymore.

The drone wasn't moving, either. It just let the black-armored man observe it, like that wasn't a strange thing to do.

Trying to look closer with his binoculars, Raul noticed something on the underside of the drone. Something pointed toward Leo. A faint blue light? Words?

It was a small display. Some kind of computer screen. Leo must have been reading it.

After a short while, Leo held up a single index finger, as if to ask the drone for one moment, and then he stood up on his platform and launched himself off of it back toward the three of them.

He fell with enough speed that Raul thought he would either break all the bones in his body or smash this little boron fortress like a meteor-- or both. But Raul's expectations were again mistaken, because Leo softened his landing at the last moment with another column of boron, though this one had a softer, sandier texture in order to catch him.

And, Raul supposed, the man's passive soul defenses would've been astronomically strong. His body wouldn't be bothered by that kind of violent change in speed at all.

""Okay, so good news,"" said Leo from inside his helmet. ""The folks lookin' for us are from Ridgemark, and they just want to talk. Supposedly.""

"2436

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'Ridgemark?' said Orric. 'Was that all they told you regarding their identities?'

""Yup,"" said Leo. He still wasn't removing his armor. Whenever he moved, it had more of a shifting and scraping noise to it than Lord Goffe's did. ""But I figure it's gotta be the RPMP, right? Other than Abolish, they're the only ones who might have any kind of clue that we're here, yeah?""

'You're probably right,' the reaper said, 'but it's common courtesy to identify yourself clearly before requesting a meeting with anyone, especially a group who may think you are hostile.'

""True,"" said Leo. ""Maybe they've got a little mission of their own, then. One that requires 'em to be a bit sneaky, eh?""

'Hmm.'

There was quiet as the four of them mulled the situation over. The drone had flown away, Raul noticed.

He certainly understood Orric's apparent reluctance in this situation, but at the same time, he felt like they almost had no choice but to go and meet with these people. The battle was currently not going their way. They had to start doing something different if they intended to turn things around.

""So what do you guys think?"" said Leo. ""Should we hear 'em out? I mean, we could just attack 'em, but it seems like that'd be kind of a dick move at this point.""

'Maybe it would, but this a battlefield, and this could be a trap to lure us out into the open,' said Orric.

Leo bobbed his head to the side but made no response.

""Did they provide a particular location in which to meet?"" said Melchor.

""They just said they would wait for us,"" said Leo. ""Guess that means they've already figured that our reaper here knows where they are.""  
"2437

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'Two of you should go,' said Orric. 'The third should remain here in

order to keep an eye on Miro and also to serve as backup in case this meeting turns into another fight.'

""Good thinking,"" said Leo. ""n we should probably inform the other Rainbros, eh?""

'That would be ideal, yes.'

""I can do that for ya.""

'Are you sure? You wouldn't rather go to the meeting?'

""I mean, kinda, sure. But let's be real here, dudes. I ain't exactly the greatest negotiator in the world, y'know? 'n I figure you guys'd probably be more comfortable without me there, too.""

'Hmm, why do you say that?'

""C'mon. You're afraid I'ma do somethin' crazy. Or say the wrong thing 'n botch the meeting. It's okay. I ain't offended. Really.""

Melchor chortled. ""Leo, we're Rainlords. We don't exactly have a reputation for calm agreeableness.""

Leo scratched his lip and shrugged. ""If you say so. Either way, meetings're pretty dull, so just go ahead 'n take the youngin' here."" He eyed Raul. ""You can handle it, right, chief?""

Raul hadn't expected to be prompted on his opinion at all. ""Ah--yes, sir, I believe I can.""

""See that? What a go-getter. Attitude like that, you'll go far, kiddo.""

For some reason, Raul didn't think he really meant that.

Leo didn't give Melchor or his reaper another opportunity to argue with him. The boron beneath his feet disappeared, and he dropped straight down. ""See yaz!""

Raul soon heard drilling noises from below as Leo presumably began tunneling his way toward the others. He exchanged looks with Cousin Melchor.

'Guess that settles that.' Orric latched onto Melchor's shoulder.

They left together.

Orric guided them toward the southwestern most fortress. The terrain was quite rough, and they didn't want Melchor to waste pan-rozum time just to move faster, so Raul cleared a smoother path with his power. A thick layer of top soil slid out of their way, creating a gently arching dirt road for them to jog across."

"2438

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When they arrived, they found three men and three reapers waiting for them just as Orric had said.

They were all casually dressed, but Raul still detected wealth in their clothing. He might not have normally noticed such things, but having spent so much time in Ridgemark over the past few weeks, he'd gained a bit of an eye for expensive brands.

Well, okay, in truth, it wasn't just his time in Ridgemark. It was his time with a particularly nice fashionista named Karina Labeau. They'd made a game out of trying to determine personality types of passersby based on their choice of attire.

Raul didn't know if he believed in it quite as thoroughly as she did, but it had still been quite the informative exercise. Karina had taught him a lot about fashion in Ridgemark and how people used it to distinguish themselves from the crowd in all sorts of ways.

And these three here definitely had money. They may have each been wearing simple black slacks and gray t-shirts, but Raul recognized the silvery collars and subtle, patterned texture in the fabrics. Those clothes were of the Domingo brand, named after a famous Steccati designer. Karina would've been able to name the line they belonged to as well, no doubt, but Raul wasn't quite that advanced.

""Thank you for coming,"" said the foremost gentleman with a slight Valgan accent. ""We understand that this may not be the most convenient timing for you.""

""Who are you?"" said Cousin Melchor.

""I'm afraid that I may not be able to answer that question in such a way as to fully satisfy your curiosity,"" the man said. ""But you may call me Renart. We represent someone from Ridgemark who is interested

in your operation here.""

'Why the need for secrecy?' said Orric.

""Ridgemark has its own power structure,"" said Renart. ""And the competition can, at times, cause difficulty that might otherwise have been avoided with a pinch of forethought or discretion.""

"2439

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""Competition?"" said Melchor. ""I was under the impression that oligarchs of Ridgemark were of unified beliefs.""

At that remark, Renart was silent for a time, merely observing them blankly.

Perhaps he hadn't appreciated Melchor's use of the term oligarch, Raul thought. It did seem like a needlessly provocative choice of word, even if Raul didn't necessarily think it was inaccurate.

""...Some in Ridgemark view Abolish's presence in this country as a necessary evil,"" said Renart. ""Our employer feels differently. As do you, we suspect.""

'We aren't here to run them out of Vantalay for you,' said Orric, 'but yes, we do feel similarly.'

Raul tensed further. He could understand Orric and Melchor's frigid approach to this conversation, but he also couldn't help feeling that being a tad friendlier in tone might be better. They most certainly had seniority over him, though, so he kept his mouth shut.

""Good,"" said Renart. ""In that case, perhaps we can offer some assistance."" He motioned to the man on his right, who was carrying something, but Orric interrupted first.

'You'll have to forgive us,' the reaper said. 'We're a rather untrusting lot. Why exactly does your employer feel so differently about Abolish?'

""Does that question truly need answering?"" said Renart. ""This is Abolish we are talking about.""

'Okay, then why do certain 'others' in Ridgemark not share your

employer's feelings?'

Renart fell briefly quiet again, and he glanced at the reaper attached to his shoulder. ""...I am not sure what relevance that information has to you. Do you think that their views might somehow convince you to change your own minds with regard to Abolish?""

'Hah, not likely,' said Orric. 'But like I said. We're an untrusting lot. We'd like to have a better understanding of things, especially when they pertain to who we're working with and why. Too often, simple misunderstandings cause avoidable problems, wouldn't you agree?'"  
"2440

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Renart's reaper detached from his shoulder and regained the form of a blackbird to Raul's eyes. 'Perhaps our two groups are kindred spirits, because we, too, are rather untrusting. Information regarding the current political state of Ridgemark is highly sensitive and not to be shared carelessly. There are many enemies, both domestic and abroad, who would seek to use such knowledge against us.'

'Your concerns are understandable,' said Orric, 'but I'm afraid we really must insist that you share something more with us. Especially because I suspect that we are already on an uneven playing field, no? You have not sought out our help while having no idea of who we are.'

'Yes,' said the other reaper, and his glowing eyes turned to Cousin Melchor. 'However, we have not asked what your business is in this country. I'm sure a great many people would be interested to know why you are so far from home.'

""Careful, stranger,"" said Melchor with physical weight behind his voice. ""That almost sounded like a threat.""

""I assure you, it was no such thing,"" said Renart. ""My colleague here was merely pointing out the fact that there is much we do not know about you, as well. It may be in both our best interests if we limited the scope of this conversation to the task that is immediately ahead of us.""

More silence arrived as Raul looked between everyone. The air in here was more uncomfortable than ever, even as a golden-orange sunrise

was beginning to fill the dark room with warm light.

Orric was speaking up again--and not with words that Raul wanted to hear.

'No. Not good enough. If that is your criteria for working together, then this is not going to happen. And if there is nothing further, then we will be taking our leave now.'

They waited a moment longer, but when Renart and his reaper said nothing, Melchor turned around and began walking away.

Raul knew it wasn't his place. And he started to follow. But then he stopped."

"2441

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Melchor and Orric stopped as well and looked back at him.

Raul could see the uncertainty on Cousin Melchor's stern face, already mixed with a hint of disapproval.

But he had to do something. He had to.

""This is a rescue mission,"" said Raul as he turned around to face Renart again. ""We are trying to save innocent lives. Not the entire country, maybe, but that is the context of our presence here in Vantalay.""

And again, no one said anything for a time.

Come on, Raul thought. He'd given a little ground, but not enough to be dangerous. These Ridgemarkers could return the favor, at least.

""...And we are trying to do the same,"" said Renart.

Raul took a single step forward. ""We have ample reason to distrust both Abolish and the Vanguard, at the moment. Reasons that... you may have heard about?""

""...Yes,"" said Renart. ""Rumors. Here and there. Of betrayal. On both sides.""

""On one side."" Raul's voice was firm as he stared at the other man.

Renart made no response.

Raul felt Cousin Melchor's hand on his shoulder, felt it silently telling him that he'd said enough.

Fine.

He'd hoped for more, but if these people weren't going to budge, then he didn't see what else could be done about it.

And so, finally, they left the boron fortress behind and returned down the smooth path that Raul had made for them earlier.

It was disappointing. And demoralizing. Raul wondered if there was any way in which that negotiation could have gone differently. Perhaps both sides were simply too stubborn.

Then he heard footsteps behind him.

Renart's group were following them.

Everyone stopped again.

Renart had a box in his hand, no larger than a basketball, and he tossed it to Raul. ""Before you go, take those with you. Do with them as you like.""

Those? Multiple? Raul felt a gap in the box's metallic frame, as well as a broken lock on one side. He pulled the top of the box open and examined its contents.

Rings."

"2442

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There were only four of them, all fastened in tight little wedges while the rest of the box was filled with a pillow-like cushion. Clearly, they were special in some way, but Raul wasn't quite sure how until Orric spoke up.

'These are the remains of an aberration,' the reaper said.



Raul's eyes widened. Now that he was looking at them more closely, they did look like bone. He hadn't realized it at first because of the polished sheen they had, as well as how small and thin they were.

Renart again said nothing.

'Where did you get these?' said Orric.

Raul doubted that question would be answered, but he was wrong this time.

""Abolish,"" said Renart. ""Where else?""

Raul could see the disgruntled expression on Cousin Melchor's face, and indeed, he could even feel a bit of that emotion himself. These Ridgemarkers obviously weren't aware of House Blackburn's experience with aberrations.

Renart seemed mildly confused, perhaps he could sense their displeasure but didn't understand why. The man posed another question. ""Are you familiar with the kind of power that can be harvested from aberrations?""

""...We have heard of such things, yes,"" said Melchor.

""Try them on and see for yourself,"" said Renart. ""They will not come off easily, but the ability they grant should prove very helpful in your mission.""

Raul's jaw clenched as he eyed the rings in the box another time. It was hard not to feel sickened.

All he could think about right now was Ibai.

What if someone out there tried to do this to him? Lord Goffe had told them that he was safe, but... Ibai's power would no doubt tempt many people if they ever discovered that they could ""harvest"" it from him in this way.

'Is something wrong?' said Renart's reaper.

'...No,' said Orric."

"2443

~~((The July 4th Special -- page 8 of 12))~~

""You can consider those rings a gift,"" said Renart. ""Or payment for your mission, if you prefer. Whatever the outcome, they are yours.""

'These must be quite valuable,' said Orric.

'Indeed,' said Renart's reaper. 'If you have some issue with holding onto them, then they would undoubtedly net you a sizable sum from the right buyer.'

Raul doubted that would happen, but there was historical precedent for it, at least. The Rainlords of Sair had often been in the business of selling military equipment to their allies, and Raul was sure that these rings would qualify as such.

With new or rare technology, though, they generally preferred to deconstruct the items for the purpose of reverse engineering and hopefully mass production. If successful, it was much more profitable in the long-term that way.

To his knowledge, they had never really tried to hoard such technology en masse for their own usage before, but that seemed to be changing with these new missions being dispatched out of Warrenhold.

""What ability do these rings possess?"" said Melchor.

""Invisibility,"" said Renart. ""Even from reapers.""

Melchor did not react, though he must have wanted to. Aberrations with invisibility had been involved in the attack on Dunehall. The attack that had been responsible for numerous casualties among the different houses.

The attack that had been responsible for Lord Ismael's death and Ibai's disappearance.

Now Raul really wasn't sure how to feel. Sickened and confused didn't quite seem to cover it. The prospect of striking at Abolish with their very own weapon was certainly... appealing, in its own way. Perhaps too much so.

""I would explain how to use them,"" Renart went on, ""but there is not much to it. Unlike other aberration-harvested items, these are very intuitive.""

"I see," was all Melchor said.

And the thick silence returned, though it was accompanied by a heavy westerly wind now that they were outside."

"2444

~~((The July 4th Special -- page 9 of 12))~~

'You seem to be rather knowledgeable about aberrations,' said Orric.

'Yes,' said Renart's reaper. 'Such information has become crucial, as of late.'

'How do you mean?' said Orric.

'Hmm. You truly have no idea what I am referring to?'

'I'm afraid not. Should I?'

'If you intend to keep participating in this war, then yes. For your own good, you should know much more.'

'Ah,' said Orric, and Raul recognized that ever-so-slightly irritated tone. 'Perhaps you would be so kind as to enlighten me, then, O wise one.'

Renart intervened again. ""My companion here meant no offense.""

'Nor did I,' said Orric. 'I was just wondering if he was good for anything other than running his mouth.'

Yikes, Raul thought.

Then again, he was already holding the rings, so he supposed there probably wasn't much point in holding their tongues any longer.

The other reaper elected not to respond, instead letting Renart handle things.

""...Tell me. What do you know of how this Second Continental War came to pass?""

Orric let Melchor take over, too, and the man angled his emerald gaze at Renart. ""What do you mean?""

""Exactly what I said.""

"I only know what I have heard," said Melchor. "Five nations invaded their neighbors, seemingly without provocation."

"Calthos, Kavia, Orsta, Corrico, and Vantalay, yes," said Renart. "All countries with significant Abolish influence, as I am sure you have noticed."

"Of course."

"And in each of the initial assaults, there were reports of strange or otherwise mysterious circumstances."

"Reports from whom?"

"From those who were present, of course."

"Yes, but how did you come by such intel?"

"It pays to have friends. And to keep your friends paid."

"Cute. Is that a company motto?"

"More like a Ridgemark motto. One that more foreigners should take to heart, in my humble opinion."

"2445 -- CCXXX."

~~((The July 4th Special -- page 10 of 12))~~

'Are you saying that Abolish has been deploying aberrations in large numbers during this war?' said Orric.

"Yes," said Renart. "The invisible ones in particular. That seems to have become a favorite tactic of theirs, especially before an assault. Having their soldiers or saboteurs sneak into a territory and sow discord before striking hard--that has been happening all over the continent."

Whoa.

The Blackburns of course knew exactly what the man was talking about. They'd experienced it firsthand. Suddenly, it was looking like Dunehall had been some kind of trial run for Abolish.

Did they really have that many invisibility-wielding aberrations? Raul

would've expected them to be fairly difficult to come by, but from the sound of it, that wasn't the case. Or Abolish had just devoted a ton of resources to that endeavor.

Either way, it was unsettling.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty: 'Thine ally, thine enemy...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Of late, Emiliana Elroy was even more uncomfortable than usual. She tried to remain focused on her training, but it was difficult. Ever since she had caught wind of another great Eloan war, her mind had been clouded with worry almost all the time.

She'd first heard of it here in the Library, in whispers among Gohvis' followers. And when she'd asked Hector about it via her Shard of the Dry God, he indeed confirmed it.

Her worries had gotten so bad that she had started relegating them to a constant place in the back of her mind. That didn't seem like the proper or healthiest solution to her, but at least it allowed her to think about other things simultaneously.

Sort of.

Too often, her other thoughts twisted back toward those in one way or another. She wondered if this training of hers would be of any use to anyone other than herself, one day."

"2445 -- CCXXX.

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"2446

It didn't help that Gohvis had begun behaving a bit differently lately, as well. His purported reason for even bringing her here to the Library of Erudia in the first place was to 'study their link,' the one that she had apparently inherited from Agam Elroy, but Gohvis had hardly been paying attention to her in the last few weeks.

She didn't necessarily mind that part so much, especially because her training had already progressed enough so that she was no longer concerned that her mutation power would go out of control, but still. She couldn't help growing more and more curious about what he was up to.

From the way Hector had described this Second Continental War, it sounded like Abolish was intimately involved. And Gohvis was one of Abolish's most notorious members. So... was he going to participate in it, too?

Didn't seem like it so far, but maybe he was just preparing or something. She was a little afraid to ask.

Scratch that. She was extremely afraid to ask. No doubt, Gohvis would wonder how she had come to learn of the war in the first place. Maybe he would believe that she'd learned about it from his followers, but she didn't want to risk it.

Chergoa, at least, had talked to her at length about the war, offering all manner of rationale and reassurances. Which Emiliana appreciated. Greatly, in fact. The reaper was good at spinning a tale.

'I'm telling you, this is actually perfect,' Chergoa told her in the echo of privacy. 'I mean, obviously, it's not so great there's a war going on, but you and I are in an ideal position. We're safely tucked away behind enemy lines while still having a means of communication with our allies.'

'...You're saying we can spy on Abolish from here?' said Emiliana, unable to conceal the doubt in her mental tone."

"2447

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'Pretty much, yeah,' said Chergoa.

'But what if Gohvis doesn't even get involved in the war?'

The reaper allowed a beat to pass. 'Well. Yeah. I mean, that would be a bit of a problem for us.'

Emiliana was somehow not surprised by that response.

'But on the bright side,' the reaper went on, 'that would probably be even better for our allies, since it would mean that the Monster of the East isn't one of their opponents.'

Well, that was true, Emiliana supposed. Above all, that was the thing she wanted to avoid most: her father trying to confront Gohvis. After all that he had been through? She couldn't imagine that would result in anything good.

Truthfully, though, a part of her felt as if that meeting was inevitable. She doubted her father would ever give up looking for her. And he was immortal. It might take him many years to find her all the way out here on the dead continent of Exoltha, but she had a terrifying degree of confidence that he would do it eventually.

And when that day came, she wondered if there would be anything she could do save her father's life. Perhaps, she thought, Gohvis might spare him in order to avoid making her hate him. Was that possible?

It was hard to tell anything when it came to what Gohvis was thinking. And it seemed the peak of hubris to assume that he would place that much value upon her feelings.

Unless she tried to win his affection before then.

Which was a similarly terrifying notion. Gohvis did seem to have a certain sense of humanity behind that colossally intimidating exterior, but she was still far from convinced that he wasn't still just as monstrous deep down as his reputation implied. Sure, he was more academically minded than she might have expected, having taken up the charge as the Keeper of the Library, but that didn't mean he was genuinely benevolent."

"2448

The Mad Demon was famously very scholarly, too, and she didn't think that made him any more humane or empathetic, either.



She knew it wasn't quite that simple, though. Gohvis had helped her get a handle on her power. Even if he had kidnapped her, it also wasn't an exaggeration to say that he had saved her life.

Ugh.

What a confusing problem. To feel indebted to someone like him.

Ibai Blackburn had also been acting rather curiously of late. Reading and writing seemed to be all he was ever doing. Apparently, Chergoa had to keep reminding him to eat. His odd behavior had even begun drawing Gohvis' attention. She occasionally saw the Monster looking over his work.

She of course had to ask Ibai about it when Gohvis wasn't around.

""Oh, he was just proofreading for me!"" said Ibai. ""Real generous offer, huh?""

""I... see,"" said Emiliana.

""He's ruthless, though, in his criticism. Doesn't hold back at all. Takes grammar very seriously, that guy. It's super helpful, though. Wouldn't want my readers getting confused.""

""...You have readers?""

""Well, not yet, but one day, maybe. You never know. My work could become posthumously famous! Happens all the time! Wouldn't that be something?!""

And as was often the case since her arrival in this place, Emiliana found herself lost for words.

But Gohvis' interest in Ibai's work also made her curious to read a bit of it for herself. And Ibai was certainly eager to give her the chance.

Only then did she realize that she had no idea what she'd gotten herself into.

There was a small mountain of volumes to choose from. Ibai had only started doing this a few weeks ago, but there were already over twenty books sitting there on the floor by his desk. Emiliana had thought they belonged to the Library, since Ibai's quaint little desk was already surrounded by bookshelves, but no. Those were apparently all his creations."

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They were all handwritten, of course. And all the words were so hastily scrawled that Emiliana struggled to read them.

"I want your honest opinion!" said Ibai. "Don't try to spare my feelings! I'll never improve, otherwise!"

Even as he spoke, Emiliana could see his hand still scribbling.

And abruptly, she felt compelled to ask, "Have you eaten today?"

"Hmm? Oh. Yeah, I think so. If not, I'll get something later."

She frowned. She'd noticed that he was looking a little thinner, recently. And of course, this whole writing craze had only started after Ibai received the news of his father's death.

It was no mystery why Chergoa was constantly fussing over him.

And the reaper was right there next to Emiliana, so when she heard that, she demanded that Ibai take another break and go to the refectory that very moment.

Ibai laughed at her insistence, but he did as she said.

Emiliana intended to follow, but first, she lingered a bit longer in Ibai's tiny, makeshift office. She had no idea how he could work in such conditions. So cramped. And aside from all the books and stacks of writing materials, all he had in here was a small table with a lamp on it--both of which looked so ancient that they could fall apart at any time.

She wondered if there was anything she could do to improve his circumstances. Maybe she could talk to Gohvis about finding him a more spacious work room. Or a computer, at least. Were there even any in the Library? She hadn't seen one, but she'd learned that this building was still hiding plenty of secrets when Gohvis had taken her on that eerie visit to the Weaver.

Which was another thing that had been on her mind a lot: the conversation she'd had with that... creature."

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Even now, she still wasn't sure she understood who or what the Weaver actually was. Emiliana had a vague idea that the Weaver was simply an old mutation user whose mutations had sadly debilitated her to an unrecognizable point, but it also seemed clear that there was more to her than just that. Assuming that part was even correct.

And if that were true, then the implications of it were quite incredible. For one thing, it would mean that mutations could allow for the development of telepathy.

Emiliana was a bit torn. A part of her would've liked to speak to the Weaver again and perhaps learn something more about mutation. Or telepathy. Or Agam Elroy, maybe. But another part of her wanted to stay as far away from her as possible.

Either way, it hardly mattered, because Gohvis wouldn't let her go near the Weaver without him there to chaperone, and he was barely around enough for Emiliana to even ask. Sure, she could try to go and see the Weaver on her own--without his permission--but she had a disturbing feeling that he would find out about it.

Maybe she didn't have to be so afraid of that possibility, though. He obviously cared about keeping her safe, at least for the purpose of continuing his research, so she doubted that he would hurt her.

But still. He was too terrifying. Even if he wouldn't physically harm her, Emiliana didn't wish to anger him and test how 'creative' he might become with his punishment thereafter.

All this business about Agam Elroy had turned him into a constant point of curiosity, though. Especially with regard to the idea that the Weaver had floated to her during their conversation.

The idea that she might somehow harbor Agam's memories in her mind. The idea that Agam himself had been able to remember things he had never personally done or seen before.

Emiliana had given that notion a lot of thought lately, too."

It was a strange thing to attempt, but she had been trying to search her memories for anything that seemed odd. Nothing in particular stood out to her, though, and she didn't even know if she was going about it in the right way. Was there some optimal technique for combing through one's own memories?

She'd started with the earliest thing that she could recall. It was of her mother walking with her through the family's courtyard, showing her the madega tree and talking to her and her two older siblings, Cisco and Gema.

She didn't exactly remember what her mother had said, but it was something about her ancestors, about the importance of that tree and others like it to their family.

Mainly, however, she remembered the tree itself. The huge, gangly branches. Those tiny blue-gray leaves. Endlessly dripping in the rain.

From there, Emiliana had wanted to go through her memories in chronological order, but she found it incredibly difficult to do that. Determining precisely when something had happened was surprisingly... impossible, she felt. Sure, she had a vague idea of how old she'd been in each memory, but actually sorting them all out? No way.

That little realization had caused her some amount of worry. She began to think that might be evidence of the Weaver having been correct about her memories--or worse, evidence of something else being wrong with her mind--but when she'd talked to Chergoa about it, the reaper had told her it was perfectly normal.

And it had taken some convincing over the course of multiple conversations, but Emiliana eventually believed her.

The memory exercise did have one effect for her, however. It made her realize how common madega trees were in her memory. The timeline might've been a bit murky, but those trees were everywhere along it."

"2452

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Granted, there were many madegas in Aguary, where she'd spent her entire life until very recently, so it wasn't like them popping up in her memories was particularly odd or inexplicable--especially given her passion for biology. Plants and animals had always interested her.

Personally, sunflowers were more her thing, but the madegas could be visually striking in their own ways. In fact, one of the more interesting things about them was the subtle differences that they could have with one another. The tree in the Elroy Estate, for example, had very small, fine leaves that looked almost like feathers, whereas the Great Madega Tree at the heart of Aguary had leaves as big as her head.

There were all sorts of variants among them. Darker- or lighter-colored bark. More gnarled-looking branches. Some would flower in the spring despite the neverending rain, and some might even bear fruit.

As far as she was aware, there were mainly just two things that distinguished a madega tree. The teal-colored leaves and the fact that they seemingly couldn't drown no matter how much rain fell. Their gigantic, sprawling root systems extended for miles beneath Aguary and beyond, and the constant flooding below the giant platform on which the city was built never bothered them in the slightest.

It was no wonder why her kin had always placed such reverence on them. She even recalled her father once mentioning that their ancestors used to believe the madegas harbored the souls of their brethren who had passed on. Or at least, the ones who had lived honorably.

Remembering all of that had made her feel even more homesick than usual. She wondered if she would ever see Aguary again. A rather strong part of her didn't think so.

Since then, she had been looking through the Library for a book about madega trees or perhaps about Lhutwē, but she had yet to find either in the literal mountain of books here."

"2453

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Gohvis probably would have been able to help her find a book like that,

but she didn't want to get into the habit of relying on him for book requests. It might make him more interested in what other books she was reading, and she most definitely did not want that.

The only useful thing that she could do here besides train was seek out ancient tomes regarding subjects that Hector Goffe expressed an interest in. He was with her family. He was helping them stay safe. So helping him meant helping them. It wasn't a difficult decision.

She had a terrible feeling, though, that Gohvis might realize that she was aiding someone outside the Library if he started paying close attention to her reading list. She didn't know how Gohvis might realize this, exactly, but it still concerned her, nonetheless. Maybe it was just paranoia on her part. In fact, she hoped it was.

Because no matter what happened, she wasn't going to stop doing it.

It was the only thing that made her feel valuable, like she wasn't just being a burden on everyone else.

Plus, Hector's chosen topics were certainly... interesting. She never would've thought to search for books about lost treasure, but it was a good idea. And the volumes she found typically made for pretty compelling reads when motivated by the idea that she might be helping someone to discover where the treasure in question was today.

One of the books she'd found was titled *The Magnificent Life and Magnificent Times of Unso the Magnificent*, and needless to say, it had left an impression on her. It didn't even have a credits page or date of any sort, so there was no way to know for certain who wrote it or when; but after reading the entire thing, Emiliana harbored a rather strong suspicion that it had actually been written by Unso himself as a kind of self-congratulating autobiography."

"2454

From that perspective, Emiliana found the book hilarious, though not intentionally. It discussed the man's creative process, and it described ad nauseum how he came to develop each of his supposedly supernatural inventions. Those parts, Emiliana didn't fully understand--or even mostly understand, for that matter.

The exposition in that book was some of the most incredible she had ever seen. At first, she'd thought it was written by an actual child. In fact, she would have certainly dropped it before finishing the first chapter if Ibai hadn't recommended it to her beforehand.

How or why he had managed to make it any further through that book, Emiliana had no idea, but regardless, as she'd continued reading, it gradually became clear that, no, these were not the words of a child. The word choice, spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, and capitalization were all over the place; and each chapter seemed to contain at least one rant about someone in Unso's life--usually a woman--who didn't understand him or had wronged him in some way.

But whenever the book got around to the inventions again, the author's technical expertise began to shine through. Even if Emiliana couldn't follow a lot of it, the sections where she could, she found sufficiently impressive.

It was like reading something that had been written by an absolute genius who had somehow never read a single book in his entire life.

Maybe that didn't make sense, but that was the impression that Emiliana had gotten, at least. And of course, books and literacy weren't nearly as common a thousand years ago, so perhaps it was possible. Emiliana just didn't understand how someone could become, of all things, an inventor without relying on any written knowledge for guidance.

And when she thought about it like that, she found the book a little sad, too. How much more brilliant might the man have been if he'd gotten a proper education?

But then she remembered the story at the end of the book about how Unso had once tried to seduce another man's wife with the power of his ""allmytee intelekt,"" only to be chased out of town by the ""ignerent pezentree.""

"2455

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She doubted that she would find a more entertaining book than that one for a good long while.

But in any event, here and now, she decided to grab a couple more of the books that Ibai had written before following him and Chergoa to the refectory.

She read while she walked, now able to divide her attention between the words on the page and the pathway in her upper peripheral vision. She was fully aware of the abnormality of this now, thanks to Hector bringing it up once before.

It was Focus. The ""blessing"" that Rasalased had referred to.

She'd been trying to discover more about blessings as well. In fact, that was perhaps at the top of her priorities now.

But such information was not easy to find. She'd tried to pick up every book she saw with ""blessing"" in the title, but it seemed to be an extremely common word among ancient toms, especially religious texts. Most of them ended up being about moral philosophy or some such thing, and she was frequently disappointed to see that they had absolutely nothing to do with the subject she was actually interested in.

Hector, however, had specifically asked her about a blessing called Domain, so she tried zeroing in on that word as well, and as a result, she had recently found a particularly dense volume of work called The Domain of Gods and Kings by Liam Larutin.

She didn't know why so many of these ancient authors seemed to have alliterative pen names, but she'd begun to think it must have been some sort of fashionable trend.

In any case, she was still trying to make her way through that book. It was absurdly verbose and difficult to wrap her head around, leaving her quickly exhausted each time she sat down to read it. She intended to keep trying, though."

"2456

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From what little she was able to discern, the text seemed to be suggesting that physical space was somehow fundamentally different than was commonly understood, that there was no such thing as ""emptiness"" as far as physical reality was concerned.



Beyond that, though, she was lost. She could hardly even comprehend the sentences that were supposed to explain the justification for that claim. It was written in modern Mohssian, but sometimes, it sure didn't feel like it. Even with a damn dictionary next to her, reading that thing was like pulling teeth.

Which, so far, was one thing that she greatly appreciated about the book that was currently in her hands. It was comprehensible, at least. Ibai hadn't used tons of words that she barely understood.

Or any, for that matter.

Was this a children's book?

Hmm.

She hadn't expected that, but as she thought about it more, that made sense to her. Suddenly, she could very easily imagine Ibai writing stories for children.

This length, though. It was the size of a full novel. She wasn't quite sure how child-friendly that aspect of it was.

But it was certainly nice to read something like this for a change. With all the stuffy, impenetrable crap she had been sifting through lately, this felt like stepping out into a fresh breeze after spending weeks in a musty old basement.

She didn't notice any mistakes in grammar, either.

Hah, wait a second...

Ibai had mentioned Gohvis proofreading some of his work for him, hadn't he?

So did that mean... that the Monster of the East had actually proofread a children's novel?

Just thinking about that possibility amused Emiliana to no end. She'd have to ask Gohvis about that the next time she saw him.

This book, though, was actually quite lovely. The sentences were simple, but they flowed like water, setting up each scene and painting nice, quaint pictures for her in her mind.

In fact... maybe it was a little too lovely."

"2457

As she continued reading, she found herself increasingly enraptured by the text.

And she didn't fully understand why, either.

It was nice, yes, but there was nothing about it that was particularly speaking to her. The text didn't resonate with her like her favorite stories did. It was clearly just too child-oriented for her tastes.

And yet... there was something about it that she couldn't quite put her finger on. An indescribable feeling. A vaguely pleasant swelling in her chest and stomach. A kind of warmth. Enveloping her body as her eyes passed over the words.

She stopped walking in the middle of the corridor and looked up from the novel in order to watch Ibai and Chergoa proceeding on even farther ahead of her.

Ibai wrote this?

She didn't know what to think. What was the best way to describe--?

""Curious, isn't it?"" came the deep and sudden double-voice of Gohvis from behind her.

And she flinched. She'd been trying to stop doing that, trying to get used him sneaking up on her all the time, but it sure wasn't easy. ""W-what's curious?"" she asked, turning around to face him.

If the Library's hallways weren't so abnormally tall, he would've had to hunch over. ""Those books in your hands. You've been reading them, no? You must've noticed it, too.""

What? She couldn't tell if he'd actually answered her question or if he was doing that annoying thing he often did where he would just ignore her and keep asking his own. ""I've, uh... I've only just started reading this one,"" she said, holding up the volume in question.

""Mm. But could you not tell? There is something strange about it.""

She blinked. ""...Yes. I think so.""

Gohvis' glowing red eyes moved to Ibai now, too, who almost out of sight. ""The first known creative works of an aberration,"" he said."  
"2458

""...You mentioned something like this before, didn't you?"" said Emiliana.

Gohvis just looked at her.

""Is this why you expressed an interest in his writing?"" she asked.  
""Because you suspected that he might be able to create something... abnormal?""

""Mm. Such a vague suspicion would make for a rather safe bet, as far as that man is concerned.""

Emiliana supposed that was true. ""...Is there some kind of historical precedent for books like this?"" she asked.

""Books like what, exactly?"" said Gohvis.

Was he toying with her, now? She didn't quite know how to articulate her feelings regarding Ibai's book, and it seemed like Gohvis could tell.  
""Um... hmm.""

Gohvis began walking, which prompted Emiliana to follow. ""Books of a 'peculiar impact' have indeed been known to exist for some centuries. Perhaps longer.""

""Do you, um... know what makes them this way?"" she said.

""Their authors, of course.""

""No, I mean... what is it about their authors that causes this phenomenon?""

The Monster regarded her from the corner of his eye for a moment.  
""There is a suspicion that the first books ever written were like this.""

It took her a second to realize that he'd ignored her question. Why the heck did he have to do that so much? It was really annoying. She wasn't even sure if she should ask another one, now.

""When writing was first invented,"" Gohvis continued, ""it was regarded as a dark art, of sorts. For multiple reasons. The most popular of which was simply that writing, for the first time in history, devalued the importance of one's memory. Many regarded this as an affront against nature or their god, and wars were fought over it.""

What in the world? She had a hard time imagining such a thing.

""One of the lesser known reasons, however, was because written works seemed to have an ability to change people. Sway them. Turn them from their tribe and their people.""

"2459

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""Are you saying that people in ancient times could do what Ibai is doing now?"" said Emiliana.

""Not necessarily, but it is an interesting thought,"" said Gohvis. ""So much knowledge has been lost over the Ages. Even with immortal beings supposedly guarding it. Would it not be nice to imagine that something once lost might have been found again?""

Emiliana didn't know what to say. As usual, she had a thousand questions that she couldn't articulate.

""How is your training progressing?"" said Gohvis.

""Oh, um. Good, I think.""

""Mm.""

Was he waiting for her to ask something else? Argh.

""You are uneasy,"" said Gohvis. It was a statement, said with certitude.

Ah.

Hearing him say that made her even more so. She didn't see much use in trying to lie to him, though. ""...I am. Yes.""

""Why?""

Because there was a giant war going on in Eloa, right now? Obviously, she couldn't say that.

""For a time,"" said Gohvis, ""you seemed to have grown more comfortable here. I assumed it was because your mastery of Sto had granted you some semblance of relief.""

Oh, was he concerned she was struggling with it again? Hmm. She could lie, but... agh, that seemed like a terrible idea. What should she say, though?

Well.

There was always another truth she could rely on.

""I... miss my family,"" she said.

""Mm,"" was all Gohvis said. Again.

There was no obvious way to respond to that, so she didn't even try.

However, the Monster of the East decided to stop walking and look at her. ""You will see them again in time.""

She blinked at that, and her mouth hung open a little. ""...I will?""

""Probably."" And he resumed walking.

What in the world? She hurried to catch up again. ""A-are you saying that you'll eventually return me to them?""

""Mm. Probably.""

"2460

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""Why?"" said Emiliana. ""Didn't you say that you needed to study the anomalous link between us?""

""Yes,"" said Gohvis. ""And once that study is complete, I will not have much reason to keep you here.""

She could hardly believe it. He was saying it so casually, like it was the most normal thing in the world to return a kidnapped prisoner to their

family.

Well, maybe to him, it was.

""However,"" said Gohvis, ""that will most likely be a very long time from now. Your mutations must grow significantly more before the link between us becomes clearer to me.""

Ah...

That made sense. It was only after her power had manifested in the first place that she began seeing those ""visions"" of Gohvis. And that would also explain why he would be interested in assisting her in her training, as well.

A part of her had thought that his motivation in that respect could only have been empathy, that he must have had a humane side to him. But this made sense, too. Much more so, in fact.

It was scholarly interest.

Yes.

She shouldn't get it twisted, Emiliana thought.

And that thought spurred another into her mind.

She was reminded of the conversation she'd had with Gohvis regarding ""the problem of humanity.""

In it, Gohvis had described his worldview to her, at least in part, and explained his feelings regarding the rest of Abolish.

And it had all... mostly made sense to her, but there was one thing that had been bothering her, one thing that she had been trying to work through and find answers for on her own--or if not answers, then at least new questions through which to approach the same subject.

And she had the entire Library at her disposal. So in addition to all of her other reading, she had also been trying to find a text that addressed the issues that Gohvis had expressed to her. She just wanted something that could help clarify and support her own feelings."

"2461

Emiliana didn't know if she had succeeded in that goal yet, but she at least wanted to take a second crack at that conversation with Gohvis.

""There's something I've been meaning to ask you,"" she said. ""A philosophical question.""

Gohvis made no response, perhaps just waiting for her to elaborate.

""...You told me that the reason you side with Abolish is because you think that human beings are a problem by our very nature, didn't you?""

""Yes.""

""And you said that the reason our nature is a problem is because of 'growth,' right?""

""Yes.""

""And... you said that growth is a problem because of conflict. And conflict is--""

""No.""

Emiliana stopped walking. ""What?""

Gohvis stopped as well and turned to her. ""I said that the human need for growth is a problem. And I said that growth requires conflict. But I did not say that growth is a problem because of conflict.""

She blinked, rethinking what she'd been about to say. ""Oh... then I think I've misunderstood what you were trying to tell me before.""

""Mm."" He began walking again.

She moved to catch up. Were they even going to the refectory now? That was where she had been headed, but now he was in the lead.

""So--wait a minute. I thought you were saying that conflict is a problem because it requires instigation and that instigation is self-evidently a problem.""

""No. Growth is what is self-evidently the problem,"" said Gohvis.

""That doesn't seem self-evident at all.""

""No? The world is finite. Growth only ever increases. The clash between the two is inevitable. The problem, therefore, is self-evident.""

Emiliana furrowed her brow, suddenly uncertain. ""But you said all those things before about conflict being bad..."

""Yes. That is how many in Abolish view the problem. Growth requires conflict. Eliminate conflict, eliminate growth. In fact, some consider conflict to be the only problem and think nothing of growth. They make war in order to end war. Noble, in some sense."

""But that's not what you believe.""

""No, it is not, though the end goal is similar, at least in principle.""  
"2462

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""Your goal is to end war?"" said Emiliana.

""Not exactly,"" said Gohvis. ""However, my goal would theoretically make war unnecessary.""

""...You're saying war IS necessary now?""

""Of course. The eternal struggles for resources, security, and power make it so.""

She thought about that for a moment. ""But, I mean, if we are still speaking theoretically, then... cooperation could resolve those issues, too, could it not?""

""Mm. A nice thought, perhaps, but mistaken nonetheless.""

""How?""

""Because betrayal is simply too tempting for some. It is an action that can take its motivation from both emotional thinking and from stone cold reason. The only counters to it are based on either morality or the fear that one might not be able to get away with it.""

Emiliana was beginning to understand. ""...You're saying that you think people are too corrupt.""



""By their very nature, yes.""

""Which is why your goal is to change said nature.""

""Yes.""

They arrived in a large room that was most certainly not the refectory. Emiliana didn't even recognize this place. Much like the main areas of the Library, this room also had several tall bookshelves lining the walls, but they were far fewer in number here. Three long, black tables sat in the center of the room, each one filled with beakers, flasks, microscopes, graduated cylinders, test tubes, and so on.

It wasn't exactly... impressive. The equipment here looked about as sophisticated as what she'd seen in her high school chemistry lab. She did see a couple computers here, at least, which answered an earlier question she'd had, but somehow, she doubted they would have internet access. They looked a bit old, as well.

There was one piece of equipment that caught her attention, though: a cylindrical chamber at the far end of the room, large enough for a person to fit inside. For two people, even."

"2463

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She'd never really seen anything like it before, but judging from the faint, watery stains on its translucent body and the dust all over its metal base, it must've been fairly old.

She was curious to know more about what the function of such a thing might be, but she wasn't yet finished with the subject that they'd been discussing.

""So if the problem is that humans are too corrupt,"" she said, ""then how do you intend to change that?""

""Perhaps you would like to guess,"" said Gohvis as he fiddled with something in the corner of the room.

Her expression flattened. ""I really wouldn't.""

""How are you to learn to think for yourself if I simply tell you everything?""

She resented that question a little. ""I think for myself quite a bit, thank you very much.""

""Oh? Then you should have no problem coming up with potential answers.""

Hmph. He really did know how to be annoying, sometimes.

She tried to think.

If the hypothetical problem was corruption, and the method of resolution was changing human nature, then... what aspects of human nature, if somehow tweaked, could possibly eliminate corruption?

""...Is this where conflict comes back into the picture?"" she asked. ""If you remove the human desire for conflict, then corruption might also be eliminated?""

At that, she saw the Monster of the East stand up more rigidly in his corner of the room. Then his shoulders began to tremble, and she heard a low rumble from him.

Wait, was he laughing?

He was! Quietly, but he was!

""No,"" he said through a subdued chortle. ""Removing all desire for conflict could have any number of unintended consequences. In fact, I'm quite sure that such a change would simply destroy a civilization instead of sustaining it."" He laughed a little more strongly now. ""And coming from a soft heart such as yours, that was a very amusing answer.""

She frowned with frustration. ""Well, then I don't know what answer you're looking for!""

""Mm.""

"2464

Emiliana sighed and allowed herself to fall into the nearest chair. It wasn't very comfortable.

Gohvis finally turned away from his corner, and in his hands was something encased in glass. A tall, flat thing. And quite large as well. As big as Emiliana's whole body, perhaps.

He stepped closer with it, and then she noticed all the tiny shapes crawling around inside it, up and down through snaking tunnels.

It was an ant farm, she realized. The biggest she'd ever seen.

And Gohvis just set it down on the table in front of her.

She looked at it, then at him, then back at it.

Somehow, she was even more confused than before.

""Do you know what the deadliest insect on this planet is?"" said Gohvis.

Emiliana's mouth twisted with an expectation of imminent horror. ""Tell me it's not these ants, right here.""

""No,"" said Gohvis. ""These little ones are harmless, but they are a close evolutionary relative, you might say. Useful for long-term study without all of the collateral damage.""

Well, that was a relief, at least. Emiliana didn't know what to say now, though.

""The deadliest insect is the Jaskadan jumper ant,"" said Gohvis.

""They vary somewhat in size, but the soldiers can grow to be as big as your fist. As their name suggests, they are known for their leaping ability, but they also have a paralytic venom that puts even most snakes to shame.""

""Why are you telling me this?"" she asked.

He held up a giant index finger. ""But their most fearsome attribute is the way that they wage war on other animals. They've been known to conquer enormous swaths of land, pushing out virtually all other fauna and even rendering certain creatures extinct--a feat which is typically only considered achievable by humans.

""However, despite all of that, despite being the deadliest insects in the world, they are still not the most resilient ones. That title goes to their long-standing rivals."" He motioned to the farm again. ""These little fellows. The Ardoran angel ant.""

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Emiliana still didn't see where Gohvis was going with any of this, but she doubted that it was some random tangent of his. There must have been something about these ants that was relevant to Gohvis' overall goal.

""Even though the Jaskadan jumper ant is a hundred times its size or more, the Ardoran angel ant is one of the few animals in the world that it cannot conquer. The angel ant is immune to its venom, has a body that can withstand pressures over ten tons, temperatures over three thousand degrees, and has an average lifespan of 150 years.""

Her eyes widened a little at that bit of information.

""Try as the jumper ant might, it cannot kill the angel ant,"" said Gohvis. ""It can 'occupy' angel ant territory, but that makes little to no difference to them. The angel ant can simply continue about its business as usual, climbing over the jumper ant's giant body like it would any other obstacle to gathering food. Even the angel queen is essentially invulnerable to attack or interruption of her reproductive cycle.""

Emiliana had to ask a question now. ""If all of that is true, then it seems like the angel ant could take over the entire world. Er, well. The entire ant world, at least.""

""Ah, but that is precisely the point. Angel ants do not wage war like most ants do. They certainly do not conquer like the jumper ants. And why should they? They have no need to. Almost nothing can truly threaten their colony.""

Hmm. She felt like she was beginning to understand now. ""Are you saying that you want to make human beings like the angel ant?""

""Mm. You're getting warmer.""

""But I'm not spot on?""

""Making humanity as physically resilient as the angel ant would be one step to ensuring its survival under extreme conditions,"" said Gohvis, ""but in truth, it is the social behavior of the angel ant that I find

most interesting."""

"2466

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""Social behavior?"" said Emiliana.

""Angel ant colonies are unique in that they function using a true hive mind,"" said Gohvis. ""Unlike other ants, which only operate according to pheromones and designated instincts to make it seem like they share one, singular intelligence, angel ants genuinely do. And that, I believe, is the real reason they are so resilient. As a unified colony, they are more intelligent than any other ant in the world.""

Emiliana felt like she could finally understand the picture that Gohvis was painting here.

The Monster sat down on the floor, crossing enormous legs over one another. He was still about as tall as she was in her chair. ""The jumper ants may be more aggressive, better at waging war, better at controlling territory, better at reproducing, but they still can't defeat the angel ants. Even by trying to take all of their food, they can't do it. The angel ant can survive for over a month on little more than a drop of water.

""They represent two very different evolutionary strategies. And personally, I believe that in the very long-term, the angel ant's method is superior. Humans could learn a thing or two from their example.""

Emiliana waited for him to keep talking, but when nothing else was said, she finally voiced the conclusion that she had reached in her mind. ""You want to create a hive mind for humanity..."

""Mm.""

""But that... agh..." How many different ways were there to tell him how crazy that sounded? What was she even supposed to say to something like that?

""You are worried about free will,"" he said.

Was she? Yeah. She supposed she was. It took her a second to gather her thoughts, but he was right. That was exactly the root cause of her concern."

""A hive mind might eliminate corruption by eliminating freedom,"" said Gohvis. ""All would be done for the good of the whole. And each brain could be used in parallel with the others to achieve a level of collective creative potential that is heretofore unheard of. But yes. The individual mind may become lost in the shuffle. Hypothetically.""

""...Only hypothetically? That sounds more like a certainty to me.""

""No. A true hive mind among beings with human-level intelligence has never been observed. The actual consequences of such a network are, at this time, unknowable."" His glowing red gaze shifted to Emiliana.

She felt like he had more to say on that point, but he remained silent.  
""...Why are you telling me all of this?""

""Because you wished to know, did you not?""

Hmm. Was is really that simple? Maybe it was. Not everything had to be complicated. But he could still be lying. He may have acted like he was above it, but she still remembered when Gohvis showed up at Dunehall and tried to lie to the Salesman of Death.

Emiliana wanted to keep pushing, to see if she could find some fault in his explanations. ""...This seems like quite a lot of trouble to go through just because you dislike the concept of growth for some reason.""

""For some reason, you say?""

""Yes. Trees grow. Animals grow. I don't see you trying to wipe them out of existence.""

Gohvis's eyes narrowed. ""I am not trying to wipe humans out of existence.""

""But Abolish is.""

""Some among them, yes.""

""And you don't have a problem with it.""

""I do. But not as much as you do, I suspect.""

""Then my point still stands.""

""Comparing human growth to that of virtually anything else on the planet is absurd. Trees and animals have not developed the ability to become the arbiters of their own destruction.""

""Why should that make a difference? Especially if you're apparently okay with Abolish wiping everyone out, anyway?""

"2468

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 1 of 15))~~

""It makes an enormous difference,"" said Gohvis. ""The growth rate of humanity is unlike anything else in the known universe. To our knowledge, human civilization has only existed for a few thousand years, but look at all the power that it currently wields. Enough to wipe itself out--and perhaps even to take the planet with it.""

Emiliana's gray eyes went to the table in front of her while she listened.

""And this trend is not going to change,"" Gohvis went on. ""If anything, it will accelerate. So how powerful do you think humanity will become in another thousand years? Powerful enough to destroy the sun? The solar system? The galaxy? What about in ten thousand years? Or a million?""

""...You're worried about a million years into the future?"" she said.

""The foundations we lay now could have consequences that resonate throughout the rest of human civilization,"" said Gohvis. ""And as immortal beings, our responsibility over the future is two-fold. I don't know about you, but I would like to see how it all plays out. This cosmic game we find ourselves in.""

Geez. She wasn't sure she had a response for that.

But still. She pressed her lips together as she tried to reevaluate his words another time. ""...This is a completely different argument to what you said a minute ago. You said growth was a problem because of finite resources, not this.""

""I said it was self-evidently a problem because of finite resources, yes.

Which is still true. Growth demands innovation, and innovation discovers new ways to exploit resources, which can slow the decay; but in the very long term, the finite nature of the world will continue to be a problem that demands a direct solution. And that is what I am most concerned about: the long term."""

"2469

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 2 of 15))~~

Emiliana growled with exasperation and scratched her eyebrow. ""If you're so concerned about humanity's long-term survival, then how can you ally yourself with Abolish? They're actively working against humanity's short-term survival!""

""Mm. The answer to that is more complicated.""

""Oh, is it?! Well, I'm all ears!""

""Part of the answer, I mentioned before. I acknowledge that my solution may be wrong, that it may simply be impossible to achieve the kind of change in human nature that I am looking for. And if that is the case, if I am wrong, then Abolish's solution may be the only thing left that will save the universe from humanity.""

Emiliana put her face in both hands and sighed. Hearing all of this, she didn't know what else she had expected. She wanted to keep arguing, but this was starting to give her a headache.

""And the other part of the answer,"" said Gohvis, ""is that my plan does not require humanity as we know it to survive. It is debatable that mutants should even be considered human in the first place.""

She blinked and looked at him again with incredulity. ""Are you saying that you think Abolish will spare our kind?""

""Oh, of course not,"" said Gohvis. ""If it ever came to that, and only mutants remained, I am sure that the true zealots of Abolish would consider us a final obstacle to the fulfillment of their dream.""

""Then I don't understand. What would you do in that case?""

Gohvis just stared at her for a moment. ""Kill them."" His flat voice sounded so utterly unconcerned by that prospect that Emiliana couldn't help being taken aback a little.



""...You're confident you would be able to?"" she said, fully realizing that she was probably starting to push her luck now.

Gohvis made no response, however."

"2470 -- CCXXXI.

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 3 of 15))~~

Something about the way he was looking at her now made her lose most of her poise. She thought twice about continuing down this avenue of conversation.

Questioning his motivations was one thing. His reasoning. His logic. He was clearly forthcoming with those types of explanations.

But questioning his strength...

Perhaps that was different. The sudden shiver down her spine was telling her that perhaps the ice she was treading on here had become too thin.

And yet.

A part of her still wanted to push onward, anyway. Gohvis would give her a proper warning if she truly said anything out of line, right? Maybe she was just getting inside of her own head.

""I was just saying,"" she tried, ""hypothetically... in the scenario you're talking about, your opponents will have presumably wiped out the entirety of the Vanguard... as well as every other powerful servant in the world... so... how can you so casually say that you would be able to kill people like that?""

Gohvis stood up and began returning the giant ant farm to its previous position in the corner of the room. ""Because the world is on my side,"" he said.

""...What do you mean?"" she asked.

But this time, the Monster of the East truly did not answer her.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-One: 'A heroic welcome...'

Click to display entire chapter at once -- (mobile link)

The trip to the Lorentian capital of Riverton, P.J. had thankfully gone without further incident. All the way up to their arrival in the city, everyone seemed a bit on edge--and understandably so, Hector thought. After such a chaotic battle, there was a lingering feeling that the Beast of Lorent might not be entirely dead, somehow.

But to the best of their ability, they had made sure that it was."  
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~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 3 of 15))~~  
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"2471

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 4 of 15))~~  
After Chort's apparent death, all of its spawn had been rendered inert. There was discussion among the reapers about taking some of them captive for study, and Hector could see the logic in doing that. Chort was still a very mysterious entity. Performing an autopsy on it and its spawn was a tempting idea. The things that they might be able to learn from such creatures... Hector couldn't really blame Ernivoc for advocating that course of action.

But he couldn't in good conscience allow it. After having witnessed Chort's history firsthand thanks to Pauline, having seen the horrific experiments that Chort had been subjected to and the terrible consequences that had followed, there was no way in hell that Hector was going to let that same thing happen again. Even if he did trust the Rainlords to not do such fucked up and idiotic experiments, he just didn't think it was worth the risk of bringing something so chaotic and dangerous back to Atreya.

So Chort and its spawn had all been destroyed. With Salvador's assistance, Hector had melted their flesh down into puddles of goo. And then that, too, was gathered up and cooked again, even hotter until it was finally nothing more than ash and vapors.

It had taken quite a while. And the stench. The Lorentians hadn't

complained, but Hector was quite certain that they had not enjoyed that long period of miserable waiting.

They did, however, seem relieved once it was all over; and they made sure to thank the young lord from Atreya another time.

From there, it was just a matter of finding a cellphone signal. The vastness of the Imara Forest made that a rather tedious endeavor as well, but Pauline again proved to be a very helpful guide, and soon enough, a military escort arrived from the capital to take them the rest of the way."

"2472

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 5 of 15))~~

As for the reinforcements that the Rainlords back in Warrenhold were sending, Hector was thankfully able to get Garovel to calm them down. With the situation now under control, there was no need for anyone else to show up and make a scene in front of the Lorentians.

With the reinforcements already en route, however, they decided not to simply turn around but to instead go all the way to Riverton, P.J. and link up with everyone in secret.

With the way Secretary Karr and Ambassador Stoutamire were talking, it seemed fairly obvious that Hector would soon be meeting with the Lorentian President and probably several other important political figures.

Mevox expressed concern about the Rainlords being present for this meeting.

'Especially if it's gonna be televised,' the reaper had said.

'What, are you camera shy?' said Voreese.

'Oh, yes. I'm the most withering little wallflower you ever did see. It doesn't have anything to do with the fact that my gigantic, highly-visible buddy over here is also one of the most recognizable Rainlords in the world. I'm not at all worried that the Vanguard might see him standing next to the Atreyan hero over here and think something is fishy.'

'In that case, why the hell did you even come along in the first place? Did you not think that the Lorentians might want to hold some type of

award ceremony for this gigantic favor that we were doing for them? Because that just seems like a profound lack of forethought on your part. Or as I like to call it: a severe case of dumbassery.'

'As it so happens, I did think about that possibility. And I also thought about the possibility of something terrible befalling our good friend-- y'know, the one who is graciously hosting us in his home despite how incredibly fucking dangerous it is?'"

"2473

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 6 of 15))~~

'Yeah, yeah,' said Voreese. 'Always with the noble excuses, eh? You sure you weren't just spoiling for a fight?'

Mevox snorted. 'I guess I shouldn't expect you to understand such difficult concepts as ""having your friend's back"" or ""acting honorably."" That would require you to know what camaraderie and integrity actually feel like, wouldn't it?'

'Do they feel anything like having to listen to some loudmouthed douche yammer on self-righteously for ages? Because if so, then I think I'd rather not know.'

'Tell me, Voreese. Are you an insufferable bitch to everyone you meet, or am I just special?'

'Well, you're definitely not special, so it must be the first one.'

'I can believe that. But y'know, when you tell me I'm not special, it kinda makes me think that I am.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah. As in, perhaps the lady doth protest too much, hmm?'

'Hah! And he's a narcissist, too! Talk about putting a shit-flavored cherry on top of a turd sandwich.'

'I'll have you know that I am extremely humble.'

'Oh, my apologies, then. If you say you're humble, then I guess it must be true.'

'No, no, I said EXTREMELY humble. Important difference.'

'If by ""important,"" you mean the exact opposite of that, then yes.'

'Well, if you were paying attention, then the exaggeration would've made it clear to you that I was joking.'

'Yeah, but were you? Just because you joke about your own massive flaws doesn't mean they stop existing.'

'Hmm, I guess you would know all about that, wouldn't you?'

'And what the fuck is that supposed to mean, huh?'

'Oh, just that you're full of horrible characteristics that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.'

'Ah, and I bet you've got plenty of enemies to choose from, now don't you?'

'Heh, well, we can't all be as warm and cuddly as you are, my dear.'"  
"2474

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 7 of 15))~~

'That's actually true,' said Voreese. 'I'm able to get along with just about anyone, if they give me a fair shake.'

'I'm sure,' said Mevox. 'From what I've seen, you absolutely crush every social interaction you encounter.'

'Hmm, I'm getting the impression that you might not be entirely sincere when you say that.'

'Not at all. It's your best quality. Your ability to obliterate a conversation is matched only by the quaintness of your intellect.'

'Wow. Y'know what, Mevox? Maybe you're right. You're clearly way too smart for me. In fact, the power of your mind is so impressive that I think you might even have the ability to lower people's IQ just by talking to them. I definitely feel stupider every time I hear you say something.'

That one had earned laugh from Mevox.

Their back-and-forth continued throughout the trip, pausing only when one of the non-servants who couldn't hear them said something to Hector or Roman.

The topic of Salvador's recognizability got brought up again, and the other reapers chimed in with their opinions as well, ultimately coming to the conclusion that Salvador, Carlos, and Fidel should all withdraw from Hector's side once they reached the capital and join up with the reinforcements.

The Rainlords were still wearing the iron masks that Hector made for them, but apparently, Mevox thought that it would still be an unnecessary risk if they ended up on television.

'Masks have a way of drawing attention, too,' the reaper said. 'And with Salvador's build, someone in the Vanguard might see the broadcast and put two and two together.'

And considering that Roman also preferred to stay out of the public eye as well, Hector had a feeling that he would be attending this award ceremony--or whatever it was--by himself.

Aside from Matteo Delaguna, he supposed."

"2475

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 8 of 15))~~  
Hector wondered if Matteo was ever going to say something to him. What a weird problem. He'd spent so much time with the guy now, and yet he still barely knew anything about him.

Maybe Hector would have to be the one to initiate a conversation.

Agh.

Or maybe not. Even without words, he felt like there was a silent understanding between them. Sort of.

As for Pauline, Hector wasn't too sure what she was going to do now. After that fight, he wanted her to get checked out by a doctor, but how exactly did Sparrows handle that, he wondered?

Plus, while he was stuck in a car, he couldn't sense where she was,

anymore. He figured she was probably just following their little convoy toward P.J., but he couldn't be sure. He had a fairly strong feeling that she would want to observe his meeting with the Lorentian president, though. He may not have known her for very long, but it was quite clear that she was the nosy type.

When they arrived at the capital, Hector found himself gawking. Just as expected, it was built right in the middle of the forest, but he still hadn't expected it to be this thoroughly integrated with it. The density of the trees wasn't even that different from the rest of the forest. Hector could see many buildings that had trees growing out of them.

From an architectural standpoint, that seemed like a huge pain in the ass. He supposed the trees could also double as structural support, but that only went so far. The way that they shifted and moved as they grew would also mean that the structural stability of the building would become compromised if it relied on them too greatly. And the holes needed for the trees would definitely make it more complicated to regulate the temperature inside."

"2476

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 9 of 15))~~

It seemed to be quite the common feature here, though. Even many of the skyscrapers had branches protruding out of the sides of them. Some were themselves vaguely tree-shaped. Instead of going straight upward, whole sections of the buildings jutted out like stubby branches.

It was certainly beautiful, but Hector couldn't imagine that maintaining all this stuff was very easy. Clearly, the people of this country valued their trees, but at some point, trees needed to be trimmed down for reasons of safety, didn't they? If drivers couldn't see around the corner of an intersection because the trees there were overgrown, then that seemed like a pretty big problem. Or if a security camera's view was blocked by branches. Not to mention, when all those leaves started falling, how much could that interfere with...?

Hmm. Maybe he was becoming a little too security conscious.

'Oh, hey,' came Garovel's private words. 'I can sense you now.'

Hector blinked. 'Wait, what? You came to Lorent, too?'



'Yep. What, did you think I would let you talk to all those Lorentian politicians without me?'

'I, uh... hmm...'

'Wow. You could try sounding a LITTLE excited that I'm here. I mean, I'm not saying you're being a bad friend or anything, but y'know, it was kind of a long trip, and I think a GOOD friend would be excited to see me, so...'

'Garovel,' laughed Hector. 'Why didn't you just tell me you were coming?'

'It's been a while since I was able to hit you with a surprise. Honestly, this feels a little overdue.'

Hector exhaled another muted laugh through his nose. But then a thought hit him. 'Garovel...'

'Yeah, buddy?'

'You got here kinda fast...'

'Did I?'

'We just arrived in the capital, and you're already here.'

'Oh, hmm. How weird.'

'Yeah...'

'Guess you guys were driving pretty slow, huh?'

'Don't think that's the reason, Garovel.'"

"2477

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 10 of 15))~~

'Why not?' said Garovel. 'It's a perfectly good reason.'

'No, it isn't,' said Hector. 'How did you get here so fast?'

'Okay, well... I may have already been with the reinforcements when they initially left to go help you.'

Hector rubbed his right temple. 'You mean right after I told you that everyone had mysteriously gone missing? When the situation was still super fucking dangerous?'

'I mean, what qualifies as ""super fucking dangerous,"" really? That was just your own interpretation of events, y'know?'

'Yes, the events that I was there for and that you weren't. I'm pretty sure that makes my interpretation more valid than yours, Garovel.'

'Well, now you're just being closed-minded.'

'What the hell were you thinking? There was no reason to take a risk like that. You should've stayed at Warrenhold.'

'Look, I would've kept my distance and provided observational support from afar. I know you think that your new Scarf buddy is better than me, but I can still be helpful in a fight, okay? Can your Scarf provide you with thousands of years of experience and wisdom? I don't think so.'

'Garovel, I don't think the Scarf is better than you.'

'Your brain may say that, but your heart is saying otherwise.'

'Oh, you can read my heart now?'

'Yes. That's also an ability I have.'

'One that you've kept secret from me all this time for no apparent reason.'

'Okay, stop poking holes in my lies. It's really obnoxious.'

'You're right. I'm sorry.'

In the end, Hector supposed it didn't matter all that much, since the situation had been resolved before Garovel could even show up, so he decided to let the issue drop. For now, at least.

According to Garovel, the reinforcements consisted of Dimas Sebolt and Zeff Elroy, along with several lesser known members of Houses Sebolt, Delaguna, and Blackburn."

"2478

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 11 of 15))~~

It was a little weird to imagine, but the forces in Warrenhold must've been getting a bit thin by now. Hector had confidence that as long as Ms. Rogers was there, things would continue to run smoothly, but he was still somewhat uncomfortable with how scattered their fighters were, at the moment.

Which was an absurd notion to even occupy his mind, he realized. The Rainlords were guests. Obviously, they had no obligation to protect Warrenhold specifically. They could go wherever they pleased.

The scenery outside began to change when they passed through a checkpoint, and Hector realized that they had entered a massive estate. There were still trees everywhere, of course, but they were slightly fewer in number now, and he could actually see between them.

Gardeners were tending to said trees, as well as several very long rows of flowering bushes. A large statue of the sun lay straight ahead, marking the apparent entrance of the building behind it.

The vehicle eased to a stop, and Secretary Karr stepped out of the car first with her black-and-white suited bodyguards. She beckoned Hector to follow. ""Welcome to Riverton Hall, Lord Goffe.""

He'd never heard of this place before, but seeing it now, he felt like maybe he should have. It wasn't a castle, but it was still a gorgeous structure, to be sure. It, too, had trees growing out of it, and they were clearly well-maintained.

The tall, triangular windows were a distinguishing feature, Hector thought, as was the black coat of paint. Very uncommon for a political building, assuming that was what this place was. Hell, even just in general, black was rarely used because of how much sunlight it absorbed, making it more difficult to keep a building cool in the summer. Maybe that wasn't an issue for them, though, thanks to the shade from all these trees."

"2479

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 12 of 15))~~It was almost like a biosphere. The trees behind the main building were large

enough that their collective canopy created a dome of leaves, allowing the late morning sun to shine through only in sparkling fragments.

The party entered through a pair of enormous double doors, and a large group of sharply dressed attendants were already there waiting for them.

Secretary Karr was moving a bit sluggishly, which was certainly understandable after all they had been through. Her clothes were scuffed and dirtied all over, and most of the feathers that had adorned her red coat were now missing.

She said her farewells and then ventured off with her bodyguards and a couple of newly attached attendants. The other Lorentians were also escorted away, presumably to a place where they could finally get some rest.

Ambassador Stoutamire, however, remained with Hector's group. And he did not stop talking as they all walked together.

"Allow me to serve as a temporary guide," he said. "I imagine you all must be quite tired after such a grueling night. Oh, or perhaps you aren't? Now that I think about it, that wouldn't surprise me. Myself, I am absolutely destroyed. Barely staying on my feet, truth be told. Ah, here we have the western corridor. These rooms are primarily offices, and in them, you will find many meticulous individuals. The type to go through more papers in a single day than I see in a month, searching for discrepancies and the like. Organizing them, too, I'm sure. And ahead are the guest rooms, which I'm sure you are--"

Honestly, Hector was pretty damn exhausted, too. Even after devoting an entire parallel thought process just to listening to Stoutamire, he was finding it difficult to actually pay attention.

It certainly wasn't the most tired he'd ever felt--or even close to it--but still. Right now, a bed sounded like paradise."

"2480

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 13 of 15))~~

The group arrived at a line of ornate doors, and Stoutamire was saying one thing or another about how wonderful these rooms were. The attendants started trying to guide everyone into different ones. The

Lorentians in their party were the first to depart, followed by Roman and Voreese.

The Rainlords, however, did not budge.

Salvador, Carlos, Fidel, and Matteo all remained exactly where they were, looking toward Hector with their iron masks on.

A suddenly awkward tension was in the air as Stoutamire and the guides all seemed uncertain as to what was happening.

Hector had a fair idea, though, and Mevox confirmed it for him.

'We ain't leavin' your side, bucko,' the reaper said. 'Not until there are cameras to worry about or until we're sure it's safe here.'

Hmm. Should he tell them to just relax? He doubted there was any real danger here--and even if there was, he'd be more worried about everyone other than himself. Somehow, though, he didn't think that saying as much would convince these guys to leave him alone.

As he was mulling his options over, a new voice arrived from behind him.

""Excuse me, but would you happen to be Lord Goffe of Warrenhold?"" It was a man's voice, somewhat hard and raspy.

Hector turned to see another small group of people.

And an unfamiliar reaper among them.

That sight alone made Hector's posture shift slightly. He might've been tired, but it was time to be fully attentive again.

The same voice spoke up again, and Hector saw that it belonged to the man standing closest to him. ""You must be him, no? Or is that armor you're wearing meant to throw us off?""

Indeed, Hector was still wearing his armor. He'd been receiving a few odd looks because of it, but that wasn't terribly abnormal, and he was mainly just concerned about hiding the light wounds that he'd received from Chort's spawn. There wasn't that much blood, but it would probably still be alarming to anyone who saw him if he dematerialized his armor."

~~((The National Ice Cream Day Special -- page 14 of 15))~~

Stoutamire interjected before Hector could respond. ""Astute as always, Mr. Zaman. This is our esteemed guest from Atreya."" He turned to Hector. ""And Lord Goffe, this is Ravi Zaman of Palei. He is currently serving as a special advisor to the President, along with one other gentleman named--""

""Let's not spoil this conversation before it even begins by speaking of him,"" said Mr. Zaman. He had quite the enormous scar down the right side of his face, and his eyes were so darkly colored that they just looked like black marbles. He walked right up to Hector and offered him a handshake. ""It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Goffe.""

Hector saw no reason to be rude. ""Likewise, Mr. Zaman.""

""Ah, please, call me Ravi. I prefer it."" He shot Stoutamire a look. ""Not you, though. You have to keep calling Mr. Zaman.""

Stoutamire merely returned a smile.

Ravi looked over the masked Rainlords next. ""This is quite a group you have here. These are all your followers, hmm?""

Hector didn't much care for that question, but he didn't want to ignore it, either. ""Something like that.""

""Might you tell me their names, as well?"" said Ravi.

Okay, that one, he did want to ignore. ""What kind of advisor are you, exactly?"" he asked instead.

""The foreign affairs kind,"" said Ravi. ""In fact, it was I who advised the President to send ol' Stoutamire to request your help. Quite the persuasive fellow, is he not? I might have gone myself, but alas, my duties keep me here.""

Hector made no response. The questions he most wanted to ask were about the man's apparent reaper, but the small crowd of non-servants around them made him hold his tongue. He supposed the reaper could've been partnered to one of the others in Ravi's entourage, but there was something in the way this guy carried himself that made

Hector doubt that possibility very much.

Somehow, he just seemed like a servant."

"2482

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"In the interest of full disclosure, there is something I should tell you." Ravi held up his hands defensively. "I suspect you will find it alarming, but I assure you, my intentions are entirely peaceful. So please do not attack me. I mean you no harm, nor anyone else here. In fact, my objective as advisor to the President is to help Lorent avoid precisely that type of conflict."

Hmm. Hector just waited.

"I am a member of the Freeman Fellowship," said Ravi. "Which, if you are not already aware, is a sect of Abolish. Among other things."

Hector's eyes widened inside his helmet, and he could sense the Rainlords all shifting behind him.

Ravi seemed to notice their discomfort as well and waited a moment before continuing. "I understand that your country, like many others at the moment, has quite a strained relationship with Abolish. I am not going to try to convince you that you are wrong. I will certainly acknowledge that Abolish has many, many problems."

What the hell? Hector eyed the onlooking Lorentians as he considered how to respond. None of them seemed terribly surprised by this revelation. Did they not know what Abolish was? "...You just admitted to being affiliated with an organization that commits genocide," said Hector.

Ravi frowned and nodded. "I am very aware. And just so it is clear, we fully condemn such actions, as well as any other that is considered a crime against humanity."

Needless to say, Hector was far from convinced.

Ravi scratched his nose and bobbed his head. "Our sect's relationship with much of Abolish is... complicated, to say the least."

Hector was incredulous. "If your intentions really are peaceful like you

say, then why don't you just disassociate yourselves from Abolish entirely?""

"2483

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""There are a number of reasons,"" said Ravi. ""For one, our primary objective is to change Abolish from within. Now, I am sure that seems impossible from the outside looking in, so I will just say this: Abolish has existed for over three thousand years. And the Vanguard has been at war with it all that time. At this point, I think an ideological solution may just be the better option.""

Damn. When he put it like that, Hector found it hard to disagree.

Mevox sure didn't, though. 'Hah! That's been tried before, kiddo. Many times.'

Rather than defending himself, Ravi's reaper spoke up for him. 'We are aware of that. But past failure is no reason to give up. And if you know your history, then you will also know that some of those revolutions came quite close to succeeding.'

Mevox laughed. 'Y'know, they say that every revolution needs a bunch of naive fools at its heart, else it will never even get off the ground. Looks like you've got that part covered, at least.'

'We shall take that as a compliment,' said the unnamed reaper.

'Yeah, why wouldn't you? It was meant as one.'

Ravi picked the conversation back up. ""I feel that I must also admit, however, that there are other, less noble-sounding reasons why we maintain our ties to Abolish.""

""Like?"" said Hector.

""The recognition and influence,"" said Ravi. ""Stained though it may be, the name Abolish still allows certain doors to be opened that might otherwise remain closed to us. At times, it is much easier to befriend someone who fears you, than it is to befriend someone who has no idea who you are. I doubt I would have acquired my position as advisor to the President, otherwise.""



Was that really true? Hector wasn't so sure, but maybe that was just because he didn't want it to be. He was still quite new to politics, after all, especially the international kind."

"2484

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))Silence drew out as Hector considered everything he'd just heard. He certainly had more questions about this so-called Freeman Fellowship, but this didn't seem like the appropriate place to ask them. That, and he wasn't even sure where to begin. He would've liked Garovel's input right about now.

Ravi took the opportunity to move on from the subject entirely. ""In any case, allow me to thank you for your wonderful service to this great country. It seemed like this Beast was becoming more and more of a problem with each passing day. It is a relief to know that it has finally been taken care of, and I am sure the citizens of Lorent will be able to sleep easier now."" And he gave a short bow.

This guy sure talked a good game. It made sense that he would be involved in politics, Hector thought.

""I am sure you will be wanting to return to Atreya soon,"" said Ravi, ""but I hope not too soon. You must allow Lorent the time to show you her appreciation in full. Physical rewards are all well and good, but hospitality is important, too. I am sure the President will be asking you to extend your stay here for as long as you like. And if he doesn't, then I shall be recommending that he do so."" Ravi's smile had a mischievous charm to it, perhaps accented by his scar.

Hector still didn't quite know how to respond, though. Was simple politeness appropriate here? It probably was, right?

Mevox interjected again. 'Are there any other servants we should know about while we're here?'

Ravi's reaper hovered around to the man's other shoulder. 'You're quite a straightforward one, aren't you?'

'It's one of my better features, I think. Thanks for noticing. Now are you going to answer my question? Or are you just working your way up to telling me to go fuck myself?'

"2485 -- CCXXXII.

The other reaper's skeletal face did not seem amused by that remark.

Ravi began ushering the other Lorentians away, telling them that he would tend to the guests himself for the time being. His small group of followers, however, remained by his side. None of them appeared to have reapers accompanying, but that was far from conclusive evidence that they weren't servants, Hector knew.

'As it so happens,' the unnamed reaper said, 'there is another. He is the advisor that Stoutamire was about to mention before Ravi interrupted him. You could say that we do not get along.'

'Ah. A case of competing advisors, is it?'

'Something like that, yes. You would do well to be wary of him and his reaper, though I suspect you will not be.'

Hector doubted that part immensely.

'What makes you say that?' said Mevox.

'Because he is of the Vanguard.'

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Two: 'The land of masks...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

A significant period of silence arrived.

'...Lemme get this straight,' said Mevox. 'The President of Lorent currently has two different foreign advisors, one of which is a servant of Abolish, and the other, a servant of the Vanguard.'

'That is correct,' said the unnamed reaper.

More silence.

Until Mevox broke it again. 'What a clusterfuck.'

Ravi released a small chortle, though Hector couldn't tell if it was sarcastic or not. "'It certainly has its difficulties. But I think the

President appreciates hearing a variety of opinions. He is a wiser man than I first gave him credit for.'"

'You don't have to suck up to your boss,' said Mevox. 'He's not here, right now.'

That made Ravi laugh more strongly, which did sound genuine this time. "'I have not met a reaper with such a sharp tongue in quite some time. Might you be so kind as to tell me your name?'"

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"2486

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""Heh. Somehow, that does not surprise me,"" said Ravi.

'Ooh, ouch,' said Mevox. 'Is that a bit of backbone I spy? If so, I'm glad. It's pretty discouraging how many servants allow us reapers to just walk all over them. Bunch of doormats, the lot of you.'

Ravi's reaper shook his skull. 'Perhaps they realized that the easiest way to deal with exceptionally rude individuals is to simply tell them what they want to hear and then move on with their day.'

'Hoho. Maybe so. But the quickest way to tell if a barrel is empty inside is to kick it, know what I'm sayin'?"

'Not in the slightest.'

'Ah, well. Never you mind your empty little head, then.'

'What?!'

'Hmm? Something wrong?'

It soon became clear that the reapers were not going to stop arguing, so Hector decided to just head into one of the rooms already. Salvador had to drag Mevox along, too.

Ravi joined them but only briefly to wish them a good rest before pulling his own reaper away.

The room was plenty spacious, but it was clearly meant for only one or two guests, since there was only one bed.

The Rainlords chose to stay, anyway. Salvador took the couch, while Carlos and Fidel both sat down by the door.

Hector wanted to just go to sleep immediately, but now that they were all alone with no Lorentians around, he felt like they needed to discuss a few things. Before he could even open his mouth, however, Garovel phased through the wall.

'About time you showed up,' said Mevox. 'How long were you planning to listen to me shit talk that Abolish reaper?'

'Oh, I could've listened to that all day,' said Garovel.

'Eavesdropping is unbecoming for us reapers, you know.'

Garovel snorted. 'Tell any other lies today?'

'Probably. I forget.'

"2487

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))

Voreese arrived, too, phasing through a different wall. 'Hey, keep it down in here. Roman's trying to sleep, and your conversation is louder than the clapping of your ass cheeks when you walk.'

'There are so many stupid things about what you just said that I don't even know where to begin,' said Mevox.

'Relax, I was just joking,' said Voreese. 'Nothing could be louder than

your ass cheeks.'

'Good to see you, too, by the way,' said Garovel.

'Aw, shut up,' said Voreese. 'We saw each other like a day ago.'

'Yeah, and you almost died since then,' said Garovel.

'Pfft, so what?' Her hollow eye sockets widened a little. 'Oh, or are you telling me that absence has made your heart grow fonder?'

'Perhaps if I had a heart.'

'Don't try to play coy now, you big flirt.'

'I fucking hate this conversation,' said Mevox.

'That supposed to be our problem?' said Voreese.

'This is all very entertaining,' came the voice of one of the other three reapers in the room who had thus far remained quiet, 'but we have more pressing matters to discuss, do we not?' That was Olijas, the reaper of Carlos Sebolt.

Hector couldn't remember if he'd even heard the reaper say a single thing since getting pulled here to Lorent. It was a little strange to him when quieter reapers like Olijas and Ernivoc were around. Maybe spending so much time with Garovel made them seem weirder than they actually were, though. And the presence of Mevox and Voreese probably didn't help in that regard, either.

'We're aware,' said Mevox, 'but the walls have ears, as they as they say. These two louts just proved it.'

'So have one of your servants soundproof the room against reapers,' said Olijas. 'You're wasting time.'

'Oh, no!' said Voreese. 'Not time! What will a bunch of immortal beings like us do without more time on our hands?!'

"2488

'Hey, don't make fun of him,' said Mevox. 'He's not wrong, y'know. All you ever do is waste time.'

'Oh, shut the fuck up!' said Voreese, though she was laughing.

Hector exhaled a tired breath and began slowly dematerializing his armor while the reapers continued bickering. As he'd expected, his clothes were torn in several places and spotted with blood. He'd brought some luggage with him for this very reason, but the last time he saw it was in the cargo hold of Roman's chartered airplane. And the last time he saw that airplane, it was in separate pieces.

Oh well. He doubted the Lorentians would mind lending him some new clothes tomorrow.

""Lord Goffe...""

Hector looked up, unsure who had just spoken to him. Ah.

Fidel Blackburn was looking at him from the corner of the room by the door. And the expression on the man's face was one of mild surprise.

Hector didn't know why that was, though. ""What's the matter?""

Garovel answered, instead. 'Ah. You're dead.'

Hector blinked but resisted the urge to say anything else. His normally dark brown skin was looking grayer than usual, and he realized that his chest felt a little odd. His breathing, too, was somehow off.

'That's strange,' said Garovel as his gangly hand found his shoulder. 'Your injuries don't seem that bad.'

The typical vigor didn't surge through him, as his tiredness remained as it was, nor was his strength being enhanced. He could only feel his wounds tightening themselves and closing. There was a stirring in his rib cage as his heart started back up.

How weird. Hector often forgot that the regeneration, the removal of fatigue, and the undead strength were all separate abilities. Garovel usually used them in conjunction with one another, excepting only when the reaper was trying to help him correct his sleep schedule. It was especially rare for the reaper to ever invoke the regeneration without anything else.

And it felt a little strange to realize that he'd been a literal walking corpse this whole time."

"2489

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Salvador had been relaxing lengthwise on the couch, but now he was sitting up at full attention. ""How did you die? Did the Beast get you?""

""...I'm actually not sure,"" said Hector. ""Some of its spawn landed a few hits, but they weren't that bad. Or at least, I didn't think they were.""

""Clearly, they didn't slow you down,"" said Salvador.

'I think I can explain,' said Garovel. 'But first, let's take precautions...' He looked toward Carlos and Fidel by the door.

Fidel seemed to understand and began to coat the entrance in copper, along with the ventilation in the ceiling and the large window on the far end of the room that had previously offered a nice view of the building's inner courtyard. The man pressed his hand against his work, too, and after a few moments, he spoke up again. ""We're reaper-proofed,"" he said.

'Thanks.' Garovel rounded on Hector again. 'Something caused your heart to stop beating, and it doesn't look like it was blood loss. You didn't get struck by lightning, did you?'

Madly, Hector actually had to stop and think about that for a second. ""No... but I did have some close calls with that, I think. And now that you mention it, I'm pretty sure that Pauline got hit by a stray lightning bolt.""

'Oh, right, the Sparrow,' said Mevox. 'Is she still around?'

Hector allowed a beat to pass, half-expecting her to chime in suddenly from wherever she was. When that didn't happen, he tried to explain. ""I believe she is, but she probably can't hear us while the room is protected by soul infusion.""

'Aha,' said Voreese. 'So reaper-proof also means Sparrow-proof, eh? Good to know.'

'Why didn't she talk to us during the car ride here?' said Mevox.

'Maybe because you never shut up,' said Voreese.



'Hmm, maybe. But I seem to recall you being quite the blabbermouth, yourself.'

'Yeah, but people love it when I do it.'

'Really? Would these people happen to exist outside of your own delusions?'

"2490

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Voreese looked like she was more than prepared to keep arguing, but Garovel managed to yank the conversation away from the two of them again.

'Well, in any case, I think Hector's heart was probably stopped by some kind of venom from the Beast's spawn.'

""Hmm."" Hector mulled that possibility over in a background thought process.

Venom, huh? How many other tricks had Chort been concealing? Even now, Hector still didn't really understand how that bastard had managed to teleport everyone around against their will. And it was particularly mysterious, because as far Hector remembered, Chort hadn't used teleportation during the fight at all.

Why was that, he wondered?

Could the auras that Pauline talked about have had something to do with it? Damn. There sure were a lot of things he wanted to talk to her about, but he figured they would be able to wait until after had finally gotten some rest.

Meanwhile, the reapers were discussing Garovel's venom theory among themselves. All of the other servants had taken a few licks from the spawn as well, but none of them had been ""killed"" in the same way because--unlike Hector--all of their reapers had been able to invoke their regeneration in the middle of the fight.

In the end, it didn't seem like any real conclusion was going to be reached, and Hector began to drift off as he listened to the reapers talk. How were they able to do that? Just go on and on, endlessly? They never ran out of energy unless they were wounded, did they?

Mm.

Man, this sleep felt good. Warm darkness. So familiar and soothing. A hot spring for the mind. And the soul, too? Maybe. Why was this so great, he wondered? Sleep never did get old, did it?

...Hmm?

He was asleep now, wasn't he?"

"2491

Hector felt abruptly uncomfortable. Which was especially weird, because the warm darkness was still comfortable, too. Somehow, everything was fine and wrong at the same time.

Was this a dream, then? He never really dreamed much. He'd been that way his whole life. Unless... he just always forgot his dreams the instant he woke up? He supposed that was possible, but...

No, he didn't think so. This wasn't normal. His thoughts were too clear. He may not have dreamed very often, but he did still know what they were like, and this definitely wasn't it. Or maybe this was just a lucid dream? He'd only ever heard of those before. Was this what they were like?

Eh. Hmm...

Well, now what? How much time was passing? Was he just stuck here? Could he wake himself up? Did he want to? Not really. He needed his sleep.

Agh. So confusing. What the hell should he--?

""Young Hector,"" came a familiar voice.

And he stopped. He hadn't even been doing anything, but he stopped. ""Rasalased?""

""Hello.""

""Uh. Hi..."

""You are confused.""

""Yes, I am...""

""That is understandable. I see you have changed again.""

""...I have?""

""Of course. Change is the most natural thing in the world, is it not?""

""Maybe. This doesn't feel very natural, right now, though...""

""Yes, I must agree.""

""...How are we even speaking, right now?""

""A good question.""

""One you don't have an answer for, I take it?""

""Perhaps. Perhaps not.""

""Right...""

""I believe your two blessings of Focus and Domain are interacting with one another. And so you have created this... headspace, so to speak.""

Hector might've blinked if his eyes weren't already closed. ""Wait, what? I did this? I thought it was your doing.""

""No, it was not I.""

""But how could I have...? Uh... I mean, I was just trying to sleep.""

""Not every accomplishment is made intentionally, Young Hector.""

"2492

Hector still had his doubts, quite frankly, but he wasn't about to argue with the Dry God over it. In fact, now that he was thinking about it, he felt like he needed to thank Rasalased before doing anything else. ""Thank you for your guidance before,"" he said. ""Again, I mean. I don't think I could have gotten through to Leo if you hadn't told me what you did.""

""Ah, the sheep. Yes. You are welcome. And I must thank you for rescuing my successor.""

""...You can just call him Asad, you know.""

""Asad? Is that the new Lion's name?""

""What? How could you not know his name already? You know, like, everything.""

""Names... are difficult for me to perceive from afar.""

""They are? Why?""

""A name is not a soul, and a soul is not a name. A brain may regard itself by its name, but a soul does not. A soul's identity is something deeper. More piercing. Illustrative. And truthful. A brain may lie to itself and often does. A soul, however, has no capacity for deceit. It simply is. And names, in some sense, are a part of that deception.""

""Huh... it kinda sounds like you just don't want to perceive their names.""

""Hmm. That may also be true. It matters little.""

Hector supposed he was right. There were plenty of other subjects he wanted to discuss. ""...How much do you know about my current circumstances?""

""You encountered an entity of Chaos,"" said Rasalased.

""Yeah. Chortomo... something or other. Chort. Have you ever seen anything like that before?""

""Perhaps. Or perhaps not.""

Hector wanted to frown. ""Rasalased...""

""You speak of the unreal made real. Have I seen the unreal before? Everyone has. In their mind's eye, if nowhere else.""

""...Okay, but have you ever seen a monster like that in the real world before?""

""I... am not certain. Chaos is, by its very nature, difficult to perceive. I feel as though I have, but the memories may be blended with dreams and nightmares.""

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Hmm. Hector was disappointed, but if Rasalased couldn't tell him anything, then that was that. And there were plenty of other subjects to ask about. ""Okay, well, do you know anything about Sparrows? Or auras, maybe?""

""Ah... you speak of the Wrobels. Yes. You are lucky. The one you are traveling with seems trustworthy.""

""Really?"" Wow. If Pauline had Rasalased's approval, then that was no small thing. Hector felt like maybe he should give her more credit than he had been so far.

""I believe so. But take my judgment of her character with a degree of caution. Wrobel souls are more difficult to read than that of our kind. And they are incredibly dangerous creatures.""

""Ah..."" Dang.

""As allies, they would of course be helpful, but you must be cautious. They are, perhaps, the worst of all possible enemies.""

""Uh..."" Hector found that a little hard to believe. ""You really think so? I mean, I wouldn't exactly put them in the same threat level as something like an emperor-level servant or a feldeath.""

""Ah. You may be right. The ones you have met do seem like a mere shadow of the Wrobels that I remember.""

""Wait, they were more powerful in the past?""

""Were they? Yes, I believe they were. Or perhaps yours are merely playing at being weaker than they truly are.""

Now there was a discomforting thought. ""I don't think so,"" said Hector. ""Pauline is one thing, but Hanton Gaolanet had plenty of reason to not hold back against me.""

""Perhaps so.""

""Can you tell me anything about auras?""

""Yes. But this headspace of yours is fading. You will wake soon.""

""Wha? Already? It feels like I just went to sleep.""

""Indeed. So allow me one last word: be wary of pretenders. They are...""

""...Pretenders? What do you mean?""

No response came.

And he could feel the warm darkness shifting. ""Aw, fuck...""  
"2494

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Sluggishly, light began to return as Hector's eyes opened. Fog blanketed his thoughts as his consciousness reoriented itself.

'Hey there, buddy,' came an echoing voice.

'Garovel...?'

'That's me.'

Hector sat up in his giant guest bed and rubbed his face. Damn, he hadn't even changed his clothes before going to sleep, and there was still blood on them. ""Uh...""

'Did you have a nice rest?' asked Garovel. 'Was it pleasant? And totally normal? Not different at all? Hmm?'

Hector blinked dully a few times. Obviously, he intended to tell the reaper about meeting Rasalased again, but Garovel's tone was making him curious first. '...Why are you asking?'

'You were talking in your sleep. Well. Mumbling, really.'

'Oh...'

'Yeah. You were kind of weirding everyone out. I thought about waking you up, but then I started to find it funny and decided not to.'

He scratched his chin. 'Ah...'

The Rainlords were all still in the room with him, as were the reapers.

No, wait, Carlos Sebolt and Olijas were missing. Salvador and Matteo were asleep, but Fidel was looking at him.

""Good morning, Lord,"" said Fidel, softly enough to not wake the others.

""Is it morning?"" said Hector, getting out of bed.

""Ah. No. It is evening again.""

Hector nodded. ""Where's Carlos?""

""He went for a walk with Roman and Voreese. I think he intended to meet up with the others, as well."" Fidel stood up and retrieved a stack of clothes from a bureau by the bathroom. He handed them off to Hector. ""Here, Lord. These arrived for you a few hours ago. Gifts from Secretary Karr, according to the attendant who brought them.""

Hector took them and then noticed that Fidel had already changed his own clothes. A sharp suit, not entirely dissimilar to what the man had been wearing before, but certainly lighter in color.

The clothes that he'd been offered also shared the latter feature. Fashion had never really been Hector's forte, but neither were bright colors. He wasn't quite sure how to feel about these, honestly."  
"2495

Still, it would've been rude to refuse them, and he didn't really have any other options at the moment, anyway. He entered the bathroom to get changed.

This place, too, was quite extravagant. The Lorentians really seemed to like their wooden beams and vaulted ceilings, and the white tiles below his feet were so polished that he could almost see his reflection in them.

That wasn't really the most desirable trait in a bathroom floor, he felt, but whatever.

The clothes, despite not exactly being to his tastes, were obviously

quite well-made. The fabrics were soft to the touch, and the golden buttons seemed like they might actually have been crafted from real gold. The tie, at least, was black, though he wasn't sure how well it went with the bright gray coat. He still had a little trouble tying it, but he managed. He was slowly getting accustomed to wearing these things.

And then there was...

Wait, what was this thing? Some kind of long, silky blue strip of cloth with white fringes? It couldn't be a second tie, right? And it was too big, besides. How was even supposed to wear this?

He decided to be stubborn for a couple more minutes, trying to solve this puzzle himself, before finally asking Garovel for help.

'Oh, that's a sash,' the reaper said privately.

'Oh,' said Hector. 'Uh... really?'

'Why do you sound so surprised? You've never seen a sash before?'

'I mean... probably.'

'In fact, I know you have. Some of the Hun'Kui in the Undercrust were wearing them.'

'Uh... oh yeah. Those didn't look like this, though.'

'Well, yeah. The one you're holding is probably a hundred times more expensive.'

'Ah...'

'Plus, I could be mistaken, but I think that one is specifically for foreign officials. Those are Atreyan colors. That sash's real purpose is probably to help the people around here tell where you're from with just a glance.'

"2496

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Hector supposed that would make sense. He slipped the sash on and fiddled with it and the Scarf for a while. This thing wasn't inside out, was it? Garovel didn't seem to think so, so it was probably fine.



He had to admit--it was kind of cool. And also very weird. When he exited the bathroom, he realized that Fidel's new clothes didn't include a sash.

Hector almost asked the man why that was directly before thinking better of it and asking Garovel.

'Hector.' The reaper's private voice sounded disappointed with him. 'C'mon. Do you really need me to explain that to you?'

'Uh... I mean...' Well, now he wanted to say no, but frankly, he was even more confused than before.

'As far as Lorent is concerned, they're just your subordinates. That sash is meant to make YOU more distinguished, not them.'

Ah.

Hector didn't like hearing that. These brave men here obviously weren't his subordinates, and they deserved just as much recognition as him, if not more.

But that was impossible, of course. There was a bigger picture to worry about.

He was really starting to hate this whole charade. It seemed like so many things were just falling into his lap, lately. Like nothing he was doing was earned. Everyone was just bending over backwards for him, because for one reason or another, they had no real choice in the matter.

And worse, it felt like nobody but him could see it.

The Rainlords were too nice to say anything, but they must have been profoundly sick of this whole arrangement already. And Garovel--wow. Garovel played it cool in front of others, but Hector could tell that the reaper was taking a certain delight in it all.

Ugh. He had to get his head on straight. This meeting with the President of Lorent was important for Atreya. If he said or did the wrong thing, it would reflect badly on an entire country.

Oh, man."

"2497

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A group of attendants arrived to check on them, and when they noticed that Hector was awake, they presented him with a blue folder and retreated without another word.

Fidel and the reapers seemed as curious about its contents as Hector was, so he tried to open it for everyone's viewing. As it turned out, there were several papers inside. He handed a couple off to Fidel.

The first few that Hector read were all part of a dinner menu. He wasn't even familiar with half or more of the listed options, but he could already feel his mouth beginning to water. If Riverton Hall was anything like Bosliat Palace, then the food here was probably pretty amazing, wasn't it?

And he was certainly famished.

""Lord,"" said Fidel, handing one of the papers back to him. Hector took it, but Fidel explained what it said for him, anyway. ""They're looking to arrange a time for your meeting with the President.""

Sure enough, Hector saw several times listed in the documents, one of which was this very night.

'Quite accommodating of them,' said Mevox from over Hector's shoulder. 'That's good. I've known more than a few of these political types who were so far up their own ass that they always tried to make everyone else work around their schedule, no matter how important their guests were.'

'I have to agree,' said Garovel. 'This is something that takes more than just money to do right. It speaks well of their consideration for us.'

""Or their fear of us,"" remarked Salvador, who had apparently woken up.

Mevox chuckled lowly. 'Well, that has its uses, too.'

""Don't even start with that,"" said Salvador, rolling his shoulders and breathing deeply.

Hector had a feeling that Mevox would start with that, regardless of what anyone else said, so he intervened with a change of subject.

""What time would you say is best for us, then?""

'Hmm, good question,' said Garovel. 'If we want to hang around P.J. for a few more days and enjoy this hospitality, then there's no real reason to meet the President tonight. But if we're in a rush to get back to Warrenhold, then the sooner the better.'

'I say we take a load off and relax,' said Mevox. 'Surely, after a battle like that, we deserve it.'

""You barely even did anything,"" said Salvador dryly.

'It's not about the quantity of one's contribution, my dear boy, but the quality.'

""Oh, shut up.""

'Maybe you should call the Queen and ask for her input,' said Garovel. 'She might want us to stay longer for political reasons.'

'Oh, good excuse!' said Mevox. 'Yeah, let's do that!'

He heard Salvador sighing, but Hector actually agreed with the reapers on this one. The Queen's opinion was pretty important here, he felt.

They decided to go through the other papers in the folder first, though. One of them was a handwritten letter from the President himself, Hector discovered with widening eyes.

It was quite wordy, but it essentially just seemed to be thanking him for his service to the country.

Wow. He should probably frame this and put it on his wall or something, shouldn't he? That would be the proper thing to do, he supposed.

He honestly wasn't sure that he was going to, though.

The final piece of paper was just a blank checklist with a short passage at the top explaining that the Riverton Hall staff would bring him any item that he wrote down. This, it clarified, would be in addition to the actual reward for killing the Beast of Lorent--which would be formally presented to him by the President and the Secretary of the Treasury.

All in all, it was pretty damn generous."

"2499

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Hector didn't plan on using the checklist, though. They were basically giving him a free pass to abuse their hospitality, but aside from food and clothing, he didn't really want anything.

'Heh, maybe you should try writing down the Dagger of Amordiin just to see what happens,' said Garovel privately.

Hector knew the reaper was joking, but the thought was honestly a bit tempting. Lorent was a pretty big nation. There was a decent chance that the government here had something like that in its possession without even realizing it.

Really, though, it just made him curious about what manner of reward they were planning to give him. It could be just about anything, he supposed. And maybe he was being greedy or narrow-minded, but he was kinda hoping for the obvious answer.

Money.

A big infusion of cash would be immensely helpful, right now. Warrenhold needed it. The Bank needed it. Sure, his financial situation was looking a lot better than it had a few months ago, but things were still in flux. He couldn't shake the feeling that the whole thing could come crumbling down at any moment with just a bit of bad luck.

Hell, even if the reward money went straight into the Atreyan treasury, he'd be cool with that. Atreya needed it, too, and that would probably help the Bank out tangentially.

As advised, he called the Queen, but she wasn't available. Her personal secretary answered instead and told Hector that Her Majesty would get back to him as soon as she could.

'Not surprising,' said Garovel. 'Busy lady, that Helen. Especially now.'

Yeah. Hector didn't need him to be more specific. Even with all this craziness going on, it was hard to forget that there was still a giant war raging across the continent.

The reapers discussed that very subject while the servants had dinner."

"2500

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The attendants offered to take them to a proper dining location, but the Rainlords preferred the relative privacy of this place. They didn't even take their iron masks off while anyone outside of the group was around.

Roman, Carlos, and Voreese returned in the middle of the meal, and so even more food was ordered. It was like a miniature banquet, if that made any sense. They moved furniture around or just sat on floor so that they could all gather in the middle of the room and eat together.

Salvador, in particular, did not hold back, and Hector felt a little bad for the waiters bringing all this food into their room. The man's gigantesque physique had not been achieved through a lack of eating, apparently. Hector watched him devour half a turkey by himself, along with dozens of other entrees and side dishes.

Hector began to wonder if part of that appetite was supernatural. It would make sense. He'd definitely noticed a difference in himself. After a big fight, he always ate way more than he usually did. And Salvador could no doubt eat more than most people, so maybe the effect on him was amplified even further.

Whatever the case, it was fantastic. Hector ate his fill, and then kept going, anyway. The crab legs were especially difficult to stop eating, he thought, and then the desert afterward with vanilla ice cream and fudge? He thought he might burst once he was finally done.

Thankfully, he didn't have to worry about being too engrossed in his meal to listen to the reapers' discussion regarding the war. They seemed to be the most interested with this news that Lorent had advisors from both Abolish and the Vanguard.

On the one hand, that seemed like a recipe for major conflict brewing in this country, but on the other, perhaps they were balancing each other out. Hector was curious to meet whoever this Vanguardian advisor was, but obviously, such a meeting would be a bit sketchy

while the Rainlords were still hanging around.

Which was another of the reapers' concerns."

"2501

The longer they stayed, the more antsy the reapers seemed to become about an accidental encounter with this Vanguardian servant. Whoever it was would have a fair chance of recognizing Salvador, Carlos, or any of the reapers.

And so, after the meal, they decided to depart under the cover of darkness.

It seemed like Fidel Blackburn didn't need to go with them, but he decided to anyway, because they thought that his copper materialization would make it easier to slip away undetected.

Matteo Delaguna, however, remained with Hector as usual while Ernivoc did not. His reaper would be able to instantly warn the other Rainlords of any new dangers that arose around Hector so long as Matteo was with him.

Roman and Voreese decided to stick around, but they were giving the impression that they would soon disappear, too. Roman was less concerned about being recognized by the Vanguard than he was about being caught on camera in Hector's company, and his ability to fly would make it all but trivial for him to escape this place.

The remaining members of the group, having all gotten plenty of sleep during the day, decided to take an impromptu nighttime tour of Riverton Hall.

Hector used the opportunity to finally bring Garovel up to speed on all the crazy things that Chort had told him. Hector was interested in hearing Garovel's opinion, but for the most part, the reaper just listened quietly, apparently wanting to hear it all first. And then, the conversation just kind of bled seamlessly into Pauline and Sparrows and aura and whatever the hell 'geographic resonance' was.

By the time Hector was done, Garovel's open eye sockets were looking a bit wider than usual.

'...Wow,' the reaper said privately. 'I mean, I'm surprised, and yet I'm

not.'

'Say what?'

'That all sounds in equal parts absurd and horrible to me, but at the same time, I knew shit must've gotten pretty weird and fucked up when reapers started getting teleported out of the country.'"

"2502

'I was hoping you'd have some useful explanations for me here,' said Hector. The stone path along the eastern edge of Riverton Hall was illuminated with scores of amber lanterns hanging from trees instead of lamp posts. They made for a beautiful view, but seeing as they weren't visibly connected to anything other than the trees, Hector wondered if someone had to light and douse each one individually every single day and night. Surely not, right? Maybe there was some sort of hidden electrical line in the trees or something.

'Well, I suppose there might be a couple things I could talk about,' said Garovel. 'You mentioned the name Lozaro, didn't you?'

'Yeah. You know it?'

'I've only heard it in passing a few times,' the reaper said. 'The first time, though, was over two hundred years ago.'

'Hmm. Don't like the sound of that.'

'Understandable. If this dude was responsible for bringing Chort into the world, then he's probably not one of the most respectable scientists out there.'

'Morgunov is a mad scientist, too, isn't he?'

'The most infamous one, yeah.'

'These two aren't, like, related at all, are they?'

'No idea. It wouldn't surprise me if they knew each other, though. The community of international madmen who are famous for conducting horrible experiments is not that big. Thankfully.'

'Are there any mad scientists that are... y'know, good?'

'Uh. Does Haqq Najir count?'

Hector bobbed his head. 'I dunno, does he?'

'Well, what distinguishes good and evil, really?'

'A question for the ages,' said Hector dryly, not wanting to go down that rabbit hole right now.

And his head turned. He'd had a thought process constantly monitoring the Scarf's input, looking for any sign of a Sparrow among the gently waving trees, and it finally found one nearby. He stopped walking, which made Garovel and the other stop, too.

""There you are, Pauline,"" he said aloud. ""I was starting to get worried.""

A rather long period of silence arrived, however, until a different voice arrived.

'Hello, Lord Goffe,' said Hanton Gaolanet."  
"2503

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Hector pressed his lips together flatly as he realized. ""Ah...""

Judging from the strained looks on everyone else's face, Hanton was allowing them to hear him speak, too.

'I must apologize for any trouble that my daughter may have caused you,' said Hanton.

""Oh,"" said Hector. ""Not at all. She was actually an enormous help in tracking the monster down. Without her... I think we probably would have suffered at least a few casualties.""

'...Truly?' said the Lord Gaolanet. 'You are not merely saying that in order to cover for her?'

That question pulled a laughing breath out of Hector. ""Yeah. It's true."" She may not have contributed to the fight itself, but there was no way he would've found everyone as quickly as he did without her there to



guide him.

'I see. Well, that is a relief to hear.'

""Where is she now?"" said Hector.

'I sent her home.'

""How is she doing? Did she seem tired or injured at all?""

'Hmm? She is fine. Why do you ask?'

Hector's eyes narrowed. ""...Did she tell you that she was struck by lightning during the battle?""

'What?!'

Ah.

'No, she did not tell me that!'

""I was afraid of that,"" said Hector. ""She sorta just brushed it off, so she seemed like she was okay, but I don't know much about Wrobel physiology, so--""

'Yes, yes, she should be fine in time, but still--agh, I cannot believe she did not mention that. Now it is no wonder why she did not put up more of a fight when I told her to return home. I would have gone with her, had I known.'

""...Are you sure she'll be okay? Most normal humans can't just brush off a lightning strike like that.""

Hanton was quiet for a moment. 'Our medicinal capabilities may not be a match for the regenerative prowess of servants, but I assure you that they are more than adequate.'

"2504

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Medicinal, was it? Hector was curious enough for elaboration on that point, but Garovel decided to intervene with a more pressing question.

'Since you're here, how much do you know about the political situation

in Lorent?' the reaper said.

'Ah, yes,' said Hanton. 'This nation is being pulled in multiple directions, at the moment. The political factions here have been split on a variety of subjects for several years now, but primarily, it all revolves around militarization. Lorent has historically relied very heavily on Intar to help secure its borders, but a growing number of congressional representatives have been arguing that Lorent needs to become more militarily independent.'

'I see,' said Garovel. 'And I suppose the war has only been emphasizing that problem for them.'

'Indeed,' said Hanton. 'I believe that this issue with the so-called Beast of Lorent was unifying them temporarily due to how pressing it was, but now that Lord Goffe has apparently taken care of that problem for them, the divisions will return--and quickly.'

Oh. Great.

'Nice going,' said Voreese flatly. 'What were you guys thinking, saving all those innocent people from mutilation and death? Now a bunch of politicians are going to start arguing again!'

Roman smacked his lips. ""You're right. We can only apologize for our thoughtlessness.""

'I was not trying to blame anyone for anything,' said Hanton. 'I was merely pointing out the facts.'

'And I was merely making an observation,' said Voreese. 'Continue.'

There arrived a sizable pause as Hanton was perhaps considering if she was being serious or not. 'The factions here are numerous, but with the continental war putting pressure on them, I expect some of them will begin compromising and merging in order to gain as much influence in the Lorentian Congress as they can.'

'Were you aware that the Vanguard and Abolish are in this country?' asked Garovel."

"2505

'Yes,' said Hanton. 'It was the main reason why I did not make more of

an effort to get involved with Lorentian affairs.'

'If you knew about it beforehand, then we would've at least appreciated a heads up,' said Garovel.

'And when would I have been able to do that for you?' said Hanton. 'This trip of yours materialized quite quickly, and I have been extremely busy.'

'Fine, but you could have sent someone else to tell us in your stead,' said Garovel.

Hanton fell quiet at that. 'You are referring to Pauline.'

'Well, I have not formally met her yet myself, but Hector here has. If not her, then were there not other Sparrows whom you could have sent?'

'Hmph.' A gust of wind caused the trees to briefly tremble as Hanton gave a single, harsh flap of his giant wings. 'You ask too much of me, reaper.'

Garovel didn't back down, though. 'My name is Garovel. And if we are to protect Atreya, then we should not ignore resources that are available to us without extremely good reason. I do not think that having your children serve as messengers for vital intelligence would be unreasonably difficult or dangerous.'

Hanton made no response.

'In fact,' Garovel went on, 'it may even be that their lack of roles to play is precisely what motivated Pauline to come all this way without your permission.'

'Do not presume to know my children,' said Hanton. 'They are not sitting at home doing nothing as you seem to think they are. They already have their roles to play.'

'Good to hear,' said Garovel.

It sounded like the reaper wanted to say more, like he wanted to question whether those roles were the ""correct"" ones, but for whatever reason, Garovel held his nonexistent tongue.

And the silence grew tense again."

"2506

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Hector abruptly felt like he would have to be the one to get the conversation back on track. ""...Do you know anything specific about the Vanguard and Abolish members who are stationed here? How strong they are? Who they report to?""

'I'm afraid not,' said Hanton. 'But if you don't mind, I shall attempt to use this visit of yours as an opportunity to learn precisely that kind of information.'

Voreese gave a short laugh. 'Don't wanna risk it without someone there to protect you in case things go pear-shaped, eh?'

Hanton allowed a beat to pass. 'Yes. Frankly, that is my exact concern.'

'Heh, well, I can't say I blame you,' said Voreese.

'I should hope not,' said the Sparrow. 'Reapers aren't exactly known for their courage, either.'

'True. And I know it's a convenient excuse, but there's only so much we can do without physical bodies of our own to work with.'

'How droll. In any event, while I may not be able to tell you about the other servants in the country, I can at least tell you about the President, if you are interested.'

'Please do,' said Garovel.

However, Voreese answered first. 'His name is Allen Dance, and he was elected under highly unusual circumstances. His opponent, Clark Griffon was the previous President who was running for a third and final term, and by all accounts, it seemed like Dance was going to be crushed in a landslide. But one day before the final debate was to be held, Griffon dropped out of the race with no explanation.'

Hector blinked. Come to think of it, he thought he remembered hearing about some crazy political stuff like that a few years ago.

'Griffon's party nearly dissolved overnight,' Voreese went on. 'They managed to prop up a last minute replacement for him to debate Dance, but Dance absolutely wiped the floor with him.'"

"2407

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'You've been following Lorentian politics,' Hanton observed.

'I do it for all of Atreya's neighbors,' said Voreese.

'How long have you been haunting Atreya?' said Hanton.

Voreese paused. 'That supposed to be an insult?'

'Oh, is ""haunting"" not the proper word?' said Hanton. 'I meant no disrespect. I would have asked how long you had been ""living"" there, but that word does not seem appropriate, either.'

'Heh, yeah, well, I guess haunting is fine,' said Voreese.

'We've been known to use that term ourselves occasionally,' added Garovel. 'I think Voreese is just looking for an excuse to get into an argument.'

'Oho! You lookin' to throw down, Gary?'

'Maybe later.'

'Hmph.'

Hanton took hold of the conversation again. 'In any case, as a result of that hectic election, Dance's presidency has been marred by a larger-than-usual amount of distrust among the general public.'

Hector had to ask. ""What's your opinion of him?""

'Mine?' said Hanton. 'Well, going on policy alone, I would say that he is actually not doing a bad job. He has an image for being corrupt, but it seems to me that he has worked hard to regain public trust.'

""If the public thinks he's so corrupt, then why did they vote for him in the first place?"" said Roman.

'The answer to that would depend on whom you ask,' said Hanton. 'His more extreme opponents would tell you that the public did NOT, in fact, vote for him, and that the entire election was rigged.'

""Hmm,"" hummed Roman, ""but I'm not asking them. I'm asking you.""

'Ah. In my view, the public simply viewed him as the better of two bad options. Griffon's replacement was barely even a candidate.'

'Same,' said Voreese. 'I don't think Dance is that bad of a dude. I mean, he might be, but as far I've been able to tell, he hasn't committed any crimes against humanity.'

'I think your standards might be a little too low,' said Garovel."  
"2508

'Eh, maybe so,' said Voreese. 'But anything less heinous than that should be left for the living to ponder over, don't you think?'

'Perhaps,' said Garovel, 'but I know a rather large amount of reapers who would disagree with you on that particular point.'

'So do I,' said Voreese.

Hanton cut in. 'And I know even more who would only SAY they agreed with you.'

That left a stinging silence in its wake, until Voreese gave a small chortle. 'You know that many reapers, do you? Because I'm pretty sure I know more of 'em than you.'

Hanton made no response.

'I gotta say, though,' Voreese went on, 'I appreciate you havin' the guts to speak your mind. It's the ones who don't that ya really gotta watch out for. So feel free to talk as much shit as you like while I'm around, Mr. Bird. It's what I live for, in fact.'

""It really is,"" added Roman.

'That is an admirable quality,' said Hanton. 'I think.'

'Thanks.'

'In that vein, please do not call me Mr. Bird again.'

'Aw, c'mon. It's a code name! Since we're in foreign territory! Makes total sense!'

The Lord Gaoalanet just gave a telepathic grumble.

Garovel pushed the conversation onward again. 'So is there anything else we should know about the President?'

'Nothing I would consider terribly urgent,' said Hanton. 'If there were, I--' Hanton cut himself off. 'Someone approaches.'

And indeed, when Hector checked more closely on what the Scarf was telling him, he could sense a lone figure walking briskly toward their group from the direction of the main building. He turned to face the apparent attendant as the man came a stop and gave a hasty bow.

""Lord Goffe. A call for you. Queen Helen of Atreya.""  
"2509 -- CCXXXIII.

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Three: 'The Mouth of Atreya...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

At the Queen's behest, Hector ended up spending considerably more time in Lorent than expected. After she heard his version of events so far, she told him that she was sending her best negotiator to meet up with him and that he should hold off on a formal meeting with the President until then. Apparently, it was going to be a few days.

Hector had of course asked for the name of this negotiator, and when she told him, a smile crossed his face.

In the interim while they waited, Hector had to find things to do. Thankfully, it wasn't very hard. He was able to explore the city a bit more and see some of the sights. He still couldn't really get over the fact that there were so many houses with trees growing out of them, but he did have to admit that they were usually quite beautiful, especially the larger ones.

He dined on more Lorentian cuisine, too, of course. Personally, he didn't think it was all that different from Atreyan cuisine, but Garovel pointed out that maybe he was being a bit biased after having tried some of the crazy food in the Undercrust.

And he made sure to meditate as well. He wanted to practice his materialization more, but this didn't quite seem like the time or place for it when there were so many strangers around. He tried out that ""Sto"" technique that Emiliana had mentioned to him, and even thought he got a handle on it.

But he wasn't really sure what to do with it. A so-called ""storage"" state of consciousness. There had to be some way he could use this, he felt. Just because it was designed for mutation users didn't mean that he couldn't take advantage of it at all, right?

Well, maybe not. Nothing was coming to mind, at least. Maybe he could store techniques in there? But in what way, exactly? And more importantly, for what purpose?"

"2509 -- CCXXXIII.

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Well, maybe not. Nothing was coming to mind, at least. Maybe he could store techniques in there? But in what way, exactly? And more importantly, for what purpose?"

"2510

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 2 of 2))He spoke to Emiliana through the Shard, and thankfully, her circumstances seemed to be fine, still. With the war going on, he feared that she would somehow get thrown into it, but from the sound of things, nothing had changed for her at all.

It made him wonder if she wasn't even on the Eloan continent, right now. It was pointless to speculate, since he knew that she wouldn't tell him her location. And even if he did figure it out, what in the world would he do with that information? Telling it to Zeff would be tantamount to sending the man to his death.

Or at least, that was what Emiliana was obviously worried about. As time went on, Hector wasn't sure that Zeff would do anything that reckless. The man would have to know that a direct assault on the Monster of the East would be suicide, so he would probably take a different approach, right? Zeff was always lecturing him about making use of appropriate tactics in battle, after all.

Perhaps he'd been thinking too little of his teacher this whole time.

Well, it didn't matter now. There was nothing to be done.

During the downtime, Hanton ""arrived"" at Riverton Hall in his illusory

human form, and Hector saw him making the rounds, probably trying to learn more about the current political environment here. He and Hector spoke a few more times.

Hector didn't feel like he'd achieved emergence in the battle with Chort, but... he did feel like something was different. It had to be this aura stuff that Pauline and now Hanton were talking about.

And after discussing it more with Garovel, the two of them came to the conclusion that Hector's own aura must have been the result of the blessing that Malast gave him, Domain."

"2511

It seemed to be the only explanation. They'd been trying to discern what the effects of Domain might be for some time now, so their lack of progress on that front made sense if those effects were all but invisible to them.

They didn't think that was all there was to it, though. From the way the Sparrows--and Chort, for that matter--talked about aura, it sounded like something natural to all life, like souls. And also like souls, it had its levels of intensity and variation. So while Domain was probably responsible for some of the things that Pauline and Hanton described to him, Hector had the feeling that Domain was not itself synonymous with his aura.

Malast's blessing had not granted him the power of aura. It had modified it. The specifics of that modification... were still quite debatable, Hector thought.

All in all, it was really fucking confusing. Had Domain just made his aura more powerful or something? Without knowing how strong his aura was before being granted the blessing, he had no way of figuring that out. And were there going to be other effects?

He sure would've liked to ask Malast about it, though he doubted that asshole would tell him anything. Rasalased might know something, if he could figure out how to talk to him again.

Which was yet another thing on Hector's mind. Rasalased had said his two blessings were ""interacting"" with one another, that they had created that ""headspace.""

Despite sleeping a few more times, Hector had yet to speak to the Dry God again. It had to be possible, though. The timing of it was too suspicious. Right after the battle with Chort, when he'd learned about auras and shit? When it seemed like his might have... changed in some way?

That couldn't be a coincidence, Hector felt. He just had to keep trying."  
"2512

More than anything, though, Hector was curious about the apparent ability of Sparrows to look into the past via locations of ""geographic resonance"" or whatever it was. To him, that seemed like an absurdly useful power--especially as it might pertain to treasure hunting.

According to Hanton, such locations were actually quite rare to find, especially without anyone around who was guarding them. Sparrows were known to cherish them, for obvious reasons, but many humans could also sense that they were in some way special, even if they couldn't necessarily discern why.

Hector's hopes of finding more of them and discovering the secrets of history were somewhat dashed upon hearing that, but if nothing else, he was still curious to know what they actually were. What made those locations ""resonate"" more than others?

Hanton said that no one really knew the answer to that for certain. He seemed to believe that were simply a naturally occurring phenomenon, an effect of the planet's own life force spilling out into nature, but he also mentioned a contradictory theory that resonance might be determined by some unknown historical factor related to each location.

Whatever the case, it fascinated him. And it kind of reminded him of the mysterious holes to the Undercrust. Those were also rare, highly valued, and of dubious origin. He might've asked Hanton about them, too, if he wasn't so concerned about keeping the one in Warrenhold a secret for as long as possible. While he did want to fulfill the wishes of Warrenhold's founder and make it a thriving center of trade between the surface and the Undercrust, that goal still seemed like a long ways off.

So until then, all he had was this dreadful feeling that, for one reason

or another, that hole would become a really big problem if too many people learned of its existence."

"2513

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During the wait, Hector was also able to meet the Vanguardian servant and reaper pair that were stationed here. Their names were Carl Rondel and Joviza, and they were about as stiff and formal as could be. Roman and Voreese had departed before that meeting, and despite Garovel's best efforts to lighten the mood of the conversation, the Vanguardians did not appear to loosen up at all.

They didn't express any gratitude to Hector for killing the Beast of Lorent, either. Which was perfectly fine with Hector, honestly, seeing as he'd actually grown a bit exhausted of hearing people praising him about that. He might not have even noticed if Garovel hadn't brought it up after the fact.

'What difference does it make?' said Hector.

'Not much, perhaps,' said Garovel. 'But I do feel it demonstrates a concerning lack of political savvy, if nothing else. That Rondel guy is supposed to be an advisor to the President. It's not very comforting to me when the Abolish advisor is seemingly much more personable than the Vanguardian one.'

Hector found that logic difficult to argue with. Ravi had been pretty polite and charming, which probably went a long way around here. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more Carl and Ravi seemed like complete opposites of one another.

It made him curious to see the two of them interact, but he never saw them together. Maybe he would get to see that either during or after his meeting with the President--which drew close when the wait for the Atreyan negotiator finally ended.

Prince David of House Lumenbel was a man that Hector had come to know fairly well but not seen in quite a while--or what felt like quite a while, at least. Hector was only too happy to have him here now.

Briefly, Hector had thought that the Queen might have changed her mind without telling him and sent Hanton as the negotiator instead, but

no, the Sparrow had simply decided to show up in his human form all on his own, citing the reason for his visit to the Lorentians as ""a wonderful coincidence.""

Oddly enough, they seemed to buy it, which made Hector wonder if Hanton was influencing their minds in some way."

"2514

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""Apologies for the protracted delay,"" said Prince David upon seeing Hector and exchanging handshakes and smiles. The latter of his seemed noticeably strained, and the rotund man paused for a heavy sigh. ""My time in Intar has not been nearly as pleasant as it was in my youth.""

Hector locked gazes with David's stout bodyguard as they all walked together toward Hector's room.

The bodyguard returned a knowing nod. That man was one Vito Sebolt, and his reaper, Kerikos, floated alongside him.

Back at the Gala, Prince David had expressed some trepidation regarding his safety while serving as an ambassador to Intar. He'd even gone so far as to ask Hector to accompany him personally, which Hector would have certainly agreed to if not for all his new responsibilities as Lord of Warrenhold at the time.

So instead, Hector sought out the most powerful servant-reaper pair who were still unknown to the wider world. And that had been Vito and Kerikos here. Hector had even sparred with them personally before ultimately asking Lord Dimas to let them accompany Prince David.

This was all before the outbreak of the Second Continental War, however.

""Intar is still at peace, isn't it?"" said Hector.

""Technically, yes, it is,"" said David. ""But there is so much infighting going on right now that it is a madhouse nonetheless. And there was a time, not so long ago, when I was merely happy to not draw too much attention to our humble little nation to the south, but as time went on, I felt that I could not play the role of demure wallflower any longer.""

Hector wasn't sure he understood most of that. So he said so. ""What do you mean?""

The Prince released a tired chuckle. ""I mean, I opened my big mouth and started speaking my mind.""

Hector snorted. ""Is that supposed to surprise me?""  
"2515

""Heh, perhaps not,"" said David. ""But as a result, they have begun calling me the Mouth of Atreya. And while a part of me finds that moniker to be actually quite funny, I cannot say that I appreciate the overall impression that it gives people of my character.""

Hector blinked. ""The Mouth of Atreya...? That's, uh...""

""Not very flattering. You can say it.""

""Oh, ah, I mean--it's kinda flattering, though, isn't it? In its own way? They're saying you have a way with words.""

""A generous interpretation if ever there was one.""

They arrived at the room, and Hector showed him in, after which Matteo and Vito followed. Garovel and Kerikos just phased through the wall without waiting for anyone, of course.

The Prince plopped down on the couch with an impressive thud and sighed.

In truth, there was one question that Hector most wanted to ask, and he'd been waiting until they had some privacy in order to do so. ""Has there been any... developments on the matter of Atreya's annexation?""

For a moment, Prince David just stared at him. ""Funny you should mention that.""

Hector cocked an eyebrow, uncertain if he would like whatever he was about to hear. ""Why?""

""My little venture to Intar was only supposed to be for a week or two, at most. But then this annexation offer arrived, which complicated my

job greatly. And now, of course, there is the war as well, complicating it further. In fact, for a while, it seemed like the business of annexation had almost been entirely forgotten, as the war tended to overwhelm all other discussions. At that point, only a bit of progress had been made--minor haggling here and there as, in truth, I was simply buying more time for my sister to come to a final decision.

""Oh, and how could I forget? A certain bank opened up at some point in the middle of all that as well. I honestly cannot remember the proper sequence of events now, because to me, it has all been a series of monkey wrenches being thrown continually into the machinery which I, alone, have been attempting to operate.""

Hector just pressed his lips together flatly."

"2516

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David still wasn't done, though. ""And then, not three days ago, I discover that there has been yet another wrench thrown my way in the form of one Lord Darksteel of Warrenhold receiving international acclaim from the Lorentian government.""

Hector scratched his cheek. ""Ah..."

""You were aware that Intar had previously sent multiple warriors to deal with this monster problem, yes?"" said the Prince.

""Er. Yes..."

""Mmhmm. And so, of course, the fact that you have succeeded where they failed has brought you to the attention of Intar.""

Yeah, Hector had been a little worried about that possibility. Prince David's mildly exasperated tone almost made Hector want to apologize, but he refrained, because he didn't really see how he could have handled the situation differently. Innocent lives had been at stake, and he'd come here with the Queen's approval, so...

David's frustrated expression melted into a smile as quickly as it had appeared, though. ""Intar has sweetened their offer of annexation by a substantial amount.""

Hector blinked. ""They have? I, uh... I kinda thought they would lose

interest, what with the war going on.""

""That is what I thought as well,"" said David. ""Especially because my sister's bargaining power has only continued to increase, thanks to your exploits. But apparently, they are not deterred by the rising costs. If anything, they seem more eager than ever.""

""Why?""

""Why, indeed. Only Intar knows what Intar is thinking--and at the moment, even that is debatable."" The Prince broke for a weary laugh. ""But I must say, it does worry me. Perhaps they are thinking that they would like to bring this new Lord of Warrenhold under their command.""

Hector exchanged glances with Garovel, who was still just listening quietly. ""...I doubt that's the reason,"" he said. ""Or if it is, then it's probably not the only one. Intar has plenty of servants already at its disposal. And from what I've heard, Intar has a great relationship with the Vanguard, too, so I can't really imagine that they would have that much use for me.""

"2417

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""You surprise me, Hector,"" said David. ""You think quite lowly of yourself despite all you have accomplished.""

That wasn't it. Well, okay, maybe it was, partially. But Hector still remembered the conversation that he'd had with the Queen back at the Gala, when Garovel had explained his thoughts regarding why Intar might be interested in acquiring Atreya. Prince David hadn't been present for that conversation; and even if he had been, he wouldn't have been able to hear Garovel, so now Hector was thinking that perhaps he should try to reiterate the reaper's points as best he could.

'Heh,' said Garovel privately. 'You thinkin' about explaining what I told you guys before?'

'Er, yeah. How could you tell?'

'Just a guess, based on the conversational context combined with the sneaky looks you're givin' me. Go on and tell him, then. Don't worry. I'll



correct you if you fuck up horribly.'

'Thanks.'

Hector took a seat in a maple wood chair across from the Prince. ""So... we have a suspicion that the reason Intar wants to annex Atreya... is because it wants to prevent Atreya from paying back its debt to Intar's enemies. Specifically, Dozer.""

Prince David's eyes went vacantly down to the coffee table in front of him as he processed that thought. ""I see...""

""And, er, if that's been their motivation this whole time,"" said Hector, ""then it would make sense why the budgetary problems of the war aren't making them change their mind.""

""Because in their eyes, the annexation is part of the war,"" concluded David, rubbing his chin. ""Yes. That may well be the case.""

'Good job,' said Garovel, again privately. 'Now ask him if he's caught wind of Intar offering to annex any other countries.'

Hector did so.

""...As a matter of fact, I have,"" said David. ""Two of our neighbors, Kahm and Rendon, have received offers. And this one is only a rumor, a very dubious one at that, but I have also heard Czacoa has recently been sent an offer as well.""

Hector blinked. ""In the middle of the war with Vantalay?""  
"2518

""Yes,"" said David. ""It would be quite absurd, if true. If Czacoa accepted, then Intar would immediately be thrust into the greater continental war, which is what Intar seems to have been trying to avoid this entire time. Such an action goes against all conventional wisdom, at the moment, but...""

""You think the rumor might be true?"" said Hector.

The Prince's expression became strained. ""I am torn on that. I would not have even brought it up if I thought it to be completely baseless. And I do think that Intar's government is currently chaotic enough for

such a thing to happen..."

"But?"

The Prince nodded. "But this could also be an instance of information warfare. Even spreading the mere idea that Intar might enter the war... could have a profound impact. I can imagine Czacoa spreading this rumor, if for no other reason than to discourage Vantalay, but the source could of course come from elsewhere. With so many participants in the war, motivations abound."

Interesting. Frankly, Hector hadn't even considered that possibility.

"As for Kahm and Rendon," the Prince continued, "well, those two offers combined with our own do end up painting a rather clear picture of Intar's interest in our region."

That caused a new thought to strike Hector. "Do you think there's something about the land itself that they could want?"

"That is, of course, also a possibility. I think it likely that Intar's interest in us is not driven by a single factor."

"Hmm."

"And lest we forget, there was another group of Abolish instigators working in Rendon at the same time as there were in Atreya, remember? That nation may not have struggled quite so publicly as we did, but if you look at their economic numbers for the last several months, you will see that they were hurt just as badly by that conflict as we were--perhaps more, even, because their recovery does not appear to be going quite as smoothly as ours is.""

"2519

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Hector had to cock an eyebrow at that last remark. "You think ours is going smoothly?"

"Compared to Rendon's, yes," said David. "Your bank may still be new, but its effects have gone far beyond merely those who have signed up for an account. Word of mouth alone of the Darksteel National Bank has reignited confidence in the economy from foreign investors. Where before, they saw us as rubble to be sifted through

and picked clean of whatever valuables might remain, now they are beginning to see us as a potential dark horse.""

He tilted his head. ""A dark horse?""

""Oh, are you unfamiliar? It is a gambling term. In horse racing. When a horse wins unexpectedly, it is a dark horse.""

""...But if they see us as a 'potential' dark horse, then it wouldn't be unexpected, would it?""

""Heh. Perhaps. But all I am saying is that speculation is beginning to turn in our favor, albeit slowly. Foreign investors are taking more risks on our companies, instead of merely trying to buy them on the cheap and scrap them for parts. Which is not to say that we are out of danger, of course, but there is at least now a visible turn and step toward economic stability.""

Hector felt like he understood what the Prince was saying, though he wasn't sure how to respond to it. For his part, he was still quite wary of getting too comfortable with the Bank's progress. On the one hand, he felt like he'd done all he could before leaving for Lorent, but on the other, he expected to hear a bunch of bad news when he returned to Warrenhold. Maybe he was just being cynical, though.

""I must say, however,"" said David, ""it does make one curious about how, precisely, Abolish managed to crash Rendon's economy. From what I have been able to discern, it was not the work of my incarcerated brother.""

"2520

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It had been quite a while since Hector had thought about Prince Luther. It felt a little strange to know that a man whom he'd never even met was almost entirely responsible for the events that had thrown Atreya into such chaos all those months ago, events that had changed Hector's life in more ways than he could even count. Hell, if not for all the news coverage, Hector might not have even known what the guy looked like.

Truthfully, a part of Hector was curious to meet him, to hear his justifications for his actions. It didn't really matter now, of course, and it

wouldn't change anything, but still.

Maybe one day, if he ever found the time, Hector would pay him a visit.

""Do you think that they had saboteurs in their government, too?"" said Hector.

""Probably,"" said David. ""I cannot imagine a scenario in which they accomplished such economic devastation without abusing some type of governing influence. Perhaps I am being small-minded, though. I should have a chat with our ambassador to Rendon soon, I think.""

Hmm. Hector didn't even know who that was, and abruptly, he felt as though he probably should. Considering how close their two nations had come to war, the Queen wouldn't be allowing just anyone to have that position.

Prince David decided to push the conversation onward before Hector thought to ask for elaboration. ""But in any event, we're here to talk about Lorent, not Rendon. And it is already getting quite late in the evening. Why don't you tell me your version of events regarding this Beast you fought?""

Hector did so over dinner. Hector had eaten in the extravagant dining hall a few times by now and was prepared to do so again, but much like the Rainlords, the Prince seemed to prefer the privacy that Hector's room afforded them.

The Prince mostly just listened, and as usual, the man's laidback expression didn't betray much of what he might be thinking or feeling."  
"2521

Hector decided to leave out some of the more confusing details, such as auras and Sparrows--and what Sparrows even were for that matter. He was a little torn on keeping that information from the Prince, but it was all rather complicated to delve into, and he didn't really think that David would be comforted by the knowledge that there were giant, invisible birds skulking around who were also capable of screwing with his mind in all sorts of terrifying ways.

Plus, Hanton had already tried to impress upon him the importance of keeping the Sparrows' existence in Atreya a secret. Hector had already

made the decision to tell some of his closest allies about them, but if he allowed that circle of awareness to keep expanding, then it would only make things more difficult in the long run, he felt. Not to mention, Hector had an unpleasant feeling that such knowledge might in some way imperil Prince David.

In a background thought process, though, he kept thinking it through. This was someone he didn't want to keep secrets from, no matter how good the reason. He might change his mind, Hector felt.

They stayed up and talked for quite a while longer, catching up on more subjects and simply enjoying each other's company. The Prince spoke more generally about Intar, describing some of its lighter sides to Hector, including its food and entertainment. Hector ended up asking where David had been staying while in Intar, hoping to hear about a castle or two in the region, but sadly, the Prince's answer was a hotel.

The discussion of entertainment, however, bled into a more general one regarding Intarian culture, and the conversation began to turn more serious again.

""I remember you mentioning at the Gala,"" said Hector, ""that there's some kind of big ideological divide in Intar, right now.""  
"2522

""Indeed,"" said David. ""Politically, the divide is between the Blue Moon Party and the Grand National Republic Party. Ideologically, it is between pacifism and interventionism. They have other issues dividing them as well, but that is the primary one, and now with the war, it has only been amplified to heights that were previously thought impossible.""

""I see,"" said Hector. ""And have you taken a side?""

""Oh, of course not. Not officially, at least. As a representative of the nation, that would just be asking for trouble.""

""And... unofficially?""

The Prince regarded Hector a moment, then briefly Matteo and Vito as well. ""Well. The party currently in power is the GNRP--or the Grands,

as they're often called. The Moons have been making strides, particularly among young people, but their actual degree of influence within the government is... questionable, at the moment."

"The Grands are the interventionists, I take it?"

"Yes. And the Moons are the pacifists."

"So you favor the interventionists, then?"

David bobbed his head. "Favor is a strong word. Ideologically, I can appreciate both sides of the argument. But in the interest of our country, I would say that the Grands are the more valuable allies for us. For now, at least."

"Hmm. And do you think that could change soon?" Hector was mildly more interested in hearing the ideological elements of the argument, but he could appreciate the difficulty of the Prince's position here. And it didn't seem all that relevant, either way, he supposed. Intarian issues were for the Intarians to worry about. Plus, Hector doubted that he would have much to contribute to such a complex-sounding debate, anyway.

"Ah. Whew. Tough question. Could the Moons become a more valuable ally to us? Hypothetically, sure. The political tide is turbulent enough at the moment that I feel like almost anything 'could' happen, but do I think it likely? Not especially. The Grands may be the interventionists, but they aren't advocating for direct involvement in the war, and that seems to be the most pressing issue on the public's mind, right now."

"2523

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Hector scratched his chin as he thought about that. "I guess it's understandable that the public wouldn't be in favor of war... but, uh..."

Prince David tilted his head. "Hmm?"

Man, he really felt out of his depth here, but he figured that this was a pretty safe environment to be asking potentially stupid questions. Hopefully. "Er. Do the Intarian people think that the war is unjust?"

"Ah," said David with an air of realization. "That... particular point

does not often get discussed, perhaps because it would conflict with the prevailing narrative of Intarian neutrality. Not that I blame them. I may not have been back to Atreya since the war broke out, but I highly doubt that our people are any different in this regard.""

Hector nodded.

""The Grands, I suspect, want to intervene more forcefully,"" said David, ""but I think they understand that admitting as much to the general public would be political suicide. The Moons are already arguing--and loudly--that Intar's current contributions to the war effort are too great. They say that even sending aid to allies is unacceptable. Though, I am sure they would choose different words than mine. They argue that the Grands are just trying to 'profiteer off of all the death and destruction.' Which, quite frankly, may hold truth to it, also. War is big business.""

Damn. Now Hector wasn't sure what to think.

""But it is true that the justness of the war is difficult to dispute,"" said David. ""Fighting in defense of so many sovereign lands that have been violently invaded--that's a slam dunk legally and morally, if not politically. Perhaps if the Grands were able to highlight that aspect of the situation more, they could spin the public narrative back in their favor. I don't know how feasible that is in the middle of all this chaos, though.""

"2524

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What a tough situation, Hector thought. He didn't envy the leaders of Intar right now, nor Prince David here. A new question occurred to him, though. ""Do you know what the Intarian Rainlords are up to?""

Vito and his reaper perked up a little, as did Matteo in Hector's peripheral vision.

""Yes, I was curious about them, too, so I have been trying to keep an eye on their movements,"" said the Prince. ""But it has not been easy. Unlike in Sair, their presence in the government is quite small. They appear to be keeping to themselves. I would have expected their representatives to voice more concern regarding the Calthosi invasion of Sair, but they were noticeably quiet on that front. The issue might

not have been brought up at all if the ambassador from Sair had not done so himself."

A briefly awkward silence gripped the room.

David glanced at his bodyguard. "Vito explained to me that... certain relations with the Intarian Rainlords are rather complicated, at the moment, so I did not think it wise to make contact with them."

Vito merely gave a grim nod.

"...Who was the ambassador from Sair?" said Hector.

"I believe it was Lord Hasan Duxan," said Prince David.

Hector blinked. "Did you meet him?"

"I did not." David turned his head slightly. "Should I have?"

Hector shrugged. "I don't know. But I met him while I was in Sair. He's the head of Hahl Duxan and one of the most powerful figures in the country, right now."

"Ah. I must admit, my knowledge of Sairi politicians is comparatively lacking. My brother Meriwether would know them better. Perhaps I will call him soon."

Hector hadn't forgotten. Prince Meriwether was the entire reason he'd gone to Sair in the first place. The man was married to one of the Saqqaf women. Hector remembered their reunion at the airport not feeling particularly warm despite the desert's blistering heat.

"2525

"If Hasan Duxan went to Intar himself," said Hector, "then he must have had a really good reason. The Sandlords have their hands full with the war. I don't think they would want to spare one of their most powerful warriors for a diplomatic mission unless they thought it was extremely important."

"I see..." The Prince touched his bare chin as he eyed Hector intently for a moment. "You seem surprisingly familiar with the Sandlords' thinking."



""Ah... well, I've been keeping in contact with Lord Asad Najir. And I did spend several days sitting in on the meetings of the Golden Council.""

David blinked at him. ""The Golden Council..."

He'd just kind of blurted that out, but now that he thought about it more, that had sounded like a bigger deal than he'd meant for it to. ""Uh. In Moaban. After the attack on Dunehall. It was actually pretty informal. The Sandlords just requested that I show up to the meetings. I didn't participate. Much. Uh..."

Technically, that last meeting had been when he and Garovel invited the Rainlords to Warrenhold. Without asking the Queen's permission.

Okay, maybe it was kind of a big deal. He'd been so busy during those days with trying to help civilians evacuate the city that he hadn't given the matter much thought. Hell, he hadn't even known that the collective group of Sandlord heads was referred to as the Golden Council until Garovel mentioned it.

The Prince was still just sort of staring at him, though.

""...Er, a-anyway, if you get a chance to talk to Lord Duxan when you return, you might wanna take it. That's... all I was trying to say.""

""Very well..." More gears seemed to be turning in the man's head. ""If your assessment is correct, however, then it sounds like Lord Duxan would only have been there to request military assistance from Intar. Nothing else would strike me as important enough, given the timing.""  
"2526

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Hector bobbed his head to the side. ""You're probably right, but... you never know. I've seen a lot of weird stuff over the last few months. Lord Duxan having some other kind of motive for his visit would hardly even make the list.""

""I shall try to keep that in mind,"" said the Prince with a mild laugh.

The conversation didn't last much longer before they finally turned in for the night. They'd scheduled their meeting with the President for tomorrow morning, since Prince David wanted to be back in Intar before nightfall.

It would be a shame to see him off so soon, but Hector had no doubt the man's work there was important, if for no other reason than to keep an eye on what was happening in that country. Intar was one of the three great superpowers of the Eloan continent, the other two being Steccat and Melmoore. If the situation changed there, the consequences would surely be far-reaching.

In the morning, Hector had breakfast together with David and Hanton. They were both exceptionally polite while in each other's company--even more so than when either of them spoke to him individually.

It was kind of uncomfortable, Hector thought. While their words were nice, he got the impression that they were actually quite wary of one another, like they were being careful not to say anything too revealing. Perhaps Hanton was worried about how much Hector had told Prince David about him, and the Prince probably knew of Hanton's reputation as a political enigma.

Hector felt like he should serve as some kind of icebreaker for the two of them, but he honestly had no idea how to go about it.

Which annoyed him. A proper lord would've known what to do. And worse, by the time he thought to consult Garovel for help, everyone was nearly done eating--or nearly done appearing to eat, in Hanton's case."

"2527

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As a member of the Riverton Hall staff guided them toward the President's office, it gradually became clear to Hector that this was going to be an even bigger occasion than he'd expected. There were more people around than ever, and he occasionally caught glimpses of camera crews through windows or among the crowd.

He'd known that this was going to be televised, of course, but that did little to settle his discomfort now, especially without his armor. He so badly wanted to materialize it again and hide behind it, but there was really no good justification for that.

Or at least, that was what Garovel kept telling him. Maybe the reaper didn't know what he was talking about, though. It's not like Garovel was

always right about everything, right?

Agh. He just had to focus. He'd done this sort of thing before. He was more experienced now. He could handle it. Probably.

The President's office was actually quite huge, but it didn't feel that way with all these people crammed into it. Hector immediately spotted Ravi Zaman and Carl Rondel among the onlookers, as their accompanying reapers made them rather easy to notice. Aside from them, he also recognized the faces of Secretary Karr, Ambassador Stoutamire, and several other officials that he had met briefly over the course of his stay here.

Which included the President himself, actually. Allen Dance was a tall man with a black-and-gray beard. His expression had a natural severity to it, not entirely unlike several Rainlords whom Hector could think of.

""On behalf of the Free Nation of Lorent, allow me to thank you for all that you have done for this country, Lord Hector Goffe of Atreya."" And the President offered him a handshake.

Hector took it, of course, but it hardly felt like a normal handshake with all this pomp and circumstance going on around them."

"2528

""I hope the amicable relationship between our two countries will continue indefinitely into the future,"" said President Dance. It wasn't quite a smile that crossed his face, but it might've been an attempt at one.

And.

Uh.

Hector was supposed to say something here. He knew that. He and Garovel had discussed how to handle this meeting at length before going to bed and again while getting ready this morning.

Words. Were needed. Really simple ones, too. So what the fuck were they again?

Uhhh.

Shit.

The cameras were all looking at him.

Standing calmly in front of them was one thing, but actually talking in front of them was another. Now that he was thinking about it, the only time that he'd ever actually spoken in front of a camera was when he had recorded that fake threat video in order to prevent Abolish from destroying the town of Harold. And he was suddenly recalling with perfect clarity how many fucking takes that recording had required.

Agh. Right now, it was all he could do to maintain his composure. He had to do something, though. Quick. Before the moment got too awkward. Or was it already too awkward? With all these parallel thought processes freaking out simultaneously, it was somehow difficult to tell how much time was actually passing here. A few seconds? A few minutes? Definitely not the second one, right? Oh god.

Would a nod suffice? Could he even manage that much? He could, right? He wasn't a fucking baby.

Yeah.

A nod.

He nodded.

And he breathed.

Agh.

Why did that have to be so difficult? Was talking in front of a camera really that different to talking to a person?

He felt like such a dumbass.

The President turned around to his desk, and for a terrible second, Hector thought that he'd fucked everything up, but then the man turned back around again, holding a finely engraved box in both hands.

"2529

Hector didn't know what to expect here. He hadn't been told what the exact reward for killing the Beast of Lorent would be--which seemed a little odd, considering this ceremony was being broadcast live across the country. Prince David had expressed some concern when he'd learned about that fact last night, but there wasn't much to be done about it. Ultimately, they were still just guests here.

So when President Dance pulled back the lid of the box and revealed its contents, Hector did his best to look pleasantly surprised despite having zero idea what he was looking at.

Inside the box, on a faintly blue cushion, lay an object about the size of a dagger. An object that, to Hector's eyes, looked... like a big noodle. It was a pale brown color, nearly white and mildly translucent.

And it was... fuzzy.

Was it some kind of plant?

""Please accept this symbol of our esteem,"" said the President, and he held the box closer.

Hector didn't see much choice but to accept it, but he sure hoped the man was about to explain what the hell this thing was, because asking directly seemed like it might be pretty rude.

""This Root of the Farakano Tree is one of our most sacred items,"" said Dance. ""Few in our nation's history have been given, and of those, you are only the second foreigner to have ever received one. We hope you will cherish it as we will cherish your remarkable service to Lorent.""

Well, when he put it like that, it sure sounded important. Hector nodded another time and tried not to look as lost for words as he felt again.

A sudden round of applause filled the chamber as all the Lorentians began clapping for some reason, including the two servant advisors.

Garovel was peering over Hector's shoulder at the Root. 'Hmm,' he hummed privately. 'I gotta say, I wasn't expecting a big white hairy turd as a gift.'

"2530 -- CCXXXIV.

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The rest of the ceremony proceeded normally enough, and thankfully, Hector didn't have to actually talk during it. There were more opportunities for him to do so, of course, but he was able to remain silent through them all without drawing more unwanted attention than he already had.

Afterwards, the camera crews were ushered out of the office by the President's black-suited security guards, and from there, the actual meeting could begin.

Surprisingly, the Lord Gaolanet was the first to speak up once everyone was seated. "'President Dance,'" he said with a stern expression on his illusory face, "'is it your intention to insult the Queen of Atreya with this gift?'"

Dance's own expression was just as steely, however. "'Not at all. There will of course be a monetary reward rendered for Lord Goffe's services as well. However, we did not feel that we should present it before the cameras, especially since we did not know who, exactly, would be the recipient.'"

"'What do you mean by that?'" said Prince David. "'Lord Goffe is obviously the recipient.'"

"'Ah.'" Dance eyed Hector for a moment. "'We thought, perhaps, the Atreyan government would be accepting payment in your stead. Forgive the confusion. We certainly meant no insult.'"

Hmm. This guy wasn't easy to read. But Hector was a little more familiar with Prince David, and with the help of the Scarf, he was able to notice the ever so slight narrowing of the man's eyes before that easy smile returned to his face.

Hanton was the one who spoke up again, though. "'That is not what I was getting at, President Dance. And I think you know that. The Roots of the Farakano Tree are part of an obscure Lorentian tradition that few in Atreya are likely to be aware of, but I highly doubt that you and the people advising you are ignorant of the historical precedence behind what you have just done.'"

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 2 of 24))~~

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Four: 'When compeers doth vie...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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"2531

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 3 of 24))~~

The whole room went quiet, and Hector waited for elaboration on what Hanton was talking about. Just from the Sparrow's tone alone, it seemed that this was more serious than Hector realized.

The President leaned back in his chair a little. ""I think perhaps you are reading too much into our actions, Lord Hanton. The Root is simply a means of expressing the depth of our gratitude. What you call 'historical precedence,' I would merely refer to as 'historical significance.' I hope it is clear--to you, Lord Goffe, especially--that we did not gift you this cherished item lightly.""

'Okay, Garovel, what the hell are they talking about?' said Hector.

'I honestly don't know,' the reaper said privately from over his shoulder. 'But I'm sure Hanton will explain if you ask him.'

As it turned out, there was no need for that.

""The Roots of the Farakano Tree have rarely ever been gifted to anyone,"" said the Lord Gaolanet, ""but on those occasions, they always doubled as a symbol of land ownership."" He shot Hector a look. ""Lord Goffe, President Dance has just granted you sovereignty over some unknown portion of Lorentian territory.""

Hector's eyes widened, and he looked at the engraved box in his hands again.

'Oooh,' was all Garovel had to say.

""Obviously, this is extremely generous,"" said Hanton. ""My issue is not with the stinginess of the Lorentian government, as the President seemed to be implying. Rather, my issue is that he has granted this land to you, not Atreya. And I do not think the Queen will find this little stunt very amusing.""

""Ah,"" said Prince David. ""I see now. How cunning. And you made a



show of the gift on national television, no less. That is quite the bold strategy, Mr. Dance."

"It was no strategy," said the President. "The reward was suited to the accomplishment. Anything less would have been an insult, we felt."

David snorted a laugh. "I do not think my sister will see it that way. In fact, I am quite certain that she will see it as you attempting to poach our dear Lord Goffe from us."

"2532

~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 4 of 24))~

Hector didn't know what to say here, and it didn't particularly help that Garovel was just laughing his ass off at the moment.

"We have no such designs on your Lord of Warrenhold," said President Dance, "but even if we did, 'poaching' would be an incorrect and needlessly inflammatory term, Prince David. We are not forcing anything on him, and Lord Goffe can make his own decisions, no?"

The Prince's big belly trembled as he broke for a chuckle. "So if he were to return the Root, that would be no problem, then? The Lorentian government and general public wouldn't see that as an incredible insult?"

The President folded his arms. "What cause would there be for him to return it? Other than the Atreyan government putting an inordinate amount of pressure on him to do so?"

"As I said, our Queen will not find this amusing," said Hanton.

"And so she will do him an injustice by depriving him of a well-deserved reward?" said the President. "If that is the case, then perhaps your government's relationship with Lord Goffe is not as healthy as it should be."

A tense silence arrived.

'Yikes.' Garovel wasn't laughing, anymore.

Hector felt a bit like the rope in a tug-of-war contest. He should probably say something here, but what?

The President was the one to pick the conversation back up. ""Lord Goffe, if the matter of land ownership is too uncomfortable for you to talk about in this present meeting, might I suggest we postpone and discuss it another time?""

Oh fuck. Lord Hanton and Prince David were both looking at him like they had something they wanted to say but couldn't.

Uhh.

Uhhhhh.

'Ask where this land in question even is,' said Garovel privately.

And Hector hesitated. Should he really do that? Well, it was Garovel saying it, so it probably wasn't a horrible idea, even though it kinda seemed like one...

Agh.

""...What land are you offering me, exactly?"" said Hector."  
"2533

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 5 of 24))~~

""Well, seeing as Warrenhold is already so close,"" said President Dance, ""we were thinking that the southern Jagwa territory would be the best suited to you, but there is some room for negotiation if you would prefer a different region.""

""Oh, like the central Nyani territory, perhaps?"" said Prince David.

The President's eyes shifted to David, and his face remained like stone. ""There is some room for negotiation, I said. I should hope it is obvious that certain areas cannot be offered.""

""Don't want to grant him sovereignty of your capital city, huh?"" said David with another laugh. ""And here I thought you were trying to be generous.""

As seemed usual, the President did not look amused.

Hector gave the Prince a look of mild pleading. ""Prince David...""

""My apologies."" He took a deep breath and nodded. ""Perhaps I have let this situation tickle my fancy just a bit too much. In all seriousness, however, I must say that I am quite curious about how you intend for this whole situation to work, precisely. Lorent is not a monarchy, and you are not a king. As far as I understand your system, you do not have the power to grant lordship over land in the same way that our Queen can.""

""Yes,"" said Dance. ""In legal terms, it would not be a 'lordship.' He would not hold the same degree of power over Lorentian citizens as he does over those in Atreya.""

He had power over Atreyan citizens? Come to think of it, Hector had never really bothered to look into the legal definition of 'lordship' in Atreya. Hmm. Maybe he should do that sometime.

""It would simply be 'ownership,'" the President went on. ""We will of course provide the full legal details to you in writing of your rights as a Lorentian land owner. Additionally, since the land in question is so large, there will likely be other regulations that apply to you--and others that may not.""

"2534

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 6 of 24))~~

""So he will still be subject to Lorentian law,"" said Prince David.

""When it applies to him, yes,"" said the President.

""And I assume you intend to grant him full citizenship as well?"" said David.

""Of course,"" said Dance. ""That is a prerequisite for owning land in this country. The process has already been fast-tracked for him and is ready to be completed whenever Lord Goffe wishes to sign the accompanying paperwork.""

""I see,"" said David. ""And would he also have a responsibility to protect any other Lorentian citizens that happen to live on his land?""

The President stared at the Prince for another long moment. ""No. That would be a matter for law enforcement.""

""Mm."" David nodded again and scratched his chin. ""But I suppose you would not have a problem with it if he took such a responsibility upon himself voluntarily, eh?""

""It would be his land. He can do with it as he likes, as long as it is within the confines of the law.""

""Right. And is it only land that you are offering? Or is there also a specific homestead you have in mind? A base of operations, perhaps?""

""That would depend on which region is chosen, but it is negotiable. I am sure that there are many historical buildings that might serve such a function, but if Lord Goffe would prefer an entirely new construction, that could be arranged as well. And I would ask that any further questions regarding the minute details of this reward be saved for a discussion with our Secretary of Agriculture and Land Development. He can provide you with more specific information.""

""Very well."" The Prince looked around the room at the remaining observers. ""He wouldn't happen to be present, would he?""

""He would not,"" said the President. ""However, his office is only a few doors down from mine, and he should be expecting a visit from you after this one, unless you prefer to reschedule.""

""How accommodating of you,"" said David."  
"2535

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 7 of 24))~~

""It is not our intention for this gift to feel like a burden in any way,"" said the President. ""Ultimately, that is all that I had hoped to achieve with this meeting here today. If there are any larger questions concerning the nature of the reward, I would be happy to answer them.""

""Thank you,"" said David. ""As it so happens, I have many more that come to mind.""

""As do I,"" said Hanton.

And Hector, for his part, merely continued listening. And as the meeting drew out, Hector had to wonder if the two men sitting next to

him were actually on his side in this particular conversation.

--++--++--

Just as the Vantalayans had said, these rings were surprisingly easy to use. The Rainlords still took precautions and decided to practice with them anyway, but Raul felt like he'd gotten the hang of it pretty quick.

Once he understood the way the invisibility functioned, the ring just seemed to respond to his intent. If he wanted to become invisible, he became invisible. If he wanted to see his companions who were also invisible, the ring revealed them.

It was unfortunately still unclear whether or not these rings could reveal the locations of all other invisibility users in the vicinity. If so, then these items could very well prove to be supremely valuable tools in the fight against Abolish, both now and in the foreseeable future. But the reapers all seemed to be concerned that this function might be limited.

They felt there was a high probability that these rings would only work on other, similar rings. As in, perhaps they would only be able to penetrate the invisibility of rings that had been ""harvested"" from the same aberration.

And with that possibility in mind, caution was still the order of the day. At first, this mission had seemed like it might well become trivial with the power of these rings now in their hands, but the Rainlords had suffered too many losses too recently. They were not going to let overconfidence be their downfall here."

"2536

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 8 of 24))~~

The plan, therefore, was to have only one person infiltrate the town of Miro before attempting to send everyone. In the event that it turned out to be some sort of trap, they didn't want to risk them all getting captured at once.

It probably wasn't a trap, though, in all honesty. If it was, then that would mean those Vantalayans had been in on it, and Raul Blackburn really didn't think that they were.

Nonetheless, the reapers wanted to be extra careful. And if it wasn't a trap, then this plan would work out just fine, too.

That was part of the reason why Raul had volunteered for it. The other part was because he still felt responsible for this whole mess in the first place. If he had been more vigilant, then his two brothers wouldn't have been captured. He very much wanted to be the one to go in and free them. Perhaps that would make up for his previous failure, if only slightly.

The others had required some convincing before eventually agreeing to it. The Lady Stroud in particular had seemed quite against letting him shoulder this responsibility, and Raul hadn't been able to tell if it was because she was worried about him or if she just didn't think he was capable of pulling it off. Maybe both.

The reapers ended up overruling her, though. They reasoned that it would be better not to risk one of their strongest warriors on this task.

A bit insulting, perhaps, but not inaccurate, he supposed.

So here he now was, all on his own, sneaking into town behind an invisible shroud. In broad daylight, no less. There was no point in waiting until nightfall again. The cover of darkness didn't really matter if the enemy wouldn't be able to see him, anyway. In fact, it would just make it more difficult for him to find his way around."

"2537

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 9 of 24))~~

The town was still in shambles from their first battle here, the one that had lasted a full twenty-four hours ended in a stalemate. He tried to take note of any new developments, though.

Several buildings were now completely gone, leveled to the ground. That seemed a bit odd, considering the fact that one of the reasons that fight had lasted so long and been such a problem for the Rainlords was because they had deliberately tried to avoid obliterating any buildings. The reapers had been able to sense innocent bystanders within many of them, and the whole point of this operation was to rescue those poor people.

As far as Raul was aware, they had thus far been successful in that

aspect of their mission, at least. While some of these squat, little buildings may have gotten punctured a few times accidentally, none of the civilians had actually been killed.

Raul had been proud of that, if not much else here.

But now, looking at these piles of rubble where houses used to stand, he found himself wondering if even that accomplishment had been undone. These civilians might have survived the fight, but they had still been forced to endure the tyranny of those Abolish maniacs for a few more days.

Raul had wanted to believe that these Abolishers wouldn't kill their hostages, their most valuable bargaining chips, but now he wasn't so sure. He hadn't seen any bodies yet, but a part of him was expecting to.

The streets were torn up, missing giant chunks of pavement or simply replaced by craters that made it more difficult to get around. No doubt, that was the point. And as Raul slowly made his way deeper toward the town center, he began to notice tall barricades that had not been there before, either.

Hmm. Perhaps that was where some of the materials from those destroyed homes had gone. To erecting defenses."

"2538

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 10 of 24))~~

Fortunately, there weren't that many barricades, and Raul was able to slip past them easily enough. The only thing he had to worry about was not making any noise. The invisibility couldn't conceal the sound of his footsteps on this wildly uneven ground, so he needed to move very slowly and carefully.

He informed his reaper, Arumoro, of his position. Arumoro was still all the way back in Warrenhold, but he was in communication with the reapers of his two cousins who were here, Dino and Rafael Blackburn. It was bit of a lengthy relay--and somewhat slow, besides--but it worked. Cousin Melchor and the others would be kept apprised of the situation as it developed.

He knew they were all on high alert while they waited for him. He had

to check in with Arumoro every two minutes, at least to confirm that he was not dead yet.

Slowly, he made his way toward the largest building in Miro. That was where Abolish seemed to be operating out of, the last time he was here.

He still hadn't seen a single person, though, which was putting him even more on edge than he already was. The streets were empty, and he began taking the opportunity to peer through windows as he passed by each building, yet still he found nothing. Without a doubt, all the non-servants had been rounded up and herded somewhere like cattle.

At length, he reached his destination, the apparent town hall. The building's old wooden beams groaned against the early afternoon wind, and the floorboards made Raul question every single step he took. His pace slowed to even more of a crawl than before.

The first floor appeared to be empty, but there were two more to check and possibly a basement as well."

"2539

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 11 of 24))~~

As Raul made his way upstairs, he began to feel sweat gathering on his brow. And it was not the temperature's fault. Vantalay may have had a tropical climate, but today, the weather was actually quite cool.

No, this was field density. Heightening his discomfort. Testing his nerves.

The enemy was here somewhere.

In all likelihood, his two brothers, Esai and Adan, were currently nothing more than frozen heads, so naturally, Raul was hoping that he would be able to locate them and destroy them so that their reapers might be able to regrow them from scratch back at Warrenhold. And of course, freeing the civilians would be even more of a boon, if he could somehow accomplish that. Perhaps with this ring, it would be possible, though he doubted it.

However, his real objective at the moment was nothing so grandiose



as being the heroic rescuer. As much as he might have preferred otherwise, his task now was far more simple and mundane than that. He needed only to confirm that these rings were actually working, that Abolish truly could not sense his presence while he was invisible.

That was the reason he was here alone, after all. Once he accomplished that small feat, it would be safe to alert the others and have everyone else join him here so that they could mount a surprise attack with full force.

And that was why it was such a problem that he couldn't find anyone. The second floor appeared to be just as empty as the first, and he continued up the stairs again, he had a dreadful feeling that the third wasn't going to be any different.

The notion that they might also be using invisibility crossed his mind. This power did originate from their aberrations. But it still seemed unlikely to him. If they had that tool at their disposal, then surely, they would've used it by now instead of enduring this stalemate over the last few days."

"2540

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 12 of 24))~~

Raul had seen Abolish patrolling the town last night through his binoculars, but he supposed that he didn't have confirmation that they were still using this town hall as their headquarters. It would make sense if they had decided to move it.

As far as he knew, there were currently eight Abolishers in Miro. Over the course of their first battle, Raul had been able to commit all of their faces to memory, but the only one whose name he knew was Thaddeus Croll, the so-called Killer of Krohin. That man was clearly the most dangerous, but the others had held their own during the fight, too.

That day had been absolutely insane. The Rainlords and Leo had come into town with full force, not holding anything back. Everyone who could use a hyper-state had been doing so. And at first, it seemed as if Croll's team would be quickly overwhelmed, until Croll himself entered pan-rozum and began repelling both Leo and Cousin Melchor simultaneously.

Even now, Raul wasn't entirely sure how he had done that. Croll's subordinates had assisted him and utilized hyper-states of their own, but even so. He may have witnessed it with his own two eyes, but the whole thing had been confusing beyond belief. A total madhouse.

In pan-rozum, Cousin Melchor's power of mercury transfiguration was like that of a monster. An amorphous beast that splashed down on its opponents and smothered them into submission. That was why they called him Darktide.

And Leo, while he couldn't use a hyper-state and was no doubt trying not to destroy the town he loved, had still been materializing so many things in such rapid succession that it was like watching a storm moving across the battlefield.

And yet somehow, Croll had endured all of that.

With a sword, no less."

"2541

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 13 of 24))~~

Raul had never seen such a thing. The way that Croll's blade had cut through Melchor's liquid body and Leo's flurry of materialized boron--it didn't seem physically possible, quite frankly.

Naturally, Croll's soul must have played a significant role in strengthening his weapon in such a way, but still. That couldn't have been all there was to it, right? Swordsmanship would've been much more common among servants, if that were case.

And of course, Raul had not forgotten the reason why he and his brothers had been sent all the way here to Vantalay in the first place.

To search for a treasure called the Sword of Unso.

It had therefore occurred to him that the Killer of Krohin might have been wielding it. That might've explained the seemingly supernatural nature of the man's swordsmanship.

Cousin Melchor and Leo didn't seem to think so, however. When Raul had voiced that idea after the battle, they both said that such skill was achievable without the aid of a magical artifact.

""You youngins would be surprised what some people can accomplish with raw talent, the right teacher, and a hundred years of practice,"" Leo had said.

It seemed like Leo had meant for that to be encouraging, but after hearing that, Raul had been anything but.

""It does strike me as strange, though,"" Melchor had added, ""that a swordsman of such caliber would be in this region at the same time that we were searching for the Sword of Unso. Somehow, I doubt that's a coincidence.""

On that point, Raul was at least able to agree. If Croll wasn't wielding the Sword, then perhaps he was looking for it.

And after seeing what the man was already capable of, it was terrifying to imagine what he would be able to do if he ever managed to get his hands on it."

"2542

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 14 of 24))~~

Perhaps the most ridiculous thing, however, was the fact that even after twenty-four hours of fighting the man, Croll's other abilities aside from his swordsmanship were still somehow unclear. He didn't appear to be a materialization, destruction, or alteration user, as the wielding of those powers should have been obvious.

That left transfiguration, integration, and mutation, but even after debating the matter for sometime, the reapers couldn't puzzle it out. If it was transfiguration, then he wasn't using it in the normal manner of creating explosive compounds and corrosive acids. If it was integration, that would make sense as to why he was relying so heavily upon his weapon, but there were still minor ways that he could have used integration in combat--theoretically, at least.

And mutation, well. That was usually obvious just by looking at someone, and Croll had the appearance of a very normal human man.

Well... mostly normal.

Those dark eyes were something else. The weight behind the man's gaze felt almost like another blade of its own. Raul never heard him

utter a single word, yet Thaddeus Croll's murderous determination still seemed obvious from those eyes alone.

'That is no accident,' Orric had observed. 'I believe that man has something called *czort-jasnosc*. It has been a very long time since I have seen it.'

""What in the world are you talking about?"" said the Lady Stroud.

'It is a unique form of psychosis,' the reaper said, 'and quite possibly supernatural, as well. It's rare, and I can't claim to know exactly what causes it--or if anything does, for that matter. I have heard speculation that it is simply a natural phenomenon attributed to genetics. But I have also heard that it is something that only happens after someone has murdered countless innocent people.'

"2543

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 15 of 24))~~

'What do you mean when you say it's a ""unique"" form of psychosis?' asked Ezura.

'Specifically, I am referring to the potentially supernatural aspect of it,' said Orric. 'Psychosis is a rather broad term that covers many different conditions, but many psychoses are characterized by delusions and/or hallucinations. *Czort-jasnosc*--or *czorja*, as some call it--is distinct in that the things it causes the person to experience... are always incredibly violent and gruesome. Those inflicted with it often believe that they are literally living in Hell--or something like it.'

'Wow,' said Ezura. 'That sounds... horrible. But not exactly supernatural.'

'Ah. Yes, well. The reason for that is because there are many disputed accounts of some of the ""sufferers"" having seen hallucinations that turned out to be real or surprisingly close to real. Some reports have even mentioned ""predictive capabilities that occasionally made it seem like the patient could see into the future.""'

Needless to say, no one had been pleased to hear that.

Certainly, Raul did not want to believe that the Killer of Krohin was capable of such a thing, but the more he thought back to that fight from

the other day--and to that penetrating stare--the more he thought it might just be true.

And if it was, then this surprise attack strategy was even more important. While it might be tempting to get discouraged and say that there was no point in attempting an ambush if the enemy could see into the bloody future, Raul was convinced that it might still work.

Especially if they didn't attack Croll first. If they could ambush his subordinates while he wasn't around, then they could isolate him. And from there, they could overwhelm and possibly even capture him or his reaper.

That was the hope, anyway."

"2544

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 16 of 24))~~

With the third floor confirmed to be clear, Raul made his way all the way back down. The basement was his next destination, and it took him a little while to find. The entrance to it was squirreled away behind the kitchen, probably for ease of retrieving food from storage.

The stairs leading down into it were even creakier than the previous ones had been, and Raul again found himself moving at a snail's pace. His foot had to flirt with each step before actually taking it, testing out the wood with light taps, trying to discern if it was going to squeal. The favored tactic was to step near the corners of each step, where the wooden boards intersected and were therefore strongest, but he still wanted to be exceptionally careful here.

If his presence was discovered, there was no telling how many of the hostages might end up dead--either now or later.

The basement was dark but thankfully not pitch black.

Nor was it empty.

The hostages were gathered in the middle of the chamber, tied up and sitting together in apparent silence.

And Raul counted two Abolish guardsmen for them, both fairly close to his position. The basement only had the one entrance, so it made sense that they wouldn't want to stray too far from it.

Neither one of them was Croll, thank god. They weren't looking in his direction, so it was little difficult to tell if they genuinely couldn't see him or if they just hadn't seen him yet.

It was boding well, though. The staircase was rather well lit compared to the rest of the basement, so they most likely should have seen him as he'd descended it.

He moved directly into their lines of sight, just to be sure.

Yes.

They looked straight through him, unfazed.

The invisibility was working just as hoped."  
"2545

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 17 of 24))~~

He informed Arumoro immediately. With this, the operation could truly begin. The others had been waiting on word from him for quite a while, and now they could finally move into the town and get into position.

It was his turn to wait. Arumoro kept him apprised of their progress.

He used the time to reevaluate his situation. This basement floor was comprised of one large room with three smaller ones attached to it. Two storage rooms and one small office.

He would've liked to lure one of the Abolishers into one of those smaller rooms in order to isolate and ambush him without alerting the other, but that might've been too much to ask for.

The hostages, for their part, were utterly silent. They were not gagged, but their dirty faces, ragged clothes, and downcast eyes all painted a clear enough picture for Raul of what these people had been through.

Were these all of them, though? No. By his count, there should have been twenty or so more.

And these two Abolishers. He may not have known their names, but after that first battle, he certainly recognized their faces. They wore matching uniforms, both about as dirtied and torn as Raul's more

casual clothing. They both carried a sidearm, though he only recalled the short one using his. The taller one was a materializer of a silvery metal. The reapers suspected it was zinc, but they acknowledged that there were simply too many other elements that fit that description to be sure.

Not that the element mattered too much for Raul. Being an alteration user, he thankfully didn't have to be terribly concerned about unexpected chemical reactions suddenly turning the tide of battle for or against him.

Most of the time, anyway.

Judging from the skill that the man had displayed previously, he was probably at least twenty years old as a servant. Which was a problem, of course, so Raul wanted to take him out first, though he was still going over options for potentially eliminating them both at once."

"2546

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 18 of 24))~~

Raul's power over friction allowed for quite a large amount of versatility, and the elder servants in his family had frequently told him and his brothers that it might just become one of the strongest abilities in the world, one day.

For the longest time, he didn't believe them in the slightest, but recently, he'd begun to see what they were talking about. Just a little.

Because in one form or another, friction was in everything. Air resistance was a type of friction. Even the internal structure of many physical objects was held together by friction. That was why he could dig his fingers into a solid rock wall as easily as if it were a bowl of pudding and pull out a baseball-sized chunk. That was why he could shear off the side of a hill as cleanly as a hot knife through butter.

But friction could also be finicky and weird. Moving objects--like living bodies, for instance--were always fluctuating and oftentimes had a fluidity to them that made them surprisingly difficult to manipulate. Not impossible, perhaps, but difficult nonetheless. And he was still trying to hone that aspect of his power.

The idea that he might one day be able to simply separate a servant's

head from their neck at range, with little more than a snap of his fingers... certainly, that seemed quite potent, indeed. However, that particular use of his power was still out of reach, and he had a suspicion that it always would remain so. Even if he could figure that trick out, there was still the matter of passive soul defenses to overcome, and sufficiently aged servants would have that in spades.

Separating their head from their neck up close, however, was still doable. He had discovered quite young that, like most servant abilities, his power was significantly more potent when harnessed nearer to his own body--at the tips of his fingers, for example."

"2547

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 19 of 24))~~

Raul closed the gap between him and the taller Abolisher, but he didn't want to get too close just yet. While he now had a fair amount of faith in the invisibility power of this bone ring on his finger, a part of him still worried that perhaps the man would be able to sense his presence in some other, subtler way.

Smell, for one. Raul hadn't bathed in days. It would be pretty goddamn embarrassing if he botched the mission because of his body odor.

And maybe he was just being superstitious, but he felt like there might be something that he didn't quite understand about presence detection. He'd heard the rumors among the Rainlords back in Warrenhold. The ones about Lord Goffe. They said it was like he had eyes in the back of his head, even when his reaper wasn't around.

Raul remembered asking Melchor about it, too, and the man had just smiled at him like he knew something but couldn't tell him.

So Raul wanted to be careful here, as ever. He didn't have Arumoro to heal his wounds or grant him superhuman strength, but he was confident that he could take both of these Abolishers if he just made the right decisions. Tall one first, short one second.

And he bided his time, waiting for word from Arumoro that the others were in position. It took a long time. The two Abolishers alternated between sitting in a corner chair and pacing across the room, observing the hostages. They were probably waiting on word from their reapers, too, Raul figured.



Then it came. Confirmation.

'On zero,' said Arumoro. 'Five... Four... Three...'

Raul's heart was racing, and his palms were clammy. He tried not to shift his feet in anticipation, because the sound of his shoes scraping against the stony basement floor would be too loud at this range.

'Two... One...'

The taller Abolisher's head perked up suddenly. He didn't look at Raul, but it was enough to cause confusion.

'Zero! Go!'

From a crouched position and still invisible, Raul bounded on the guy, going straight for the neck with his left hand."

"2548

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 20 of 24))~~

The fingers dug into the man's flesh but caught halfway. And though that might've been enough to kill a normal person, it was barely enough to even slow a servant down.

The tall man growled in agony and gurgled blood up from his mouth, but his reaction was still quick. Silver metal coated the majority of his body in an instant, making it immediately more difficult for Raul to complete his intended task.

They both hit the ground in a messy heap. The shorter man was alerted, but with Raul still being invisible, he must not have been able to tell what exactly was happening or how to attack, because he just sort of stood there, watching with apparent confusion.

The silvery metal lashed out haphazardly with materialization, searching for Raul's hidden flesh, and Raul knew that he couldn't afford to let it hit him, even by accident. So he resorted to one of his most favored tactics.

A massive increase in air resistance all around his body, like an invisible cocoon.

The reason it was one of his most favored was because he had been able to hone it enough to stop even bullets in midair.

Unfortunately, it wasn't yet perfected. At his current skill level, the caliber of the firearm and travel speed of the bullet still mattered greatly, but here and now, he wasn't dealing with high-powered rifles. The wild flailing of blind materialization was no trouble by comparison. Scraps of metal appeared all around the two of them on the ground, scratching the floor and wall, toppling boxes and furniture, and flying through the air--until they came within Raul's range. Then they got stuck like pins in an invisible cushion."

"2549

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 21 of 24))~~

With his attention divided between guarding himself against the materialized flurry and trying to take off the enemy's head, Raul struggled to maintain his focus. His fingers were still stuck in the tall man's neck. He just had force them the rest of the way through.

He could feel the bone in the way. Blood was gushing everywhere now, splattering over the aberration ""shadow"" that granted him his invisibility. If it wasn't already obvious to the other Abolisher what was happening, it would be soon.

Raul forced his left hand deeper, and he felt the bone give. Whether that was the result of his ability or simply brute force, even he wasn't quite sure, but the head came off all the same, and then Raul was scrambling to get back on his feet. It didn't help that the floor was slick with blood.

So he fixed that. And he got his footing back instantly.

He was still covered in blood himself, though, and therefore not particularly invisible anymore. The other Abolisher had already drawn his sidearm.

Aberration shadows were supposed to be quite good at blocking purely physical attacks, but Raul didn't have the luxury of mulling his decision over, nor would there have been any logic in taking that risk.

His right hand became a fist, and he reached for the absolute limit of that which he was capable. He needed to maximize the air resistance

in front of him if he was going to have any hope of stopping bullets.

The piercing crack of the gun firing came so quickly and repeatedly that, at first, Raul couldn't even tell if he'd been fast enough. But when the bullets started pelting his chest harmlessly, having been slowed down to the speed of spitballs, he was able to exhale a relieved breath."

"2550

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 22 of 24))~~

The shorter man scowled at the sight of what had just happened, and he holstered his gun again. His posture straightened, and he looked like he was about to say something until the ground began to shake.

Trails of dust shook loose from the basement's ceiling. The old building groaned and cracked. Raul's breathing paused as he waited for the trembling to subside, and thankfully, it did.

He was reasonably certain that the fighting elsewhere in the town had caused that just now. Faint popping sounds arrived as well, probably from explosions in the distance. They must have been pretty loud if they were making it all the way down here.

But Arumoro wasn't informing him that anyone needed his help just yet, so Raul tried not to worry. He still had one more opponent to focus on.

And the other man was taking his time, too, perhaps to consult with his reaper and assess the situation.

Raul took the opening not to attack but instead to undo the invisibility-inducing shadow from the ring. The blood that had been splattered across it suddenly had nothing to hold onto and dropped in midair, splashing around him. Some of it got on his clothes, but that was fine, because he immediately resummoned the shadow. He made sure to engulf the severed head under his arm as well, carrying it like a football.

The remaining Abolisher sighed and muttered something in Valgan.

Then he drew his weapon again and blew his own brains out.

Raul just blinked and stared.

It took more than one bullet. The undead man had to unload the rest of the magazine into his head before his body finally went limp, and he dropped to the ground in a bloody heap.

Wide-eyed, Raul needed a few moments to process what had just happened."

"2551 -- CCXXXV.

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 23 of 24))~~  
Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Five: 'O, twisted Mover...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

'Please tell me you are done with this nonsense,' said Bool privately.

""It's not nonsense,"" said Morgunov. ""It's a great humanitarian effort. This could change the world for the better if I decide to mass produce it.""

'Setting aside the first absurdity you uttered--how, pray tell, would a vending machine be able to change the world?'

""Because! It'll feed people! While also imparting a valuable life lesson that everyone should understand!""

'Which is?'

""That pain is incredibly valuable.""

The truth was, he was nearly done. When it came to machinery, he didn't usually need very long unless it was something truly cutting edge. It had only taken him a couple hours to jury-rig the thing to his liking. He'd actually spent most of his time trying to decide on what the appropriate prices for each product should be.

A slap to the face for a pack of gum seemed fair, as did a boxing of the ears for a bag of chips and a purple nurple for a candy bar. He wondered if anyone would go for the bag of mini-donuts, though. Maybe a needle in the eye was too much to ask.

Eh, oh well.

The real problem was that servants with strong enough passive soul defenses would be able to just shrug all this stuff off. The longer he'd spent on this thing, the more he'd realized that he really wanted to make a version that could assess the buyer's soul power and adapt accordingly in order to ensure that they experienced the optimal degree of pain.

But that would obviously be a much more involving project. He'd have to invent a mechanism that could analyze soul power, and as far as he was aware, there was no modern technology that could accomplish that.

Dang, that sounded like fun."  
"2551 -- CCXXXV.

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 23 of 24))~~  
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"2552

~~((National Senior Citizens Day -- page 24 of 24))~~

'You realize that you're holding back our entire operation while you waste time fiddling with this thing, don't you?' said Bool.

""Eh, it's just another day of sieging,"" said Morgunov, rubbing his chin. A fresh shave always made him feel like a million sparks. Hmm, was that still a modern currency? Didn't matter. ""The boys can handle it, I'm sure.""

'It would go a lot faster if you lent a hand yourself.'

""How will they ever learn to stand on their own two feet, then?""

'They won't. That's the point. We WANT them to remain reliant on us.'

""Hmm, that seems a little selfish of us.""

'Could you please stop talking aloud? Someone will overhear.'

It was true that there were many in their encampment now. When

Morgunov had sent the call out to gather his forces, he hadn't quite expected this many to respond. How much had Abolish grown while he wasn't looking? Was this Jercash's doing? Probably.

All the attention had been rather nice, at first. It had felt like years since he'd been out in public and interacted with anyone.

Wait. Had it been years? Oh, maybe it had.

In any case, he'd been able to enjoy himself for a time. Meeting all the eager young folks, seeing that starry look in their eyes as so many of them laid eyes on him for the first time. It was no wonder why so many of his peers had gotten such a big ego over the years. So many of these youngins treated him like some sort of messiah, come to cleanse the land and show them a rollicking good time in the process.

Which wasn't inaccurate, he supposed. But still. No sense in getting a big head about it. Anyone could've orchestrated this war. In this political climate? And all the resources at his disposal? All the eager participants?

Child's play, as far as war games went."  
"2553

It wouldn't be easy going forward, though. Kicking the hornet's nest wasn't the hard part. Getting away with it was.

He felt like this plan was pretty good, especially considering he'd only come up with it in about a day, but there was no telling what the future might hold.

At least, in the long-term.

The Vannies had obviously gotten all hot and bothered over all these fights breaking out simultaneously, but heck, they probably enjoyed having some real problems to deal with for a change. No doubt, they would've protested until the sun went down if someone were to say that to their faces, but there was no doubt in Morgunov's mind that they were just as sick as his boys were of this endless staring contest between the two of them.

Someone had to make something happen. Just a quaint little push.

And bam. Second Continental War.

It was a bit more than he'd bargained for, honestly. Old as he was, the actual depth of cultural strife between nations still managed to surprise him, sometimes. This one seemed like it might last for a good while.

His real objective, though, wasn't the war. That was just a useful distraction. Unfortunately, these days, he was far too famous to be traipsing around wherever he pleased. Sure, he had various means of stealthily entering or exiting countries--even ones hostile to him--but at the end of the day, this wasn't just about touring the world for funsies. If he was going to find his pet ""god,"" then he would have to ruffle more than a few feathers in the process.

Which was why he was here in Calthos.

The recent events in this place were quite convenient for him. Apparently, the Rainlords of Sair had been run out by the Vanguard, and his own boys had already been harassing the Sandlords for a while, weakening them."

"2554

To compensate, the Vanguard's presence here was now stronger than most other regions, but Morgunov was reasonably sure that they weren't expecting him to show up.

Benefits of being regarded as a madman.

Even if they had spies informing them of his movements, he had enough double agents on his side to run interference. They wouldn't know who to trust--or even if the misinformation being provided was intentional or not.

Psyops were a fun hobby. He was glad he'd gotten into it at such a young age. There weren't many thrills greater than that of swaying an entire country into doing his bidding without realizing it.

Historically, though, that was one of the big reasons why Sair was always such a problem. The Sairi were more difficult to manipulate than most, doubtless because their servant population was also their ruling class. It afforded them a level of cultural rigidity that was virtually unmatched.



Eheh. What a weird little experiment of a country. Even today, he still recalled how surprised he'd been when he heard that a bunch of Rainlords and Sandlords were getting together in order to jointly rule a newly formed nation. No one thought it would last, including him. Maybe even including them.

Yet here it was, two hundred years later.

Morgunov admired the accomplishment.

Wasn't looking too good for them at the moment, of course, but even so, Morgunov had to admit that a small part of him hoped that Sair would survive this whole thing.

Ehehe. If they pulled that off, then they would certainly deserve it.

Ooh, or maybe their little god buddy would rustle up a miracle for them. Wouldn't that be something?

Rasalased, the so-called Dry God, was of course not one of the Primordial gods that Morgunov was chiefly interested in, but he still felt like he would've been a fool to let this opportunity pass him by. Wasn't often that this region of the continent became this unstable. And heck, maybe the ol' Raw Salad would be able to help him capture one of those slippery little buggers."

"2555

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Oh, and he supposed he should try to free Ivan while he was at it. If he could be bothered. In a way, Ivan's capture was also somewhat fortunate, because the Vanguard and the Sandlords no doubt believed that he was Abolish's true objective in this campaign.

Plus, there were plenty of eager youngins who were hoping to be the one who found Ivan's head. It would be a pretty good way to earn some reputation, after all.

Eheh. The Void only knew how many young Abolishers were aiming to take advantage of this war in order to boost their fragile, piddling egos.

Good on them. The world needed more passion like that. And besides, Jercash always seemed to enjoy promoting the little dumplings.

Ah, Jercash. He hadn't been too pleased when he found out what Morgunov had done, but as much as that guy liked to protest, he'd been adapting to the war just fine. Better than fine, from the sound of it. He already had Hoss on the ropes, and the Vanguard had been forced to divert quite a significant chunk of their manpower just to keep him at bay. Kane, Grant, and Carson had all supposedly been dispatched to that region.

This would be the first real test for the sly boy in quite some time. Even for Morgunov, fending off three marshals at once wouldn't be easy.

But if Jercash really intended to lead Abolish on his own, one day, then he'd have to step up sooner or later.

Might as well be sooner.

Eheh.

As for the remaining marshals, that still left Sanko, Lamont, Jackson, and Graves. Lamont was here. Jackson was supposedly in Melmoore. Graves was supposedly in Vantalay. And Sanko was supposedly still in Korgum.

Morgunov was of course keenly aware that any of those could change at any time, especially once he revealed himself on the battlefield. And he probably wouldn't get much warning, either."

"2556

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He was particularly skeptical of any intel he received regarding the current whereabouts of Jackson. After slaying both Gunther and Dunhouser and apparently achieving emergence in the process, that one was obviously the Vanguard's new golden boy.

It therefore struck Morgunov as rather strange that Jackson would be in Melmoore, of all places. Sure, the fighting currently going on there was said to be quite grisly, but none of Abolish's top figures were there, right now.

It seemed much more likely that, instead, Jackson was doing the very same thing that Sermung, Dozer, and Morgunov were doing.

Waiting.

When one of them made the first move, the others would then make theirs.

He might've also included Sai-hee on that list, but frankly, she was always waiting for someone else to make a move. And Morgunov had deliberately left her territory out of this. If she intended to involve herself in the war, then she would have to take action without direct provocation, which she almost never did.

Eheh. It sure would've been neat if she decided to do something, though. He hadn't seen the old bat in well over a hundred years now. He had to wonder how different she was these days, if at all.

And Dozer. That curmudgeon was his own brand of unpredictable. People liked to say that about Morgunov, that no one could ever tell what the Mad Demon would do next, but no one ever mentioned that Dozer was just as bad. Heck, maybe Dozer preferred it that way.

Over the many long years, Morgunov had often wondered with a smile on his face why Dozer bothered to put up with him. Yeah, strength and manpower were the main reasons, of course, but still. Was that really all there was to it? Morgunov enjoyed pressing ol' Wrinkle Brow's buttons more than just about anyone else in the entire world.

Maybe, on some level, Dozer kinda liked it, too.

Hmm, yeah, he should ask him about that the next time they saw each other."

"2557

As for this current campaign against Sair, Morgunov had the distinct feeling that he would, as usual, have to be the first one to move. Everyone else was so scared of everything. Dozer, Sermung, Sai-hee.

Cowards, all.

It sure would've been a breath of fresh air if one of the others would actually try to enact some type of meaningful change in the world, try to genuinely tip the centuries-long balance of power that had been established between them.

But no. It was always him. He shouldn't get his hopes up again.

And to think, there had once been a time when he thought himself too meek and introspective to ever do anything with his life. He'd just been another boy who'd learned to be quiet the hard way from a world that didn't want to listen to anything he had to say.

Eheheheheh.

It sure listened to him now, though, didn't it?

""Something funny, boss?"" came a familiar voice.

Morgunov popped his head out of the vending machine to see the angular face of Albert Crowe.

The black birds on the man's shoulder followed him around wherever he went, and even Morgunov wasn't quite sure why. There'd once been a joke going around that they did it because they mistook Albert's giant, pointy nose for a beak and therefore thought he was their mother.

That time was long gone, though. Morgunov didn't hear anyone laughing at the Man of Crows like that, anymore.

""Oh, I was just reminiscing to myself."" Morgunov wiped his hands and headed over to the rocky chamber's corner table, where an assortment of tools lay. The impromptu workshop that the boys had created for him was lacking in many ways, of course, but he wasn't feeling especially picky, at the moment. He'd made do with worse.

""Need something from me?""

"2558

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

Albert was eyeing the vending machine up and down, but he didn't ask about it. ""I was just coming to report in, boss. The last of our scouts have been routed from Kuros. Seems the Sandies came up with a way

to track the movements of our invisible units, unfortunately."

"Surprised it took 'em this long," said Morgunov. "Know how they did it?"

"Our running theory is some kind of specialized listening technology," said Crowe. "It's difficult to tell for sure. It seems they were able to spot them even in crowded areas, where they should have been impossible to hear."

Morgunov stopped and leveled a stare at the other man.

And Albert Crowe did something he rarely did. He hesitated. "Ah... where they should have been difficult to hear, boss. Is what I meant to say."

Morgunov allowed his gaze to linger a moment more. A part of him was simply curious about how uncomfortable he could make him. But then he relented with a smile and went back to assessing his tools.

"There are any number of ways it could've been done," said Morgunov. "Echolocation. Aerolocation. Stupiditylocation. Etcetera."

"...What is 'aerolocation,' sir?"

"The tracking of air currents within a given space for the purpose of determining the precise shape of said space and any objects therein."

"You can do that, sir?"

"Eheheh."

That almost sounded like a challenge. Now there was a thought. The urge to drop everything and build a device that could do exactly that reared up on him.

Eh, but would that even be useful?

Well, sure, of course it would.

But, eh. It wasn't really necessary. The enemy wasn't employing invisibility like they were.

Yet.

Eheh.

Well, the real trick wouldn't be building it. The real trick would be making it compact enough for easy use. Talk about a pain. He'd need rare materials from all over the world to pull that off. And maybe a few from outside the world. Hmm.

Neat thought, though. Dang."  
"2559

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""That's not an answer, boss,"" said Crowe.

Morgunov ignored the question. ""Is that all you had to report?""

""Yes, sir.""

""Alright, you can go now.""

But the Man of Crows' footsteps did not arrive, and Morgunov could sense him lingering.

""...Was there something else?"" said Morgunov.

Crowe tilted his head slightly as he looked around the workshop. ""I suppose I'm just wondering the same thing that everyone who knows you're here is wondering, boss.""

""And what's that?""

""Whether or not you've got some special trick up your sleeve. With regard to our battle plan, specifically.""

""Ah. Eeh. Hmm.""

Bool, who had thus far only been listening, decided to chime in. 'You can always bet that he has something up his sleeve', the reaper said. 'What's less certain is whether or not he will actually decide to use it.'

'Hmph,' huffed Learxia, Crowe's reaper. 'Well, I hope he decides sooner rather than later. I'm sure it would save us all a lot of trouble.'

To Morgunov's eyes, the reapers were a pair of old, mangled clocks. Their faces were bent, their hands twisted out of position and pointing the wrong way, and gears and springs were visible brains through

cracked open skulls.

"Maybe if you behave yourselves, I'll let you see something truly extraordinary," said Morgunov with a slight laugh.

Eheh. Wasn't often that a reaper other than Bool ever gave him any kind of attitude. And Learxia didn't used to do that. Perhaps she'd grown confident in Crowe's abilities over the years and thought he could protect her from him.

Ooh. A tempting thought. Morgunov decided to keep his back turned to them, just in the off chance that it might motivate them to try something.

'Don't tease them,' said Bool. 'This battle is still in its early stages. The importance of it cannot be overstated. The result of this battle will affect the entire war. Rushing in haphazardly, as fun as that might be for some of us, would hardly be a sound strategy.'

'Hmph. Do you fear Iceheart?'"  
"2560

That made Morgunov chortle. For quite a while, in fact. By the time he settled again, everyone was staring at him. "Only a madman would not fear Iceheart," he said.

And no one responded.

Which made him laugh again. Harder, this time. The more uncomfortable his audience looked, the funnier it became.

There were so many things he could say here, so many demeaning or even infantilizing remarks that popped into his head. It was clear to him that Learxia just wanted him to hold Crowe's hand while they confronted the Vanguardian Field Marshal. To ensure the lad's safety. And hers, of course.

But pointing that fact out might just embarrass the two of them enough to go out and try to prove him wrong, to try to take down Iceheart on their own.

And yeah, that might've been amusing. Hell, imagine if they even pulled it off. The Man of Crows was a strong, growing boy. The

possibility was non-zero.

But the risk was needless, all the same. Crowe was one of the two most powerful servants that Morgunov had at his disposal here. Bool would throw a fit if he allowed him to die so stupidly.

Especially when Morgunov was already planning to take to the field soon, anyway.

""I hope you aren't getting too eager for your own good,"" the Mad Demon said. ""You two are supposed to set an example for the young ones, and they've already got eagerness to spare, I'm sure.""

Still, no one said anything.

Well, that was fine.

""Anyway, good work so far,"" said Morgunov. ""Keep me apprised of further developments.""

""Of course, boss.""

And they departed without another word.

Bool lingered, of course. 'Sometimes I forget how skilled you used to be in leadership,' the reaper said privately.

Morgunov smiled as he returned to his vending machine. ""Y'know, there was once a time when I thought it was the reaper's job to lead and the servant's to follow.""

"2561

((The Mon/Wen/Fri Double -- page 1 of 2))

'Hmph.' Bool's twisted clockface became abruptly even more so. 'What are you trying to say?'

""Eheh, only that the term 'servant' is misleading,"" said Morgunov.

'Just because you don't do my bidding anymore doesn't mean that most servants are the same way.'

""I am quite exceptional, aren't I?""



'Oh, be quiet.'

""Hey, which of the Primordials do you think would actually make for the best pet, by the way? I've been thinking about it for a while now, and I can't quite decide.""

'What does it matter? We both know that you'll go after whichever one you can find first.'

""Eheh. True. But say that we had to choose, for some reason. Who would you pick?""

The reaper sighed. 'Hada.'

""Ooh, the God of Storms and Wrath, huh? Are you just saying that in the hopes that it will make my job harder?""

'...Frankly, yes.'

""Eheheh.""

'An avatar of destruction that supposedly hates humanity sounds like a useful ""pet"" for Abolish to have, wouldn't you say?'

""Hmm. Guess so. There would definitely be plenty of ego there to break down. But I don't know. Hada just doesn't seem like a real mushroom to me. And I'd kinda like one that's a mushroom.""

'What? You want a mushroom?'

""Yeah, y'know. A fun-guy.""

Bool fell dead silent.

Morgunov had to pop his head out of the vending machine again to check on him. Yeah, he was still floating there alright. He just wasn't saying anything. ""That was a joke, Boolie. I want a pet god that's a fun guy. And a fungi. They sound the same.""

Still, though, the reaper said nothing.

Yep. Morgunov knew he wouldn't, but that still never stopped him from trying. ""One of these days, I'm going to discover that sense of humor of yours. It's gotta be in there somewhere.""

'No, it truly doesn't. After half a millenium, you should know that by now.'

""Nah. ""

"2562 -- CCXXXVI.

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Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Six: 'The land's attention...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector stepped up to the edge of the cliff for a better look. It was even taller than he'd expected. He could see the edge of the Imara Forest to the north, as well as the road that led to Atreya to the south. There was a clear gradient among the foliage as it slowly changed from the lush green north to a thinned out grassland and finally to the barren gray south.

It was a little strange to realize that his home was down south, in the mildly evil-looking region.

He could hear the ever present footsteps of Matteo Delaguna behind him, along with the much more distant ones of the survey team farther down the slope. The Lorentian Secretary of Agriculture and Land Development, Jonathan Nash, had insisted on sending them with him in order to answer any questions that he may have. Mostly, Hector had just been talking to them through his radio from a thousand or more feet away, because actually waiting up for them was pretty painful.

They weren't the only other members of the party, though. Ravi Zaman and Carl Rondel and both their reapers had decided to come along as well. The presidential advisors from Abolish and the Vanguard, respectively.

Precisely what their goal here was, Hector really couldn't say, though Garovel seemed to think that it was to ingratiate themselves with the new hero of Lorent. With the war going, Hector would've thought they were too busy for something so trivial, but he was having a hard time imagining a different reason.

They actually weren't even talking to him much, though. Mr. Rondel in particular had barely said five words to him so far, and from what Hector had seen, both men were constantly on their phones."

"2562 -- CCXXXVI.

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Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Six: 'The land's attention...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector stepped up to the edge of the cliff for a better look. It was even taller than he'd expected. He could see the edge of the Imara Forest to the north, as well as the road that led to Atreya to the south. There was a clear gradient among the foliage as it slowly changed from the lush green north to a thinned out grassland and finally to the barren gray south.

It was a little strange to realize that his home was down south, in the mildly evil-looking region.

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"2563

As for Prince David, he had already gone back to Intar, which was a shame. Hector had enjoyed his company, even if their meeting with President Dance had gotten a little awkward.

Lord Hanton had technically departed as well, supposedly back to Atreya, but he was actually still following Hector while invisible. He wasn't trying to hide his presence from Hector himself, however.

'It's rather barren,' said Hanton, presumably from somewhere up in the sky.

'I'm sure we could find a use for it,' said Garovel, who was hanging on his shoulder. The reaper still didn't seem to be terribly comfortable in the presence of Sparrows, and Hector couldn't really blame him much.

'I still can't believe you're considering their offer,' said Hanton. 'The only reason they are interested in granting you this land is because it will compel you to defend Lorent for them in the event of another crisis.'

'So you've mentioned. Multiple times now.'

'You must realize that if Lorent gets dragged into the war, you will have a serious dilemma on your hands.'

'And passing up this opportunity without first giving it appropriate consideration would be incredibly stupid.'

'There is nothing in this empty land that could possibly be valuable enough to counterbalance the level of risk that you would be taking by accepting it.'

'Dunno about that,' said Garovel. 'I seem to recall hearing something about a point of ""geographic resonance"" in this country, which sounded like it could possess all sorts of value.'

'Hmph. Yes, well, that location was further north, and moreover, it was destroyed in the battle.'

'I'm just saying that if we happened to find another one in this Jagwa region here, then that might be valuable enough to take the risk, wouldn't you say?'

Hanton gave a psychic grumble, one that seemed to harbor begrudging agreement."

Hector, for his part, was still a bit torn about this whole deal. He certainly didn't want to upset the Queen, but from the sound of things, he'd also be upsetting the Lorentians if he refused. And he could see Hanton's point, too. If Lorent really was just doing this in order to manipulate him, then this wasn't exactly the start of a healthy relationship, he felt.

But it was free land. And lot of it, too.

The Jagwa territory alone spanned over three hundred thousand square kilometers--almost double the size of Atreya in its entirety. And the deal currently on the table would grant Hector ownership of about a third of Jagwa, including the areas nearest Warrenhold around the Atreyan border.

A hundred thousand square kilometers...

That was pretty generous. It was no small wonder why Garovel didn't want to make a hasty decision here. Hector doubted that they would be able to make up their minds even after conducting this little survey out here. He very much wanted to hear Amelia Carthrace's opinion about this whole thing.

He was thinking about calling her right now, in fact, but he knew how busy she was. And if this expedition turned up anything crazy, Garovel might just tell him to take the deal immediately.

Thus far, it all looked fairly normal, though. The land was quite easy on the eyes, too. The morning sun made for quite a picture over the windswept grasslands below. He could see the occasional stone formation dotting the plains as the land stretched closer toward Atreya to the south. He even spotted a couple mobs of wild horses grazing in the distance.

He also knew that there were four towns that would technically be falling under his ""ownership"" as a result of this deal. That wasn't very many, considering how huge the section of land in question was, but one of those towns had a population of around two hundred thousand people."

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Hector would hardly call this place ""empty,"" as Hanton had, when so many were living in this region. But then again, compared to the forty million or so people who were crammed into Atreya, he could kind of understand what the Sparrow had meant.

He just hoped that Hanton would actually tell him if he sensed anything strange in this region.

""Lord Goffe,"" arrived the voice of Carl Rondel, making Hector turn to see him approaching. ""What is your opinion on the war?""

Hector blinked, unsure what to even say to that.

The man's reaper, Joviza, hovered nearer. 'Excuse our bluntness,' she said. 'We did not mean to blindside you with such a heavy question, but we are curious. And we find it best not to dance around the subjects we are interested in discussing.'

Ravi and his reaper were observing, seemingly also interested in how he would answer.

Well, shit.

'Remain non-committal,' advised Garovel privately. 'But try to also sound strong, if you can.'

Hector could agree with those sentiments. He had a question of his own first, though. ""Why are you asking?""

""Because it is relevant,"" said Carl flatly. ""If the war comes to this part of the continent, do you intend to get involved?""

Did this guy even know the meaning of the word tact? ""...I would defend Atreya from invaders, if that's what you're asking,"" said Hector.

""And what about Lorent?"" pushed Carl.

No. Hector was pretty sure he didn't.

And Hector didn't feel particularly compelled to answer that question.

So he decided to just leave the guy hanging without a response and began to descend the cliff, taking the slow route by simply walking.

Mr. Rondel put himself in the way, however. ""I asked you a question.""

Hector stopped and met his gaze evenly.

""Would you defend Lorent from invaders?"" he repeated.

""Would the Vanguard?"" asked Hector.

Carl's dark eyes narrowed."

"2566

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The tense silence lasted long enough for the non-servants in the survey team to begin catching up. They seemed to sense that something was amiss and gradually slowed their pace even further as they approached.

At length, Ravi seized the opening. ""I am sure Mr. Rondel meant no offense, Lord Goffe. He is merely eager to hear what your ultimate decision will be with regard to this historic offer that has been made to you.""

Carl and Ravi exchanged looks but not words.

Garovel chose to chime in publicly. 'And we meant no offense, either. We appreciate that the Vanguard is in a difficult position, at the moment, and we sympathize.'

That seemed to smooth things over well enough for Mr. Rondel to stop glaring at them, but the expression on the man's face was still far from warm.

The survey continued on foot for a while longer until they reached a main road. A group of vehicles were already there for them. They had left these behind earlier in order to get a closer look at what Jagwa's wilderness had to offer, and the drivers had been following them in the distance all the while, waiting for the chance to link back up with them.

Naturally, there was still plenty more land left to explore. They used the cars to go a bit farther before setting out on foot again. Hector tried

telling the non-servants to hang back, but they were adamant about accompanying him.

This pattern of walking, then driving, then walking again repeated a couple more times before Hanton's voice arrived in Hector's head once more.

'I sense something peculiar,' the Sparrow said.

That was enough for Hector to ask Hanton for directions. The Sparrow rendered himself visible in order to do so, and Hector was briefly concerned that others would notice him, but apparently, Hanton was able to pick and choose who could actually see him. So for everyone but Hector, the Lord Gaolanet remained invisible."

"2567

Their destination was in the middle of an enormous plain, where land depressed ever so slightly around the base of a lone tree.

But what a tree it was.

It rivaled even the largest ones that Hector had seen in the Imara Forest, which included the Riverton, P.J. and all the gargantuan building-supporters that had been there. This one here looked like it was about ten or more stories tall, and its canopy of yellow-green leaves could probably shade half a city block by itself.

Still, though, it seemed like a pretty normal tree. Not supernatural.

Hanton's clarification arrived on its own. 'The tree isn't what's peculiar. There's something in its trunk. Or rather, a lack of something. The aura is distinctly empty. Missing.'

Hector didn't quite understand. The others were still catching up, so he asked in a low voice, ""So the trunk is hollow?""

'No,' said Hanton. 'The absence of aura means more than just empty air. Or even a vacuum, potentially. Everything has an aura. The aura of the planet itself should fill any and all ""gaps"" like this. So the fact that it's still there means that there must be something quite strange inside this tree.'

Hector's gaze went up the length of the trunk as he stepped over one



of the roots that was jutting partway out of the ground. Something inside it, huh? Well, it was wide enough to conceal a small house--or several, perhaps, stacked on top of each other.

'Hmm,' hummed Garovel privately. 'Now that we're this close to it, I can sense something a little odd inside there, too.'

He and Garovel circled around the base of the tree together, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He never really considered himself a nature lover, exactly, but this was a pretty magnificent specimen, he felt. And he would hate to have to tear into its trunk."

"2568

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""How big is this mysterious thing inside of it?"" Hector asked.

'Hmm, tough to say,' said Hanton. 'The gap in the aura seems relatively large to me. About the size of a car, perhaps. But the gap may not be reflective of the size of the object that is responsible for its creation. For all I know, it could be something quite small.'

'Hector.' Garovel pointed a skeletal finger.

He couldn't tell what the reaper was trying to show him at first, until he noticed a small hole in the tree, no bigger than cat. Hector approached it, squinting and trying to discern what it was, if anything.

Something was there, beneath the wood. It looked like the bark of the tree had crowded over it, as if from slow growth over time. But what was that? It was a faded brown color and almost looked like it was just what the wood inside the tree looked like, but it was too uniform. Too flat.

He tried focusing on what the Scarf could tell him, but he doubted that there would be enough space for any air to flow through. It looked pretty solid, and--

No.

There was space. Slight, but it was there.

""...I think there's a door behind this,"" said Hector, close enough to touch the bark now.

Yep. The tree had grown very tightly over it, but he could still sense a bunch of tiny gaps between the flat wood of the door and the uneven wood of the tree.

That was a pretty weirdly shaped doorknob, though. It was just a long cylinder. A stick, really. Not like anything he'd seen before--or sensed, in this case.

'Welp,' said Garovel, readying a hand over Hector's shoulder, 'in that case, looks you've gotta yank some of this bark off. Wanna use materialization or brute strength?'

"2569

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Hector hesitated. 'You don't think the Lorentians will be upset if I just start hacking away at this thing?'

Garovel spared them a glance. 'Well, Carl and Ravi are on their phones again, and they're trying to give this land to you, anyway. I doubt they'll care.'

Still, Hector held back. 'And what if we find something in there that suddenly **MAKES** them care?'

'Oh, you mean if we find something so good that it makes them take their offer off the table entirely? I figured that was the point of them coming with us in the first place, so it can't really be helped.'

'There's that, too,' said Hector. 'But I meant, like... what if Carl and Ravi tell the Vanguard and Abolish about whatever we find here?'

'Oh, I'm sure they will. Especially Carl. Seems like a real prick, that guy.'

'I mean, he would just be doing his job...'

'A loyal prick, then.'

Hector deliberately avoided looking in their direction and instead relied on the Scarf to observe them. They hardly seemed to be paying attention to him now, but he knew that their reapers were still with them even though the Scarf couldn't pick them up.

'So what should we do, then?' asked Hector.

'Start hacking away.'

'Really?'

'Sure. Whatever's in there probably isn't all THAT crazy, and even if it is, well... we can ask Hanton for a favor.'

Hector's expression hardened. 'Garovel...'

'As a last resort, that is.'

With how casually the reaper was bringing it up, Hector got the impression that Garovel had considered this possibility before they even set out.

He really didn't like the idea of allowing Hanton to mess with anyone's memories, but he could also see Garovel's point about how it might be necessary. If it could prevent Abolish or the Vanguard from coming down on Lorent like a sack of bricks, then maybe...

Agh. Dammit."

"2570

'Well, we already know something is here, so maybe we should cut this expedition short and take the deal,' said Hector. 'Then we can come back later to investigate it when we don't have a tail.'

'I'm still not convinced that whatever this thing is would make the deal worth pissing off the Queen,' the reaper said. 'And honestly, I was hoping that we could use what we find here in order to temper her anger. Our relationship with her is one of the most important things we have, you know. If this fuckin' thing turns out to be a big pile of shit, then I don't think it'll help us convince her of how much we still love her.'

Hector gave a muted sigh. 'Alright, well, maybe we could cut the expedition short, tell them we haven't made up our minds yet, and then sneak back out here later on our own.'

The reaper was quiet a moment. 'Heh, yeah, we could do that.' The

tone of his voice, however, was implying something else. Something unsaid.

And Hector waited for elaboration that never arrived. His eyes went to Carl and Ravi, who were steadily drawing closer. 'But?' he pushed.

'But... I'm kinda curious to know what these nosy buggers following us will have to say about this thing, too.'

'Garovel, are you fucking serious?'

'What?'

'You're playing with fire. What if they tell their bosses about this place, and then a whole bunch of super strong servants show up to check it out?'

'Eh, there's no risk of that when we can just wipe all their memories.'

Hector's jaw clenched as he glared at the reaper. 'The Sparrows' memory wipes don't always work, remember? One of them could resist it.'

'That's highly unlikely.'

'Yeah, and knowing our luck, that means it's a virtual certainty!'

'You're being a real drama king, right now, y'know that?'

'Garovel!'

"2571

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'Look, it's barely a risk at all,' said Garovel. 'And who knows what juicy things we might be able to learn from those two and their reapers? And I'm referring to more than just this tree artifact, by the way. They could probably tell us all sorts of useful things about what their organizations are up to. Not to mention the war. We would just need to get them talking.'

Hector's expression relaxed a little, but he still couldn't say that he liked what he was hearing.

'And whatever this thing is--it'll probably make for a pretty good conversation piece, eh?'

Hector frowned. The others were getting quite close now. If he was going to do anything about it, he would have to make his decision now.

He turned away from the tree. ""Let's call it here for the day,"" he said loud enough for everyone to hear.

Carl and Ravi both looked at him, as did their reapers, but none of them were saying anything.

He wondered if it might not already be too late. Still worth a shot, though, he felt. He started walking back in the direction they'd come, aiming to join up with the rest of the group's stragglers.

'Hector, what are you doing?' said Garovel privately.

'If you want to pump them for information, then fine, but let's come up with a less risky way of going about it. And we should give Hanton a heads up, too. I'm sure he'd be willing to help us as long as it means acquiring information that'll help protect Atreya.'

'Hmph. Y'know, when I told you that I wanted you to act like a lord, I didn't mean that you should start bossing ME around.'

-+--++-

It was snowing yet again up in the Omarest Mountain Range, and their giant cabin was without power for the tenth day running. That old bastard claimed that this was another one of his ""family bonding exercises,"" but Francisco Elroy was beginning to think that the guy just didn't have enough fuel for the generator, anymore."

"2572

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Maybe that was absurd, though. Damian Rofal still kept bringing them plenty of food, and made sure that everyone knew how to build a fire. It had a been a few years since Cisco had received instruction on that matter, and he thought it best to play along as if he didn't know anything.

The old man was a surprisingly patient teacher. Cisco watched him

work with each and every one of the other Rofals, even Dunstan, who clearly did not wish to be here even more passionately than Cisco did.

But it was precisely because of the biting cold that Dunstan couldn't just ignore the rest of his family as he had tried to do in the early portion of their stay here. Everyone had to huddle together for warmth, especially at night.

Ridiculously enough, however, the old man's plan actually seemed to be working. As far as Cisco could tell, the Rofals were getting along a lot better than they were at the beginning. Where before they had been dismissive or insulting of one another, now they were talking more and even laughing.

Cisco and Dunstan were still the odd ones out, though.

Dunstan's hatred for his family was not going to go away anytime soon, Cisco felt. There was something very deep there.

Rezamaar, Dunstan's rather loudmouthed reaper, was more conciliatory in her disposition towards them, but seeing as they were all normal humans who couldn't see or interact with her, that didn't accomplish much. If anything, it just seemed to annoy Dunstan even more.

And since Cisco was Dunstan's "friend," he ended up being lumped in with him.

All in all, it was strange state of affairs, being trapped in this place with little more to do than observe a bunch of purported criminals who were mostly just trying to ignore him--probably because they were afraid of Dunstan now."

"2573

Ever since Dunstan manhandled Jonah and threatened to kill him--his own cousin--all of the other Rofals were clearly wary of him. When he entered a room, they typically left.

Apart, perhaps, from one: Grandma Rofal, Damian's wife. She didn't seem too bothered by Dunstan's presence at all.

And Cisco was left to wonder why that might be. She wasn't even hesitant around him. She just said whatever she felt like, even if it

meant insulting someone, Dunstan included. And Cisco could tell that she managed to get under his skin a few times, too.

Maybe she just didn't think that Dunstan would hurt an old lady like her. If so, she was probably right. And if not, well. Maybe she just wasn't really thinking about the potential consequences of her actions. That would make a worrying amount of sense, too. As much of a lunatic as her husband was, she definitely wasn't totally sane, either.

But of course, if anyone laid a hand on her, Cisco could only imagine what Damian would do.

If it wasn't clear enough to him before, it was certainly clear to him now. Damian was no normal servant. That old man had real strength. More than Cisco had ever personally seen. The noticeable field density of the man's soul already made that point obvious, but the occasional sparring sessions that he held with everyone had really nailed that point home.

Damian had been training everyone in the usage of these rings that he'd gifted them. The red shadows that could be summoned out of them were incredibly malleable, and Cisco could see incremental improvement from everyone across the board. They could make the shadows move faster and create more sophisticated shapes. And Damian promised to take them to still further heights.

Perhaps that was another reason why the old man's ""bonding"" strategy seemed to be working. These Rofals clearly enjoyed what the shadows allowed them to do. And the prospect that they might become yet more powerful? Music to their ears, no doubt."

"2574

And if they grew sufficiently confident in their newfound abilities, then Cisco had no doubt that their attitudes toward Dunstan and him would also change--and not for the better.

In that sense, perhaps it was good that the Rofals had gotten to see what the two of them were really capable of. The enhanced strength, regenerating limbs, hand-to-hand martial abilities, and element transfiguration--they got to see it all.

Because Damian hadn't allowed them to hold back when he tested

them.

The old man was a monster. Even when holding back, not using his ability, Damian could fight them both at once with only his bare hands. Cisco knew that age was deceptive when it came to servants, but even so, it was surprising all the same. When the vigor was running through him, the man could move like Cisco had never seen. Even working together and having enhanced strength of their own, Dunstan and Cisco could barely lay a finger on the old bastard.

That wasn't just the undead vigor accomplishing that. And sure, the difference in passive soul defense played a part, too, but that couldn't account for the gap being so massive.

No. He might've been crazier than a drugged-out chimpanzee, but Damian Rofal was a truly experienced warrior.

And odd as it was, Cisco had been learning a lot from him. Footwork, weight distribution, body stabilization, distance control, and especially grappling were all frequent subjects of instruction.

He'd learned a few unarmed killing techniques from his father when he was younger, but with this training, it felt like anything could be turned into a killing technique in combination with his fluorine transfiguration ability. One solid grapple, and the enemy would be completely at his mercy or dead.

In theory, anyway. Nothing he had learned so far had actually worked on Damian unless the man allowed it to for the purpose of demonstration.

And, of course, when Damian started using his ability, their training went straight to hell."

"2575

It was like trying to fight an invisible puppet. A puppet which could also transform into a wall. Or a blade. Or a storm. Or a hole in reality itself, perhaps.

Even after fighting the old man multiple times now, Cisco still couldn't tell what Damian's ability actually was. Nor could Dunstan.

Damian could make objects float through the air as if through



telekinesis. He could freeze the boys in place, as if trapping them in invisible stone. He could sever limbs with only a look--or even crush them into nothingness.

That was the most alarming thing that they had seen, without a doubt. On one occasion, the man had seemingly atomized one of Dunstan's arms. Or vaporized it. Or teleported it to some unknown location. Just from looking, there was no telling what had actually happened.

Rezamaar and Dennex seemed to think it was an alteration ability that harnessed some kind of force that was as yet unknown to modern science.

And if that was true, then it wasn't very helpful information.

They tried simply asking Damian what it was directly, but he never gave them a straight answer. Usually, he just acted like he didn't hear them or changed the subject or just spouted some insane non sequitur.

Which was another subject unto itself.

Damian was definitely crazy. But sometimes, Cisco got the feeling that he was leaning into it, that he was pretending to be more insane than he actually was. Cisco had been noticing that there were some moments where he was extremely sharp. Not the mention the fact that this ridiculous family bonding exercise was actually somehow working.

Cisco began to wonder if there was more knowledge and wisdom concealed in even some of the crazier things that came out of his mouth. Some hidden messages. Or veiled truths, maybe.

And so, when the day came that the power in the cabin turned back on and Damian said that he had something very important to tell everyone, Cisco was paying close attention."

"2576

""You have all been making wonderful progress,"" said Damian. ""And as such, I think the time will soon come when we have our first, true family outing!""

A chorus of uncertain mumbles ran through the audience, and Cisco and Dunstan exchanged looks.

They didn't need words. They both understood the implications. Any chance at freedom was a chance to escape the old man's clutches. Ideas were already forming in Cisco's head about how they might be able to accomplish it, and he had no doubt Dunstan was the same.

Unfortunately, ideas of how impossible it might be were also forming. Dunstan hadn't tried to conceal his dislike for their current circumstances. Damian had to know that Dunstan would want to escape.

""And in celebration of this magnificent step forward--"" The old man raised his left hand somewhat, and the front door of the cabin swung open. ""--I've decided that it's time to give you all more presents!""

A line of various electronics came floating into the cabin, all bobbing up and down in air as if in tune with some silent music.

""I know how much you young folk hate being 'off the grid,' as they say,"" said Damian. ""So I figured that it was about time I let you reconnect with the world a little. But only a little! Okay?! Don't abuse this privilege, or Grandpa will have to punish you!"" And he smiled wide.

A flat screen television hovered right into Cisco's hands.

One of the younger Rofals, a teenage boy named Ricky, looked ecstatic as a tablet floated toward him. ""Wow, Grandpa! Thanks!""

""You're welcome, my boy!""

Ricky's apparent enthusiasm turned to curiosity. ""But do we even have an ISP way out here in the mountains?""

Damian blinked at him. ""Hmm? An ISP? Wazzat?""

And from there, it became quickly apparent that the old man didn't actually know much about modern electronics.

On the one hand, Cisco was surprised by his ignorance, but on the other, he wasn't at all."

"2577

Hmm. Maybe that could prove useful in making their escape, Cisco thought. There was a pretty good chance that Feromas, Damian's reaper, wouldn't know much about electronics, either. It seemed like most reapers weren't terribly knowledgeable about modern technologies.

""In any event,"" Damian continued, ""before I let you all play with your new toys, I should tell you that. Well. There've been some pretty big developments in the world. So try not to freak out too much if and when you turn on the news.""

""What are you talking about?"" said Dunstan.

Grandpa Rofal's eyes snapped to Dunstan, who was standing right next to him. His smile broadened, and he patted the young man on the head, which Dunstan batted away. ""Well, y'see, sonny, the second great Eloan war has begun.""

""What?!"" exclaimed Dunstan.

And he wasn't the only one.

The others had questions, too, and they did not hesitate to ask them.

Five nations. All coincidentally Abolish-influenced. Invading their neighbors simultaneously.

And the continent was in chaos.

Cisco didn't know what to think. While he'd been lounging around in these snowy mountains, the world out there was burning down?

A moment ago, he'd been hoping to find news of what had happened in Sair, to the Rainlords, to his family. But now, he wondered if that would even be possible. News this big must've been dominating every station.

If he had internet access, that wouldn't have been a problem, but that still seemed like it was off the table.

And indeed, after Damian finally let them disperse, Cisco plugged his new television into an outlet in the room that he and Dunstan had been sharing, and the only news he could find was of this war that Damian had just told them about. It didn't help that he only had five channels to go through."

"2578

But one thing, at least, was clear. Sair was directly involved in this war.

His homeland had been invaded.

Why, though? Because the country had been weakened by the Vanguard's attack on his kin?

That had to be it. This timing couldn't be a coincidence.

For a long time, he just sat there on edge of his bed. Thinking. Barely even listening to the television as the anchors and reporters began to repeat their vague explanations.

His parents were right.

He'd always been an obedient son. For the most part, at least. He never openly questioned their teachings. Even from a very young age, he'd understood the value of what they were trying to instill in him. Discipline. Vigilance. Preparedness.

If anything, it was his little brother Marcos who never quite seemed to understand. So Cisco had tried his best to help him. Not to coddle him. To show him how to be stronger. Even if it meant that the little brat thought he was a jerk.

But now, hearing about all this, Cisco realized that somewhere in the back of his mind, he had doubted his parents. Silently. He'd wanted to complain. To act like Marcos did. To be childish. Because he was a child, wasn't he? That was only fair, wasn't it?

Man.

He felt like he'd had some kind of grand epiphany, all of a sudden. Like he was waking up after having been asleep his whole life.

This was what it meant to be a Rainlord. This understanding.

It was in everything that he'd been taught. The history of his kin. Besieged. How many times had that land been invaded? How many tales had he heard of one war or another?

He could feel it in his bones. The pull of his ancestors.

It was his turn. As it had been theirs so many times before.

Cisco didn't have to wonder. That was what his father would tell him if he were here, right now. He knew it was."

"2579

'...Cisco, look at me,' came the private words from Dennex.

Cisco did so, moving his eyes but not his head. The reaper was floating right there next to the television.

A skeletal wolf wreathed in black flames, as always.

And yet... Cisco blinked. Did Dennex look different, somehow? A bit smaller, perhaps?

His eyes were probably just playing tricks on him.

'Are you okay?' the reaper asked him.

The answer to that was relative, he felt, but he decided to just say, 'I'm fine.'

'You have been staring at that television for over two hours now.'

Ah.

'And I have been calling out to you for the past five minutes straight.'

Ahhh.

Cisco leaned back on his bed and stretched his arms. 'I guess I was a bit lost in thought.'

'Listen. Anyone would be unsettled after learning what we have.' Dennex hovered over him and stared down into his eyes with his hollow ones. 'But shutting me out is not how you cope with it, my boy. I am not just your reaper, understand? I am your friend. And over the course of our time together, we may go through many more things like this. It is important that you lean on me. It is what I am here for.'

Cisco scratched the back of his own neck. 'What's there to talk about? Our family's in trouble, and we can't do anything about it. It's pretty

straightforward, isn't it?'

'We can make ourselves ready for the time when we CAN do something about it.'

'I've been meditating every single day. And for more hours than I ever have before. Are you saying I need to do it even--?'

A shift in the Dantean news program on TV caught his attention. For the first time that Cisco had seen, the mustachioed anchor was brightening up--smiling, even. For the first time that Cisco had seen, the man wasn't talking about the war."

"2580

Dennex must've noticed the change in Cisco's demeanor, because he also turned to look at the television.

The infographic next to the anchor's head read thus:

Beast of Lorent slain by Atreyan Hero

The accompanying image was that of an award ceremony. The anchor explained that the President of Lorent had granted one of the country's highest honors to someone two days ago, in recognition of an act of heroism that surprisingly had nothing to do with the continental war.

And then they showed actual footage of this ceremony.

Apparently, this hero was the young black guy standing there with a big scarf around his neck. They must've mentioned his name, but Cisco didn't catch it.

He was too busy staring with widening eyes at the person behind him.

That was Matteo Delaguna right there.

Cisco had met him many times. And sparred with him, too. Only to get his ass kicked.

Not that he'd been the only one.

Matteo was a wrestling prodigy, already distinguished among the Rainlords. Cisco distinctly remembered him from an interhouse

tournament between the Sebolts, Delagunas, Garzas, Strouds, Zabats, and well, him, the lone Elroy. It had been almost two years ago now, but it had left a lasting impression on him.

On his ego, in particular.

He remembered feeling like he was pretty hot shit before that tournament. Struggling in the first round and losing in the second had corrected that problem.

Well, okay, maybe it hadn't.

But he'd certainly gained considerable respect for the finalists--and most of all the winner, Matteo.

Cisco also remembered hearing all the other boys talk about him, about how it was only a matter of time before the rest of the world began to take notice of him, too. The sound of resigned admiration in their voices had made Cisco indignant, like he wanted to disagree with them for no reason.

No. Not for no reason. Because he was jealous. And childish, perhaps.

But seeing him on television now... it looked like they were right.

'Dennex...'

The reaper didn't require elaboration. 'What in the world is he doing there?'

'That's what I'd like to know.'

"2581 -- CCXXXVII.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Seven: 'O, lost comrade...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

""Y'know, I've often heard that having an overly dark sense of humor can be a sign of dementia or brain damage, but personally, I think that's just a bunch of anti-psychopath propaganda, bought and paid for by Big Pharma and the normies who run it.""

As he listened to the wild-haired man on stage from an empty table in the back row of the outdoor theater, he began to wonder--and not for the first time--what he was doing here.

The rest of the crowd seemed to be enjoying themselves, though they also seemed pretty thoroughly sauced by this point.

""They're always trying to scaremonger and devalue our contributions to society, trying to convince people in various ways that we're the ones who are abnormal, not them. As if there was anything strange about us in the face of this ridiculous world we live in!""

As far as he could tell, the only other ones not drunkenly laughing or cheering were all sharing a table together a few meters away. And a couple were looking right at him.

He knew who they were. Members of the Freeman Fellowship.

He found himself paying more and more attention to them, lately. Their numbers seemed to have been growing, and if the expressions on their faces right now were an indicator, they were hoping to keep that trend going.

But of course, that wasn't really up to him, was it? He was just a servant, after all.

His reaper was right there next to him, being a silent enigma as always. Rezolo never laughed or cracked wise like most other reapers. It was rare to see him react with anything other than calm observance.

He doubted they would be able to convince Rezolo to join their faction, but who knows? Even after nearly five years with the reaper, he still didn't feel like he knew him very well at all."

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"2582

For his part, he wouldn't mind joining the Freeman Fellowship. They seemed a little crazy, sure, but this was Abolish. Everyone was crazy in one way or another. And they were at least not quite so violently crazy.

The Void knew that he'd seen more than enough violence in his life.

Growing up in the middle of the Vaelish Civil War had granted him far too much experience with that.

It was a bit strange to think about now, frankly. How different his life would be if he had been born in a different time or place.

He wouldn't have met those other children in the forest and banded together. He wouldn't have seen so much death and misery before achieving any kind of stability in his young life again, however fragile. He wouldn't have resorted to banditry.

And he probably wouldn't have met Dozer and the Monster of the East.

He wouldn't have joined Abolish on that same fateful day, either. He wouldn't have made a name for himself so quickly and become mildly infamous.

They wouldn't be calling him Loren Lighteyes.

On some days, he was able to take pride in that. On others, he wanted to rethink every decision he ever made.

It was a mixed bag. Most lives were probably like that, he figured. Maybe one day, if he continued to excel, he would be able to feel like more than just a disposable cog in the great machine that was Abolish.

The way that the Old Man had talked to them on that first day, he'd made it sound like they would be able to achieve greatness through following him. Like they all had conqueror's spirits within them, just waiting to burst out.

But it was five years later, and here he still was among the rabble, watching what passed for a "stage show" in Abolish encampments."  
"2583

"I say, if anyone should be worrying about their state of mind, it's all the idiots who think they're somehow normal," said the stage performer. "Seriously, how deluded must you be if you don't feel at least a little bit cracked in the noggin by all the stuff goin' on these days?"

Loren currently had the displeasure of being in the same sect as that tempestuous gasbag up there on stage. Zahi Rambata had a certain

way with words that involved never shutting up.

""Just last week, while doing reconnaissance, I met a guy with a wife and kids. But that wasn't the strange part. No, the strange part was that he didn't even realize anything was wrong with him!""

A low chorus of laughs ran through the crowd at that ""joke."" It was difficult for Loren to find it very amusing when he'd heard some variation of it a dozen times already.

""It was like seeing someone going through chemotherapy who didn't realize they had cancer!""

Loren still did not laugh, but the drunken crowd did. He had to wonder if it was because they actually found it funny or because they would laugh at just about anything, right now. Tough to say. Even some of the reapers were laughing, though, so maybe Zahi was onto something.

Loren decided to get up from his table and go for a walk. He'd already finished eating, and he didn't see much point in wasting the rest of his break on Zahi, of all people.

The encampment wasn't very large, and he soon reached the edge of it while Rezolo followed after him, silent as usual. The Gettira Plains stretched out before him, as green and vast as anything he'd ever seen.

The place didn't offer much in the way of natural cover, which was why there were constant patrols around the small encampment's perimeter."

"2584

They weren't expecting much in the way of resistance way out here, though. The war was on Eloa, right now, and this was Ardora, on the other side of the world.

The strangeness of the timing had not been lost on him. Anyone would've figured that the initiatives on Eloa should require all hands on deck, especially considering the Vanguard's supposed numerical advantage over Abolish, but apparently, the Old Man thought otherwise.

This had to be some kind of plan of his, Loren figured. While the Vanguard was distracted with the war, Dozer was sending out tendrils--like this sorry group--in order to... accomplish what, exactly?

Loren hadn't been able to piece that together yet. The encampment's leader--who also happened to be Zahi's much older brother, Kareem--had been keeping a tight lid on what their exact orders were.

They weren't conquering villages. They weren't fighting the Vanguard. They were just sending out scouting parties and marching--or driving, in the case of the lucky few sects who'd been able to requisition vehicles for themselves.

In any case, it was a shitty detail to be stuck on, Loren felt. Right now, all the glory and fame were back on Eloa. He hoped to get back that there as soon as possible.

But at least the view was nice. With the sun reaching low for the horizon, the Plains came alive with more colors than he'd ever seen on Eloa.

And the clouds. They twirled like snakes. Bumpy, gargantuan snakes. All across the sky, wreathed in all types of reds and oranges, yellows and green, blues and purples--as well as a few that were perhaps impossible to describe as anything other than ultraviolet.

Maybe there really was something special about this place.

He sure bloody hoped so, at least.

Movement in the distance acquired his attention before any of the patrols around him. His eyes narrowed as his vision sharpened."  
"2585

But it was more than just that. Loren's eyesight was his most prized possession--and not coincidentally. He had been working on it from the beginning, ever since he discovered he was a mutation user.

And ever since Gohvis had helped him get a handle on his power.

He hadn't known back then how fortunate he was to have found an instructor so soon after his ability manifested itself. Since that time, he had heard and read many tales of the sad fate that had befallen many

mutants throughout history.

He might've been nicer to Gohvis, had he known what a privilege and an honor it truly was to be taught by such a master and pioneer.

It was still a work-in-progress, of course, as all mutations were, but Loren could see farther, clearer, and in lower light than anyone else in this encampment. Or in the majority of Abolish, for that matter.

Now if only he could do something about these seven stubby little horns that crowned his head. He would've liked to not have to wear such bulky hats all time in order to conceal them. They made even other servants stare.

He'd heard from other mutants that it might simply be impossible to remove them, since it was supposedly impossible to ""undo"" any mutation, but Loren was highly skeptical of that claim. Gohvis didn't have horns on his head. Sure, he barely looked human anymore, but that was beside the point.

He wished he'd thought to ask Gohvis about it directly when he had the chance. Unfortunately, during his time under the Monster's tutelage, Loren had actually thought the horns were cool. It was only after returning to the world at large that his mind began to change on that matter."

"2586

In any event, Loren understood how lucky he was, as a mutant, to have as normal of an appearance as he did. Few others of their kind had been able to maintain such visually subtle mutations. Perhaps that would change for him in the future, but for now at least, he was more or less content.

These eyes of his were enough.

They saw, before anyone else, how the horizon was shifting. How those distant shapes were appearing. Seemingly from nothing, as mirages might.

But these were no mirages.

They were figures. On horseback. And they were not small in number, either.

Right away, he became both wary and confused.

That group was certainly large enough to be considered an army, but not one from this century. Or even the last one, perhaps. Horseback? If it was the Vanguard coming to attack, they would not be riding horses.

The patrols were beginning to take notice now, too. They could probably see the abnormal movement, at least.

Loren strained for more, trying to further sharpen his vision. He wanted to see these figures in greater detail. Who the hell were they? If it was just a bunch of local villagers, aiming to make a sort of show out of their collective strength, then they were going to be in for a rude awakening. The men in this encampment were already restless as is, and even on good days, they were not known for their mercy or restraint.

Whoever these poor bastards riding this way were, they were going to be massacred if they didn't turn around soon. Loren could already imagine--

What?

What the fuck?

The detail of the riders' faces came into focus, but Loren couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Those weren't normal people at all.

They were rotting corpses. He could see flesh peeling off their bones, dried blood all over their pale and torn skin, barely any hair on their bald heads. Some even looked like they were more skeleton than flesh.

And that armor. Not all of them were wearing it, but it didn't belong in this century, either.

An army of undead. But not like any Loren had ever seen."  
"2587

Was it a mirage? As much he wanted to trust his eyes, they could still play tricks on him. Such a large force of decaying servants couldn't be real, could it? Clad like that? And on horseback, no less?

For a short time, Loren could only continue watching, blinking, and trying to process what he was seeing. But when the riders persisted, refusing to disappear as he hoped they might, he knew he had to speak up. He had to warn the rest of the camp.

""Unknown servants approaching!"" he yelled in Valgan, drawing urgent looks from the patrols around him. ""Inform Kareem! Send word! Unknown servants approaching from the west!""

More calls came out in response, echoing his warning, and without even moving, he could feel the camp coming to life with the sudden anticipation of battle. There was no telling if these ghoulish warriors in the distance actually intended to attack them, but they certainly didn't look friendly. Better to be prepared. Hopefully, none of the idiots around here would make him regret this decision.

'I cannot sense them yet,' said Rezolo privately. 'What do they look like?'

And Loren did his best to explain, expecting not to be believed.

Instead, however, the reaper was simply quiet for a time. Then he asked, 'What does their heraldry look like?'

'Their what?'

'Their war banners. Describe them to me.'

Still a bit confused, Loren looked toward the riders, searching for banners. It didn't take long to find them. There were plenty. 'They're just black.'

'Pure black? You're sure?'

'Yes. Is there supposed to be something on them?'

The reaper fell silent again, ignoring him.

'Rezolo, do you know who they are?'

'Those are not servants,' the reaper said. 'At least, not the kind you are familiar with. Those beings are not of this world. Not anymore.'

"What are you talking about?!"

"2588

'It would be too difficult to explain,' said Rezolo. 'Just prepare yourself. Either they will leave us alone, or this will be one of the worst fights you ever experience.'

Loren gave a wide-eyed frown as he kept scanning the horizon. The half-rotted soldiers were close enough now for the other servants on patrol to begin noticing the abnormalities about them. The confusion in the air spiked to an almost palpable degree, and then--

The riders vanished.

Like smoke. They disappeared into swirling plumes of black. Loren wanted to ask Rezolo for answers again, but he didn't get the chance before the riders reappeared.

Right next to him.

And in front of him. And already passing him by. They were mid-stride, running through the encampment--through tables and chairs and tents and walls. Even through people.

One passed right through Loren, too, and as it did, he felt a biting shiver across his entire body. And the smell. Rotten flesh mixed with ash. He might've vomited if he hadn't already smelled the like several times before in his life.

He didn't understand in the slightest. Were they incorporeal like reapers? They could phase through objects undeterred, but that feeling just now hadn't been the same as when a reaper passed through his body. Not at all.

Panicked shouts arose throughout the camp, and he could see his fellow servants lashing out at the riders, trying to attack them and failing. Nothing was landing. Like throwing rocks at smoke.

And there were so many of them. They just kept rushing past. Hundreds. Maybe thousands, even.

Until, just as quickly as they had arrived, they were gone.



Loren, along with everyone else, was left looking around, dumbstruck.

What the hell had just happened?

It was all the more confounding, because he couldn't see any obvious damage that had been done to the camp, either. The riders had surged through it like a crashing wave, the countless hooves creating almost that exact sound.

And yet, as Loren inspected his surroundings, nothing seemed disturbed. Everything was just the same as before the riders arrived."  
"2589

Loren asked Rezolo the very same question that he could hear being uttered aimlessly by the other men around him. 'Where did they go?'

'No telling. Perhaps they achieved their objective.'

'Which was?'

'Let's search the camp.' And Rezolo didn't wait for him.

Loren followed. To his eyes, the reaper was an oversized gecko with glowing white eyes. The long toes and swollen tips of the reaper's large feet hung rigidly below him as he floated impossibly through the air. It almost looked like the reapers were all standing on some kind of invisible ball as they moved.

The rest of the camp was still intact, it seemed. The confusion among everyone was apparent, but he didn't see any injuries.

He spotted a commotion in the distance, however, and Rezolo was already heading toward it. As they got closer, the reaper wisely slowed in order to let Loren take point.

Loren pushed his way through a gathered crowd to see what they were all staring at.

The smell hit him first. Charred flesh. All too familiar. Not enough to make him recoil or wretch, but it was still far from pleasant.

And when he saw the body, it took him a moment to even recognize it as such. Blackened ashes were all that remained. If not for the small

and the vaguely human shape left behind in the smote grass, Loren might not have been able to tell what he was looking at.

The low mutterings among the onlookers increased as someone else began to push through the opposite side of the circle.

It was Kareem, Loren realized. A tall man of dark complexion and chiseled features, Kareem was one of the few people in this camp who actually bothered to dress well for his job. His stiff black coat with its golden collar and buttons looked like it would have fit in at a much ritzier event than this.

""Who was it?"" said Kareem, loud enough for all to hear. ""Who was killed?""

"2590

'It was our aberration,' said Rezolo. 'It's impossible to identify the body from these remains, but I can sense that the aberration's abnormal soul is no longer among us.'

Disquieted murmurs passed through the crowd.

Loren had only met the aberration briefly and couldn't even recall the man's name, but he was aware of how highly sought after they were by many different sects. Their potential for growth was well-known, as was their insanity--which was saying a lot, if they were being judged by Abolish's standards.

Kareem scowled, and he looked around. ""Clean this up. Don't dispose of the remains. Seal them in an airtight container and bring it to my quarters."" His gaze settled on Loren. ""Lighteyes. You and your reaper are with me. Come."" He turned and started walking briskly away.

Loren had to hop over the ashen body and push through the reconvening crowd in order to catch up.

Kareem's reaper was attached to his shoulder, perhaps worried that the riders would show back up again. Morix was particularly strange in that way. Most reapers weren't known for their bravery, but Morix had a reputation for his cowardice. It caused no end of loose talk among the lower ranked Abolishers, theorizing how someone like that could

have ascended to such a position of influence.

No one would dare say that while Kareem was within earshot, though. And it was typically Morix's fellow reapers who were talking like that, not their servants. The corporeals were generally more concerned with Kareem himself, and he was more than capable of commanding respect on his own.

""I want you to go around the camp and track the path that these apparitions took,"" said Kareem. His Valgan was strong and clear, much like his voice. ""Find the person who saw them first and go from there.""

""That person was actually me, sir,"" said Loren."  
"2591

Kareem stopped and turned. ""Ah. I might've guessed. Perfect, then. You already know where to start. Confirm their trajectory through the camp and talk to everyone who saw them, especially the last person before they disappeared.""

""Do you know what those things were, sir?"" said Loren.

""The Mendocava,"" said Kareem. ""They aren't exactly the reason we're here, but they're close enough. Gather as much data as you can, Lighteyes. Take notes on everything. I don't care how irrelevant it seems. Put it in your report and bring it to me by morning.""

""Will do, sir.""

And they split up. Loren had to hunt down a notepad. A digital one would've been nice, but those things tended to break easily on long missions like this.

In the meantime, he tried consulting Rezolo again. 'So can you explain now? What the hell are these Mendocava?'

'That is just one of many names. Void Riders. The Undying Host. The Hunters of Ardora. They are ancient beings, often thought to have left this world for good or to have simply never existed to begin with. In some cultures, they are regarded as a force of nature.'

'But what are they? You said they weren't of this world ""anymore,"'

didn't you?'

'Yes. It's said that the Void claimed them from their reapers. And rather than turning to madness with broken psyches, they came under the Void's direct control. Which is, supposedly, why they have the appearance that they do. They no longer have reapers to regenerate their bodies, and the Void, perhaps, sees no reason to fill that role for them.'

'Why would they have killed our aberration but no one else?'

'I don't know,' said Rezolo.

Loren kept pushing, but the reaper kept claiming ignorance. He wasn't sure he was buying that, frankly. Rezolo had a tendency to keep things to himself.

He soon discovered that this new task that Kareem had given him would probably take all night. It seemed like almost everyone in the camp had seen these damned riders. Figuring out who had seen them last would not be easy. And worse, he wasn't sure it would be worth the trouble."

"2592

What did Kareem hope to learn by discerning the riders' ""trajectory?"" Did he think they were headed somewhere else and wanted to follow? As far as Loren or anyone else could tell, they'd simply vanished into thin air. How were you supposed to follow that?

Hmm. On second thought, maybe that was exactly what Kareem intended to do. If they weren't going to pack up camp and leave, then they were going to stay, which probably meant that they would continue to deploy scouting parties.

Well, in any event, he had his orders. It wasn't his place to question them.

And it wasn't Zahi's, either, but that didn't stop the big-haired man from waltzing up to him and doing so.

""Who expected that, huh?! Not me, that's for sure!"" He had a habit of speaking Mohssian quite often, and he was one of the most fluent in their camp. Some found that obnoxious, but it wasn't a problem for

Loren, since he was quite fluent himself. ""Hey, do you think they'll come back?""

""I have no idea,"" said Loren absently. He was more focused on surveying the soldiers around him, looking for ones he hadn't yet talked to.

""But if you did, you'd tell me, right? You wouldn't leave a brother hanging, would you?""

Loren ignored that question and kept walking.

""You're pretty cold, Lighteyes. Anyone ever tell you that? Cold as an ice cube on a winter's evening.""

""You're not exactly warm, either, Zahi.""

""I know of plenty of people who would say otherwise, friend.""

""Plenty of people who you've deceived, you mean.""

""Hey, I'm just being true to myself. I can't help it if people get the wrong impression. I'm a friendly guy who likes to have friendly conversations with other friendly people. Where's the harm in that, I ask you?""

""I think the harm comes when you stab them in the back.""  
"2593

""Why would you say something so utterly untrue and hurtful?"" said Zahi. ""I know I put on a brave face, but I do have feelings, you know.""

""Feelings like anger and jealousy, maybe.""

""What, those don't count?""

Zahi kept pestering him, apparently having acquired enough of an interest in what he was doing for some reason. Loren mostly just tried to ignore him.

He consulted the other reapers around the camp, wanting to see if any of them could tell him anything more than what Rezolo had been able to, but he found no such luck. Despite there being more than fifty

servants in this group, there were only about fifteen reapers.

No doubt, most of them were at some base somewhere, playing it extra safe and operating as communicators. Or simply doing something else. Loren was a little surprised to see how many reapers and servants rarely traveled together. While there were certainly benefits to splitting up--such as the servant being able to more easily go undercover as a normal human--Loren still felt that he would never be comfortable if he didn't stay with Rezolo all the time.

Their relationship was obviously a little odd, though. Especially in Abolish.

While Loren didn't feel like Rezolo was his ""friend,"" exactly, it would be a lie to say that he only cared about the reaper in terms of preserving his own life. True, he would've preferred it if Rezolo wasn't so quiet and mysterious, but after all this time together, Loren was beginning to feel like maybe words were a little overrated.

They'd had numerous close calls in the past, times when either Rezolo or him would have died or been captured if the other hadn't done or said something. Shielding the reaper with his body. Killing an enemy just before they could strike. Or a simple warning at just the right moment.

These things added up.

They had their own kind of understanding."  
"2594

At length, Loren began to have trouble finding witnesses whom he had not already talked to. He was nearing the end of his mission, it seemed. He could probably stop here, because he already had a pretty good sense of the trajectory that Kareem was looking for. Northeasterly was most likely the way to go.

Before he was fully satisfied with his results, however, the members of the Freeman Fellowship approached him. They looked like they had something they wanted to say to him, but he decided to ask them what they had seen first. Nothing new, as expected. He tried to turn and move on, but the shorter one called out to him.

""Lighteyes, sir, one minute, please."" It was a young guy. Very young, in fact. Scarcely more than a boy, if his voice and physical appearance were to be trusted.

But of course, they weren't, really. For all Loren knew, the two older-looking ones were actually subordinate to the boy. Not likely, sure, but certainly still possible.

He waited.

The boy's gaze fell to Zahi, however, as if reluctant to say anything in his presence.

Not one to be deterred by things like awkward tension, Zahi just blurted out whatever he wanted, as usual. ""Oh, are you hoping to poach him from our sect? Because I don't think we'd appreciate that very much. We're a tightly knit bunch, you see. Like brothers. We share everything with each other. Clothes. Secrets. Beds. Toothbrushes. Even women.""

Loren couldn't let that go by. ""He's joking. Badly.""

""See that? We banter just like brothers, too. Everyone in our sect is the same. Loren is perfectly happy in the Rambata Rangers.""

""That's not our name,"" Loren had to say. ""We're the 331st Ranging Regiment."" And while he spoke the truth, he also knew that their official name wasn't all that much better. There were most certainly not 331 ranging regiments in Abolish. It was just a stupid naming scheme to make their numbers seem larger than they actually were."

"2595

Honestly, it probably caused more confusion to Abolish's own members than to any enemy spies that might have infiltrated their ranks, but there was no use complaining about it at this point. Especially when so many of his bosses had reputations for their total madness.

The shorter Freeman seemed hesitant. ""But is it true that you are happy with your current position?"" Wow, maybe he really was the boss of their little trio.

""Ooh, so I was right, then?!"" said Zahi. ""You really are trying to

poach him?!""

""Membership within our Fellowship is flexible,"" said the same one.

""We would not necessarily be 'poaching' him, as you suggest.""

""Hmm, that ain't how I've heard it,"" said Zahi. ""I hear you guys're pretty fanatical about your rules 'n such.""

""Well, we're all fanatical in one way or another, aren't we?""

""Hah! True! Hey, then maybe I could join, too, eh?!""

""If you pass the entrance test, then sure.""

""Say what? Wait, does Lighteyes have to take a test, too?""

""No, he has received a formal invite from our leader.""

""Tch. Now that is some unfair bullshit right there...""

The little Freeman tilted both his head and his brow at Zahi with seeming sympathy. ""You are not genuinely disappointed, are you?""

""Hmph. That so hard to believe?""

""Well, yes. I'm sure the Fellowship's reputation precedes us. Do you truly think that you would be happy within it?""

""Maybe. I'm a complex guy. Full of nuance 'n stuff.""

The little Freeman chortled. ""Well, then take the test.""

""Maybe I will!""

Loren had had just about enough of listening to this shit. ""Our feelings don't matter. The real decision is up to our reapers, anyway.""

The little Freeman nodded. ""There is certainly truth in that, yes. But if you feel very strongly on the matter, I think you'll find that our group can be quite persuasive."" His beady eyes went to Rezolo. ""Though, of course, we would be interested in hearing your opinion as well.""

"2596

Rezolo, however, merely remained quiet, which Loren did not find



surprising.

The little Freeman seemed to take that as a bad sign. ""A-ah, well, like I said, the matter is open to discussion if it interests you. Lighteyes has been invited by our leader, so we would be happy to work with you toward an acceptable compromise in becoming a member. You would not have to leave your current sect if you do not wish to.""

""Who is this leader of yours, anyway?"" said Zahi.

""That would be Germal, the Gentleman of Palei.""

Loren blinked. That guy was the leader of the Freeman Fellowship? Loren had met him a few times while studying under Gohvis; and while he was aware that Germal was rather famous in his own right, it was still difficult to bridge the mental gap in his mind between that one-horned weirdo and the increasingly talked about Freeman Fellowship.

Really, it had only been a few months since he first started hearing about the Fellowship, whereas it had been years since he'd last seen Germal. And at the rate they were growing, Germal had probably just made a list of servants he barely even knew and gave it to subordinates for this apparent recruitment drive of theirs.

Yeah. He decided that he shouldn't read too much into this whole ""invite"" thing being a big deal.

Perhaps Rezolo was thinking something similarly, because he chose that moment to finally speak up and say, 'What has Loren done to earn the honor of an invitation from your leader?'

""Hey, before that, tell us your name already, short stuff,"" said Zahi.

""Oh, my apologies. My name is Wallace Chandler. And the two behind me--""

""Can I call you Wally?""

""I... I suppose.""

""Cool. But yeah, anyway, Wally, how come Lighteyes here gets an invite, and I don't, hmm?""

"2597

""Well, to get the full picture of that, you would have to ask Germal,"" said Wally, ""but my understanding is that Lighteyes has been invited because of his reputation as a principled warrior who does not use excessive force to complete his missions.""

""You mean because he's not a bloodthirsty psycho,"" said Zahi. ""But hey, I'm not bloodthirsty, either.""

""Ah--y-yes, well, as I mentioned, the invitations are delivered at our leader's sole discretion..."

""Oh, but if it were up to you, then you'd give me an invite, right?"

""Er, well, I barely know you, so..."

He stuck his hand out. ""Zahi Rambata. Great to meet you. They call me the Bard of the Modern Era.""

""No, they don't,"" said Loren.

""Don't listen to him; he's just jealous. I'm a real man out of time, you see. Tell me, have you ever felt like you were born in the wrong period of history? Because that's me in a nutshell, my friend. Very relatable, right? Oh, and I can play twenty instruments, you know. And I'll talk your ear off if you'll let me, aha! And I'm also very much what you would call a joiner! It's why I'm with Abolish, in fact! Someone just offered me a membership, so I said okay! I didn't even have a reaper yet! Boy, was I in for a surprise later!"

""Th-that's all very nice, Mr. Rambata, but--""

""I'm all about maintaining morale, see. I think that's very important. You need cheering up, I'm your guy. You need a wingman when you go pick up chicks, I'm your guy. You need someone to carry something heavy up a hill for you, well, that's why I keep this killjoy around. But for anything else, I'm probably your guy. Just give me a chance, and you'll see how multi-talented I am.""

"2598

Loren almost pitied the little Freeman. He'd seen Zahi get like this before. The man wouldn't stop talking until his listeners either ran away or caved to his implied demands.

In both cases, Loren's role in this conversation was pretty much over, so he decided to speak privately with Rezolo instead. 'What are you thinking?' he asked.

'Do you wish to join this Fellowship?' said the reaper, echoing.

'It has me curious, at least.'

'Fine. Then you have my permission, on the condition that you use it as leverage to get us transferred out of this sect.'

Loren had to stop himself from reacting visibly to that. 'You want out? You never mentioned that before.'

'I didn't have a problem with it until today.'

It took him a second to put those clues together. 'You're afraid of the Riders...'

'I am. And if you are not, then you are a fool. The Mendocava are far beyond our ability to deal with--beyond anyone in this camp.'

'They didn't attack us, though. Only the aberration.'

'Yes, and they rent him to dust. Even his bones cannot be harvested now.'

Loren threw another look around the encampment. Everyone else seemed to have already settled back down after the encounter with the Riders, but that wasn't terribly strange, he supposed. These were soldiers and madmen of Abolish. Flexibility under stress was arguably their greatest strength as a unit.

And yet here was Rezolo. The reaper might have sounded as calm as ever, but these weren't the words of someone confident or comfortable. In fact, this might've been the most scared that Loren had ever heard him.

'And as it will likely prove relevant to the mission,' the reaper went on, 'Kareem will keep prodding them. I would rather not be here the next time they appear.'"

"2599 -- CCXXXVIII.

Well, Loren couldn't really complain. He'd been looking for a way back to Eloa, and here it was, staring him in the face.

And yet.

Now that there was this new wrinkle in this regiment's mission, he had to admit, a part of him would be disappointed to leave. He felt now more than ever that Dozer had sent their sect to these Gettira Plains for a good reason. Surely, it was no coincidence that these Mendocava just happened to be here. Were they protecting something, perhaps?

It seemed he would not be among those who found out.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Eight: 'A candle in the Dark...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector approached the tree again, this time with only Garovel and Hanton behind him. It was the dead of night, and the rest of the expedition was staying at a luxurious hotel in the nearest town. Sneaking out had been rather easy with Hanton's help, though Carl and Ravi's reapers might've been wondering where his soul had inexplicably disappeared to.

He'd left them a handwritten note on his bed, just in case. If they grew too worried about him and stormed into his bedroom, then hopefully they would relax knowing that he would be back by morning.

Probably. Inspecting a single tree shouldn't take all night, right?

He tried to be as gentle with the tree as he could, even going so far as to inspect the whole thing top to bottom, to discover an alternate entrance to the bark-covered door that he'd found before. The sparse moonlight didn't provide much help on that front, and unfortunately, he hadn't brought a flashlight, either. He'd figured that he wouldn't need one, seeing as he could just materialize a glowing hot cube of iron for light, but standing in this giant canopy of leaves, he suddenly became too worried about accidentally setting this poor tree on fire."

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"2600

Alas, after quite a while of searching, he found no other way in. So he

set to work, trying to gingerly peel the bark from the doorway. He chose not to rely on the vigor, because he didn't want to deal with after effects of exhaustion.

It was a slow process. Garovel seemed to be getting antsy, even offering to stick his head through the doorway to take a look inside first. But since there was no telling what was waiting for them, that seemed a little too dangerous. Plus, it was most likely pitch black in there, anyway.

But the reaper's offer did get Hector thinking.

About how reckless Garovel was being.

Sure, in some ways, maybe that wasn't so abnormal, but it still struck Hector as strange. Garovel always at least TRIED to appear level-headed, even when proposing one of his batshit crazy plans--hell, especially when proposing one of them.

But these past few days, it almost felt like Garovel just didn't give a flying fuck, anymore.

Hmm.

So, as Hector tried to gain leverage over the bark without destroying the door with his materialization, he decided to just be direct and ask about it.

'Hey, Garovel, why're you being such a reckless jackass, lately?'

The reaper gave an echoing snort. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, it's like you're trying to prove a point or something. And you don't care who or what might get trampled in the process. Even if it's you.'

'Alright, Mr. Judgmental. Just because I've suggested a few ideas recently that you didn't like, doesn't mean you need to start psychoanalyzing me.'

'Hmm.'

'And what does that mean? What kind of a response is ""hmm,"" hmm?'

'I think you're lying to me, Garovel.'

'Excuse me? Why would I be lying? And what about, exactly?'

'Something's different with you, and you don't want to tell me what it is.'"

"2601

'Ah. Hmm. Well, that's an interesting theory, Hector. But have you considered that possibility that you might be crazy?'

'I'm considering the possibility that YOU might be.'

'Hey, now, let's not start throwing those kinds of insults around.'

'I literally just said what you said first.'

'And that was very low of you, Hector. You're not supposed to stoop to my level. You need to be more gracious and understanding. And to let me abuse you verbally without fighting back. It's only fair.'

'Garovel, are you sure you're feeling okay? And not, like, EXTRA stupid or anything?'

'I'll have you know that I feel just fine, thank you very much. But your concern is noted.'

And it seemed like the reaper intended for the conversation to end there, but Hector wasn't yet satisfied. 'That's... not good enough, Garovel. If we weren't in the presence of a telepathic bird that can fuck with people's minds, then I might feel differently. But since we are, you've gotta give me something more. I need to know you're okay.'

'Ugh. What, are you planning to put me back in an iron jar again?'

'Technically, they're orbs, not jars.'

'Whatever. I don't like confined spaces, Hector.'

'I didn't think you did, Garovel. But I don't want the Sparrows screwing with your head.'

'They're not screwing with my head.'

'Are you sure? Would you even be able to tell if they were? I mean,

they can mess with memories, you know?'

'Alright, alright, geez. Okay. You got me. It's not Hanton making me act weird. I've been acting weird deliberately.'

Hector paused his materialization work to glance at Garovel. 'Say what?'

'Listen. Hector. I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm not the only one who's been acting differently lately. You have, too.'

'I have?'

'Yes. And just like how you've become concerned with my behavior, I was becoming... well, slightly concerned with yours. Overall, I think you're doing great. But that in itself is also worrying.'

Hector just remained quiet, not sure what to say."  
"2602

'I guess if I were to put all my observations and concerns into one, cohesive thought, it would be that I feel like your two blessings have begun to affect your personality,' said Garovel.

Hector blinked.

'And that worries me a little, because I liked you exactly how you were, shyness and all. A rather strong part of me doesn't WANT to see you change, Hector.'

Holy shit. 'Garovel...'

'But on the other hand, I have to acknowledge that you've kinda been killin' it, lately. And I don't just mean in growth as a warrior, either, although that's incredible, too. Your decision-making has been pretty on point. Seeing you talk to all these high-ranking people like it's no big deal for you... frankly, it still boggles my mind.'

Wow. Uh.

Hector still didn't know what to say. He hadn't expected Garovel's concerns to be nestled between this barrage of compliments.



'So yeah, I might've been kinda... pushing the recklessness a bit, as a way of testing you. I wanted to see how much I could influence you, or if you would actually resist my ideas.'

'I... uh... hmm.'

'And look, you've always been surprisingly sassy with me, so don't get it confused. I'm talking about the big ideas. When it comes to important matters, you've usually followed my lead. And that was fine, though I suspected it was primarily because you were terrified of making any kind of heavy decision yourself and bearing the accompanying weight of its consequences. I was perfectly content to be the one carrying that responsibility for you while you just concentrated on not letting people die.

'But lately, that doesn't seem to be the case for you, anymore. Which is rather surprising, to say the least. You've only been a servant for a little over a year now, and yet the change I've witnessed in you is... well, to be blunt with you, it's unlike anything I've ever seen in a servant.'"

"2603

Hector felt compelled to say something now. 'Garovel, I...' It was still difficult to find the words, though. 'I don't know what you want me to say. I mean... a lot's happened in this past year...'

'That, it has.'

'I don't... feel like I've changed that much, myself. Like, deep down, I mean. But... yeah, I do understand where you're coming from, I guess...'

'Really? You don't think you've changed deep down?'

'Uh... well, yeah. I feel like I've gotten better at hiding my, er, uncertainty, maybe... but that's about it.' He paused to think. 'Now that you're bringing all this up, though, maybe I'm just fooling myself...'

'What the hell?' The reaper paused for a silent laugh. 'I'm not telling you this in order to make you feel self-conscious. I just want to make sure you're aware of the changes you're going through.'

'Er, right...'

'Listen, Hector. I...' It was Garovel's turn to hesitate, which made Hector eye him curiously. 'I've grown very attached to you. Not just as my servant. But as my friend. And I've seen servants change dramatically in the past. Never quite this quickly or absurdly, but yes. So... I just...'

As the realization dawned on him, Hector took a long breath and nodded. 'You don't want me to snap and turn into some kind of gigantic asshole.'

The reaper chortled again. 'I wasn't going to phrase it quite like that, but yes, that is my concern in a nutshell, more or less.'

'That makes sense. I mean, I don't want to turn into a gigantic asshole, either.'

'Good. Glad to hear it.'

Hector returned to trying to gently pry the bark of the door in the tree. 'But Garovel, you don't need to ""test"" me. You can just tell me what you're worried about, and then we can discuss it.'

"2604

'I agree in sentiment. Problem is, like I said, I've seen servants change dramatically before. And they're not always as receptive to a calm discussion about these types of things as you are.' And a beat passed. 'Plus, it was an opportunity to mess with you a little bit. Can't very well pass that up, now can I?'

'I don't know, Garovel. They say the key to any healthy relationship is communication.'

'Oh, shut up,' laughed Garovel.

Which made Hector snicker, too. 'But if I shut up, how will we healthily communicate?'

'I'll just tell you what to do, and then you'll do it. How about that? Nice and simple.'

'Pass.'

Finally, the bark cracked enough, and a sizable chunk of it came free.

From there, Hector was able to use his gauntleted hands to gain leverage over the rest and pull it off with only his normal strength.

'Someone is approaching,' said Hanton. 'From the sky. A servant and reaper.'

Hector tensed and focused on the Scarf, but whoever it was hadn't entered its range yet.

After a few more moments of uncertainty, Garovel clicked his nonexistent tongue. 'I wish you hadn't warned him about that.'

'What?' said Hanton. 'Why?'

'Nevermind,' said Garovel. 'The ones approaching aren't a threat. We can relax.'

A servant approaching from the air? And not a threat? There were a number of people Hector knew who fit that description, but if Garovel wanted it to be another surprise or whatever, then that was fine. He focused on the door in front of him.

The cylindrical doorknob didn't turn at all, at first he thought it might be broken, but then he realized that no, it wasn't designed to turn. It was really just a handle. He pulled, but it still resisted. With the Scarf, he was able to sense multiple beams pressed lengthwise against the other side of the door."

"2605

A group of iron platforms materialized from below to push beams off the door. Two of them wouldn't budge, however, so he increased the upward growth force of his iron. Still, they refused to move, so he increased it again. And then again. And, growing frustrated, one more time.

Instead of being lifted out like the others, however, the two stubborn beams yanked their metal rests out of the door and went sailing into the unexplored room.

'What was that noise?' said Garovel from over Hector's shoulder.

The sound of heavy wood clattering against a stone floor arrived, and Hector avoided looking at the reaper. He pressed his hand against the

door, and this time, it all but opened itself.

'I thought you were trying not to break anything,' said Garovel.

He took a curious step inside. ""I did try. I just... didn't entirely succeed.""

The room was pitch dark, as expected, but the shape was still quite clear to him thanks to the Scarf. It had been clear even from the other side of the door, but nothing in particular had stuck out to him.

Apart from the giant orb in the middle of the chamber, that was.

Along the walls, he could sense cabinets, tables, and bookshelves--most of which were empty or barely standing. And there seemed to be a bed, as well, nestled in the far corner. Perhaps someone lived here, once upon a time.

He materialized a hovering iron cube above his hand as a glowing light source. It didn't provide much light, but he was reluctant to go bigger. This was a tree, after all, and he was still worried about accidentally setting something on fire.

It seemed fairly clear, at least, that the giant orb was the mysterious thing that had lured them here, so Hector approached it for a better look. The Scarf surprisingly couldn't tell him much about it, but with a bit of light, he was able to see that it was apparently made of glass."  
"2606

The sound of footsteps behind him arrived, and Hector turned to see Hanton there--or the illusory human form of him, at least. That would explain why the Scarf didn't sense him approaching.

Hanton's illusion looked around the chamber as if actually surveying it. And maybe he was. Hector didn't fully understand how the Sparrow's senses worked. Perhaps their illusions could also serve as conduits through which they perceived their environment. That idea sounded a little ridiculous to Hector, but then, so did telepathic birds and skeletal phantoms. Plus, Hanton's body was too big to fit through the door--as it probably was for most man-made buildings, so maybe sending in his avatar as a kind of a ""sensory probe"" was how the Sparrow usually handled things.

More sounds arrived, this time from outside the tree, and Hector could sense the physical form of someone with the Scarf there. He hadn't yet reached a point where he could recognize people by the aerial outlines that the Scarf described to him, but the shape was definitely familiar, at least.

""Hey, in there!"" came the voice of Roman Fullister.

Ah. So this was why Garovel hadn't wanted to warn him. The reaper always seemed to like allowing Roman to get the jump on Hector out of nowhere.

""Hey,"" Hector responded, though he did have his questions as he saw Roman and Voreese enter together. ""You said you were going back to Atreya.""

""I did."" Roman's smile was big and familiar. ""Then I came back.""

'We got to wondering what was taking you so damn long,' said Voreese. 'The Lorentians offered some kind of a sweet deal, didn't they?'

'You could've just called and asked about it,' said Garovel.

'Eh, Roman needed the flight practice, anyway.'

""I feel like I'm really starting to get the hang of it.""

"2607

'Perhaps he and Big Bird over here can race, one day,' said Voreese, addressing his humanoid illusion.

""Racing would be an utterly pointless and wasteful use of my energies,"" said Hanton.

'Spoken like a grumpy old man. Hey, what's your guys' average lifespan, anyway?'

""None of your business, is what it is.""

'What, was that too rude? Here, let me try again. Ahem. Please, m'lord, could you spare a morsel of information regarding the average lifespan of your glorious and noble kin?'

Hanton made no reaction.

Voreese just kept going, though. 'Oh, please, please, please, m'lord. Don't you see? Us pathetic commoners are so lacking in worldly knowledge that it is only by the grace of one as benevolent and generous as yourself that we might be able to gain anything of true intellectual value.'

Hanton allowed another beat to pass. ""...About 150 years,"" he said flatly.

And there was more silence, perhaps caused by how stunned everyone was.

'...I can't believe you actually gave me an answer,' said Voreese.

'Neither can I,' said Garovel.

Hanton, however, just turned away to observe the giant orb, walking around to the other side of it.

'Yo, am I crazy or did he actually LIKE it when I did that?' said Voreese.

'Nah,' said Garovel. 'There's no way. You were clearly trying to mock him by being as obnoxious as possible.'

'Yeah, I thought he would pick up on that, too! It was super obvious, right?'

'Of course. He must've just decided it was easier to answer you than keep listening.'

'Hmm, I don't know. I feel like I saw him smile a little. In like a ""I'm so superior"" kind of way, y'know?'

'That can't be,' said Garovel. 'He's probably just--'

""Hey, could we focus a little?"" said Roman. ""Like, what the hell is this place, even? And what's up with the giant orb? You guys know anything about that? Anybody?""

"2608

'Oh yeah,' said Voreese. 'Why are you guys fuckin' around with this weird tree, anyway?'

'Look closely,' said Garovel. 'You can sense that there's something off about this place, can't you?'

'Hmm.' Voreese floated over to Hector, not waiting for Roman. Her hollow gaze lingered on the orb. 'Ah. Yeah. It's suspiciously ""empty,"" isn't it? No soul power here at all. Interesting. Haven't seen a soul vacuum in ages.'

'Hector and I actually saw one while we were in the Undercrust. We didn't know what it was at first, but it turned out to be a powerful artifact known as the Moon's Wrath. It could absorb ardor and then shoot it back out as a destructive beam of light.'

'Oh yeah? That sounds awesome. How come you never showed us?'

'It got eaten by a worm.'

'Baha! Nice job, losers!'

Hector was too busy connecting the dots in his head to worry about her cackling. He remembered the Moon's Wrath quite clearly, but Garovel hadn't referred to it as a ""soul vacuum"" before.

So he was saying that this giant orb was like the Moon's Wrath, then?

""Are you saying that this thing can shoot out lasers, too?"" said Roman, reaching a hand toward the glass.

'Ah-ah, I wouldn't do that if I were you,' said Garovel.

Roman retracted the hand. ""Why?""

Voreese was the one to explain. 'Soul vacuums are rare, but they can have all sorts of weird effects. Like, if you're unlucky, sucking your soul right out of your body.'

Hector and Roman both blinked.

'It wouldn't kill you, since I've already got a handle on your soul, but it wouldn't exactly tickle, either, said Voreese. 'Existential pain is difficult to describe, and sometimes, the brain has a way of manifesting it into physical pain as well, just as a cherry on top.'"

"2609

Roman's expression spoiled into a twisted frown. He pulled a flashlight out of his pocket and switched it on, adding another much needed light source to the dim chamber.

Hector looked at Garovel. ""You didn't mention that when I touched the Moon's Wrath.""

'Oh yeah, well, you'd already touched it before I realized that it was a soul vacuum, so I didn't see much point in telling you after the fact.'

Hector's mouth just remained open a little.

'In any event,' Garovel went on, 'there are plenty of different things that this orb could be. Given its size and transparency, it's unlikely to have much in common with the Moon's Wrath.'

""How do we figure out what it does?"" said Roman.

'Try touching it,' said Voreese.

""Garovel literally just told me not to,"" said Roman.

'Yeah, and now that you know what you'd be getting yourself into, it'll be funny.'

""Shut up, Voreese.""

'She's actually not entirely wrong,' said Garovel. 'The direct approach could work, but before we give that a try, how about we look through some of these bookshelves, first? There might be some relevant writing on what this thing does.'

'Yeah, yeah, if you wanna be all ""smart"" about it,' said Voreese.

And the group split up, Hanton included, in order to do as Garovel suggested. The first book that Hector looked through was written in a language that he didn't understand, and as he was about to ask Garovel about it, he glanced over and noticed Hanton holding a book as well.

Literally holding it. Then putting it back on the shelf. And grabbing another.



The man might've been an illusion, but those books were definitely real. He could sense their shape with the Scarf.

And so he had to ask. ""How are you able to pick those books up?""  
"2610

Hanton's illusory form looked over at him with a raised eyebrow. ""You are not familiar with telekinesis, Lord Goffe?""

""Can't say I am,"" said Hector.

Hanton dropped his hands, but the book remained floating in front of him. ""Strange. I was under the impression that you could do it yourself--in some form, at least.""

It took Hector a second to register what he meant. He was talking about Hector's orbiting technique. Yeah. Even if Hanton was familiar with materialization--and perhaps he wasn't--the Sparrow probably didn't know much about that particular technique, did he?

Hmm.

Hector wanted to inquire further, to ask about how powerful this telekinesis actually was. But he held back. There was no way Hanton would share that information.

And in a background thought process, he was recalling Rasalased's words about Wrobels being much more powerful in the past. Or concealing their strength in the modern day.

Still, it was interesting to know. The ability to move objects with his mind was no small thing. Hector's imagination was already running wild with how potent such a thing could be, especially if it could achieve anywhere near the same level of speed as the velocity states of materializers.

'I'm envious,' said Garovel from Hector's peripheral vision. 'If reapers could use telekinesis, a lot of our problems would be solved.'

Hanton breathed half a laugh. ""Would you use it for anything other than annoying us corporeal beings?""

'Heh, well, it would be nice if I could at least turn the pages of a book without requiring someone else's help,' said Garovel.

""Ah, yes, I imagine that must make learning quite a tedious affair for you, at times.""

'Yep. It's also why so many of us are such blabbermouths. Talking is pretty much the only way we can accomplish anything. I keep wondering if technology will ever progress to a point where that'll change for us, but I'm not exactly optimistic.'

"2611

'Same,' said Voreese. 'Plus, I don't think I'd trust any new tech that could supposedly help us like that. You're gettin' into the territory of miracles there, and historically, those are pretty fuckin' few and far between. And I definitely don't wanna be some technological guinea pig, either.'

The reapers kept talking, but Hector returned the majority of his attention back to the book in his hands. He had to interrupt Garovel privately in order to ask what language it was.

Garovel gave it a look while Hector held it up and turned the pages for him. 'Ah, I see two languages, actually. Old Mohssian and Nykeirian.' Then publicly, he said, 'Hey, Voreese. You're Nykeirian, aren't you?'

'Sure am. Why? Got something for me?'

'Come have a look.'

She floated over and spent a few minutes directing Hector to flip past certain pages before ultimately landing on what seemed to be a later chapter. And while she kept reading, Garovel went over to help Roman out.

'Holy fucking shit balls,' Voreese eventually said. 'Garovel, this thing's a Fusion Forge.'

'Oh, please, tell me you're not just messing with me.'

'Nope. Says it right here, clear as day.'

The reapers both started laughing.

Hector, Roman, and Hanton all merely exchanged looks with one another as they waited for an explanation.

'That is some magnificent luck,' said Voreese.

'Assuming we can get it working again, that is,' said Garovel.

'Oh, yeah. It must still work, though, right? I mean, it doesn't look damaged at all.'

'Sure, but Forges tend to all look different, so we don't really know what damage would look like for this one, either. And given how valuable these things are, there's probably a reason it's just sitting here, seemingly abandoned.'

'Aw, don't say that. You're really bringing down my mood.'

'Just trying to temper our expectations here.'

'Yeah, yeah. We need a skilled integrator to inspect this fucking thing.'

'More than just one, probably.'"

"2612

'Know anybody who might fit the bill?' said Voreese.

'Maybe,' said Garovel. 'We should be extra careful who we ask, though. I think trustworthiness is an even more important qualifying factor than skillfulness. Something like this could attract the wrong sort of attention, if word gets out.'

'You're right about that.'

""Would you mind telling us what a Fusion Forge is?"" said Hanton.

'Oh yeah, sorry,' said Garovel. 'Put simply, a Fusion Forge is something that, historically, can only be created by an extremely powerful integration user. It's a kind of super-advanced tool for them, used to combine materials--even soul-infused ones.'

'We're talkin' like emperor-level strength requirements here,' said Voreese. 'Less powerful integrators might still be able to make use of a

Forge, but they can't create one.'

'And even then, it can still be dangerous,' said Garovel. 'If you don't know what you're doing with this thing, then you're liable to kill not only yourself but also your reaper, too.'

""Oh, good,"" said Roman dryly.

'This is a fantastic find,' said Garovel, 'but it won't be easy to actually get any use out of it. Especially if it's broken, which I suspect it is.'

""I see,"" said Hanton, eyeing the glass Forge anew. ""So then... not to put too fine a point on it, but what would you say is the bottom line here? Do you believe this object is worth accepting Lorent's offer and possibly irritating the Queen?""

Everyone looked to Garovel, who fell quiet for a time, deliberating.

'...Yes, I do believe that,' the reaper said. 'This thing is so valuable that, even if it doesn't work, it's STILL worth it. Just the idea that we might be able to fix it SOMEDAY would be enough.'

Hanton nodded. ""In that case, I'm sure the Queen will understand.""  
"2613 -- CCXXXIX.

'I'm not concerned about her misunderstanding the Forge's value,' said Garovel. 'I'm concerned about what she'll think regarding our apparent division of loyalties between the two countries.'

'True,' said Voreese. 'I'm sure she'll play it off gracefully, like always, but there's no way she'll be happy about having to share Hector with Lorent. He's the pride and joy of Atreya, right now.'

Hector's brow tilted upon hearing that last part. She was exaggerating, obviously, but he knew what she was getting at.

Weirdly enough, though, a part of him also felt like the Queen would be upset with him if he didn't take the deal, too. Like, she would be disappointed if he passed up something this valuable, even if it was for her own sake.

Hmm. Maybe it was just one of those situations where neither option was perfect.

As usual.

""Well, in any case, it sounds like you have already made your decision,"" said Hanton. ""Let us finish up here and return before the Lorentians begin to worry too much.""

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Nine: 'Amid the churning sand...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The Uego Desert was quite a sight in the evening. The enormous dunes had a way of catching the sunlight with their slopes and curves that made them shine, and the heat that still lingered from earlier in the day made that gentle shimmer tremble and waver.

The uncommon purity of the sands themselves might've also factored into the scene. More than perhaps any other desert in the world, the Uego had a large percentage of translucent or even transparent grains of sand.

That was said to be the work of Asad's earliest predecessors, the arasaba, the mythological creatures from which his moniker--the Lion of the Desert--originated. They were said to have gifted their ability to create sand upon those who gained their favor, before ultimately departing from this world."

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"2614

Asad had gazed upon this desert many times over the course of his life--and not always for good or peaceful reasons.

And unfortunately, this was another such occasion.

The Abolish-backed invasion of the Calthosi Armed Forces into his homeland of Sair had thus far proven to be largely a stalemate, but according to the scouts, Abolish did seem to be very slowly gaining ground. It wasn't yet enough to cause real concern, but it wasn't encouraging news, either.

Asad had been involved in a few wars already in his lifetime but never one of this scale--and never one that threatened the very existence of Sair.

That was what was really weighing on everyone's mind, he felt. The idea that, if they failed, everything they had built here over the last two centuries would be reduced to ruin.

The reapers of his Hahl had always told him that if a day like this ever came, it would come quickly. And he'd nodded along like a good student and son.

However, only now did he feel as though he truly understood. And even that was debatable.

He still occasionally found himself wondering how they'd ended up in this position. Their entire purpose in joining with the Rainlords all those years ago was precisely to prevent circumstances such as these. And later, when half of the Hahls partnered with the Vanguard, the same reasoning had been used.

True, that was all before he was born, but he knew the history well. His parents would've surely been rolling in their graves if he didn't.

And yet here the Sandlords now were, relying on the already-strained Vanguard. Any other allies that they had made over the years were either busy with their own war, in hiding, or simply long dead.

The isolationism that his brethren on the Golden Council so loved to speak about--well, it wasn't looking so wise now, was it?

It was hard not to be bitter during their meetings, these days."

"2615

His relationship with the other councilmen felt strained from both ends.

They were displeased with how he had gone against them in order to aid the Rainlords and subsequently jeopardize their relationship with the Vanguard; and he was displeased with how they didn't seem to realize that they would be in a much better position to fight this war now if they had just done as he had requested and supported the Rainlords against the Vanguard, at least politically if not militarily.

The Vanguard was not supposed to be a political organization. Even if some of the Rainlords were members, the Vanguard simply didn't have the right to remove them from their own territory--not without the support of the rest of the government. If the Sandlords had made clear their opposition to the Vanguard's actions, this whole thing might have been resolved peacefully.

At least, that was Asad's opinion. The rest of the Council clearly did not share it.

They seemed to be under the impression that the Vanguard would have pulled out of Sair entirely--or worse, attacked the Drylands, too.

Which was an absurd notion to Asad; but of course, explaining as much had not proved easy.

The Vanguard wanted their alliance with the Sandlords to continue. Never was that more clear than now. Sair was far too important geographically, and the Sandlords knew this land better than anyone. And with the Sunsmith finally stepping onto the world stage as a powerful enough figure to truly oppose the other juggernauts, the Vanguard would have even less reason to pick a fight with them.

How he wished Zeff had accepted his proposal a year and a half ago. Perhaps a very public marriage between Emiliana Elroy and Midhat Najir would have been enough to prevent all of these problems from growing so out of control.

Or maybe he was just deluding himself."

"2616

There was no sense in whining about it now, he told himself. What was done was done, and allowing resentment to build up in his heart would do nothing to improve the situation--not for his people and not for himself.



His father had taught him that.

The Lord Salim Najir had been a man of few words. Asad's mother had typically been the one to raise her voice or decide punishment--and between him and his brother Haqq, there'd been plenty of that to go around.

In fact, there was only a single instance in Asad's memory of his father ever sounding angry. Perhaps the rarity of it was precisely why he remembered it so vividly.

It had happened not long after he'd become a servant at the age of fourteen and manifested his ""divine"" materialization ability. At first, he'd been ecstatic with the discovery. He had the most esteemed power among the Sandlords at his fingertips. What was there to dislike?

He soon found out, when all of his peers began treating him differently. It was like they suddenly thought he was above them--or that he thought he was, perhaps. At that tender age, he couldn't recognize the quiet resentment in their eyes. He couldn't understand why all of his friends suddenly seemed so different.

They weren't mean, of course. That was the confusing part. They were perfectly cordial. They were just... detached. They would still invite him to play with them, to hang out, but they couldn't laugh like they did before. They couldn't relax. It was like everyone was walking on eggshells around him.

If he'd been more emotionally mature, perhaps he would've been able to navigate those relationships better. Instead, he'd started picking fights. For no real reason, either--or at least, none that he could have articulated at the time."

"2617

Really, he'd just wanted someone to treat him like a normal person again, even if that meant getting them to punch him in the face.

And when his father had learned of what he was doing, that was the one and only time that Asad recalled him ever growing frighteningly angry. But it was not because of the fights that he'd picked, precisely.

His father seemed to understand that part well enough.

No, what truly bothered Salim Najir was when Asad kept complaining.

Many times over the course of his life, Asad had remembered that moment for how strange it was. Of all the things that could have possibly set the man off, why had it been that? There were so many worse things that he and Haqq had done in their youth. Setting off fireworks in his office, for example. Or giving each other black eyes. Or eating so many sweets that they both vomited in the middle of a prestigious dining event with Hahl Saqqaf.

It hadn't been any of those. His father had been cool as a cucumber in each and every instance. Never yelling. Always gentle.

Aside from this one instance in which he apparently could not abide Asad's childish whining.

For many years, the oddness of that memory had continued to puzzle him. Maybe his father had just been having a bad day. Maybe his father had just gotten fed up after listening to him for too long. Or maybe it was some other thing.

But somewhere along his maturation into a man, Asad felt like he understood, because he remembered what his father had said afterwards, once he'd calmed down.

""Every man has his own burdens to bear. His own misery. But not every man has to let those burdens belittle him. Not every man has to become pathetic.""

And if that didn't sum up his father's entire philosophy for life, then he didn't know what else would."

"2618

He wondered what his father would make of the current situation. Was this war just another burden to be borne?

Maybe it was.

His mother certainly wouldn't have been quiet about it, though.

Asad didn't think that he had ever seen two more different people than

Salim and Yasmin Najir. How they'd ended up married--much less, happily so--he still struggled to wrap his head around.

He'd heard from the reapers that their union had been arranged, then called off, then rearranged, then called off again, before finally going through. Apparently, the drama had arisen from the uncertainty between the two Hahls, rather than between the bride and groom. No doubt, the families had seen their opposite natures and been concerned.

But for whatever reason, it had worked out. His mother never seemed to mind his father's stoicism, and his father never seemed to mind his mother's temper. In fact, his father was perhaps the only person who was ever spared from her biting wit.

While it might've been an exaggeration to say that their marriage had been openly ""affectionate,"" Asad did remember the occasional moment of tenderness between them.

He wished that he'd realized sooner how special their relationship was. They'd made it look easy, never arguing--at least, not in front of him.

Compared to his own marriage, the memory of theirs felt like some far off dream.

He didn't want to think about that right now, though.

They were expecting another major offensive from the Calthosi any day now. The last few attacks had only been harassments, probably scouting for weaknesses in their defenses. They weren't likely to find any, though. Asad had been walking the lines, checking the comms, and assessing the troops and ordnance all day long--and he wasn't the only one doing that, either.

The Uego Desert was a death trap, just waiting for the enemy to try and cross it."

"2619

Asad finally sat down and breathed a heavy sigh. He'd decided to take a rest in the final bunker that he'd checked for the evening. Asho Duxan, son of the Lord Hasan Duxan, had taken over Asad's shift in making the rounds.

Asad wondered if he would even be able to sleep tonight. His body felt weary enough for it, but pre-battle tension had a way of ignoring that. And nighttime, of course, was a favored opportunity for launching attacks.

For a while, he just kept staring out the long, horizontal hole in the bunker. This modest structure was almost entirely buried in the Uego sands, and the nightly wind occasionally whipped a dry spray into the domed chamber.

Glass could've kept the sand out, of course, but any glare from the sun or moon would hinder visibility, which was much more important than any discomfort that Asad was feeling from getting splashed in the face with sand every now and then.

Plus, this wasn't bad. Bad was when the sand swept in and covered his whole body in a matter of seconds. Bad was when the winds had been strong enough to make the sand grains draw blood after pelting him in his youth. Bad required goggles and body armor.

This was just fine.

The pair of silent sentries sitting next to him were wearing goggles and armor, however. And judging from the amount of sand on the floor, still waiting to be removed, maybe these fellows had gotten a taste of bad earlier.

With all that gear on, there was no telling which Hahl they belonged to, but they must've been young if they were stationed here. They might even be non-servants, since he didn't see either of their reapers hanging around.

His own reaper, Qorvass, phased through the wall and hovered over to him. 'I don't think the Vanguardians like our desert very much,' he said in Valgan.

'I'm not sure WE like our desert very much,' said Asad."

"2620

'Even so, it's obvious that many of them aren't handling the heat very well,' said Qorvass.

'Well, it's winter, so maybe they are enjoying the freezing nights,' said

Asad, unable to conceal his amusement.

'They aren't.'

Asad couldn't say he was surprised. Extreme temperatures were something of a weakness for servants, especially those lacking experience or training in such environments. The effects of very high or low temperatures on the brain were big factors. Overheating obviously impaired one's cognitive ability, and regenerating could only do so much against that. And freezing, of course, was arguably even more debilitating.

While it was true that passive soul defenses could neutralize those problems, the younger servants wouldn't have that luxury. And hell, even a lot of the older ones might still be uncomfortable--and therefore irritable--if they weren't accustomed to working in places like this.

'Abolish will be in the same boat,' said Asad. 'In fact, they'll probably be worse off. This is where having soldiers who lack discipline can become a major problem.'

'I appreciate your optimism,' said Qorvass. 'By the way, have you forgotten anything today?'

Asad almost resented that question. 'I don't think so.'

Lately, the reaper had gotten into the habit of asking him that every day. Asad had found it annoying at first, but after a couple of instances where it helped him to remember something, he decided that maybe there was some utility in it, after all.

'You're sure?' said Qorvass. 'You didn't leave the Shards behind again, did you?'

'They're right here.' Asad touched the breast pocket concealed beneath his bulky robe.

Qorvass seemed to be especially wary of where the Shards were, these days. Which wasn't so surprising, really. There were only four of them in total, and two of them were no longer in Sair."

"2621

Now more than ever, the potential that lay dormant in the Shards was

constantly on Asad's mind. If he could just unlock their power, he could ascend to a level of strength that the Sandlords had not wielded in centuries.

That would change things, of course. Abbas Saqqaf would no longer be the undisputed powerhouse among them, but Asad was confident that they would be able to work through any political challenges that might arise. The safety that the Shards would be able to provide would far outweigh any drama between the Hahls, he felt.

But there was a reason why the last seven Lions had all failed to accomplish this feat.

No one knew how to do it, anymore.

Qorvass believed that it was simply a matter of growing old enough, of allowing their soul synchronization to reach a certain threshold; but the reaper had also admitted to him privately that he didn't actually know what that threshold was or when they would pass it. Despite him being even older than the Shards themselves, the reaper could provide no definitive historical evidence that this theory was actually true.

Certainly, it was comforting to imagine that all Asad had to do was survive, to live long enough to obtain some godlike power that would solve all their problems. It was no wonder why Qorvass wanted to believe that.

It was much better than the alternative explanation, where it is simply impossible for Asad to unlock the Shards' potential in the first place.

Better to keep hope alive, right?

Soon. Just a little longer. Someday. Eventually.

Those all sounded nicer in one's mind than simply ""never,"" didn't they?

Frankly, Asad didn't know what he believed, anymore. On the one hand, he'd gotten confirmation that Rasalased really did still exist within the Shards; but on the other, the Dry God had apparently mentioned something that seriously challenged Qorvass' theory of eventuality.

Worthiness."  
"2622

When Hector and Garovel had explained their strange encounter with Rasalased to him and Qorvass, that was the thing that Asad found the most curious.

Rasalased was apparently able to gaze deeply into their souls and judge their character. To measure their worthiness. And most importantly, he said that he had ""learned his lesson after the three.""

There was little doubt in Asad's mind that the Dry God had been referring to the War of the Three Sands. If Rasalased was able to perceive the greater world beyond the Shards, then it would only make sense that a time in which the Sandlords had tried to annihilate each other left a lasting impression on him.

Perhaps before that conflict, the Shards worked just as Qorvass said. Any sufficiently skilled Lion would be able to unlock their power. And after seeing the destruction wrought by such indiscriminate strength, Rasalased decided to take a more cautious approach.

If that was the case, then Asad had to wonder what hope there was for him. What did it even mean to be worthy of the Dry God's power? He had a feeling that only Rasalased himself could answer that question.

And he had another feeling that perhaps his own inability to access the Shards, to even speak to Rasalased, was itself an answer. Maybe Rasalased had already judged him and found him lacking.

He certainly wasn't perfect. It seemed like every day, he discovered some new way in which he was a failure. As a friend. Or a warrior. A lord. A father. A husband.

What was left for him to be worthy of? From the sound of it, Rasalased would see right through him. There was no point in putting on airs.

His golden eyes eased shut as he rubbed his forehead, trying not to dwell on those thoughts again. Trying not to imagine how many people he'd let down, how many he would in the future.

Trying not to let the weight of the world crush him."

"2623

He was only in his forties, and yet he already felt like an old man sometimes. How did the truly old servants do it, he wondered? Surely, at one point or another, they all must have felt this same pressure that he did.

Well. The ones that hadn't lost their minds, anyway.

Maybe there was a connection there. Maybe he should have a talk with Abbas, the next time they were both free.

Which would probably be never, a stray thought told him.

He stood up. A bed was waiting for him a couple floors down, and sleep was starting to sound pretty damn good. He shuffled over to the sandy hole in the floor and slid down the ladder until he reached the bottom.

It was dark and cramped, but at least the wind's howling was a bit softer in here. The bed was right next to his feet, so he didn't even bother struggling for a light source. He just plopped down and pulled the dusty blanket over him.

From experience, he knew that there was a fair chance that at least one scorpion was sharing this bed with him, right now, but if that was the case, then he wished it a good night's rest, too. He was too tired to give it much more than a passing thought.

His tattoos factored into that lazy sentiment. He didn't actually have to worry about his skin being penetrated by something as weak as a scorpion's stinger. In fact, since he was still wearing the ring that Haqq made for him, such a sting might just reflect back on the creature and kill it, instead.

Perhaps that was the last thing on his mind as he fell asleep, because he dreamt of his mother. Of the months she had spent, working to the point of exhaustion, trying to complete these same tattoos for him."

"2624

She had, quite literally, poured her very soul into these tattoos. And as a result, Asad was a far more durable servant than just about anyone else in his age range. They had saved him time and again, most



recently at Dunehall during the battle with the Marauder of Calthos.

Having them inscribed into his flesh, however, had been the most torturous thing he had ever experienced. And at the age of thirteen, he hadn't been prepared for it at all. Apparently, his mother had to do it before he became a servant, else the tattoos would disappear whenever the regeneration was invoked.

He hadn't understood that very well, back then, and he'd resisted his mother every time she wanted to continue the process. He'd thought it was some kind of punishment. It certainly felt like it.

Eventually, he grew so terrified of it that she resorted to anesthetizing him before each session. That had been a major improvement, as far as he was concerned, though he still had lingering pain for days afterwards.

And once the tattoos were finally completed, it was a tremendous relief. His peers in school looked at him differently but not in a bad way. If anything, they seemed to think the tattoos were cool. It wasn't until after becoming a servant and realizing he had the divine materialization of silicon and oxygen that their behavior began to change. In retrospect, though, perhaps the tattoos had played some sort of role there, too. They certainly made it more difficult for him to blend into a crowd.

His mother had tried to do the same for his brother Haqq, but she hadn't been able to finish his.

She died at the age of thirty-three, when without warning, her reaper released her soul and disappeared."

"2625

None of the family's other reapers could explain what might have prompted her reaper to do such a thing. By all accounts, their relationship had appeared to be just fine.

In many ways, his mother's death was as mysterious as her life. She had been younger than Asad was now, and yet her skill with integration was legendary. Asad had never once heard of someone else being able to accomplish what she did with these simple black tattoos.

But he had also heard that integration could be like that. It was a bit different from the other ability types--even mutation, with which it seemed to have the most in common. Supposedly, integration was more ""varied"" and ""scholarly"" in its usage. While age and experience were certainly factors, there was greater opportunity for true genius to achieve unexpected results with it.

There was a reason why the most famous integrators were generally inventors, after all.

And yet, even so, Yasmin Najir had been a mysterious enough figure that Asad often wondered if there wasn't more to it. Somehow. He might've been her son, but to say that he knew her well would've been an exaggeration.

Some days, she would be all passion and fury, speaking her mind to anyone who would listen--and to many who wouldn't. She would be full of energy and affection, wanting to spend as much time with him and Haqq and their father as she could. And on other days, she would disappear into her lab, consumed with her work or research. Asad might try to pester her, to regain her attention, and she would barely notice him--or even tell him off in quite a cold and curt manner.

She was so different, in fact, that he remembered asking his father if he had two mothers. The man had explained quite bluntly that, no, that was just how she was."

"2626

His mixed memories of her worked their way into his dream. Images of her smiling face. Feelings of her warm embrace. Followed by colder eyes and closed doors. And the pain from the tattoos. Coming and going.

And she spoke to him. Telling him to quit crying. That she wouldn't always be there to make everything better. That he had to take care of his little brother. That he should learn from his father's example. That a day would come when everyone was depending on him.

He saw Eloa. The whole continent. Burning. He saw creatures he'd never seen before. Monsters, humanoid but not. Gangly and distorted. Melting out of the ground. Rampaging. Slaughtering. Devouring.

And he saw them all turn toward him, hunger in their eyes. Until it turned to fear.

He snapped awake, thrashing. The blanket was wrapped around his face, and he had to take a few moments to undo it. His breathing was labored, though he couldn't tell if that was from the dream or from the blanket.

For a while, he just sat there in the pitch darkness, trying to clear his mind and failing.

He pulled one of the Shards out of his robe. He could feel where they had both pressed up against him while he slept. If not for the tattoos, he would probably have a bruise there.

He gripped the crystal and closed his eyes.

And he tried. Again.

He concentrated on the Shard, on its shape, on his own soul passing into it.

And again, he came up empty. As expected, nothing became clearer.

He sighed and returned it to his pocket with the other one.

The darkness was interrupted by the sudden appearance of an abnormally illuminated scorpionfly descending through the ceiling."  
"2627

'Oh, you're already awake,' said Qorvass privately. 'Good. Come back up.'

'What's the matter?' he said, already making his way over to the ladder.

'Well, um. There's... a cluster of vending machines in the middle of the desert.'

Asad stopped climbing the ladder briefly, blinking dully for a moment before continuing.

'They just suddenly appeared there,' the reaper elaborated. 'No one's quite sure what to make of it.'

'Vending machines,' Asad said incredulously.

'That's right.'

And sure enough, when he made it back up to the bunker's main floor, grabbed a pair of binoculars, and looked out through the wide observation window again, he saw exactly what the reaper had described.

A ring of six tall, boxy machines. Just sitting there, half-buried in sand, but also lit up, as if operational.

Obviously, there were no electrical outlets way out here, so what in the world was powering them? As if their appearance alone wasn't strange enough.

The scouts were looking his way. ""We've already radioed it in, Lord,"" said the one on the left through his faceguard. ""Command doesn't seem to know what to make of it, either. Apparently, we aren't the only ones seeing something like this. They've received reports like ours from a dozen other bunkers.""

""What do you make of it, Lord?"" said the other scout.

Well, this was Abolish they were dealing with, Asad thought. Morons and lunatics filled their ranks. Perhaps he shouldn't overthink this.

""It's probably a diversionary tactic,"" said Asad. ""Keep an eye on them but watch their surroundings, too.""

""Yes, Lord.""

Abolish knew by now that their invisible soldiers weren't going to work, anymore. Not by themselves, at least. The sands of the Uego made it all but impossible for the enemy to sneak across without leaving very noticeable tracks, and even if they somehow got past that, the Sandlords had also planted thousands of booby traps in this region--a number which was still growing by the day."

"2628

That was one of the things that Asad and the other senior warriors had been making sure to emphasize when making their rounds. The management of the defensive line's observational systems was key in the battle--and indeed, in the war. If they allowed Abolish to infiltrate their land again, then they might not be able to recover from that problem a second time.

To that end, Haqq had proved very helpful. Many of the new traps they were using were based on his designs. Some were quite simple and even non-lethal, like the Jamal-3, which was a sound-triggered paint-thrower, designed to be used in conjunction with scouts and snipers.

Others, however, were quite deadly indeed. The Kubra-4 was a sound-triggered explosive using soul-infused materials. An average servant caught in the blast radius would be reduced to a red mist, and even an older one would have a hard time living through it with passive soul defense alone.

Haqq was already at work on the Kubra-5, which he claimed would be even more powerful, despite the fact that they still had plenty of Kubra-4s waiting to be used. Their deadliness was precisely why they hadn't seen much action yet. The audio-based trigger meant that a snake could slither too close, and then suddenly an entire sand dune would be removed from this plane of existence.

They did make for one hell of a deterrent, though. Asad had a couple Kubra-4s in this very bunker. He hadn't received advisement to use them yet, but he did have the authority to do so whenever he wished.

Right now, though, his mind was leaning more toward the long-range artillery that he had in stock. Those were older and not Haqq's designs, but with a bit of soul-infusion, they would pack plenty of wallop. He ordered one of the scouts to go fetch some mortars and shells, just in case."

"2629

When the materials arrived, Asad began pressing his soul into them. He could leave the actual firing of the mortars to the two lads in the bunker with him, though. If their position came under attack, it would be better if he was free to directly engage the enemy.

After the mortars and shells were infused, he tried to contact the

targeting center over the radio, but there was only static now.

Someone had started jamming them. Some form of attack was probably going to arrive soon, then. That was useful information to know, which why he often liked to use the most vulnerable radio first.

Asad couldn't claim to be very technologically savvy himself, but he knew that his kin had recently developed several new types of jamming-resistant radios, all apparently using different techniques.

So when he opened the corner cabinet, he had a veritable buffet of devices to choose from. The first one he picked didn't work, either, but the second one did. Maybe Haqq would be able to explain precisely why that was, but all Asad cared about was getting through to observational support.

Sure enough, they already eyes in the sky for him, along with coordinates for the mortars.

Asad still remembered a time when mortars didn't have any kind computational assistance built into them, but he wasn't about to complain about things being better back then.

Before they could fire, however, he spotted a change among the group of vending machines.

A brightly lit sign rose of out of the sand at the center of them. In Valgan, it read: ""DON'T SHOOT. COME HAVE A SNACK.""

'...They can't possibly think that's actually going to work, can they?' said Qorvass privately.

Asad didn't even want to answer that. ""Fire,"" he said.

And the first shell went flying."

"2630

Asad watched with his binoculars, waiting and bracing himself for the blindingly bright explosion to arrive.

And it did, but it was not on target. It instead landed far afield, obliterating a dune in the distance.

Targeting errors were perfectly common, and the two young ones were already trying to make adjustments, but Asad had enough experience to know that something else was the problem. That was too much of an error. These boys here would've had to be complete amateurs to screw it up that badly, and they wouldn't be out here if they were.

Qorvass corroborated his thinking. 'Someone deflected it.'

""No adjustment,"" said Asad aloud. ""Just reload.""

The bunker scouts both answered in the affirmative.

The illuminated sign in the middle of the vending machines crumbled to pieces, and a new one rose up from the sand to take its place.

This one read: ""HEY! I SAID DON'T SHOOT! CAN'T YOU READ?!""

And suddenly, Asad found himself rethinking everything.

The first sign, he could chalk up to being an elaborate and ridiculous practical joke by one or more of Abolish's many lunatics. They could've rigged it up somehow, found a way to secretly bury it out here--sure, fine.

But this second sign... it had responsive text on it--as if it had just been made after its creator witnessed what happened.

And how many people were there who could do something like that in so short a time?

Of course, that could be the point of their ploy here. Perhaps they predicted the response and prepared the second sign for this exact reason. Psychological warfare, of a sort. Abolish had plenty of--

The second sign broke itself apart, and a third sign arose from the sand, reading: ""PLAY NICE, KIDDOS, OR YOU'LL BE REMOVED FROM THE GAME EARLY.""

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 1 of 24))~~

Chapter Two Hundred Forty: 'The Lion's share...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Asad could see the young ones looking to him for instruction, but he didn't have much for them, at the moment--other than a mounting sense of dread.

Qorvass wasn't helping with that feeling, either. 'It can't be...'

He was reluctant to ask but he had to. 'Do you know who is doing this?' said Asad.

'I can't sense him, but that power over machines... making such complex things like magic...'

'Spit it out already.'

The reaper's insectoid gaze locked onto him. 'It might just be Morgunov himself.'

Well, then.

That was the last thing he had wanted to hear, and yet he wasn't terribly surprised by it, either. There were plenty of old, dangerous madmen in Abolish, but that bastard was the one who always came to mind first.

'Then get out of here, Qorvass.'

'No,' the reaper said.

'Now isn't the time for--'

'If it's really him, then it's already too late for me to flee,' said Qorvass. 'Separating myself from you would just make things even easier for



him.'

Asad wanted to argue, but he could tell from the reaper's tone that it would be pointless. He got back on the radio. ""Possible encounter with the Mad Demon. I repeat. Morgunov may be on the battlefield. Do you copy?""

There was only static, however.

""Please respond,"" he tried again, though he was already moving to retrieve another radio, one that utilized different antijamming measures.

That one didn't work, either. Nor did the next one.

And in the meantime, a fourth sign arrived.

""STOP FIDDLING WITH YOUR TOYS AND COME GET A SNACK.""

The two bunker scouts were looking at him again, not the sign. He couldn't see their faces through all their gear, but from their body language, they didn't seem scared--which was a minor miracle unto itself, professionalism notwithstanding.

A fifth sign: ""IF YOU DON'T, I'LL HAVE TO BRING THE SNACKS TO YOU.""

"2631 -- CCXL.

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 1 of 24))~~

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A fifth sign: ""IF YOU DON'T, I'LL HAVE TO BRING THE SNACKS TO YOU.""

"2632

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 2 of 24))~~

Asad had to remain calm.

The defensive line was under constant surveillance. Even if the enemy had somehow neutralized every single radio in the bunker, his kin would surely notice the communications blackout soon and send reinforcements.

If they were really up against the Mad Demon, though, then those reinforcements were doomed, too. Alone, the only warrior on this battlefield who stood a chance against him was Lamont, and how long would it take to alert him of Morgunov's presence here?

If they were working in unison, the Golden Council might be able to mount a defense, but right now, they were divided.

Asad had to stall. And even more importantly, he needed to get word out about the severity of the threat. It wouldn't matter how much time he managed to buy if the ones who showed up to help were unprepared.

There was one method that might work. A very old-fashioned tactic. But Morgunov would probably block that, too, if Asad didn't wait for an opening first. No doubt, Morgunov was watching them like a hawk, right now.

As he was thinking, a sixth sign appeared: ""DECIDE SOON. I'M GROWING IMPATIENT.""

'Our options are limited,' said Qorvass, clinging onto Asad's shoulder. 'The smartest move might be to play along with whatever sick game he has in mind, right now.'

Asad's jaw clenched as he tried to think, tried to find some alternative. Conventional procedures went out the window when dealing with

someone like Morgunov.

Hmm. So maybe... an unconventional strategy was in order?

He was suddenly reminded of the young lord from Atreya for some reason.

Asad stepped closer to the edge of the bunker and concentrated. He raised his right hand into a fist and summoned a quartz construct in the distance, near where the vending machines were located.

If it was to be a game, then Asad could play."

"2633

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 3 of 24))~~

He used veins of molten quartz in order to embed Valgan letters into a larger case of glass. It needed to glow so as to be visible in the night, but the extreme heat meant that the case wouldn't contain the letters for long. He could already see them beginning to melt through the glass and ooze out onto the sand below.

But the message was a simple one. ""WELCOME TO SAIR,"" was all it said.

And there arrived an intervening period of silence as they waited.

The response did arrive. ""I DON'T FEEL VERY WELCOME,"" it read.

'Where in the black hells are you going with this?' said Qorvass privately.

'Just trying to buy time, honestly.'

'Well, hurry and say something else, then. Anything to keep him distracted.'

That advice wasn't very helpful, Asad felt. He annihilated his sign and remade it with a new message.

""IS THIS YOUR FIRST TIME VISITING?""

'Wow, Asad.'

'Look, I'm open to topic suggestions.'

""NO, I HAVE BEEN HERE MANY TIMES,"" came the response.

And Asad actually found that a bit curious. Many times? Really? Visits from the Mad Demon would have been historically significant, and as far as Asad was aware, there were only a couple of instances where he had appeared here. Could he be lying? It would be far worse if he were telling the truth.

Unless he and Qorvass were wrong, and he actually wasn't conversing with Morgunov, right now. Wouldn't that be nice.

Before Asad could craft a reply, another mechanical sign appeared.

""I'M LOOKING FOR A FRIEND OF MINE,"" it read.

Asad had a rather strong feeling that he knew who that friend was, but he didn't see any harm in playing dumb with his response. ""PERHAPS YOU COULD DESCRIBE THIS FRIEND.""

The answer arrived swiftly. ""LIKES TO WEAR ONE COLOR AT A TIME. GREAT PERSONALITY. KNOWS HOW TO LAUGH. VERY SOCIABLE. GOOD DANCER. SURPRISINGLY SKILLED MIME. A TOTAL GEMINI.""

"2634

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 4 of 24))~~

Qorvass shifted on Asad's shoulder. 'He's screwing with us.'

That seemed pretty clear to Asad, as well. But messing with them was better than killing them. He went to work on his response.

""THIS FRIEND WOULDN'T ALSO HAPPEN TO BE A MASS MURDERER, WOULD HE?""

""OH, SO YOU'VE MET HIM!""

""HE DIDN'T MAKE A VERY FAVORABLE IMPRESSION ON US.""

""COME NOW, THAT CAN'T BE TRUE! I'M SURE IT WAS JUST A MISUNDERSTANDING!""

Qorvass sighed. 'How long do you think you can keep this up for?'

Asad had no idea, quite frankly. And for all he knew, it might be an hour or more before Lamont finally got word and came to see what was happening for himself--assuming he would even show up at all, that was. Asad doubted that anyone, even Iceheart, would be very eager to face this particular monster.

And of course, Morgunov probably knew all of that and more. If he was willing to waste time toying with them like this, then he must have been supremely confident.

Or just totally insane. How strange that Asad might actually be hoping for that to be the case.

""WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO CONVINCE YOU TO LEAVE SAIR ALONE?"" read Asad's next sign.

""OOOH! ARE YOU ASKING FOR A LIST OF DEMANDS?!""

""YES.""

""OKAY, OKAY! LET ME THINK FOR A MINUTE! I HAVEN'T MADE ONE IN A WHILE!""

And they found themselves waiting again. Asad tried to focus on his breathing and keeping his mind clear. His hand went to the Shards in his pocket unconsciously.

'Do you think there's any chance he would actually leave if we acquiesce to whatever ridiculous demands he is about to make?' said Asad.

'No,' said Qorvass. 'I've been following his career for hundreds of years now. Morgunov is the type to make us burn down our own home and then still rob the ashes afterwards.'

"2635

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 5 of 24))~~

When the next sign arrived, it was the largest yet, displaying an enormous wall of text.

""OKAY, SO HEAR ME OUT: I WANT AN ARASABA. Y'KNOW, ONE OF YOUR SUPER COOL LION-FAIRY-BEASTS? THAT WOULD MAKE ME SO HAPPY. AND ALSO, TEN BUCKETS OF YOUR BEST ICE CREAM. COOKIES 'N CREAM FLAVORED. I'VE HEARD YOU GUYS HAVE STARTED MAKING AMAZING ICE CREAM IN RECENT YEARS, BUT I'VE YET TO TRY IT. THIRDLY, I WANT TO PLAY WITH THE SUNSMITH'S FANCY NEW ARMOR. JUST FOR A BIT. I'LL GIVE IT BACK TO HIM, PROMISE. OH, AND BRING ME THE COUNTRY'S BIGGEST RUBBER BAND. FOR KEEPING, I MEAN. I WON'T BE GIVING THAT BACK. ALSO, BUILD ME A SAND CASTLE HERE IN THE DESERT. A REALLY BIG AND ELABORATE ONE. IT'S OKAY IF IT BLOWS AWAY IN THE WIND, THOUGH. I JUST WANT TO TAKE SOME PICTURES WITH IT FOR MY SCRAPBOOK.""

About halfway through, Asad began to wonder if he really needed to read it all. He kept his response short and sweet, not wanting to discourage further rambling. ""ANYTHING ELSE?""

""YES, BUT TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK OF THOSE, FIRST.""

Well, damn.

'He doesn't actually believe that arasaba are real, does he?' said Qorvass.

'Who knows?' said Asad. 'Maybe that's the point. To make impossible demands.'

'Challenge him on it,' said the reaper. 'Keep him talking.'

It was as good a plan as any other, Asad felt. ""ARASABA DO NOT EXIST,"" read his next sign.

""THAT'S WHAT SOMEONE WHO IS TRYING TO HIDE THEM FROM ME WOULD SAY.""

Asad honestly didn't know what to say to that. And as he was deliberating, another sign arrived.

""IF ALL OF THAT IS TOO UNREASONABLE, HOWEVER, THERE IS ONE OTHER THING THAT WILL SUFFICE.""

Ah. Was this where Morgunov steered the conversation back to Ivan?  
""AND WHAT WOULD THAT BE?""

""YOU, ASAD NAJIR.""  
"2636

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 6 of 24))~~

Asad froze up, eyes stuck wide after seeing those words. Was he seeing that right? Him? Morgunov was after him? What sense did--?

""So are we doin' this or what?"" came an unfamiliar voice in Asad's ear.

He didn't even think. He just reacted. Asad dove forward and spun around, launching a bladed disc of soul-strengthened quartz right where he had just been standing.

And indeed, the man was there. The Mad Demon. He caught the disc between gloved fingers as if it were no more dangerous than a frisbee.

The two scouts were scrambling back, trying to create distance while freeing and raising their weapons.

Morgunov just looked at them expectantly as their guns refused to fire, both seemingly jammed simultaneously.

There was no time to process it. Asad had to protect them, or they were dead. With all his concentration, he summoned a great prism of glass, blasting through the roof of the bunker with its explosive growth and carrying everyone with it.

He made the prism force the scouts away from him, propelling them both outward in the direction of Kuros. He couldn't be too forceful, of course, or else he would kill them before Morgunov could, but he could at least give them a head start on their journey back to headquarters.

Morgunov, in the meantime, disappeared. Asad was left searching frantically for where he had gone. Was this invisibility? It couldn't be with all the sensors around, could it?

""Peekaboo,"" came Morgunov's voice, again in Asad's ear.

Asad reacted the same way again, but this time, Morgunov caught him by the wrist and pulled him back toward him like he barely weighed anything.



He writhed within the Mad Demon's clutches, trying to summon his materialization again and failing almost entirely. Where should have appeared a flurry of glass spikes, only a miserable sputter of dust arrived instead."

"2637

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 7 of 24))~~

Morgunov was chuckling. ""Now, let's just calm down for a hot sec, shall we? Is it too much to ask for a nice little conversation before you try to kill me? That's quite rude, you know.""

'Hmph,' said Qorvass. 'Are you really going to pretend like you didn't want Asad to attack you? After popping up behind him like that?'

""Ah, Qorvass!"" said Morgunov with widening eyes and smile. ""How long has it been?! Decades?! Centuries?!""

What? Asad stopped struggling to listen.

'I wouldn't have minded if it were a bit longer,' said Qorvass.

""Oh, my feelings,"" said Morgunov.

And it was only now that Asad realized the Mad Demon was speaking with two voices.

""So what do you think?"" said Morgunov, not waiting for a response. ""Is it time for our plan to finally come to fruition? You've been undercover so long! You must be tired of pretending by now, right?! Come and join me again! We've missed your company!""

Asad's expression hardened as he tried not to react, but he still couldn't keep his gaze from trembling. He wanted to look at Qorvass, but the reaper was attached to his upper back.

For a time, no one said anything.

""I'm just messin' with ya,"" said Morgunov with a laugh. ""Qorvass didn't betray you. Scary thought, though, right? Never can be too sure of what the ol' reapers are really up to, can ya? Could just be a matter of time 'til he sells you out. Or everyone you've ever cared about.

D'you think that'd be worse? I think it might be. Tough to say, really. Depends on how selfish you are, I suppose. Deep down, y'know? So deep that you're afraid to even admit it to yourself, perhaps, hmm?"

'Are you done?' said Qorvass.

""Just a little food for thought,"" said Morgunov. ""As the senior servant here, it's my duty to impart the wisdom I've gained over the years to my juniors.""

'You're so full of shit.'

And the Mad Demon just cackled."

"2638

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 8 of 24))~~

'What is your interest in Asad?' said Qorvass.

""Eeheheh. Well, I did mention that I wanted an arasaba, didn't I?"" The emperor's silver gaze locked onto Asad with manic interest. ""The Lion of the Desert is pretty much the same thing, I'd say.""

'You want him as your pet? To what end?'

Rather than answering, however, the Mad Demon just kept staring.

Asad had never met Dozer or Morgunov before, but after all that he had been through in his life, all that he had seen and done, he had come to think that he was prepared for an encounter like this. Not in terms of power, of course, but in terms of mental fortitude. Psychologically.

He'd heard the tales. Of people meeting a hostile emperor. Of the overwhelming presence, full of palpable malice. He'd heard that many who experience it were forever changed, that weaker servants could just... break. Spiritually. They would simply give up. On trying. On growing. Or even on living. And their reapers would have little choice left but to release them.

He'd thought that, by now, he couldn't possibly be susceptible to a thing like that. Or that the tales were exaggerated, perhaps. There was no way that someone's presence alone could do such a thing, surely.

And yet now, with the Mad Demon holding him in place like a helpless child and staring straight into his soul, Asad Najir was made to doubt.

Those eyes. And that wild hair. Black speckled with gray, bobbing and swaying with the slightest movement of the madman's head, as if it were a living creature unto itself.

Asad's vision blurred and darkened around the edges. It felt like the entire world was shrinking around him. Like Morgunov was making it shrink.

And maybe he was.

In that moment, Asad felt as if no feat could possibly be out of this being's reach. Because this wasn't a man. This was a god taking the appearance of one."

"2639

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 9 of 24))~~

Dread crept through his mind like a spider. Breathing was becoming more difficult. And he could swear that the Mad Demon's face was beginning to take on the appearance of an actual demon. Twisting, distorting, silver eyes beginning to emit a harsh light.

It was too much. Far too much. He had to constantly remind himself that it couldn't be real. That it was an illusion. That Qorvass had warned him of something like this happening years ago.

It felt like that thin rope was his only tether to reality, the only connection between his waking mind and what was actually happening. Shivers coursed through his whole body as the temperature seemed to drop.

Where was he? Everything had gone dark, apart from Morgunov's giant form. He wondered if--

And then he was back. In the bunker.

It was still somewhat dark, but only due to the night, as it had been before. He could see again. And Morgunov looked human.

""Eheheh. Resilient. How fun."" The Mad Demon's smile hadn't changed, though. It seemed as if that might just be a constant of the universe.

""What was that?"" said Asad, out of breath. ""What did you do?""

""HMMMMMMMMMM..."" Morgunov touched his bare hand to Asad's face, as if inspecting him, then traced the shape of his bald head. ""These tattoos are interesting. They're adding to your resilience, aren't they? Where'd you get 'em?""

Asad didn't want to answer that.

'Stop this.' The reaper's voice sounded noticeably more shaken now. Before, he'd spoken to the emperor with surprising calmness. Familiarity, even. That was still there, to an extent, but Asad could sense a hint of desperation in his tone. 'Please.'

Morgunov chuckled. ""Don't worry, Qorvass. I'm just testing his limits. I won't break this one. I've gained so much more control since the last time.""

"2640

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 10 of 24))~~

Qorvass fell silent, but Asad had heard enough to know there was a horrible tale there that the reaper had never shared with him.

And perhaps Morgunov could tell what he was thinking. ""Eheh. Ol' Qorvy never told you about that, eh? Hmm, I can see why. Not the most comforting story in the world."" His nose twitched and he rubbed it. ""I almost feel like spilling the beans myself, but y'know what? That would be downright disrespectful of me, don't you think? So if anyone ever tells you that Morgunov is a disrespectful jerk, you go ahead and tell them that they're wrong. Got it?"" And he winked.

The crystal prism that Asad had previously summoned was still largely intact, and they were now suspended a dozen meters above the busted bunker below. Asad's thoughts went to the two scouts who'd escaped. It seemed like the warning about Morgunov's presence might not have made it through the radio, but if those two could get back to base, then that was something, at least.

""Hey."" Morgunov turned Asad's head back toward him. ""Watcha thinkin' about, hmm? You never answered my question about your tattoos, you know. That's quite rude. You're not distracted by something, are you?""

Asad just remained silent.

""Like, maybe, those two dudes you were with earlier? You're not worried about them, right? If so, then let me dispel all your concerns. They're just fine."" He released Asad's face and raised his hand. ""See?""

The great prism shook and bent as two figures came shooting up through the bottom of it and stopped right in front of Asad, suspended on squirming tendrils of clanking machinery.

And Asad's heart sank.

The two scouts were struggling, but it was obviously in vain. One of them was trying to say something through his faceguard, but a mechanical mask covered his face and muffled his words to the point of near silence."  
"2641

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 11 of 24))~~

""Hush now,"" said Morgunov, frowning suddenly. Somehow, that expression was even more unsettling than his ever present smile. ""You haven't yet earned the right to speak, little ones. Behave yourself and you may yet live."" He paused. ""I mean, okay, you probably won't, honestly, but hey, it becomes a non-zero possibility, at least.""

The muted screaming ceased.

Morgunov's smile returned, and he eyed Asad again. ""That's better. Are you able to concentrate on what matters, now? I sure hope so. Wouldn't want you to miss out. You're the key, you know. I'm going to let you see all sorts of amazing things before our time together is concluded.""

Mechanical tendrils reached for Asad now, and he didn't even have the heart to fight them. With two hostages, no materialization, an emperor staring him in the face, he didn't really see much point in struggling.

And indeed, when he consulted Qorvass privately, the reaper affirmed as much.

The only positive was that Morgunov released the monstrous grip of his hand in order to let the machines take over.

""So tell me,"" the Mad Demon went on, ""where'd you get those tattoos?""

""...My mother gave them to me when I was young,"" he said.

""Ah, is that so? Neat! Those must've been quite the boon, eh? Kept you nice 'n safe, I bet. Is your ol' mama still around?""

""No.""

""Hmm, really? You're not lying to me now, are you? Lying is the tool of cowards, jerks, and swindlers, you know. You don't want to be one of those three, do you?""

""It's the truth,"" he said tiredly.

Morgunov eyed him intently for a long moment, bobbing his head from one side to another. ""Welp. Alrighty, then. Guess I believe you. So have you managed to speak to your Dry God yet?""

Asad thought he couldn't be surprised anymore, but that did it, and his eyes bulged.

Morgunov just waited quizzically for his response, though."  
"2642

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 12 of 24))~~

Again, Asad did not wish to answer.

Morgunov pursed his lips like a duck. ""You're just gonna leave me hanging like that, huh? It's not that complicated. Simple yes or no answer. Either you've talked to him or you haven't. Oh! Or are you thinking that you shouldn't tell me because it's privileged information?! Yeah, that must be it, right? Well, not to worry, lad. There's nothing you could let slip about Rasalased that I don't already know. If anything, I could probably teach you a few things! But only if you're nice!"" And he

was laughing again, because of course he was.

Qorvass answered for him. 'We have not met Rasalased yet, no.'

""Aha! I thought not! Somethin' aboutcha just gave off that sort of vibe, y'know? An aura of doubt and frustration and disappointment. Very pitiable, honestly."" He clapped a hand down on Asad's entangled shoulder. ""I feel for ya, homie. It's tough, trying to measure up to everyone's expectations, isn't it? But the thing you've gotta understand is, no one actually cares that much.""

Asad just returned a look of mild exasperation as the mechanical tentacles raised him up in midair, suspending him face-first in front of the Mad Demon.

""Mm, I can tell by your expression that you don't understand yet,"" said Morgunov. ""You're still caught up in all the little traps that people lay out for one another. The quiet tyrannies of 'expectation.' Of social responsibility and morality. You can't see how meaningless all that stuff actually is.""

Asad gave a muted sigh.

Morgunov snapped his fingers and began circling around Asad as he talked. ""But that's okay. I won't lecture you. Too much, eheheh. Youngins should be allowed to learn at their own pace. I'm sure you'll figure it all out on your own, eventually. If you survive your encounter with little ol' me, I mean. Eheheh, admittedly, that IS still a problem for you, right now. I'll be rootin' for you, though.""

"2643

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 13 of 24))~~

""But in any case, down to business. I think I know what your problem is. You're frustrated 'cause you can't talk to Rasalased, right? And that's understandable, because you've got a few years under your belt now, hmm? Still a child as far as I'm concerned, but you're not a baby anymore, at least. So you should probably know how to talk by now, right? Kids are s'posed to be able to talk. Only makes sense.

""And you think it's your fault, am I right? Like you're just too dumb to figure it out. Can't quite put your finger on what's wrong, can ya?

Hence the frustration! Boy, do I know that feeling! How many experiments have I had like that?! Oh, it's just the worst!" He spun around to face Asad again. "Good news, though, lad! It's actually NOT your fault! Or at least, I'm eighty percent sure that it's not! Which is pretty good, right? Quite favorable odds! Just don't blame me if it turns out I'm wrong. Twenty percent is still twenty percent, okay?"

Asad's mouth wasn't covered like the other two, and after listening to all this rambling, he was feeling bold enough to speak up. "What in the world are you talking about?"

Morgunov poked him in the forehead. "The tattoos, dear boy. If they were able to protect you from me crushing your spirit, then I'd say there's a fair chance that they are also 'protecting' you from Rasalased. By preventing you from even being able to communicate with him."

Asad blinked. That... couldn't be true, could it?

Morgunov snapped his fingers again. "And if that's the case, then the solution to your problem is obvious! Just remove the tattoos!"

"But... they can't BE removed..."

"Oh? Is that a challenge I hear?"

"2644

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 14 of 24))~~

"N-no, it's not," said Asad.

Qorvass spoke up again. 'He just meant that they grow back during regeneration. That's all.'

"Ah. Well, that shouldn't be a problem," said Morgunov.

Asad shut his eyes, trying not to imagine where this was leading. And failing. It already seemed quite obvious what torment awaited him. Was there anything he could do? Was there anything anyone could do?

Regret filled his mind. He hadn't felt this helpless in many years. If he'd realized sooner that things were going to end up this way, then he would have attacked the Mad Demon a lot more instead of giving up



so quickly. Even with his materialization suppressed, there had to have been some way that he could have put up more of a fight.

The quartz prism shook and shifted again, and this time, it kept doing so, until Asad could feel the whole thing beginning to sink. He could see the horizon rise slowly in the distance.

""In any event, this is hardly the proper place to start flaying you alive,"" said Morgunov. ""Battlefields are for battle, not science and/or torture. Not to worry, though! I've got plenty of suitable locations in mind! Collecting laboratories and workshops has become something of a hobby of mine, you know. I haven't yet found one in Calthos that I like, though. Ooh, hey, do you know of one in Sair?""

Asad made no response.

""Now, now, there's no need to give me that look. No one likes a sore loser.""

Asad just hung his head and sighed.

""C'mon! You should be happy! I'm helping you out, after all! If I'm right, then you'll soon be able to contact your Dry God, you know! Isn't that cause for excitement?! I'm a swell guy, aren't I?!""  
"2645

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'Why are you so interested in Rasalased?' said Qorvass.

""Hmm? Well, why wouldn't I be? He's a fascinating dude, isn't he?""  
said Morgunov.

'You lie. You have some design for him. I know it.'

""Eheheh.""

'Hmph. You know something? I would quite like for you to meet him as well.'

The prism reached the ground again. The bunker was gone, too, leaving only empty sand behind. A nightly wind arrived, strong and biting cold, as was normal during the winter months in Uego.

Even that wind couldn't prevent the Mad Demon's piercing laughter from reaching Asad's ears, however. ""You think I wouldn't be able to handle him, huh?! To be honest, I'm kinda hoping that's the case, myself!""

Qorvass made no other response, nor did Asad.

Morgunov didn't move, though. His loud amusement settled, and he simply remained standing there before Asad, Qorvass, and the two others. He looked around, fiddled with something in his pocket, sniffed absently, and scratched his cheek.

Asad wanted to ask what he was doing, why he wasn't taking them back to the Abolish encampment, but he held his tongue. If Morgunov wanted to waste time, then so be it.

""...Ever get a feeling like you're a little too good at what you do?"" said Morgunov. ""Like you gotta slow down to let the rest of the world catch up, or else you just won't have as much fun playing with everyone?""

Asad just returned a flat expression.

Morgunov made a few popping noises with his mouth and swung his arms to and fro in front of him. ""Well. Maybe just a few more minutes. If none of 'em were able to figure me out, then I guess they only have themselves to blame, eh?""

What was the madman rambling about now, Asad wondered?"  
"2646

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""Mm. I wonder if it's inattention or stupidity or just fear. Could be any or all of 'em, really. Maybe I should've left some hints. Bah, but I feel like that's just cheating, y'know? If someone wants to challenge me, then they shouldn't need me to give them a hand, right? Why should I have to be a worse version of myself just so they can stand a chance? It's unfair, I tell you! But I guess waiting like this is also kinda helping them out, so... Hmmmmmm. Ooh, maybe I should build an obstacle course for them! Or would that be too patronizing, you think?""

And the man just kept going, looking back and forth between Asad and

the horizon, acting as if he was asking for Asad's opinion but never waiting to hear it before continuing.

At length, Asad began to wonder if the torture had already begun.

Then the Mad Demon fell suddenly silent, and his head snapped to the southeast. His already wide eyes seemed to grow even wider, and the delight on his face was obvious. ""Finally! A contestant!""

Asad turned to look as well, but he couldn't see or sense anything yet. The wind seemed to be picking up considerably, though.

""Ah, is that who I think it is?! What a brazen boy he's become! I hope he knows what he's doing! Eheheheh!""

The wind kept rising. And rising. And rising still more, until it began lifting up the sand and swirling it around them, blocking most of Asad's view of the sky.

Morgunov chopped the air horizontally with one hand, and the sandy whirlwind dispersed in an instant, torn apart by a fleet of tiny machines that had leapt out of the dunes below.

And they weren't alone, either. Morgunov motioned eastward with his hand, and a giant, snake-like machine launched out of the sand and sailed toward a distant figure in the sky there."

"2647

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 17 of 24))~~

The wind picked up suddenly again, and the mechanical snake veered off course. Instead of hitting the figure, it circled around it and then came sailing straight back toward Morgunov.

Morgunov barked a laugh, and the snake disassembled itself into a thousand tiny pieces. The parts scattered and rained down around the Mad Demon and his captives.

Asad could see some of the machine parts disintegrating into dust, too, before being swallowed by the desert.

""Parson Miles!"" shouted Morgunov. ""Get your butt down here and say hi! It's been too long! Let me get a look at ya!""

Asad blinked and strained to see. Captain General Parson Miles? The one behind the plot against the Rainlords? He couldn't truly be here, could he? He'd been removed from Sair on the Vanguard's own orders.

But as the figure slowly descended from the sky and as Morgunov raised a giant light bulb out of the sand to help illuminate the area, Asad saw that it really was him.

Asad had only met him a couple times, many years ago, but recent events had made him refresh his memory with all the pictures and documentation that the Sandlords had of the man.

Morgunov was cackling again. ""Wow! Still keeping yourself nice 'n young lookin', I see! How've you been?!"

Miles' long coat flapped wildly around his missing legs as he hovered there, apparently deciding that it was better to remain in the air. He was using pan-rozum, no doubt, and likely didn't plan on releasing it for as long as he was in Morgunov's presence. ""Oh, we've been better,"" he said quite calmly in two voices. ""This war of yours has been keeping us busy.""

""Of mine?"" said Morgunov. ""You're misinformed! I'm just lending Calthos a hand against the big, bad Vanguard! They wouldn't stand a chance against you jackbooted thugs otherwise, eheh! I mean, just look what you did to poor Sair!""

"2648

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""Yes, we're sure you have only the noblest of intentions,"" said Miles. ""We don't suppose there is anything we could say to convince you to leave this place, is there?""

""Lemme think! Hmm! Well, I suppose I do already have what I came for! There's no real reason I have to stick around!""

""It's a trap,"" said Asad. ""He was waiting for--"" A mechanical mask wrapped itself tightly around Asad's face.

Morgunov frowned, and the air grew abruptly heavier--so heavy in fact

that it felt like gravity had increased, too. ""Tsk, tsk. I haven't been this disappointed in someone in many years, Mr. Lion. That was quite uncool of you, I must say.""

Miles just tilted his head, though. ""You don't honestly think that you were tricking us, do you?""

Morgunov's smile returned immediately. ""Well, I was hoping not, but you were a little slow getting here, so I didn't want to expect too much of you, either! And I just don't like it when people butt in on conversations that they aren't ready for. Really muddies the waters, y'know? And I hate muddy waters.""

""Unless you're the one doing the muddying.""

""Ooh, what could you possibly be referring to, I wonder? Probably some other thing you're misinformed about, I bet!""

Miles ignored that comment and threw a look around the area. ""You're very bold, coming out here without any backup.""

Rather than responding, however, Morgunov merely returned a wide, toothy grin. Then he changed the subject. ""What're you doing back in Sair, by the way? Last I checked, you were over in Jesbol. Shouldn't you be handling the conflict in Melmoore, right now? Would've been a much shorter trip for you.""

""You've been tracking our movements? We're honored that we warrant that much consideration.""

""Don't get too happy. It's only because you're usually joined at the hip with one of the marshals. Now answer my question. Did you happen to get a little 'tip' that I might be showing up here? From an old pal, perhaps?""

"2649

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 19 of 24))~~

Miles frowned deeply. ""Unfortunately, we cut ties with the old pal that you're thinking of a long time ago.""

""Yes, I heard something to that effect,"" said Morgunov. ""But then I thought, maybe that's just what you wily kiddies WANT me to believe!

To help keep Papa Morgunov off the scent, hmm?! While you're getting up to all sorts of sneaky business!"

"We would never presume that we could slip anything past you, of all people," said Miles.

"Flattery or sarcasm? Perhaps a bit of both? You're a walking contradiction, y'know that? Or a floating contradiction, in this case."

"Coming from you, we will take that as a compliment."

"Eheheh. So what're you hoping to achieve by showing up here all of a sudden and challenging me, hmm? Just the boring tactic of trying to buy time for your big, scary friends? Or do you actually think you can take me down all by your lonesome?"

"The former, I'm afraid."

"Aww! Booooo! Have some stones, man! Tell me I've seen my last sunset or something cool like that!"

"Heh, we don't see much point posturing in front of someone who can see right through us."

"Ooh, flattery again? Say, you're not tryin' to join Abolish, are you?"

"Afraid not."

"Pity. All in all, I thought you performed well during our clash at Bellvine. Struck the killing blow on me. Pretty impressive."

"You weren't exactly yourself, though, were you?"

"Eheh, what does it even mean to be oneself? Who knows? Maybe I was closer to my true self then than at any other point in my life!"

Miles' eyes narrowed a little, and he glanced at Asad before addressing Morgunov again. "You said... you already have what you came for?"

"I did say that, yes. Good listener."

"Your objective was to capture Asad Najir, then?"

"Hmm? Oh, is that who this is? Honestly, I just nabbed him 'cause I thought his tattoos looked cool!"

Miles bobbed his head. ""Considering who I'm talking to, that's actually somewhat believable...""

"2650

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 20 of 24))~~

""Of course it's believable,"" said Morgunov. ""You think I would ever be so morally bankrupt as to lie? If so, then I must say, I'm insulted.""

Miles made no response.

Morgunov just kept talking. ""Hey, where's your Titan at? If you knew I was going to be here, then you must've told him, right? Or do you really think that Iceheart will be enough to stop me?""

""Maybe you should wait around a bit longer and find out,"" said Miles.

And Morgunov paused, wide eyes stuck open--perhaps with contemplation, perhaps anticipation. Then he smiled broadly, of course. ""Eheh! If you think I came here unprepared to fight anyone less than Sermung himself, then I'm afraid you're going to be in for a rude awakening, my boy!""

It was Miles' turn to pause. He looked much more uncertain than Morgunov had, however.

""Feel lucky, Parson Miles,"" laughed the Mad Demon. ""I don't give out warnings like that very often. Usually, I just do stuff and sort out the consequences later. Eheh, or leave that part to other people!""

""People like us, you mean,"" said Miles.

""Mm, maybe.""

""Well, unfortunately, as much as I might like to turn around and leave you be, I don't think that would be a very wise move, right now.""

""Oho! And why not? I mean, I wasn't going to let you get away without playing with me a lot more first, but I'm still curious to know what kind of reasoning goes on in that sneaky little head of yours!""

Miles' expression tensed.

It seemed clear to Asad that Morgunov was still just screwing around in anticipation of others showing up. He could attack Miles at any moment, and Miles probably knew that--which was why the Vanguardian captain general didn't seem to mind letting this conversation drag on for however long the Mad Demon wanted it to.

""If you must know,"" said Miles, ""I have a number of reasons.""

""Do tell!""

"2651

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 21 of 24))~~

""Well, the first reason is simply because Sair is the gateway to Intar,"" said Miles. ""If the Vanguard allows you to take it, then you may well be able to drag another of the continental superpowers into the war.""

""Mmhmm, mmhmm,"" said Morgunov while bobbing his head. ""Bold of you to assume that I couldn't do that without conquering Sair first, but go on.""

That earned a pause from Miles before he continued. ""Secondly, you clearly have some plan for Asad Najir.""

""Oh, that's clear, is it? Why is that clear? You said it was believable when I said I just grabbed him for his tattoos, didn't you?"" Morgunov held a hand in front his mouth and gasped. ""Unless?! Don't tell me! You were lying when you told me that?!""

""We thought that much was obvious.""

""Eheh. Well, maybe. But you know what's REALLY obvious? This act of yours, pretending like you don't already know what I'm after. You're not concerned about Intar. You're concerned what I'll do with the power of a god at my fingertips.""

""What in the world are you talking about? The power of a god?""

""Ah, yes! Don't let the facade of ignorance slip! Maybe I'll believe you if you keep it up for long enough!""

""You really are a madman..."



""You're still in contact with the Liar of Lyste, aren't you? That's how you knew to come here. And why you're here alone. When you found out how urgent it was, you knew you didn't have time to wait for backup, hmm? Organizing a proper response to me would take quite a while, now wouldn't it?""

Miles was just frowning.

""I've got an idea!"" said Morgunov. ""I think I'll go pay the Liar a visit next! I wonder what interesting things I'll be able to learn from him!""

Still, Miles remained silent.

""And y'know! I bet it would be an even better meeting if you came along, too, Parson Miles!""

And the sand dunes all around them began to tremble."

"2652 -- CCXLI.

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 22 of 24))~~

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-One: 'The Calamity at Uego...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

As the machines began to appear, the mechanical tendrils that were keeping Asad in place started to move and shake with violent force. They were not just tendrils, he learned. They were connected to hulking figures beneath the sand--figures with so many different and moving parts that he scarcely knew what he was looking at.

And there were so many of them. Dozens, at least. Just one of them was holding onto him and the two scouts, while still having more tendrils and body parts to spare.

The noise they made was particularly unsettling. Given their size and shapes, they seemed like they should have been incredibly loud, making all sorts of clanking and whirring sounds.

But they weren't. They were quiet. Asad could only make out muted puffs and hisses, faint sliding noises, the light tapping of many small

footsteps on sand, and the swiping sound through open air whenever their tentacles moved quickly.

These things hadn't been slapped together haphazardly. They were thoughtfully crafted--and deadly efficient, most probably.

Only two of them moved to engage Parson Miles, while the one holding Asad skittered closer to Morgunov, who was just watching with a big smile on his face.

Miles zoomed up into the air, leaving a sand-whipping twister beneath him for the approaching machines. They both got yanked off the ground and sent flying, and for a second, Asad thought that was it for them.

But it wasn't. Not at all.

Their appendages all retracted into their bodies, and they both became balls. Large jets appeared in place of their missing limbs, adjusting their trajectory to stay with the tornado and ride it up toward Miles.

And Miles must have noticed, because the tornado burst apart just as they were getting close to him, and they were both sent careening away.

Until their jets adjusted and they caught themselves, growing wings and propellers."  
"2652 -- CCXLI.

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 22 of 24))~~

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"2653

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 23 of 24))~~

The machines zoomed after Miles, who in turn flew away, no doubt wanting to put more distance between him and them. A flurry of visible

bursts of air surged out from Miles' hands, and the machines zigged and zagged between them.

Asad could hardly believe his eyes. Their mobility was absolutely absurd. The way they could react and dodge so quickly in midair--he'd never seen any machine do that, much less ones that seemed to be operating autonomously. Perhaps they had pilots flying them remotely. Asad found himself hoping that was the case, because the alternative meant that the Mad Demon was even further ahead technologically than he'd imagined.

The captain general was at least managing to stay ahead of the flying death machines, but he was clearly struggling. Finally, one of his air bursts connected, knocking a machine off course and sending it into the side of a dune, kicking up a giant cloud of sand.

Morgunov was still chuckling, though, and threw a glance Asad's way. ""Glad he's not making it too easy on 'em! They'll never improve, otherwise!""

Miles seemed to be turning the tables on the remaining machine, zipping around it and launching an even more furious surge of blasts at it, battering it around. Even if he wasn't quite landing a solid hit yet, it seemed like only a matter of time now.

But Asad could see the sand dune being disturbed again, and the machine that had been knocked down came blasting out of it, this time boasting a new adjustment.

A red flash cut through the night sky in an instant. A laser. Followed by several more, rapid fire. They nearly hit Miles, getting closer each time, until he noticed and began evading, which unfortunately meant that he had to stop attacking the one that he'd had on the ropes."

"2654

~~((National Do Something Nice Day Special -- Page 24 of 24))~~

Morgunov clicked his tongue. ""Hmm, I wonder if the targeting system is off because of that hit it took or if it just needs some more tweaking in general..."" He raised a hand, and two more machines leapt forth from the crowd surrounding him. ""Experiment time! Hooray!""

Now there were four robots going after Miles, all deploying jet propulsion and lasers. The sky began to light up with each bright red beam, and it wasn't long before the captain general was no longer able to avoid them.

A beam skewered him through the side and severed his right arm completely. The man went tumbling down toward the ground, seemingly trying to catch himself but only managing to angle and slow his descent. He still left a large cloud of sand behind when he landed.

The machines didn't let up, though. They dove into the screen of sand, and Asad could no longer tell what was happening. More wind arrived, turning the screen into a whirlwind, then a twister, then finally a full blown tornado.

Its massive funnel just kept growing in size, obliterating dunes left and right, tossing more and more sand in the air.

Then the tornado divided. Into two. Then into three. Then four.

Four tornadoes of equal size, whipping up winds so furious that Asad could see several of Morgunov's stationary robots beginning to rattle, struggling not to get pulled in.

And the winds only kept increasing. The nearby machines had to dig into the sand with their tendrils in order to remain where they were.

Morgunov, meanwhile, was just stroking his bare chin thoughtfully as he kept observing the scene with a smile.

The flying sand was so ferocious now that Asad could feel it pelting him and starting to activate his tattoos. The slight pressure and golden glow told him that these winds had enough power behind them to tear through a normal person, and his thoughts immediately went to the two scouts."

"2655

They did have protective gear on, so hopefully they would be fine, but he wanted to add a layer of quartz armor to them, just to be sure. To do that, though, he would need his materialization.

He tried again to summon it but nothing happened. His ability was still being suppressed by the Mad Demon's overwhelming soul power.

And with his movement completely neutralized, what else could be done? Nothing. He was powerless.

All he could think to do was beg.

""Morgunov!"" yelled Asad over the howling wind, drawing the madman's glance. ""Please! Don't let my men die in this storm!""

The man stared at him for a moment, perhaps thinking it over. ""Hmm! Now that you mention it, yeah! This is pretty callous of the noble Vanguardian over there, isn't it?! Let's see how he--!""

And he kept talking, but Asad wasn't able to hear him over the raging winds. The tornadoes were so close now, threatening to yank Morgunov's robots right out of the sand despite how dug in they were.

Then, amid the increasingly dense swirl of sand, Morgunov disappeared from Asad's view. He couldn't tell where or how he'd gone, just that he'd vanished. More of the machines began to disappear, too, and again, Asad couldn't tell how. Had they dug even deeper in? Or just been yanked into the air by Miles?

He could hear faint traces of screaming, cutting in and out between the sand-riddled winds. And to his horror, he realized that it was the scouts. He caught glimpses of them, of their gear being shredded, of blood flying.

They were dying.

And all he could do was watch.

Desperate, he and Qorvass activated pan-forma, hoping that it would allow him to materialize again. But it was in vain, as they both knew it would be."

"2656

Asad raged in place. He struggled, wanting to thrash his way to freedom, at least, but even with undead strength, the mechanical tendrils held him fast, preventing all but the smallest movements.

The thought occurred to him that they might be better off if Qorvass tried to use this opportunity to flee, while the Mad Demon was possibly

too distracted.

But neither of them really believed that he would be able to slip away. Morgunov had more tricks up his sleeve, no doubt.

And indeed, they soon saw another one.

The hellish winds ceased.

All at once and without warning.

They just stopped. The four tornadoes each burst apart like popped balloons, and within seconds, there was no wind at all anymore.

Asad searched for some explanation, utterly confused until he saw Miles in the sky with a machine wrapped around him like a spider that had just caught a fly.

Or at least, it looked like Miles from this distance. It was made more confounding by the fact that Asad noticed another figure that could have been Miles, too. And then a third. And a fourth. He could only make out their vague shapes, but each one could have been the captain general.

Regardless, they'd all been caught, seemingly in unison. One machine each.

Morgunov, meanwhile, also reappeared in his view, on the ground. He was in the middle of where the four tornadoes had been just a few moments ago, and he was staring up at his captives. He crouched down briefly, then leapt up into the sky with enough force to explode the sand beneath him. The nearest robot released a captive just as the Mad Demon passed by and skewered the figure through the chest with his face.

And when the figure vanished, leaving no trace behind, Asad understood that Morgunov had just obliterated a clone made in pan-rozum. Morgunov landed on a distant dune with a booming thud, then leapt back up to do the same thing again, leaving only two."

"2657

As he watched with utter incredulity, it seemed entirely clear to Asad that Morgunov was still just having fun. The fact that he was jumping at

the clones in midair--that seemed especially ridiculous. Asad obviously didn't know the full extent of the Mad Demon's powers, but given everything that he'd witnessed thus far, he had to imagine that the madman had some means of flying at his disposal. And yet he wasn't using it. He was just jumping.

Instead of destroying the third clone of Miles, however, Morgunov grabbed him by the head, palming it like a basketball while the clone's body ragdolled wildly around him. Perhaps the clone was flailing on purpose, struggling to counterattack in the midst of that absurd situation, but Asad couldn't tell; and it didn't take much longer for Morgunov to leap after the fourth and final clone, closing in at rocket speed.

Just as his flying robot let go of the fourth clone, the Mad Demon took the third in hand and quite literally dunked it down on top of the fourth. The impact between the clones was strong enough to send an audible shock wave through the air, and one of them was obliterated while the other got spiked into the ground with another sandy explosion.

Asad felt the reverberations from both hits and saw the sands all around them tremble, too.

Morgunov, meanwhile, was still up in the air, sitting on one of his hovering robots and laughing his head off. ""Is that one point for me or two?! Or maybe it should be four, since there were four of you?! Eheheheh!""

Dear merciful gods, Asad thought. This really was just one big game to him, wasn't it? He'd known that all along, but somehow, it was never more obvious than right now."

"2658

As the sand settled, the figure of Parson Miles stood back up. The man's bones were still visibly realigning as he glanced in Asad's direction with a haggard look on his face.

Morgunov crossed his legs as the machine he was sitting on descended slowly. ""So how much longer until one of your bosses shows up to play with me?!""

Miles tried to brush the sand off his coat and did not entirely succeed.



""Any minute now, I'm sure.""

""Ooh! Think you can last that long?!""

The captain general made no response.

Morgunov gave another laugh and snapped his fingers.

More mechanical tendrils burst out of the sand beneath Miles' feet. He leapt away with a surge of wind, but two of the tendrils still caught him around the upper leg. His whole bottom half vanished into thin air, and Miles nearly slipped free again until another robot came down on him from above and wrapped itself around him.

The tendrils reaffirmed their grasp on him, too, and Miles got pulled beneath the sand, disappearing entirely from Asad's view. More shock waves arrived as the desert itself began to quake and tremble.

An eternity seemed to pass while Asad waited and watched. Miles would pop out of the sand, thrashing and wrestling with two or more machines, only to be dragged back down again. And this just kept happening. Over and over. Until at length, Morgunov apparently grew bored of it and had the machines let the man go. They dropped him off in a battered heap in front of Asad and the small crowd of robots surrounding him.

Morgunov scratched his brow as he floated closer. ""Any minute now, you said?""

On all fours, Miles tried to say something but just spat up blood, instead. He was still struggling even to stand.

""Oh, what's the matter?"" said Morgunov. ""Problems with your regeneration?""

"2659

""W-what did you do to us?"" said Miles between hacking coughs. He tried to push himself up but wasn't able to.

""Me?"" said Morgunov. ""That's very presumptive of you! What makes you think I did something? Maybe you're just getting slow in your old age, eheh!""

Miles rolled onto his side, revealing a large gash in his back that didn't appear to be closing.

The Mad Demon hopped off his robot and landed next to Miles, tilting his head at him. ""Don't you think it's a little unfair to everyone else how we can just shrug off mortal injuries like they're no big deal? And then sleep off the pain and exhaustion later? How's a normal person supposed to live with peace of mind, knowing there are all these unkillable psychos out there in the world? And don't even get me started on hyper-states! Talk about scary!""

""What--what nonsense are you--?""

Morgunov squatted down and put a hand over Miles' mouth. ""Shh, shh. You should probably save your breath, right now. Don't worry. I'll talk enough for both of us!"" He motioned one of his robots over and then opened its chest cavity to retrieve something.

Black and red chains. Morgunov tossed them on top of Miles, then rolled him over with his foot until the Vanguardian was wrapped up. Morgunov fused the chains together with one hand and hoisted the squirming Miles over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

""Man, those bosses of yours sure are taking their sweet time, aren't they? You don't think they abandoned you, do ya? Buncha honorable and noble guys like them? No way, right? Yeah, they're probably just waiting until the absolute last possible second to jump in and rescue you! For maximum dramatic effect! That's what I'd do! I'm sure they're--""

And the Mad Demon paused, staring at the robot in front of him. It was emitting a low, repeating beep, and its eyes were flashing yellow.

""Ah, y'see? Looks like I was right!""

"2660

Morgunov clicked his tongue, and the robot in front of him crouched down, allowing two others to climb on top of it.

Then something else happened that Asad could hardly believe.

The three machines unfolded themselves in countless different ways, clanking and scraping against one another, until they reformed and

became one, much larger robot.

Now it was the size of a van--and very bulbous looking, besides. Its ""head"" was still domed and bearing blinking ""eyes,"" just like all the other robots, but its body was so much larger. And judging from the way the other robots appeared to function, there was no telling what kind of mechanical tricks it might be concealing within its black-and-gray frame.

Its giant chest cavity opened up, and Morgunov tossed Miles inside. The chamber slid shut with a shunk, and the Mad Demon smiled again, waving the robot off. It responded by rocketing away from the ground and soaring into the night sky.

Then Morgunov turned to Asad. ""Enjoying the show?"" he said, motioning to more of the robots. ""Sorry, you probably shouldn't be here for the good part. For your own safety, you understand. Wouldn't want some emotional teenager to accidentally kill ya! You know how they can be, I'm sure.""

The machine that was holding him crouched down, too, and two more robots piled on. Just like the ones from before, they unfolded and began merging into a single machine--only this time, they did it while maintaining their grip on Asad. The inner chamber of the robot quickly formed all around him, until all light disappeared, and he was sealed inside.

--++--++--

Morgunov tingled with excitement as he watched the Robert Mk. III launching away with Asad Najir and Qorvass inside it. Not only were the packages secure, but things were finally about to kick off for the first time in a long time.

A long, long time."  
"2661

He'd almost forgotten what it was like, this feeling just before a big fight--the kind of fight that he wasn't a hundred percent sure he could win.

There was a time when he hated this feeling. That was only normal, after all. The fear alone tended to overwhelm the inexperienced. The

unenlightened.

Fear was the catalyst. The focal point. The most beautiful and fleeting feeling of all.

Even at his age, the effects of fear on the body were remarkable. The fight-or-flight response. Such a marvelous achievement of evolution. It deserved so much more appreciation than it ever received.

In many ways, that was Morgunov's greatest philosophical motivation for everything that he did. Every goal he chose to pursue in the world, every change he tried to bring out.

The spreading of fear. There was no greater teacher than fear. Everyone seemed to loathe it, but the more people who came to appreciate it, the better off this world would be. On that point, he held absolute conviction.

Perhaps one day, the world would come to understand that and commend his efforts.

Eheh. Okay, yeah, probably not. But it would definitely remember his efforts, at least. Maybe that would be enough.

At the moment, however, as he watched the Mk. III dwindling into the distance, the only thing on Morgunov's mind was who would appear next. Who would it be? Who had come to challenge him? Iceheart was the most likely candidate, of course, but he was hoping--

His head twitched as he sensed a surge of power in the distance. Something bolted across the sky. Not a person. Just a pocket of power moving at lightning speed.

It struck the Robert Mk. III with Asad in it.

Morgunov saw the distant explosion, then the Robert tumbling down into the sand.

And the Mad Demon's smile, the expression that normally came so easily to him, disappeared. His brow lowered, and he squinted.

This was another thing that had not happened in a very long time.

He felt irritated.

Genuine, unmitigated annoyance.

Whoever had just done that... they were about to have a bad day, Morgunov decided."

"2662

If he inspected the crash site later and discovered that Asad and Qorvass had just been killed because one of those damn marshals was too stupid to realize their own ally was inside the robot, then Morgunov was going to be a lot more than just annoyed.

He was going to be angry. And that was something he hadn't felt in an even longer time.

There wasn't much left in this world that could set him off, anymore. He'd learned long ago how to take things in stride, to just enjoy life. But one thing that he'd never quite been able get past was that special Vanguardian blend of hypocritical moralizing combined with utter incompetence. There was just something so keenly unbearable about that habit of theirs.

So if that mixture ended up being responsible for the premature conclusion of an experiment that he had very much been looking forward to, then Morgunov could already tell that he was gonna have to do something quite mean-spirited to the Vanguard before he would feel better.

For now, though, it was just irritation. If Asad was still alive, then everything would be fine. And with any luck, the Mk. III would keep possession of him.

In the meantime, he would have to deal with these challengers.

Yes. Multiple.

He could sense them now, in the distance. They were arriving in even larger numbers than he expected, and thanks to Bool's memory, most of their souls were familiar.

And it was quite a party. He recognized Lieutenant Generals Wes, Kehl, Harisson, and Vernon. From the rank of General, he noticed Lawrence, Min, Edward, Fremont, and Calvin. And from the Captain Generals, he spotted Jules, Eckard, Malinda, and Meris. Combined with Parson Miles, that was a sizable chunk of the Vanguard's top

brass taking part in this operation.

They must've known who they were dealing with.

But of course, it wasn't the generals that he needed to worry about. Sure, they could become a problem if he let them, but it was those two at the front he needed to take seriously.

Lamont and Jackson. Together."

"2663

Still no Sermung, though. Frankly, a part of him was disappointed. All the preparations he'd made to face the Crystal Titan--they were a bit wasted, now. And moreover, it made him wonder where the ol' Sermu actually was, right now. Surely, there couldn't have been many things that demanded his attention more than the Mad Demon knocking on the door to Intar.

Oh well. Iceheart and the Star of the West would make for suitable replacements.

Unfortunately, these fellows were not like Parson Miles. They weren't going to just fly up to him and have a nice chat before everything went down.

No, these guys were the surly sort. Too serious by a half. Iceheart especially, though Jackson wasn't much better. Morgunov knew well in advance that they were just going to attack him without so much as a howdy-do.

Sermung wouldn't have been so rude. Unless he was in a bad mood, maybe. Which, come to think of it, he usually was whenever Morgunov met up with him.

Hmm.

Eh, that was probably a correlation not causation thing, right? Yeah.

Anyway, the first task would be to deal with the light-wielders. Those guys always tried to get a few cheap shots in before anyone else could. It was like they thought that just because they could attack at the speed of light--or near to it, at least--they were somehow entitled to drawing first blood.

The Roberts would be ruining their fun, however. That was one of the earliest tricks that he'd worked into their design: reversible mirrors. Their black frames could turn inside out, revealing a shiny inner coating.

They weren't all identical, though. Different wavelengths of light required different materials to be reflected. Glass for infrared, aluminum for UV, iridium for X-rays, and so on.

The best thing, though? Every Robert knew what to look for. They all tracked their opponents and singled out the ones they were strongest against, for maximum obnoxiousness. And efficiency, of course. But mostly obnoxiousness."

"2664

Already, the Roberts were doing their jobs, leaping in front of him to receive and bounce back attacks from the light-wielders--some of which were invisible to the naked eye without soul vision.

Technically, Morgunov didn't need them to do that for him. If he wanted, he could take those hits just fine and barely be slowed down. But it was more fun this way. He'd put a lot of work into the Roberts, so he liked seeing them do their thing.

There were thirty-eight of them currently surrounding him. That number would probably be good enough, he figured. As long as he kept the marshals busy himself, the only way the Roberts would struggle would be if one of the Vannie generals started to dramatically overperform.

But was that all he wanted? To be ""good enough?""

Of course not.

He didn't become the Mad Demon by settling for mediocrity. He did it by breaking his enemies' spirits.

He raised his hands, and more Roberts arose from the sands around him. In an instant, their numbers swelled to near a hundred.

They were all Mk. Is, the smallest and most mobile models. But of course, due to their ability to combine, they weren't JUST Mk. Is. With a snap of his fingers, they could reduce their numbers by half and

become Mk. IIs, or to a third and become Mk. IIIs.

Each Mark increase meant a further loss of mobility but also a disproportionate improvement in firepower and durability. There were some weapons that couldn't even fit inside a single Mk. I or II. The Mk. IIIs were where things started to get really intense, and anything higher than Mk. V was still experimental.

A Mk. IV would be a good way to start things off, he decided. He waved four of the Mk. Is over and motioned to them. All he had to do was think about what he wanted, but he liked waving his hands. It made him feel like the conductor of an orchestra.

The four smacked together, unfolded themselves, and combined into the Mk. IV--a hulking beast of a machine, as big as a bus."  
"2665

With so much space to work with, Morgunov had a lot of options to choose from. The Mk. IV's innards could be rearranged into a wide variety of different weapons, many of which he'd designed personally. The one that he currently had in mind, however, he actually didn't come up with. At least, not exactly. He did invent it, technically, but he only got the idea for it after watching what was otherwise a terribly made science-fiction movie.

The Anti-Air Scatterburst Particle Exciter, was one of his favorite creations of the last few decades. He hadn't used it in actual combat yet, but he'd gone through quite a long phase of testing during various field experiments.

The name hadn't really stuck, though--not even the acronym, ASPE. Instead, Jercash had started calling it the BSLG.

The Big Scary Lightning Gun.

Which, admittedly, Morgunov did like the sound of a little better. The sly boy had a way with names, dang him.

Technically, though, it wasn't quite ""lightning"" that it was shooting. It just kinda looked that way to the untrained eye. Really, it was just shooting a scattered group of ionic channels, through which were carried very powerful currents.



And the channels could be adjusted as desired, of course, but he had always found it best to lean into the ""scatterburst"" aspect of it.

The result, therefore, was a spray of lightning so massive that, for more than a few seconds, it could turn night into day.

Which was what he did now. He pointed the BSLG straight at the oncoming Vannies and let it rip.

And standing this close to it, without his passive soul defenses, he most certainly would've been rendered both blind and deaf instantaneously.

Fortunately, he was the Mad Demon.

So he just smiled with wide eyes, as if watching fireworks."

"2666

The bolts arced across the sky, filling the horizon and making the desert itself quake from the dozens of sonic booms going off simultaneously.

Needless to say, the attacks from the light-wielders came to an abrupt end. The lightning shredded their ranks, sending them in all different directions--a few of which were down toward the ground in charred heaps.

The dark of night returned as the afterimage of the bolts faded, but more light was already beginning to arrive--this time from the Vannies' end.

Specifically, from Jackson.

Morgunov didn't budge, though. He'd fought the Star of the West before, of course, but not for many years. He was curious what the fiery fella could do, what with all the gossip surrounding him. Some were even saying that he was on the level of an emperor now.

Wishful thinking, most likely. But heck, if it turned out to be true, then Morgunov would actually be quite pleased to welcome another member into the fold. There hadn't been a new emperor in over three hundred years. In fact, the last one to achieve that status was none other than himself. It would be nice not to be the new guy in the office,

anymore.

Of course, there'd been many claims of new emperors over those three hundred years. Too many to count, quite frankly. And the Mad Demon had greatly enjoyed putting those claimants to the test. The other emperors rarely ever seemed to care about such things, but they were boring, so that wasn't too surprising. He was only too happy to serve as the ""gatekeeper"" for their little clique.

So when the horizon began to come alive with fire, Morgunov's smile only widened.

It was a bit like watching the sunrise. Only, he knew that the sun hated him and wanted to reduce him to ashes.

Then again, maybe that wasn't too different from the real sun."  
"2667

Even at this distance, he could already feel the heat. And then he saw the tidal wave of white hot flame approaching, scorching whole dunes and melting them before even touching them. The bottom half of the wave plowed through the ground, splashing molten liquid into the air like a boat cutting through water.

Hmm. Not bad.

Not enough, though.

It would probably require two or three Mk. Vs to absorb so much heat, but they would need time to combine, first. Soul-infused, the attack would knock out dozens of Mk. Is if he waited.

So he'd have to deal with it himself.

He took a crouching step forward, launched away from the ground with an explosively powerful jump, clapped his hands together, and concentrated as he soared closer to the inferno.

Integration was not a well understood ability, even to this day. Over the course of his long life, most of the other integrators that Morgunov had met only had a solid grasp on the basic principles of it. Two materials being fused together. Learning new materials through the hyper-state of pan-wzrost.

But there was so much more.

The fusing process itself was fantastically complex, yet so easy to pull off that the youngins rarely ever gave it a second thought. With sufficient practice, the bonds between molecules or even atoms could be directly manipulated.

Admittedly, that wasn't easy, but it opened up a world of possibilities regarding energy transference--for example, in the instigation of both endothermic and exothermic reactions. Or in other words, the absorption and release of heat.

So this gargantuan wall of fire in front of him wasn't that big of a problem, really. Sure, it was a buttload of heat that needed to be absorbed, and sure, transferring all of it into something without causing that thing to violently explode was dangerous beyond measure.

But what was a battle without a little danger, eh?"

"2668

Fortunately, Morgunov knew a couple tricks when it came to transferring so much heat at once. Any normal material would be unable to withstand such an extreme and sudden spike in energy, but he had a very abnormal material on hand at all times.

His very own body.

Passive soul defenses combined with soul-strengthening went a long way toward preventing his body from instantly exploding. Plus, he didn't actually have to absorb all of it. He could simply transfer a huge portion of it straight into the ground, effectively turning the sandy desert into even more of a sea of molten glass than it already was.

But he pushed himself to his absolute limit, still. He wanted to take as much heat directly into his body as he possibly could--not because he needed to, per se, but mainly because he wanted to throw it all back in the Vannies' faces.

He ended up bursting into flames. Literally, the heat caused most of his clothes to catch on fire. It was a bit painful, but the discomfort from the heat raging through every cell of his entire body was much more noticeable.

He had experience with this, though, having been set on fire many times before. That was why he always made sure to wear fire-retardant pants and undies. Too many times, he'd been caught butt naked during an experiment or a battle or a battle experiment. So it wasn't too agonizing or distracting for him.

The flamey boy would have to do a lot better than this to make him flinch.

He sent a good eighty percent of the tidal wave's heat right back at them, while still allowing some of it to remain with him just because fighting while on fire was also kinda cool.

And now, apparently, it was Iceheart's turn to step up."  
"2669

The rebounding wave of heat curved suddenly upward and kept going, where it would eventually vent off into space.

Then came a fleet of deadly javelins--though not the kind any normal person would be able to see. These were invisible, having no solid form, instead being made purely from the absence of heat. Localized bodies of absolute zero--or near enough to it, at least. And packed with soul-infusion for extra oomph, of course.

Therefore, without soul or thermal vision, they were impossible to detect. Fast moving, stealthy, and capable of ceasing all atomic movement on impact, they were truly the weapons of a cold and callous monster like Iceheart.

Against someone else, they might've ended the battle right then and there.

Instead, he made them all but disappear by rapidly bringing them into equilibrium--like icy bullets melting as they traveled through warm water. And when they were close enough to hit him, he didn't even have to dodge, as they just splashed against him, no stronger than a brisk gust of wind.

Which was actually kind of pleasant, after how much he'd just been sweating.

Eheh. What a silly matchup.

Lamont and Jackson could each affect thermodynamics in their own way, so together, their mastery over it equaled--or perhaps even exceeded--his own. Morgunov was already getting the feeling that this would become a stalemate if he didn't hit them with something else.

Thermodynamic manipulation was a tough opponent to deal with, though. Such abilities were a threat to the stabilization of any system, small or large. To effectively fight against that, he would require some very specialized tools and tactics.

Of which, he had many. He would need some Mk. Vs for this.

And thankfully, after the time he bought for them, several were now ready for action."

"2670

Compared to the Mk. IVs, the Mk. Vs might not have seemed all that different. They were a bit bigger, sure, but the Mk. IVs were still pretty huge. The color scheme was the same. The Mk. Vs had all the Mk. IVs' weapons. They had the same beady, glowing eyes on their little, domed heads.

Really, there was only one major feature that set them apart.

But what a feature it was.

The Cage System.

Of all his brainchildren, the Cage System was near the top. He'd come up with it when trying to think of how best to take advantage of all the extra space in the Mk. V's torso. It seemed a waste to just cram more weapons in there--though he'd ended up doing that, too, of course.

The Cage System was designed to capture targets of an extremely high threat level. In fact, it was one of the ways in which he planned to catch himself a pet god. He wasn't yet sure if it would actually work, of course, since he'd never had any suitable test subjects for it--other than feldeaths, perhaps, but he didn't want to count those annoying jerks.

Lamont and Jackson, though?

They were looking quite suitable, indeed.

He set all four of the freshly combined Robert Mk. Vs to target them as they drew close. But targeting didn't mean engaging them directly. Instead, the Mk. Vs cloaked themselves with Invisibility. For now, their only goal was to position themselves and bide their time.

The marshals, meanwhile, were hoping to keep him pressured and focused on the two of them so that he couldn't obliterate their little buddies--which was a wise strategy, because he very much wanted to do that."

"2671

The Vannie generals--the ones that weren't already smoldering on the ground, at least--were trying to interfere again. He knew they were just going to utilize hit-and-run tactics against him while leaving the real bulk of the fighting to Lamont and Jackson, but unfortunately, they were still at a level of power such that he couldn't simply ignore them.

If the generals' attacks landed at just the wrong moment, or if they devoted all of their power into a single blow, then they might be able to damage him significantly--which would then set the marshals up for a truly life-threatening attack.

Even for him, that was a lot to keep track of, which was where his modest army of Roberts was meant to come in.

Somehow, though, he'd almost forgotten that he didn't just have the Roberts at his disposal. He had a few kiddies on his side, too, didn't he?

The Man of Crows had slipped into the fleet of Roberts so stealthily that Morgunov barely even noticed. When had he even arrived? What a sneaky boy, eheh. He felt a surge of pride in the lad.

The result, in any case, was chaos.

Glorious, glorious chaos.

The Vannies and the Roberts crashed into one another in midair, destroying what little sense of rank and order had remained. The

desert immediately below them was already unrecognizable. Jackson's attack had melted it; Morgunov's counter had turned it into a bubbling cauldron; and now, the countless explosions, lasers, lightning strikes, blasts of radiation, and more were only compounding the matter further.

Not to mention, the soul-infusion making every attack more potent.

A black haze was beginning to form, a ruinous smoke that threatened to fill the area if not for the constant barrage of attacks pushing it around."

"2672

Lamont and Jackson were sticking to him like glue, both in the air and on the ground, following him wherever he leapt, even when he hopped atop Roberts or their own generals. Their wispy, amorphous bodies barely seemed human anymore as they had both become the very essence of cold and hot, respectively.

They swirled around him like twin ghosts, smothering him with innumerable blades of frost and flame. Waves of heat or its absence tried to pummel him constantly, to throw him off balance. And hands appeared from thin air, trying to grasp and grapple with him, to prevent his movement so that any other attacks might land.

This was a deadly dance, the Mad Demon knew--and a bit unfair, considering how many hands were flying his way. They were only supposed to have four between them, but he was counting upwards of twenty. If he actually bothered to deflect them all, he might've been in trouble.

Half or more were mirages, though--illusions conjured by heat and pan-rozum, meant only to distract. Some were more effective than others, but he could usually tell the real from the fake.

The auras tended to give it away. Theirs, as well as his own.

So when he was able to grab Lamont's wrist and yank him closer to clutch his neck, Morgunov wasn't sure why the man looked so surprised on his icy face. Had he thought he would be able to slip away again like a cold breath of air? Just because pan-rozum was normally able to wriggle free of soul-infused hands?

No, no, no, eheheh. Not with this particular glove on. Lamont was probably feeling its soul-weakening effects already.

His back was now turned to Jackson, and he could sense that the flamey boy was gearing up for another doozy of an attack. Probably something more concentrated--and therefore, more deadly--than that tidal wave had been.

Yeah, probably didn't want to mess with that. Now seemed like a good time for the Mk. Vs to decloak."

"2673

There were a few reasons why he didn't let the Roberts use their Invisibility more frequently. The first was simply that, usually, the entire point of deploying them was to have them take some of the enemy's attention away from him--which they couldn't exactly do if no one could see them.

The second reason was that there weren't enough Invisibility-inducing aberration items to go around. Most them were already in use by his boys. He could've simply ordered them to hand them over to him, of course, but he felt like they needed them more than the Roberts did, honestly.

And the third reason was that Invisibility made it impossible for the Roberts to communicate with one another, unless they were all utilizing the same invisible ""umbrella,"" as it were. And the Invisibility items tended to have a very limited range, so if he wanted the Roberts to operate invisibly, he had to sacrifice either mobility or teamwork--both of which were the Mk. Is strongest attributes.

That was much less of an issue for the Mk. Vs. Their mobility was already greatly diminished, and they were powerful enough that they didn't need to work together. Not to mention, Invisibility complemented the Cage System oh-so-nicely.

When one of them sprung up behind Jackson in midair, Morgunov had to twist around to see the man's face.

That was perhaps his guiltiest pleasure of all. He loved to see that look of sudden realization. Of shock. And the haughtier the person, the



more satisfying it was.

Eheh. It didn't get much haughtier than a marshal. They were just brimming with that sense of superiority and self-righteousness.

In the moment, the Mk. V's giant torso was like the open mouth of a dragon as it closed in.

The Star of the West reacted too late, and the surge of flames that came pouring out of him in all direction disappeared behind a wall of black and silver."

"2674

There was little doubt in Morgunov's mind that Jackson had more than enough raw power at his disposal to tear the Robert Mk. Vs to shreds.

But it wasn't just about strength.

That was the beauty of the Cage System.

Over the many long years of having Ivan as his subordinate/unwilling test subject, Morgunov had learned a thing or two about suppressing servant abilities. The Salesman of Death was arguably the best at that, after all--or at least, he was, until a few years ago when Morgunov perfected the Mk. V design.

The truth was, there were actually a number of different ways to suppress a servant's power. The first was oppressive field density, but of course, that didn't work on servants with powerful enough passive soul defenses. On the surface, at least.

The second was brain freeze. Preventing the servant from thinking prevented them from activating their power in the first place. And naturally, slowing down their thought processes also had deleterious effects on ability usage.

The third was the destruction of the physical body. The power stemmed from the brain, of course, but without a conduit through which to flow, the servant's power was like electricity stuck in a battery. Useless. Plus, bodily destruction served as a great distraction when trying to overwhelm someone. Most people weren't able to concentrate very well while under the realization that their body was being attacked. That was why servants often trained themselves

psychologically to improve concentration and why reapers tried to nullify signals from the brain that might prematurely tell it to shut down--but those tactics had their limitations.

Especially if the bodily destruction was designed to be particularly horrific.

The fourth method, seemingly, was Ivan's power. Alteration of the weak force--the bonds between subatomic particles.

Morgunov had learned, however, that Ivan's power was not uniquely special in this way. Ivan's ability allowed him to ""suppress"" the body as a conduit by distorting energy transfer between atoms. While he wasn't ""destroying"" the body, exactly, he was still preventing its normal function by numbing it to the extreme.

Therefore, any power that could accomplish the same feat could achieve the same result.

Morgunov had been very pleased to learn that."  
"2675

The Cage System, therefore, employed every single one of those tactics. There was no sense in picking and choosing when he didn't have to, he'd always thought.

As soon as the Mk. V's walls slid shut, the inner chamber was supercooled, filled with weaponized hallucinogens, bombarded with various radiations, diced up with saw-toothed blades, and sprayed with flesh-eating microbes--all of which were permanently infused with his very own soul, of course.

Oh, and there was one other little trick thrown in there. Little being the operative word.

Teeny, tiny machines.

But those were one of Papa's most special-est of secrets, eheh. Even Bool didn't know about those nanoscopic beauties.

And it wasn't for a lack of effort, either.

Whenever they entered pan-rozum together, he could tell that the

reaper wanted to uncover all of his juicy secrets. Because of course he did. Morgunov didn't blame him. If their positions were reversed, he would've been the same way.

But he'd learned long, long ago that reapers weren't nearly as wise or powerful as they all liked to believe they were.

Morgunov was at a point now where pan-rozum was less of a fusion of two souls and more of a... subjugation of one over the other. Bool was just along for the ride now, and Morgunov could tell that he didn't entirely love it. If not for the massive benefits afforded by their militant endeavors, the reaper probably would've never done it again.

Bool was but a plaything in his hand. More so than ever before. He'd seen the entirety of the reaper's soul, all the complexity of it, all the quaint simplicity of it, the admirable parts, the ugly parts.

Still hadn't found that sense of humor, though. Hmm. Had to be in there somewhere."

"2676

The rest of the Vannies were clearly upset by what they were witnessing, but the Roberts and Crowe were giving them plenty to think about. Oh, and were there a few more of his boys here now, too?

Eheh. Adorable.

Iceheart was struggling quite hard in his grip, trying to freeze him, slow his mind down maybe. And frankly, Morgunov was feeling pretty chilly. At this rate, his teeth might start chattering soon.

But again, his integration-based mastery over heat transference made this quite manageable. He wanted to warm Iceheart up and maybe thaw his frozen face out a bit, but alas, it wasn't to be. Iceheart specialized in that, after all. Would've been pretty embarrassing if he couldn't even maintain his own iciness, eheh.

It was interesting how he managed to prevent his own brain from freezing, though, wasn't it? Morgunov had been curious about that for years now, actually. Mm, yeah, Lamont would make for a great test subject, too. Another Mk. V decloaked, and Morgunov was about ready to toss him in.

But the Mk. V that contained Jackson was shaking pretty violently, now. That was actually another tactic of the Cage System--rattling the subject inside to help disorient them. The more confused they were, the better.

The shaking was too violent, though. That wasn't normal.

And he could feel the heat leaking out, too.

Well, poop.

He flung Iceheart into his own Mk. V and spun around just in time to see the first Mk. V glowing white hot. Its metallic body was distorting and bending, on the verge of combusting.

Morgunov put his hand forward, trying some last second heat transference to help the Mk. V survive, but it was too late.

The machine erupted like a volcano, and Jackson came flying out.

Morgunov frowned. The Mk. Vs could repair themselves quite extensively, but this? A bunch of half-molten scrap? Yeah, that was pretty unlikely--though, he did spot a few parts still wriggling here and there, trying their best.

Agh, he loved the Roberts so much."  
"2677 -- CCXLII.

Jackson was free again, but he didn't seem to be doing too well. Morgunov was just waiting for him to launch another attack, but the poor fellow was flying around all haphazard-like, tumbling through the air and zigzagging for no apparent reason.

Despite being destroyed, it looked like the Mk. V's Cage System had still done a number on him.

Morgunov felt a swell of pride in his mechanical child and wiped away an imaginary tear as he snickered to himself.

Abruptly, a group of Vannie generals were flanking him, getting close enough to draw his glance. Some heavy materialization bombardments flew his way, and for a split second, he thought he might actually have to deal with them personally.

But then a troop of Mk. IIs rolled through them like bowling pins and started splitting off to go capture their scattered remnants.

Honestly, he was starting to feel a little bad. This was his first time deploying the Roberts in real combat, but they were exceeding his expectations by a substantial margin. If the enemy didn't get its act together soon, this whole battle might come to a disappointingly swift conclusion.

Hmm, maybe the Vannies just needed a little encouragement.

""Eheheh! C'mon, fellas! Don't tell me you're finished, already! It's been so long since I fought you guys! I've still got so many new tricks I wanna show ya!""

That was encouraging, right? Yeah, he was pretty sure it was.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Two: 'The forest's reflection...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector talked to the Queen over the phone again. As the reapers had predicted, she at least sounded understanding of his decision to take the land offer from the Lorentians. He of course made sure to explain that he'd found a very valuable artifact on the land and that it wasn't his intention to slight her or the Atreyan government in any way.

Whether or not she was actually cool with it, only time would tell, he felt."

"2677 -- CCXLII.

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Despite being destroyed, it looked like the Mk. V's Cage System had still done a number on him.

Morgunov felt a swell of pride in his mechanical child and wiped away an imaginary tear as he snickered to himself.

Abruptly, a group of Vannie generals were flanking him, getting close enough to draw his glance. Some heavy materialization bombardments flew his way, and for a split second, he thought he might actually have to deal with them personally.

But then a troop of Mk. IIs rolled through them like bowling pins and started splitting off to go capture their scattered remnants.

Honestly, he was starting to feel a little bad. This was his first time deploying the Roberts in real combat, but they were exceeding his expectations by a substantial margin. If the enemy didn't get its act together soon, this whole battle might come to a disappointingly swift conclusion.

Hmm, maybe the Vannies just needed a little encouragement.

""Eheheh! C'mon, fellas! Don't tell me you're finished, already! It's been so long since I fought you guys! I've still got so many new tricks I wanna show ya!""

That was encouraging, right? Yeah, he was pretty sure it was.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Two: 'The forest's reflection...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector talked to the Queen over the phone again. As the reapers had predicted, she at least sounded understanding of his decision to take the land offer from the Lorentians. He of course made sure to explain that he'd found a very valuable artifact on the land and that it wasn't his intention to slight her or the Atreyan government in any way.

Whether or not she was actually cool with it, only time would tell, he felt."

"2678

His stay in Lorent had ended up being extended yet again, as the

Lorentians wanted a few more days with him to go over various things in order to finalize the deal. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite as simple as just signing his name on a dotted line or being handed a land deed. He had meetings with a number of leading figures from the lower Jagwa territory, including mayors, secretaries, real estate CEOs, and bankers.

Those latter ones were decidedly less hospitable than the others. While everyone else seemed pleased to work with the famous ""hero"" from Atreya, the bankers acted like they didn't even want to be in the same room with him.

Hector wasn't exactly surprised, but still. They could've been a little more polite about it.

""Yes, they are a bit of a surly bunch, aren't they?"" said Ravi Zaman as they were having dinner together again. ""Not that I can entirely blame them. Your Darksteel National Bank may still be an Atreyan operation at the moment, but would I be incorrect in assuming that you intend to expand into Lorent?""

Hector tilted his head as he slipped a chunk of grilled salmon into his mouth. This wasn't the first time that particular question had popped up over the last few days. Far from it, in fact. It seemed like every businessperson he talked to wanted to know his answer to that, even when it wasn't relevant to the land deal that was supposedly the purpose of their meetings.

And he'd already talked to Amelia Carthrace about it, too. And Garovel, of course.

The Bank only had been meant for Atreya--hence the word ""National"" in the name. Not to mention, the primary objective of the Bank was to prevent Atreya from being flooded with foreign money and losing financial independence."

"2679

And yet now, it seemed like the Bank itself might become another avenue through which foreign money might arrive in Atreya.

That was a big point of concern for him--and for Madame Carthrace, though she seemed to think that there were preventative measures that could be taken.

Hector still felt quite a bit out of his depth on this one. But if it really was true that expansion into Lorent could be conducted safely, then... well, that was a lot of money on the table.

Moreover, he'd been learning in his conversations with Amelia that, while the Bank was doing well in terms of both customer growth and stabilization of the national economy, the Bank itself still wasn't making much of a profit yet.

Part of the problem, she said, were old governmental regulations that were specifically designed to limit the growth of banks. There were several she'd mentioned, but the one she took particular issue with was the law that forced newly formed banks to keep up to two hundred thousand troa in ""reserve"" for every customer they took on.

According to Amelia, the reason this was such a problem was because ""reserve,"" in this case, was a legally binding term that meant the Bank could not invest that money into anything else--which severely limited the profitability of their entire operation. Therefore, the only way to recoup their costs was to burden their customers with some rather hefty service fees.

Right now, because of all the uncertainty in the economy and abroad, their customers were putting up with it--presumably for the sense of security that the Bank provided--but Amelia believed that it was only a matter of time before this began to threaten the Bank more dramatically.

For a while now, she had been trying to convince the Queen to repeal some of these regulations. In the beginning, she had thought that it wouldn't be an issue, due to their good relationship with her and the rather extreme state of financial affairs facing the nation.

But apparently, it was an issue."

"2680

After reading up a little more on the laws in question, Hector learned that they had originated about sixty years ago, after a series of new banks had collapsed, all within two years of each other. It turned out to be an elaborate scheme to ""store"" people's money and ""invest"" it in legitimate-seeming companies; and then when those companies



declared bankruptcy, the investing banks would follow suit, ridding themselves of any responsibility to pay back their customers.

Tens of thousands of Atreyan citizens had lost their life savings, and millions of troa had essentially been stolen without hard evidence of any legal wrongdoing, because the bank owners supposedly didn't have access to the money, anymore. It had been ""lost"" in some tragic fire--or similarly destructive accident--that had befallen one of the companies that they had invested in.

It was widely believed that the money had really been used to buy huge volumes of products that were illegal or otherwise lacking a paper trail, in order to avoid the attentive gaze of auditors and insurance companies.

Multiple attempts had been made to find the culprits over the years, but they never resurfaced, probably for fear of facing the wrath of the newly crowned King Martinus. Even if they had technically not broken any laws, the King had made his displeasure over the situation quite widely known, and it would've certainly been within his power to change the laws retroactively just to punish the involved parties. The public probably would've been on his side, too.

When he'd read about all that, Hector had gained a modicum of appreciation for the regulations--or what they had been attempting to accomplish, at least.

It still seemed clear to him that the problems facing the nation now trumped any concerns over something like that happening again, but according to the Madame Cathrace, Queen Helen wasn't quite in agreement on that point. Or at least, not yet."

"2681

The Queen seemed to think that it was ""not the right time"" to remove those regulations--which implied, at least, that she intended to remove them in the future.

But Amelia was apparently starting to think that perhaps the Queen liked the current situation just fine. The economy was still recovering, after all. The Bank would continue to help with that, even if its profit margins were minimized.

Or in other words, perhaps the Queen simply didn't want the Darksteel National Bank growing too powerful.

When Hector had heard the Madame Carthrace float that idea to him, he hadn't been sure what to think. And now that he'd had a few days to let it stew in his mind, he was uncomfortable with how much sense it made. He didn't want to imagine that Queen Helen was being so mistrustful of his intentions or that she might care more about some political power game than about the hundreds of thousands of Atreysans who were still struggling financially, right now.

There must've been more to her reasoning than what Amelia had inferred. There must've been.

But if Amelia was right, then that would mean the Queen had been thinking this way for months now--not just as a result of this business with Lorent. And if that was the case, then he had even more reason to think that she was displeased by his land acquisition.

He honestly didn't know what he would do if his relationship with the Queen ever truly soured. She was one of the people he trusted most, out of everyone he'd ever met. The notion that she might start working against him? He didn't even want to humor that possibility.

And yet, here he now was, doing exactly that.

Because if Atreya wouldn't lift its regulations on the Bank, then... wasn't that even more motivation to expand their operations into Lorent? Where the rules might be more lenient?"

"2682

Hector had his own investors to think of, too. Meeting with all those Atreyan lords, asking for their financial backing--if he didn't start turning a profit soon, they wouldn't be very happy with him.

Not to mention, his own friends had helped him out, too. Roman had just fucking GIVEN him ten million troa. If that wasn't the ultimate bro-move, then Hector didn't know what was.

And of course, the Rainlords had put their faith in him, as well.

The last thing he wanted was to let all that trust and generosity go unrewarded. Honestly, he was still a little shocked that they had

decided to invest any money in him to begin with, much less twenty-five million troa. Sure, they hadn't seemed very pleased by the idea when he and Garovel had asked for their help, but that number spoke for itself.

Their faith in him was... well, it was mind boggling, quite frankly. Heck, he felt like the Rainlords probably wouldn't even get that mad at him if he couldn't deliver.

Yet somehow, imagining that outcome made him feel even worse.

Like he'd be kicking them when they were down. After all they had been through, the last thing they needed now was to take a huge financial hit because of his incompetence.

And so, with all of that in mind, Hector decided to just keep on chewing his salmon. It was perfectly cooked and melted in his mouth, but he kept chewing it for a while longer, anyway.

Ravi's question--of whether or not he intended to expand into Lorent--was not something that Hector wanted to answer, right now. Giving voice to his thoughts didn't feel like the smart move here.

Even if he'd pretty much made up his mind, already.

Ravi might have grown on him a bit in the past few days, but Hector wasn't so comfortable with the guy as to tell him things that he hadn't even finished discussing with Garovel and Amelia yet."

"2683

After persistent silence, Ravi seemed to understand that Hector wasn't going to answer him and decided to change the subject. ""Have you heard about the developments in Hoss?""

Hector shook his head.

""Apparently, Jercash has been causing the Vanguard no end of difficulty up there,"" said Ravi. ""They've had to deploy three separate marshals in order to contain him, and even then, he's still proving problematic for them.""

""...Is that the kind of intel that you should be sharing with me?"" said Hector.

The man gave a dismissive shrug. ""Why wouldn't it be? You're not with the Vanguard, are you?""

Hector breathed half a laugh. ""So your superiors wouldn't be upset if they found out what you just said to me?""

Ravi's smile was a mischievous one. ""Mm, that would depend on which superiors you're talking about, I imagine. Just don't mention it to anyone outside the Freeman Fellowship--unless you secretly hate me, which I sincerely hope is not the case.""

""I won't,"" said Hector with another small laugh.

Ravi had a way of making people like him. That much was obvious by now--and not just because of his own interactions with him, either. Nearly everyone the guy spoke to seemed to be exceptionally courteous or otherwise pleased to see him. Doormen, waitresses, receptionists, janitors, cooks, staff members working for other politicians--it didn't seem to matter who they were or what they did. They all liked him. Hell, even when he and Hector ventured out onto the town for lunch, random passersby would stop and say hello with big smiles on their faces or little anecdotes to share about their lives, as if speaking to an old friend.

Of course, a lot of them also stopped to stare or greet Hector, wanting to get a picture with him, but that was beside the point."

"2684

It was simply impressive, Hector thought. Ravi might not have been a Lorent native, but Riverton P.J. certainly didn't seem to mind having him around.

Hector felt like he could learn a few things just by observing this guy, the way he conducted himself. Maybe such natural charisma wasn't possible to replicate, but there had to be some technique involved, he figured. He had wondered if maybe just asking him about directly was a good idea. Would Ravi be willing to share some of his social wisdom?

Probably. The dude seemed pretty damn agreeable about most things. Man, if the rest of the Freeman Fellowship was like Ravi, then Hector wouldn't mind meeting more of its members.

...And yet.

Despite his growing affection for Ravi Zaman, a part of Hector was very discomforted by him. This was the man's job, after all--to make people like him. Just because he was good at his job didn't mean he was good as a person. When it came down to it, Hector still barely even knew that guy.

And perhaps most of all, Rasalased's words were lingering in Hector's mind.

""Be wary of pretenders,"" he'd said.

Hector didn't want to believe that warning was referring to Ravi Zaman, but he also couldn't afford to ignore the possibility.

He had to stay alert. Vigilant. And at times, it felt like Riverton Hall was trying its best to prevent him from doing that, what with its fancy meals, welcoming faces, spacious rooms, comfortable beds, and beautiful views of the city and the greater Imara Forest that encompassed it.

It was such a weird feeling. He liked it here. And he didn't like how much he liked it.

With each passing day, he became more eager to get back to Warrenhold. According to Ms. Rogers, the reconstruction work on the Bell Tower was coming along quite well."

"2685

Most of the Rainlords had already returned to Warrenhold, leaving only Matteo and a handful of lesser known members of the various Houses. It had been a bit of a pain to convince them to go back, especially Salvador, Mevox, and Zeff; but Hector was sure that this was for the best. They couldn't even get near him anymore because of all the attention he was drawing here. Better to have them back at Warrenhold, making sure everything was safe.

He had also finally received word from the treasure hunting teams--word which was filled with both relief and worry.

The good news was that the Vantalayan team had successfully recovered the Blackburn Triplets and routed Abolish from the town of

Miro.

The bad news was that even after days of fighting, the so-called Killer of Krohin was still at large and actively harassing them, hindering them at every turn without actually engaging them in another direct fight.

It seemed he was a bit of a sore loser.

Also, they had found the treasure that the Triplets had originally gone there to find: the Sword of Unso.

Unfortunately, it was currently being used against them by the Killer of Krohin.

Hector would've been fine with it if they decided to simply return to Warrenhold, but they were apparently quite determined to complete their mission. If they left now, then not only would they be giving up on the Sword, but the Killer would almost certainly retake Miro. Hector told them that they could bring the Miroans back to the Warrenhold, too, if necessary, but they decided not to resort to that just yet.

Hence Hector's continuing worries.

But he had to admire them, too. And if he were the one on the mission, he would probably feel similarly. Letting the Killer get away and enslave more hapless villages--that wasn't a very appealing notion. Especially after hearing more of the details about the human trafficking going on over there."

"2686

It was sometimes difficult to wrap his head around how horrible things were in other parts of the world, right now. Before meeting Garovel and becoming a servant, he'd always just had a vague feeling that, yes, of course terrible stuff was happening out there. That was just how it was. That was life. That was humanity.

But now, it was a bit different. More and more, he was finding himself in positions where he might be able to do something about some of that horrible shit.

He didn't want to get a big head about it, of course, or start thinking he could solve all the world's problems; but it was still a pretty fucking surreal feeling to him, this notion that... well, he was holding quite a bit

of power at his fingertips. And not just in terms of physical strength, either.

This sense of responsibility in the back of his mind was beginning to feel quite heavy.

But also exciting.

If things kept on like this, how much more would he be able to do? How much farther down this road would he be able to travel? He had no idea, and at times, it seemed like it must all come to a screeching halt or he might go sailing off a cliff--but still, he very much wanted to find out. Because there were plenty of reasons to think that it might not all end in absolute disaster.

The other two treasure hunting teams, for instance--they'd both reported in, as well. And their news was much less troubling than that of the Vantalayan team.

They had been dispatched to completely different continents, though--Qenghis and Ardora--so there was little reason to worry that they might get caught up in this Eloan war going on."

"2687

The team that had been sent to Qenghis was looking for the Sun Hat of Amordiin.

Given how useful the Scarf of Amordiin had turned out to be, Hector was intensely curious to know what the Sun Hat might be capable of. He was trying to keep his expectations relatively low, though. According to Garovel, Amordiin had worn the Scarf at all times, even in the bath, but that was not the case for the Sun Hat. And while Emiliana Elroy had told him about it last being seen in Qenghis, she also mentioned that the book she'd read that it was written over 240 years ago.

Which, sadly, was still more recent than Garovel or any of the other reapers had seen it.

For that reason, He and Garovel had almost decided against sending a team after it. The only thing that changed their minds was the fact that Emiliana had managed to provide quite specific details regarding its

location.

""A kingly prison, northwest of the great city of Jeruda.""

Considering Jeruda was one of the largest cities in the world, that was an easy starting point for a search. And a ""kingly prison""--while sounding slightly oxymoronic--also sounded like it might be a pretty good landmark.

And he and Garovel figured that if the team couldn't find any leads, that was fine, too. They would be able to return soon and be sent after some other item. No big deal.

But apparently, the hunters had found a new lead. The ""kingly prison"" turned out to be a castle called Dagracourt.

Needless to say, Hector's interest had been piqued even more than before.

Dagracourt had, in ancient times, been the place where the rulers of Jeruda sent all of their political prisoners. At first, it was a nice place, meant to appease an angry peasantry that was threatening rebellion after having seen justice not done countless times. High-ranking officials would go there for a time, enjoy a spa-like ""imprisonment,"" and then be given a new title and powers elsewhere, after their scandal had passed.

Then the peasantry really did rebel, overthrew the government entirely, and Dagracourt become a place where the previous ruling class was sent to be tortured for the rest of their days."

"2688

As such, Dagracourt's prestigious reputation turned into one of absolute dread and horror, and it was eventually abandoned. Nowadays, it was regarded as a spooky ruin that even the locals avoided.

It took the team several days to explore it, but they found a records room in which a ""peculiar hat"" was listed as having been removed by someone named Remi Viviloro. There was a chance the name was just an alias, of course, but it was another lead, at least; and now the team was looking for more clues in Jeruda.



Their search could still reach a dead end, but hell, as long as they weren't being attacked, Hector considered that enough of a win so far.

The Ardoran team was similar. He'd sent them after the Mask of Amordiin, which according to Emiliana Elroy, was last seen in the Gettira Plains--though, again, she mentioned that her information was quite out of date, in this case over 330 years old.

Despite that fact, the team had already discovered that the Mask had at one time been in the possession of a local lord. Apparently, it had been stolen by a thief and caused all sorts of commotion when the lord started executing suspects without trial. As a result, the new king of the land came down upon the lord's head and had him executed, which historians say probably avoided a revolt.

But the Gettira Plains were incredibly vast, and the team was following up on famous thieves who had lived in the region during that time period. By all accounts, they sounded optimistic, but again, Hector wasn't holding out hope.

There was one more team, as well. Not a treasure hunting team like the other three, but a scouting party in deep cover.

A team that they had sent to Sair."

"2689

Hector was more worried for them than even the Vantalayan team, but as of yet, they had not reported anything too troubling. The Vanguard and the Sandlords were apparently getting along with only minor disputes between them, as the aid that the Sandlords had given the Rainlords had apparently not yet come to light.

If it did, though... Hector didn't even want to think about what kind of problems that might bring. Frankly, he'd been against the idea of sending that team into Sair in the first place, but the Rainlords were adamant about the need for trustworthy intel from the region. Which he understood, of course. It was their land. If he was in their position, and it was Atreya that was at risk, then he would probably feel the same way.

But it was nerve-racking, all the same. He was expecting to receive terrible news any day now--or to simply stop receiving reports

altogether.

He had therefore been incredibly tempted over the last few days to go ask Ravi if he knew anything about the conflict in Sair. The guy had been a little loose with information from other war zones, so it wasn't inconceivable that he might be willing to share details from that one, too.

But that would be extending quite a bit of trust Ravi's way, Hector felt. Too much, perhaps.

It was one thing for Ravi to volunteer such information without being prompted. It was another thing for Hector to ask about it. Doing so would immediately reveal to Ravi that Hector had some kind of interest in the region--and that might be enough for the man to look deeper and start connecting all sorts of dots that Hector didn't want him to.

And no matter how Ravi might contextualize things, he was still a member of Abolish at the end of the day.

Hector had to keep that in mind."

"2690

Additionally, there was still the dangling thread of Chort, the so-called Beast of Lorent.

Hector hadn't forgotten what he'd seen in that vision Pauline showed him.

Chort had been brought here and experimented on. Which left the question of who had done it and why. Hector had the impression that the earliest events from that vision had occurred many years ago, but the facility that Chort had been kept in seemed to be government run.

So how trustworthy was the Lorentian government, really? Could Abolish have been involved in that whole mess? Could Ravi have? Or maybe Carl and the Vanguard?

He'd already talked to Garovel about this at length, and ultimately, the reaper came to the conclusion that, even if the government here was shady, the land in Jagwa was still too valuable of an opportunity for them to pass up.

And reluctantly, Hector agreed, but that didn't mean he intended to let the issue drop, either.

He'd tried looking into the name Lozaro more--the person who Chort claimed had ""brought him into this world""--but thus far, Hector hadn't found any mention of him here in Lorent. According to Garovel, the man was some kind of internationally famous mad scientist, but his current whereabouts weren't widely known, it seemed.

He wanted to find out more, but another part of Hector wondered if searching harder for such a person would be a good idea. It would obviously be a big problem if the guy was in Lorent, and Hector would rather know about his presence here than not, but what would a confrontation with a mad scientist look like?

Nothing good, Hector suspected.

He supposed, right now, the wisest course of action was simply to prepare. For whatever came next.

He'd been trying to talk to Rasalased again, too, because if anyone knew what was really going on in Sair right now, it would probably be him. Two of the four Shards were with Asad, after all.

But unfortunately, it had been radio silence so far."  
"2691

It didn't help that Hector still had no idea how he'd managed to do it that first night. Rasalased had mentioned something about his blessings interacting with each other, hadn't he? How the hell was he supposed to replicate that? Because normal meditation wasn't cutting it.

He had started to think that it wasn't even up to him. Maybe it was actually Rasalased controlling when they could speak. Rasalased had made it sound like Hector was the one in control, but it just seemed more sensible that the ancient warrior god would have that power, not him.

And if that were the case, then surely, Rasalased would warn him if anything truly dire were to happen over in Sair. So maybe he could just relax a little. Ease his mind.

No.

It would be at this very dinner with Ravi Zaman that Hector would realize just how mistaken that assumption was.

The first indication that something was amiss was simply the look on Ravi's face. Visibly tensed jawline. Hard, wide eyes staring at his phone while the color drained from his face.

""...Something wrong?"" asked Hector, having just about finished his plate.

Ravi didn't seem to hear him. Nor did his reaper, whose name they had since learned was Beldorix. They were both just staring at his phone.

""Mr. Zaman,"" Hector pushed, drawing a few blinks out of the man.  
""What's the matter?""

""...It appears that Sair has just been conquered,"" the man said.

'What?!' said Garovel.

Hector didn't know what to say. He wasn't even sure he'd heard that correctly.

""A report just came in,"" Ravi went on. ""Perhaps it is mistaken, or perhaps it is too early to be using a term like 'conquered,' but... it seems that the Sairi forces have just lost a decisive battle in the Uego Desert. The Calthosi are moving in now, unimpeded.""

Hector pulled out his own phone, but he couldn't find anything to corroborate Ravi's information. No news on the internet. No messages from the Rainlords back at Warrenhold.

Until about twenty minutes later."  
"2692

Hector could hardly believe what he was reading. A stream of texts were coming in from Gina back at Warrenhold, bringing him up to speed on intel from the Sairi team. Apparently, she was receiving constant updates from them.

The Vanguardian and Sandlord forces had been broken through and were now in a scattered retreat. Abolish had already entered Kuros and was seemingly headed for the Golden Fort, the seat of Sandlord power.

People were fleeing the city. Average citizens were being slain in broad daylight or rounded up. The undercover team had defended themselves from hostiles twice already and were now pulling back.

No confirmation yet on any high-ranking casualties, but rumors were spreading that Lamont and Jackson had both been killed.

By the Mad Demon himself.

It was too much to take in all at once. Ravi excused himself from the table, and Hector hardly even noticed.

For a while, he just sat there, reading and rereading while he waited for more news to arrive.

It couldn't be true. It couldn't. Rasalased would have warned him that something like was going to happen. And the Vanguard... and the Sandlords... they were too strong to be defeated so abruptly like this...

It made no kind of sense.

'We need to keep a level head,' came Garovel's private words, finally drawing Hector's gaze away from his phone.

'...Lamont AND Jackson?'

'It's just a rumor, for now. One that greatly benefits Abolish by being spread around, I might add. I highly doubt that they have both been killed.'

'It says Morgunov was there, though...'

The reaper gave a grim nod. 'Yes. It does.'

Hector leaned back in his chair. A waiter dropped off a dessert entree with a smile. A chocolate sundae. He just sat there for a moment, blinking at it. 'Garovel, what the hell am I doing here...?'

'Hector...''

"2693 -- CCXLIII.

He already knew what the reaper probably wanted to say--that there was nothing he could have done to prevent this. That whatever had gone down in the Uego Desert had been entirely beyond him.

And he knew the reaper would be right, too. There was no sense in agonizing over it.

If only he could be entirely sensible.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead, trying to find his concentration again. Suddenly, his multiple thought processes all felt like one, big useless one.

'Let's head back to Warrenhold,' said Garovel.

He didn't look back up yet. 'But we still have a few more meetings here...'

'Eh, fuck 'em. The Rainlords need us, right now. We can take care of the rest of this later. Or better yet, have Ms. Rogers do it for us.'

Hector found it hard to disagree.

He took a deep breath and stood.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Three: 'O, ingenuous children...'

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This wasn't right. Not at all.

Parson Miles, at this point in his long life, liked to think he had acquired some semblance of control, of order. Laying plans. Nudging the world toward peace through controlled and necessary conflict. Trying to avoid needless bloodshed. And reacting appropriately when things went awry, which they often did.

He'd learned that long ago. It wasn't about crafting the perfect plan. It was about making the right decisions when things inevitably went pear-shaped.

But this.

Well.

Getting captured by the Mad Demon.

What was the right decision to make, now?

He'd stopped struggling a while ago. This mechanized beast had a solid hold on him, and whenever he acted up, its grip only became that much more oppressive. When he relaxed, the machine at least allowed him to think straight. And as a result of multiple prior attempts to escape, he'd lost time--and perhaps quite a lot of it. He didn't even remember ending pan-rozum and separating from Overra, but there she was in front of his face."

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"2694

The reaper was unconscious, however, so he couldn't even talk to her during this long, dark journey. That was another reason why he'd stopped struggling. He didn't want this blasted machine to accidentally kill her while trying to suppress him.

Maybe that was a needless concern, though. If one thing had become clear from his brief ""fight"" with Morgunov, it was that these mechanical abominations were damn well made.

That crazy bastard. How many of these giant, transforming drones did he have at his beck and call? And how long had he been keeping them



secret?

At this point, there was no telling, but Parson had a genuine fear that the numbers might be truly staggering. This was the Mad Demon, after all. If he had managed to mass produce these things...

An army of soldiers that could take down even a captain general...

No. No, that was impossible, even for him. The metal--or whatever material these damn things were made from--had clearly been permanently soul-strengthened by Morgunov himself. And while Parson didn't personally know much about that process, he did know that it was very time-consuming. Surely, the madman didn't have the patience required to do that over and over again, thousands of times...

God, he hoped not.

He was suddenly reminded of a reoccurring topic that he'd heard various reapers discussing over the years.

The terrifying advancement of technology.

The vast majority of reapers he'd known over his life were either dismissive or frightened of technology, and the frightened ones often liked to debate whether it would be prudent for servants to directly intervene in such things and work to actively suppress innovation.

He'd even known a few reaper collectives who were dedicated to that very task. He'd never taken much of a personal interest in their objectives, but...

Maybe he should have.

Ugh, or maybe he should've done the exact opposite.

Dammit."

"2695

These machines were so much more advanced than any other technology that Parson had ever seen. Just how far ahead was Morgunov? Compared to the rest of the world, how many more years would it take before someone else could build machines like these? Twenty years? Fifty? More?

Even disregarding the emperor-level soul-strengthening, these things were absurd.

They could think. Seemingly, at least. Maybe the old bastard had just been controlling them somehow, giving them an appearance of autonomy, but Parson could've sworn that these robots were actively problem solving when fighting him. And they probably held plenty of other secrets that Morgunov hadn't even bothered to reveal to him.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt like trying to suppress innovation was the wrong way to go. Maybe in the past, when the Mad Demon didn't exist, that tactic might have worked, but now? There was no suppressing Morgunov's genius. He could do whatever he bloody wanted, innovate however he pleased.

And if something wasn't done, then eventually, nobody would be able to keep up with him. Not even Sermung.

Assuming that wasn't already the case.

Morgunov did say that he'd come prepared to face Sermung himself, didn't he?

No, it was far too early to be thinking things like that. By any estimate, Lamont and Jackson will have at least been able to achieve a stalemate. That would buy time for Sermung to arrive and push Morgunov out of Sair.

And that, of course, would buy time for the Vanguard as a whole.

He wondered what Jules, Calvin, and Vernon would make of these machines. They were in the Vanguardian encampment as it was preparing to engage Morgunov, so perhaps they had gotten a good look at them during the clash. With any luck, the Vanguard would be able to capture one of these things for study. At the very least, word needed to get out about the leap in strength that the Mad Demon had made.

As if he wasn't terrifying enough before."

"2696

Parson was left to stew in his thoughts for a long while as he waited for

the blasted robot to reach its destination. Wherever he was being taken, it was probably going to be an absolute nightmare.

Morgunov had said that he intended to take him to Germal, of all people, but he doubted that would be their first stop. If Asad Najir had been captured, too, then Morgunov would probably treat him as the priority. Probably, being the key word. There were really no certainties when it came to predicting the Mad Demon.

Parson could only hope that the others had arrived in time to save Asad, though he doubted it immensely. His plan to stall the Mad Demon until they got there had been far from ideal--not the least because Morgunov saw right through it.

What a day.

When he woke up this morning, he hadn't expected to be facing down a hostile emperor all by himself. And as he sat here in the darkness, contemplating his fate, he began to wonder if he hadn't been bamboozled.

That message he'd received from a Courier out of the blue. Maybe he'd been a fool to trust it.

""Morgunov seeks the power of a god in Sair,"" it had read. ""If he captures Asad Najir, he may find it. And all we have worked for will be imperiled like never before. Please, old friend. Do whatever you can, for the sake of the bond we once shared and for the vision that I hope we still do.""

It hadn't been signed, of course. And sharing that bit of intel with his superiors directly would have jeopardized so many other things, his life and career being among them.

Perhaps it would have been wiser to disregard it, to remember that Germal had never been the same after Bellvine and especially not after Damian.

But that letter had stirred something in him. Something he thought long dead."

"2697

He hated the prospect that he might've allowed himself to be betrayed

by someone he hadn't trusted--or even seen, for that matter--in decades. The idea that he might have allowed childish feelings to interfere with his judgment...

But no. If it had truly been a trap, Morgunov probably wouldn't have said all those things he did. The Mad Demon seemed to have some lingering resentment for Germal--which wasn't terribly surprising, really. The madman had known that they were secret partners for ages, now.

Frankly, Parson had no idea how Germal had managed to stay alive all this time as a member of Abolish. Why hadn't Morgunov killed or exposed him years ago? Parson remembered asking him that very question many times before their final parting, but Germal had never given him a straight answer.

Parson had his theories, of course. Maybe Koh was somehow able to protect him from Morgunov. Parson had seen what that monster was capable of firsthand, so it wasn't out of the question. But even if that was the case, it didn't explain why Morgunov hadn't simply exposed Germal's treachery to the rest of Abolish.

And while it was true that Germal worked under Dozer and not Morgunov himself, that fact alone couldn't explain it. Surely, Dozer would listen if Morgunov told him that one of his most trusted subordinates was a traitor.

Then again, maybe he wouldn't. Dozer and Morgunov's relationship was a centuries-long subject of mystery--even to the rest of Abolish, Parson suspected.

Agh. He couldn't see the whole picture, and he hated that. He doubted that any good might come out of this disaster, but if it did, then perhaps it would arrive in the simple form of answers to questions that he'd harbored for what seemed like a lifetime now.

If he was actually going to see Germal again...

Hmm."  
"2698

He would have to think about what to say, he supposed. They certainly

had a lot of things that they could discuss, if they ever found the opportunity to do so. But how much of it would just be lies? Or manipulation?

Old friend or not, how could any semblance of trust between them ever be truly restored?

He felt the machine begin to decelerate, heard mechanical parts shifting and whirring. After what seemed like a couple more minutes, the change became even more pronounced, and the machine slowed down enough that Parson couldn't even tell if they were moving, anymore. The loud howling of jets changed, too, as if reverberating off of walls or perhaps the ground.

And then, at last, he felt a gentle touchdown, and the machine went quiet as its propulsion systems appeared to power down.

It took a while longer before the metal door slid open, making him squint while his eyes tried to adjust to the light. A pair of hands grabbed his chains and yanked him out and tossed him onto the ground like a sack of barley.

He looked around, searching for anything that would help him make sense of his surroundings.

There were so many robots, all lined up and standing at attention. And some of them were so much larger than others, black-and-silver giants amid a crowd of machines that Parson had previously thought quite large.

And he wasn't the only captive, he realized.

He recognized several of his fellow generals. Eckard, Malidnda, Meris, Harrison--and more.

So many more.

Then he laid eyes on Asad Najir, and his heart sank. Unlike the others, however, the tattooed man was blindfolded.

What about the marshals, though? Where were Lamont and Jackson?

Parson didn't have enough time or even the proper viewing angle to look over everyone before that all-too-familiar voice arrived."

"2699

""Apologies for the long flight, kiddos. I wanted to find a nice local workshop to use, but it seems like the Sandies were pretty paranoid about me using their own toys against them. Either that, or there was a series of freak accidents involving soul-empowered fire! Which is actually more common than you might think, eheh!""

A foot arrived and rolled Parson over onto his back, forcing him to look up at the Mad Demon looming over him.

""So? What do you think?"" Morgunov looked over his audience, who were all battered even more badly than Parson. Blood, bruises, and scorched or frozen flesh abounded. ""Pretty impressive haul, wouldn't you say? Everyone is going to be so jealous of my collection!"" And he pointed. ""Especially that one, eheh.""

Parson turned and saw the unconscious face of his superior and long-time mentor. Lamont.

Parson shut his eyes. He hadn't lost control of his emotions in many, many years, and he didn't intend to let it happen now.

It was difficult, though.

""Hmm?"" said Morgunov, pressing a gloved hand to his heart. ""What's everyone bein' so quiet for, eh? No questions for me? Or concerns? C'mon, fellas, I'm here for you! Feel free to open up and talk about your feelings. The REAL stuff, y'know? And don't worry. There will be no judging. This is a safe place. No one--except me--will EVER hurt you here! I promise!""

Nobody said anything, in part because half or more of them were still unconscious and the rest knew how bad this situation was. The amount of mission critical intel Morgunov would have access to if he got any of them talking...

He could agonize over that later, Parson decided. ""...Where's Jackson?"" he asked.

""Ah, concerned about the flamey boy, are ya? Well, if it makes you feel better, he did manage to wriggle out of my grasp. But, uh. Eheh. He won't be feelin' too hot for quite a while, I expect.""

"2700

""What are you talking about?"" said Parson.

Morgunov stared at him for a second. ""So you're not even gonna acknowledge that stellar pun I just dropped on you? Jackson not feeling too 'hot,' anymore? Hmm? C'mon, that was great.""

Parson wasn't much in the mood to play along.

""Hmph,"" huffed the emperor. ""Well, if you're going to be rude, then I don't see why I should explain anything to you. Only good boys deserve explanations.""

And before Parson could even respond, Morgunov stepped over him and walked away.

The machines began to disperse, creating more room around the pile of captives and allowing Parson to get a better look at the enormous chamber they were in. It seemed to be some sort of hangar. He spotted several main battle tanks in the distance and even a few fighter jets parked even farther away. And unless his eyes deceived him, those models were the Altay and the F4 Phantom, respectively, both of which informed Parson that Morgunov had brought them to Calthos.

It was a bit strange that such units were sharing a hangar, but this place looked largely abandoned otherwise, so there was no telling why only a handful of such expensive units would be here to begin with. Decommissioned hardware would normally be stored in much larger quantities than this while they waited to be scrapped for parts or perhaps sold off.

Morgunov wasn't heading for those units, though. He he was going toward a line of long workbenches. Parson was content to wait here and not see what exactly the madman was going to do over there. He tried to nudge himself closer to Lamont, hoping to prod him awake, perhaps.

It didn't work so well. Even if he wasn't chained up, his body still felt incredibly weak, and he couldn't seem to harness his power of oxygen transfiguration at all. His head felt mostly clear, if a bit sluggish, but his body was numb all over."

"2701

""Monty,"" Parson whispered. ""Monty, wake up."" He writhed weakly and vainly within his chains, but nothing could be done. He wasn't even able to hoist himself into a seated position.

He sighed. Lamont wasn't going to respond, was he?

'Overra?' he tried.

And he waited.

No answer there, either.

Where were all the reapers? Parson couldn't see any of them. They must've still been inside each of the robots--and unconscious, most likely, because a few of those reapers weren't given to being quiet, even in the face of an emperor.

He tried to think. To focus any thoughts that might be useful. Escape was essentially impossible. Not useful to dwell on, at the moment. But that didn't mean they were doomed, either. If he operated under the assumption that he eventually would be free again, one way or another, then he could view his current time as a chance to learn about the enemy.

About the Mad Demon himself.

From an intelligence-gathering standpoint, this was an invaluable opportunity.

The emperor of madness had been reclusive for the last twenty years or more. A few rumors had even begun to spread that he might've accidentally killed himself in one of his own experiments--or gotten lost in some foreign reality, never to return. Parson had never believed such things for a moment, of course, but they did paint a certain picture of the strangeness of Morgunov's absence.

The more reasonable speculation had been that Morgunov was simply working on something and didn't intend to reveal himself until it was ready. And seeing these machines, that seemed be right on the money.

And yet, this timing was also suspicious.



Ever since the outbreak of this new continental war, Parson had been thinking that something was off. Before news arrived of those five simultaneous invasions, the long-awaited Project Blacksong had been imminent. Now, it was delayed due to the massive number of redeployments required to deal with the war."

"2702

Parson had to wonder if Morgunov had intended to disrupt Blacksong all along. After such a long absence, could it really be a coincidence that Morgunov decided now was the time to reemerge?

Well. Of course it could be a coincidence. That was the trouble with the Mad Demon. It was impossible to tell whether he had planned for something or not. Skill and good fortune became almost indistinguishable.

Hell, Parson had experienced that phenomenon himself. When he acted the fool, people tended to underestimate him, but among those who didn't, those who knew the truth about him, the reverse reaction sometimes appeared. They would overestimate his ability, attributing some great wisdom or predictive intelligence to him when, in reality, he'd simply gotten lucky.

And Overra never let him correct anyone on that particular point. If they wanted to give him credit he didn't fully deserve, then so much the better, she always said.

'Because luck is a skill, too,' she explained. 'Having the wherewithal to take advantage of opportunities as they arise is just as important as those opportunities arising in the first place. Too many people allow their own good fortune to pass them by without so much as a second glance.'

It sure sounded nice when she'd put it like that.

Perhaps this was karma, then, to be on the receiving end of an enemy's good fortune.

With this apparently disastrous outcome of the battle at Uego, the Vanguard as a whole was now in danger. Even before this, it was already having problems with disorganization, and now its total number of generals had been reduced by, what, a third? More?

How many of their forces were now leaderless? How many innocent lives were now at stake? Or soon would be?

It was enough to make a normal man lose hope.

Parson Miles was not a normal man, however. Despite all of these things, he was not panicking."

"2703

In fact, this was a lesson that he had learned as a result of seeing so much devastation over the years--a lesson that the Mad Demon himself had played a large part in teaching.

A lesson about the tempering nature of chaos.

Time and again through the ages, the story was the same. When this kind of danger arrived, when threats became imminent and real, when the fragile harmony of the world began to break--that was when people rose to the occasion.

On both sides. Good and evil.

It was true of the normal folk, and it was truer still for servants.

That was the double-edged sword of emergence.

So many of his peers failed to understand this simple truth. Because of emergence--and indeed, the nature of humanity itself--these kinds of difficult tribulations were not only inevitable, they were needed.

It wasn't enough to preserve peace. Peace never lasted. Not while Abolish existed.

Peace was important, of course. It allowed wealth to be created. Technology to advance. Civilization to flourish and grow. Of course these were all great and wonderful things.

But peace also made men weak. Even vigilant warriors would eventually become complacent.

And what would happen when true malevolence arrived? Hell bent on crushing them? Those weak warriors would crumble.

The Breaking of Korgum would happen. Or Lac'Vayce. Or Exoltha. Or any of countless other historical examples.

Abolish, or someone just as evil, would triumph. Good people, peaceful people, innocent people, they would all be trampled into dust.

Sparing people from war, therefore, was not a kindness. Not always, at least. Too often, it was simply setting people up for disaster.

And that was why, even now, Parson's spirit was not broken.

This great Eloan war... it was inevitable. If not now, then it would have happened later.

And by happening now, it would give the younger generations their much needed chance to grow.

It would temper them."

"2704

That was also, essentially, why he and Overra had worked so hard to oust the Rainlords from the Vanguard. While it was true that plan had gone slightly off the rails, the core justifications behind it remained unmitigated, even now.

Zeff Elroy, the Water Dragon of Sair, had needed the push. As did many others, of course, but he was the most important. The Water Dragons of Old were some of the most powerful forces for good that the world had ever seen, but at the rate he was growing, Abolish would have killed him off within the next fifty years, at most.

But now, the lad was on his way. After all those emergencies, Zeff was probably twice as strong as he was before, if not more.

It was just a shame what had happened to Mariana. Her death had not been necessary. Not at all. She was a good woman, and moreover, she would have likely become a strong ally against Abolish, too.

Hopefully, her death would continue to inspire Zeff and perhaps others to greatness in the future, but Parson had to admit, such a gamble was far from ideal.

And it reminded him of his own wife. And his mother. Rest their souls.

But this was the hard truth.

It had not escaped his notice, the idea that if he hadn't weakened Sair by removing the Rainlords, then Morgunov might not have chosen to attack now.

The idea that the disaster at Uego might have been his own fault.

But such self-flagellating thoughts were beyond worthless, he knew. It was one thing to have a guilty conscience. It was another to blame yourself for things that were entirely beyond your control or that might have happened anyway, even if you had done everything differently.

If Morgunov hadn't chosen Sair, he wouldn't have simply remained quiet. He would have chosen some other hapless country. Perhaps one that was even less prepared for him than Sair was."

"2705

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It was just a shame that Morgunov had chosen now, of all times, to resurface. Parson had hoped for a few more years to prepare the young ones and root out more of the poison within the Vanguard's ranks. Only rarely had he been able to prove it, but Abolish had undoubtedly snuck dozens or even hundreds of spies into the Vanguard with the influx of new members over the last few years. Not to mention, he suspected several older members as well.

And with such a heavy defeat on the war table, the temptation to turn traitor would only increase. Certain cowardly fools out there would delude themselves into believing that they could surrender themselves to Abolish and be spared the same fate as everyone else. And others might just be broken.

Certainly, it would've been easier to give up. To just stop struggling. To let Abolish win. It would bring an end to this endless back and forth, at least.

Parson had seen it many times. Servant and reaper alike. Just snapping, one day. Murdering their brothers-in-arms with little to no warning. Going on truly unhinged rants, proclaiming to the heavens

that Abolish had it right all along, that they should just put everyone out of their misery and be done with it.

That it was all pointless.

And Parson would be lying if he said that, in his darkest moments, he had never harbored such thoughts.

The longer he lived, the more terrible things he bore witness to, the clearer it became how unnatural servants really were. At times, he wondered if nihilism and madness weren't simply the inevitable destinations toward which they were all creeping.

And he wondered if reapers weren't trying to hide that fact from them, for their own good.

It was no wonder why Sermung wanted to die.

But even so, Parson Miles planned to continue down this road for as long as he was able."

"2706

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At length, Morgunov's footsteps returned, drawing Parson's gaze. The man's walk was bouncy with obvious delight, almost to the point of skipping.

""What's this?"" said Morgunov, still with two voices as he looked over the tied up Vanguardians and Asad. ""None of you made even a little progress in trying to escape? C'mon, I gave a big ol' window there and everything! What, are the chains too strong? Or are you just too weak? Mm, maybe a little of column A and a little of column B? Don't tell me you're too scared to even try! Eheh!""

""To hell with you, Demon!"" said a voice that Parson identified as Lieutenant General Harrison.

Morgunov's head twitched. ""Oho! Who said that?""

No response arrived. Which was the correct course of action, as far as Parson was concerned. Harrison had always been a courageous one, but this wasn't the time or place. Right now, that sort of defiance was

just foolish posturing.

""Hmm? Don't be shy now! I was just about to praise your fighting spirit! I'm a big appreciator of passion, you know!""

Still, no one said anything.

Morgunov frowned briefly, then smiled again. ""Well, whoever it was, your turn will come. Don't you worry your self-righteous little head. Oh, and how about this? When it's your turn, if you have the guts to say something like that again, I'll give you a nice little surprise! A reward! For being so full of gusto! So try and muster up that bravery again, if you can!""

Stay quiet, Harrison. Stay quiet, damn you.

Morgunov paused, listening.

Thankfully, though, Harrison managed to keep his mouth shut.

Morgunov sniffed audibly and scratched his nose, perhaps disappointed. ""Anyway, sorry for keeping you all in suspense. Just wanted to take a quick gander around the facilities. Been a while since I was here, so I wanted to see what I was workin' with. Turns out, we've got some real old school toys here. Medieval, you might say!""  
"2707

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One of the machines moved suddenly, grabbing hold of Asad with a pair of metal tentacles and carrying him over to Morgunov.

And as Parson looked at Asad again, saw his blindfold again, a question occurred to him.

Why was Asad Najir the only one with a blindfold?

Off the top of his head, a couple of different answers came to mind, but before he could delve too deeply into either, Morgunov caught him staring and must've noticed something in his expression.

""Hmm,"" said the Mad Demon. ""What's the matter, Parsey Boy? You wanna watch? Bet you do, huh? Deep down, I mean. You Vannies are horribly repressed, aren't you? Especially you company men. Gotta 'fight the good fight,' and all that, right? Never can just sit back and enjoy your own Void-given abilities for what they're really best at. No, no, you have to pretend you don't enjoy that part. Wouldn't want anyone to think you've grown psychotic and bloodthirsty over the years, oh no. You only resort to such measures when it's absolutely, one hundred percent unavoidable, am I right? Of course I'm right, eheh.""

What a sick bastard.

But Parson did want to see what Morgunov was going to do to Asad. He still wasn't entirely sure what the Demon's interest in him was or how Asad was supposed to help him obtain the ""power of a god.""

Should he actually respond, though? Parson felt like saying that yes, he did want to watch would just encourage Morgunov to leave him behind.

So he merely remained quiet.

""Eheh, alright, c'mere ya little rascal! But don't say Papa Morgunov never did anything for ya!""

A second machine scooped Parson up like a loaf of bread, and then they were off.

Morgunov made his way back toward the workbenches while the robots followed. They didn't stop there, however. They kept going, headed through a wide tunnel in the hangar wall, and eventually arrived at an entirely different chamber.

Full of black, metal cages. And giant vats of some pale, bubbling substance."

"2708

The heat in here was intense, and the musty stench was almost entirely foreign to Parson's nose.

Almost.

A memory scratched at the back of his mind. Something faint, yet still somehow horrid. A half-remembered nightmare. His whole body prickled with abrupt discomfort, and breathing became slightly more difficult.

His mind remained calm, but his body was reacting. In a familiar way, no less.

He'd smelled this only a handful of times before, in the presence of particularly nasty greatworms.

All worms in the Undercrust had an innate ability to strike terror in their victims, but it didn't work on sufficiently experienced warriors--with rare exceptions. Some could secrete an ooze that released panic-inducing fumes. Passive soul defense usually offered fair protection against it, which told him that these fumes must have once belonged to a truly monstrous creature.

Had Morgunov gone hunting for greatworms in recent years? That wouldn't be so surprising, Parson supposed.

The machine carrying Asad slapped him down onto a large table in the middle of the room, and Morgunov circled around him.

""Alrighty, let's try this the easy way first, shall we?"" said Morgunov.  
""Where are the Quta Jaf'lah?""

The what?

Rather unsurprisingly, Asad made no response. He just lay there, on his back and blindfolded. To his credit, he wasn't showing much fear at all, but if these fumes were able to affect Parson even a little, then they must have been horrifically effective on a servant as young as Asad.

""Tsk, tsk, c'mon. You don't actually think the silent treatment will work, do you? Eheh. If so, then let me just dispel you of that notion right now. It will not.""

Asad was squirming now, jaw clenched.



""The Shards of the Dry God? How about that? Ring any bells? Papa Morgunov knows that you know where they are. And Papa Morgunov doesn't like it when children are stingy with him. Or when they lie.""

"2709

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Parson had to wonder if any of this was even necessary. Surely, the Mad Demon could have simply pressured Asad with his overwhelming soul power and compelled him to be truthful. Morgunov was the inventor of that technique, after all.

So was he just doing this for shits and giggles?

Well.

Yeah, there was a decent chance that was precisely the reason. If this were any other emperor, then Parson would've been certain that they wouldn't want to waste their time, but this was Morgunov.

That reasoning, however, made Parson feel a bit bolder all of a sudden. He felt that, perhaps, if this was all just some big game to him, then the mad emperor might not mind if Parson chimed in with his own distracting inquiries.

""Why did you blindfold him?"" asked Parson, trying to sound as genuinely curious and non-threatening as possible.

Morgunov's piercing silver gaze rose to him, and for a second, he just stared at Parson.

In that second, it felt like the man was weighing the entirety of his existence, deciding whether to end it or not.

Then he smiled that insane smile again. ""Well, you never know who might be watching. Or listening, even. But sadly, he wouldn't be able to answer my questions if I plugged his ears, now would he?""

In all his time corresponding with Damian, Parson had learned many things about the Mad Demon of Abolish. And one of those things was that, oddly enough, the man seemed to enjoy teaching.

If it was the right student. And only if.

According to Damian's tales, Morgunov was ruthlessly cruel and vicious toward students who earned his ire. Parson recalled one story about some poor bastard named Heinrich who'd had his entire bloodline extinguished after Morgunov decided that the man hadn't been taking his lessons seriously. And another about a guy named Lozaro, who was already an infamous scientist in his own right, until he fell asleep during one of Morgunov's lectures.

Supposedly, Morgunov ""tore him from the very fabric of reality itself,"" though Parson hadn't quite been able to understand what that meant or how Damian knew it to be the case."

"2710

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This was all to say that Parson knew what thin ice he was treading on here. While he felt that it might be possible to gain valuable knowledge from Morgunov, he also had to be exceptionally cautious with his choice of words and mannerisms.

""...I don't understand,"" said Parson. ""How is covering his eyes supposed to prevent someone else from watching?""

Morgunov paused, tilting his head at him. ""Hmm? You're not a toddler anymore, Parsey Boy. Surely, you know about the existence of Sparrows.""

As a matter of fact, he did.

""Or did you perhaps think that I didn't know about them? That they were some kind of super Vannie secret? You guys are pretty protective of them, aren't you?""

Parson was still struggling for a response, and Morgunov didn't give him much of a window before he kept talking.

""Oh! Or are you just trying to play dumb in order to take advantage of my affection for curious little dumplings? Tryin' to get on my good side like the cunning monkey you are, hmm?""

Shit, he needed to deflect. ""Actually, I was more wondering whether the blindfold had anything to do with Asad's reaper.""

Morgunov just looked at him, eyes and smile unmoving.

""I thought that, perhaps, you didn't want Asad to see his surroundings, because he then might be able to give information to his reaper.""

""I see, I see,"" said Morgunov. ""That's a rather gutsy implication there, my boy. You're suggesting that I allowed Qorvass to escape."" His eyes widened slightly. ""That I made a mistake.""

There was no use balking now. ""I'm just curious. It seemed odd to me.""

""Yeah-huh?""

""...And if you were worried about Sparrows,"" said Parson, ""then you would need to cover my eyes, too, wouldn't you? As well as everyone else's?""

""Eheheheh. The cunning monkey, indeed!""

"2711

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""Are you admitting it, then?"" said Parson. ""You let the reaper escape?""

""Why so curious?"" said Morgunov. ""Ya think that one little ol' reaper might be your salvation, Parsey Boy? You know better than that by now, don'tcha?""

""I don't know,"" said Parson. ""What if Qorvass manages to contact Sermung?""

""Eheh, here's hoping!""

Wow. Momentarily, Parson was tempted to say that he remembered witnessing the two of them clash before--and moreover, that he remembered how Morgunov hadn't looked quite so happy then.

But his better judgment won out. There was no point in antagonizing the madman--even if, on occasion, Morgunov had been known to respect those who dared to try it.

For now, all that mattered was playing the part of an eager student. And stalling for time, perhaps, though he knew that part was likely to be a futile endeavor.

As Morgunov's attention seemed to be drifting back down to Asad, Parson came up with a new angle of approach.

""You know what I'm really curious about,"" he said, ""is those machines of yours. They're remarkable.""

""Mm, like 'em, do ya? Thought you'd be more upset, considering how easily they handed you your own keister.""

Parson had to relinquish a nod at that. ""Got me there. But I can still admire their craftsmanship, can't I?""

Morgunov gave him a sidelong look. ""You're not one of them masochistic types, are ya? They're not those types of machines, I'll have you know! They're good boys! I only designed them for the very wholesome purposes of kidnapping, murder, and conquest!""

Right. Parson wondered if he should try to lean more into his own madness here. To invoke a sense of kindred spirits, perhaps. ""Wasn't my intention to suggest otherwise. Did you really make all those things yourself, though? That seems like so much work. Even if I had the know-how, I don't think I'd have the patience.""

""Oh, indeed, indeed. Took me quite a few years, you know. Probably coulda finished 'em faster, but I can be a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to this kinda stuff. If it's worth doing, it's worth overdoing, I always say.""

"2712

~~((Halloween Special - Page 8 of 30))~~

A few years, was it? From the way he'd said that, he probably didn't have an assembly line somewhere constantly cranking out more of these monstrosities.

Probably.

As much as he might've liked to ask Morgunov about that directly,

Parson decided against it. He had to be careful. He couldn't afford to push his luck too much.

Because there was another reason why he wanted to stall the emperor.

Beyond merely trying to keep himself and the other captives alive for even a millisecond longer, there was the greater objective of the Vanguard to think of. Even now, taken off the chessboard as he was, he was still mindful of the future. Maybe he would never be able to fight again. Maybe Morgunov would kill him after he'd found Germal and had his fun.

But Blacksong was still coming. It had to be.

Sure, there was the concern that their losses at Uego had been too great, that perhaps the remaining leaders would get cold feet and delay or even abort the entire operation as a result.

But Parson didn't believe that. He couldn't.

If anything, they should know that the timetable needed to be sped up, not delayed. Uego was a terrible loss with potentially catastrophic consequences, but ultimately, it was still only one battle. A major offensive was needed in order regain momentum, to maintain morale and to rally their forces.

That was the only real strategy now, he felt.

If the Vanguard didn't take dramatic action, if they allowed this continental war to devolve into a series of attritional battles, then it was already as good as over. The losses at Uego truly would reverberate throughout the continent and slowly degrade troop morale, young and old alike--not to mention the effects that it would have on all the non-combatants of Eloa."

"2713 -- CCXLIV.

~~((Halloween Special - Page 9 of 30))~~

And Sermung was only one man. If Dozer took to the field, too--which was likely now that Morgunov had made a move--then Abolish would be able to divide and conquer more easily than ever. They could lure Sermung to one battlefield with one emperor while overwhelming

another with the second.

The marshals were meant to be a safeguard against that, but with the way Morgunov's blasted machines had manhandled everyone, that strategy might no longer be viable. For the moment, at least.

So there was no doubt in Parson's mind.

Blacksong, in one form or another, was coming.

It was just a matter of holding on until then.

## Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Four: 'Renewed anger...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector Goffe had never seen them this way.

Thus far during their stay at Warrenhold, the Rainlords had been frequently restless and frustrated. He saw it in their body language, in their apparent need to constantly be working on something, and he heard it in their voices, underpinning every word in every meeting. Rarely had it seemed like any of them could relax, but he had thought that, perhaps, they were beginning to. Perhaps, a little, they were warming to his home, this place of rest and safety.

But that was all gone now. So much so, in fact, that Hector began to wonder if it had been there in the first place, if he'd just been seeing what he wanted to see.

The news from Sair had them in a fury.

There were calls for immediate deployment of all their forces to retake the country. There were calls to march into Calthos and take Abolish by surprise. There were even calls to attack the Vanguard in order to locate and recover their captive kin.

But one thing, at least, was clear.

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"2714

~~((Halloween Special - Page 10 of 30))~~

With several of the family heads still stuck in Vantalay, they seemed to realize, begrudgingly, that they couldn't make a hasty decision here. The constant debates in the Grand Hall of the Night made a return, especially between the reapers since they didn't even have to sleep.

Their scouts in Sair had been trying to gather more intel, but none of it was good. Abolish's presence in the Drylands seemed to increase by the hour, and the scouts had to continually pull farther and farther back. Every town they passed was either abandoned or in the midst of evacuating.

The scouting team, led by one Isaac Sebolt, had begun setting up a position in Callum, the nation to Sair's south. As intelligence on Sair itself was dwindling, the scouts were shifting their attention to how Sair's neighbors were reacting.

Sair's largest neighbor, of course, was Intar, which covered its entire western and northern border, and considering all that he had recently learned about Intar from Prince David, Hector couldn't help but wonder how that continental superpower was reacting to this news.

Neither Callum nor Intar were directly involved in the war, at the moment, but Hector felt like that might change any time now.

Hector wished he could do more for the Rainlords. Sitting in on their meetings and listening to them agonize over what the best course of action was--that certainly didn't feel like enough, even if they seemed to appreciate his presence.

He was told that he had a calming effect on them. Apparently, before returning to Warrenhold, they were going at it like cats and dogs, whereas now they were at least managing to remain mostly civil in their discourse.

Hector kinda doubted that, though. He had a hard time imagining the heads of the Houses screaming at each other like that--and even more



of a hard time imagining that he might've been the reason why they would have stopped."

"2715

~~((Halloween Special - Page 11 of 30))~~

More than anything, though, Hector was worried about Asad. He had of course tried to call the guy, but unsurprisingly, the Lord Najir had not answered him. Hector hoped he was just too busy with evacuations or something.

He desperately wanted to contact Rasalased again and perhaps learn something useful, but the Dry God had not appeared before him.

Which was baffling, quite frankly. How in the world could the conquest of the Sandlords' territory not be something that Rasalased wanted to talk to him about? Even assuming that Rasalased hadn't seen it coming, surely he would still want to discuss it now, right?

There must've been something else going on. Either he was doing something wrong himself, or there was more to Sair's conquest than there appeared to be.

Or Rasalased was just being incredibly callous, but Hector sincerely doubted that. If nothing else, he'd seemed much too interested in meeting Asad for that to be the case.

He voiced these concerns privately to Garovel, and the reaper seemed to be of the opinion that there was indeed something strange going on.

'Morgunov's presence there alone makes that a virtual certainty,' said Garovel in the echo of privacy. 'I doubt he would make a move just because he wanted to conquer some land. He's got some kind of plan for Sair, I'm sure.'

'Hmm. Think Rasalased might know what it is?'

'It's possible. But this is an emperor we're talking about. I wouldn't be surprised if Morgunov had some kind of protection against Rasalased's sight. You might recall that Rasalased wasn't able to discern exactly who the ""shadow"" following Emiliana Elroy was.'

Hector tried to think back and was struggling to. 'Shadow?'

'Back when we all met Rasalased, remember? He warned Emiliana that she was being followed.'

'Oh yeah... and then later, that shadow turned out to be Gohvis.'

'Mhmmm.'"

"2716

~~((Halloween Special - Page 12 of 30))~~

It was a disconcerting thought, to be sure. The idea that Morgunov might have some way to counter Rasalased's abilities? Agh. Hector very much wanted to believe that the seemingly benevolent Dry God was more powerful than any living servant, emperors included, but was that really the case? Or just wishful thinking?

There was no telling how strong Rasalased really was, especially outside the ""space"" within the Shards. Even if he was older than Morgunov, he didn't exactly have a normal body anymore. Hector had to wonder if Rasalased's power could even grow in such a state. If his soul was being ""preserved"" in those Shards, then it seemed somewhat logical that his strength could be ""frozen,"" in some sense.

Or hell, he could be weaker than he was in life.

Perhaps it was all a matter of perspective. Whatever the case, Hector intended to ask Rasalased about it at the next opportunity.

In the meantime, there was at least one other person that he needed to talk to through strange and supernatural means, and that was Emiliana Elroy. He had hoped that she might be able to tell him more about the attack, but apparently, the whole thing was news to her.

In the end, she was the one asking him questions. Her telepathic ""speaking voice"" remained mostly calm, but he could sense her emotions through the Shards.

Her heartbreak.

Worry, sorrow, helplessness, and just... pain.

He wished he could do more for her. But that was nothing new, of

course.

The only thing she was able to tell him about Abolish's movements was that Gohvis himself had not mobilized.

'I'll try harder to find out more about their operations,' she promised.

The just made him more concerned, though. 'Don't push it. Even if you found out something really useful, I don't even know if we would be able to take advantage of it. And I don't really have the means of passing it along to the Vanguard, either, so...'

She gave a mental sigh."

"2717

~~((Halloween Special - Page 13 of 30))~~

The silence drew out, and Hector struggled to think of what to say. He'd told her what he needed to, but he didn't want to just excuse himself and leave her hanging, either.

What was the right way to handle a conversation like this, he wondered? It wasn't the first one of its kind that he'd had with her, and he had a terrible feeling that it wouldn't be the last.

'...I'm sorry you're going through all this,' was the only thing that came to mind.

It did not elicit a response from her.

He tried again. Maybe something more reassuring would do the trick. 'I promise I'll do everything I can to help you and your family.'

'...I appreciate what you are trying to do, Hector,' she said, 'but let's not kid ourselves. What can you do? You are just as powerless as I am in this situation.'

He blinked, not having expected such biting cynicism from her.

Maybe he should have, though.

He'd been dealing with so many non-servants lately--and politicians, to boot--that he'd kinda forgotten that she wasn't like any of them. His

growing ""reputation"" didn't mean anything here. To Emiliana, he was probably still just some random kid she met in the middle of all that craziness that went down in Sair.

Which was a more accurate assessment than anything else, honestly. Lord or not, ""hero"" or not, he was out of his depth. He'd been out of his depth for quite a long time.

He felt her let go of her Shard, and that was that.

The next couple days were agonizing as it felt like all he could do--all anyone in Warrenhold could do--was wait for more news to arrive. News of the treasure hunts. News of the Sandlords. News of the other fronts in the war. News of anything.

That was just the prevailing feeling of unease, though. There was no lack of work that needed doing, including but not limited to meditating, training, the Bank, the reconstruction, the land deal, and plenty of meetings, of course.

There was one meeting, however, that took him by surprise, as it arrived in the dead of night.

The Queen of Atreya paid him a visit."

"2718

~~((Halloween Special - Page 14 of 30))~~

Ms. Rogers had to come and get him out of bed. By the time Hector made it downstairs and over to the Entry Tower in order to welcome her, Queen Helen was already seated at a long, polished black table in the East Hall, the tower's most spacious chamber. Around the Queen were her reaper Mehlsanz and Lynnette Edith, as well as the Lord Dimas Sebolt and a handful of Rainlord reapers, including his own Iziol, Axiolis, and Mevox.

""I hope you will forgive the suddenness of my visit,"" said the Queen upon seeing him. She was wearing a black cloak with the hood still up, as was Lynnette--which was a little weird, since she usually wore white.

""It's no trouble at all, Your Highness,"" said Hector. He took the open seat by her side at the head of the table. ""And, er... I appreciate your

discretion. I know you're mainly doing it for the sake of my guests.""

Helen gave him a smile, then eyed the small cluster of reapers around her. ""I have been wanting to meet these Rainlords of yours ever since they arrived. I am glad to finally have found the opportunity.""

Hector's face tightened a little as he tried not to wince at that mention of them being 'his Rainlords.' He was sure she didn't mean it in the same sense as, for example, Leo did, but it was still unfortunate phrasing all the same.

Garovel interjected. 'Will you be able to stay the whole night? Or even longer, dare I hope? We have quite a bit here that we would like to show you. There's still a lot of work left on the restoration, but we're pleased with the results so far.'

Helen exchanged glances with Mehlsanz--and perhaps a few private words, as well. Then she addressed Garovel. ""I had only intended to stay the night, but I suppose we could take the day, too, and depart tomorrow night, instead.""

"2719

~~((Halloween Special - Page 15 of 30))~~

'Excellent,' said Garovel. 'I'm glad you're able to escape the media's gaze for a single day, at least.'

""Well, don't speak too soon,"" said the Queen, her smile suddenly growing faintly weary.

'No kidding,' said Mehlsanz. 'There's been so much going on lately that it wouldn't surprise me if some other terrible news arrived and forced us back to the capital.'

'That's very true,' said Garovel. He looked over at Dimas. 'I hope you've been treating our Queen well, Lord Sebolt. Hector and I are very protective of her, you know.'

Helen gave an airy laugh. ""He has been a perfect gentleman.""

'Bit on the quiet side, though,' added Mehlsanz.

Dimas looked as expressionless and stoic as ever. ""I happened to be

awake, and I thought it would be rude to leave her alone in this giant castle, as it is apparently her first ever visit here.'"

'He's understating things,' said Iziol. 'After getting to know King William so well, we've all been eager to meet the wife of such a charming man, especially after he spoke so highly of you.'

""Oh my,"" said Helen. ""I shall tell him you said that.""

'Please do,' said Iziol. 'I only wish I could've had a conversation with him directly.'

The Queen tittered. ""No wonder William took such a liking to you. Hector, you didn't tell me the Rainlords were such smooth talkers.""

""Uh..."

'We're only that way towards people we like,' said Mevox. 'Sadly, our reputation elsewhere is not always so pleasant.'

""So I have heard,"" said Helen. ""I have met several Sandlords in my day, so I must admit that I had perhaps allowed some of their opinions of you to color my own.""

'Ah,' said Mevox. 'Yeah. Historically speaking, we have what you might call a love-hate relationship with those guys.'

And the Queen's smile diminished somewhat. ""I can only imagine how you must feel about the news of current circumstances.""

"2720

~~((Halloween Special - Page 16 of 30))~~

'Well,' said Mevox, 'I'd like to say it's complicated, because that's the way our feelings toward them usually are. But it's not. In this case, I don't think it could be any simpler.'

""You wish to go to their aid?"" said the Queen.

'Damn right we do. But we can't.'

Helen nodded.

'What DO you intend to do, then?' asked Mehlsanz.

'We are still rather torn on that point,' said Axiolis. 'But at the moment, we are trying to locate any Sandlords who managed to escape.'

'And how has that been going?'

'Not well,' said Iziol. 'Abolish seems to have moved very swiftly. Right now, it is not even clear if any of the heads of the Hahls made it out. We are hoping that one or more of them will try to make contact with us soon, but they are no doubt dealing with an oppressive communications blackout.'

'I'm confident that many of them did escape,' said Axiolis. 'They are a paranoid sort and would most assuredly have had many contingency plans for exactly this scenario. Whether or not they will actually risk reaching out to us, though--that is a different story.'

""You do not think they would?"" asked Helen.

'Not right now, no,' said Axiolis. 'I suspect many are already safely in hiding and feel that the wisest course of action is to wait things out.'

""I see...""

'Not all of us share Ax's optimism,' said Mevox. 'It's difficult to hope for the best when you fear the worst.'

'Have faith, old friend,' said Axiolis. 'You'll see.'

'Is that faith in Lhutwë you're asking me for? Or faith in your best bud, Qorvass?'

'Is it too much to ask for both?'

'Yes.'

'Hmph. Then have faith in how well I know the Sandlords,' said Axiolis.

'I'm just trying to be realistic here. I don't want you getting your hopes up, only to be crushed later when we learn the full truth of things.'

'On the contrary, I'm the one who's being realistic. You're just assuming the worst because you're afraid.'

'Hah. If you say so.'

"2721

~~((Halloween Special - Page 17 of 30))~~

'Let's not trouble the Atreyan Queen with our bickering, shall we?' said Iziol, turning everyone's attention back to her. 'Allow me to again thank you for letting us take refuge within your borders. It is our hope to not overstay our welcome, but with the war on, I fear we may have need of Warrenhold for some time yet.'

""As far as Hector has told me, you have all been perfect guests and exceptionally helpful in restoring the castle,"" said Helen. ""If you continue on as you have been, then you can be certain that your welcome will never expire.""

'That is comforting to hear,' said Iziol. 'Thank you.'

The pleasant exchanges continued to overwhelm the conversation, but Hector could hardly be disappointed about that. He had a feeling that the Queen hadn't shown up in the middle of the night like this just to meet the Rainlords and have a nice chat. She probably wanted to talk about Lorent but not with an audience. He kept expecting her to ask for a chance to speak in private, but she never did--not before Garovel offered her a room in the Tower of Night, at least.

Perhaps she'd had a long day, because she accepted and retired to bed soon afterward--or tried to, anyway. More reapers kept appearing on the way up to her room, and naturally, they all wanted to talk. At length, Mehlsanz took over her conversational duties.

If nothing else, Hector was glad to see her hitting it off with the reapers. The last thing he wanted was strife between her and the Rainlords.

Before he could return to bed himself, however, Lynnette grabbed his shoulder and made him turn to look at her.

""Hey,"" she said. ""You'll have to tell me about this Beast of Lorent you fought. I want all the details.""

"2722



For a moment, Hector just stood there, looking at her. ""Ah... sure...""

She retracted her hand. ""Um. Later, I meant. Not right now. You're probably tired, aren't you?""

He didn't know what to say. Garovel was talking to the Rainlord reapers and seemingly not even paying attention to him.

Uh.

He was tired. Not anymore, though. Should he tell her that? He should, right? He didn't get many opportunities to talk to her, after all.

Oh god, he wasn't prepared for this.

""...Hector?"" she said, giving him a sidelong look. ""Are you tired?""

""...Are you?"" Shit, what was wrong with him? He'd learned that strategy from Garovel--how to answer questions he wasn't sure about by just repeating them back at the asker--but now was not the time. It was totally unnecessary.

""Um. Not really, I suppose. But I'm accustomed to guarding the Queen while she sleeps.""

He just nodded stupidly.

Now Lynn also seemed like she didn't know what to say, anymore.

Well, fuck.

They were already quite high up the Tower of Night. The Queen's designated guest room was only one floor above his own quarters. He was trying to remember the layout of the Tower and failing. These floors were huge. He was certain there was a common area where they could go to talk. Nearby. Somewhere.

Fucking fuck.

They ended up just kind of standing there in middle of the big, open hallway.

Where did everybody go? When did it get so empty in here? Should he call Garovel for help?

Oh, man.

""Oh!"" said Lynnette suddenly. ""Madison asked me to talk to you about something a while ago. What was it, ah...? Er...""

""Madison?"" said Hector. ""You mean Madison Reach? Lord Dimas' girlfriend?""

""Yeah. She wanted Gina and I to ask you about sending someone out to investigate some kind of shady group or something..."" Lynn rubbed her neck. ""I kinda forgot...""

""The Andalero group,"" said Hector. ""Yeah, Gina mentioned it.""

""Oh. Um. Okay. Good.""

And the awkward silence returned."  
"2723

~~((Halloween Special - Page 19 of 30))~~

There had to be something he could talk about. Wasn't he always feeling like he was juggling a billion different things? He could just pick one and go from there, couldn't he?

Or could he?

What if it was boring and just led to more of this shit?

Oh no.

Oh shit.

Agh.

No, he shouldn't talk about himself. He should ask about her. That was way smarter, right?

""S-so how's your family doing?"" he blurted. There was nothing smart about this at all, was there?

""Oh, um, they're doing well. Thanks for asking.""

He nodded again.

""I bought my mom a new sword a couple weeks ago. She, er, collects them. It's kind of her hobby. And mine, I guess. But, um, she really seemed to like it. It was an ancient Melmoorian warblade. Or a modern recreation of one, I should say. Heh, a real one would be, like, insanely expensive. And probably be in a museum. Um..."

Hector listened like she was giving a lecture for an upcoming exam that he really needed to pass.

She trailed off, though, having perhaps grown uncertain if he cared about a single thing she was saying.

Hey, that was one of them social cues, wasn't it? He needed to say something here and let her know that he actually was interested in the conversation.

No sweat. He knew just what to say.

Uh.

Something to do with swords...

Aw, fuck, dude, c'mon!

""Uh--h-have you ever heard of something called the Sword of Unso?""  
Oh god, was that right? It wasn't, was it? He should've just said something simple and reassuring.

Lynnette blinked at him with her one eye. ""You mean from mythology?""

""Er, yeah... I think. Do you know much about it?""

Her singular gaze drifted up and left. ""Um... it's been a while, but yeah, I remember reading about lots of mythical swords when I was younger. They're pretty fun to imagine."""

"2724

~~((Halloween Special - Page 20 of 30))~~

""Right,"" said Hector hesitantly. ""Because... it's not... real..."

She paused. ""What's with that tone? Are you trying to tell me that the Sword of Unso is real?""

""Well, I mean... yeah, I'm pretty sure it is.""

She just returned a blank expression with her mouth slightly agape.

""At the moment,"" Hector went on, ""it's supposedly in the possession of a really dangerous guy named Thaddeus Croll. Also known as the Killer of Krohin.""

Her eye drifted away from Hector's face. ""I... huh... it never occurred to me that all those legendary blades might actually exist..." Her head snapped back to Hector. ""Why do you know so much about the Sword of Unso's current whereabouts?""

Hmm. Was it okay to tell her about the treasure hunting mission in Vantalay? Probably. But...

It wasn't just his secret, now was it? If it was his own safety on the line, he would've been happy to tell her everything, but he was also mindful of the team's operational security, too. Lynnette was obviously trustworthy, but he still wanted to be exceptionally cautious.

If word ever got out that the Lord of Warrenhold was actively hunting rare artifacts of power around the world...

Well, that seemed like the kind of thing that could bring a lot of trouble down on his head from some very dangerous parties.

""That's... kind of a sensitive subject,"" said Hector.

She frowned. ""Hmph. You've gotten a lot more mysterious lately, you know that?""

He didn't know what to say to that.

""I mean, you were always quiet, but now, it feels like you have all sorts of secrets.""

Well, she wasn't wrong. He still didn't know what to say, though.

Her frown twisted up into a half-smile, and she breathed a quiet laugh. ""It's kind of annoying, is what I'm trying to say.""

That pulled a small laugh out of him in return. ""I, uh... I wish I could

share more with you.""  
"2725

~~((Halloween Special - Page 21 of 30))~~

Lynn exhaled an exasperated breath and folded her arms. ""Are there any other mythical swords that you just 'happen' to know the locations of?""

He scratched his brow. ""Uh... hmm.""

She waited but not for very long. ""You're not going to answer that question, are you?""

""I probably shouldn't...""

She backed up a few steps and leaned against the pitch black wall behind her. ""Why did you even bring up the Sword of Unso, then? Just to tease me? That's pretty mean, you know.""

Oh, shit, uh. ""Actually, I was wondering if you knew anything about what powers it might have.""

""You know its location but you don't know that?""

""Well, I've heard some things, but I'm not too sure...""

""What sort of things?""

He supposed he could part with that much intel, at least. ""Like... it can cut through almost any material.""

""Hmm. That might be one way of describing it. As I recall, the Sword Unso was special because it could create 'pathways.' By cutting. Through just about anything, like you said. Even air.""

""Huh...""

""In the hands of a skilled warrior, it was supposedly able to carve out an entire tunnel through a mountain--or even make a bridge over a river.""

""Whoa. But wait, it could actually build a bridge? Like out of stone or

something?"

"No, I think it's made out of air. Like the bridge would be invisible to the naked eye, but you could walk on it. I guess. It was just a cool story, I always thought. I have no idea how it would function in reality, but that was how it was described."

"Interesting..." That didn't quite track with what the team in Vantalay had reported of its capabilities after fighting the Killer. Was that because the tale was only half-true? Or could it be that the Killer just hadn't revealed all of its powers to the Rainlords yet?

He supposed he should pass that information along, just in case. Better safe than sorry. And heck, maybe it would help them take down Croll."

"2726

~~((Halloween Special - Page 22 of 30))~~

And now that he was thinking about it, that was a pretty good excuse to flee this conversation. He needed to go tell the Vantalay reapers about this critical piece of new intel. Yeah. Putting it off for even a moment longer wasn't wise. The Rainlords could be fighting Croll this very second, and this could be the information they need in order to turn the tide of battle in their favor.

Definitely. That was pristine logic. Not motivated reasoning at all.

"I should go tell Arumoro what you just told me," said Hector, straightening his back and looking toward the staircase down the hall.

"Who's Arumoro?" said Lynn.

"Oh, uh. He's a reaper whose servant may, uh... benefit from what you just said."

"Really? I thought reapers knew pretty much everything already."

"Ah. Heh... well, they certainly act like they do." He started ever so slightly turning his body to leave. "It might be a time-sensitive situation, so I shouldn't delay..."

Lynn nodded understandingly. "Oh, okay. Let's go, then." And she

took a step closer.

Ah.

Hmm.

She intended to come with him.

Shit.

He supposed he could play up the mysterious, need-to-know-basis thing again, but... aw, fuck.

Wait, no, there was something better. ""I-is it okay for you to leave the Queen's side?""

""Ah, no, I'm off the clock, technically. She told me that I should try and relax while we were in Warrenhold.""

""Wow, uh, really?""

""Yeah. She seems to think I don't get enough rest or something."" She started moving ahead of him, as if to urge him along, and he figured that he couldn't justify standing around like a stump, anymore.

This had not gone as planned. Now they were just walking together.

""Hey, tell me something,"" said Lynn. ""Do I seem like an uptight person to you?""

Oh, boy. ""Uh...""

""Hector.""

""Er, what?""

""Do I seem uptight?"" she repeated, more slowly this time.

""Ah, I mean... n-no?""

""Hector, that wasn't convincing at all.""

"2727

""Y-you don't seem uptight,"" Hector tried.

Lynn just gave him a flat look.

Yeah, she didn't believe him. Hmm. Maybe he could turn this around on her, though. ""...Why does the Queen think that you're not getting enough rest?""

Lynn put her eye forward as they descended the dark stairs. ""I don't know.""

""...You sure about that?""

""What are you implying?""

""I'm just wondering if you actually are getting enough rest,"" said Hector.

""Hmph. You're one to talk.""

""Maybe. But I'm also undead. You're not.""

""I'm fine.""

""...Really? You're not pushing yourself too hard with your training?""

""Of course not. I know my limits.""

""I don't know. I'm inclined to trust Her Highness' judgment on this one..."

She snorted. ""Are you seriously trying to use the Queen against me?""

""You need your rest, Lynn.""

""What're you, my mother?""

Hector snickered. ""Oh, there's an idea. Maybe we should give her a call. See what she thinks.""

""Whoa, whoa, whoa. There's no need for threats.""

A related thought occurred to Hector. ""Were you able to try out the hot springs when you were here with the King?""

""Oh, no, the renovations weren't done yet. Are they finished now?""



""More or less. They still need some final touches, but they're functional now, at least. If you're supposed to be relaxing more, then you should give them a try.""

""That does sound pretty nice. And I'm curious to see what they look like, too.""

They kept talking as they made their way down, which was quite a lengthy journey, because the Tower of Night was still lacking one important feature.

Elevators.

Of Warrenhold's eight great towers, the Tower of Night was the largest and most secure by far. That was thanks entirely to the nighrock from which it was built.

But unfortunately, the strength of the nighrock also made it incredibly difficult--if not impossible--to work with in renovating the place."

"2728

~~((Halloween Special - Page 24 of 30))~~

At first, Hector thought it was just too much of a problem for a normal construction company. He thought maybe he would be able to find a servant-run company that could deal with the nighrock; but now, after letting the Rainlords assist in the reconstruction effort for quite a while, he was starting to wonder if even that was doable.

Thus far, none of the Rainlords had been able to put so much as a dent in the Tower of Night.

It was a bit of a delicate situation, though. Since there were so many people currently living in Warrenhold, there was understandable concern about using too much power and accidentally hurting someone with flying debris.

When news of the continental war broke, they had been in the process of organizing for a new, more ambitious attempt at breaking through the nighrock, but that had since been indefinitely postponed. The most powerful servant at their disposal, Melchor Blackburn, had been a key part of that plan, and he was now in Vantalay, along with several others who would've proven very helpful in mitigating damage.

All in all, though, it was pretty shocking.

When Voreese first described nightrock to Hector and Garovel, she had made it sound tough but not this tough. She'd mentioned that it would require someone on the level of Harper Norez to break through it, but this was far beyond that, Hector felt. Harper was a powerful Lieutenant General of the Vanguard, yes, but Hector was reasonably certain that there were several people here among the Rainlords who were stronger than him.

And yet the nightrock had bested them all.

So far, at least.

After talking to Voreese about it again, she expressed surprise as well.

'Huh,' she had said. 'This stuff seems a little sturdier than I remember...'

"2729

~~((Halloween Special - Page 25 of 30))~~

Hector hoped they would be able to find a solution to this problem soon, because trekking up and down these stairs every day was kind of obnoxious.

Plus, it wasn't exactly friendly to the disabled or injured. That wasn't a big problem at the moment, but Hector wanted to be prepared if it ever was.

Little Ramira Elroy had been something of a warning, in that regard. Her foot had been wounded back at Dunehall, and she'd been on the mend ever since. Luckily, she was small enough for Zeff or even Marcos to carry her up or down the stairs without any trouble, but seeing her roam around on her tiny crutches had caused Hector to imagine much worse scenarios.

Warrenhold was supposed to be a place of safety, after all--and the Tower of Night, the safest building. There might very well come a day where they needed to take in a large number of injured people. Sure, they could be placed in the other towers--and probably would--but what if this place ever came under siege?

The more he'd thought about it, the more important the Tower of Night seemed.

The other seven towers all had nightrock inside them, too, but only in small amounts--a single, black chamber in the heart of each building, to be precise. The rest of their stone, while still not entirely normal, was at least malleable. The new elevators in the Entry Tower had been especially welcome, since that was the tallest of all eight towers.

Their current destination, the Bell Tower, would soon have working elevators, too.

Renovations on it were coming along pretty well. The first floors were pretty much done, and it was turning into quite a handsome building. The light gray stone here now looked pristine, and the edges of each room had been lined with a dark walnut wood that provided a pleasing degree of visual contrast, Hector felt."

"2730

~~((Halloween Special - Page 26 of 30))~~

The reapers for the dispatched teams were almost always gathered together in order to share information with one another and relay it back to their respective servants on a moment's notice. They'd swapped between various gathering spots over the last few weeks, but their most recent one was here on the Bell Tower's second floor.

When Hector and Lynn arrived, Lynn paused in the open doorway, seemingly surprised at the sight before her. She'd donned her Hun'Kui made goggles and was therefore able to see all of the reapers clustered together like nowhere else in Warrenhold.

Hmm. Hector wondered if he shouldn't be showing her this. She was obviously going to wonder what they were all doing.

Eh, it was fine. Lynn was trustworthy, and she still couldn't hear anything the reapers were saying, anyway. There was zero risk of her accidentally compromising one of the missions.

There were four circles, one for each team, but the reapers were still occasionally intermingling with one another. As Hector understood it, they all wanted to stay up to date on the status of each others'

missions. That seemed needlessly confusing to him, but apparently, the reapers didn't feel the same way.

So essentially, the reapers for the Vantalay team knew everything that the reapers for the Qenghis, Ardora, and Sair-scouting teams knew--and vice versa. They claimed that it was because there was always a slight chance that one mission might somehow affect another or that something learned in one part of the world might be useful to pass along, but Hector didn't entirely believe that.

He thought it a lot more likely that the reapers just wanted to know everything going on, because that was how reapers were.

And of course, with the developments in Sair, they had plenty of extra reason to be interested in what the scouting team had to report."  
"2731

~~((Halloween Special - Page 27 of 30))~~

The atmosphere in here was tense. Normally, when so many reapers gathered together, it was a jovial affair--or at least, in Hector's experience, it was. Even when talking business or otherwise discussing quite serious subject matter, reapers always seemed to find a way to enjoy themselves.

But not this time, it would seem.

The news of Sair's defeat had affected their spirits. The same could be said of all the Rainlords in Warrenhold, of course, but these reapers seemed to be particularly different, Hector felt.

It was a little hard to explain why, though. Their collective demeanor was more serious. They didn't joke around with each other very much, anymore. But there was something else, too. Something Hector couldn't quite articulate.

A vague feeling. A kind of heat in his mind. It was both familiar and unfamiliar to him, like he should recognize it but couldn't. And it was bothering him enough that he often devoted a background thought process to just trying to puzzle out what it was.

In any case, Arumoro was at the back of the room. Hector could've gone to any of the reapers from the Vantalay team, but Arumoro was

the one he'd grown the most personally familiar with. He was the reaper for Raul Blackburn, one of the mildly infamous Blackburn Triplets.

'Lord Goffe,' said Arumoro as he watched them approach. 'And Lady Edith. What brings you here?'

Hector relayed what Lynn had told him about the Sword of Unso. He made sure to qualify his statements with a level of uncertainty, wanting the reaper to take them with a grain of salt. Lynn chimed in as well, reiterating her points, and Arumoro thanked them for the information.

And that was it. That was all Hector had wanted to do here.

But before they could leave, one of the reapers from the scouting team said something that made the entire room full of reapers go quiet.

'We've just made contact with Abbas Saqqaf.'"  
"2732 -- CCXLV.

~~((Halloween Special - Page 28 of 30))~~

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Five: 'O, fledgling commander, falter not...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The reapers all turned to look at Hector. None of the Rainlord heads were immediately present. They were all either asleep or Dimas Sebolt, the man with chronic insomnia.

It wouldn't take long for the reapers to fetch them, of course, but judging by the expressions on all these skeletal faces, they were expecting him to step up and do or say something first.

Well, then.

A part of him wanted to pretend he hadn't heard anything and just go crawl back into bed. Someone else would handle it. And Abbas probably wanted to talk to a Rainlord, not him, right? Yeah.

...Eh, who was he kidding?

He took a long, deep breath and walked over to the reaper who'd delivered the news. ""What kind of contact?"" he asked. ""Remote or direct?""

'Direct,' said the reaper. This one name's was Levinox, as Hector recalled, and he was linked with Cristina Sebolt of the scouting team. 'My servant is looking at him at this very moment.'

Hector nodded and turned to the others. ""Inform the family heads. Bring them here, please.""

'You got it.'

'Sure thing.'

'Heh, yes, sir.'

Three reapers departed instantly, followed by two more who said nothing. That number made sense, because there were currently five Rainlord heads in Warrenhold: Zeff, Dimas, Horatio, Joana, and Salvador. The only other one was Evangelina, who was in Vantalay.

'Garovel, I need you,' thought Hector as he turned back to Levinox. Garovel said something, but Hector was too busy processing what he wanted to say to Abbas to respond.

Levinox spoke up again before him, however. 'Lord Abbas is talking about their status. The Sandlords have been completely pushed out of the Drylands. They're scattered. The Vanguard has apparently regrouped in the Wetlands, but the Sandlords are having difficulty linking back up with them. They've been running into fierce opposition wherever they go.'

"2732 -- CCXLV.

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"2733

~~((Halloween Special - Page 29 of 30))~~

""Have they talked to the governments of Callum or Intar yet?"" Hector asked. Logic would dictate that Sair's neighbors didn't want Abolish conquering it, either. They'd been dragging their feet so far, but they had to be reevaluating their positions on the matter now.

Levinox took a minute to relay Hector's question and receive an answer. 'Intar has proven difficult to reach. They have spoken to Callum, however, and unfortunately, it appears that Morgunov has promised not to invade them as long as they don't provide refuge to the Sandlords.'

Oh shit.

""And Callum's government actually believes him?"" said Hector with wide eyes.

'It would seem so,' said Levinox. 'Callumi authorities have been trying to capture them on sight, ostensibly to turn over to Abolish.'

Damn. ""Is it even safe for them to be having this conversation, right now? Is their current position secure?""

Another long pause. 'That is debatable. The Callumi authorities themselves aren't too much trouble for the Sandlords, but if they alert Abolish to their location, then the situation could worsen again.'

Hector knew what he wanted to say here. But it would be taking a huge leap. It might ruffle a few feathers.

He grit his teeth for a moment as he mulled it over.

He had to say it. Of course he did.

""If they can at least make it to Lorent, then I can provide them with a place to regroup.""

Levinox fell silent again, relaying the message.



Hector wanted to say that they were welcome in Warrenhold--because they were, of course--but at the moment, it seemed safer to just say Lorent. It was a lot closer for the Sandlords, too.

And while he didn't think the Queen would refuse to help them when her own family had ties with Sandlords, he also didn't want to test his relationship with her too much. And welcoming another group of refugees who were being hunted by one of the most powerful organizations in the world without her permission... well, that seemed like it might annoy her.

Just a bit."

"2734

~~((Halloween Special - Page 30 of 30))~~

They could work through the details later. The Queen couldn't get mad at him as long as they weren't actually coming to Atreya yet.

Well. Okay, maybe she could. But she couldn't do anything about it if she did. Lorent was outside her jurisdiction.

President Dance might have a thing or two to say about it, though--if he ever found out about it, that was.

As he waited for Abbas' response via Levinox, Hector noticed Garovel hovering there next to him. The expression on the reaper's skeletal face implied that he had something he wanted to say, but he merely remained silent.

'Lord Abbas says that would be much appreciated,' said Levinox. 'They will head for Lorent right away.'

""Do they have civilian refugees with them?"" asked Hector.

'...Yes. Many.'

Hector nodded. ""Can I get a rough estimate of the number?""

'...Perhaps three hundred.'

Hmm. Less than he'd imagined, but that amount would still prove

challenging to conceal from the Lorentian government. Would it be better to just ask the Lorentians for help directly?

Maybe, but he still didn't fully trust them. He might've gained their favor, but this was an emperor of Abolish they were dealing with. If Morgunov made the same promise to the Lorentians that he did to the Callumi, they might very well agree to it. He highly doubted that they liked Hector Goffe of Atreya more than they feared the Mad Demon.

Hell, he wondered if even Queen Helen would be able to hold out against something like that.

He did not wish to find out. Yeah. It was safer for everyone if he just tried to keep everything as quiet as possible for now.

"Alright," he said. "Tell the scouting team to stick with them and keep us updated on their movements. We'll try to link up with them at the Lorent-Callum border and proceed from there."

He still had plenty of questions, particularly regarding casualties, but the situation was still too fluid for that, Hector felt. He could ask those things later, once Abbas and his group were safe."

"2735

Hector was concerned about why Abbas hadn't been able to get through to Intar. From the conversation that he'd had with Prince David not too long ago, it had seemed like the Sandlords were on fairly reasonable terms with the Intarian government. Maybe that had been too much to assume.

Or maybe there was something else going on in Intar.

Prince David had mentioned a "culture war" dividing the country at the moment, but Hector hoped that wasn't the cause of this. Surely, the Intarians would be able to see that there was an actual war going on right now and that it needed to take precedence. Their neighboring country was on the verge of collapse, after all. That had to be a wake up call for them, right?

The Rainlord heads soon arrived--Dimas first, followed by the all the rest in a group.

Naturally, they had plenty of questions that Hector didn't yet have answers for. He brought them up to speed on the conversation he'd just had.

""Just like that?"" said Zeff. ""You've already offered them asylum?""

And maybe it was the man's tone, that voice of a perpetually judgmental teacher, but Hector abruptly felt uncertain. Had that been a mistake? ""I... didn't think it would be wise to delay,"" he said, struggling to maintain his composure.

Zeff said nothing further, however. He just kept looking at Hector with that stern-as-hell face of his.

That was just his normal expression, though, Hector knew. It was intimidating, but it didn't necessarily mean that he disapproved. He shouldn't read too much into it, he decided.

Or tried to decide, at least.

He was suddenly feeling more self-conscious. Maybe because everyone was staring at him.

'You made the right call,' came Garovel's words, cloaked in the echo of privacy.

Hector had to consciously avoid reacting to that, but it was a relief to hear. Had Garovel guessed what he was thinking? Yeah, he probably did, didn't he?

Heh. Dammit."  
"2736

Axiolis floated forward. 'I would like to speak to Worwal.'

Worwal was Abbas' reaper, as Hector recalled. Hector saw no reason to get in Axiolis' way and so just motioned toward Levinox. ""He said that they were heading for the border right away, so he might be too busy to talk, but feel free to give it a shot.""

Axiolis just nodded and hovered closer.

""I want to head out soon, too,"" added Hector, focusing on the

urgency of the task ahead. That always seemed to be the best way of distracting himself from his feelings of insecurity. To just concentrate on what needed doing immediately. ""I'll need Levinox to come with me, so we can work out the best location to meet up.""

Dimas, who was not one to chime in very frequently, cocked an eyebrow at him. ""You intend to go personally?""

Hector didn't know why the man seemed surprised. ""Of course I do. I'd like for everything go smoothly and quietly, but if the Sandlords end up attracting attention from the Lorentians, then I should be there to help smooth things over with the government.""

The Lord Sebolt's eyes shifted to Hector's left, where Lynn was standing. ""And what of your guests?""

Ah...

Hmm.

The Queen had just talked about staying a full day at Warrenhold. Moreover, he knew that he and she still had quite a bit to discuss with regards to Lorent. If he suddenly decided to leave, it might look he was trying to avoid her--or that he just didn't care what she had to say.

Agh.

Either way, he still felt like he needed to be there for the Sandlords, right now. He'd have to go and talk to her before he left. According to Garovel, lords weren't supposed to apologize, but for inconveniencing the Queen, an exception definitely needed to be made, Hector felt."  
"2737

""I'll go talk to the Queen, right now,"" said Hector. ""Levinox, please meet me at the Entry Tower in half an hour.""

'Okay.' He motioned to two other reapers behind him. 'Rokoz and Orongel are also connected to the scouting team. They should probably come with us, too, in case something happens to my connection.'

Hector paused at that, thinking it over. It was a fair point. If Cristina Sebolt somehow ended up killed, captured, or separated from the

Sandlords, then meeting up with them would become a lot more difficult.

But he didn't want to overcommit, either. These three reapers were their only connection to the scouting team--and by extension, the Sandlords. The scouting team did have more non-servant members as backup, but Hector didn't want to rely on them unless he had to. The non-servants of the team were meant to provide support for the servants in the field, not to send intel back to Warrenhold. He didn't want to divide their attention any more than was absolutely necessary when lives were on the line.

""Alright, but not both of them,"" said Hector. ""One reaper needs to stay here and keep Warrenhold updated on what's happening out there.""

The three reapers looked between themselves for a moment, then gave Hector an acknowledging nod.

'Very well,' said Levinox.

And with that, he left the Rainlord heads there to converse with the scouting reapers and Sandlords. They probably had a lot to talk about and not much time to do it in.

He made his way over to the Tower of Night again.

Lynn followed, of course. ""Seems like you're being pulled in a hundred different directions, lately.""

""Sorry,"" said Hector. ""I was... really looking forward to spending time with you and the Queen tomorrow.""

""Today, you mean. It's after midnight already.""

""Right."" He wondered if there was anything he could do to make it up to them."

"2738

When they arrived at the Queen's room, Hector reached toward the door to knock on it, but her voice arrived first.

""Enter.""

They did so and found her sitting on the edge of her bed with the adjacent lamp to her turned on. Mehlsanz was floating there next to her, which explained how she'd known they were there before Hector even knocked.

There was something else, however, which probably shouldn't have been an issue but was.

The Queen was in a nightgown.

It wasn't particularly revealing, but it still made Hector feel intensely awkward all of a sudden. Where did she even get that? Hector hadn't seen any luggage when she and Lynn arrived.

Ah, Ms. Rogers had probably procured it for her, hadn't she?

""Mehlsanz informs me that something has happened,"" said Helen.

Hector did his best to explain, though it was made more difficult because he didn't know where to put his eyes.

""...So you will be leaving for Lorent immediately, then,"" she summarized.

""Y-yes.""

""I see..."

There arrived a long pause.

Then the Queen stood up from her bed and started toward the bathroom. ""What coincidental timing. I was just thinking about paying a visit to Lorent, myself.""

Hector blinked, awkwardness forgotten, and he exchanged looks with Lynn.

She seemed just as surprised.

""Y-your Highness,"" said Lynn, ""it could be very dangerous. You really shouldn't--""

""Oh, I know."" The Queen assessed her own hair in the bathroom's mirror while speaking through the open doorway. ""I will not be accompanying you on your mission. I will simply be going to Riverton, P.J. and meeting with President Dance.""

Lynn shook her head, not with disapproval but with confusion. ""What? Why?""

""I was planning to do so soon, anyway. Now seems like a good time. Hector wishes to operate discretely, no? But he has become quite famous there. My presence in Lorent will provide a helpful distraction for both the government and the media.""

"2739

That was... one way of looking at it, Hector supposed. He couldn't help feeling like there was more to her reasoning here, though. ""Are you sure it'll be that easy? Won't they also try to beef up their security while hosting such an important guest?""

""Perhaps,"" said the Queen, ""but such increases would be limited to P.J., I am sure, and you are heading for the border, are you not?""

""Yeah..."

""Then there should be no problem. And besides, if the Lorentians catch you acting suspiciously, I will be there to bail you out. So to speak.""

Hector looked to Garovel for help.

The reaper shrugged. 'Doesn't sound like we can change her mind,' he said privately.

Hector was getting that impression as well and breathed a sigh.

""Alright, then, uh... I guess I'll try to pay you a visit in P.J. when I can, then.""

""Oh?"" said the Queen, looking away from her mirror to eye him. ""You are not intending to march the Sandlords right up to Riverton Hall, I hope.""

""No, no. I'll find them a suitable place to rest first, of course.""

""In Lorent or in Atreya?'

Ah. The big question. ""Well, I was thinking Lorent first, but if you don't mind me bringing them all the way here to Warrenhold, then..."

""I do not mind. But will your Rainlords?""

""No, they're worried about them even more than we are.""

""Mm.""

He still couldn't see her again, and he couldn't tell what she was doing.

""I, uh... I gotta say, Your Highness, I'm a little surprised that you aren't pushing back more against providing refuge for them..."

""Hmph. I resent what you are implying. Abbas Saqqaf himself has come to you for help. What did you imagine I would do? Order you to turn a blind eye like some stone-hearted louse?""

""No, I just mean... I know it's not exactly an ideal situation.""

"2740

""Heh. You have a talent for understatement, Hector."" She moved away from the mirror and disappeared deeper into the bathroom. ""But the Sandlords are our allies--and valuable ones, at that. If they have come to us in their hour of need, we should not turn them away.""

Hector could only agree.

And yet, it did feel a little strange, hearing all this from her. While the Sandlords were indeed allies, there was the minor issue of Helen's own relationship with them.

It wasn't even a year ago when Helen had been run out of Sescoria by a handful of Abolish terrorists. Certainly, if she had been able to acquire the Sandlords' aid at that critical time, they would have been able to make quick work of Abolish--and saved everyone a lot of trouble in the process.

But obviously, that hadn't happened.

Atreya's alliance with the Sandlords stemmed from a political marriage between Helen's brother, Prince Meriwether, and Nasira Saqqaf. And while Prince Meriwether had turned against the conspirators at the end, he had still been a part of the inner circle that had ousted her in the first place.



So ultimately, in the Queen's own hour of need, she could not go to the Sandlords for help. Yet here she now was, telling him that they needed to behave like good allies.

She wasn't wrong, of course, but Hector couldn't help sensing a level of awkwardness beneath this whole situation. He had to wonder if she harbored any feelings of resentment toward them.

Probably not, he figured. She was the Queen. She had to be dignified and stuff. Above that kind of thing.

...Right?

""You're not concerned about Atreya getting dragged into the war by helping them?"" asked Hector.

""Of course I am concerned about that,"" said the Queen. ""But I am also concerned about the war coming to our doorstep while we have few strong allies who are willing and able to support us.""

"2741

'I have to agree,' said Garovel. 'If Abolish manages to conquer western Sair as well, then that will almost certainly pull the neighboring Intarians into the war, whether they like it or not. And if Intar enters, it has the power to impact all five war fronts at once. Which is why I'm thinking that Abolish won't actually try to finish Sair off--or at least, not yet. It seems more likely to me that they will want to expand their influence AROUND Intar first.'

'Which would mean invading Callum next,' said Meslhanz, 'followed by Lorent, and then quite possibly Atreya.'

'Yes,' said Garovel. 'I doubt they consider us anything more than a speck on the map, at the moment, so there's a slight chance they might just pass us by and not even bother invading, but that's one of the best-case scenarios, as far as I'm concerned.'

'I don't know about that,' said Mehlsanz. 'The best-cases would all involve Abolish being defeated before even getting close to us again.'

'Mm. Call me a pessimist, but that sounds too optimistic to even humor.'

The Queen reemerged from the bathroom, having redonné her dark attire from when she'd first arrived at Warrenhold. ""In any case, we should not dawdle. Matters must be attended to. I look forward to seeing you in Lorent, Hector. Hopefully, we have a greater opportunity for a long talk.""

From there, the conversation didn't last much longer. They said their goodbyes and went their separate ways, the Queen and Lynn leaving first.

Hector made a quick trip over to his own room since it was so close and changed into some clothes that he didn't mind getting destroyed. Unfortunately, he didn't have a black cloak at his disposal like his royal guests did, but he had plenty of dark coats and pants--and of course, the Scarf of Amordiin.

It didn't take him long before he was ready, and he made for the Entry Tower to meet up with Levinox."

"2742

When he arrived, he found the reaper in question there waiting for him.

Along with a whole bunch of other people.

And for some reason, Hector found that surprising. He'd intended to go alone, but that seemed like an altogether foolish notion all of a sudden--not because it would be dangerous for him to do so, but just because the Rainlords simply wouldn't allow it.

The sight of them all there pulled a faint smile out of him as he approached. ""You guys really don't need to come with me,"" he tried, knowing it was most likely a futile effort.

'Yeah, what are you all thinking?' said Mevox, the reaper of Salvador Delaguna. 'We'll be just fine without your help.'

'Ah, yes, agreed,' said Iziol. 'Dimas and I must obviously go with him, but the rest of you are unneeded.'

'You're all adorable,' said Voreese, only then making Hector notice that she and Roman were there in the crowd. 'Roman and I are all the assistance Hector needs. Too many of you clods will just slow us down.'

Axiolis hovered forward as well. 'Amusing, but let us be serious. A large group would attract attention. You wish to be fast and quiet, yes? Then we should send only those of us who are most suited to that end.'

'Heh, well, no offense, but I'd say that eliminates ol' Zeffy boy,' said Mevox.

Zeff gave the reaper a look but said nothing.

'As much as we might like to accompany you, we feel that it is best we stay here,' said Axiolis.

Which Hector found surprising. And quite agreeable. Zeff did have Marcos and Ramira to look after, so it made plenty of sense.

'I'm glad you think so,' said Garovel. 'We'll be more at ease knowing that Warrenhold is safe in your hands.'

Axiolis just nodded."

"2743

""A part of me thinks that you should be staying as well,"" said Zeff, looking at Hector. ""Any among us could serve as a reasonable liaison without putting you in danger.""

Hector met the man's hard gaze for a moment. His tone was harsh, but Hector still somehow sensed a warmth in them.

Zeff was worried about him. Or he just didn't think Hector could handle it. Maybe a little of both.

""...Only 'a part' of you thinks that?"" said Hector, trying to restrain his smile.

Zeff did not react to his prodding, however, and merely maintained the same stony expression as always.

Well, that was fine. Hector decided to change the subject. ""A small group, then,"" he said. ""Dimas and Roman are easy choices because you both have such great aerial mobility.""

Those two exchanged glances with one another.

""Hmm,"" Hector continued, ""and I feel like Mevox will throw a fit if I don't bring him and Salvador.""

'Whoa, hey now!' said Mevox. 'I take offense to that, Mr. Warrenlord! You're not allowed to talk that kind of shit to me! We don't know each other well enough yet!'

""Oh, I think he knows plenty about you already,"" said Salvador with a chortle.

'Ah, and you've turned my own servant against me, I see. Truly, a wicked mind is leading this operation. I fear for all our safety now.'

""We can leave him behind, if you want,"" said Salvador. ""Lock him in an iron box. I give you my consent.""

'I'm pretty sure it's MY consent that's important here!'

""Eh.""

Hector assessed the remaining candidates. Horatio Blackburn, Joana Cortes, and a few more Sebolts and Delagunas. ""Horatio and Joana, I would like the two of you to stay, as well.""

They both frowned.

""Why?"" said Joana."

"2744

Because she was Zeff's one and only sister, that was why. Plus, her husband Rick was incredibly helpful in the reconstruction of Warrenhold. But most of all, Hector didn't want to take so many of the family heads with him.

Only the last reason sounded good enough to vocalize, though. ""I don't think it would be wise to bring the heads of all the families. We already have Evangelina out in the field.""

Joana's frown deepened, but she said nothing further.

Horatio's expression was tough to read. The man looked a bit haggard,

but he usually looked that way, of late. He and Dimas had only very recently become the heads of their respective Houses, but Horatio seemed to be having a significantly harder time with the transition than Dimas did.

Many times now, Hector had wondered why that might be. He'd offered to lend the man an ear, if he needed one, but Horatio always politely declined.

Truthfully, Hector was worried about the guy in more ways than just one. Sending him out on a mission right now didn't seem like a good idea, if for no other reason than because he still seemed to be finding his footing.

All the Houses had suffered in one way or another, but House Blackburn was in an especially peculiar situation. The former head, Ismael Blackburn, had been killed by Ivan at Dunehall. Right in front of Hector's eyes, no less. And in the aftermath, his wife, Nere Blackburn, apparently had a mental breakdown. Hence why they had all turned to Horatio and not her.

However, Nere had recently returned to taking a leadership role. Sort of. From what Hector had seen, it was mostly Sentsia, the woman's reaper, who did the talking.

It was all quite odd, and Hector could tell that there was a lot more going on with them than he knew about. He hoped that he would be able to grow closer with them one day and learn more of their history--and of what was troubling them so much, perhaps--but he didn't want to rush things. They were a grieving family, after all."

"2745

With the team more or less decided on, there wasn't much else to do other than leave. A couple more Rainlords ended up joining from House Sebolt--as well with Matteo Delaguna, as always. Hector had been about to ask where that guy was when he suddenly appeared, clad all in black and ready to go.

They ascended the Entry Tower together and headed over to the halfway-constructed garage. When finished, it would be similar in size to the underground bunker that Hector and Colt had used when on the run from the law. This one connected to the Entry Tower just below the

top level and already had enough space in it for a dozen or so large vehicles.

At the moment, there were only a few here, but the team didn't need more than one. They all piled into a black SUV, save Roman and Dimas. Matteo got behind the wheel, started the engine, and drove it up the ramp and out onto the freshly-paved surface.

Matteo just headed toward the gate, apparently thinking that they would be driving the whole way there.

Dimas Sebolt, however, had other plans.

The vehicle lifted off the ground, ignoring gravity and flying over to Dimas and Roman, who were already headed north.

Hector had the front passenger seat, and Matteo just gave him a flat look along with a few dull blinks. Then he turned the engine off again and sighed before leaning back in his seat.

Hector hadn't quite expected Dimas to just take the initiative like this, either, but it did seem pretty convenient. And from what Hector understood, after what had happened to his last two airplanes, Roman hadn't been eager to get his hands on a third one just yet, even as a rental.

It wasn't the most comfortable flight, of course. The car wasn't exactly aerodynamic, and it definitely wasn't pressurized properly; but that didn't bother the group of undead servants and incorporeal reapers very much."

"2746

Hector wondered if Dimas could somehow make this a more viable means of travel for normal people. Could his gravity alteration power be used to vacuum seal and pressurize the vehicle? Or could it be used to counter the effects of air resistance to mitigate turbulence?

He felt like it might be doable, but without knowing more about the Dimas' power actually functioning on a technical level, Hector couldn't be sure. At the very least, it seemed like it would be a lot more complicated than just wrapping the car in a gravity bubble.

Whatever the case, they appeared to be moving at pretty good clip.

The landscape below was mostly dark, but the lights from roadways and small homesteads were passing by relatively quickly. In that regard, at least, it didn't feel much different from a normal flight.

Lorent was a big country, though, and its border with Callum was pretty far. It would probably be a few hours before they arrived, Hector figured. And with all the noise from the roaring wind, it was almost impossible to hold a conversation.

With physical voices, at least.

The reapers settled in rather quickly and began talking, as usual.

Garovel asked one question in particular that caught Hector's attention. 'Have you been able to learn anything else from Lord Abbas about the situation in Sair?'

'Indeed,' said Levinox. 'Even before their forces in Kuros were scattered, many of their people were already unaccounted for. He doesn't have confirmed numbers at the moment, but he fears that even after regrouping, there will be a large number who are MIA.'

'Does he know the whereabouts of Lord Asad Najir?' said Garovel.

'Zeff asked that earlier,' said Levinox. 'Abbas said that Asad is currently unaccounted for, but that he was on the front line at Uego, where the heat of the battle took place.'

Oh no.

The reaper said nothing further, but he didn't have to."  
"2747

Hector tried to keep listening, but he found it difficult. Even with Focus allowing him to divide his attention, it was hard to let any of what the reapers were saying into his head now. They were saying something about machines and armor, but Hector's mind was too far gone.

If Asad had been on the front line, where the Mad Demon himself had been, then anything could have happened. He could be captured or dead or even still fighting for his life at this very moment. He could've been on the run or trapped somewhere or leading his own band of refugees like Abbas.

Hector just didn't understand how this could be true. Rasalased would have warned him. He would have. This made no sense. So was Levinox wrong? Was Abbas mistaken?

The Shard was right here in his pocket. Hector had been sure to bring it with him.

He'd been trying to contact Rasalased again ever since that night when he accidentally did it while asleep, but after so many repeated failures, he'd begun to think it was just straight up impossible. That night must have been a fluke or something. He'd been about ready to call it quits, at least until he thought of some other way to approach the problem.

But now.

Now he was just mad. And confused. Something obviously wasn't right here.

He needed to understand. More than anything else, he needed that. It was the single most important thing in the world, at the moment. Why the fuck had Rasalased not warned him about what was going to happen? Did Rasalased just not know? Was Morgunov just that powerful? Was Asad actually just fine? Or was something else going on entirely?

Unconsciously, he reached into the vest pocket of his coat and clutched the Shard tightly with one hand. And with frustration filling his mind, with emotion and determination filling his heart, he closed his eyes and concentrated, pouring as much of his soul power into the Shard as he could possibly cram in there."

"2748 -- CCXLVI.

And instantly, he felt an enormous shift take place.

His mind was divided more noticeably than a moment ago. He was still in the car, being carried through the sky. He could sense himself there, feel his limbs, hear the half-muted words of the reapers passing through his head.

He was somewhere else, too. Somewhere different. Deeper. Yet still tethered to himself.



Maybe this was what they called an out-of-body experience.

Hmm. Or maybe not. It felt similar to when he'd contacted Rasalased the last time, but not exactly the same. Probably because his physical body wasn't asleep.

Or was it? Shit, this was confusing. He felt split, yet whole. Near, yet far.

And the Shard. It was in his hand, yet all around him. It pulsed with life, reverberating like a heartbeat. Like his own heartbeat.

""Young Hector,"" came that familiar voice.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Six: 'O, drowning Sand...'

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""Rasalased,"" said Hector. ""Finally. I've been trying to reach you for days now.""

""Yes, you have.""

That response gave him pause. ""...Have you been avoiding me?""

""Yes, I have.""

""Why? You know what's happening out there, don't you? You must!""

""Because terrible though it may be, I knew you would seek to interfere, had I warned you.""

Hector took a moment to think about that. ""You think I would've run in to fight Morgunov like some kind of moron?""

""No."" The Dry God allowed a beat to pass. ""Then again, perhaps, yes. But that is not the only reason I wished for you not to interfere.""

""And what does that mean?""

""Morgunov, as you call him, may be exactly who the Lion needed to encounter.""

""What?!"

""It is difficult to explain.""

""Yeah, it sounds like it! But I'd like you to try, anyway!""

""You must promise not to go after the Lion, Young Hector. There can be no victory if you do.""

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"2749

Hector put two and two together. ""Are you telling me that Morgunov is currently holding Asad hostage?""

Rasalased made no response, however.

""And you know where they are, too,"" Hector surmised.

""It matters little. I will not tell you something that will only lead to your own demise.""

Well. Hector didn't necessarily disagree on that particular point. He

might've been able to skate by with Ivan and Leo, but those were just freak accidents. There was absolutely no way in hell that he would be able to pull anything like that off again, much less against the Mad Demon, of all people.

But hearing Rasalased say all that made Hector curious about something else. ""...You're actually able to see my death? That far into the future?""

""It would not be very far at all. Trust me.""

""Ah..."" Okay. Damn. That degree of roasting felt a little uncalled for, but alright. ""Er... can you at least confirm for me that Asad is safe, right now?""

""Of course he is not safe. He has never been in more danger in his life.""

Hector sighed. ""You're not helping your case here, Rasalased...""

""It is an experience that he must have, else he will be unable to grow and meet me.""

""Say what? How could that be true?""

""I will not lie to you. He may die. Morgunov may simply extract what he pleases from the Lion and then kill him immediately. But the reaper has escaped, and the risk, I believe, is worth it. No other opportunity may arise.""

That brought a whole host of new questions to Hector's mind, but one in particular stood out. ""What does Morgunov want from Asad?""

""Me, I suspect.""

""What?!""

""Morgunov seeks that which lies beyond this world. And he believes I may be able to help him find it. This much, he has made obvious. But his intentions thereafter, I do not know. Chaos guards his mind.""

"2750

Hector's thoughts were racing. Morgunov was after Rasalased? Worse

news, he could hardly imagine. ""What do you intend to do?""

""The only thing that I can. Wait.""

""Are you kidding? You plan to just LET Morgunov find you?""

""As much as he seeks to use me, I too seek to use him. There is much I may be able to learn from such an experience. Which is not something I can often say.""

Oh god, what the fuck? ""But you have no idea what he'll do to you!""

""Yes.""

""And--there's still Asad! He's--!""

""Yes. This will be difficult for him.""

Hector couldn't believe what he was hearing. Rasalased sounded so cold. So matter-of-fact.

But maybe he shouldn't have been surprised. In their first encounter, sure, Rasalased had made a favorable impression upon him. He'd seemed a little mixed up, but Hector's overall feeling was that the Dry God ultimately wanted what was best for everyone. For him. For the Sandlords. For the Rainlords, too.

Was it really that straightforward, though? Were people always as uncomplicated as that? What about ""gods,"" then?

Rasalased barely even seemed human now. What did he really want, Hector wondered? Being trapped in the Shards like that--what could he want? It wasn't like he was devoid of all desires or anything, right? He'd ""wanted"" to help Hector before, seemingly.

Hmm.

""...You are disappointed in me,"" said Rasalased.

Was he? Perhaps he was. ""I'm just... trying to understand you, is all.""

""It is not through safe journeys and easy trials that great deeds are achieved, Young Hector.""

Hector still didn't like what he was hearing, but he tried to listen carefully. ""...Okay. But what 'great deed' are you trying to achieve, then?""

""Me? Nothing at all. My only aim is to help others do thusly. My time has long passed.""

""...Time is not time, Rasalased.""

And for a while, the Dry God remained quiet. ""Heh. Perhaps so.""  
"2751

""What you decide to do now,"" said Hector, ""could have... no, it will have very far-reaching consequences.""

""I am aware.""

""Are you? If you allow Morgunov to get his hands on you--""

""We will have an interesting conversation. I have been wanting to meet these modern 'emperors' and evaluate them. It will be a good opportunity. And a dangerous one.""

Hector wanted to sigh. Maybe he needed to rethink his approach here. He recalled something that Garovel told him about the Shards, about them being catalysts for unlocking great power. That had to be what Rasalased was getting at here, in his own roundabout way.

""...You want Asad to harness the power of your Shards, don't you?"" said Hector.

""Heh.""

What? What did 'heh' mean? Agh. ""Rasalased...""

""If I allow the new Lion to unseal my soul, it would do more than simply amplify his strength. Much more.""

""Er... what do you mean, exactly?""

""There is far too much to explain, Young Hector. But as a Shardkeeper, you must already have some idea of what I speak, no?""

""Uh... Shardkeeper? I didn't realize this thing came with a title, too...""

The Dry God gave a brief laugh that seemed to make the whole world tremble. ""Well, you are a bit more than a Shardkeeper, in truth. That

title refers merely to anyone who holds one of my Shards, however fleeting. Shardkeepers are not normally able to converse with me so easily.""

""Er, I see...""

""If and when the Lion unseals my soul, all Shardkeepers will have their strength amplified as well. But as so few Shards remain, that includes only you and Young Emiliana Eirwen Elroy.""

Oh. Right.

Yeah, Garovel had mentioned that, too, hadn't he? Somehow, Hector had forgotten about that part. He'd thought it was just Asad who would be affected.

""What bitter irony that a Rainlord should now be counted among my Shardkeepers. And a trustworthy one, at that. The world truly is an absurd place.""

"2752

Hector wasn't quite sure what to say now. A power boost from the Shards sounded pretty fucking sweet, quite frankly.

""And there would be other effects as well,"" said Rasalased. ""As I said, there is far too much explain.""

""Well, I'm not busy. I've got plenty of... opportunity to listen to you, right now.""

""Heh. Yes. But there are more important matters to discuss, no?""

Were there? Shit, there probably were.

""You never know what may happen. Our conversations have a way of ending prematurely.""

Okay, now that was definitely true. He'd always kinda felt like Rasalased was to blame for that, though. Hmm.

""Ask about what you feel is most pressing, Young Hector.""

If he didn't know any better, he would've thought Ras was worried

about time.

But he wasn't wrong. And the more he thought about it, the more Hector realized there was a still a rather obvious point of concern. ""...What if Morgunov gets his hands on one of the Shards? That'd make him a Shardkeeper, too, wouldn't it?""

""Indeed. Which is why I do not intend to let the Lion unseal my soul until he is free again.""

""Hmm.""

""But that is only my intent. If I feel that I am left with no other choice, I may allow it before then.""

""Ah... you mean if Morgunov threatens to kill Asad and Qorvass if you don't let him unlock the power?""

""No. I would sooner let the new Lion die than allow my power to fall into Morgunov's hands.""

Shit. Brutal. Hector had a rather strong feeling that Asad and Qorvass would agree with that sentiment, though. But that did beg the question. ""How would you end up with no other choice, then?""

""If the existence of all my remaining kin were to be threatened--truly threatened--then that may change my mind. It would depend on the circumstances.""

"2753

He was talking about the complete destruction of Sandlords.

Genocide, Hector realized.

And by all accounts, the Mad Demon of Abolish was absolutely someone who might try to make that happen--especially if he discovered that it would motivate Rasalased.

Aw, fuck. Hector could already see this going terribly.

""...And how do you expect Asad to escape Morgunov's clutches?""

""That, I do not know. But there is little chance that Morgunov will kill



him before getting what he wants.""

Well, that was true, Hector supposed. They probably had time on their hands, though Hector could only imagine what type of horrible captivity Asad must have been enduring, right now.

Agh, he wished he could do more. Even if Ras was willing to tell him where Asad was, what difference would it make? Short of Sermung himself, who in the world could possibly hope to rescue Asad Najir?

Hmm.

The more he thought about it, the more that seemed like the only real option.

""...Rasalased, do you know anything about Sermung? Like, his current whereabouts, I mean?""

""You would seek his aid?""

""Eh, I just... I don't know. That would be pretty dangerous for me to do while the Rainlords are in my home. But, uh... it was just a thought, I guess. So you can't, like, sense his super-powerful soul from afar or something?""

""I am afraid not. The world is a large and crowded place. And the strongest among you often have a desire to conceal yourselves.""

""Are you saying Sermung is able to hide his soul power from you?""

""Perhaps. Perhaps not.""

Ah. Hector had been wondering when that shit would start again.

""It may help if I knew where to search for him. Alas, I do not.""

Damn. Hector had to wonder what the most powerful man in the world was doing right now. Maybe he was outside his area of expertise here, but this seemed like exactly the kind of problem that the Crystal Titan would be interested in."

"2754

Surely, the emperor of the Vanguard would want to prevent an

emperor of Abolish from acquiring new and dangerous power. But other than himself, how many people knew about this situation, Hector wondered? It certainly seemed like the Sandlords had been trying to keep Rasalased's existence a secret, so it was a fair bet that Sermung didn't know what Morgunov's plan here was.

Which meant that someone needed to tell him... unless, of course, the Sandlords had already managed to. But from the sound of things, they'd been far too busy.

Agh. He was probably just being presumptuous, though. This was the Vanguard. They had all kinds of resources at their disposal. They even had their own teams of Sparrows, according to Hanton Gaolanet. Their spy network was probably spectacular.

...But if that were true, then why had Sermung allowed this to happen in the first place? If he knew what Morgunov was after, he would've surely come to Sair himself and stopped him, right?

Hmm.

Yeah, this was above his pay-grade for sure, Hector figured.

He could worry about that later. He didn't know how much longer this conversation would last, so he tried to think of what else he should ask about.

It didn't take him long to come up with something. ""The last time we spoke, you told me to be wary of pretenders.""

""Yes.""

""What did you mean?""

""Was that not clear? Those who sought to use you for their own gain? Those who hid their true intentions from you? Those who harbored dark secrets within their souls? There were many who fit the term.""

""Ah... but could you, like, gimme some names or something?""

""I am not good with names.""

""Oh, right, you told me something like that before, didn't you?""

""Ah, did I? Splendid. No further explanation is required, then.""

""Well, I don't know about that. Maybe you could narrow--""

""What are your intentions for my kin, Young Hector? You are going to meet them, are you not?""

"2755

""Yeah, alright, just ignore me. That's fine."" Hector didn't think he would be able to get Rasalased to talk about anything he didn't want to. ""But, uh... regarding the Sandlords, I just want to help them stay safe. Beyond that, I wouldn't say I really have any 'intentions' for them.""

""Is that so?""

""Er. Yeah. Why do you sound so curious about that?"" Hector might've been squinting with his physical body, but he couldn't quite tell in this weird headspace or whatever it was. ""Hold on. Can't you just read my mind or something?""

""Alas, I cannot.""

""What? Why not? You were doing that all the time before.""

""Yes, but your aura has grown significantly since then.""

Hector stuck on that remark for a moment. Yeah, there was another subject he needed to ask about. ""What can you tell me about auras?""

""It is a power that belongs to all, though few are able to sense it. Even I can only do so in a limited capacity.""

""It seems to be a specialty of the Sparrows,"" said Hector.

""Ah, yes, the Wrobels. You are being careful of them, I trust?""

""Er, yeah.""

""...Your answer lacks confidence, Young Hector.""

""Well, that's not too abnormal for me.""

""Hrm.""

""Anyway, keep telling me about auras, please. So they're like a hidden power that everyone has? Even non-servants?""

Rasalased took a moment before continuing. ""Yes. And no.""

""Ah, thanks for clearing that up.""

""Theoretically, I believe, all may possess the power of aura. But not all do.""

""Uh, okay..."

""I believe it is because an aura is not itself an independent power.""

""...What do you mean?"

""Your materialization, for example. That is an independent power. It relies not on anything else, other than you. Your soul power, as well. That is independent.""

""Hmm. But don't those both 'depend' on the connection I have with my reaper?"

""Yes, but that is a different manner of dependency than that which I speak of. Your materialization and soul power do not directly affect one another. If one grows, it does not impact your skill with the other.""

"2756

""So you're telling me aura is dependent on another power?"

""Yes. You might say that it is a product of your entire self. All of your abilities. Even the parts of you which hold no physical power, such as your emotions and memories, are retained within your aura.""

""Huh..." Hector supposed that made sense with what he knew of auras so far. It was still a little strange to imagine, though. ""So... if my aura continues to grow, what will it do for me? Like, what are the actual effects of it?"

""Ah. A good question. Ultimately, no two auras are identical. Many may share similar attributes--especially if the individuals they belong to are of similar mindsets--but their effects can vary greatly.""

""Hmm.""

""An aura born from a vicious murderer will have quite different effects than one born from a gentle nurturer, for example.""

""I see. And how is a new aura 'born,' exactly?""

""Another good question. Had I still a body, perhaps I would be researching that very subject.""

""You don't even have a guess?""

""Perhaps. Perhaps not.""

Yep. On the whole, Hector couldn't be too disappointed. Rasalased seemed to be more coherent now than in any of their previous conversations. He felt like he was learning a lot. ""Okay, uh... then can you tell me what the current effects of my aura are?""

""Hrm. No.""

Well, fuck. ""Really? Not at all?""

""It is shielding your thoughts from me. That much is obvious.""

""Right...""

""Yours is a peculiar aura.""

""Uh. It is?""

""Yes. It is warm and friendly, yet not docile. It is comforting, yet not self-certain. It is protective, yet also somewhat aggressive, as if readying itself to boil.""

Hector wasn't too sure what to make of any of that, especially those last bits. Aggressive? Really? And it was supposed to be a reflection of himself?

Hmm."

"2757

""If you find that concerning,"" said Rasalased, ""then you should be mindful of precisely what kind of man you are becoming.""

Hector mulled that point over. ""...You think I'm turning into a bad

person?"

"Heh. Not at all, Young Hector. However, I think a man who never questions himself in these ways is not a man who should be trusted to determine right from wrong."

It sounded a bit like a lecture was coming his way, but Hector couldn't help pausing at the Dry God's words. This struck a chord with what Garovel had been talking about not too long ago, worrying about how much he had changed in a relatively short amount of time.

As much as a part of him wanted to dismiss Rasalased's concerns here, Hector felt like he should be careful. This was the wisdom of literal ancients that he was listening to. Just because it made him uncomfortable or because he didn't want to believe it could be true--that wasn't good enough reason to reject it without first giving it real consideration.

"Your power and influence are growing, Young Hector. This much is clear. And as a result, your role in events to come shall similarly change. Despite your age, you are fast approaching a point at which many older servants begin to struggle with the nature of their existence. The sweet allure of countless ideas and philosophies--born from your own mind and others--will eventually find you and try to win your favor. Some may even succeed, to the betterment of all.

"But if you are unable to pick and choose well, to hold true, then the suffering of one shall inevitably become the suffering of many. Your misery shall spread through the world like a plague, until eventually, if you are lucky, some kind soul finally grants you the heroic mercy of ending your monstrous life."

Holy fuck."

"2758

As Hector listened, he felt like he barely understood what Rasalased was trying to say, but if nothing else, it definitely seemed important. "...You've seen that type of thing happen before, I take it?"

"Of course," said Rasalased. "Even for non-servants, the confrontation with the self is all but inevitable. The weight of decades or even centuries of experience, knowledge, and responsibility--it will

instigate one form of change or another. You have already seen this, too, have you not? With that sheep of yours."

Ah. Hmm. ""Leo had his mind messed with by Ettol, though.""

""Perhaps. Or perhaps he merely had his existing traits amplified. It seems reasonable to me that the so-called God of Impulse might be able to prey upon one's weaknesses in such a way.""

Not a very comforting thought. Hector wanted to ask Ras about Ettol again, but he recalled him saying that he didn't know about him beyond the name. Better to stick to more immediately relevant and useful subjects, Hector figured. ""What's your opinion of Abbas Saqqaf?""

""Names mean little to me, Young Hector.""

""Oh, uh... the current head of Hahl Saqqaf? You know the name Saqqaf, at least, right?"" Which brought another question to the forefront of Hector's mind. ""Hey, what Hahl did you belong to, by the way?""

""You ask questions faster than I can answer them.""

""Er, sorry...""

""I was born to Hahl Duxan.""

""Oh. So Lord Hasan Duxan is your direct descendant, then?""

""No, the main family branch has deviated many times for a multitude of reasons.""

""Ah..."" Hmm, maybe that was a dumb thing to say.

""But yes, I am familiar with Hahl Saqqaf. How strange it is that they now hold so much power over my kin. I remember when they were naught but an afterthought among the Hahls. The weakest and most easily forgotten, by far.""

"2759

""Is that resentment I hear in your voice?"" said Hector.

""Heh. Perhaps. But they are my kin, nonetheless. A different part of

me is proud of what they have achieved. Including Abbas, of course."

"So you do know who he is, then."

"I have been following the head of Hahl Saqqaf's exploits for many years now, yes. But only just now, thanks to you, did I learn his name."

"That's... pretty weird, but alright. I guess, um, back when you helped me against the Salesman of Death, you knew that Lord Abbas was going to show up and help me, didn't you?"

"Ah. I knew of the possibility, yes. There could have been many other outcomes, however. Truthfully, I did not expect him to emerge victorious in that battle."

Hector paused at that bit of news. "Excuse me? What did you expect to happen, then?"

"I thought it more likely that the deal you struck with the Salesman, as you called him, would be the deciding factor."

Hector had to think back. That whole situation felt like some kind of crazy fever dream in his memory now, and it was a bit difficult to recall it with perfect clarity.

The "deal" that he'd struck with the Salesman of Death had, in short, been to help Abolish seize control of the Golden Fort in exchange for sparing the lives of the Rainlords.

And yeah, Hector remembered that the deal had been more or less agreed upon when Abbas Saqqaf suddenly showed up in his mechanized armor and took down the Salesman single-handedly. That had been unexpected, for sure.

But to think that it had surprised even Rasalased...

Hmm.

"So you thought I'd be in a really terrible situation right now," said Hector. "Caught between a deal with Abolish that threatened the lives of everyone I cared about and trying to help the Sandlords."

"Indeed."

"Great. That's, uh... real comforting, Rasalased."

"2760



""I would have offered more aid to you, assuming we were able to speak again thereafter,"" said the Dry God.

""...Did you have any reason to think that we would speak again?"" said Hector.

""Hrm. Does hope count as a reason?""

""Ugh..."

Rasalased laughed. ""In any event, I was quite impressed by Abbas Saqqaf. It is a relief to know that one so capable leads my kin during these uncertain times.""

Hector caught that last word and held onto it for a while, thinking. ""You seem... a little different, Rasalased.""

""Do I?""

""Yeah. You're a little more... chipper, I guess. And you keep saying the word 'time' without telling me how it's not actually time or whatever.""

""I see.""

And silence arrived.

Hector waited, but it seemed like he would have to be the one to say something again. ""You feelin' okay?""

""Now that you mention, I suppose I do feel a bit different from usual. How odd.""

""Do you have any idea why that might be?""

""Well, time is indeed not time. Perhaps I have just grown a bit forgetful. Thank you for reminding me.""

""That wasn't really what I was trying to--""

""I shall try to be more vigilant in the future.""

""Oh. Uh. Good..."

""Alas, this conversation should come to an end. You will be arriving soon, and your attention should remain focused on my kin. Thank you for keeping me company, Young Hector.""

""Er, ah, no problem. Any, uh, last second advice for me?""

""Hold true, as always, Young Hector.""

""Ah...""

He didn't even get to say farewell before he was booted back into reality.

Hector blinked and shook his head, feeling a similar level of disorientation as waking up from a deep sleep. It took him a second to realize that he was in the same place, the front passenger seat of a car as it soared through the night sky."

"2761

The reapers were still conversing about one thing or another, but he could barely catch what they were they were saying. It seemed like they still had a bit more time before arrival.

His mind lingered on that conversation with Rasalased for a while, going over everything they'd talked about.

In the end, though, he couldn't help coming away with this very uncomfortable feeling. This feeling like Rasalased had been keeping something from him, like the Dry God had ended things prematurely for some reason.

And with everything else going on in the world right now, Hector didn't appreciate all the terrible things that might imply.

It made him wonder if something was going on with Asad, with his imprisonment. Or with something else entirely, perhaps. Considering how Rasalased had apparently chosen not to warn him about the attack on Sair, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility that the Dry God might do something like that again.

Hector sighed.

It was understandable, he supposed. Rasalased had his own reasons. Of course he did. Hector couldn't exactly fault him for that.

He couldn't help feeling a bit disillusioned, though. He'd have to be careful of growing too reliant on Rasalased for guidance.

At length, the deafening howl of wind around the vehicle began to lessen, and Hector could see the ground approaching through the window. Dimas Sebolt set the car down in the middle of an empty road.

Everyone exited together, wanting to stretch their legs and take in the landscape. They seemed to be pretty far away from civilization, though, because there wasn't much light to work with. Only the stars and a dim moon staved off pitch blackness.

According to Levinox, Abbas' group was already quite close. The reaper had been in constant communication with them, coordinating their approach by feeding information to Dimas during the flight."

"2762

His conversation with Rasalased hadn't felt all that long, but he knew full well that there was some sort of time dilation effect. The same thing had happened when he talked to him in his sleep. Most likely, several hours had already passed.

Yet even so, Hector was a bit surprised to hear that the Sandlords had made it all the way across Callum so quickly. Sure, they had already been in the country by the time his own party had left Warrenhold, so the distance traveled was probably similar or perhaps even shorter; but still, he'd expected the Callumi authorities to prove more of a hindrance to the Sandlords' progress.

Not to mention, there were supposed to be three hundred civilians with them. Hector wondered how Abbas' group was managing to move so many so quickly.

According to the reapers, the Lorent-Callum border was only a short hike to the east, but Hector couldn't see any kind of barrier out there in the dark. Only open plains. Hector asked Garovel privately if there were any nearby guards on patrol, but apparently, that wasn't a problem, either.

It was convenient, but it also made Hector concerned about the overall safety of Lorent as a nation. There was a war going on, and it was literally headed in this direction. Border security should've probably been something of a priority at the moment, shouldn't it have?

Maybe he would broach that subject the next time he visited Riverton Hall.

'Hold on,' said Levinox, drawing everyone's glance. 'The Sandlords are not alone, anymore.'

The group perked up collectively in the darkness, waiting agonizingly for elaboration. Hector could see the reaper's skeletal expression distorting with apparent confusion as he was no doubt trying his best to decipher the information he was receiving.

'...They're under attack,' Levinox finally said. 'Abolish caught up to them.'"

"2763 -- CCXLVII.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Seven: 'The hand that needs grasping...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

A string of explosions rocked the night sky, but Lord Abbas Saqqaf couldn't let that deter him. The suit could take it, and so could he. He soared through the onslaught head on and clobbered one of the Abolish bastards in midair.

Unable to stand up to the force of the impact, the enemy's body simply exploded into a cloud of blood.

That was one down, but there were plenty more left. Dozens of them-- and all flying, too. Only some of them seemed to be flying under their own power. His visor was picking up several identical high-energy readings among the group of hostiles. The speed of combat made it difficult to be certain, but he was fairly certain that he caught sight of machinery on their arms and backs.

More toys of the Mad Demon, Abbas figured.

But that was fine. He was mainly just glad there weren't any more of those hulking monstrosities here. He'd been forced to fend off two of those damn things back in Sair, and while he'd emerged victorious, the suit hadn't quite been the same since.

It was still mostly functional, thankfully, but it wasn't regenerating like it was supposed to. He would've like to run full system diagnostics to figure out what the problem was, but he would need at least eight uninterrupted hours to do so. That obviously wasn't possible when, for the past three days, he'd had to be combat ready at all times.

Even without diagnostics, though, he had an unsettling suspicion about what the problem might be. There weren't many things that could hamper regeneration for a sustained period of time, after all.

He had more pressing matters on his mind at the moment, however.

Abolish flies buzzed all around him, a veritable swarm. No doubt, they all hoped to be the one to deliver his head to their bosses, but none of them were going to succeed.

Apart, perhaps, from that one with the birds. The Man of Crows."  
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"2764

Gathering intel on him had become a priority since the beginning of the war, yet details had remained sparse all throughout. His apparent ability to manipulate flocks of black birds made little sense to Abbas' mind--and to the many reapers among his brethren, as well.

Because there was more to it than simply controlling them. If that were all it was, his ability might be easily explained by some sort of psychic connection developed via mutation. But no, those birds could do so much more. They were supernaturally resilient, able to withstand conventional firearms, extreme temperatures, and more force than even most servants. Plus, they could spit acid, fire, ice, electricity, toxic fumes, and even explosions.

And their agility. They were speedy little bastards, quick to dodge.

Strong, too. The Man of Crows often sat or even stood atop a cluster of them as if they were a solid platform. They sometimes went to the aid of his subordinate Abolishers, too, which was quite obnoxious.

The damned things were more akin to dragons than birds.

For a while, Abbas had thought they might also be machines, just disguised. But after blasting whole swathes of them to pieces personally, he saw that they were indeed biological.

That encounter had not earned Abbas much favor with the Man of Crows, it seemed. This was going to be their seventh clash in as many days. Even before the disaster at Uego, Albert Crowe had been gunning for him.

If the suit's systems were at optimal performance, and if he didn't have so many civilians to look after at the moment, Abbas might have welcomed the opportunity to end Crowe's obsession with him permanently. It certainly would've been one less major headache to worry about.

Crowe didn't care about having an honorable duel, however. He had the tactical advantage, and he didn't hesitate to keep pressing it.

Not that Abbas expected any better from Abolish, of course."  
"2765

If he hadn't recalibrated his visor and ocular replacements prior to escaping the Golden Fort, it would've been almost impossible for him to track the movement of Crowe's birds well enough to keep the civilians safe.

They were like giant tendrils, snaking and expanding through the air, scattering on a moment's notice and reconvening elsewhere just before striking again. And the collective power that their formations gave them was simply absurd. Abbas was probably the only one present who could hope to block or divert their assaults.

Which was saying quite a lot.

Much of Hahl Saqqaf was here with him, servant and non-servant alike. They had over two dozen fighters present, including his son Raheem, his grandson Amir, and even his great grandson Badat. As a

result, their entourage was a hastily assembled mixture of ground-based vehicles, deployable helicopters, and people simply being carried by servants--either physically or with abilities.

In the better moments, the servants had been able to carry everyone, even the vehicles, but they couldn't keep doing that when faced with an attack; so now the pace was slowed again while clusters of Saqqaf warriors broke off to engage the enemy.

Abbas was under no illusions, though. It was all resting on his shoulders, right now. His sons and cousins were strong, but if he fell in battle here, Abolish would probably kill or capture everyone.

For that reason, it may have seemed unwise to have Worwal with him during this fight. But the unfortunate truth of the matter was that they simply didn't know where else to go.

The prevalence of invisible aberrations had changed the nature of this war. Too many times, the Golden Council had received reports of reapers who had separated from their servants for their own safety, only to get ambushed and captured or killed.

But most of all, it was those damn machines of the Mad Demon. Even when reapers tried to escape by themselves into the ground, far and deep into the earth, those machines were still a threat.

They could show up anywhere at any moment, it seemed.

Abbas had a rather strong feeling that at least one or two of them was still chasing him, though perhaps that was just paranoia getting the better of him."

"2766

In an ideal world, Abbas would have loved the chance to capture one of the machines in order to study it. Haqq Najir had certainly harped on about that, requiring quite an irritating degree of convincing before finally realizing that such a feat was impossible. Abbas had seen it firsthand. When defeated, the machines annihilated themselves, leaving seemingly no trace behind.

Because of course they did. This was the Morgunov they were talking about. If anything, Abbas would have been even more mistrustful of



the machines if they didn't self-destruct in some way. That would have just made him wonder why Morgunov was allowing them to study his technology so easily.

Haqq was still quite young and naive in that way. A budding genius he might have been, but when would his arrogance stop causing him to underestimate others? Emperors, especially.

The boy had been helpful, though. After the fight with Ivan at Dunehall, Abbas had wanted to make upgrades to the suit right away. The world at large might have been praising him for his incredible victory, but he knew the truth. That fight had nearly been a disaster. It absolutely could have gone Ivan's way if conditions were even slightly different.

So Abbas had been doing his best to ignore all of the attention--even from the Vanguard, when he could.

To his mind, there had been no greater priority than elevating the suit to new heights as quickly as possible. He'd kicked the hornet's nest by capturing Ivan. This attack would have arrived eventually, and he needed to be prepared.

If only he could have done more.

Even in its sub-optimal condition, the suit was probably still more powerful now than it was when he'd faced the Salesman. The incredible, tide-shifting potency of the suit's fusion-propulsion system in that fight had greatly motivated him to find a way to weaponize that technology."

"2767

He hadn't had enough time to truly refine it, but with Haqq's help, a working prototype--the Ro'Hada 0-A--was now attached to his right arm.

And thank the benevolent gods for that.

Without it, he probably would have been killed by those two machines that ambushed him outside Kuros. The Ro'Hada--or the Dark God's Death in Mohssian--had made the difference in a critical moment when one of them had him pinned and the other was approaching, mere seconds away from barreling into him and destroying his already-

battered armor.

But it was unstable. The Ro'Hada may have saved him once, but he knew from his number crunching during development and testing that it was a weapon of last resort. Technically, there was still about a 1.328 percent chance that, whenever he pulled the trigger, it would create a chain reaction that would likely result in his death before the suppression system could kick in.

He had to be prepared for that whenever he chose use it.

...And also that there was, theoretically, a 0.0000000014 percent chance that the chain reaction would defeat the suppression system and create an explosion powerful enough to wipe out everything within two kilometers.

He hadn't mentioned that bit of math to anyone, not even Haqq. He was hoping to iron out that particular kink the next time he had access to a decent workshop.

Right now, though, he had to deal with Crowe and his lackeys, preferably without resorting to the Ro'Hada 0-A.

It wouldn't be easy. The cruise missile in his chest piece was no longer functional, as was one of the two drones in his shoulder.

He did, however, still have a few other tricks up his armored sleeve. Quite literally, in this case. His forearms concealed a dozen micro-RPG launchers of his own design."

"2768

With heat-seeking capability, omnidirectional quick-turn movement, and a maximum range of four hundred meters, these miniature missiles were perhaps Abbas' best means of crowd control. And Crowe's giant flocks of birds certainly qualified.

The mini-missiles were too recent of an addition to be permanently soul-strengthened like most of the suit, but that was no problem. He pressed his soul into them now and loosed a quarter of them from his left arm, then another quarter from his right.

The ones from his left whistled across the sky and ripped through the nearest flock with a series of air-shaking explosions.

The copious amount of smoke they left behind was also by design. With his soul power still lingering in it for a few moments, it provided an invaluable screen as he closed in.

And the best part was that he didn't have to worry about his own vision being obscured, because the quarter of mini-missiles from his right arm had not yet exploded, having been deployed for a slightly different purpose. They were, in fact, more than just missiles. They observed their surroundings, tracking enemy movement with coordinate data and sending it straight to the heads-up display on his visor.

With that information, Abbas still knew precisely where the Man of Crows and the five Abolishers around him were, even through the smoke.

There was no point in easing up off the throttle. He pushed the suit for more speed and went straight for Crowe.

The Man of Crows didn't have time to react. Abbas torpedoed straight through, taking an arm, leg, and half his rib cage with him. More blood splattered across the suit, staining it even further red than before.

Damn. That was the first solid hit in a while, but it obviously wouldn't be enough to overcome Crowe's regeneration. Moreover, his visor warned him of another flock already whipping toward him from what would otherwise have been his blind spot.

He jetted out of the way, though only just. Claws, acid, and flames scraped his right arm, doing minimal damage."

"2769

Five more hostiles were closing in, his visor warned him. Crowe's men. All using pan-rozum with various metallic elements. Abbas had identified each of them in previous encounters, but their names didn't matter to him, for the most part. He'd only wanted to know if there were other infamous names to be wary of. Thankfully, there weren't, but there was one who kept distinguishing himself as a more threatening opponent than the others.

Otto Konig. Abbas had never heard of him before this war, and according to the suit's database, he was a fixture of Crowe's otherwise

frequently-rotating cast of subordinates. That, at least, implied that he had the Man of Crows' trust. And after butting heads with him several times, Abbas could see why.

The way the man fought was not entirely unlike that of Melchor Blackburn. Not as refined or overwhelming, perhaps, but his aerial mobility might have been superior. Possibly. It had been many years since Abbas had sparred with Darktide, so perhaps that was an unfair assessment.

Either way, Konig was threatening enough that Abbas didn't want to let any of his kin fight him alone. He used the suit's visor to keep a near-constant track of both him and Crowe. If either of them got too far away, he would move to intercept.

Which was a problem, currently, because while Konig and the other four lackeys were coming in for another attack, Abbas just barely noticed that Crowe was instead moving toward the civilians.

This could not be allowed.

Abbas picked an opponent that wasn't Konig and blasted straight through him like a cannonball through a wet paper towel. Pan-rozum or not, their body couldn't hold up against a simultaneous full burn from the suit's six jets.

Konig gave chase, of course, as did the three slower enemies, but none of them would be able to catch him before he caught Crowe.

Another flock of birds, however: that was different story."  
"2770

A bombardment of ice and lightning arrived as the flock whipped toward him. He had to jet out of the way, unfortunately. If the suit was still able to regenerate properly, he would have simply ignored the attack--or even leaned into it, perhaps, and countered. He couldn't be so reckless here. The longer this fight went on, the more his resources dwindled.

He had the mini-missiles, though. They were one of the few systems that was still fully operational, regeneration and all.

For now, at least.

He deployed another quarter portion from each arm, and this time, both sets connected immediately. He would've been thrown off course completely if not for the suit's automated impact mitigation system. It excelled in helping him maintain optimal flight speed while in close proximity to his own targeted explosions.

The flock shriveled back, but it wasn't defeated. It would soon return, Abbas knew--probably sooner than his missiles finished regenerating, but he still had two more quarter portions on each arm if that happened.

He soared out of the smoke cloud, still intent on catching Crowe before he could attack the civilians.

But Crowe had turned around to face him--with four more flocks swirling around him, no less.

Crowe still wasn't fully regenerated from the earlier hit Abbas had landed. Another solid blow, perhaps to the head this time, might just finish him--at least for this fight.

It was like Crowe was daring him to go for it.

The four flocks were a challenge. If they were the ones to land a solid hit on him, they could probably penetrate his armor and weaken him enough to give Crowe a decisive advantage.

Or just outright kill him. That was unlikely, though.

Regardless, Abbas didn't intend to take such a risk. He had Crowe's attention again. That was all he needed in order to keep the civilians safe a little longer.

Maybe Crowe had a hard time comprehending that. Abbas didn't give a damn about proving which of them was stronger. Bravado was not a factor in his thinking.

Only the objective. The civilians. His kin."  
"2771

Abbas made a hard right turn, swooping up and away from Crowe and the civilian entourage on the ground. He could all but sense Crowe's

frustration with that avoidant maneuver as the four flocks of birds bristled and spun toward him, giving chase.

Good.

If Crowe was getting emotional, Abbas could only see that as a positive thing for their battle. The Man of Crows would be more likely to make mistakes, to act recklessly. This back-and-forth between them had gone on for days, after all. Abolishers were not known for their patience or mental discipline.

He lead the flocks away from the refugees. If he kept moving, they would keep following--so long as he didn't create too much distance too quickly. That would just motivate them to go after the civilians again.

It became a mad aerial dance. Bolting across the sky, weaving in and out of oncoming Abolishers who thought they could cut him off as he circled back around.

The flocks stuck on him, too--all of them, this time.

That was ideal. Many times previously, Crowe had tried to divide his attention between Abbas and the civilians, no doubt hoping to kill or capture them while the Lord Saqqaf was distracted.

An annoying strategy, but one that Abbas had made sure to consistently thwart. Crowe must have finally realized how unfeasible it was and--

'I sense Bloodeye approaching from the north!' came Worwal's private warning. The reaper was clinging to him inside the suit, not merged with a hyper-state.

That news was just about the worst thing Abbas could imagine, right now, short of more robots or Morgunov himself showing up.

Bloodeye was the other primary instigator in this war on his homeland. From the very beginning, it had been Crowe and Bloodeye together that led the invasion.

True, they hadn't been able to stand up to Iceheart, even while working together, but neither had Iceheart been able to pin them down and eliminate them. Their hit-and-run tactics in his presence had caused no end of headaches.

And now, Iceheart wasn't even here, anymore."

"2772

Gods.

He couldn't think about any of that, right now. Everything was riding on him. He had to focus.

If all else failed, he still had the Ro'Hada as a last resort. Until that hope was gone, he had no cause for despair.

Abbas turned and fought. He wouldn't have Crowe alone for much longer, so he decided to take advantage of the time while he could. It would likely prove a futile effort, as Crowe no doubt knew of Bloodeye's imminent arrival and would therefore try to play it safe.

But he had to try.

Crowe's men, including Konig got in the way again--or tried to, at least.

The Lord Saqqaf was not having it. They bombarded him with a smattering of explosions and materialization, hoping to block his vision or pin him down or perhaps something else entirely; but he blasted

straight through it all at full burn. He skewered one man and didn't stop, even when the body refused to be bisected and instead stuck to him like bloody ornament.

The body struggled a moment, trying to get a grip on the suit no doubt, so Abbas zagged suddenly right and barreled into Otto Konig's liquid metal body.

Konig tried to stick to him, too, but that was fine. Abbas still had plenty of control. At this speed, with this much momentum, jets could handle the weight difference just fine. Turning was obviously more difficult, but he could compensate. The suit was already assisting him with calculations and flight path guidance on his visor.

He could still aim for Crowe. And now the impact would be three times as heavy. Roughly speaking. Konig's metal body probably made up for the weight disparity that the suit itself added to Abbas.

Crowe saw him coming. Of course he did. And he wisely tried to move out of the way. Those black wings offered great mobility of their own.

Not enough, though.

Abbas pierced two flocks of birds before clobbering the Man of Crows with his small mountain of metal and flesh."

"2773

Crowe's body stuck onto him, too, added to the pile. Now the weight was beginning to become an issue. Abbas could hear the jets straining.

It was the perfect time to cool them down, then.

He opened both hands wide and vented several supercoolant packs on his back. Liquid hydrogen spewed out, splashing everywhere.

Normally, the venting would be a much more controlled process, but while he was covered in mangled bodies and twisting metal, control was a luxury. And of course, he wanted the coolant to get all over his opponents.

After having been both reminded of and further impressed by Iceheart's effectiveness on the battlefield, Abbas had been trying to



increase the suit's freezing capabilities to new heights. While he didn't yet have the ""cryo-weapon"" of his dreams at his disposal, the addition of several spare supercoolant packs was a start.

And they seemed to be doing well. System heating metrics were way down, and he could feel the three bodies around him squirming less than before.

But he wanted more. Crowe was still in one piece and struggling. That needed to be rectified.

Abbas couldn't even see out of his visor anymore, but the compass on the HUD was still working, at least. Bloodeye was approaching from the north, and Lorent was to the west.

He banked hard left, hearing the cooling hiss of the hydrogen almost overpowering the howling wind.

For a moment, he seriously contemplated just crashing straight into the ground. All these bodies would take even more damage than he would, especially if they were partially frozen already.

But no. Too reckless. With the suit's regeneration still in question, he couldn't risk it.

So he tapped all five fingertips together on his right hand, instead.

The suit's anti-personnel shock shield activated, covering his entire body in electricity."

"2774

Everyone's grip on him loosened instantly. Even the guy he'd nearly cut in half exploded apart. And suddenly, he was free again--covered in frosted blood and guts, but free.

Able to see now, the visor tracked Crowe and Konig both falling toward the ground in statue-like heaps, barely twitching. The remaining flocks of crows were visibly disoriented, too, without orders from their master.

Excellent. Crowe's subordinates were rushing to his aid, but more mini-missiles would provide cover while he moved to finish the job.

'Bloodeye just disappeared,' warned Worwal.

Ah.

Invisibility again.

It had been a while since one of the Abolishers had tried that tactic, doubtless because most of them had realized that it was no longer effective.

Abbas had installed a Sound Navigation and Ranging device precisely for this purpose. True, it wasn't as effective in air as it was in water, and there was some added latency to account for, but it was certainly better than fighting blind.

The first pulse was ear-splitting and grinding--enough so that he would've certainly gone deaf at this range without passive soul defense or a very powerful sound dampener. It had to be so loud, of course, or else the pulse wouldn't travel with enough strength to bounce back and be useful.

Bloodeye was already quite close, the HUD revealed. And with the latency of sonar in air, Abbas knew that he would be even nearer than what the suit was telling him.

It shouldn't be too much of a problem, though. Bloodeye was dangerous, but he was a known quantity. His power was that of bromine transfiguration, and he relied heavily on fumes and acids to smother his opponents.

A relatively common fighting style, primarily elevated by the strength of the servant's soul and pan-rozum. It was still deadly, of course, especially when part of a team, but alone?

Abbas could handle him so long as Crowe stayed down for a bit longer. This situation was bad but still salvageable. As long as he stayed focused. He had to keep reminding himself of that."

"2775

He needed an attack that would cover a wide area. The sonar couldn't give him pinpoint accuracy, so he had to account for that. The mini-missiles might work again, but he had something better in mind.

Abbas, Haqq, and all their researchers had spent considerable time

breaking down the many problems that the Invisibility-inducing aberrations presented so that they could develop countermeasures. Discerning how they functioned was key to that effort, and the major issue there was figuring out how the cloaking ""shadow"" actually interacted with light.

Whether it should be regarded as ""magical"" or ""a matter that was beyond science"" was irrelevant. Obviously, it was not reflecting or refracting light as any normal material would, which meant there were really only two other options for how the interaction might work.

Either the light was passing perfectly through the cloaked entities as if they were not even there; or the light was being absorbed entirely and a perfect replica of what was ""behind"" the entities was being projected back out to the eye of the viewer.

The first possibility seemed less likely, because logically speaking, if light was truly passing through the cloaked entities, then anyone inside should have been rendered blind, as the light would also be passing through their eyes without touching their photoreceptors. And by now, they knew very well that the invisible aberrations were not blind at all.

The only reason they had theorized this as a potential explanation at all was because, well, these were aberrations they were dealing with. Much like servants, they did not always follow the conventional wisdom of science, to the chagrin of many lifelong academics like himself.

In this case, however, their extra caution was unwarranted. Through further field testing, they had indeed been able to confirm that it was the second method. The light was being absorbed and a perfect image was being projected back.

It was an incredible feat, far beyond what any ""normal"" technology was currently capable of. If it could be reproduced with said normal technology, that would be a tremendous breakthrough.

But right now, that didn't matter. What mattered was that first bit: the light was being absorbed.

A high-powered laser, therefore, would be especially effective against it."

"2776

He had just the thing. A sweeping laser ""net,"" capable of covering seventy cubic meters of space in front of him with a single flash. It could also be concentrated into one giant beam--and empowered with his soul, of course--if he wanted to do some real damage, but the situation didn't call for that. Yet.

The suit opened up at six different points: the shoulders, waist, chest, and palms of his hands. Focusing lenses appeared from each compartment, varying in size relative to their location. Then red lights blasted out all at once, crisscrossing and weaving together to form a crimson web of glowing beams.

It filled his vision, illuminating the sky far more than the still rising sun. He didn't register any damage being done, though. The lasers should've been able to shred the Invisibility of any cloaked units--or simply shred the units themselves.

He swung the net wide across Bloodeye's last known location, searching to and fro.

There it was. A sudden splattering of blood and tumbling chunks of flesh arrived. The cloaking shuddered, and Abbas saw seven men there, less than twenty meters away.

Well. Three men, now.

The others were in bad shape, too, apart from Bloodeye himself, who was only scorched across his face and chest but otherwise fine.

Time for concentration, then. Abbas locked onto the man with his visor and made every single laser converge on him at once.

In an instant, it burned a hole straight through Bloodeye's chest and set his black trench coat ablaze.

The man reacted by converting his entire body into red fumes. The flames were immediately extinguished, even while the fumes scattered out wide.

Abbas didn't intend to let himself be surrounded and smothered. He might've liked to use the laser net again to further scatter Bloodeye's fumes, but this was where the downside kicked in. The power draw. More than perhaps any other weapon in his arsenal, the lasers demanded power. The suit could regenerate its own fuel cells, but only very slowly--and only when it was functioning properly, which it most

certainly was not."

"2777

That was okay, though. The mini-missiles would serve just fine here. And the smoke would--

Bloodeye's movement changed suddenly. Instead of the red smoke enveloping Abbas, it shrank back down and compressed, reforming Bloodeye's human body.

The unexpected maneuver made Abbas wary as he waited for the attack to come. If Bloodeye wasn't going to try to smother him with smoke and acid, then what did he intend to do? Stall for time while Crowe recovered? There might've been wisdom in that, but Abbas wasn't going to let it happen so easily.

He pushed the jets for another full burn and torpedoed himself straight toward Bloodeye.

What happened next, however, was outside all possible predictions or expectations.

Abbas slammed into him, just like he'd previously done to Crowe and Konig, but Bloodeye held firm, holding onto Abbas' torso with both arms and legs as if trying to crush the armor with his bare hands.

That was most certainly impossible. The suit, even in its currently battered state, was more than durable enough to withstand the enhanced strength of any servant.

But then Bloodeye began to change. His face distorted, flashing between sickly grays and purples. His eyes and nose began bleeding, and he coughed up a nasty red glob right onto Abbas' visor, blocking most of his vision but not all.

The man's jaw stretched and grew, realigning itself, popping out teeth as big as a crocodile's. His eyes bulged grotesquely, looking as if they might burst until his skull reshaped itself as well--and not for the better. It became lumpy and stretched, with entirely new bones sticking out, looking like broken horns. His nose shifted, too, twisting diagonally. It flared out and grew, while also melting partway into the rest of his plumpening face.

And then other, smaller faces began to appear in the man's flesh. All horrified and screaming, like something out of a nightmare. A literal monster."

"2778

Abbas Saqqaf didn't even know what he was seeing. He didn't get much time to mull it over, either, because Bloodeye's now massive jaw lurched toward him. He pulled back at the last second, but the teeth still found his left shoulder and crunched through the suit's armor.

The bite was solid. It didn't take his arm off, but that was arguably worse, because now he couldn't even get away. He felt the teeth dig into his flesh and even pierce bone before Worwal numbed the pain entirely.

He called on the shock shield again. Electricity blasted out of the suit in fractured bursts, sparking badly around the broken shoulder.

But it worked.

Bloodeye spasmed and loosened his grip on him, allowing Abbas to grab him by his neck and twist with all the might that the suit and undead strength combined could provide.

A sickening crack arrived, but that was all. Abbas had wanted to tear his head clean off, but that didn't happen. The man's neck merely kept twisting and cracking, and Abbas could see in his crimson eyes that he was regaining his faculties, despite the shock shield still remaining active.

Abbas growled with frustration and flung him straight down to the ground, just wanting to give himself a moment to breathe. To think. To reassess what the hell had just happened.

Bloodeye sailed into solid rock with meteoric force, leaving a crater the size of a house behind and a cloud of dust to accompany it.

What sense did that transformation make? An illusion? No, Abbas had been able to feel the change. The weight differential. The thrashing, twitching movement.

A hallucination, then? Had some aerosolized drug made it past the suit's filters and even the system alerts?

Everything else seemed perfectly normal. He still felt clear-headed."  
"2779

He had never seen such a thing before. Monsters, yes. But never one like that--and more importantly, never one that at first appeared perfectly human.

He didn't get the opportunity to consult Worwal on it. Just as he finished wiping most of the blood off his visor, a warning of incoming attacks arrived. Blodeye's two remaining men were both blasting him with materialization, and he needed to evade.

Simple enough. But a third attack came with even less warning attached to it.

A flock of crows on his right side. Acid, flames, and lightning all obscured the assault, making it difficult to tell which direction to evade in. Even with the visor's aid, which was now flickering, he couldn't be sure. He had only a split second to guess.

He chose to dive down.

That was incorrect. The birds appeared like a hundred tiny spears with the speed of a freight train, shredding his entire right side and sending him into a tailspin as system alerts flashed across the HUD.

Armor integrity critical. Multiple power failures. Impact mitigation errors. Flight assistance errors. Weapons systems failing. Hostile targets closing in.

He was nearly in freefall. He had to stabilize. Flight assistance be damned. The jets were still working, the beauties. He could do it all in his head.

He twisted his body and angled himself down as he activated a hard burn. With the computer drilled into his thalamus and cerebral cortex, he could tell the suit exactly what to do with only his mind. It was more difficult and dangerous without the benefit of guidance vector calculations being pumped straight into his brain, but he'd practiced this scenario hundreds of times.

The suit swooped down low, clipping a line of tall trees and taking their

tops off before finally achieving stable flight again."  
"2780

He remained at a low altitude for a while longer, knowing that most of the Abolishers were after him and that flying up higher would just make him an easier target.

He needed time to reevaluate the suit's condition, as well as the situation at large. So many failing systems. Was anything regenerating?

Here and there, it seemed, yes--and at a massively slowed rate. Both arms and shoulders torn to hell, as was his right leg. But the helmet was still working. And the mini-missiles. Jets, of course. Radar and sonar. The coolant system. Shock shield. Flares.

Ah.

And the Ro'Hada.

Even after the beating his right arm had taken, the ace up his sleeve was still fully operational. That was good news, at least. He had designed it to be even more durable than the rest of the suit. That was a necessity when it came to a last resort weapon. It needed to endure even when everything else gave out.

But was the situation truly that dire?

Debatable. The more this battle dragged out, though, the more the scales seemed to be tipping in its favor.

Either way, he would need to get up fairly close if he intended to use it.

That part, at least, looked as though it would not be an issue. Bloodeye and the Man of Crows were both on his tail now. No doubt, their murderous instincts were telling them that he was on the verge of death here. He could practically taste their bloodlust, their eagerness to claim the prize that was his head.

Of the two, Bloodeye now seemed the most problematic. Not knowing what he was capable of put a big asterisk next to any plan that Abbas could concoct. And if he reacted incorrectly like last time, with his armor in its current condition, Crowe's next strike might very well be a



fatal one."  
"2781

They'd been chasing him for a while already, having left all their subordinates in the dust. He was alone, too, though. Covering fire from his family would've certainly been welcome right about now, but they were too far away to do anything.

The suit could still outrun these two, however. If they doubled back to attack his family, he would have to turn and fight, but for now, at least, it seemed as though they were intent on chasing him down. Perhaps they didn't realize that he was purposely allowing them to keep up.

So much the better. It gave him time to think. Without Bloodeye and Crowe to worry about, he had confidence that his Hahl could handle the others. His sons were strong.

But this stalemate couldn't last forever. Something would have to give sooner or later.

'Abbas,' came Worwal's private words, 'our allies--'

A system alert cut him off. A bad one. ""Incoming AIM,"" read the visor with an accompanying tracking dot.

Unfortunately, AIM stood for Air Intercept Missile.

Where the hell that thing had launched from, Abbas had no earthly idea, and there wasn't time to worry about it. The suit, even in its battered state, could probably withstand most air-to-air ordnance relatively well when accounting for his own passive soul defenses.

But he had to assume that it was soul-strengthened by someone very powerful. That was the protocol here. If it was normal, he'd be fine either way. But if it wasn't, and he didn't take it seriously, it could kill him instantaneously.

He could go supersonic, but that would only buy him a few extra seconds, because that thing was almost certainly capable of doing the same. And at this point, the suit might not hold together very well during supersonic flight.

He deployed flares and banked hard right, watching the HUD as sweat

dripped down his face.

No dice. It didn't lose target lock. Contact in under ten seconds."  
"2782

Max burn. More flares. More evasive maneuvers. Both of the drones on his shoulders were broken, but he deployed them anyway. They just fell out of the sky, but that was fine. Anything to pull the damn thing off of him.

Still didn't work, though.

The mini-missiles were his best hope now, but he'd only get one good chance. They didn't have an AIM's range, speed, or tracking accuracy. If he deployed them too soon, that was it. If he deployed them too late, that was it. If the soul-strengthening somehow allowed the AIM to withstand their barrage, that was it.

Mind racing, he waited. Six seconds left. Five. Four. Three.

He loosed the mini-missiles.

They hit.

The AIM exploded.

The blast was close--and just as powerful as he'd feared. It rocked the sky, catching him with the edge of its radius and spiking him toward the ground.

So many system alerts. More than ever.

He was barely conscious of anything other than the fact that he was falling. Where had that missile come from? Where was he going?

Worwal was talking. Telling him he had to do something.

He hit the ground and left a running crater, an elongated trench, before finally grinding to a halt.

The suit was smoldering. Smoke and heat. Beeping, sizzling, crackling.

He tried to move and found it difficult. Still disoriented. Suit resisting him, too.

Another alert appeared on the visor, flickering harder now.

""Incoming AIM,"" it read again.

He just blinked at it, scarcely able to comprehend what he was seeing. A second one?

Worwal was talking again, telling him to move, among other murky things.

He was probably right.

Abbas struggled. Head was clearing but not fast enough. Needed to get up. Disorientation was probably affecting the suit's responsiveness. Missile contact imminent. Eleven seconds. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Fi--

It was gone. The tracking dot disappeared. Visor malfunction?

No.

He sensed someone there. Nearby. Then he saw them.

An armored figure. Not like his. Old. Medieval.

Was that... a knight?

Why was there a knight standing over him? Did that missile hit him so hard that he went back in time?

""Get up, Lord Abbas."" The knight reached a hand toward him.

""Fight's not done yet. And we're gonna need you.""

By the gods, those words cut into his mind like a friendly knife. Clarity returned almost immediately. Almost involuntarily, even.

And he took the knight's hand."

"2783 -- CCXLVIII.

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Hector had to admit, Lord Abbas wasn't looking too good. His suit of mechanized armor was cracked and crumbling in a dozen different places, and tendrils of both smoke and steam were leaking out everywhere.

Not to mention the blood all over him.

Still, though, it wasn't as bad as it had been after that encounter with the Salesman of Death. Large chunks might've been missing, and yeah, it kinda looked like a giant shark had taken a bite out of his shoulder or something; but at least Abbas was able to stand up.

That was good. Because thinking about who could've done something like this to the freaking Sunsmith, of all people...

Well, it wasn't comforting.

That inbound missile had been a real problem-and-a-half to deal with, too. They probably wouldn't have even known about it if Worwal hadn't warned Levinox. And without Dimas Sebolt's help flying and Garovel's help aiming, Hector doubted he would've been of any use in that situation.

In fact, he was certain he wouldn't have.

The thing had been so damn fast. Dimas, flying at his max speed while also carrying Hector, had only been able to provide the two of them with a window of a couple seconds to attack.

But somehow, they'd managed it, via a combined barrage of gravitic bullets and iron slugs launched via Hector's orbital technique.

It was a pretty fucking intense experience, actually. Hector had never flown that fast through open air before. The Scarf had been going nuts with the howling air currents all around him. So much information pouring into his brain at once. Too overwhelming to be very useful.

But a part of him wanted to give it another try. Maybe he could get the hang of it.

And he had a feeling that in this fight, he might just get that chance."  
"2783 -- CCXLVIII.

## Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Eight: 'The Battle at the Border...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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"2784

Worwal informed them that their opponents were Bloodeye and the Man of Crows and that Bloodeye had some kind of strange transforming power, but there wasn't enough time to swap more intel than that.

'I sense them,' said Garovel.

'As do I,' said Izio.

Hector had wanted Garovel to retreat underground, but the reaper insisted on tagging along for observational support. Hector hadn't been too pleased about that. Sure, Garovel had turned out to be correct in helping him take down the missile, but that didn't change how risky the whole thing was.

And now that they knew precisely who they were up against, Hector was even more uncomfortable.

'Garovel, you need to fall back,' thought Hector in the intervening seconds.

'Too late for that, buddy.'

Was it really, though? 'Go underground. Now.'

'No.'

Hector grit his teeth and wanted to argue. He didn't get the chance, because an ear-piercing gunshot rang out from a short distance away.

One of the Rainlords was there, nestled behind a large rock with one of the largest rifles Hector had ever seen.

""That's a hit on Crowe!"" the man called out.

Hector looked toward the horizon and saw the black swirl of birds there. At this distance, he couldn't tell if the shot had done much.

The gunman was Dimas' cousin, Rolando Sebolt. As Hector

understood it, he was actually older than Dimas by about fifteen years, so the soul power that he must've been pushing into that giant weapon was probably quite potent.

Lord Abbas still went over to him, though, and laid a hand on the massive scope. ""Do it again,"" he said in his Valgan accent.

Rolando gave him an acknowledging nod, and then Abbas blasted away from the ground, rocketing back up into the sky again."

"2785

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 1 of 30))~~

'We'd better stick with him,' said Iziol.

Salvador Delaguna stepped closer with Matteo right behind him.

""We'll head to that northern hill there,"" he said, pointing. ""Send one of 'em our way if you want help up close. Otherwise--"" He pulled out another heavy rifle from a duffel bag, though it wasn't fully assembled yet. ""--we'll provide cover.""

""Understood,"" said Dimas, and he gave Hector a look that seemed to be assessing whether or not he was ready to be carried off by gravity again.

Covered in full armor, however, Hector couldn't exactly answer with the expression on his face. Dimas must've come to the conclusion that he was indeed ready, because the Lord of House Sebolt did not waste another moment and launched away from the ground with Hector in tow.

It was a good thing he didn't have a problem with motion sickness. Holy shit.

They soared almost straight up, then arced toward direction of the enemy. Roman was keeping pace with them as well, though Voreese was not with him. She had stayed by the car with a few others, mostly reapers, including Levinox.

Hector's grip on his shield tightened as they drew closer. It was probably his best hope of surviving this battle.

He wanted to keep his mind clear, but a background thought process,

he couldn't stop thoughts from manifesting.

Bloodeye and the Man of Crows. Very high-ranking Abolishers. Not top tier threats like Ivan or Jercash or Gohvis, perhaps, but they were probably on a similar level to the Marauder of Calthos, whom Hector had encountered at Dunehall.

That guy had been kind of overshadowed at the end of the day but definitely hadn't been a pushover. He'd taken on Zeff, Asad, Melchor Blackburn, and Xuan Sebolt all by himself."

"2786

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 2 of 30))~~

Sure, there'd been extenuating circumstances, as Melchor and Xuan had still been exhausted from their own clash at Marshrock, but it was hard for Hector to just put all of his concerns out of his mind.

Because now they were facing two such people.

And in another thought process, Hector kept reevaluating their combat strength. On the ground, they had Salvador, Matteo, Rolando, and one other gunman in Rico Sebolt. Rico and Rolando were something of a duo, from what Hector had seen.

In the air, they had Dimas, Roman, Abbas, and himself. And that last one was pretty debatable, regarding aerial combat.

All things considered, this wasn't the most fortunate of match ups. If Abbas fell or was otherwise incapacitated, even briefly, then someone might just die.

Or they all would.

So more than anything, their role here was to support Abbas, Hector felt. They had to keep him alive, no matter what. Which meant they needed to keep Bloodeye and the Man of Crows separated. Whatever their powers were, they would be weaker in isolation; and allowing them to attack Abbas together one of the worst-case scenarios.

But that was exactly what was happening when they finally caught up.

There was barely any time to process what he was witnessing. So



much going on at once. New enemies with new powers to assess. Everyone zipping back and forth in midair, wrestling and clawing at one another, throwing explosions and punches and explosive punches. Fire and lightning and acid and smoke and blood spraying everywhere in midair.

Perhaps now more than ever, the parallel thought processes were crucially valuable.

The enemies were easy to tell apart, at least. The Man of Crows was obviously the dude with all the fucking crows flying around him, but Hector hadn't expected him to have giant black wings growing out of his back, too. Mutation user?"

"2787

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 3 of 30))~~

The crows themselves were obviously abnormal, too, being the sources of much of the fire, lightning, and acid thrown around. And Hector could tell that they were even more dangerous than they looked, because Abbas was clearly trying his best to avoid them. If the Lord Saqqaf could just ignore their attacks and blast through, he assuredly would've been.

But what in the fuck was up with Bloodeye? Worwal's description of a ""strange transformation power"" was an understatement if ever there was one. The guy looked like some kind of demonic alligator-goblin, which might've also implied mutation, but his body was frequently shifting between its solid form and crimson smoke.

Hector had seen such shifting before with Xuan Sebolt's usage of transfiguration and pan-rozum.

Bloodeye's fumes seemed to be having a harder time keeping up with Abbas than the crow guy did, so perhaps that was why Dimas chose to go after him first.

A hail of gravitic bullets sprayed across Bloodeye's horned backside, peppering it with bloody holes and making the monster turn his head toward them.

An instant later, Hector had a present for him, too.

A giant ball of iron, as big as a car, launched via his orbital technique.

It clobbered him, carrying him off into the distance.

Which actually surprised Hector a little bit. He hadn't expected that to work quite so well. But then again, that was a quite literal ton of solid iron he'd just flung at the guy, and there was nothing up here for Bloodeye to brace himself against.

Inertia and momentum had been on his side for that particular interaction. He had no doubt that Bloodeye would be back, though-- and soon.

But in the meantime, they could gang up on the crow guy with Abbas."  
"2788

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 4 of 30))~~

Unfortunately, the crow guy seemed to have already noticed them. A flock of black birds came snaking through the air.

Dimas dodged, but an errant lightning bolt from one of the crow's mouths caught him.

And then Hector was falling through open sky.

Dimas had dropped him, he realized.

Shit.

What to do? His vision was limited through the slit in his helmet, and the Scarf was sending him all sorts of confusing information with how fast the wind around him was moving.

But he'd wanted to give it a second try, hadn't he? Well, now was the time.

He shut his eyes and concentrated, trying his best not to think about the fact that he was currently in freefall, the fact that he'd soon hit the ground and be turned into canned meat if he didn't do something about it.

High winds had intense effects upon the Scarf. He knew that from his

first trip to Lorent, when he'd met Pauline Gaolanet, the Sparrow at the airport.

And the effects now were similar, perhaps even stronger. He could sense so many pathways in the air, all linking together, pushing each other or crash against one another. It was like trying to pick out individual strands of spaghetti within a giant bowl. One big mess.

But that was the wrong way of looking at it, wasn't it? Individual strands weren't that important. The groupings of strands were more informative, weren't they?

Yeah.

Some of the currents knotted together, creating nothing but chaos that disrupted his senses, but around them, the air could still flow. If he could ignore the holes and follow the other paths, maybe this was doable.

Oh hey, there was a flock of crows chasing after him from above.

Wow, couldn't they tell he was already falling out of the sky? That was pretty aggressive. What a bunch of dicks.

Hmm, maybe one of these thought processes was a little too calm."  
"2789

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 5 of 30))~~

Whatever the case, this ruled out flying, Hector decided. While it was true that he'd been practicing his flight quite a bit recently, he didn't think he had enough speed with it yet to warrant using it against these guys.

These motherfuckers were using pan-rozum. They might not have been able to keep up with Abbas, but they were still damn fast. Abbas could break the sound barrier, if he wanted to. The fact that he wasn't running circles around them was impressive enough on its own.

No, he had to prioritize speed here, Hector felt--even if it meant losing some of his control and maneuverability.

And to his mind, his flight wasn't even that stable yet. If it was just a

matter of maximizing speed, then one of his most primitive techniques would be best here.

He pummeled himself with a big block of iron from the side. He took the hit with Haqq's shield, but it still sent him flying, just as desired.

He tumbled haphazardly through open air, which made it difficult to keep his bearings but not impossible. He maintained his concentration on the Scarf, using the oncoming flock of birds as a fixture point. Even if he couldn't be quite sure of his own location within this wobbly storm of air currents around him, he knew that he wanted the distance between him and those crows to be increasing, not decreasing.

They were getting closer, so he slammed another block into himself, even harder this time, aiming more upward and diagonally.

The impact was more disorienting, but it worked. It created distance.

For a moment, at least. The birds weren't letting up, of course.

So he did it again. And again. And still again, essentially ping ponging himself back up into the sky and toward the battle."

"2790

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 6 of 30))~~

Thank god for the Scarf of Amordiin. Without it, there would've been no way he could sense where anyone else was.

Roman was zooming around the crow guy but keeping his distance, probably caught in the dilemma of trying to draw attention but not too much attention.

Dimas had regained his composure and was on the way to attack again. Hector sensed him looking in his general direction, but the Lord Sebolt didn't move to catch him with gravity again. Perhaps he thought Hector knew what he was doing and so didn't want to interfere.

A very generous assumption, if true.

As he neared the midair combat zone again, Hector could still sense the flock of crows chasing after him from below. He would need to deal with them, somehow, else they would be a distraction for Abbas.

After one last aerial tumble, he managed to catch himself on an upside down platform of iron. And for a brief time, as his physical momentum remained with him, pushing the platform higher, his feet were firmly planted on it as he looked down through his visor at the ascending onslaught of murderous crows.

He didn't yet know how durable those little feathered bastards were, so perhaps it was a good time to test them out. With enough concentration in the Scarf, he was very aware of their individual spatial locations relative to himself.

So he started doing two things: spinning up a slew of new iron boulders in orbit around him, and clapping iron boxes around the birds at range. If he could thin their numbers a bit, then perhaps they wouldn't be quite so deadly.

Some of the boxes weren't quite on the mark, which wasn't too surprising considering how quick the damn things were; but some of them were dead on. And immediately, scores of iron cubes began dropping out of the sky, taking black birds with them."

"2791

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 7 of 30))~~

Hector didn't bother collecting them yet. He didn't know if the birds would be able to break free without assistance, and he didn't want to bring them so close to his body and to Garovel while lacking that critical piece of information.

The flock as a whole still remained quite strong, though. The density of birds packed in there was even greater than he thought. Already, they were spitting fire and acid in his direction.

He had to move, but not before launching one of his boulders at them. It rocked through them, attracting lightning and acid attacks that caused it to crack apart and scatter--but that still didn't render it worthless. The broken chunks sprayed across the flock in a wide pattern, smashing clusters of birds out of formations and sending blood and feathers flying.

Hmm. He felt like that had done even more damage to them than if the

birds had just tried to avoid the boulder altogether. Maybe they didn't expect it to have that much force behind it.

Or maybe they were just a bunch of stupid birds that attacked anything that came close.

If that was the case, then he could probably take advantage of that, couldn't he?

He knocked himself away from his upside down platform just as it was engulfed in flames and acid--a combination which combusted and sent him tumbling through open air again.

He was getting used to this, though. He still had more boulders in orbit around him, and it wasn't that much more difficult to keep them there even while moving like this, so long as he maintained his focus.

The flock was still chasing him, but it had lost probably a third of its number already.

Time to make it more.

He repeated his process, catching himself on another big slab of materialized iron that was moving with him through the air, then clapping more boxes around more birds."

"2792

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 8 of 30))~~

They were closer now, so he didn't have quite as much time to work with as before, but was he still able to lessen their numbers and deliver another speeding boulder into the remaining flock before leaving.

And indeed, the birds crudely attacked the boulder again, splitting it apart and blanketing themselves in more iron chunks, just like before.

So they really were that primitive, then. Either the crow guy couldn't manipulate their behavior that closely, or he was simply too distracted by his fight with Abbas to spare that much attention for Hector.

The latter might've made the most sense, actually. He was close enough to sense Abbas' insane movements now at the edge of the Scarf's range. The Sunsmith was pressing his advantage with a flurry

of hand-to-hand attacks in midair. The man was using the jets on his suit to put his entire body weight and more into his punches, which he weaved into spinning kicks and compounded with three-dimensional movement, zipping above and below the Man of Crows constantly.

Given the technology at Abbas' disposal, hand-to-hand combat seemed a bit quaint to be employing now, but Hector had to admit, it still looked pretty damn overwhelming. The crow guy couldn't even get away from him now and was only able to dodge maybe a fifth of the attacks overall--perhaps even less as the barrage continued, unabated.

Plus, Dimas appeared to have a rather strong matchup against the birds. While Hector had been trying to deal with one flock, Dimas had been dealing with three and was now even pulling another away from Abbas.

The birds were flying all over the place, being thrust up and down like yo-yos through the sky as gravity rapidly increased and decreased around them. Some dropped and just kept falling, unable to resume flying."

"2793

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 9 of 30))~~

The Man of Crows was on the ropes, Hector felt. But he also remembered what terrible shape the Sunsmith's armor was in. That was probably why Abbas was resorting to such a straightforward beat down now. His technological arsenal was limited.

Hector couldn't get too comfortable, he knew. Even as he saw the flock of crows chasing him slow down and begin to disperse, even as they stopped spitting deadly attacks in his direction, he was reluctant to conclude that the battle was already won.

He did, however, allow himself to reach the apex of an arc and land on a hovering iron platform. It was still wobbling and moving with his momentum, but the footing was mostly stable. And after all that, he didn't feel too disoriented. He'd expected a lot worse, quite frankly.

He took a moment to reassess the situation. None of the boxed crows had broken out yet, as far as he could tell, so he started collecting

them and boxing up more.

It might have been a needless effort, though.

Abbas was still going hard. No doubt, the crows were losing their potency because of how badly he was slapping the shit out of their master. It seemed like every hit was landing now, drawing more and more blood, with only the occasional glancing blow being returned.

At this point, Hector couldn't even picture how he might assist in such a fight. A ranged attack would risk hitting Abbas, and trying to help up close would probably just earn himself a flying roundhouse kick to the face or something. Either that, or Abbas would have to start pulling his punches, and Hector certainly didn't want that.

Hector was watching in morbid awe. One of Abbas' metal boots caught the crow guy in the side, folding the man's body in half--and not in the normal direction. Abbas was trying to grab his head, seemingly--probably to rip it off his shoulders--but the guy was barely managing to wriggle away.

Honestly, the fact that the crow guy wasn't dead yet was kind of impressive in its own way. Abbas was moving like a man possessed."  
"2794

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 10 of 30))~~

Hector didn't mind letting someone else do the heavy lifting. That was the point of providing combat support.

'Bloodeye inbound on your right,' came Garovel's private warning.

Well, shit.

Hector couldn't sense Bloodeye yet with the Scarf, so he had to turn and look.

Okay, what the hell? The dude had wings now. He definitely hadn't had those before. And unlike the Man of Crows', Bloodeye's were not feathery at all. They were clearly more fleshy and gnarled. They barely even looked like wings, actually. It was like some sort of horribly deformed pterodactyl.



The fact that Bloodeye could apparently grow wings was strange enough on its own, but why had he grown them? He'd already been capable of flight via his red smoke form in pan-rozum.

Regardless, Hector knew at once what his task here was.

Delay, delay, delay. He just needed to buy time for Abbas to finish off the crow guy.

Or in other words, he just needed to be as obnoxious as possible.

And when he thought about it like that, this seemed doable. Obviously, he couldn't take either of these monstrous Abolishers in a fight. But he could almost certainly annoy the shit out of them.

Dimas and Roman both seemed to be thinking the same, because they were already pelting Bloodeye with scarcely visible attacks, trying to slow his progress. Hector, meanwhile, prepared a couple more boulders while circling around on his hovering platform. He wanted to wait for a solid opening before attacking again, because it seemed like Dimas and Roman might just provide one soon. That, and if he fired a boulder off too soon, the bastard would probably just dodge.

As Bloodeye entered the edge of the Scarf's range, however, Hector sensed him do something incredibly strange.

Bloodeye opened his toothy maw, reached his own hand deep into it, and pulled out a fucking missile."

"2795

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 11 of 30))~~

It made no sense. Of course it didn't. Lengthwise, the missile was larger than the dude's whole body. It was physically impossible for him to have been keeping a missile in his freaking stomach--nevermind the implication that he'd had more than one in there.

Absurd. The missile was already active, too, with the rocket on its tail firing even as it emerged from Bloodeye's mouth.

'Garovel, are you seeing this shit?!

'Worry about it later! Stop that thing before it achieves its top speed!'

The reaper was right. The last missile was so damn fast that it would've bridged the current distance between Bloodeye and Abbas in the blink of an eye. This one obviously needed time to accelerate, and that was their only window to work with.

With the way Abbas and the crow guy were locked in close quarters combat, Bloodeye should've been reluctant to use such a dangerous weapon for fear of hitting his own ally in the process; but Hector had a feeling that these these Abolish maniacs probably didn't give a fuck about things like that.

He loosed one of the iron boulders. At this range, he didn't expect it to hit and just wanted to give Bloodeye something to think about. But to that end, Dimas achieved better results than any of them.

Perhaps too much so.

Dimas did to Bloodeye what he'd just been doing the crows, yo-yoing him up and down with gravity. He ended it off by flinging the monstrous man straight upwards, even higher into the sky--and perhaps, Hector briefly thought, all the way out into space.

But not before the missile managed to slip out of the gravity well. And much to Hector's surprise, it didn't go for Abbas.

It went for Dimas.

And it was blindingly fast. There was barely a moment to react."  
"2796

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 12 of 30))~~

Hector put out a hand, aiming to materialize an iron wall into the missile's path. Dimas raised both hands, perhaps trying to throw it off course.

It was Roman Fullister, however, who actually succeeded.

He just happened to be the closest to the missile's flight path. Why it hadn't picked him in the first place was impossible to say. Perhaps Bloodeye had simply thought the gravity user to be the bigger problem. Perhaps it was just pure chance.

Whatever the case, there was no time to question why or make an informed decision, no time to use logic or concoct a strategy. There was only time enough for Roman to let his instincts take over, to do what required as little thought as possible.

He put his very own body in the way.

Hector's eyes widened at the sight of the explosion, and in the back of his mind, he had to remind himself that Voreese hadn't been with him. Roman would be fine.

But the man had really just taken one for the team.

The aerial battlefield shook violently, and the resultant shock wave nearly knocked Hector off his hovering platform. Even at this distance, smoke and shrapnel still made it all the way over to him, piercing his armor in a couple places.

Dimas had been closer, though. He might've still been caught in the explosion a little, Hector realized.

He concentrated on the Scarf while steadying his platform simultaneously.

The air currents all around him were swirling like mad. He'd just gotten accustomed to the crazy winds at this altitude, and now everything was confused again. But he kept searching. Dimas had to be around here somewhere.

Ah. There. Below him.

Something wasn't quite right, though.

Dimas' left arm and leg were missing.

Damn. That could be fixed shortly, though. And at least he was still alive.

'Another missile above!' yelled Garovel."  
"2797

How many of these damn things had this motherfucker swallowed?

Hector didn't waste time trying to confirm anything visually. He just materialized a giant dome high over everyone's head, adding as much thickness to it as quickly as he could. Thankfully, there was more time to react than with the last missile, because Dimas had flung Bloodeye so far away.

The iron dome lingered there in the air for a couple seconds, falling and beginning to pick up speed even as Hector kept beefing it up--until the explosion arrived.

The iron ripped and scattered into a million pieces, threatening them all with even more shrapnel than the missile itself provided. Hector did his best to annihilate what he could, but the twisted chunks of iron were like a heavy rain for a few lingering moments.

The smoke was the real danger, though. It obscured their view, and Hector had a rather strong feeling that Bloodeye would be pouring through it any moment now. He tried to focus on what the Scarf could tell him, but Bloodeye could also be smoke, so he had to be extra attentive.

And indeed, when the dark red fumes plumed diagonally out of the dark gray smoke, he almost didn't see them.

Bloodeye was headed toward Abbas now.

The two missile explosions seemed to have caused a mild disruption in the fight between the Sunsmith and the Man of Crows, but they were still going at it. Some of the birds had returned to harass Abbas as their master struggled to get away, but Abbas had a solid grip on one of his wings now and seemed to be trying to achieve the same on his neck.

Hector needed to keep buying time. And hitting Bloodeye with another boulder wouldn't be nearly as effective while the dude was in his smoke form."

"2798

Wind might be the trick, Hector thought. If a solid object couldn't stop the smoke, then maybe a tornado would. He'd recently gotten a crash course in tornadoes, after all.

But could he actually generate one with just his iron? In his battle with that tornado back at the airport, he'd been trying to smother and calm it, and this was basically the exact opposite.

He had an inkling of how he might attempt it, but not having pulled this off before, he couldn't help feeling enormously anxious in a background thought process.

He needed to create a whirlwind with orbiting iron cubes. The problem, though, was that the point of origin for the orbiting was not himself. It needed to be Bloodeye. Who was still moving.

If he'd had more time to think the problem through, Hector probably would have just been even more hesitant. Creating orbiting cubes around an enemy--much less ones that were moving fast enough to stir up a violent wind--that was a shaky idea, at best.

But he went for it.

His spatial awareness was key. Without a good sense for Bloodeye's exact location within Hector's own sphere of influence, this technique would be horrifically imprecise. Concentration, experience, and the Scarf of Amordiin were the deciding factors.

The literally fuming Bloodeye made for a terrible target. His amorphous body seemed like it was going everywhere at once--but of course, it wasn't. Bloodeye's aim was clear, at least. Hector used that to his advantage.

The cubes materialized around the red smoke, moving with it as they spun up, accelerating. The disturbance of the wind was made more visible by the distortions it created in Bloodeye's form. Perhaps that was hesitation on display as well, mixed with confusion.

But no. Fuck. It wasn't working. It was barely slowing Bloodeye down, if at all, even as Hector kept trying to ramp up the speed."

"2799

Hector didn't know why. Maybe he'd been foolish to think he could create a strong enough whirlwind so quickly. Maybe the altitude had something to do with it. Maybe heavy wind didn't affect pan-rozum-created fumes like he thought it would. Or maybe Bloodeye was just too damn strong.

Whatever the case, Bloodeye was getting through. He was going to make it to Abbas. He was going to interfere in their fight and help the crow guy. He was practically on top of them, already.

The smoke bent visibly downward, and then Hector noticed Dimas there, still mid-regeneration as he tried to pull Bloodeye off of Abbas with pure gravitic force.

It wasn't entirely taking, though. The smoke resisted. As if it had a mind of its own. Because it did, of course.

Neither wind nor gravity was enough to deter Bloodeye's fumes. Hector's orbiting cubes were distorting with Dimas' gravity, too, making it more difficult to keep the wind up and the pathing correct.

Not a very good combination, unfortunately.

Bloodeye made it to Abbas. The red smoke became a red cloud, expanding continuously and enveloping the crow guy, too.

Hector racked his brain, trying to think of something. How the fuck were you supposed to fight smoke?! With the view of the fight obscured, he couldn't even tell what was happening anymore. Was Abbas holding his own? Should he jump in there and try to help? That seemed like a terrible idea, but launching iron boulders into the smoke blindly didn't seem much better.

Before he could decide, the crow guy came flying out, tumbling through the air with one wing missing and a dozen trails of blood following. His neck was still attached to his shoulders, but only just. A fist-sized chunk of it was gone.

Maybe that was the ticket, then."  
"2800

Hector abandoned his previous orbital project and started a new one-- with a quite a different objective in mind, this time. He gathered all of his focus in order to sense everything the Scarf could tell him about the Man of Crows.

The guy's black wing was regrowing. His movement was slowing. He was trying to steady himself. He would soon succeed, no doubt.

They couldn't have that.

Iron cubes orbited around the crow guy as he moved. Birds were circling around him, too, but they seemed pretty disorganized, still. Hector knew they'd be a problem again if the guy got his bearings back.

This time, wind was not the goal. This time, he had a clear target. He was just waiting for the bird guy to stop tumbling. There would be a perfect moment to strike, Hector felt, when the guy caught himself in midair. The cubes would be the least likely to miss.

In the meantime, though, he could do more. He still had mental room to work with. An entire thought process to spare, more or less.

He used it to fill the cubes with molten iron.

He'd only done this one before, so perhaps it was a bit risky... but it had sure been effective last time. That was undoubtedly his most powerful technique, at the moment, and this would be a new variant of it.

Would the Man of Crows be able to take it better than Chort had?

Probably.

Hector doubted it would tickle, though.

The moment arrived. The wing had completed enough of its regeneration, and the crow guy stopped himself in midair with a suddenly furious beating of both feathered appendages. From the look on his face, he only just barely glimpsed the four giant, red hot cubes around him before their orbits shifted.

And they all converged inward simultaneously."

"2801

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 17 of 30))~~

The impact was far bigger than Hector expected. This was a genuine explosion. The aerial battlefield shook from the force of it alone, and molten iron splashed out in every direction at once, flashing bright enough that Hector had to squint from behind the eye slit in his helm as he watched.

The Man of Crows dropped. Covered in what was essentially lava, his figure was barely even humanoid anymore as he fell, motionless as a statue, through open air.

The birds were still following him, though. Disorganized, but following.

That seemed like evidence that the job was not yet done.

Hector bounded off his platform, annihilating it behind him. He let himself fall--skydiving in a full suit of plate armor.

He watched the birds closely for any signs of life. With the Scarf, he could tell that the crow guy had lost some body parts in that attack, but it was tough to sense exactly which ones were missing beneath all that molten iron. He could annihilate it for a better look, of course, but that seemed imprudent, considering how much it must've been impairing the Man of Crows' senses, at the moment.

Was the head still attached? That was all he wanted to know, really. At this range, it would be difficult to target such a small point on the man's body with a powerful enough blow--which was why he'd resorted to this variant of his strongest technique first--but maybe it would be doable if he got a bit closer.

He pushed himself downward with velocity states on the back of his armor--an extra layer of descending iron.

It worked surprisingly well. He jolted closer to the Man of Crows by several meters, and he could see with his own two eyes the molten iron was being disturbed. A scorched arm and an inflamed wing were trying to wipe it away."

"2802



That was useful information. He traced the positions of the arm and wing with the Scarf and located where the head should been below the iron. By now, the neck might've finished regenerating, or it might've been in even worse condition after that attack. There was no way to tell while it was covered.

If he wanted to decapitate the Man of Crows, he'd have to remove the molten iron first. He needed a better look, and he didn't want the iron to dampen the force of the blow, either.

But that would obviously expose him to danger, too.

No time to think about it. They were falling. That ground was coming up fast.

He annihilated the molten coating.

In that moment, he had a full view of the Man of Crows' smote and sundered body. It was in pieces and still trying to regenerate, but the head, neck, and most of the torso were intact. The limbs looked like they'd exploded out of their sockets.

And the guy saw Hector there, approaching from above. They locked gazes.

That was certain death in the man's eyes. Perhaps he saw the same thing in Hector's.

Hector had an orbiting blade already prepared. It didn't need to be big to sever the neck, but it was. Wide and flat, the size of dinner table. Better to overdo it than under.

He loosed it.

Straight and true, it flew--thanks again to the Scarf, most likely.

And it cleaved the Man's neck from his shoulders. Blood soared amidst the charred flesh and scattered feathers.

It still wasn't over, though. Hector could sense the crows around him. Three separate flocks, all twitching at once, all suddenly converging toward him.

Hector knew at once. So long as that head was unrestrained, those

birds would probably remain within his control.

Finishing this meant doing something about that."

"2803

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 19 of 30))~~

He'd practiced creating truly cold iron during his training with Zeff, but he didn't have much confidence in it yet. Molten iron was much easier by comparison. It pulled on an ""emotional"" command from his mind, feeling something like anger and ferocious concentration. Lowering the temperature, then, seemed to be about summoning the opposite feelings, which still felt somewhat strange to him. He could do it, just not as easily.

It wasn't just the difficulty of the technique that concerned him, though. It was its efficacy. He didn't know if it would actually be able to freeze someone this powerful. By all accounts, the molten iron should have melted the Man's body within seconds, but clearly, his passive soul defense was so strong that he'd only ended up with burnt flesh, instead.

And if he relied only on the cold to subdue the Man of Crows, then nothing less than freezing would do.

Which was why he didn't intend to rely on cold alone.

Hector traced a quick outline of the Man's face with the Scarf and created a frozen iron mask for it in his hand. He might've liked to simply coat the guy's face in iron, instead, but he was certain the field density of the Man's soul would prevent his materialization from functioning that close to the skin. He had to do this the hard way.

It all happened within a few moments.

As he soared close, the iron mask was so cold that he'd immediately lost sensation in his right hand, even through the gauntlet he was wearing. Which was a good sign, at least.

But the birds were there, too. The quick little bastards.

He slammed the mask onto the Man of Crows' face and just barely twisted himself around in time to take the brunt of the first flock's attack

with Haqq's shield.

It dented impressively but held together, and Hector went flying off course as the unshielded extremities of his iron armor shattered."  
"2804

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 20 of 30))~~

He could sense more crows en route. Two other flocks. They weren't as rigid as the one he'd faced earlier, nor were they spewing ranged attacks; but he couldn't just wait around for them to skewer him. Garovel was with him, after all.

And, well. It worked before, so he did it again. Hector knocked himself out of the flocks' paths with an iron boulder, narrowly avoiding both streams of beaks and claws.

As he tumbled, struggling to keep the severed head in view of his eye slit, he caught sight of something that took priority over just about everything else in his mind.

He saw a reaper melt out of the Man of Crows' head.

The face was covered by the frozen, soul-infused mask, but the back was still open, which was something he'd been intending to fix. But that was where the reaper appeared from. Perhaps it was trying to flee during the confusion, believing Hector would be too distracted by the flocks and the utter mayhem of freefall to notice.

Hector didn't have to think. He hadn't even been certain that the Man of Crows had been using a hyper-state up until now, but it didn't matter. There was no need to be surprised or to question it.

The reaper was a servant's weak point. There was only one action to be taken here. Instinctual.

And for it, Hector had the perfect technique, something he'd picked up from a man he admired more than almost anyone.

He launched a crude iron javelin with a simple, straightforward velocity state. No orbiting or parallel thought processes required.

It missed.

But that was okay.

It just had to get close enough to the Man's reaper. Which it did.

The iron shaft branched out violently, becoming a deadly tree of blades in the direction of the reaper.

And it connected."

"2805 -- CCXLIX.

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 21 of 30))~~

With his soul pressed into it, the iron branches skewered the reaper dozens of times, shredding its soul in the blink of an eye.

Hector didn't get the opportunity to even process what he had just done, however.

Right as his own killing blow was struck, a flock of crows crashed into him, tearing his armor apart and ripping through his body like paper. He barely sensed the flock's form at the last moment, convulsing and scattering.

He tumbled through open air again, having lost all sense of direction. He reached out with the Scarf to get his bearings, only to sense that he was heading straight toward some kind of gargantuan wall.

Wait, no.

That was the ground, wasn't it? Because he was falling. And it was far too late to do anything about it now.

Everything went black as he hit solid earth.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Nine: 'O, inciting tribulation...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector awoke with a start, jolting upright and taking a moment to blink away the disorientation in his vision.

'Easy there,' came Garovel's echoing voice. 'I decided to wake you up

a bit early, just because there's a lot of people who want to talk to you. So take it slow. It'll probably take you a full week to recover completely.'

Hector tried to think. Recover from what? Agh, his head was pounding. Everything was, actually. ""What happened?"" he mumbled.

'Don't remember?'

""I remember a battle... er, in the sky...?""

'Yeah, and you hit the ground like a ton of bricks. Killed you real good. Big splat. Blood everywhere. Even your brain didn't survive, so I had to regenerate you from scratch.'

It was coming back to him.

He was in his own bed, he suddenly realized. ""We're back at Warrenhold already? How long was I out?""

'A full day.'

""Agh...""

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~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 21 of 30))~~

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'A full day.'

""Agh... ""

"2806

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 22 of 30))~~

'You did well, Hector,' said Garovel. 'Perhaps a little TOO well, in fact.'

""...What do you mean?""

'You slew the Man of Crows.'

Ah...

He remembered now.

The reaper. He'd killed the reaper.

His eyes eased shut, and he lay back down again with his forearm pressed against his forehead.

And he sighed.

He'd been in so many fights now. So many life and death situations. It felt a little strange to think about it, but... he still wasn't really used to killing. Especially people. Reapers.

In fact, that might've been the first reaper he'd ever killed. It was a bit hard to be certain, thinking back on some of the more chaotic fights he'd been involved in, such as the one at Dunehall where there'd been tons of invisible enemies around.

If nothing else, that was the first reaper he had knowingly killed.

Yes. The first.

He didn't much like that word. First. It implied there might be many more to come.

Egh.

While he didn't exactly feel bad about it, he didn't feel great, either. Hell, he hadn't even known the reaper's name. Or the crow guy's for that matter. When it came down to it, he'd barely known anything about them. Beyond the fact that they were the ""enemy"" and that they were infamous, they'd been mysteries to him.

It made him question things.

Could he have taken the reaper captive, instead?

Hmm.

Not likely. The way those crows had been gunning for him, they would've killed him and freed the reaper immediately thereafter. And

the Man of Crows would have escaped. And Garovel might've been dead now, too.

Or maybe not. Maybe he was lacking imagination in some way.

Ugh.

He didn't like how... unbothered he was, right now. He felt the weight of his actions, the importance of them, but he didn't feel guilt. Like, at all, really.

That was a good thing, he supposed. And not wrong, perhaps. But it was still... concerning, in its own way."

"2807

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 23 of 30))~~

He'd done what he had to, though. He'd protected Garovel. And their allies.

If the Man of Crows and his reaper hadn't wanted to die, then the motherfuckers shouldn't have been trying to kill them.

Pretty simple.

Still strange, however. Despite how much death and destruction he'd seen, this sense of permanence still felt weird to him. Servants could come back from so many things. Even the bloodiest and most gruesome of fights often didn't carry much sense of finality to them.

Perhaps Garovel had some idea of all the different thoughts that were going through his head right now, because the reaper wasn't saying anything. He was giving him time to think, seemingly.

Still on his back, Hector decided to break the silence with a question. ""...What happened to Bloodeye?""

'Still alive, unfortunately. He escaped.'

Hmm.

'Which means the rest of Abolish will know that Abbas found allies near the Lorent-Callum border.'



""Shit. You think they'll be able to identify us?""

'Well, it's a bit of a toss up at this point. None of our reapers recognized Bloodeye's soul, so our individual identities might still be safe--at least until any of us run into him again. But then again... you've gotten kinda famous lately. And your armor is pretty distinctive. I wouldn't be terribly surprised if they figured out who you were.'

""Fuck...""

'Plus, some of them probably know that you were at Dunehall. With Ivan. Which is another matter, by the way.'

Hector hadn't forgotten. He'd been hoping to talk to Abbas about that very subject as soon as possible, in fact. ""Just tell me that Ivan isn't free.""

'He's not free.'

Hector opened his eyes and turned to look at the reaper. ""Wait, really? He's not?""

'As far as Abbas knows, at least, a small group of Sandlords managed to escape from the Golden Fort with Ivan's frozen head before Abolish showed up to sack it. There's no telling where it is right now, though.'"  
"2808

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 24 of 30))~~

Hector exhaled a long breath. Frankly, he'd been trying not to worry too much about the problem of Ivan simply because he didn't fucking know what to do about it. So to hear that it wasn't an immediate issue was an enormous relief--more so than he'd realized, even.

'That being said,' Garovel went on, 'we still can't ignore the threat that Ivan poses to us now.'

That put a bit of a damper on Hector's little relief party. Primarily because he knew the reaper was right. Dammit.

'We have to assume that Abolish is tracking the group who escaped with Ivan's head. Freeing him is probably their top priority, right now.'

Yeah, that sounded about right.

'If they find and revive him, he's going to be pissed. At two specific people, most likely.'

""Me and Abbas.""

'Both of whom are here at Warrenhold.'

Hector sighed. ""Couldn't they just, like... drop his head to the bottom of the ocean somewhere? Or better yet, launch it out into space?""

'Ah. If only. You're not the first to have had that idea. Launching captives into space, that is. Unfortunately, it doesn't work.'

He kinda figured as much. Seemed too easy. ""Why?""

'Because for whatever reason, the servant-reaper bond is constrained by Eleg's atmosphere. If you send a servant into space, the bond will fade until they simply die. Or in other words, if Ivan's head leaves the planet, then his reaper will be able to resurrect him from scratch again.'

""That blows...""

'Kinda, yeah. But it's also good that Abolish can't do shit like that to us. I can only imagine how different history would be if such a tactic were possible. By now, there'd be countless reapers who'd lost their servants like that.'

""I don't care about history. I care about how upset I feel.""

Garovel chuckled. 'That's exactly the type of level-headed thinking we need, right now.'

"2809

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Hector let out a small laugh of his own and rolled out of bed. He was abruptly reminded of how sore and stiff his body was. He stretched his neck. ""What about the ocean, though? You didn't explain why that wasn't an option.""

'Well, that one has multiple reasons. In general, it's just a bad idea to abandon any captive's head, no matter how remote you think the location might be. Anything could happen to it out there. For example, a temperature shift could cause it to thaw, and if brain function returns, the servant would be able to communicate telepathically with the reaper again.'

Hector rubbed his chin. ""So it would be better to hide it in like a snowy tundra region or something...""

'Methinks you've missed the point about it not being a good idea to abandon captured heads in random places. But technically, you're not wrong. There've been a number of notorious prisons throughout history that were located in frozen regions for precisely that reason. In fact, I'm sure there are still a few being used to this day.'

""Really?"" said Hector. ""I was just kinda talkin' out of my ass...""

'I could tell. And yeah, that's a thing, though it's probably less common than it used to be. A few hundred years ago, there was a series of wars often referred to as the Icy Clog that took place in northern Ardora. They were all about trying to free captive servants from various prisons. Lasted decades. A real shitshow, if ever there was one.'

Hector allowed a beat to pass before turning to look at Garovel again. ""I still feel like it'd be possible to hide the head somewhere that no one would ever find it.""

'Are you fucking kidding me, right now?'

""Look, I'm just saying, like, what about a super deep hole in an iceberg or something?""

"2810

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 26 of 30))~~

'And what if the iceberg melts one day?' said Garovel. 'Or simply shifts? Or if a reaper happens to wander by? Or something else, perhaps?'

Hector gave a shrug and stood up. He was naked, he suddenly realized. He decided to sit back down and pull the bed sheets over him again.

'I've seen it all before, buddy,' said Garovel. 'No need to start getting embarrassed in front of me now.'

That was probably true. If only it was as simple as deciding not to feel embarrassed. He pulled the sheets with him as he got up again and made his way over to the closet to fetch some clothes.

'Anyway, even if you did find a really good place to hide the head, there are artifacts out there that are capable of helping reapers locate their lost servants. The Vanguard has access to a few such things, so I'm sure Abolish does, too.'

""Artifacts?"" said Hector. ""Magical ones, you mean?""

'You could say that. They can look like all sorts of different things, but we generally refer to such items as ""soul compasses."" They're rare but highly valued. I wouldn't be surprised if Abolish was using one to help them track down Ivan, right now.'

Clothes in hand, Hector waddled over to the bathroom. ""Doesn't that mean the people who escaped with the head are in a shitload of danger?""

'It sure does. They'll have to keep moving until they find a place they think is secure enough to store the head.'

""Does such a place even exist?"" said Hector. ""I mean, if they're being chased by friggin' Morgunov, then...""

'Yeah, it's a tall order. Short of asking Sermung himself to look after it, I'm not sure what you would do in such a situation. I don't envy their position, right now.'

"2811

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 27 of 30))~~

""Shit..."" As he got changed, a different question occurred to him. ""So wait a minute, how do these soul compasses work, exactly? Can they help you track down ANY soul you want?""

'No. Only souls that you are bonded with, such as that between a reaper and servant.'

""Ah...""

'Which is why Abolish actually might NOT be using a soul compass to track Ivan, just yet. Because it means that Ivan's reaper has to be involved in the chase. Which is risky. And with the war going on, they probably can't spare that much high-level manpower to protect the reaper while they go on some long ass soul hunt across the world.'

""Hmm.""

'Such hunts have been known to last for years or even decades, in extreme cases. I remember one time, about 1500 years ago, when a prince of the Mohssian Empire was captured by a famous general of the Valgan Empire. Now THAT was a hunt. A half century of constant clashes spanning the entire planet, including the Undercrust. I've heard it called the greatest chase in history.'

""Geez...""

'It finally ended when the chase led them to Exoltha, and a group of feldeaths annihilated both parties.'

""Holy shit...""

'Yeah, it was pretty fucked. And also a valuable lesson. Don't screw around in Exoltha.'

As Hector finished getting ready, one last thought occurred to him, and he frowned. ""Aw, shit, I was supposed meet the Queen in Lorent, wasn't I?""

'Well, you didn't HAVE to. It was an open invitation, I think.'

He straightened his black tie. ""I really don't want her to think that I'm ignoring her.""

'She might like to meet Abbas. Perhaps it would be a good idea to take them. You were thinking of getting the Sandlords settled in Lorent, anyway, weren't you?'

That was true, he supposed."

"2812

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 28 of 30))~~

'Not to mention, there's that OTHER matter to look into,' said Garovel.

Fully dressed now, Hector poked his head through open bathroom doorway before walking out. ""What other matter?""

'Oh, c'mon, you know the one. The other matter.'

""Uh...""

'The one involving the thing. Inside the other thing.'

Ah, wait a minute. ""Hmm. Weirdly enough, I think I actually know what you're talking about...""

'Heh. Good. Then there's no need for me to ramble on. Our reaper-servant communication skills are doing excellently.'

""If you say so.""

A beat passed, and Garovel tilted his head at him. 'Again with the all black getup, huh?'

""Hey, these are the nicest clothes I've got."" It was true. Ms. Rogers had picked them out and gotten them fitted for him. She said they belonged to the Umbral Heart line from Domingo. He didn't know what any of that meant, but they sure felt nice on his skin and didn't restrict his movements as much as other fancy clothes he'd worn.

And apparently, they were ""expensive but not TOO expensive."" According to Ms. Rogers, they would allow him to appear respectable and distinguished in front of people who cared about these sorts of things without looking like he was showing off.

That all sounded good to Hector.

'I wasn't questioning their niceness,' said Garovel. 'It's just a lot of black, y'know? A black man in a black suit in a black tower. Don't you think a splash of color might do you some good?'

Well, the reaper had a point. Hector scratched the back of his head as he looked around his room. He went through the dresser near the closet, searching for something he could wear with color on it. Some extra piece of clothing he could wear with or perhaps on top of--

He popped his head out, suddenly realizing.

He wasn't wearing the Scarf of Amordiin, right now."

"2813

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Where was it? He looked around, but the Scarf was black, and just like Garovel had said, so was the whole damn tower.

'By the bed,' said Garovel, apparently not needing an explanation of what Hector was after.

And indeed, there it lay, on the nightstand next to the amber lamp.

Hector breathed a sigh of relief and went over to pick it up again.

Immediately, the fullness of the room filled his mind as he could sense the flow of air all throughout it.

'I'm surprised you didn't notice you weren't wearing it sooner,' said Garovel.

""You said you regrew me from scratch, right?""

'Yup.'

""So then...""

'Dimas Sebolt carried it back for us,' said Garovel. 'At my request.'

""Ah...""

'Yeah.'

""So now he knows what the Scarf is capable of.""

'Yes, he does. I didn't exactly explain it to him, but he was touching it for several hours while you were busy being dead.'

Hector squinted. ""Wait a minute. Why didn't you just resurrect me then and let me carry it back myself?""

'Oh, um. Well, y'know. I probably should've, huh? Guess it slipped my

mind. Probably would've saved us some time, too. Bit of a BONEHEADED move on my part. Heh. Get it? Boneheaded?'

Hector did not react.

"Cuz you see me as a skeleton, right? Skeleton joke.'

Hector just kept staring at him.

'You could at least pretend to laugh. It was a little funny.'

Still, Hector made no response.

'Alright, stop that. You're freakin' me out. Say something, damn you.'

The truth was, something else was bothering Hector. He stepped closer to Garovel, looking the reaper up and down, searching for signs of anything amiss. Hmm.

'Excuse me, but my eyeholes are up here.' And after a beat, he added, 'They ARE up here, right?'

Hector ignored him. He didn't find--

Ah.

There was a gash on Garovel's backside. Small but there. Smoldering with ethereal, black-and-white smoke."

"2814

~~((Thanksgiving Special - page 30 of 30))~~

""You were wounded in the battle,"" said Hector, displeased--both with Garovel for hiding it and with himself for having allowed it to happen in the first place.

'It was nothing. I'm already back in top form.'

""...Are you?"" said Hector. ""That's why you had to let Dimas carry the Scarf, isn't it? Because you couldn't revive me?""

'Listen, I was just feeling a little woozy. I could still talk. Kinda. For a while. Anyway, I'm fine now.'



Hector's frown only deepened, however.

'There's no point in worrying about me. And besides, reapers are more durable than you give us credit for, Hector.'

""...I just killed one of you, Garovel. And it wasn't that difficult.""

Garovel fell quiet at that remark.

""I knew you should have stayed behind with Voreese,"" said Hector.

'And I knew you would reach that conclusion if I told you about my wound. Hector, I'm not going to just keep sitting on the sidelines while you do all the heavy lifting, alright? I need to be with you when shit hits the fan. I need to be useful. I'll lose my fucking mind otherwise.'

""Garovel, this isn't... agh..." How was he supposed to explain? Technically, the reaper was supposed to be the one in charge here, but Hector didn't know if he could put up with this.

'I helped, didn't I?' said Garovel. 'I warned you about that missile from Bloodeye. Gave you the chance to intercept it with a big dome, remember? Maybe that doesn't seem like a big deal to you, but if that thing had hit, it could've shifted the entire tide of the battle. I mean, when you think about it, I saved all our lives.'

Hector just sighed.

'And besides, the safest place for me is by your side,' said Garovel. 'You may not think so, but it's true. With all those invisible assholes in Abolish, you're one of the few people who can actually sense their presence and protect me from them. Am I wrong?'"

"2815

The reaper did have a point, Hector knew, but he was still far from convinced. And worse, it was starting to sound like there was no way that he would be able to make Garovel see reason here.

'Hector, I refuse to be one of those reapers who gets sniped by some low-level douchebag while their servant is distracted. I'm sticking with you. I don't care how dangerous it gets.'

Fuck.

'And I REALLY don't want to be one of those reapers who allows their servant to get captured for twenty years or some shit, either. That would be hell.'

""Garovel, you're being unreasonable...""

'I know I am. But I didn't take you on as a servant because I wanted to be reasonable. I took you on because I wanted to save some fucking lives. To be involved in some heroic-ass shit! And you still need my help, goddammit! I mean, don't get me wrong! I'm super proud of you and all, but battles are crazy, and my experience is invaluable to you!'

Hector held up both hands. ""Alright, you're getting a little worked up...""

'I've BEEN worked up! For thousands of years, I've been worked up! You know how much bullshit I've seen and couldn't do anything about! I go through these phases of feeling incredibly powerful and then incredibly useless! I'm not gonna become your fucking pet reaper, okay?! I'm gonna do everything I can to keep being useful, and you're not gonna stop me from doing that! We're in this together, you little shit!'

Wow. Hector just kind of stood there, not even sure what to say anymore.

Garovel seemed to be done now, though. And an awkward silence arrived.

After a while, Hector scratched his cheek and looked around the room again. ""So... about that splash of color you mentioned... ""

"2816

After a while longer of rifling through his clothes, Hector was finally able to pick out something to wear that wasn't black.

Garovel was still not entirely pleased with the outcome, however. 'Of all the possible colors, you choose GRAY?'

It was his undershirt that he had changed. It contrasted with the black of his suit and also made his black tie more visible. ""Yeah, y'know, it's like, thematic. Because we live in Gray Rock.""

'So you're trying to wear the environment?'

""Look, I don't know fashion, alright? But I think it looks decent, at least. You never said I looked bad.""

'No, you look fine. Very lordly. I guess. Doesn't change the fact that gray is the most boring color in the world.'

""I don't know if I can trust your opinion on this, Garovel.""

'That's hurtful. In fact, I think my wound from Crowe just reopened.'

He was finally ready to leave the room, until he reached the door and remembered yet another thing that he should probably ask about.

""Where's the Shard?""

'Oh, it's under your pillow,' said Garovel.

Hector gave him a look.

'What?'

""You had Dimas put it under my pillow? Like the Tooth Fairy?""

'Yeah, what's wrong with that?'

""I just... I mean... why the pillow?""

'Why not? Clearly, it was a pretty good hiding spot, since you were just sleeping on it and didn't even notice.'

Alright, whatever. Hector ventured over to the bed and grabbed it.

""Did you tell Dimas how important it is, too?""

'I think so. Sort of. My memory's a little fuzzy on that one. I don't think I went into detail about it being your personal hotline to an ancient warrior god of his ancestral rivals.'

""That does seem like it would be a little hard to explain...""

As they left the room, Hector briefly wondered if perhaps he could've located the Shard without asking Garovel where it was. He recalled having some weird kind of... extra awareness of its location in the past. Maybe if he'd concentrated, he could've sussed it out on his own.

Hmm. Maybe he'd try to test that theory out later."

The Tower of Night was busier than he'd ever seen it--which wasn't too surprising, really. If all three hundred of Abbas' refugees had made it to Warrenhold, then the number people within the castle had almost doubled overnight.

He wasn't too concerned about having enough room for everyone, but food was another matter. No doubt, Ms. Rogers was having a hell of time with all of these new guests.

On every floor, he could see the Rainlords and Sandlords intermingling, but they were easy to differentiate from one another. Even if their bronzier skin, head coverings, and robes didn't give them away, it would still be obvious because the Sandlords looked like they'd all been through hell.

So many wounded.

He was glad to see they were being tended to, though.

Hector was a bit worried how the Rainlords and Sandlords were going to get along under one roof, but this was an encouraging sight, he felt. And they'd shared a country for ages, so maybe there was hope.

With each room or crowded corridor that he passed, Hector sensed a lot of eyes on him and heard plenty of hushed whispers.

It was making him self-conscious. These clothes weren't making him stand out too much, were they? They couldn't be. They practically blended into the nightrack.

As he neared the first floor, a crying woman stumbled in front of him and all but fell at his feet. She was saying something, but he couldn't tell what it was, either because she was sobbing too hard or because she was simply speaking a different language--or perhaps both.

'I think she's thanking you,' said Garovel privately. 'Ah. For saving the lives of her grandchildren.'

Hector's brow peaked in the center, and a somber frown split his face as he helped the poor woman back up to her feet. When he looked her in the eye, it only seemed to make her cry harder."

An unfamiliar pair of men pushed through the crowd and gently put their hands on the woman, pulling her away from him. They didn't say anything, perhaps because they didn't speak Mohssian, but they did give him nods of acknowledgment.

Hector just stood there for a minute longer, watching them go.

Wow, he thought. He had no idea who that woman was, and he felt like she might've been giving him a bit too much credit; but all the same, he was unbelievably glad to have played a part in helping her.

He was abruptly reminded of why he was doing all of this, why he wanted Warrenhold to become a bastion of safety in the first place. He hadn't forgotten, of course, but still. Seeing all these people like this... battered and in need...

It was an odd mixture of emotions. Sorrow and frustration. He hoped he could do more for them. With every fiber of his being, he intended to keep them safe, at the very least.

He was starting to draw even more attention, just standing here like a weirdo, so he moved on.

Garovel led him out into the main plaza, around which stood all of Warrenhold's eight great towers.

The reaper pointed out Lord Abbas, who was overlooking the underground lake on the far side of the plaza.

The man wasn't in his armor, but he did seem to be tinkering with something in his hands. He wasn't alone, either. A sizable crowd was gathered around him, most of whom Hector did not recognize. A few Rainlords were sprinkled in there as well, however.

They all turned to look his direction as he approached.

Abbas' reaper--Worwal, as Hector recalled--was the first to speak up. 'The Lord Darksteel of Warrenhold. This is a magnificent fortress you have here.'"

"2819

'We appreciate your kind words,' said Garovel, 'even if you are only being polite. It still needs quite a bit more work before it will be deserving of a term like ""magnificent,"" I feel'

'Oh, you are being too harsh, surely,' said Worwal. 'Why, this castle is a wonder and a half. The size alone is enough to leave a lasting impression in the mind, but the fact that it is also underground makes me think that it could only have been the work of a true artist of the architectural craft.'

'Ah, that artist would be one Stasya Orlov,' said Garovel.

Worwal's hollow eye sockets widened a little. 'That name is familiar, though I have not heard it since before the banners of Al'Imbratur were flown in Kuros.'

'Indeed. My friend Voreese would be able to tell you more of her, if you are interested.'

'I would be. Perhaps we could--'

""I'm afraid I must interject before the entire day disappears during this conversation,"" said Lord Abbas. ""Unfortunately, there are more pressing matters to be discussed than that of your lovely home, Lord Goffe.""

'Of course,' said Worwal. 'Forgive me. I have something of an obsession when it comes to the matter of grand masonry.'

Oh? Hector's head perked up a little at that.

Abbas seized full control of things before Hector could respond, however. ""Firstly, please allow me to thank you for coming to our aid. I believe it is no exaggeration to say that your efforts saved the lives of my entire Hahl, and I could not be more grateful.""

""Oh. Uh... er..."" Shit. He should've practiced for this or something.

""If the situation had grown any more dire, I would have been forced to do something quite drastic indeed,"" said Abbas. ""So thank you for stepping in when you did."" And he offered him a handshake.

Well, Hector knew how to do that much, at least. He shook it."

Abbas held his gaze for a long moment, not saying anything.

Hmm, perhaps he was waiting for Hector to take the initiative. Uh. Shit. There were plenty of things to discuss, weren't there? He thrust his uncertainty into a background thought process as he tried to think about what to say.

This handshake was going on for a bit too long, Hector suddenly realized. He tried to pull his hand back, but Lord Abbas maintained his grip.

And the man tilted his head at him. ""So I wasn't hallucinating,"" said Abbas.

Hector didn't know what was happening, right now. He tried to pull his hand back again, and this time, Abbas let him go.

""Everyone,"" said Abbas, apparently addressing the small crowd around them, ""would you mind giving us a moment, please?""

A string of acknowledging murmurs ran through the onlookers, and a minute later, they had all dispersed. Only the handful of Rainlords remained behind, and Hector noticed that they were looking at him, as if expecting something.

Hmm.

He gave them a nod, and then they dispersed, too.

Abbas' gaze lingered on those departing Rainlords for a bit longer before returning to Hector again. ""The Rain is very attached to you, it would seem. Asad did not mention that.""

Again, Hector did not know what to say, so he merely remained quiet.

A mild smile crossed Abbas' face. ""Perhaps he thought it too unbelievable. The idea that these frigid puddles would act so deferential to someone not of their own blood--if I had not seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears, I may have simply thought him a fool.""

Deferential? Eyes and ears? What exactly had he been seeing and hearing from the Rainlords over this past day, Hector wondered?"

""There is something very peculiar about you, Lord Goffe."" Abbas' dark brown eyes held on him, seeming somehow more penetrating due to how deeply sunken into his long, thin face they were. ""Something familiar.""

Hmm. Hector had a feeling he knew what the man was getting at, but he wanted some elaboration first. ""Familiar in what way?""

""It is difficult to describe,"" said Abbas. ""I have felt its like before--I am sure of that. But it has been a very long time since I felt it so... strongly.""

Garovel interjected before Hector could answer. 'When WAS the last time, if you don't mind my asking?'

Abbas gave him a look. ""So you are aware of it, then.""

Garovel gave a light chortle. 'Maybe just a bit. But please, answer my question. I'm quite curious.'

Abbas took a moment to think, and his gaze grew distant. ""I was but a child. Not yet a servant, even. My grandfather introduced me to a man named..." He shut his eyes, perhaps to help him concentrate. ""Hanseth. Yes, that is what it was. Hanseth.""

'Jara Hanseth?' said Worwal.

Abbas looked at his reaper. ""I don't recall his first name. And you and I had not met yet, so I don't know if we are referring to the same person.""

'Mm. You're probably thinking of Jara. Or perhaps his brother, Kizo Hanseth. They were both friends of your father around that time.'

'Hanseth, you say,' said Garovel. 'I've heard that name before. And not in the most flattering of contexts, unfortunately.'

'That does not surprise me,' said Worwal. 'Jara had a reputation for being something of a... ""kook,"" to put it nicely. Many a strange idea were born from that man's mind.'

'Is Jara still alive?' said Garovel.



Worwal's skeletal face twisted awkwardly. 'Ah... no. He was killed. By Kizo, no less.'

'Oh.'

"2822

'Quite an odd story, that one,' said Worwal. 'And rather long, as well.'

'I should like to hear it another time, then,' said Garovel.

'And I should like to tell it.'

""Regardless,"" said Abbas, ""I only meant that it is familiar in its strangeness and intensity. I do not mean to imply that you are the same at heart as this Jara character. I did not even know the man.""

That was a bit of a relief, Hector supposed. It sounded like Jara Hanseth wasn't someone he wanted to emulate, though he was admittedly still curious. Moreover, he figured he could offer some elaboration of his own now. ""The Wrobels call it 'aura,'" he said.

Abbas' head reared back, and he blinked at him. ""You are in contact with a nest of Wrobels?""

Hector had a hunch that Abbas would know of them. The dude was old as hell, after all, and the leader of the Golden Council besides. ""I am. But I can't say more than that without betraying their confidence.""

""That must be quite helpful, indeed,"" said Abbas. The surprise on his face was not going away. ""Aura, you said? How did you come by this strange power?""

Even though he trusted Abbas Saqqaf and felt like they could gain a lot by swapping information, Hector didn't want to give too much away too quickly. Not to mention, there were more pressing questions on his mind. ""That, too, might be best saved for a different conversation,"" he said. ""Right now, I'm more interested in hearing what your current plans are.""

""Ah."" Abbas' expression returned to its more rigid state. ""At the moment, making repairs to my armor is the priority. That battle would have gone much more smoothly if its functionality had not been so

greatly compromised by those damnable abominations of the Mad Demon. ""

"2823

Hector observed the object in Abbas' hand another time. It seemed to just be a hunk of metal, yet Abbas was still fiddling with it even while they talked.

The Lord Saqqaf took notice and held it up more easily for Hector to see. ""The central processing unit for the suit's cerebral implants. Fixing it has been an exercise in tedium.""

Cerebral implants? What the heck? ""Er... what's wrong with it?"" asked Hector.

""It was crawling with nanoscopic saboteurs,"" said Abbas. ""I managed to contain them, but removing them has been akin to picking lice out of my son's hair one by one. If only there was a solution as quick as shaving him bald.""

Nanosopic? The more he talked to this guy, the more Hector felt like he was out of his depth here.

'You're talking about nanomachines?' said Garovel, sounding truly shocked. 'Used by Morgunov?'

""Indeed. Quite the obnoxious little things. I would have liked to study them, at the very least, but it appears they have some sort of built-in self-destruct mechanism whenever they are 'caught.' How the old thu'ban managed that, I do not fully know. Perhaps it is something to do with their proximity to one another, but I have tried catching them in groups and yet they still annihilate themselves, so that cannot be the only trigger."" The man broke for a sigh. ""I dread to think that he could have actually harnessed the observer effect at a quantum mechanical level, but that may be exactly what he did. Haqq Najir has been studying them around the clock and trying to learn more, though I am not hopeful for his findings.""

Yeah, okay, wow, Hector felt pretty stupid after listening all of that and retaining almost none of it. He could at least pick out the name Haqq Najir, though. ""How long do you think it will take you to repair your armor?""

""That is a difficult question to answer."" Abbas touched a hand to his mouth as he eyed Hector. ""But perhaps you will understand. You were gifted the Amir-9 prototype unit by Sazandara, were you not?""

Hector paused. Amir-9? Prototype? What was he--?

Oh, wait a minute.

""You mean this?"" Hector materialized Haqq's heater shield into his left hand.

The Lord Saqqaf's eyes just about popped out of his head. He said something Valgan that Hector didn't quite catch, and then recomposed himself. He pocketed the CPU he was holding and then held his hands out as if to ask for the shield. ""May I?""

Hector handed it over.

Abbas inspected it up and down with his mouth hanging slightly open.

Hector and Garovel exchanged glances while they waited.

Abbas pressed his right hand against the face of the shield, stretching all five fingers out wide and closing his eyes. After a moment, he opened them again and handed the shield back to Hector.

Rather than taking it, Hector simply dematerialized it.

Abbas blinked as he shook his head. ""Unbelievable... how in the world were you able to assimilate it into your materialization?""

""Uh... well, I didn't do it. Rasalased did.""

That response made Abbas look even more incredulous.

Hmm. So it was called the Amir-9 prototype, huh? That was news to Hector. He'd just been thinking of it as Haqq's shield this whole time. He resummoned it into his hand and looked it over again.

""Unfortunately, it seems to have lost its soul-enhancing properties, but other than that, it's still just as durable as it used to be, I think.""

Apparently, Abbas still needed a few more moments to find his words. ""...And it still regenerates on its own? Without thought from you?""

""It does,"" said Hector.

""That is what I was getting at before you... showed me..." He trailed off, eyes having grown distant again.

Worwal jumped in to help him again. 'His armor can regenerate in a similar manner, is what he is trying to say, I believe.'

"2825

""I see,"" said Hector, though he was mostly just saying that to be polite. ""By the way, uh..." He offered the Amir back to Abbas. ""Er, I know this was a gift and all, but if you want it back, then please, take it. I, ah... I actually have a collection of about three hundred more of these sitting in an armory at the top of the Entry Tower." Plus a few more in the hands of Rainlords on the other side of the world, but that wasn't worth mentioning, Hector felt.

Abbas looked positively disgusted at that information. ""Three hund--?" He shook his head. ""Do you have any idea how long it took Haqq and I to develop this prototype?""

Hector just kind of pressed his lips together flatly. He suddenly recalled Garovel mentioning something about how big of a deal it was that he could create so many replicas of this shield, about how it could gain him quite a bit of influence and attention in the world that he wasn't yet prepared for.

So much crazy shit had happened since that conversation, though. Thinking back on it now felt almost quaint, somehow.

Lord Abbas sighed and took the shield. ""Thank you, I suppose. In any event, my armor should be able to repair itself rather quickly once the nanomachines are expunged from it. I suspect it will take at least four more days to remove enough of them to restore the primary systems. For all systems, however, we might require an entire week. Or more, perhaps.""

Hector scratched his upper lip. ""How much could you get done in one day?""

""Why do you ask?""

""Because I would like you to come to Lorent with me.""

""As I said, the armor takes priority over everything else, right now.""

""I have a Fusion Forge there.""

Abbas fell silent. And just stared at him."

"2826 -- CCL.

## Chapter Two Hundred Fifty: 'Partnership of the Age...'

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""You have... a Fusion Forge..."" was all Abbas managed to say. He looked dazed now.

In spite of himself, in spite of wanting to remain as composed and lordly as he could, Hector couldn't help smiling a little. He put a fist in front of his mouth to hide it, not sure if it would offend the Head of the Golden Council. ""Perhaps you could work on your armor on the way?"" he suggested, trying his damndest not to start laughing.

Abbas and Worwal both squinted at him, then exchanged looks with one another.

'Do you truly have a Fusion Forge in your possession?' said Worwal. 'You are not trying to prank us, are you?'

That did it. Hector shut his eyes and chuckled into his closed fist. Shit. He had to clarify immediately. ""It's not a prank,"" he said, regathering himself. He looked to Garovel for help.

Garovel was turned around and doubled over in the air. The black shroud that covered his skeletal form was shaking violently. With suppressed laughter. He was having an even harder time than Hector was, apparently.

'You ARE pranking us!' said Worwal.

Garovel started guffawing outright.

""No!"" said Hector, still struggling to keep his composure. ""It's real! I swear! Come with us to Lorent, and you'll see!""

""How in the world did you get your hands on a Fusion Forge?"" said Abbas.

Hector took a second to let Garovel calm down. And then he shrugged.

""I just found it.""

"2826 -- CCL.

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"2827

""Are you sure that it is a Fusion Forge?"" said Abbas.

That was actually a good question, Hector thought. ""Well, Garovel said it was, so... if it turns out to be a fake or something, then... blame him, not me.""

'Whoa, whoa, whoa. First of all, it was Voreese who first said it was a Fusion Forge, so if anything--

Their conversation continued on for a while longer, as did the Lord Saqqaf's incredulity. And frankly, Hector didn't feel like he was doing a very good job of convincing the man that they weren't bullshitting him. But in the end, Abbas agreed to go to Lorent with him, which was all that really mattered.

Hector had more that he wanted to discuss, but he figured they could talk more during the trip.

In the meantime, Hector wanted to check up on things around Warrenhold. Having just woken up, he still didn't feel like he had a clear picture of everything that had transpired while he was asleep. He figured Garovel would've told him right away if anything really terrible had happened to any of the other combatants in the battle, but Hector decided to pay a visit to everyone, anyway.

Roman, having been blown to pieces by a missile, had also been

regrown from scratch by Voreese. Unsurprisingly, he was in even more pain than Hector, which was doubtless why Hector found him enjoying a nice long soak in the bathhouse.

They didn't talk long, as Roman soon drifted off to sleep.

Hector almost woke him up, because he was fairly certain that he'd heard it was a bad idea to sleep in a hot spring, but after thinking about it, he decided that it was probably fine. Roman was undead, after all. And obviously tired, besides."

"2828

Hector might've liked to get some more sleep of his own, but now wasn't the time--nor would it be any time soon, he figured. He found Salvador Delaguna by chance among Hahl Saqqaf, tending to some of their wounded. Hector hadn't expected to see him there, as he didn't realize the man had any medical experience; but indeed, after watching him work for a few minutes, it seemed clear that Hector had been right. He didn't have any.

Salvador was just helping his niece out, apparently. Clarissa Delaguna didn't hesitate to chastise him when he made mistakes or moved too slowly for her liking, but she was also taking the time to show him how to do things properly.

It was a bit of a strange sight. Such a giant man, hunching over tables and bed-ridden people, clearly trying to be as gentle as he possibly could with his enormous hands.

Hector admired it, though. If he had more time, he would've liked to join in. Medical knowledge might not have been too useful for him personally, but maybe one day, in sufficiently terrible circumstances, it could be the difference between someone living and dying.

Maybe that was what Salvador was thinking, too.

Something else to add to his to-do list.

Hector found the Sebolts in the Entry Tower. Dimas had suffered some pretty heavy wounds in the fight, too, and his new girlfriend was now hanging onto him like some kind of human bracelet.

""Thank you so much for keeping my man safe, Lord Goffe!"" said



Madison Reach. ""I was so worried!"" She pecked Dimas on the cheek, then perhaps thought that wasn't enough and went back for a second, much longer kiss in the same spot.

An impressive amount of lipstick stayed on Dimas' face. As usual, though, his expression was impossible to read.

The other Sebolts in the room snickered and whispered among themselves."

"2829

Maybe it was a bit rude, but Hector felt more of a kinship with the onlookers. The sight of Madison clinging to him like that made Hector want to tease Dimas, too. ""Not at all,"" said Hector. ""If anything, it was your boyfriend here who was keeping me safe.""

""Oh?"" Madison's big, curious eyes went to her beau.

Dimas, however, kept his eyes on Hector. ""You're too modest, Lord Goffe. I did hardly a thing."" Something about the way he said 'Lord Goffe' so stiffly made Hector think that Dimas might actually be somewhat uncomfortable--which was not something Hector had seen from him before.

""Have you ever seen him use his powers, Ms. Reach?"" said Hector.

""Oh, a little bit, yeah. Dimas doesn't like to show off much, you know. He can be kinda shy, sometimes.""

""You don't say?"" said Hector. ""How so?""

""Well, for instance, he doesn't like kissing for more than three seconds in front of other people, but when we're alone--""

Hector felt his chair raise off the floor and begin floating toward the door.

""It was nice talking to you, Lord Goffe,"" said Dimas, ""but I am sure you have many other pressing matters to tend to. We wouldn't want to keep you.""

Hector just laughed and didn't put up any resistance. Motive aside, the man wasn't wrong about him having other things to take care of.

His next encounter was not nearly so jovial, unfortunately. He first noticed it when crossing the main plaza and sensing a sudden disturbance in the air over the half-sunken town below Warrenhold. He returned to nearly the same spot where he'd talked to Abbas earlier and looked out into the distance, concentrating harder on the what the Scarf could tell him.

Air tremors might've been the best way to describe it. Indicative of heavy impacts. Not enough to make the cave itself tremble, thankfully, but still noteworthy, just the same.

That area over there was where he and Zeff often trained together."  
"2830

Hector decided to check it out. As he got closer, the impacts became more obvious, the tremors more violent. And the cave indeed began to shake.

Perhaps that was why the Lord Elroy had chosen to move even farther away from Warrenhold than usual. He didn't want to hold back, today.

As he approached, a car-sized chunk of ice flew toward Hector, and he had to slip out of the way. For a second, he thought Zeff was attacking him, but after a moment, he realized that it had just been part of an even larger iceberg that had shattered on the ground.

All the ice disappeared after a moment, replaced by a tornado of water.

And a scream.

Raw frustration. Anger. Agony.

The whirlwind of water seemed to grow in power, as if to conceal the noise, and soon it was spinning so fast that it was yanking loose boulders out of the distant ceiling and carrying them around it like orbiting satellites.

Hector had to armor up, even as he backed away. He added extra layers, too, just trying to add more weight so that he didn't get pulled away from the ground.

Then the tornado burst apart, sending a tidal wave of water and rocks in all directions. Hector materialized another Amir to help take the brunt of it, but it still knocked him on his ass and sent him skidding across the wet, stony floor.

Water still drizzled down around him as he picked himself up again.

Zeff was just sitting there now, hunched over, his thick black hair soaked and dripping.

Hector had no idea what to say, but he kept his armor on as he approached, hopefully allowing the metal clink of his footsteps to alert Zeff to his presence. There wasn't much light around, so Hector materialized a glowing iron cube, too.

""...No training today, Hector. You're still recovering."" The man didn't bother to look up at him."

"2831

Hector tried to think of the right words. They didn't come.

Asad Najir and Zeff Elroy had a unique relationship, Hector knew. Something akin to best friends, perhaps. Zeff might not have let it show before, but the fact that Asad was missing must have been tearing him up inside.

Especially after everything else the man had already lost.

And now Hector had confirmation from Rasalased that Asad was not only missing but actually captured by Morgunov.

Hector considered telling Zeff. Would it help anything? Would it just cause Zeff even more misery?

He wasn't sure.

But there was one thing Hector knew for sure. He knew that if their roles were reversed, he wouldn't want Zeff to hide this from him.

So he had to say something. Dammit.

""...Rasalased told me that Asad was captured by Morgunov.""

Zeff made no response.

Hector waited, though. For something. For anything. An explosion of water, maybe. Or at least some yelling.

But it didn't come.

Zeff just kept sitting there, not looking at him.

""...Zeff?""

Nothing.

That was weird. He didn't even seem surprised. Maybe on some level, Zeff had already known. Or suspected as much, perhaps.

But did that make sense? Wouldn't Zeff have been more worried that Asad was just dead? Not captured?

Hmm.

In any case, Hector didn't want to leave it there. ""Rasalased believes that Asad will make it out of this alive. And be stronger for it, too.""

Still, Zeff remained quiet.

""I don't know if that's true or not, but... Rasalased hasn't steered me wrong so far.""

""Hector.""

""Yeah?""

""Leave me alone.""

""...Alright.""

Without another word, Hector crossed the lake and returned to the castle. He wasn't too concerned about Zeff running and doing something stupid like trying to mount a one-man rescue. As long as Asad's actual whereabouts were unknown, that wasn't really an option."

"2832

Which was to say nothing about the prospect of having to fight the Mad fucking Demon. Considering the fact that he'd just taken down two marshals, even Zeff had to know how utterly moronic that would be.

Hector checked up on the renovation progress as well, but as expected, there wasn't much change. It had only been a day and a half or so since he last checked, after all. And of course, with the arrival of the Sandlords, many among the construction team had gotten distracted or otherwise volunteered to assist in getting everyone settled.

Everyone's priorities had temporarily shifted. That was alright. And understandable. The renovations weren't that urgent.

Were they?

The more he thought about it, the more he had to admit, the possibility that the war might come to Atreya was rising. And if it did, it would most likely come through Lorent now. And geographically speaking, Warrenhold was the first line of defense for Atreya.

...Maybe the last line of defense, too.

Now there was a disconcerting thought.

He put it out of his mind for now.

By the time he finished making the rounds, it was already nearing dinnertime. He'd been grabbing snacks from the kitchen throughout the day, but he was still famished. He decided to give Her Majesty a call before eating, though. He only managed to get a hold of her secretary, but that was fine. He just wanted to let her know that he would be visiting Riverton Hall the day after tomorrow.

After dinner, he went straight to bed. When he awoke, he was still sore all over, but he wasn't quite so stiff anymore, at least.

They set out in the early morning--using regular, old, non-flying cars this time. Since it wasn't an emergency situation, they didn't need Dimas to help them cut down on their travel time so much. Plus, Abbas was bringing a few non-servants with him, and an unpressurized vehicle at high altitudes would not have been kind to them."

"2833

Abbas continued to tinker with the helmet of his armor during the ride. He had decided not to bring the entire suit with him, as most of it was apparently in a delicate stage that made moving it problematic. Haqq Najir had stayed behind at Warrenhold to continue working on it.

Hector used the opportunity to tell him what he'd already told Zeff about Asad's captivity.

Abbas was in turns displeased and confused. He had a few questions about Rasalased but not as many as Hector might've expected. Abbas seemed to already have some idea of what was going on there. Perhaps Asad had told him, or perhaps he'd been talking to people around Warrenhold.

Either way, it wasn't anything that Hector hadn't heard before. Once that conversation was out of the way, Hector was eager to move on to topics that he felt were more pressing.

"I was wondering what you plan to do after you finish repairing your armor," he asked.

Abbas took his time responding. "Truth be told, I have been wondering about that, myself."

Hector frowned and eyed the other members of Hahl Saqqaf in the car with them. They didn't look very encouraged by those words, and Hector couldn't blame them.

He couldn't really blame Abbas, either, though. The guy might've been their leader, but he was in a horrible position, right now. His country had just been stolen from him. His kin, crushed and scattered.

If he was feeling a bit lost, then that made perfect sense, unfortunately. Hector sympathized.

But even so, admitting as much in front of his people... Even if there were only a handful of them here, right now, Hector didn't see much logic in that.

He might've still been new to this whole lording business, but in his experience, keeping up appearances was half the battle.

Well, okay, in his experience, it might've actually been more like ninety percent of the battle."

"2834

Before the silence could become too deafening, however, Worwal stepped into the conversation. 'I believe the best course of action is to get in touch with the Vanguard and join the fight for the Wetlands. The situation may look grim, but as far as we know, Sair might still be saved.'

Garovel had something to say about that, apparently. 'I would caution against that. I've gotten word that the Vanguard has already lost its grip on the Wetlands.'

'You've gotten word?' said Worwal. 'From where?'

'We have informants still in the country,' said Garovel.

Informants? That was news to Hector. Garovel couldn't have been talking about the scouting team of Rainlords, could he? Hmm, maybe he was. Hector had assumed that the scouting team had returned to Warrenhold with Hahl Saqqaf and the rest of the refugees, but it would also make sense if they'd redeployed to western Sair, instead.

Agh, so many moving parts to keep track of. Hector was glad to have Garovel around for these sorts of things. Hector hadn't seen him all that much while making the rounds earlier, and he knew it was because Garovel had been busy talking to virtually every other reaper in Warrenhold, old and new arrivals alike.

Hector had wondered if this was going to be the new paradigm, with the two of them dividing the responsibility of overseeing Warrenhold's operations. It certainly helped save time, even if it meant not getting to see Garovel quite as often.

If this really was going to continue into the foreseeable future, though, then they would probably need to spend more time bringing each other up to speed at the end of each day, Hector figured.

'That can't be true,' said Worwal. 'The Vanguard couldn't have lost the Wetlands so quickly. Didn't we just receive word that Jackson survived the clash at Uego?'

"2835

'Not lost,' said Garovel. 'Losing. And yeah, it sounds like Jackson made it out alive, but I'm also hearing rumors that he is gravely wounded and unable to lead.'

'Wounded?' said Worwal. 'He's undead! Why should his wounds matter so much?'

Garovel's hollow gaze went to Abbas. 'Why should the regenerative properties of your armor be impaired?'

Worwal paused. 'You are saying that Morgunov attacked him with nanomachines, as well?'

'It's possible,' said Garovel. 'Probable, even. You two didn't even come into direct contact with Morgunov, correct? And yet you were still infected. I think it's quite likely, therefore, that Morgunov hit Jackson with something far more potent.'

Silence arrived for a time until Worwal broke it again. 'Even so, that doesn't change the fact that reuniting with the Vanguard is our best option, at the moment.'

'That is your choice to make, of course,' said Garovel. 'But we will not be able to assist you. The Rainlords are still fugitives from them. Even if they are busy with the war, we can't risk drawing their attention to Warrenhold.'

""The Vanguard cannot help us,"" said Abbas. His downcast gaze was fixed on the helmet in his hands.

That made the silence return briefly as everyone waited for him to elaborate.

Worwal had to push him. 'What do you mean?'

""The Vanguard is the entire reason we are in this situation to begin with,"" said Abbas. ""They drove out the Rainlords, weakening the nation and inviting attack from Abolish. We were fools to side with them over our own countrymen."" The Lord Saqqaf took a heavy breath and rubbed his brow. ""Asad was right.""

More silence.

Damn, Hector thought. He didn't necessarily disagree, but... damn.



'If we had openly opposed the Vanguard, that would have invited an attack just the same,' said Worwal."

"2836

""No,"" countered Abbas. ""The Vanguard's mission is to fight Abolish, no matter the geopolitical circumstances. Most likely, they would have still come to our aid even if we stood with the Rainlords.""

'You can't know that,' said Worwal.

""At the very least, we should have reminded the Vanguard of their code of non-interference. They had no right to move against the Rainlords the way they did.""

'That code doesn't apply to servant-led governments like ours.'

""A matter of debate. One which we should have held, instead of simply cowing before them."" He shook his head. ""We have disgraced not only ourselves, but also our forefathers. And the people suffer for it, as always.""

Worwal didn't have a response for that, apparently.

Shit.

Generally speaking, Hector had never really considered himself to be a very positive person, but fuck. Someone really needed to give these two a pep talk.

That seemed like a job more suited to Garovel, honestly, but the reaper wasn't saying anything. In fact, he was just staring at Hector. Expectantly.

What the heck? Did Garovel want him to say something? Why wasn't he giving him orders privately, then?

Eh, maybe Hector was reading too much into his expression. It was just a skeletal face, after all. What was there even to read?

""...If you can't rely on the Vanguard,"" said Hector, ""then it's clear what your next move should be.""

Abbas looked up at him, as did Worwal.

""Regroup,"" said Hector. ""Find your people. Reform the Golden Council."" Hector thought he saw a smirk flash across Garovel's bony mouth.

'...That is easier said than done,' said Worwal. 'We have no idea where the other Hahls have gone.'

'Really?' said Garovel. 'None of them?'

Worwal shook his skull. 'We kept many different rallying points in the event of such an attack, but all of the ones we checked were already razed or taken by Abolish by the time we arrived.'

"2837

""In fact,"" said Abbas, ""that was where I encountered two of the Mad Demon's killer robots.""

'That's very alarming,' said Garovel, sounding surprised. 'Does that not suggest that Abolish had access to privileged information?'

'It does,' said Worwal. 'I have to imagine that was a contributing factor to the scattered nature of our retreat. If I had to guess, I would say that each of the Hahls has gone to ground and intends to wait quite a while before risking contact with anyone outside of their respective families.'

Hector understood. But he had a hard time buying all of that. ""Do you think one of your own kin would have given up details like that?""

'I would like to say no,' said Worwal, 'but the more times goes by, the more skeptical I become.'

Hector didn't know the Sandlords like he knew the Rainlords. He couldn't treat them like they were the same. But even so, it seemed to him that there was at least one way in which the Sandlords and the Rainlords were extremely similar. Their sense of honor. ""Is it possible that the leak could have originated from the Vanguard, instead?"" he asked.

Worwal and Abbas both paused at that.

""...Perhaps,"" said Abbas. ""The rallying points might have been shared with certain Vanguardians whom had gained one or more of the Hahls' trust.""

'Either way, it makes no difference without proof. Even if we could contact the other Hahls, they would likely be incredibly suspicious of us. As we should be of them.'

""What about Hahl Najir?"" said Hector. ""Haqq was with you, but where are Jada and Imas?"" Asad's daughter and sister, respectively. There was Asad's wife and son, too, but Hector couldn't quite recall their names, at the moment.

'We don't know,' said Worwal. 'Nor does Haqq.'"  
"2838

Hector's hand went to the Shard in his coat pocket. It didn't quite fit perfectly in there, but he'd gotten accustomed to the feeling. He pulled it out. ""I... might be able to help with that, too.""

Abbas and Worwal both stared.

""If Rasalased is cooperative, he could probably lead us to the other Hahls,"" said Hector.

'You sound uncertain,' said Worwal.

""I am,"" said Hector. ""Talking to Rasalased is difficult. I still haven't quite figured out how to do it at will. But I'll try my best and hopefully get some answers out of him soon.""

""...I still cannot believe you are able to converse with him,"" said Abbas.

Honestly, neither could Hector. He didn't know if he should admit that, though.

They continued talking for the length of the journey. Worwal asked about their recent trip through the Undercrust, having apparently already heard quite a few different things that he wanted confirmation on. Hector mostly let Garovel handle it while he concentrated on contacting Rasalased.

Again, he found himself struggling. How had he managed it the last time? He remembered getting frustrated. Emotional.

...And that had actually worked? Hmm. He supposed it had.

How weird. Usually, allowing himself to get upset seemed like it was the exact opposite of what he was supposed to do. In fact, he wasn't even sure how he was supposed to do it now. What, was he just supposed to pretend that he was mad again?

Eh.

He gave it a shot.

Shockingly, it didn't work.

He tried a few more times and failed a few more times. It seemed like he would have to actually get mad again in order for it to work, but how the hell was he supposed to do that? Think anger-inducing thoughts? That seemed pretty weird."

"2839

He was definitely missing something here, he felt. Why would it be an emotional trigger, of all things? What sense did that make? The only thing he could compare it to was his materialization, with how he used a kind of ""emotional command"" in order to manipulate temperatures.

But this was completely different, wasn't it?

...Wasn't it?

Why in the world would it be the same? Or even just similar?

Hmm.

Maybe there was a common denominator here that he just wasn't quite seeing.

...An emotional command. He'd only been thinking about the 'emotional' part of that term. But what if that wasn't the issue?

Argh.

Before he could finish working through his thoughts, the vehicle arrived at its destination. Hector tried to shove the problem into a background thought process, but he was suddenly feeling a tinge of nervous

anticipation. That big tree in that open field over there was looking pretty damn important, right about now.

Truth be told, he hadn't really given it all that much thought before. Garovel and Voreese said they needed skilled integrators for the Fusion Forge. Abbas Saqqas was a skilled integrator. Pretty straightforward reasoning.

But now that it was imminent, Hector's mind was beginning to go in all sorts of directions. Obviously, Abbas considered the news of a Fusion Forge to be incredibly important for it to be worth the trip all the way out here, so what was he going to think when he saw it?

And more importantly, what might he be able to do with it?

Hector didn't want to get his hopes up too much, but at this point, he couldn't help himself. Would Abbas be able to make crazy weapons? Crazy armor? Or some kinda super weird shit?

...Fuck, it was probably gonna be some super weird shit, wasn't it?"  
"2840

He led the entourage to the tree and welcomed everyone inside.

Hector and Garovel had been worried about leaving the Forge here all by itself. They'd considered various options, such as moving it to Warrenhold, but they didn't want to risk damaging it or making some other kind of mistake with their lack of knowledge regarding its usage. They'd also considered assigning someone to stay and guard it, but without knowing when--or even if--they would be able to find a use for this thing, they decided against that, too. Plus, no one else knew of its existence, so there wasn't much chance of it being stolen.

For now.

Instead, Hector had simply encased the whole huge thing in an iron box. That way, in the unlikely event that someone else had found this room, there would at least be a barrier in place to prevent them from doing anything to the Forge. True, it wasn't the greatest safety measure in the world, but when Hector annihilated the iron, there the Forge still was, waiting.

Its giant glass body gleamed against the meager daylight from the

open doorway. Abbas walked toward it first, holding up a hand behind him, telling the others in their party to stand back. His steps were slow and measured as his gaze drank in the view.

The man took his time.

Hector was eager to know more, but he wasn't eager to rush him. From the way Garovel and Voreese had described the Forge, this thing seemed pretty fucking dangerous in the wrong hands. Hector was prepared to give the Lord Saqqaf all the time in the world to examine it.

Abbas got very close to the glass, but Hector could sense via the Scarf that the man wasn't actually touching it.

At length, Abbas finally spoke up. ""Do you know who crafted it? Or how long it has been here, perhaps?""

"2841

'No on both counts, I'm afraid,' said Garovel. 'But it appears to be at least as old as the early Mohssian Empire. One of the books on that shelf over there mentions the Forge, and it is written in both the Nykeirian and Old Mohssian languages.'

""A minimum of two thousand years, then."" The sheer awe in Abbas' voice made Hector's anxiety spike somewhat. ""Magnificent.""

'Can you tell if it's still functional?' asked Garovel.

""Its condition appears absolutely pristine, but when it comes to Fusion Forges, without being able to consult the creator, the only way to know for certain is to test it out.""

'That... sounds rather dangerous,' said Garovel.

A beat passed.

""Yes,"" was all Abbas said.

Ah.

Hmm.

Everyone fell quiet again, and Abbas continued his inspection, circling around the stony base of the giant glass globe.

Eventually, Garovel spoke up again. 'Y'know, if you think it's too dangerous, we understand. No matter how useful the Forge is in theory, it's not worth losing you, Lord Abbas. I mean, it REALLY isn't. So. Please. Don't feel pressured to do anything you are not comfortable with.'

""Oh, we are far beyond the realm of comfort already,"" said Abbas.

Yikes, Hector thought. A question stirred within him, and he had to ask it. ""Have you ever worked with a Fusion Forge before, Lord Abbas?""

Abbas scratched his temple, not taking his eyes from the globe. ""As a matter of fact, I have."" There was a wavering laugh in the tone of his voice. ""It nearly killed me.""

Hector was not pleased to hear that.

""I was young and foolish then,"" Abbas went on. ""I refused to heed my mentor's warnings.""

'Or mine,' added Worwal.

""Yes. I wanted to prove myself--that I was the intellectual equal of so many of the great men around me. It was pure egoism.""

"2842

At that, Hector wanted to ask another question, but it sounded rather rude in his head.

Thankfully, Garovel posed a similar enough inquiry first. 'Have you had any GOOD experiences with a Fusion Forge, Lord Abbas? Like where you actually made something cool and didn't almost die in the process?'

""Tell me,"" said Abbas. ""Have you ever heard of a man named Dolf Rachman?""

Garovel was quiet for a lingering moment. 'I most certainly have. The Rachman Duels were the stuff of legend.'

A short laugh escaped Abbas' lips. ""He would have been pleased to hear someone say that. Many historians, reapers included, seem to treat him as little better than an ant whose most noteworthy accomplishment was getting stepped on.""

'Historians can be cruel,' said Garovel. 'And cowardly, too--especially when their work involves a living emperor. It may be another century or two before Rachman is given a fair shake by the historical community.'

'Even that may be too optimistic,' said Worwal.



'Why do you bring Rachman up?' said Garovel. 'You knew him, I take it?'

""He was my mentor,"" said Abbas. ""One of several, in truth, but the one I loved most, to be sure. He would have been ecstatic to discover a new Forge.""

Hmm. Hector couldn't help noticing that Abbas was not giving a straight answer to Garovel's earlier question.

""Dolf's own mentor was Kalim Lotorevo--an even more remarkable man, though I never had the privilege of meeting him. Kalim was the one who made the Forge that I used in my idiotic youth. The Earth Cruncher, is what they called it in Mohssian. An incredible, hulking thing. Full of grinding metal and fire--and honestly quite terrifying to be near when in use. Not like this one at all, I'd say."" Abbas paused, and Hector sensed a silent sigh between breaths. ""But Dolf treasured it more than any other object in his workshop. And he was heartbroken when it was finally attacked and destroyed.""

"2843

'That makes a lot of sense,' said Garovel. 'I remember how much of a stir the Duels caused in the beginning. Everyone thought Rachman was insane to be challenging emperors to single combat, but if he had a Forge at his disposal, then that would explain why he was able to surprise so many people with his strength.'

'In fairness, he **WAS** insane,' said Worwal. 'Never have I known a more absurd individual than Dolf Rachman. He was nowhere near old enough to be threatening Morgunov and Dozer the way he did. But he was convinced he could defeat one or even both of them.'

'In the beginning, the Duels weren't to the death, were they?' said Garovel.

'That's right. His goal was to simply show the world that they could be beaten. To weaken their influence. It wasn't until the eighth consecutive duel in as many years that Morgunov finally decided that he had grown tired of the game and refused to fight him again unless they raised the stakes by including their reapers in the contest.'

'That was when the Duels began to gain worldwide attention, no?' said

Garovel.

'Indeed. It was an utterly ridiculous agreement--and very captivating, I must admit.'

""It was precisely that increased pressure that made Dolf burn at his very brightest,"" said Abbas. ""His brilliance shone through like never before. The items he was able to craft with the Earth Cruncher toward the end... they were truly awesome. They kept him alive when he should have died a dozen times over. I am convinced that Morgunov grew to fear him after that final Duel, and that was why the workshop was attacked and the Forge, destroyed. He was afraid that Dolf would finally beat him one day, and so resorted to sabotage.""

"2844

'You might be right about that,' said Garovel, 'but I find it a little hard to believe that Morgunov would be afraid of anything. All accounts that I've heard of the guy have painted him as an absolute lunatic who loves battle, even when he is losing.'

'Don't bother trying to make that argument,' said Worwal. 'I've told Abbas the same and more a hundred times over. His mind is made up on this particular matter.'

'Fair enough.'

""Morgunov loves the image that the masses have of him,"" said Abbas. ""This idea that he is incapable of fear, immune to worry, that he is in so many ways an immovable genius beyond the scope of normal human understanding--these are all music to his ears. Propaganda to help sow the seeds of fear. In the end, he is just a man like any other.""

Damn. Hector wasn't sure whose word to trust more here, but he had to admire Abbas' passion, at least. If nothing else, it was clear that the Lord Saqqaf had been thinking about the problem of Morgunov for a very long time now. And with the conquest of Sair, Abbas was probably feeling more strongly about it than ever.

Abbas wasn't done talking yet, though. ""I've sometimes heard it said that if Dolf had only been more patient, he might have become an emperor himself one day, but I knew him better than anyone, and that

simply wasn't his way. He was not a man who could abide mediocrity in virtually any aspect of his life. Every pursuit had to be given the entirety of his effort, and the Duels epitomized that part of him more than anything else. Frankly, I'm surprised he lived as long as he did. And I'm even more surprised his reaper went along with him."

"2845 -- CLI.

""For all his other faults, I always admired that about him. His single-minded, unshakable drive. In that way, I have often felt small when compared to the enormous shadows that he and his mentor both cast. But seeing this Forge here now... I feel that this is an opportunity that I absolutely must not let pass me by."" Abbas circled around the other side of the Forge and then looked Hector in the eye. ""I promise you, I will get this Forge working if it is the last thing I do.""

Hector sensed an ever so slight shift in the air as he listened to Abbas' words. The man's intensity was obvious enough from his words and expression, but with the Scarf, Hector felt a little something more. A trembling in the room's air currents.

Abbas was, perhaps unintentionally, affecting the environment with his... words? His soul? His will? Hector wasn't sure.

But whatever it was, it made Hector quite certain that Abbas meant what he said.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-One: 'The song's whisper...'

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The party lingered at the tree for a while longer. Hector wanted to head to P.J. soon and meet the Queen, but Abbas' fascination with the Forge was so apparent that he didn't want to pull the man away just yet.

Unfortunately, it seemed like it would be a while before Abbas could give him an idea of what sorts of items they could create with this thing.

""For that, I will require a better understanding of what this Forge is truly capable of. The Earth Cruncher specialized in metalwork, but this

is obviously quite different. Were you able to learn its name, by the way?"

'No,' said Garovel. 'It wasn't written down, but we weren't looking for it, either. Do Forges usually have names?'

'Yes,' said Worwal. 'They are typically given to them by their creator, but if this one's name has been lost, then we should give it a new one.'

"2845 -- CLI.

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'Yes,' said Worwal. 'They are typically given to them by their creator, but if this one's name has been lost, then we should give it a new one.'"

"2846

'Ooh, I love naming stuff,' said Garovel. 'The best names are ones that come with built-in nicknames. How about the Toby? Short for Globey Toby. Or Orby? Short for Orby Orbington. Or Glassy? Short for Amassy Glassy.'

'Those are all impressively terrible,' said Worwal.

'Thanks. Think you can do worse?'

Worwal thought a moment. 'George the Forge.'

'Wow, okay. Good job.'

Perhaps having some inkling that this was going to spiral out of control if he didn't do something, Lord Abbas decided to intervene. ""A new name is not a trivial matter. It should only come after we understand its capabilities better.""

'Really?' said Garovel. 'What difference does it make if we name it now or later?'

""A Forge's name is more than just words. It binds itself to the Forge metaphysically and becomes entwined with its identity. A name can even impact the properties of the Forge itself, altering its power in minor ways.""

'Are you serious?' said Garovel. 'I thought this was all scientific stuff when it came down to it, but you're talking about straight up wizardry, right now.'

""Make of it what you will, but I am not lying. Most importantly, an ill-fitting name can have negative effects. I have heard of one case in which a Forge was rendered all but useless due to a badly chosen name.""

'Well, shit,' said Garovel.

A lull in the conversation arrived as everyone was apparently thinking at the same time.

Hector decided to break the silence himself, because there was one thing he wanted to know. ""What... what name was so bad that it ruined a Fusion Forge?""

Abbas eyed him for a time. ""...It was too ridiculous to utter.""

Hector just frowned.

Garovel had him covered, though. 'C'mon, now you've gotta tell us.'

The Lord Saqqaf sighed. ""...The Great Tornado Toilet of Ultimate Toilation.""

Hector had to cover his mouth to hold back his laugh.

Garovel didn't even bother."

"2847

Hector had to ask. ""Was that Morgunov's doing?"" It certainly sounded like something a total lunatic would name his Forge. Hector was hoping not, though, if only because he didn't want to find anything that the Mad Demon had done amusing.

""Actually, no,"" said Abbas. ""It was a different madman by the name of Rakko.""

Garovel's laughter began to settle. 'Ah. Him. Yeah, that makes sense. Y'know, I kinda miss that guy. He was a good emperor in his time.'

Abbas cocked an eyebrow. ""That is not what I have heard.""

'Well. Okay. ""Good"" may be a strong word. He wasn't an evil son of a

bitch, at least. And that's all I really ask from servant emperors.'

""Did he not raze Arkotesh to the ground?""

'Yeah, but I'm pretty sure that was an accident,' said Garovel. 'And he worked to help the people he displaced for many years afterwards.'

""Arkotesh,"" Abbas repeated. ""The academic capital of the world for a thousand years up until that point. The birthplace of geometry, algebra, the calendar system.""

'Yeah, but he also apologized. When's the last time you heard an emperor apologize, huh?'

The Lord Saqqaf did not look convinced.

'Look, we can stand around here and argue about history all day, but I'm sure we have more pressing things to be doing, don't we?'

And indeed, they did. They stayed a while longer to let Abbas give the Forge another once over, but then they were on their way to the capital.

Riverton, P.J. was quite far away, however, and the Imara Forest was so dense that even the highway passing through it felt a bit claustrophobic. The speed limit on these winding roads was noticeably lower in the Jagwa region and Atreya.

They settled in for a long ride.

On the bright side, Hector had plenty of time to come up with more questions for Abbas."

"2848

""The naming thing is still confusing me,"" said Hector. ""If the Forge's name is so important that it becomes a part of its... metaphysical identity or something, then... shouldn't it be impossible for us give the Forge a new name? Shouldn't its original name be too important?""

Abbas returned a nod. ""That is entirely possible, yes. However, even if its name was never written down and has been forgotten by all who yet live, I should still be able to discover what it is via the Forge itself. If its name is truly a part of it, then it should be able to tell me what it is. In

theory.""

Hector and Garovel exchanged glances.

""But on the other hand, if the Forge is broken--or if it was never given a name in the first place, perhaps--then yes, a new name will be required before it can achieve full operation.""

'The way you talk about Forges is peculiar,' said Garovel. 'You treat them as though they are living things.'

Abbas bobbed his head to one side. ""That may not be an inaccurate way of thinking about them. While they are certainly not alive in the same sense that any of us are, they do have a certain... presence to them that is purely their own. As objects, they are undoubtedly greater than the sum of their parts. And for that Forge in particular, such thinking may be even more true than usual.""

'What do you mean?' said Garovel.

""The location of a Forge is another important factor in its function. I do not think it is mere coincidence that it currently resides within an enormous tree. That tree no doubt plays a large role in that Forge's power.""

""Hmm,"" hummed Hector. ""So moving the Forge to Warrenhold is out of the question, then?""

"2849

""Ah... most likely, yes,"" said Abbas. ""I cannot say for certain that it would be impossible, but with any Forge, its environment is key. Even if we could move it safely--and I am not sure that we could--doing so could disrupt its power in ways that are difficult to understand.""

'I guess it's a good thing we decided to hold off on that, then,' said Garovel.

Hector wasn't entirely prepared to concede, though. ""But... if it's already broken, then wouldn't now be the best time to move it?""

Abbas' brow crinkled together with apparent disapproval. ""Perhaps. And perhaps it would acclimate to the new environment of Warrenhold quite well. Or perhaps it would be rendered completely useless. I do



not think it is worth the gamble.""

Hector gave a slight sigh. ""Yeah, alright, I understand...""

He hadn't really thought it would work, but it sure would've been nice. He wouldn't have had to worry about keeping it safe quite so much, at least. Even if it had meant uprooting the whole damn tree and taking it back to Atreya, it would've been worth the hassle, he felt.

But yeah, the tree probably wouldn't survive. Plants couldn't grow in Warrenhold, after all. Maybe it could work if they transplanted it aboveground, but even that was debatable, since there wasn't much natural vegetation there. Plus, it would kinda defeat the purpose of using a castle to protect it if it wasn't actually in the castle. They would have to build a special sanctuary for it or something--and they could just do that here in Lorent, instead.

Hmm.

A sanctuary, huh?

...Like a second castle? A brand new one? Just to protect the Forge?

Oh, baby.

That would be so fucking expensive, though.

But oh, baby...

He tried not to delve too deep into that fantasy. It was tempting. God, it was tempting. But he wanted to be pragmatic. For the most part."

"2850

By the time they arrived in the capital, the sun was already waning in the sky. Combined with the thick canopy of leaves covering most of the city, it felt like nighttime. Hector made sure to call ahead again so that the Queen would be ready to meet them. Certainly, he didn't want to just waltz into Riverton Hall with Abbas Saqqaf by his side, so he asked the Queen to come to them.

There was a quiet place that Ravi had showed him the last time he was here. A little hole-in-the-wall diner with some of the best chocolate milkshakes he'd ever tasted. To be safe, though, Hector picked the

next building over, instead. An even-more-empty taco shop.

They'd brought some hats, hoodies, and sunglasses with them from Warrenhold for this occasion, but with how barren the place was, maybe they weren't even necessary. They picked a booth near the back and sat down. A server came over to take their order, and they decided to go ahead and eat while they waited. Hector made sure to pay in cash. He'd brought Lorentian loros, as well as Atreyan troas, so it wasn't a problem.

The food wasn't very good.

That actually made Hector a bit more comfortable, though. He found that diner next door a bit strange, honestly. If the their food was so great, why didn't they get more business?

Maybe he was just being paranoid. Not every great restaurant could afford equally great publicity, but still. The fact that Ravi had recommended it to him was enough to cause concern, too. As much as he wanted to trust Ravi Zaman, Hector felt like there wasn't any harm in being extra careful.

Other than having to choke down these awful tacos, he supposed. If he wasn't so hungry, he probably wouldn't have even finished them."  
"2851

When the Queen and Lynn appeared, they were both wearing clothes that were more casual for them than he'd seen in a long time. Or what felt like a long time, at least. Not since they'd been on the run from Abolish had they looked so... normal. Little to no makeup, lack of bright colors in the wardrobe, not even the sword that Lynn always carried with her.

Though, it wasn't like she needed it to protect the Queen.

And it wasn't like she needed expensive clothes or that fancy white cloak in order to look good, either.

""Hello there,"" said the Queen softly as she joined them at their modest table.

Lynnette decided to sit at the table across the narrow aisle and turn around to face the taco shop's front door.

""Hello..."" Hector almost added a 'Your Highness' to that but caught himself. It felt a little weird to not use her honorifics, but he was sure she would understand.

""I am pleased to see you, Helen,"" said Abbas. The gentleness in his voice took Hector by surprise.

""And I you, Abbas. It has been some time.""

""You've grown into a fine young woman.""

She giggled lightly at that. ""I am well into my thirties, you know.""

""Hah. Is that meant to make you sound old?""

""Youthfully experienced, is how I like to think of it.""

The Lord Saqqaf gave her a brief smile before his expression turned more serious again. ""Thank you for sending Lord Goffe to our aid. It could not have been more timely. I dread to think of where my family would be right now if he had not arrived when he did.""

Her gaze flitted between the two of them for a moment. ""I am glad to hear that. He was quite adamant about it. He scarcely even asked my permission before departing. It may be a stretch to say that I 'sent' him.""

""Perhaps, but you could have intervened, if you wished--and been well-justified in doing so, I am sure.""

"2852

The Queen's expression betrayed nothing of her thoughts, but she paused a moment before changing the subject. ""How fares your Hahl?"" she asked.

""Well, it is still intact,"" said Abbas, ""which may be more than can be said for others. I do not know what has become of the other Hahls, but I suspect we were among the luckier ones. Hahls Kattan and Dagher worry me most. Their homes were even closer to Uego than the Golden Fort was. They likely received the least warning of the invasion.""

""I see,"" said Helen. ""Do you have enough space at Warrenhold for everyone?""

""Yes, but we do not intend to stay there long.""

""I would imagine not. The Rainlords must make for awkward bedfellows, no?""

Abbas shook his head. ""Far from it. We have our differences, but it is precisely in times such as these that our commonalities rise to the surface. Their presence is a welcome comfort.""

The Queen seemed surprised, but then nodded. ""I am sure that my brother Meriwether would like to see Nasira and Rashad before you go. They are well, I hope?""

""They are. And I have no objection to their meeting, of course. We are but guests, after all.""

""Where do you intend to go, if not Warrenhold?""

Abbas glanced Hector's way. ""We are thinking of here. In Lorent. Hector has kindly offered us a place on his land. Temporarily, of course.""

Helen's gaze turned briefly to Hector, too. ""Are you sure? You are welcome in Atreya. I do not know if the Lorentians will be quite so understanding as we are.""

Abbas folded his hands on the table. ""I do not intend to ask for their permission. We will remain here covertly.""

The Queen's head reared back a little. ""Perhaps I am misunderstanding something, then. That seems a needless risk when you have a perfectly viable alternative in Atreya.""

"2853

""It is not a question of viability,"" said Abbas. His eyes shifted around the empty restaurant, and he looked at Worwal for a moment before continuing in a slightly lower voice. ""I must work on the Forge that Lord Goffe has recently found. If I can get it up and running, it could be exactly the boon we need to turn the tide of this war back in our favor.""

Her posture stiffened a bit as she listened. ""You truly believe this Forge to be so important?""

""I do.""

""More important than seeking out aid from Intar?"" she said.

At that, the Lord Saqqaf paused and rolled his neck to one side for a moment. He exhaled heavily. ""I am sure that one or more of the other Hahls will attempt to acquire Intar's help. I will leave that task to them. However, knowing what I do of Intarian politics, I have little reason to believe that such efforts will bear fruit. It is worth checking, of course, but I am rather confident that Intar will attempt to maintain their neutrality, even now.""

The Queen blinked. ""Surely not. Abolish is all but knocking on their door.""

""Their congress is paralyzed by divisive rhetoric. They will not take action until their land is directly attacked."" The man paused for a light shake of his head. ""Hmph. Perhaps not even then. They may just expect the Vanguard to take care of everything for them, as usual.""

The Queen looked concerned, her frown deepening, but she made no response.

""As for the Vanguard,"" Abbas went on, ""I think it best that my kin and I try to decouple ourselves from them as soon as possible. They may still be useful as allies, but it is clear to me now that we have grown too reliant on them over the years. And too trusting.""

"2854

Hector hated to admit it, but Abbas' assessment tracked fairly well with what Prince David had told him not too long ago. The sociopolitical divide in Intar between the Blue Moon Party and the Grand National Republic Party was exacerbated by their differing opinions on interventionism. The Grands, who were currently in power, might be inclined to aid Sair, but if they did, they would risk losing said power to the Moons.

Or something along those lines. Honestly, it all sounded pretty fucking complicated to Hector, and keeping up with a foreign nation's political

drama wasn't the easiest thing in the world.

Hmm. Maybe he should ask Hanton to keep an especially close eye on the situation over there. Come to think of it, the Sparrow was probably already doing that, but Hector wouldn't mind confirming as much.

And maybe putting Roman on it would be a good idea, too. Or some of the Rainlords, perhaps. There were a few Sebolts who might be suited to it. Or Blackburns?

He kept that internal debate going and assigned it to its own thought process as he continued listening to Abbas and the Queen.

"Hector has told me of this Forge," Helen was saying, "but I must admit, I do not fully understand its value. It can be used to create items of incredible power, yes? But what manner of items would that be, precisely? Weaponry, no doubt, but what kind of weapon would it take for you to reclaim Sair from the likes of Morgunov?"

"Your skepticism is understandable," said Abbas. "At the moment, the fact of the matter is that I simply do not yet know what we will be able to create. In fact, it may not even be weaponry that results from our efforts. Not weaponry in the conventional sense, at least." He broke for a weighty pause and glanced Hector's way one more time. "However, after giving the Forge a preliminary examination and thinking on it for a while during the drive here... I may have a very vague notion of the possibilities."

"2855

"Is that right?" said Helen. "Well then, please, don't keep me in suspense."

"I think it may have something to do with fire," said Abbas, "but not like that of a roaring inferno, as one might normally expect from anything called a 'forge.' I think it will have a... gentler aspect to it."

That was the first Hector was hearing of that. Abbas must really have been mulling that assessment over for a while.

The Queen did not look terribly impressed, though. "A... 'gentle' super weapon." She didn't say anything further, perhaps because the tone of her voice was saying it for her.

How were they supposed to fight the maniacs of Abolish with something gentle?

""As I said, it may not be weaponry that is born of the Forge.""

The Queen just gave a doubtful nod.

""I know how it sounds,"" said Abbas. ""Perhaps the Forge will not live up to my hopes. That is quite possible. Likely, even. I have no illusions about that. But even so, I must pursue this opportunity. Wherever it may lead me.""

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Caster Egmond unfolded his chair and sat down in it.

He was earlier than most of the others. That was abnormal for him. For the longest time, he had stopped taking these meetings seriously. He had stopped caring about the cause, the shared misery and accompanying sense of camaraderie. He'd just been going through the motions, playing a part, repeating the words he'd heard thousands of times by now.

""It's not as bad as we make it out to be in our minds.""

""People aren't judging us as much as we think they are.""

""We command respect, in our own way.""

""We have other, more important qualities that we can focus on.""

""If our reapers haven't given up on us, then we shouldn't give up on ourselves.""

And to think, he'd actually begun to believe all that stuff for a while. For a long while. Decades, even.

But now?

He sighed quietly to himself."

"2856

The others were filing into the chamber now. Some looked about as

discouraged as he felt. Others were more poised, guarded. Veterans of this place, like him.

He felt like a kid again, in the worst possible sense of the phrase. A mere child.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. He was supposed to be long past these feelings of inadequacy. As far as servants went, he was getting up there with the rest of them. His soul power was nothing to sneeze at. He could use pan-rozum, for god's sake.

He wasn't weak. He was strong. One of the strongest in Abolish, in fact. The Marauder of Calthos, they called him. Caster the Immovable, they called him.

And he'd been working on his image, too. Calm. Collected. Measured. Polite. Different from the men under his command. No longer acting the fool or the lunatic like so many others in Abolish.

So why, then, had the attack failed so miserably? Why had Ivan been captured by the bloody Sunsmith, of all people?

And why had Gohvis been able to punch him so hard that he nearly exited the troposphere?

It didn't make sense. The gap in strength between them should not have been that wide.

He hadn't even been able to look his own men in the eye after suffering such an absurd degree of humiliation.

And now, of course, he'd missed out on the opportunity to regain his honor. By the time he arrived at Uego, the battle was already over.

From the sound of it, Morgunov hadn't needed any help, but plenty of his peers had been able to grab a sliver of glory for themselves, at least. Vanguardian generals had been ripe for the picking, apparently.

But he'd been too slow.

Again.

How many times had he been shown up on the battlefield over the years? How many times had he been passed over by his superiors in favor of someone more ""suited to the task at hand?"" Someone more ""versatile?""



Someone whose ability wasn't destruction."

"2857

The other men in this group understood. They were all going through the same thing. His brothers of destruction.

They had to hold these meetings in secret, though. It would be too embarrassing if any other members of Abolish discovered what they were doing here. Hell, even most of their own reapers didn't know--or they thought it was for some purpose other than encouragement and support. Whenever one of the boys expected an outsider to show up, that was usually when they broke out the playing cards and alcohol.

They couldn't show weakness. They all knew that entirely too well by now. If nothing else, destruction users had to have the appearance of strength, of self-certainty.

Because oftentimes, that was simply how destruction users were.

Or at least, that was Caster's view of it. Whether or not servant abilities were in some way linked to the psychology of the servant--that was a matter of debate for the more academic among them. Caster believed so, but he most certainly had to acknowledge that there were outliers.

Which was what these men were. Outliers.

Destruction users were supposed to be more simple-minded. Not ""dumb,"" necessarily, but easier to please, at least. Not so ambitious or self-reflective. They were supposed to revel in their destruction, in their power.

But this group wanted more. They always had. When it came down to it, one might call that the source of all human unhappiness. The desire for that which they could not have.

Even now, there were those among them who did not believe it was hopeless. Guys like Paulie over there, still so blissfully young and inexperienced.

""I'm just saying, there has to be more to this power than we know. We just need someone who's, like, super ultra smart to help us analyze it and discover its hidden depths.""

"2858

""You think we haven't tried that?"" said someone on Caster's right. That one's name was Deacon. Not as much of a veteran of this little club as Caster but definitely an experienced fellow in his own right. ""We work for the most brilliant mind who has ever walked this planet. You think no one has ever brought this to him? Of course they have.""

Paulie didn't respond, but his face spoke of stubborn refusal to accept what he was hearing.

Deacon wasn't done. ""I know it's difficult to accept. Believe me, I do. But isn't that why we're all here in the first place? Because we need help with exactly that problem? Acceptance? We are what we are, gentleman. No amount of wishful thinking is going to change that. The important thing is to focus on what we can change. To hone our other skills.""

""That's right,"" said a man named Olaf on Caster's left. ""If even the Mad Demon himself can't find a path, then that path simply doesn't exist. Listen to us, Paulie. It'll save you years of agony. Years that you could be spending on more productive things.""

""It's true,"" said yet another man. This one was Tim, and he was sitting next to Paulie. ""Face it, my boy. There's a reason why there's never been an emperor who used destruction. We've got a hard limit on our abilities. That's just the way it is. Ain't nothin' to be ashamed of.""

Unsurprisingly, Paulie still didn't look convinced. ""I don't believe that. There were plenty of emperors or emperor-equivalent servants in the ancient past who've been lost to history, right? One of them could've had destruction. We can't know for sure that they didn't.""

A low chorus of disagreement and general grumbling ran across the men.

""Just look at Caster!"" said Paulie, pointing. ""Strongest we've ever had! Respected by everyone! He's an example of what we could all become! And he's still growing!""

Oh, god."

"2859

If only the boy knew how bad it really was. The last thing Caster wanted to do was crush his hopes, but maybe that would be for the best. Maybe he should just confess to his own crippling insecurities here and now, in front of everyone. That was the point of these meetings, after all. If anyone would understand, it would be the guys.

But he still hesitated.

Paulie wasn't entirely wrong. Caster did want to be something of a role model for all these poor bastards. He wanted them to be able look at him and see something for their future selves besides dying in obscurity.

So this was a lose-lose situation for him, in other words.

What else was new, eh?

Before he was forced to make a decision, however, Deacon chimed in and saved him. ""Caster has had many of his own struggles with this over the years. You can't just point to him and act like it's such a straight line to where he's standing.""

""First of all, he's sitting, not standing,"" said Paulie. ""And second, I'm not saying it'll be straightforward or easy. I'm just not ready to give up. Just because Morgunov couldn't crack it doesn't mean it's uncrackable. He could've missed something. I mean, he can't be that smart.""

Dead silence arrived.

Ah.

That had not been a wise thing to say.

Luckily for Paulie, it didn't take him long to realize his mistake. ""Uh. W-what I meant was that, he might have been too busy to really look into it, y'know? Like, if the problem didn't interest him enough, then, er, he wouldn't have had enough, ah, motivation to... um... dig into it for real... since he's not destruction himself, right? That's all I was getting at.""

The others in the group were still just staring at him.

Truth be told, Caster's own sympathy for the boy had lessened quite a

bit, too. This may have been a place for having difficult conversations, but that was most assuredly not one of them."

"2860

Caster kept a cool head, though. ""Let us call it a day, shall we? Good discussions, everyone."" Best to end things here before Paulie stuck his foot in his mouth again and got himself killed.

Caster stood up, and the others all gradually followed suit. There was nowhere to put their folding chairs, so they mostly just picked them up or left them where they were.

In the middle of this blown out gymnasium.

The missing roof, broken floor, shattered windows, and crumbling walls did not provide the most comforting atmosphere in the world, perhaps. But privacy was more important, and abandoned areas like this were great for that.

And of course, they were not normal men. They were not comforted by pristine surroundings. At the end of the day, despite their status as outliers, they were still men of destruction. Perhaps there was something soothing in this type of environment.

The beautiful calm of a devastated world.

Artful, Caster felt. More so than any painting, certainly.

They all went their separate ways. Those who belonged to the same sect probably didn't want to be seen returning to camp together. It would just draw needless attention to themselves.

Caster, for his part, didn't care so much about that anymore. He always had men in his sect or others hanging around him for one reason or another. Such was the life of a Judicator. People were always looking for someone to pass judgment for them on this dispute or that one.

Lately, he'd been swamped by arguing Raiders, all looking for someone to decide who got what spoils from the war. Killing each other over and over didn't accomplish much when they were in disagreement, especially when their reapers refused to risk their own lives getting involved. So they relied on the Judicators to sort

everything out. Sometimes, violently. But always decisively."  
"2861

Paulie, however, was not from his sect. So it was bit strange when the lad caught up to him on his way back to camp and struck up a conversation.

It started off with awkward pleasantries mixed with apologies. The boy seemed to be trying to figure out if Caster was upset with him for questioning Morgunov's genius.

He was.

But he also wasn't going to let that show. Trivial things were for trivial people. Until they were repeated and grew into non-trivial things.

Either way, Caster was ready to move past it, for now. ""What do you want, Paulie?"" he said.

""Ah, er, I just wanted to talk to you privately,"" said Paulie. ""It's just, like, I know those other guys mean well 'n all, but I don't think they get it. They've given up, and they won't be happy until I do the same.""

That wasn't it at all, Caster thought. They weren't concerned with their own happiness. They were trying to preserve what was left of Paulie's. The kid probably wouldn't be able to see that, no matter what anyone said to him, though.

Such was youth.

Caster kept those thoughts to himself. The boy had obviously come to him because he was looking for someone who wouldn't try to rain on his parade. It was a little obnoxious, but Caster supposed he could at least hear him out. There was still quite a long stretch of ruined town ahead of them, so there wasn't much harm in filling it with a pointless conversation.

And besides, the slow, grueling march of time would do plenty of enthusiasm-crushing without any help from himself, Caster felt.

""You were quieter than them,"" said Paulie. ""I thought maybe you were... of a different mind, I guess. More open, y'know?""

""Open to what, precisely?""

""Possibilities. Listen, I... I've been... uh...""

Caster gave him a look, just waiting. Honestly, he already knew everything Paulie might say. But why was the kid getting so hesitant all of a sudden? Nerves? Paulie had never struck him as a nervous speaker."

"2862

""Promise you won't tell anyone what I'm about to say?"" said Paulie.

Absolutely not, but Caster had no qualms about lying. ""Of course. If that's what you want.""

""I... I've been hearing voices, lately,"" said Paulie. ""Well. Just the one voice, I suppose. But it's in my head. When no one else is around. And it keeps telling me things. Whispering. It tells me to look harder at my ability. At our ability. It says there's more to be found.""

Hmm.

Alright, well, that was a new one, at least.

Oddly enough, though, Caster still wasn't all that surprised. While it was true he hadn't heard this particular excuse before, it also wasn't terribly uncommon for people to be hearing voices in their head.

This was Abolish.

Half of them were insane. And the other half were also insane, if for no other reason than because they were willing to work with the first half.

And Caster worked, primarily, with that first half. He'd encountered many, many people in his life who claimed to be hearing voices in their heads. He recalled one gentleman who'd had his mind blown when he discovered that those voice were, in fact, his very own thoughts.

Caster had never had a particularly strong sense humor, but that had made him laugh.

He could recall other examples, however, which were not nearly so amusing. Old tales, mostly. Of psychics. People who loved to toy with vulnerable young minds, twist them to their will, plant ideas in their

heads, or simply break them for no other reason than to prove that they could.

He hadn't heard stories like that in ages, though. Over half a century, at least. It was rumored that one of them had bitten off more than they could chew by trying to manipulate the Mad Demon and that in response, Morguonv had rendered their kind extinct."

"2863 -- CCLII.

If that rumor was true--and Caster was inclined to believe that it was--then Paulie probably wasn't being toyed with by some psychic. Which was perhaps a shame. Caster might've liked to learn more about psychic powers. It was doubtful that someone like him would be able to add such a thing to his repertoire, but it could be worth trying.

They were always talking about honing other skills, after all. He would've appreciated the opportunity, at least.

In any case, Paulie was probably just going mad. Or rather, more mad than he already was.

But that was fine. Caster wasn't the type to discriminate based on such things. Some of the best friends he'd ever known had been madmen. Before they'd gotten themselves killed. Or released. Or tried to kill him.

Caster could at least humor the lad. ""Has this voice ever identified itself to you?"" he asked.

""Yeah,"" said Paulie, ""though, uh..." He leaned and lowered his voice to a whisper. ""I'm not entirely sure I believe it.""

Right. Caster had seen this behavior before, too. Trying to speak quietly so that the voices don't ""overhear."" Worried about how they'll react to what's being said.

Yep. Definitely madness.

""Go on,"" Caster urged, lowering his voice as well. ""I won't tell anyone.""

""Well, the voice says... it's a god.""

""...I see. And does this god have a name?""

Paulie glanced around at the annihilated town. ""Malast.""

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Two: 'O, illuminating path...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The meeting between Queen Helen and Lord Abbas lasted for quite a while longer. They discussed various possibilities and intentions for the future. The Queen was even so bold as to bring up the issue of Intar's offer to annex Atreya, apparently wanting Abbas' opinion on the matter.

Hector found that quite surprising, for a couple of reasons. It was incredibly sensitive information, first of all. If her political opponents or the Atreyan public caught wind of the offer, it probably wouldn't be good for her. The fact that she was trusting Abbas with such details--that alone spoke volumes to Hector about her feelings toward the Sandlords."

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"2864

Second of all, he'd kinda been under the impression that she'd already decided not to accept Intar's offer. With how well the economy seemed to be recovering, it probably wasn't necessary anymore, right?

Then again, he wasn't an economist. And with how distracted he'd been lately, he was sure that the Queen had a much better grasp on

that whole situation right now than he did. So if she was still considering it as an option, then maybe the recovery wasn't going quite as well he'd thought.

Or maybe there was some other factor he didn't know about.

Whatever the case, Abbas ended up advising her against taking the offer, though he admitted to harboring significant bias.

""It is nothing against Intar, mind you,"" he clarified. ""At heart, I am simply an independence-loving man. My family instilled that in me at a very young age, and I do not think it is ever going to change. Nor would I wish it to.""

The Queen's smile was a soft one. ""The Sandlords of Sair declared independence from Calthos two hundred years ago, yes?""

'It was actually closer to three hundred,' said Worwal, 'but Sair wasn't officially recognized as a nation until about two hundred and twenty years ago, yeah.'

The Queen nodded while keeping her eyes on the Sunsmith. ""And you yourself are... how old, Lord Abbas?""

""One hundred and fifty-four.""

""Goodness.""

""My parents were among the founders."" His eyes dropped to the table. He fell quiet.

Hector didn't need him to say more in order to guess what was going through his head, right now. The guy had personally lived through the majority of Sair's lifespan as a nation. And it was directly threatened.

""...Sair may still be relatively young,"" said the Queen, ""but that region is not. And your people are not. I may not be quite the student of history that my husband is, but as I recall, your kin have survived far worse than this.""

"2865

'That is very true,' said Worwal. 'Our Hahl is still intact. We have wonderful allies. And hope. I've seen times when all we had was the

latter. And even that was debatable.'

Abbas made no response, but the expression on his face seemed to soften a little.

Maybe it felt a little weird for him to receive consolation from someone who was so much younger than him. Over an entire century.

Hector had to wonder what that was like. Perhaps he had it all wrong. Perhaps after living as a servant for that long, Abbas had reached a point where age just stopped mattering to him altogether. In a way, that would make sense. Worrying over age differences all the time did seem like it would get a little exhausting after a while, especially if you don't have many peers left in your own age group.

That might explain why Lord Abbas never seemed to talk down to him, despite how young he was.

Or wait, did that explain that? Come to think of it, Hector wasn't actually sure how old Abbas thought he was.

He... he wasn't under the impression that Hector was super old, right? Asad probably mentioned it to him at some point, right?

Unfortunately, the more he let those questions stew in a background thought process, the more Hector came to realize that there was no good way to ask them.

After their meeting, Abbas and Worwal departed first, taking the vehicle and their accompanying entourage back towards the Forge and Atreya. Hector intended to stay in Lorent with the Queen and fly back with her.

And he was finally able to speak with her alone.

Somehow, it felt like ages since they had last been able to do this.

The Queen must have been waiting for this opportunity, too, because she didn't waste time with softball questions. ""If Lorent is attacked, do you intend to fight in its defense?""

"2866

Fortunately, Hector had already been thinking about the answer to that

for a while now, himself. ""Well, it would depend on the circumstances of the attack, but... probably, yeah. Especially now that I have the Forge to worry about.""

The Queen kept her gaze fixed on him. ""And if I were to order you to not get involved, would you listen to me?""

He took a deliberate breath. He'd been thinking about that question, too. And frankly, he didn't have a good answer yet. ""Why would you order me not to get involved?""

""Perhaps to prevent Atreya from getting swept up in this war. Perhaps to prevent you from becoming a political pawn of a foreign nation. Perhaps simply because I feel you are needed more at home. Would my reasoning matter? Hypothetically speaking, this would be a lawful order from your queen, Hector.""

Agh. Shit. He needed to choose his words carefully here. ""Well... we both want to protect Atreya. But I don't think letting Lorent get invaded, especially by Abolish, would help keep Atreya safe, no matter what kind of promises they might make to you.""

The Queen fell quiet. Maybe that hadn't been what she wanted to hear. Or maybe she was just thinking. Her expression was stone.

Hector found a difficult question of his own to ask. ""If Morgunov found out the Sandlords were here... and if he made you the same offer that he made to Callum, that he wouldn't invade so long as you handed them over to him, would you take it?""

The Queen took her time responding to that one. ""...No, I would not.""

Hector had kind of expected that response, yet he still found it a little surprising, somehow. ""You'd really risk antagonizing the Mad Demon?""

""It would antagonize the Sandlords first and foremost,"" she said. ""And frankly speaking, I do not think we would be able to capture Abbas Saqqaf and 'hand him over' to anyone.""

"2867

That was a fair point, Hector supposed. But he wasn't quite satisfied yet. ""Alright. Then... what if Morgunov were to say that handing them

over wasn't necessary? That we just had to not provide refuge for them, instead?"

The Queen sighed. "'Are you just trying to think of how best to paint me into a corner?'"

Hector relinquished a sympathetic smile. "'Kinda.'"

She dropped her gaze down to the table and stared at it while she thought. And she kept staring.

Mehlsanz decided to chime in. 'Either way, it would be a major crisis. You can't take Morgunov at his word. Especially after what his men did to this country before.'

The Queen was still thinking, though. Perhaps even she didn't know what she would do in that situation.

Hector kept waiting for an answer, but the silence was growing rather extreme, and he began to feel like he was torturing her. "'...Well, on the bright side, I don't actually think that Morgunov is going to show up around here anytime soon.'"

That made her look up at him again. "'I agree, but why do you sound so confident?'"

Now there was a sentence he'd never expected to hear. "'Ah... I think Morgunov has already gotten what he wanted out of Sair. I kinda get the impression that he's more interested in his... er, 'scientific' experiments, now.'" Torturing Asad Najir, specifically, but Hector didn't feel like that gruesome little detail was necessary to mention here. The Queen had enough on her mind already, he felt.

"'I see,'" she said with trepidation. "'You think he will be preoccupied for a while, then?'"

"'Morgunov himself, yeah. His goons, maybe not so much. I, uh... er...'"

Garovel stepped in now. 'Hector killed the Man of Crows two days ago.'

Mehlsanz's hollow eye sockets bulged. 'He did WHAT?!'"  
"2868

'Hector killed him,' Garovel repeated. 'I watched it happen. It was pretty crazy and--if the Queen will excuse my language--fucking awesome as hell. Rarely have I ever been so pleased with the outcome of a battle.'

The Queen seemed surprised, but it was Mehlsanz who looked the most shocked by far.

'I don't...' She stared at Hector directly. 'H-how...? The Man of Crows... is incredibly dangerous.'

'Was,' said Garovel.

'You really killed him? Permanently?'

The intensity of her reaction was making him feel a little awkward again. He managed to give her a nod, though.

'Albert Crowe was an infamous killer of rising stars in the Vanguard. I personally knew three good servant-reaper pairs who died at his hands. I never encountered him myself, but from everything I heard during my time with the Vanguard, the man was an absolute menace to deal with. And now you're telling me he's dead at your hands? I... I don't...'

Hector felt the need to clarify. "'I-it was just a lucky shot, honestly. His reaper picked the wrong moment to escape and gave me an opening to land a killing blow. And Lord Abbas beat the crap out of him beforehand, so he wasn't at full strength or anything. So, er, I just, uh--'"

'He's being modest,' said Garovel. 'Not only did he kill the Man of Crows, he saved Abbas' life, too. Scored a lot of points with Hahl Saqqaf as a result, I think. They were singing his praises at Warrenhold.'

'I don't believe what I'm hearing,' said Mehlsanz. Her tone was on the brink of laughter. 'That's... phenomenal.'

'Yes, it is,' said Garovel. 'But it also probably pissed off Abolish quite a bit. There's a solid chance that Bloodeye will come looking for a rematch.'

'You fought Bloodeye, too?'

'Oh yeah. Very strange powers on that guy. No idea what was going

on there. Abbas still kicked the shit out of him, though."  
"2869

Mehlsanz's skeletal jaw just hung slightly open.

Hector hadn't expected this conversation to turn into such a deluge of compliments. He very much wanted to keep things focused on what was most important, but he wasn't quite sure how to do that. Technically, they weren't really off topic.

'Do you have any useful intel on Bloodeye?' asked Garovel. 'Anything you remember?'

Mehlsanz took a moment to think. 'Um... well, he was similarly infamous, though for slightly different reasons. Where Crowe was renowned for being something of a hero killer, Bloodeye was more renowned for his utter brutality. He doesn't take prisoners. Rumor was, he enjoys killing so much that he even sometimes goes against the orders of his superiors in order to do so.'

'Ah. One of those types.'

'Indeed.'

'What about his powers? Did you hear anything about them? He used some sort of transformational ability. I've never seen the like before. He pulled a freaking missile out of his mouth.'

Mehlsanz just looked bewildered.

The reapers kept talking, but it soon became clear that Mehlsanz couldn't tell them much else about the enemy.

At length, Hector thought up another topic that he wanted to ask the Queen about.

""Your Highness, are you seriously considering Intar's offer of annexation?""

'Oh yeah,' said Garovel. 'I thought you would've made up your mind by now, but the way you were talking about it to Abbas, it sounded like that wasn't the case at all.'

""Ah. Yes, well, that had more to do with my interest in Lord Abbas' perspective than with the offer itself. I felt that telling him about it would be a good way of hearing his earnest thoughts about the nation. Politicians often guard such feelings carefully.""

Garovel still wanted clarification, though. 'So you're not really considering the offer, then?'"

"2870

A slight smile crossed the Queen's face, and she bobbed her head to the side. ""Oh, I don't know... They DID improve their terms quite a bit after all the publicity Hector garnered for himself in Lorent.""

Garovel chortled. 'How ""improved"" are we talking here, exactly?'

""More money,"" said the Queen. ""Another billion troa for each of the great houses, to be precise. Plus, another ten billion on top of that for building new schools around the country. And two additional representatives in the Intarian Congress, as well as four additional electors in their Holy Imperial Council.""

'Ooh,' cooed Garovel.

Holy Imperial Council? That name confused Hector, and it must've shown on his face, because the Queen offered an explanation.

""The Holy Imperial Council is how they choose their presidents. The territories each vote, and then the Council decides the winner based on a point-value system attributed to each territory before each election. More electors on the Council would mean that our people's votes matter more.""

Huh. That sounded a little complicated, but he felt like he understood. It still left him wondering something, though. ""Why do they call it the Holy Imperial Council? Isn't that kinda... weird and medieval-sounding?""

Garovel took the opportunity to jump in. 'Yep. That name is actually a remnant of the Mohssian Empire. Back then, the Holy Imperial Council had tons of power. They handled whatever affairs the emperor didn't feel like taking care of himself--which was usually A LOT. Nowadays, though, its only role is to elect the president. Kind of a traditional thing.



The electors don't have any power of their own. They just vote for whoever their territories tell them to.'

'There've been many attempts to change the name,' added Mehlsanz. 'A few times, it even came to a full blown referendum. And it's been close, but in the end, the Intarians have always voted to keep the name the way it is.'"

"2871

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'I think it's a heritage thing,' said Garovel. 'The Mohssian Empire had a rich history, and Intar was at the heart of it. The people there might understandably have some lingering attachment to it. But yeah, it's super weird that any part of a republic should still be legally referred to as ""Imperial"" anything.'

Hector had to agree. It was strange to imagine that something from the Mohssian Empire still existed today in an official capacity like that. In a spare thought process, it made him wonder what a modern day Mohssian Empire might look like.

Probably wouldn't be very pretty, he felt.

'Still, that's a big upgrade,' said Garovel. 'Intar really offered us all that just because of little ol' Hector here? I'm blushing vicariously through him.'

The Queen giggled.

'That last one is particularly interesting,' said Garovel. 'Granting us more power in their government is no minor thing.'

'It is,' said Mehlsanz. 'It would give us a disproportionate amount of influence for our total population and land. But that's not saying much. We'd still be dwarfed by the larger territories--of which, there are many.'

'True. And I wasn't suggesting that we should take the deal, just so it's clear. I, too, am an independence-loving man, at heart.'

'Heh. Are you sure you aren't just worried about losing your position of influence in the government if Helen gives up her power?'

Garovel paused at that. 'Oh, damn, I didn't even think about that, actually. Shit. Hector wouldn't be a lord anymore, would he? Oh, no, no, we can't have that. You have to refuse, Your Highness.'

The Queen laughed again, a bit harder this time. "'I appreciate your enthusiastic support.'"

'I imagine Hector and all the other lords would be able to retain their titles,' said Mehlsanz. 'They just wouldn't have any legal authority in their regions anymore.'

'That's still unacceptable,' said Garovel. 'I'm power hungry, dammit.'"  
"2872

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"'I will be sure to keep your ego in mind when making my final decision on the matter,'" said the Queen.

'Thank you,' said Garovel. 'I appreciate that. How much time do you have to decide, by the way? Is there an expiration date on this deal, or is this just going to become an indefinite thing that keeps getting brought up every time we meet? If it's the latter, then let me just say, I wouldn't mind as long as the stakes keep getting raised each time, too.'

"'There is no expiration date,'" said the Queen, "'but I do feel that it would be rather rude of me to go too long without giving them an answer. Most likely, I will send them a formal response within the next six months. It may not be final, however, depending on how interested Intar truly is. Negotiations for a matter such as this could continue informally for several years.'"

'Hmm. So you're saying that Hector and I have plenty of time to make them juice up their offer again.'

The Queen gave him a bemused smile. "'...Juice up?'"

'Yeah. To make juicier. Jucify. It's a technical term.'

'I'm not sure it is,' said Mehlsanz.

As the conversation continued, the two reapers began to overwhelm it

for a time. Until at length, Queen Helen asked Hector about his plans for the lower Jagwa region of Lorent. The truth, of course, was that he didn't really know yet.

But that topic did remind him of something else. Something he almost wished he'd forgotten about. Even now, he was reluctant to bring it up. But he had to. Clarity was important for matters like this.

""Your Highness,"" he said slowly, ""it's my understanding that... Madame Carthrace has talked to you about loosening some of the regulations regarding banks in Atreya?"" It wasn't exactly a question, but he posed it like one.

The Queen eyed him steadily. ""Yes, she has.""  
"2873

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""I'm... still pretty new to all this,"" said Hector, trying to be very careful with his words, ""but it seems to me that... my bank would be able to grow a lot more quickly and help a lot more people get through this economic depression if those regulations weren't quite so strict. But Madame Carthrace tells me that you... feel differently.""

""I do,"" said the Queen. ""While I did not create those regulations, I think that they were placed there for good reason. And it is precisely in times of crisis like this one when influence and power shift in unexpected and potentially terrifying ways. I will freely admit that I am afraid of the Darksteel National Bank growing too powerful too quickly.""

Wow.

Hector had to admire the way she just came right and said it. That still didn't exactly soften the blow, though. ""...You think I would abuse that power?""

""As a matter of fact, I do not,"" said the Queen. ""But your Bank is more than just you. How many employees do you have now, I wonder? And how many more would you need in order to cope with the explosive growth that you would undoubtedly see if I were to change the law purely for your benefit?""

Hector frowned. ""I get what you're saying, but... Your Highness, there are still a lot of people suffering financially, right now. And we have the power to change that. If you're worried about something like... corruption in my bank--or whatever else--then let's address that issue. I don't think we should avoid the whole thing just because we're worried about one aspect of it.""

""Respectfully, Hector, I don't think you do get what I am saying. The economy is on the road to recovery. The situation is improving. And at a historic pace, I might add. Just because we can make it go faster does not mean we should. We would be opening ourselves up to the same essential problem that the Vanguard is currently having: bloat. And once that becomes an issue, it is very difficult to fix.""

"2874

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Hector tilted his head. ""...Wouldn't that be my problem to deal with, not yours?""

""If your bank continues to grow unchecked, it could become the entire nation's problem,"" said the Queen.

Hector furrowed his brow. ""And if it continues to stagnate, then that could also become the entire nation's problem.""

""Stagnate?"" she said with obvious doubt. ""In what way is your bank stagnating, Hector? Customers are flocking to you, are they not?""

""They are. Because the nation is in crisis. And yet we're still barely operating in the green. What happens when it's not? They'll take their money elsewhere, because we can't afford to lower our service fees and incentivize them to stay."" Hmm. Maybe he was picking up a thing or two from all his conversations with Amelia.

The Queen paused at that, but she still looked unconvinced. ""Why would they leave? The law applies equally to your competitors, does it not?""

Hector was a bit surprised to hear her say that. ""Actually, no, it doesn't. Older banks are given more leeway. Once this crisis passes and people aren't quite so worried about stability anymore, the older banks that manage to survive will probably be able to make a killing

while we collapse from the inside.""

""Those older banks have earned that privilege through years of proving their credibility. I appreciate what your bank is doing for the nation at the moment, but it is still very young, and I do not think it should be given special treatment just because of abnormal circumstances.""

He exhaled, trying not to sound exasperated. ""Your Highness... I'm not asking for special treatment. I'd be happy if the regulations were loosened for all banks, not just mine.""

""Hector, I am sorry, but the answer is no. I will not risk long-term stability for short-term gain.""

""That's... I don't think that's what the choice is, Your Highness. I agree that unchecked growth would be dangerous, but it wouldn't be unchecked. And if the bank is allowed to generate revenue without charging our customers through the nose for it, then that will contribute to the long-term stability of the nation, too, don't you think?""

""I'm afraid I disagree.""

"2875

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Damn. She sounded like she wasn't going to change her mind, no matter what he said.

Hector still wasn't quite prepared to give up, though. He had one more argument up his sleeve. ""Your Highness... my bank has a lot of investors who've taken a big risk by supporting me. Including the Rainlords. If the Bank collapses, they'll take a huge hit. Not to mention all the Atreyan lords who contributed."" There was Roman, too, but Hector had a feeling that he'd be just fine.

""Considering the ingenuity displayed by both Amelia Carthrace and yourself, I highly doubt that the Darksteel National Bank will collapse. I am sure you will find a way to continue operations within all currently legal means. Turning a massive profit, however, may prove to be a challenge, yes.""

Ingenuity, huh? ""...Does that mean you wouldn't mind if we expanded

our operations into Lorent?"

At that, the Queen paused for a long moment, eyeing him, then Garovel, then him again. "Is that a threat, Hector?"

He could hardly believe his ears. "Why would it be a threat?" he said, unable to conceal his bafflement.

The Queen didn't answer. She just kept staring at him.

Garovel decided to step in now. 'This is getting a little too heated for my tastes. Let's all take a breath and remember that we're on the same side here, shall we?'

The Queen indeed took the requested breath. She shut her eyes for a moment, too, before opening. "Hector... my entire reason for blocking foreign banks from jumping in to aid with the economy was to prevent foreign interests from tearing this nation apart like a pack of piranhas. If you expand into Lorent, it would create a new stream through which such piranhas might arrive."

Hector wished Amelia was here to help. He felt like he wasn't making his best possible arguments. But he kept trying. "If anyone ever tried to use my bank in such a way, I'd have their account terminated in an instant."

"2876

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 6 of 24)~~

The Queen gave him a sympathetic smile--or a patronizing one. He couldn't quite tell which, and he didn't like the uncertainty he was feeling about it.

"I appreciate you saying that," said the Queen, "but I do not think you will have the time to monitor all of your accounts for such activity. And the more your bank grows, the more difficult that problem will become."

"So I'll hire someone," he said. "A whole team, if need be. It's important enough to warrant it, I think. And I'm sure Amelia will agree."

The Queen paused again. "Amelia, is it? You've grown quite familiar with her in these past few months, it would seem."

Had he? Oh. He didn't typically use her first name out loud, did he? Either way, that was beside the point. ""That... doesn't seem relevant to what we were talking about, Your Highness.""

""How much do you trust her, Hector?""

He blinked at that question. ""Well... quite a bit. I mean, you appointed her to be my financial advisor, Your Highness.""

She took a deep breath. ""Yes, I did. However, I did not foresee how pivotal her role in things would soon become. By your side, she is on track to become one of the most powerful individuals in the country. And perhaps beyond, judging from the way you are talking.""

Hector's posture stiffened in his chair. ""Do you not trust her?""

She bobbed her head a little. ""For the most part, I do. Her family is another matter, but her strained relationship with them makes that a moot point. My only issue with her--impolite as this may be to say--is her age.""

Hector just cocked an eyebrow at that. Impolite was right. Damn.

""Oh, do not look at me like that,"" she said. ""I adore Amelia. I truly do. And it is precisely for that reason that I worry what will become of your bank once she is no longer able to run it for you.""

"2877

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 7 of 24)~~

Geez, Hector thought. Just how far ahead was she thinking here?

""She's not that old, Your Highness...""

She gave him a look. ""It has been making me wonder if we should try to find a reaper for her. That would give me peace of mind. Somewhat, at least.""

He scratched his brow at that notion. A reaper for Amelia Carthrace? Hmm.

The Queen was still giving him that same look, as if there was more she was trying to say.

""...The Rainlords don't have any available reapers, if that's what you're getting at,"" he said.

""Hmm."" She looked away, then promptly looked back at him again.

And again, he understood without explanation. ""I... don't think the Sandlords have any available, either. But I suppose I could check..."

""It would not be ideal if the reaper has divided loyalties,"" said the Queen, ""but if it cannot be helped, then so be it. As long as it is a division between allies, then I suppose it would suffice. Assuming the reaper is trustworthy, of course. I would want to meet them. Several times, in fact, before any commitment is made.""

""You're talking like it's already been decided..."

The Queen breathed a slight laugh. ""True. I have been thinking about it for a while, I suppose, so my mind is already made up. Do you think Amelia might have a problem with it?"

Now there was a question. As much as he might've liked to think that becoming a servant was all upsides and no downsides, he knew that wasn't quite true. Even assuming they could find a reliable reaper--which was a big assumption--the Madame Cathrace might not love the idea of letting herself be killed as part of the process.

That would be like the ultimate trust exercise. And it wouldn't be terribly unreasonable if she didn't want to go through with it, he felt.

""I honestly don't know,"" said Hector. ""And, uh... I'm not really sure how I would broach the subject with her, either..."

""I do not mind doing it,"" said the Queen.

Somehow, he wasn't surprised by that."

"2878

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 8 of 24)~~

Their conversation continued for a short while longer as they discussed the bank's potential expansion into Lorent. By the end of it, though, Hector still wasn't entirely sure what to think. The only thing that was clear was that the Queen didn't exactly love the idea, but she wasn't trying to forbid him from doing it, either.



Maybe she could tell that he wouldn't be very happy if she just came right out and told him no. Or maybe she felt that that would be overreach on her part.

Frankly, he wasn't sure what he would've done if she had forbidden him from expanding. He didn't want to go against the Queen, obviously, but he also didn't want to let down his investors, especially the Rainlords. And her authority didn't extend to Lorent. If she'd acted like it did, then... well, maybe it would still be justified since he was one of her subjects.

Hmm.

In any event, once they they were done talking, Hector considered returning to Riverton Hall with the Queen. Technically, there were plenty of things he could discuss there with various Lorentian officials. It wouldn't be a wasted trip, and he had made the journey all the way here to the capital, already.

In fact, that was part of the reason why he'd let Abbas leave first. In the back of his mind, he'd intended to remain with the Queen and hitch a ride back to Atreya with her.

But all of a sudden, he couldn't help feeling like none of the encounters at Riverton Hall were particularly pressing. The only thing that seemed truly urgent right now was the Forge. He very much wanted to go meet up with Abbas again and see if he'd discovered anything new yet.

Perhaps that was a silly notion. He and the Queen had only talked for an hour so.

But he decided to go for it, anyway. Besides, he wanted to try out some new things with his materialization on the way back."

"2879

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 9 of 24)~~

Knowing a thing or two of aerial combat now, Hector felt like his flight capabilities were significantly lacking. Sure, he'd managed to stabilize it since first coming up with the technique, but it was far too slow to be useful in a real fight. He'd certainly learned that lesson the hard way. Having to ping pong himself through the air in that battle at the border

had not been ideal. If not for the Scarf enhancing his spatial awareness beyond normal means, that strategy would have been useless.

He needed to develop greater speed and control.

And seeing the mechanized armor of the Sunsmith in action again was making him think that perhaps he didn't need the little ""hovering pod"" that he was previously using to fly. Even if it was stable, it was obviously unwieldy and not very aerodynamic.

But if he could integrate his flying technique directly into his armor... that might open up a world of possibilities for him, Hector felt.

How to do it, though? He had an idea, but frankly, he wasn't entirely sure it was possible.

The basic principle of the hovering technique was to create a constantly-rematerializing ""cradle"" below a static iron platform for himself to stand on. The static component was key, since he couldn't very well stand on a platform that was constantly moving.

...But could he wear armor that was constantly moving? It wasn't like he would slide out of it while he was completely covered.

It might rip the flesh off his bones, though. If it was moving was enough to counter gravity, then that probably wouldn't tickle, he imagined.

He was tempted to give it a try, just to see how bad it would be. Maybe it would be surprisingly okay.

Ultimately, though, he decided against that. The more reasonable solution seemed to be in utilizing layers, just as the hovering technique normally did. A static inner armor with a gravity-counteracting outer armor.

With that idea in his head, he sat on a big hovering platform at the edge of the city and took a long, deep breath.

Oh, boy, these first attempts with experimental new techniques never went well, did they? And his whole body was going to be wrapped up in this one."

"2880

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 10 of 24)~~

He told Garovel to keep his distance while he tried this out. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally hurt the reaper somehow.

For the outer layer, he decided to keep things simple. It didn't need to be as complexly fitted together and interlocking as his static armor. That would've just made it needlessly difficult to maintain its constantly-moving form. Plus, it would probably reduce air resistance more if it was simplistically shaped.

And so, he began to create the outer layer. It melted into existence around him, smooth and already moving while stationary. It coated his entire armor, save only for the eye slit and a small hole at the neck for the Scarf of Amordiin to fit through.

When he dematerialized the hovering platform beneath him, Hector half-expected to drop like a stone. But he didn't. He stayed in the air. The coating was working.

The scraping against the static layer was intense, however. It was even louder than he'd thought it would be. Metal grinding against metal--but it was all around him, becoming almost like the roar of an engine but more piercing. Not to mention, the vibrations that the technique sent throughout his body were their own kind of disorienting.

For a time, he just hovered there, trying to give himself time to acclimate. If he concentrated, perhaps he could dull the noise--in his mind, at least, if not in reality.

And he had a thought. Maybe he could use that thing Emiliana had told him about here. Sto. A ""storage state"" technique of the mind.

While he couldn't place the actual noise into storage in his mind, maybe he could place his perception of that noise in there. To isolate it. And numb himself to it. To make it so that the only way for him consciously hear it was if he concentrated on it."

"2881

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 11 of 24)~~

It worked surprisingly well. And easily. That was probably another benefit of Focus, he felt. In fact, it was so easy that Hector had a feeling that he wasn't even utilizing Sto properly. Instead, he might've

just shoved the noise perception into a background thought process and ignored it. That probably wasn't how this sophisticated ""state of altered consciousness"" stuff was supposed to work.

But hey, if it did the trick, it did the trick. He didn't see much point in agonizing over it right now, especially during an experiment.

He focused on his work. The vibrations from the scraping were an interesting aspect of it. The grinding along the top side of his armor was not nearly as strong as the grinding along the bottom side. Which made sense, he realized. The bottom was serving as a ""cradle,"" going against gravity and holding the weight of his entire body plus the static armor, whereas the top side had basically no pressure being applied to it at all.

He'd had to take all of that into account when creating the outer layer in the first place, of course. If he gave both sides the same amount of force, then either top would float away or the bottom wouldn't be able to hold his weight.

So in a way, these scraping vibrations were helpful. If he paid close attention to them, he could literally feel the difference between the pressure being applied to the bottom side and top. Perhaps, then, he could use that as a kind of gauge. If the difference in the vibrations were to grow too great, then that would probably be a bad thing, right? So maybe it could serve as a good warning mechanism for the overall balance of this technique."

"2882

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 12 of 24)~~

He tried to keep that in mind as he began to make the outer layer move. He started off slow, wanting to get a feel for things. The vibrations shifted along with him, grinding slightly differently as they pushed the static armor horizontally through the air.

Hmm. Pretty manageable so far. The different angles of force that needed to be applied simultaneously were a bit tricky, but he wasn't struggling. It was just new to him.

Time to ramp up the speed, then. He angled himself downward like a missile in order to reduce air drag, gathered his concentration, and sent himself flying.

The canopy of trees below were rushing past now. And the Scarf was telling him all about the buffeting winds around him.

Yeah, that was better. Pretty fast. He was already moving more quickly than he'd ever gotten on that hovering pod thing.

The vibrations were significantly different, too. They were weaker on the bottom than he expected, and now he was starting to gain altitude without meaning to. Those trees were getting smaller pretty quickly.

But he could adjust. He just had to pay attention to the angles of vibration. Lighten the application of force below. Simple.

Alright. Cool.

...Hmm, this was going a little too smoothly. He was almost disappointed. It was still a little nerve-racking, but eh. Obviously, he'd been through a lot worse.

How fast could he really go, he wondered?

In theory, he should've been able to fly just as fast as he had been able to ping pong himself around before. Those giant boulders had been utilizing velocity states, which were still the underlying principle of this mobile outer layer. Same basic concept, just being applied differently. And constantly.

He wanted to see what would happen. It was dangerous, of course, but. Welp. Benefits of being undead.

He punched it. He made the outer layer around his feet and legs push him as hard as could manage.

And he soared."  
"2883 -- CCLIII.

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 13 of 24)~~

Again, he found himself gaining altitude unintentionally and had to compensate. That was going to be a reoccurring issue, wasn't it? He'd have to keep that in mind.

But this speed. It was exhilarating. Going this fast through the open air,

with the whole wide world stretched out below him? It was like a dream.

Was this really his top speed, though? He kinda doubted it.

What if he just kept applying that same force over and over again? Would he keep accelerating? And how was his control? He'd just been going in a straight line this whole time, but obviously, that wasn't going to do the trick in an actual fight.

He decided to try banking left.

Holy fuck, everything went wrong at once.

Turbulence, vibrations out of balance, losing altitude.

He tried to compensate and overcorrected. The turbulence made it too difficult to tell what the right balance was, and he ended up zooming almost straight up--which he had to correct again, only now it was even worse.

Then the outer layer began coming apart, breaking away from him in chunks that went sailing off in their own directions. And with his thoughts disorganized, his concentration disrupted, and iron flying haphazardly all around him, Hector began to enter freefall and saw the forest quickly rising up to meet him.

And he only managed to hold on to one cogent sentiment as all of that was happening.

Yep. This seemed about right.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Three: 'That which eludes Knowing...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Abbas had never seen anything like it. Even the Earth Cruncher didn't truly compare. They were only similar in the most superficial of ways.

He wished he had more to contrast it with, but he'd only heard of others, never gotten close to them. He'd actually been hoping to change that soon, what with the Vanguard having grown so eager to win his favor. In time, he was sure that he would have finally been able to gain access to their famed Golden Hour in Intar."

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"2884

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 14 of 24)~~

They had always protected that thing with an absolutely absurd level of paranoia, due in no small part to that blasted Magician of theirs. By all accounts, that man had been guarding their only Forge like a jealous housewife for nearly two centuries now.

And for what? What technology did the Vanguard have to show for all that effort? What had the Magician come up with that was so vital to their enterprise?

Perhaps they were keeping that, too, a secret, but Abbas doubted it. More likely to him was that this so-called Magician of Light was, in truth, incompetent and arrogant. How the man had convinced the Vanguardian leadership that he should be the one to look after the Golden Hour, Abbas could only imagine.

But it was the world that had been suffering as a result of such foolishness.

Meanwhile, Morgunov was obviously making great strides with his own work. There was little doubt in Abbas' mind that the Mad Demon had a new Forge of his own and was using it to create these mechanical nightmares. Either that, or his old one, the Cauldron of Chaos, had not been truly destroyed during the Jungle Wars like the rumors had said.

Supposedly, Sermung himself had put an end to it, so Abbas was inclined to believe that was the truth. Sixty years was certainly enough time for Morgunov to have created a new Forge for himself.

Hmph. Abbas remembered overhearing some of the younger servants in the Golden Fort discussing Morgunov's absence from the world



stage over the last few decades. They dared to hope that he might have grown tired of waging war or become otherwise indisposed permanently.

Abbas couldn't fault them for their youth and inexperience, he supposed. But there had never been any doubt in his mind that the Mad Demon was working on something this whole time. More than just one thing, most likely.

He didn't even want to imagine what other horrors that madman was waiting to unleash. He had a feeling that Uego had just been a taste of what Morgunov had in store for them."

"2885

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 15 of 24)~~

In any event, with the way the war was going, Abbas felt that there was little chance of him being allowed access to the Golden Hour now. He hoped that someone would be able to do something with it, though. Anyone, so long as they weren't with Abolish, would do.

Forges were too important to be left idle and unused. In the right hands, they had the power to enact incredible change in the world. For good or ill.

As far he knew, there were only six Forges in the world--and that was counting the one in front of him now. Perhaps there were more, squirreled away and lost to history like this one, but he doubted it. They were simply too highly sought after.

How many wars had been fought over these objects, he wondered? It was hard to say. Even with reapers constantly watching, so much had still been forgotten to the ravages of time. And oftentimes, the self-appointed stewards of remembrance were themselves secretive.

Abbas had visited the Prime Archivers in Luugh multiple times for this very reason. If anyone could help him learn more about Forges that had been lost or destroyed, it would be them. Theoretically.

He had never met a more uncooperative group of reapers. They weren't ""hostile,"" exactly, but they refused to aid him in his search and demanded exorbitant payment each time he visited.

It had been many years since his last trip, but even after double-checking with Worwal, he did not recall ever reading about a Forge that matched this one's description. A giant glass orb in the heart of a giant tree.

Assuming that really was glass.

It seemed to be, but looks could be very deceiving when it came to Forges. Or so he had read.

He took a deep breath and pressed his bare hand against it."  
"2886

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 16 of 24)~~

He partly expected the world to erupt into fire around him or for his mind to be assaulted by a tidal wave of ardor. That would have at least given him something to work with.

But it was silent. Still.

Not quite dead, though.

The tree would not be alive if that were the case. It was deeply connected to the Forge, though he was not yet sure how. Was it drawing life from the Forge's dormant power? Or was its life force sustaining the Forge? Perhaps a bit of both? Mutualism would be an interesting strategy to employ in the creation of such a thing.

He wished he knew who had made it. In terms of historically famous integrators, there could not have been many candidates. Hamenszoon was likely still too recent, so perhaps someone like Unso or Skapa. But then again, if someone that famous had been its creator, then how could it have ended up here, abandoned?

He was just guessing, of course, but it seemed more plausible to him that this Forge had been created by a so-called ""secret emperor."" That was, someone who held the requisite level of power but never revealed it.

It was difficult to know how many such people had existed throughout history. Some reapers argued that none did, that it was simply impossible to keep such might secret for long. And he could see the logic in that. But he'd also read accounts of past emperors being

bested by completely unknown warriors. Unso, for example, had been slain by a cabbage farmer, of all things, when the emperor tried to seize his land from him.

That account had read like something out of a mythic legend, though Abbas had since met several reapers who swore up and down that it was true."

"2887

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 17 of 24)~~

However, what became of that cabbage farmer was still a matter of dispute. Some argued that his anonymity was destroyed by that event and that he went on to be known by the much more famous name of Ferrico, another emperor of that Age.

Others claimed that the cabbage farmer was actually Unso's rival, Isaac, in disguise and that the whole affair had been a ruse in order for Isaac to get close enough to Unso to kill him.

And still others said that it was all some sort of cosmic fluke, that the cabbage farmer somehow killed Unso's reaper without even realizing it and that afterwards, the farmer was himself killed by ambitious upstarts seeking to make a name for themselves by slaying the man who had brought down an emperor.

For his part, Abbas leaned more toward the first theory. While it did seem difficult to keep such incredible power concealed, he wasn't convinced that it would be impossible, especially if one had centuries to devote toward that quieting effort.

It did make him wonder what sleeping giants might exist in the modern world, however. And what would it take to stir them?

A continental war, perhaps?

Hmph. He was letting himself get distracted. He tried to focus on what was in front of him.

This Forge was all that mattered, right now. He needed to let everything else melt away.

He kept his hand pressed against the glass and closed his eyes.

The art of sensing ardor was a strange thing. On the one hand, it was as obvious as soul power. Any reaper or sufficiently aged servant could detect it. But on the other hand, there were many subtle complexities to ardor that were lost on those who had not actively worked with it for years.

Ardor. The so-called ""planet force."" The Earth Cruncher had not utilized it, but this one clearly did. He could sense its presence all throughout the base that the giant orb rested upon."

"2888

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 18 of 24)~~

This would be tricky, Abbas knew. He had to do something that was generally considered incredibly stupid by integrators.

He had to begin the process of fusing his own consciousness with a material object. In this case, the Forge.

For reasons that were perhaps very obvious, the use of this technique was greatly discouraged. A sufficiently terrible mistake at this stage might mean trapping himself in this Forge for all eternity--or at least until Worwal decided to take mercy on him and release his soul.

Abbas was confident that wouldn't happen, though. Mostly confident.

Dolf Rachman had taught him of this method. With normal objects, the fusion of the consciousness was a supremely stupid and pointless activity. There was nothing to be gained, other than the potential loss of one's own body.

It was akin to walking a narrow ledge across the side of a cliff. The balance and skill required to do it were technically achievable, but the risk was so great--and the reward, so small--that there was little point in learning.

When it came to soul-infused or ardor-infused objects, however, this that was not the case. One could discover any number of useful things about the object in question while dancing at the edge of brain death.

The trick, of course, was to not actually fuse his consciousness with the Forge, to hold himself back just enough so that he could catch a glimpse of the true nature of the thing.

He wanted to find its name. With the name, he would probably be able to unlock other bits of dormant information. The name was like a key in that way. Or the first in a line of dominoes, perhaps. It depended on how one wished to conceptualize it.

Which was an important aspect to this whole thing, by the way. His chosen method of conceptualization of this process would affect the clarity of his searching ability. If he didn't maintain a strong grasp on what he was doing and why, it would not work. Or it would just take an incredibly long time."

"2889

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 19 of 24)~~

As he pressed himself more deeply into the Forge, he had to be careful. Getting a good, clear look at the ardor therein was the goal, but that was also where the temptation lay. Go too fast, stretch too far, lose concentration, and this slumbering beast would swallow him whole before he even realized what had happened.

Or at least, that was how Dolf had described it. Abbas wasn't terribly keen to find out how accurate that had been.

The ardor was there. Just at the edge of sight. If it was possible to squint with one's mind's eye, then that was what he was doing now. Strain to see. To understand.

What was your name, damn you? If you recalled that much, then there was a fair chance that you were still operational. If not, then... well, this was going to get a lot more complicated.

He lost time. Hours, maybe. There was a moderate chance that time was simply flowing differently in this strange space. If he hadn't been relying on his own body as a tether back to reality, he would have known even less. Days or even months could have transpired without his knowledge. Years. Decades.

Time might've become little more than an illusion in this place. Hell, for all he knew, it could've started going in circles.

It was confounding, to be sure. But the distortion of time was almost certainly a factor in how objects like these were able to keep memories within them, Abbas knew. Such fleeting pieces of information would

normally be lost to time's arrow. But here, it could be preserved. The steady march of entropy could be held at bay. For a while, at least.

How long that ""while"" might be--well, that was anybody's guess. How long could a Forge last before eroding to dust? If left alone, perhaps these things had the potential to outlast humanity. Ardor was the fuel of the planet, after all. The relevant time scale could have been approaching the cosmic for these bad boys.

Shame they usually ended up obliterated long before nature could run its course."

"2890

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 20 of 24)~~

Slowly, the ardor at the edge of his senses was becoming clearer. He tried to press onward, to ""move closer,"" but it was a deceptive process. He couldn't expect the desired change to be immediate or even obvious. It would appear when it appeared. Hopefully.

To perceive memory, he would first need to perceive the ardor's flow. Information was often found within disturbances there, sometimes referred to as ""whirlpools"" or ""knots."" Without a clear view of that flow, they might as well have been invisible.

Oh, goodness. Yes, the ardor was coming into focus.

But there was so much here.

He'd expected a lake, but this was a sea.

Just how old was this thing? Had it been created this way? Or had it been accumulating ardor over time? Already, this seemed to dwarf the amount of soul power that had existed within the Earth Cruncher.

That didn't necessarily mean it was more powerful, however. With a machine of creation, what truly mattered was the creative potential that had been poured into it--and the skill of the person who hoped to use it, of course.

...But yes, this was surprising. Why was there so much? And it was so dense, too. Streams layered upon streams, so close together that they almost appeared to be flowing through each other.

Almost. Because, of course, that was impossible. If the flow was disrupted to such an extent, the ardor would clash and begin to leak, eventually dissipating.

This was simply a masterful use of space. The efficiency with which these flows had been pressed so closely together--Abbas had to admire the craftsmanship. If he survived long enough and reached the point where he could create a Forge of his own, he would have to remember this technique.

Unfortunately, this density was also going to make his search more difficult. Oh, and gods forbid if he had to make repairs. That already sounded like a nightmare."

"2891

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 21 of 24)~~

Hmm. But looking at the quality of the ardor's flow, the Forge seemed to be in rather good condition. He couldn't spot any major breaks or diversions--no ""hemorrhaging,"" as it were.

He had a feeling there were many smaller ""bleeds"" going on elsewhere, though. He would have to inspect the Forge with a fine tooth comb before he dared to try and reactivate it.

Which was a whole other problem--and an even more dangerous one, in fact. Right now, he was just searching for the name in order to help him comprehend what this thing was truly capable of. If and when the time came to actually turn the Forge back ""on,"" that was when the real fireworks would happen.

The kind of fireworks that could kill him and Worwal in the blink of an eye. That was why it was so important to ensure that repairs had been done properly before trying to flip that metaphorical switch. Worst-case scenario, the Forge would explode and leave a city-sized crater behind.

Admittedly, that possibility seemed quite unlikely--and not just because he was confident in his ability to do everything correctly. This Forge had a gentleness to it. An explosion would be ""out of character"" for it, he felt. If it were to destroy itself, it would probably go some other way. Ah, an implosion perhaps.

It could still suck him and Worwal in, though. And they would still be just as dead.

His search continued for what felt like a long while. He could sense many tiny knots in the ardor's flow, but without the name, they were all but impossible to read. Perhaps Dolf could have done something with them at this stage, but alas, he could not.

The name, the name. Where could it be? He sincerely hoped it had one. If it didn't, then he was searching this entire sea for nothing.

Agh."  
"2892

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 22 of 24)~~

He could feel his consciousness slipping. This frustration wasn't doing him any favors. The tether was weakening. He had to pull himself out before the risk became unacceptable.

So he did.

His eyes opened, and his hand came away from the glass. And he felt his own body again. Breath in his lungs. Flesh and bone wrapped around his soul.

He gave a long, tired sigh.

This wasn't going to be easy, was it?

After a few moments of allowing his thoughts and emotions to settle, he moved to press his hand against the glass again.

But halfway, he stopped himself.

Perhaps he needed to rethink his approach. There was far more ardor in this machine--if it could even be called that--than he had expected. At this rate, searching for the name could take days, weeks, or even months. Hell, maybe longer. He didn't really know how deep the ardor was, yet.

He looked around the chamber. It wasn't just the Forge in here. This place was obviously some kind of ancient workshop. Hector and his associates may have already inspected it from top to bottom, but



perhaps it would be prudent to give it a look himself. They said they hadn't found the name in any of those books over there, and he believed them, but there could still be useful clues therein.

Honestly, he didn't know what he was looking for. He had a faint hope that something he learned would help him to locate the name when he dove back into the ardor. Some kind of historical context, maybe?

He couldn't read the language that these books were written in, but fortunately, Worwal could.

So they set to work--Worwal reading, Abbas turning pages. He counted twelve books on this shelf, and perhaps another ten or so on a different shelf by the door.

But if he had to sit here and let Worwal read every single one of them, cover to cover, then he would."

"2893

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 23 of 24)~~

This was why he'd tried to start with the Forge, first. Going through all of these texts was obviously going to take ages, but there'd been a chance, at least, he could have learned what he needed from the Forge right away.

A shame.

At least he could relax his mind a little while he let the reaper read. The strain of that dive through the ardor was probably not something he should ignore--even if he'd been about to do just that. He could handle another two or three dives, most likely, before requiring real rest.

Meditation was a fair substitute, though.

Or it would have been, if he didn't have so much trouble settling his thoughts.

Even at his age, with all his experience, he still encountered this problem, sometimes. His younger self would probably have expected to grow out of this by now. But worries only ever seemed to grow with age. And power.

What would become of his kin? That nagging question lay at the root

of every concern that crossed his mind.

Before this war had come to their doorstep, Abbas had harbored an idea. It was an absurd notion at this state in time, far beyond his or Haqq's ability to achieve. But if he'd pushed for it more, if he'd worked harder... then perhaps they wouldn't have had to flee from their homes. Perhaps they wouldn't have had to suffer such disgrace--or not to this extent, at least.

It wouldn't have stopped Morgunov, most likely. But it might have stopped his horde of madmen.

This armor. Creating copies of it, lesser ones if need be. That was the idea.

That had always been the ultimate goal when designing it: to one day make it usable by much younger servants. Or perhaps, dare he imagine it, even non-servants.

The Mudarra'un--or the Armored, in Mohssian. An entirely new warrior class. An elite group of soldiers, trained in the use of his armor."  
"2894

~~Christmas Day Special - (page 24 of 24)~~

It was a long-held dream, one that he'd gone back and forth on over the last twenty or so years. Sometimes, it seemed entirely achievable. Other times, he chastised himself for not staying focused on more realistic goals.

Just creating the prototype suit had been so incredibly laborious. And it still wasn't even done. Rather, it felt like a constant project, always tweaking, always refining. A slow crawl toward strength.

He may have achieved victory over Ivan, but he knew only too well how close it had been. That was a victory with an asterisk next to it.

Obviously, not every suit needed to be as powerful as this one, but at the end of the day, what was more important? Creating the Mudarra'un or continuing to improve upon the prototype?

Ideally, he would be able to do both. Pragmatically, he knew that to be impossible.

He had hoped that perhaps this Forge would be able to change that, but now he was more uncertain than ever about that possibility. Given its apparent age, there was absolutely zero chance that the creator had intended for it to be used on machinery.

That might be a problem.

Or it might not.

And worrying about it was making his stomach turn.

He took a moment to steady his mind, to quell his emotions. That was all anxiety was, ultimately. An emotion. A persistent one, perhaps, but an emotion, nonetheless.

First and foremost, he was a man of rationality. To calmly assess every situation, to think everything through as much as time allowed--that was the ideal that he had always striven to achieve.

That was another lesson that he had taken from Dolf--though not by Dolf's design. That man, in so very many ways, had been the furthest thing from rational. True, he did have his moments of it--and Abbas had been supremely relieved whenever they occurred--but those who knew Dolf would have certainly characterized his life as one of constant, fiery passion.

Until it had been snuffed out, that was."  
"2895

Abbas admired his mentor for many reasons, but that was not one.

And Dolf had known that, too.

""That's good,"" the man had once told him. ""That's how it should be. You are my apprentice, not my clone. A copycat is never as good as the original. So take what I have to teach, and then pursue further knowledge in your own way."" And he'd laughed. ""Who knows? Maybe one day, my accomplishments will look quaint compared to yours!""

Abbas remembered thinking, at the time, that he'd been sarcastic in saying that last part. But now, all these years later, and after having had a couple apprentices of his own, Abbas felt differently.

As a teacher, the idea that his students might one day achieve wondrous or remarkable feats--that was one of the most appealing thoughts in the world.

Dolf hadn't been joking, Abbas had come to believe.

Somehow, that seemed more relevant than ever.

It had been some time since Abbas felt that familiar burn of ambition within himself. As a young man, it had been there all the time. A constant pressure to prove himself to his elders and his peers.

When had that changed, exactly? The slow grinding of age had whittled him down, it seemed. He might've liked to think of it as ""growing,"" but was that really so? Was it growth when the motivation deep within one's soul had diminished so greatly?

Hmm.

Perhaps the gods were giving him another chance. If he allowed it to, perhaps this Forge could reawaken his ambitions from all those years ago.

Heh. He felt like such an old man.

A thud arrived from outside, heavy enough that he could feel the ground tremble briefly beneath his feet. He stood up to go take a look, while still holding onto the book in his hands and turning pages for Worwal.

He opened the primitive wooden door and saw Hector there in the distance, standing in the middle of an elongated crater."

"2896

What in the world was he doing, Abbas wondered? Had he just arrived? It looked like a meteorite had struck the field.

Not the most graceful of landings, apparently.

Come to think of it, though, he had not actually seen Hector flying during that last battle--unless he was feeling extremely generous with the term ""flying,"" perhaps.

Abbas just stood there in the doorway, turning pages absentmindedly as he watched Hector hobble closer.

Broken a few bones, eh?

Ah.

Abbas was beginning to get the picture.

It was true that Abbas hadn't quite gotten a clear understanding of the young Atreyan lord's strength, but he also hadn't given it much thought, either. The boy had saved his life. And finished off the Man of Crows.

Could that have really all been a fluke? He hadn't thought so.

Now, though?

Hmm.

Perhaps.

And not terribly difficult to believe, either. It would not be the first time that Abbas had seen a young servant best a much older one through little more than good fortune.

But from everything else that he had seen thus far, there was obviously still more to this young man than just luck. The Lord of Warrenhold? Encountering Rasalased? The strangeness of his power? A nest of Wrobels at his disposal? And a Fusion Forge, too?

He would have been a fool to dismiss all of that as luck, too.

No. There was, at the very least, a certain... grit to this young man. It was difficult to describe, having known him for so short a time.

He would have to pay closer attention in the future, Abbas decided.

Hector's composure improved as he got closer, until he finally zoomed the rest of the way and landed gently in front of Abbas.

""Learn anything yet?"" the young man said, ever so slightly out of breath."

"2897

For a moment, Abbas just gave him a look. He shifted his gaze back to the crater in the distance, then back to Hector. ""...Are you alright?""

The boy was keeping his armor on for some reason. ""Oh, uh, yeah. I'm fine. I was just, er... experimenting with my ability a little and, uh..."" He threw a glance back toward the crater, too. ""I'm still working out the kinks. You know how it is, I'm sure.""

Mm. Indeed he did know. A fair explanation, he supposed.

He decided to let the matter drop. Whatever the truth was, Hector most likely did not wish to appear weak in front of him. That was probably why he wasn't removing his armor. If he'd really been ""experimenting,"" then his clothes might very well be soaked in his own blood, right now. And considering how long he'd taken to shamle out that crater for using his materialization to carry himself closer, he'd probably been trying to buy time for himself to finish regenerating.

Fair enough. Abbas couldn't fault him for caring so much about appearances. Any leader needed to be aware of such things. Abbas and Worwal were not the only ones here, after all. A handful of his family members were waiting by the car and probably saw that little display, too.

""Unfortunately, progress has been slow,"" said Abbas, turning to go sit back down. Worwal asked him privately to turn the page again, and he did so. ""And I suspect it will be for some time.""

""I see,"" said Hector. Garovel phased through his armor as he closed the door behind him. ""Is there anything I can do to help?""

""Thank you for the offer, but I am afraid not.""

""Are you sure? Anything at all? I could bring someone here to assist you, if you want. Haqq Najir, maybe?""

""Haqq should remain focused on my armor until its repairs are complete,"" said Abbas. He eyed the Forge again. ""And this... well, let's just leave it at that, shall we?""

"2898

""Alright,"" said Hector, ""but is there anyone else? Literally, anyone you can think of. If they're trustworthy and could help, then I'll do my best to bring them here for you, even if I have to go halfway around the world.""

Something about the boldness of that statement made Abbas want to tease him. ""Perhaps Xixa would be of some use. I hear she is quite good at keeping things to herself.""

Hector paused at that, his expression unreadable, but Garovel spoke up in his stead.

'Yes, I'm sure the Goddess of Secrets would be very helpful. If she existed. Or are you saying you know where we can find her?'

""I'm afraid not,"" said Abbas, exhaling half a laugh. ""And while there might be plenty of individuals out there who could assist me, I do not think it worth the risk. As you said, Hector, trustworthiness is a key factor. But Forges are so highly prized that someone whom I currently believe to be trustworthy might soon discover the motivation for betrayal upon seeing it.""

Hector frowned but bobbed his head to the side a little, as if acknowledging the strength of his point.

""I am certain that I will be able to revive it,"" said Abbas. Which wasn't entirely true. He was certain that he would either do it or die trying, at least, but that wasn't something that he wanted to admit. Not even to Worwal. ""I only need time.""

The Lord of Warrenhold stepped closer. ""You'll have all you need.""

Hmm. He did have a way of saying comforting things, didn't he? Why was that, exactly? Something in his tone? In his expression, maybe? Abbas couldn't quite put his finger on it.

""By the way,"" Hector went on after a time, ""there was something I wanted to ask you. What are your thoughts on building a castle around the Forge?""

Abbas blinked."

"2899 -- CCLIV.

## Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Four: 'The Roar of Old...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The Eternal Storm was even more ferocious than he'd heard. The raging winds, the skewering hail, the earth-shaking thunder. It was small wonder why everyone avoided the Dáinnbolg. Even if all the feldeaths disappeared tomorrow, it wouldn't revive this dead continent unless this storm was somehow quelled.

A gargantuan figure stood in the darkness, barely visible until lightning flashed across the sky and briefly illuminated it.

A tall, narrow building, it was. It looked like it reached all the way up into the dark, long-hanging clouds above, though he couldn't quite tell that for sure from here on the ground.

""This must be the place. It looks just like the voice said it would.""

Caster Egmond had no idea what he was doing here. How in the world had he let Paulie talk him into this nonsense? Not only was this going to be a gigantic waste of time, it had already proven to be an insanely dangerous waste of time.

They'd been on Exoltha less than a day, and yet within that brief span of time, Caster had seen more feldeaths with his own two eyes than in the rest of his life combined.

They were everywhere. Even now, he counted five of them on the horizon. Hulking, ethereal reptiles of various sorts. Some with huge shells like turtles, others looking more like dinosaurs. Some had twenty limbs or more. All had eyes that burned with white flames, and beams of black and white energy frequently spewed from their mouths as they attacked each other.

That was the only reason the two of them were still alive, Caster felt. Most of the feldeaths were more concerned with fighting one another than with them.

They'd certainly had a few close calls, though. Paulie was missing his right arm, and half of Caster's face was scorched black and still stinging."

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"2900

They didn't have access to regeneration, either, because neither of them had wanted to tell their reapers where they were going, much less bring them along. If they both ended up dead, then well, their reapers would realize eventually.

Kalikos occasionally checked in on him, and Caster had to act like everything was fine, like he wasn't staring death in the face and trying not to blink first.

They'd told the reapers that they were going on a training retreat deep into the Otoron Mountains in Calthos. The reapers didn't come with them because, technically, their respective sects were still on duty. The extra respite that they had been granted after the victory over Sair was conditional. They could still be called back to fight at any time, so the reapers needed to stay behind in order to alert them if such orders arrived.

All things considered, the timing was rather convenient--which was perhaps how Paulie had managed to convince him. After all, if they didn't go now, then who could say when another opportunity would present itself? This war seemed like it could go on for a long while. Even if the lingering fighting in Sair died down completely, they would doubtless be sent to a new front within a week; and if they got separated, then it would become that much more difficult to coordinate a little excursion like this.

What utter madness.

He just had to keep reminding himself that he was undead. He didn't actually have to worry about being killed here.

Probably.

He did recall a few old rumors that some feldeaths could, in fact, kill you permanently even if your reaper wasn't present, but those were just rumors, he was fairly sure. They'd never been confirmed. Which they would've been, if they were true.

...Right?

Yes, of course they would've. The eggheads in Research loved that kind of stuff. They wouldn't have looked into it and told everyone all about

it. Or maybe Morgunov himself would've.

Definitely.

An even-larger-than-usual explosion in the distance made him turn and stare."

"2901

"We should hurry inside," said Paulie, "before more hail arrives." He didn't wait for Caster and ran ahead.

It was true. The kid wasn't looking so great. His clothes were in tatters, and apart from his missing arm, he was also covered in blood, having been skewered by hail on several occasions. Caster had been able to protect him from a lot of it but not all, especially when the hail whipped around in the wind and attacked from the different angles.

Caster's own attire was still mostly fine, though. A bit of soul-strengthening applied to the cloth was all it took to prevent it from being shredded. Alas, he hadn't thought to do the same for Paulie's clothes until it was a bit too late.

If they'd known more about what they would be facing, they might've brought some soul-strengthened hazmat suits. The time crunch would've made that a bit difficult, however.

Caster approached the building at a more leisurely pace, uncertain if it would truly prove to be the refuge that Paulie was obviously hoping for.

How in the world could any manmade structure still be standing in a place like this? Even assuming it was strong enough to prevent the Dáinnbolg from battering it to dust, how had all these feldeaths not blasted it into oblivion? It couldn't be luck that had allowed it to survive all this time.

Which was another issue. When could such a thing have possibly been built? And by whom?

Frankly, he hadn't even expected this so-called "Tower of Remoria" that Paulie had been going on about to even exist. Sure, he couldn't deny that a sliver of hope in the back of his mind had been there, quietly nagging at him--an absurd notion that they might actually discover something relevant to the path of destruction.

But now that he was looking at this tower, that notion didn't entirely feel like hope anymore. It felt more like worry. Deep, terrifying worry."

"2902

There was no front door, just an empty hole to walk through. As he stepped foot inside, he tried to inspect the building more closely. Thankfully, he did think to bring a flashlight, at least. The pitch black stone looked pristine, and as he shone his light up to it, he could see embossed lines in its surface.

""This way!"" came Paulie's voice from deeper in.

""Don't run off on your own,"" Caster called out. He couldn't even see the kid anymore, but he could hear ascending footsteps. Caster looked for a staircase.

What were they supposed to be looking for? This place was empty. A reaper would have helped right about now in searching.

Being of sufficient age, Caster was able to vaguely sense the soul power coursing the building. If he busted down the walls, he would no doubt be able to see the flowing soul power with his own eyes quite clearly, but as long as it remained embedded within an object, it was still mostly invisible to him.

He found the staircase in question and took it. The next floor looked just as empty as the first, and he could hear Paulie's urgent footsteps already ascending to the next floor again.

They didn't actually have to go all the way up this thing, right? It was touching the clouds. It could have a hundred stories or more, for all they knew.

""Paulie, do you still hear the voice?"" shouted Caster.

The kid took a moment to answer. ""Yeah! It says to keep climbing!""

Of course it did.

He was beginning to hope that it would tell Paulie to jump off the roof when they got there.

Caster had asked Kalikos about Malast, this so-called ""god"" that Paulie was hearing. Apparently, as far as gods went, Malast was some kind of lazy son of a bitch who never did anything for anyone. So this whole trip made even less sense than Caster had first thought."

"2903

Caster didn't know what to think, now. He'd never believed in any gods, excepting perhaps the Void, but that wasn't a god, really. That was the supreme consciousness that existed within all things. The collective will of the universe. And even his faith in that wasn't terribly strong. He certainly didn't consider himself nearly as fanatical as many of his peers and subordinates.

But if this Tower was real, then perhaps so was Malast.

Ugh. He felt too old to be taking up a new belief system. Even if this Malast was real and everything he said turned out to be true, Caster would probably just... shrug, at this point. To be genuinely moved, Caster felt like he'd have to be shown something so utterly spectacular that it defied his own capacity for imagination.

Boy, these stairs were taking a while. The long trek through the Storm hadn't exactly been a picnic, and without a reaper to pep him back up, he was beginning to feel the familiar and unwelcome touch of fatigue. From the sound of the slowing footsteps over his head, Paulie was feeling it, too.

Without warning, the Tower shook violently, and light filled his vision for a moment, blinding him. The booming crash of thunder that he'd heard a hundred times before arrived again, louder than ever this time.

Disorientation held onto him for a few moments longer, but his passive soul defenses were enough to keep him steady. Lightning had just struck the building, he was fairly sure.

His ears were still ringing as he continued the climb, so he couldn't hear Paulie's footsteps anymore. Therefore, he was surprised when he reached the next floor and found Paulie crumpled over.

Hmm.

Still had a pulse. Still breathing. Just unconscious, probably. Might

have been blinded or had his ear drums ruptured, though. Or both.

Caster tried to slap him awake, but the kid wasn't moving.

Wonderful."

"2904

Caster scratched his neck, thinking.

Well, he wasn't about to carry Paulie's ass the rest of the way up this tower. Tired as he was and without enhanced strength to help him out, that would not go well.

And besides, Caster was not a large man. In height, he barely broke a hundred and fifty centimeters. He had no delusions about that. Growing up, that had been his single most defining characteristic, and the world rarely ever let him forget it. Paulie might've been his junior by over a century, but that didn't change the fact that the kid outweighed him by thirty kilos or more.

So he left Paulie where he was and kept climbing. He'd worry about the kid on the way back down. Depending on what he found up there and how bad Paulie's condition turned out to be, he might just destroy kid's brain and have his reaper regenerate him. It would mean weaving a tale about what had happened to him during their ""training,"" but that was already sounding more appealing than trying to drag him all the way back to Eloa.

The wind outside the Tower picked up and began howling through the empty windows, casting hail throughout each floor like little daggers, sometimes making it all the way to him in the center of the building. He soon got used to it, though, as the climb continued with no end in sight.

He was left alone with his thoughts for a long while.

He remembered hearing that Gohvis had a home out here on Exoltha. He wasn't about to run into that dragon bastard, was he?

Of all the members of Abolish that Caster had ever met, Gohvis had to be one of his least favorites. Everyone was afraid of him, but the guy rarely ever helped with anything. He didn't even seem like a part of Abolish, really. Caster had no idea why Dozer put up with him. He highly doubted that Morgunov would, if Gohvis worked for him."

That had been a concern of many, in recent years. The loyalty of the Monster of the East. And now, with the war, it was a bigger question than ever, Caster felt. Why had Gohvis not involved himself in the war effort yet? Dozer may not have been taking to the front lines like Morgunov was, but he was at least sending forces to fight. Where were Gohvis' mutants? Why weren't they helping?

There were some who questioned the Monster's loyalty. And Caster was one of them.

He hadn't stopped thinking about it. If Gohvis hadn't intervened at Dunehall, Caster could have seized a glorious victory right then and there. Ivan would not have gotten involved--and even if he had, then Caster would have been there to help him when that damnable Abbas Saqqaf showed up and somehow captured him.

There was no doubt in Caster's mind that, together, he and Ivan would have conquered Dunehall and all of Moaban completely.

And he would have the respect of his peers and superiors--of Morgunov, most importantly.

Instead, he was a joke. And elsewhere in Dunehall, the other Rainlords had managed to slay Collins. Now, Ivan's forces were in shambles, leaderless and getting their members poached by countless other sects who were looking to take advantage of their weakness.

Where before, Caster had commanded eight different sects, now those same men were so few in number that he'd had to combine them into only three.

That wasn't even the worst part, though. The worst part was that after Dunehall, for whatever reason, Jercash had actually given him a promotion. He'd granted him control over all operations in Calthos. It hadn't made much sense to Caster at the time, but he'd tried not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

And then, before he'd even gotten the chance to take decisive action, Morgunov arrived and took everything away from him again. Bloodeye and Crowe were placed in charge, while he was all but demoted."

It wasn't like he had much room to advocate for himself, either. He'd allowed Collins to be killed, Ivan to be captured, and any element of surprise regarding an invasion of Sair to be lost.

But the most gut-wrenching aspect of it, the thing that really cut into his heart like a knife... was how Morgunov had spoken to him when taking command away from him. The Mad Demon hadn't gotten mad, not even in that strange, happy-yet-obviously-angry manner of his. He hadn't punished him or even threatened to do so.

Instead, he just said, ""It's okay, Casty. I'm sure you tried your best."" And gave him that look.

That look of utter dismissal. Of low expectations being met.

Absolutely soul-crushing. For a man of Caster's ambition, there was almost nothing more damning than that.

But in the end, it was just another example of what they'd been talking about in their meetings for years. The hard cap. Or ""the Wall,"" as some liked to call it.

It always came back to that, sooner or later. No matter how confident he was feeling after a good day or a strong victory, it was just a matter of time until someone or something reminded him of reality.

Oh, what he wouldn't give for the chance to break down that Wall.

They talked about coming to terms with it. They talked about learning to accept themselves for what they were. They talked about looking for other ways to grow their power, to round themselves out and ""achieve wholeness,"" as some put it.

But as he climbed this cursed tower in a dead continent on the edge of the world, he was in no mood to kid himself. If he really believed any of that horseshit, he wouldn't be here, right now. He would've told Paulie to shut his fool mouth and leave him alone."



The farther he climbed, the more exhausted he became. And the more exhausted he felt, the more irritated he grew.

What was with all this bullshit, huh? A stupid tower in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by feldeaths and a storm that could rip through even moderately-aged servants like tin foil--why did it have to be here, of all places?

He supposed it would make sense that the ""hidden potential"" of the path of destruction would be sealed away in such a difficult to reach location, but seriously. Come on, man. If he didn't find the answer he was looking for at the top of this damn thing, then he was going to tear this tower to pieces even if it killed him. So what if even feldeaths weren't able to take it down? He was angry enough that he was sure he'd find a way. Somehow.

His ragged breaths gradually turned more into growls as his pace began to slow, and his climb gradually became a crawl.

Goddamn Paulie and his goddamn voices in his goddamn head. This was going to be a gigantic waste of time. He just knew it. The disappointment was on its way. Only, it wasn't going to arrive alone. It was going to bring mind-numbing rage along with it.

Which was a very uncommon emotion for him.

Caster Egmond was not a nice man. He had learned that about himself at the tender age of thirteen. He realized how easy it was to hurt people, how trusting everyone was in the basic civility of others. They all seemed to believe that true malevolence simply did not exist in the hearts and minds of those around them.

Surely, everyone meant well as long as they were being polite, no? And maybe even when they weren't?

Regular people were so utterly ignorant in that regard.

That was why, in all things, Caster Egmond tried to keep his cool. Being physically outmatched by almost everyone he met throughout the entirety of his youth, he'd had no choice but to blend in. To seem normal.

To conceal his burning hatred of existence beneath a calm exterior.

He'd gotten so good at it, in fact, that he was sometimes able to fool even himself."

"2908

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 2 of 12))~~

He hadn't been afforded the luxuries of so many of these other Abolishers. Able to just speak their minds, to cause mayhem wherever they pleased, get into fights whenever they pleased, and deal with the fallout however they liked.

He'd grown up in an environment of total oppression, and it had never really left him--partly because it was such a useful adaptation. True, he was getting to a point now where the natural field density of his soul was strong enough that more and more people could tell what they were dealing with as soon as they met him, but that was a relatively recent development.

For the vast majority of his life, his calm demeanor had been a boon. By and large, it set him apart from the rest of Abolish. It likely played no small part in helping him acquire promotions--more so than his combat prowess, perhaps.

Every once in a while, though, when circumstances were sufficiently aggravating and no one was around to see, his true feelings were able to bubble their way to the surface.

And it felt good.

To give in to it. Finally. It was like hearing someone speak the truth after listening to nothing but lies for years. Cathartic barely even began to describe it.

He should have been getting more and more tired as he climbed. He should have been nearing the point where he could hardly move.

But that hatred was energizing him. His limbs felt like they were on fire, but somehow, that just seemed appropriate. More and more, he was looking forward to reaching the top of this forsaken tower and going on a rampage when nothing was there. Maybe he would challenge a feldeath to a fight and get it to help him demolish this place."

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 3 of 12))~~

If this voice that Paulie had heard was actually real, then why wasn't it talking to Caster now that the kid was down for the count? And what was the sense in talking to Paulie in the first place? This tower was obviously too difficult for a young servant like him to reach. Had it just been using Paulie as a means of getting to him?

The more he thought about his questions, the angrier he became, because the more it seemed like this was all leading up to a whole lot of nothing. He was just wasting his time on Paulie's delusions. Of course he was.

At length, he began to notice a change in the Tower itself. Floor after floor had looked identical, but now the stairwell was narrowing. He decided to stop briefly and look around one of the floors more thoroughly. The whole building itself was narrowing, he noticed. As if it were a sword. Tapering toward its point, perhaps.

He kept going.

Fog arrived next, thin at first but growing denser as he continued to climb. And he could feel an electric charge in it, too. He must've climbed high enough to reach the clouds, he figured.

Visibility dropped to almost nothing as he pressed on. He couldn't even see his own feet. He had to use the walls and handrails for guidance. He tried blowing the fog away with the path of destruction a few times, but it only allowed him a glimpse before converging back in on itself. He saw the path break upon the Tower's dark walls, too, with little more than a lingering rumble--which was more of a confirmation than a surprise.

Then came the noises.

Quiet. Muffled. Mixed. Sometimes, they sounded like shuffling or scratching. Other times, almost like voices. The fluctuating wind outside the Tower made it all the more difficult to tell what he was hearing.

He called out multiple times as he continued his climb but never

received a response.

Hmph.

This couldn't be what Paulie had been hearing, could it? Or was the fog playing tricks on his mind. It did have a strange odor to it that he couldn't quite place."

"2910

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 4 of 12))~~

If he was about to start hallucinating, then that would just be the icing on this shit-filled cake, Caster felt. One more obnoxious thing to deal with.

He wasn't going to stop until he reached the top. After coming this far, there was no choice. Even if nothing was here, he had to know that for sure. He'd be curious for all eternity if he didn't. There was no telling what--

The top of his head hit something, and he recoiled a few steps back down.

What?

He's been in the middle of a staircase, so how could he have run into anything? What could possibly--?

Brushing away the dense fog above him, he saw it. Dark stone. Just like the rest of the Tower.

A dead end.

For a time, he was just confused.

These stairs just led into the ceiling? There was no next floor? No outlet onto the roof? What the hell was happening?

What did he just climb all these fucking stairs for?!

That was it. The last straw.

He summoned the path into his fist and blasted the ceiling with as

much destructive force as he could muster.

The Tower trembled from the impact, but that dark stone didn't budge.

Which just made him even more angry. How was that possible, huh? This power was called ""destruction,"" wasn't it? So why couldn't it even do the one thing that it was supposed to?! If there were things that it couldn't destroy, and if it didn't have any other fucking properties, then wasn't it just useless?!

He growled unconsciously, which in turn became a yell as he kept attacking the ceiling with his power like a battering ram. Everything else was forgotten as he let his rage consume him and mindlessly kept bashing with both hands, alternating between two paths of destruction, not letting up nor ever intending to until this fucking stone was gone. His screams blended with the deep, piping sounds of his paths, and the Tower's rumbling seemed to heighten, reverberating with his very own soul.

He just wanted to destroy."  
"2911

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 5 of 12))~~

At length, the stone began to crack. And seeing that weakness in it only emboldened him to attack even harder. He smashed through the ceiling, making the Tower shake so much that it seemed almost as if it was about to tip over.

But when the vibrations settled again, he was finally able to feel a brief moment of triumph. His breathing was ragged, and his shoulders were heaving, but he'd done it. He'd done something, at least.

He climbed through the hole he'd made.

Immediately, he could feel the difference in the wind. The fog was still too dense to see anything around him, but this must have been the roof.

Which meant that not being able to see his feet was a much bigger problem. He could walk right off the edge if he wasn't careful.

He decided to crouch down as he moved and brush away the fog in

front of him with more paths of destruction. He didn't much care if he broke through the Tower again. Even if it collapsed with him still on top of it, he'd count that as another win.

It was still holding strong, though. Whatever that damn stone was, it could withstand a lot more than just one hit from destruction.

He took his time searching the roof, wanting to make sure he didn't miss anything. While these damn clouds made everything more difficult, he also had to acknowledge even through his frustration that they were probably the only thing keeping him safe from all the feldeaths around. These were clouds of the Dáinnbolg, after all. They must have been supernatural in nature, which meant they were helping to conceal his soul.

Eventually, after combing the edges and going back and forth across the roof, he found the apparent center.

And to his muted shock, there was actually something there.

Some kind of pedestal, it was. And on it, sat some kind of cube.

No. An orb.

No. A pyramid?

No? He blinked at it, not even sure what he was seeing, anymore."  
"2912

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 6 of 12))~~

He stepped closer, gradually realizing that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. Probably. The object itself was shifting between different shapes every few seconds.

How in the world...?

He reached out to touch it but found disappointment again.

His hand phased right through it, as if it wasn't even there.

Confusion seized him another time. Stubbornly, he kept trying and kept failing to grab the object.

He could already feel himself receding back into his anger. Did he need to use the path of destruction on this, too? Because that notion was sounding all the more appealing with each passing moment.

Before he did anything impulsive, however, his ears pricked at the noises around him. They hadn't stopped. If anything, they seemed be growing louder. Scratching, scraping, shuffling, mumbling, whispering.

But this time, he could also hear a familiar piping noise beneath it all. Like paths of destruction were being summoned in the distance--or behind a wall, perhaps. But he couldn't make out a clear direction. They were all around him, yet as he searched the enveloping clouds another time, he found nothing.

Well, his rage was subsiding, at least. Clearly, there was something strange going on in this place. He didn't understand it, but it seemed that this was not a wasted journey.

Thank the Void. Or Malast. Or whoever the hell was responsible for it.

Hmm.

He steadied himself, trying to listen. The whispers were difficult to parse from all the other noises, not the least of which was the damn wind, but as he concentrated, they seemed to become clearer.

""A test, a test...""

""To grasp, to grasp...""

""To breathe, to breathe...""

""To see, to see...""

""To know, to know...'

""A test, a test...""

He couldn't tell if they were in his head like that of reaper voices or not. But they were growing louder, it seemed to him.

Perhaps a little too loud, in fact. Or maybe the other noises were waning."

"2913

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 7 of 12))~~

The world around him grew slowly dimmer, slowly quieter--save only the voices. Their whispers became a chorus, of sorts, and their words, an almost rhythmic hum.

""A test, a test...""

""Come and try...""

""Be my chosen...""

""No, be mine...""

""No, mine...""

""A test, a test...""

Hmm.

He brushed the crowding fog away again with his hand and eyed the object on the pedestal. He'd already tried picking it up with soul-strengthened hands, so it clearly wasn't intangible in the same way that a reaper's body was.

Well.

If this was a test, then there wasn't really much else he could think to do, was there? He was a one-trick pony, after all.

He summoned the path of destruction.

He wasn't sure that he should try to destroy it, though. Somehow, that seemed like the wrong thing to do. If it was truly intangible, then perhaps the path would simply pass through it, as well. But if that happened, then he'd be stuck.

Agh.

He tried to be ""gentle"" with his use of the path--which, strictly speaking, was not entirely possible, but he tried to will his intentions into existence, anyway. He made it small, narrow. And only loosed it for a split second.



It connected.

The shifting object jostled off of the pedestal and clattered against the rooftop.

""No!""

""Wrong!""

""Return the phylactery!""

""Be quick, be quick!""

The passion in the whispers kept growing, but Caster would not be rushed.

Phylactery? Why were they panicking all of a sudden? And what in the world had just happened, anyway? Why had the path been able to touch it when his own two hands and soul could not?

He eyed the object more skeptically now.

""To grasp, to grasp!""

""Touch, chosen! Touch!""

""Return! Return!""

The voices were all but hissing at him, and he could hardly make out what they were saying, anymore."

"2914

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 8 of 12))~~

He approached the object and knelt down toward it. The so-called phylactery, whatever that meant. The voices wanted him to grasp it? How the hell...?

Maybe...

He used both hands, summoning multiple tiny paths at once. In truth, they were more like bubbles than paths, and he tried to coat his palms and fingers in them as he moved to grab the object.

Oddly enough, it seemed to work. It jostled wildly in his grip, both because the bubbles were constantly appearing and reappearing and because the phylactery itself was continuing to shift. It hovered there haphazardly within his grasp as he did his best not to drop the damn thing.

""Good, good!""

""Yes, chosen! Yes!""

""Become one and see!""

""Breathe and see!""

""Return it! Return it!""

""No, keep it! Keep it!""

""Hold! Hold!""

""No, return! Return!""

What in the goddamn hell was happening, he wondered? These contradicting messages weren't helping. And they were just getting louder and louder, too.

""Who are all of you?"" he said aloud. ""Why are you talking to me?"" It was just an impulse that made him speak up like that. He didn't actually expect a response.

Which was good, because he didn't receive one. Not directly, at least.

Instead, the voices fell suddenly silent.

The rest of the world still sounded comparatively muffled, however. The howling wind was the most prominent noise again, and yet it was scarcely louder than his own breathing.

Had they not expected him to say anything to them? Had they not thought he could hear them? He was quickly getting sick of all these unanswered questions.

""Are any of you Malast?"" he tried again.

No answer.

Of course.

The phylactery, meanwhile, was gradually settling down, he noticed. It was getting easier to balance within his hands. As if it were calming down--or his own bubbles of destruction were, perhaps."

"2915

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 9 of 12))~~

He watched it carefully as it eased closer and closer to his bare flesh, sinking through the ability that should have been destroying it.

Until, finally, it touched him.

He felt it there, in his hands. And it ceased shifting its form, too. It merely sat there, having settled on the shape of a trapezoidal prism.

Which made his eyes narrow.

Every user of destruction had a specific, two-dimensional geometric shape that their path conformed to. His was a trapezoid.

This could not be a coincidence, he decided. Given all the different types of polyhedrons that the phylactery had just been iterating through, it had to be connected to his power in some way.

But nothing was happening. He waited, but no new voices arrived. No new anything.

The muted sounds of the world around him began returning to normal, too.

Was that it?

""Hello?!"" he called out into the swirling cloud, having to shout over the wind. ""What am I meant to do with this?!""

He kept waiting, and no answer came.

He exhaled a long breath, feeling his fatigue wash over him again. Why couldn't anything ever be simple?

Well, he supposed he didn't need to destroy this blasted Tower of Remoria, at least. It hadn't been a wasted trip. He didn't understand

what he'd actually accomplished during it, but hopefully, that would come in time. Very much hopefully.

He wasn't looking forward to the trek back down those damn stairs. Maybe it would be better to just jump off the roof and take his chances with the fall. Ah, probably not. Feldeaths might sense him again once he left the cloud. Oh, and Paulie. He was still somewhere on the staircase. Caster wondered if he'd woken up by now. If not, then--

'Check and see.'

Caster stopped. He'd just reentered the stairwell again, and his head hadn't even finished going below the rooftop. He threw a look around the area, as if the fog might tell him whose voice that was just now.

'If you are curious about Paulie, then think of where you last saw him, and you will see.'

"2916

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 10 of 12))~~

Just the words alone were enough to put the idea into his head, and without even intending to, he was already doing what the voice said. He thought of Paulie, where he'd last seen him, collapsed in the middle of the stairwell far below him.

And immediately, an image flashed before him. In midair. Right in front of Caster's face. Like a projector screen.

But it didn't last. After a moment, it was gone, leaving Caster more confused than anything. What had he just seen? What had been in that image? It had been too fuzzy and fleeting for him to even process.

'You must be more accurate than that,' said the voice. 'To control the Tenor of the Veil requires both precision and concentration. You must learn.'

""...What the hell are you talking about?"" said Caster, still looking around for a source.

'Go on. Try again.'

Hesitant, he did so. Paulie. Unconscious on the stairs.

The image flickered in front of his face again, and he blinked at it in disbelief. It lingered there this time, but it was still too fuzzy to make anything out. Was that actually Paulie there? It just looked like a vaguely humanoid blob.

And then the image faltered before disappearing altogether.

What the fuck was going on here?

'Ah. A good attempt. Your memory yet lacks depth, but that will do, for now. Here. Allow me to assist.'

The floating image returned, crystal clear this time. Too clear, actually. It looked like Paulie was right there in front of him, like Caster could just reach out and touch him.

'That is because you can.'

What?

He didn't understand. How could--?

'Reach through.'

At this point, he didn't see any reason not to comply. He put his hand through the image and sure enough, he was able to grab Paulie's tattered collar.

'Good.'

Caster retracted his hand. He had to ask. ""Who or what are you?""

'A strange question. I am you, of course. And you are me. If you will it, then we shall soon be as one. And we will remind this slumbering world of many things.'

"2917 -- CCLV.

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 11 of 12))~~

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Five: 'Thy bracing constitution...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector had been a little disappointed to realize that Lord Abbas wasn't quite so enthused about the idea of a castle around the Forge as he was. He hadn't actually refused to help build it, but it was clear that he had reservations about it.

Yeah, it would be expensive. Like, obscenely so. And yeah, Abbas probably had a point when he said that the tree served as quite good camouflage and that constructing a giant fortress around it might actually draw more attention to it, not less. And okay, sure, he might've also been right when he said that they would never be able to build a castle that was strong enough to hold back an emperor who had set their sights on the Forge.

But they couldn't just leave it out here unprotected, either, right? It was sitting in a fucking tree. One stray lightning bolt, and the whole thing could go up in flames. He had a feeling that the Forge would survive such a blaze, but its camouflage would be gone, at the very least.

The Sunsmith's arguments did get Hector thinking, though. If the entire purpose of the castle was to protect the Forge, then he shouldn't just ignore those points, Hector felt. He should try to incorporate them into the castle's design, somehow.

And Lorent was full of trees, right? The Imara Forest covered nearly fifty percent of its land. And as skeptical as he had previously been regarding the functionality of Riverton, P.J.'s weird architecture, Hector had to admit that he was beginning to see it in a new light now that he was imagining his own sneaky forest castle.

Maybe that had been the core logic behind building their capital here. Despite what a nightmare it must have been to clean up all the leaves and insulate all the buildings with trees growing out of them, the city probably would be pretty difficult to attack, wouldn't it?

Well, unless the enemy used fire, maybe.

Hmm. Come to think of it, he wondered what kind of fire prevention tech the Lorentians had. Maybe he should look into that."  
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"2918

~~((New Year's Day Special - Page 12 of 12))~~

It seemed like Hector was spending more and more time in P.J., lately--and that probably wasn't going to change anytime soon, he figured. He was bouncing back and forth between Warrenhold and Lorent on a daily basis. After telling the Lorentian Secretary of Defense



about their lackluster border security, they'd been calling him up constantly, asking him to sit in on more meetings every day.

He tried to attend some, but they were pretty difficult to listen to, especially when he had so much other stuff on his mind. And it felt a little improper for him to even be there, at times, too. If the Secretary of Defense hadn't sounded so... well, desperate, then Hector probably would have politely refused altogether.

The people on the Lorentian Security Council obviously meant well. They wanted to keep their nation safe as best they could. But it also became increasingly clear to Hector that they were a bit overwhelmed by the war. They were constantly talking about trying to recruit more ""superhuman soldiers"" to their side--a sentiment which Hector didn't necessarily disagree with--but their strategies for actually doing so were a bit lacking, quite frankly.

They seemed to think it was purely a matter of money, that if they diverted a large enough amount of government funds, they could hire pretty much anyone they wanted to protect the country. Which, by extension, meant that anyone opposing such an increase in funding was also opposing the safety of the nation.

Apparently, the reason they were under this impression was because, a few years ago, Lorent had a private security company on retainer called Greenworth.

A lesser known mercenary group who used servants, according to Garovel.

And according to Ravi Zaman, Greenworth had been involved in a number of national scandals, not the least of which was the sudden death of a politician. The details were disputed, however, with some claiming that Greenworth had actually been trying to save the man's life, not end it."

"2919

Hector wasn't sure what to make of that story. It sounded pretty shady, but at the same time, he had personal experience with extremely bad publicity. Maybe these Greenworth guys really were innocent.

In any case, President Allen Dance's predecessor had very publicly

pushed to outlaw such government contracts with private security companies, and Greenworth had since left the country. Several members of the Security Council wanted Dance to help reverse that decision so that they could either bring Greenworth back or hire a new company to fill their shoes.

For his part, Hector thought this all sounded like a terrible idea, but he could also appreciate how difficult of a situation the Lorentians were in. With the war so close, they wanted to take steps to help keep everyone safe.

His instinct was to not trust any mercenary group with servants in it. Because how were they supposed to be held accountable? If they were more powerful than the government's military, then who could possibly hold their feet to the fire if they broke their contract? And what about the reapers? The Security Council didn't seem to be aware of that wrinkle, but would reapers even care about money? It seemed more likely that they would have some other agenda.

He kept his opinion to himself, however, because this wasn't his area of expertise. He was well aware of how young he was, of how much experience he still lacked. He didn't exactly feel qualified to be telling these heads of state what to do. In fact, he still thought it was pretty weird that they even wanted him to be present for their discussions in the first place.

Garovel seemed to think this was a deliberate bit of political maneuvering on the Lorentians' part. Trying to get him personally invested in the defense of the nation or whatever.

And maybe the reaper was onto something.

More and more, Hector was getting a feel for how these government people operated. What they said they wanted was usually not what they actually wanted. There was more to every action that they tried to take.

It was impressive, in a way. And exhausting, in another."  
"2920

Hector had enough on his plate already and didn't much care to get involved in their messy political games.

And yet he was. Undeniably. By accepting their land, he'd accepted their problems, too. At least partially. It would've been both irresponsible and delusional to think that he could simply ignore what as going on in the rest of Lorent and expect everything to be fine in the lower Jagwa region.

So he tried his best to keep on top of things. He was beginning to think he would need a representative of his own in P.J. soon, too. Someone he could trust to handle most of these meetings in his stead and help him stay informed about what was happening in the capital.

Who that person might be, though... he currently had no idea. A Lorentian insider seemed like the most potent choice but maybe not the most reasonable one. He didn't really trust this government, so how was he supposed to trust someone who was already associated with it?

There was no need to rush, he supposed. Things were... mostly manageable, at the moment.

He'd been trying to conduct as many of his meetings outdoors as possible so that he could continue taking in P.J. while he was here. His insistence seemed to make a few of the officials uncomfortable, but rarely did any of them say anything.

Perhaps they were afraid of upsetting him. Or perhaps they were simply coming around to the idea that outdoor meetings beat the hell out of indoor ones. He hoped it was the latter, though Garovel didn't hesitate to remind him how useful the prior could be.

Ravi Zaman was eager to show him more of the city during his stay, which Hector certainly didn't mind. It was Ambassador Stoutamire, however, who proved to be the most enthusiastic tour guide."  
"2921

Stoutamire was often traveling, the man explained. He would not stop going on about how nice it was to finally be home for more than just a couple of weeks. He wanted to show Hector this historical building or that one--and to tell him the stories accompanying them all.

Hector tried to be polite and pay attention, but he felt like he wasn't

going to retain any of it very well. Garovel could remember it for him, he figured.

If nothing else, though, it was clear that the guy loved his country. Which was probably an important quality in an ambassador, Hector figured. Couldn't really fault him for spirit.

But of course, Stoutamire's trivia was never the actual purpose of their meetings. The purpose was to maintain a steady line of communication between Atreya and Lorent, to help keep each other up to speed on what was going on in the world--or as much as they were willing to share, at least.

And to that end, Hector could not fault Stoutamire in the slightest. The guy was plenty eager to share information with him. The Lorentians had learned quite a bit about the situations in Melmoore and Hoss. They'd gathered a fair bit of intel about Sair, too, but nothing that Hector didn't already know--which was to be expected.

In Melmoore, despite having been invaded by both Corrico and Ostra, the tide was supposedly beginning to turn in favor of the defenders. A recent battle in some place called Trintol had gotten quite a bit of attention on the world stage. Apparently, the Melmoorians had whooped some serious ass there and then gone on to retake a large portion of the northern countryside from the Ostran forces.

After the disaster in Sair, that was welcome news indeed. There was no word yet about who among the Vanguard the victory was being attributed to, which seemed a little strange, but Hector couldn't complain."

"2922

As for Hoss, things were looking less great over there. Arida, one of the largest cities on the continent, had turned into a battleground, and civilian casualties were reportedly skyrocketing.

The fact that such reports were making it out at all, though, was a minor comfort. That alone meant that their situation still wasn't as bad as the one in Sair. But yeah, it was still pretty fucking worrying, especially because there were supposedly three Vanguardian marshals in Hoss, at the moment.

Garovel seemed to think that might be old news by now, though. It was quite possible that one or more of those marshals had left to provide reinforcements for Sair, which certainly needed them. If so, then the situation in Hoss was probably only going to get more intense from here.

When it came to reciprocating intel, however, Hector found himself reluctant. Stoutamire just sort of volunteered all this stuff, so Hector felt it would be improper if he didn't return the favor for the Lorentians, but still...

Sharing details gathered by the active teams in Callum and Vantalay was a big deal. He didn't want to say the wrong thing and potentially endanger them. Plus, all of this stuff was treading awfully close to sensitive information regarding the existence of reapers and how they fueled the strength of all those ""superhuman soldiers"" out there.

He was uncertain how much he should reveal.

Garovel wasn't, though. He didn't want Hector to say shit, other than the most vague things imaginable. ""Sair is trying to regroup"" or ""the conflict is intensifying."" Stuff like that.

Which was what Hector ended up doing. Maybe that was a little unfair to the Lorentians, but Hector saw the wisdom in Garovel's thinking. For the time being. Their government hadn't really earned that level of trust yet, he felt.

But he'd probably have to come to a clearer decision about that sooner or later, he figured."

"2923

As for the treasure hunting teams, they still hadn't made much headway, but the Vantalay team was able to tell him about one ""John Wright,"" a.k.a. Donald Elias.

Hector had asked them to find out what they could about the man's status, but considering how busy they already were with keeping the residents of Miro safe, he hadn't been expecting much.

Donald Elias was an undercover operative of Atreya who used to work for Hanton Gaolanet. The Sparrow had asked King William to see

about securing the man's release, but Hector, already having people in Vantalay, couldn't help being curious about him, too.

Plus, Hector kinda doubted that the King or Queen would be able to do much in this case. With Vantalay in the middle of a war that it instigated, that country probably wasn't going to be in the mood to negotiate with some tiny nation on the complete other side of the continent for a random prisoner.

But heck, maybe the Belgrants would prove him wrong. They'd certainly surprised him before.

In the meantime, though, he was interested to learn more about this spy that Hanton had talked up so much. From what the Vantalay team was able to gather, Donald was being held at a rather infamous prison deep in the heart of the country. If they were to mount a rescue, they said, then it would first mean a long and difficult trek through multiple heavily fortified locations.

Hector definitely hadn't intended to ask them to do that, but he appreciated their forward thinking. Hector wanted to be mindful of overstepping his bounds here. They were already playing with fire by having a team of wanted fugitives infiltrate the country. Having them attack a military installation and stage a daring rescue would've been seriously pushing it.

...Unless he got the Queen's permission, maybe. But he figured that could wait until after the team had finished dealing with the Killer of Krohin, at least. They didn't need more distractions from that objective right now, Hector felt."

"2924

In fact, Hector was debating sending them more reinforcements. It was a tough situation, though, because who would he send? If this Thaddeus guy was such a problem that even Leo and Melchor working together were having difficulty putting him down, then it'd probably require someone pretty damn powerful to actually provide assistance. Sending the wrong person or group of people might just make things even worse.

That, and he had the impression that they wanted to finish this themselves. Like a pride thing. They hadn't expressed a desire for

reinforcements to be sent, and from the way their reapers were talking, they sounded fairly confident that their victory was inevitable.

But still. Not long ago, Hector had been quite confident that the Sandlords would kick the crap out of Abolish.

He didn't want to make that mistake again. True, the Vantalay team was strong as hell, but this war was full of surprises so far.

He wished he could go to Vantalay himself. And indeed, he found the notion more appealing with each passing day. Yeah, he was busy with meetings and shit, and it definitely wouldn't look good for Atreya--and now Lorent, too, perhaps--if he got caught up in that mess publicly, but...

Apparently, the Vantalay team had gotten their hands on some aberration-made rings that could render them invisible. So if he were to go over there personally, it would be a lot easier to lay low...

But getting into the country would still be a big problem, of course. It wouldn't be like Lorent. Vantalay was an active war zone, with battlegrounds shifting constantly. Any number of things could go wrong. It'd be a huge risk.

Or so Garovel kept telling him.

And he was probably right. As usual.

But there was another reaper whose opinion greatly concerned him on this particular issue. Ericoros, Leo's reaper."

"2925

Hector had been trying to make time to talk to Ericoros whenever he was at Warrenhold. If he and Garovel were ever going to change the reaper's mind about Leo, about joining their side in earnest, then it was crucial to keep talking to him on a regular basis.

It might never happen, of course. Even Leo didn't think it was possible to change Ericoros' mind about releasing him and rejoining Sai-hee. But Leo was a valuable enough player on the board to warrant the potentially wasted effort.

That was how Garovel put it, at least. Hector wasn't terribly

comfortable thinking of it in terms like that, like this was all a big game. He understood what Garovel was saying, but still... these were people with lives of their own. They were definitely valuable in the grand scheme of things, but they deserved to be treated like free individuals, didn't they?

Despite the fact that Ericoros was currently their prisoner.

There was no getting around that, Hector knew.

He'd been trying to come up with a way to make Ericoros more comfortable, to feel included in what they were doing, without giving him too much freedom. This was a two-way street, after all. He wanted Ericoros to trust them, but they also needed to be able to trust Ericoros. If the reaper somehow escaped and brought Sai-hee here to Warrenhold...

Ugh.

As Melchor's reaper, Orric, had mentioned, this was going to take a long time. Many years, most likely.

Which was kind of a strange thought. As a servant, Hector was little over a year old now, and yet he was making plans for quite far into the future. It really wasn't that long ago when he felt the future wasn't even worth thinking about.

If this next year was as crazy as the last, then he wondered if Warrenhold would even be standing by the end of it."

"2926

Regardless, even if he couldn't go himself, Hector was hoping to send more reinforcements to Vantalay soon; and with a sudden influx of new servants at Warrenhold from Hahl Saqqaf, there were a few more candidates to consider now. Hector had been trying to familiarize himself with the structure of Hahl Saqqaf, but it was quite a bit different from the Rainlord Houses that he'd become accustomed to.

Because of Abbas, mainly.

None of the Rainlord families had such an old and powerful patriarch. The only person even remotely comparable to him was Melchor Blackburn, who, for whatever reason, was not the acting head of



House Blackburn. Abbas' influence within Hahl Saqqaf was unlike anything else Hector had seen from these warrior families.

The guy had so many freaking kids. And his kids had kids. Who also had kids, too. And so on. Even after spending time among them for a few days, Hector still wasn't quite sure how many living generations of Hahl Saqqaf there currently were.

But there were definitely some noticeable gaps.

And while it was a bit early to be drawing too many conclusions about their family dynamics, it had quickly become apparent that many of Abbas' sons were standing in his shadow in more ways than one.

Not only was Abbas the most powerful warrior among the Sandlords, he was also a genius. Even in their battered state, everyone's reverence for him was apparent. As was their deference.

None of them wanted to make a big decision without first consulting him--a decision like heading off to Vantalay to support the Rainlords.

Hector hadn't actually asked any of them about that himself, but several of the Rainlord reapers had, and each time, the Saqqafs deflected in an identical way.

""Ask adabbi,"" they said."

"2927

Maybe they just didn't want to do it and were trying to find a way of politely saying no, but that wasn't the impression Hector was getting, especially because of how incredibly old some of Abbas' sons were. A couple them were apparently in their early eighties.

Which, on the one hand, was kind of nuts. Asad Najir was only like forty-five or something, Hector thought. And yet he'd been a member of the Golden Council, while these guys weren't. And for all Hector knew, there could've been other council members who were even younger than that. Hasan Duxan hadn't seemed all that old, either--but looks were also deceiving, of course.

Still, Hector had to wonder if that kind of age disparity caused any kind of resentment or bitterness from these guys. It'd be understandable, if it did. Hector wondered how the Sandlords handled it. Maybe Abbas'

sons had their own important positions in their government.

But on the other hand, the fact that Abbas' oldest sons were only in their eighties also left some lingering questions--questions that were too awkward to even ask.

If Abbas was a hundred and fifty-four years old like he'd said he was, then did that really mean he didn't start having children until his mid-seventies?

Or...?

Did it mean that he'd lost the ones who were born earlier than that?

Not a pleasant thought, to be sure--and made all the more so because of how much sense it made. The younger Abbas was, the more difficult it would have been for him to protect his children.

It made Hector think of Zeff.

Hector wanted to spend more time with the Elroys, to see how they were all doing, but it was difficult enough just finding the opportunity to keep up his training with Zeff. Hanging out with the Elroy kids was tough to justify when he had so much other stuff constantly competing for his attention."

"2928

Garovel had been telling him that it soon wouldn't be a matter of ""finding"" the time for things, anymore. It would only be a matter of ""making"" time for them. And Hector was beginning to understand what he meant by that.

With so much going on all the time, so many people requesting meetings with him in both Atreya and Lorent, everything was just totally different now. If he wanted to, he could book every hour of every day for the next month with one thing or another. A meeting or training or maintenance or patrolling or reading paperwork for the Bank or listening to reports from various reapers--there was, quite literally, always something that he could be doing.

Free time simply didn't exist, anymore.

Unless he went out of his way to create it, was Garovel's point.

At this rate, he wondered if he would ever watch another movie or play another video game again.

Right now, his ""free time"" was all going to patrolling Gray Rock. It used to stress him out so much, but now he looked forward to how relaxing it was. Compared to facing down some insanely powerful servant or monster, it was quite pleasant to be dealing with regular ass criminals.

He could use the time to multitask, too. He could read up on various subjects that interested him while en route to wherever Garovel sensed the next ""doomed"" person. Or he could just mull things over in a background thought process or two. It was nice to just take time to think about shit.

Unfortunately, Garovel was having an increasingly difficult time finding people with the ""aura of death"" around them. Well, okay, that wasn't actually unfortunate. It was obviously great that crime seemed to be on the decline in Gray Rock, especially after the spikes that it had seen after his return from Sair."

"2929

But if crime kept going down, then he wouldn't be able to justify going out on patrol very often, and then his free time really would disappear. He'd have to find some other way of unwinding while still feeling like he was being productive. Soaking in the hot spring was great for the prior, but not so much for the latter.

Hmm, maybe he could find a hobby that included the Elroy kids, somehow. That, alone, might make it feel more productive. He felt responsible for all the Rainlords in Warrenhold, of course, but when it came to Marcos and Ramira, that feeling was... magnified, in a way.

Perhaps it wasn't quite accurate to say that he was ""closer"" to the Elroys than with the other Houses, but there was definitely something different about his relationship with them. Between the familial link of Garovel and Chergoa, Zeff teaching him so much about materialization, and Axiolis being the one who introduced them to all the other Rainlords--he couldn't deny their special status in his mind.

And even aside from Emiliana, there were more Elroy kids out there

whom he hadn't met. Francisco and Gema Elroy, wherever they were.

Regarding Emiliana, she'd been fairly quiet, recently. She must've been busy doing... whatever it was she did. Research under Gohvis or something. She hadn't tried to contact him, as far as he'd been able to tell. He wanted to think that no news was good news, especially with the war going on. If she was getting roped into the conflict, he hoped that she would tell him, but maybe that was foolish.

He hadn't exactly volunteered information about his own, insanely dangerous adventures, either. He didn't see much point in giving her cause to worry about her family any more than she probably already was."

"2930

Either way, if this radio silence kept up for much longer, he would try to contact her again soon. Apart from just wanting to check up on her, she might've come up with new treasure hunting clues for him. He hadn't wanted to dispatch a fifth squad, as the reapers all seemed to agree that it would mean spreading their forces too thin, but now that Hahl Saqqaf was here, that might have changed.

With so many teams out looking for these artifacts of power, at least one of them would have to find something, right? It hadn't been looking great so far, but he was trying to think positively for a change.

Hmm.

Yeah, it didn't suit him, he concluded. Better to just plan on everyone coming back empty-handed.

And to that end, Hector's greatest concern at the moment was motivating him to spend the majority of his time differently than usual.

That concern being Ivan.

If the Salesman of Death returned, perhaps with Bloodeye in tow, then the entirety of Warrenhold would be endangered. Everything that he and Garovel had been working so hard to build over the last several months could be destroyed overnight.

More than anything, he couldn't allow that to happen. If he was truly the Lord of Warrenhold like everyone said he was, then protecting this

place was his responsibility.

Which was why he decided to start taking an even more active role in the castle's reconstruction.

The one thing he had right now was time to prepare.

And heck, maybe it wouldn't even be Ivan. Maybe it would be some other invader. And maybe it wouldn't be for many, many years.

But he felt in his bones that it would happen eventually. One way or another, Warrenhold would definitely come under siege, one day. With all the shit he'd gotten himself involved in? All the fugitives and refugees he was accepting?

It was inevitable, Hector thought.

And when that day came, he aimed to make sure that the attackers got a lot more than they bargained for."

"2931

He figured that a good first step was to materialize a kind of rough ""false castle"" aboveground. As long as it was all materialized, it wouldn't matter as much if it got obliterated. Plus, since nobody would actually be living in it, he didn't have to worry about things like insulation and heating and plumbing.

It was mainly just to help conceal the doorway to the Entry Tower. The longer the enemy spent wandering around on the surface, trying to locate the way inside, the more time they would have to organize their real defenses.

And it was kinda fun just creating entire towers out of his iron. He found himself spending perhaps a little too long on them, comparing them against pictures of real buildings from around the world and trying to make them look as believable and cool as possible.

He'd never been to the beach before, but maybe this was what building sand castles was like. He'd always wanted to give that a try.

He couldn't go quite as nuts with it as he might've liked, though. It required a gigantic amount of iron, after all. Multiple buildings, each with multiple floors. And all that iron that he devoted to this project

would count against his volume limit while he was in the area. He had to exercise some restraint, unfortunately.

His preliminary results were looking pretty alright, though, Hector felt. Nothing as visually impressive as Stasya Orlov's work, of course, but it was a decent start, at least.

It helped that there was already some aboveground construction going on in the first place, so he could weave the iron buildings into and around them. The only real issue was making sure that his phony iron castle didn't get in the way of any of the real buildings that were still going up. Sure, the ones up here weren't as important as the eight towers underground, but they would probably still get used eventually, one way or another. He didn't always want to receive guests underground, especially with all the Rainlords down there."

"2932

It wasn't quite the majestic iron fortress that he'd envisioned in his mind, but maybe he could keep adding to it as his volume limit increased. Slowly. Over a period of many years.

Tch. Okay, he was kinda disappointed with this humble collection of metal towers. They were shinier than the others, which was sort of neat, but he couldn't help wanting more of them. There was still so much empty ground left to fill.

Maybe he should go out and try to achieve emergence again. That was the fastest way to increase his volume limit. Sure, it would mean risking his life--and probably endangering the whole country, come think of it--but a nice, big, shiny castle would make it all worthwhile, right? Garovel and the Queen and everyone else would understand, surely.

Nevermind the fact that actively trying to achieve emergence was supposedly counterproductive and might actually prevent it from happening. That was beside the point.

Dammit. Well, at least he would have something to look forward to in the years to come. In the meantime, he could focus on refining the towers and making them look pristine. Come to think of it, he'd probably have to remake them a lot, wouldn't he? They might start to rust after a while. He wondered how long--

""What'cha doing?"" came a feminine voice from below him.

The interruption made him blink. He'd been perched atop an iron platform, inspecting the crenellations on his southernmost tower and trying to decide if a tiled roof with a high apex might look better. When he looked he down, he saw a woman with long blond hair and unfamiliar face, staring back at him.

His confusion lingered for a few moments more, first because she was quite pretty, and second because she wasn't actually there.

He could sense it with the Scarf. She was an illusion."

"2933

He connected the dots. ""...Pauline?"" he said.

""Aha, hello,"" she said with a nice smile. ""I was wondering if you would be able to tell it was me. What do you think of my avatar? Nice, right? I'll be honest--if you don't tell me it's nice, I'm going to be upset.""

""...It's nice."" In another thought process, he was reaching out with the Scarf, trying to locate her invisible avian body. With so much open air out here, though, it was difficult. She might've been too far away.

""Your enthusiasm could use a little work, but I suppose that will do. So what are you doing?""

He slowly destroyed his platform and let himself back down to the ground. He supposed he could tell her the truth here. In fact, he'd been wanting to share a bit with someone. Beyond the fact that it was to prep for a potential siege, Garovel hadn't demonstrated much interest in his iron castle strategy--perhaps because it was taking a while. Probably thought it was tedious or something.

That, and he'd been thinking about asking one of the Sparrows for help on this project, anyway.

""It's a decoy castle,"" he explained. ""Not terribly unlike your family's estate, actually.""

""Oh?""

""I'm just trying to, ah... have a bit of forethought, I guess. In case Warrenhold is ever attacked.""

She was quiet a moment as her avatar gave the nearest tower another look, the expression on her human face looking abruptly more serious than a second ago. ""...Are you expecting an attack to arrive soon?" she asked.

Ah. Difficult question. ""Not sure. Maybe. Better safe than sorry, though.""

She gave an admmissive nod.

""Hey, uh... I don't suppose you could work some of your illusory magic and help spruce it up a bit for me, could you?""

Her brow furrowed. ""Excuse me? 'Illusory magic?' What do you think I am? Some kind of sorceress?"" A whisper of a smile was creeping across her lips, however.

Hector took that as a cue to double down. ""...A little bit, yeah.""  
"2934

That pulled a laugh out of her. ""Well... hmm. I wouldn't mind helping, but in order to maintain the illusion, I would have to remain in the area. Unfortunately, I can't just create a permanent illusion here for you and leave.""

""Ah..."" Hector looked at his surrounding work, sizing it up again and thinking. ""So... I should create, like, a 'nest' for you around here, is what you're saying.""

Her avatar's eyes bulged a little. ""I... uh... you'd be willing to do that? To just give me a place of my own in your castle?""

Oh, maybe that was a bigger deal than he'd thought it was.

Yeah, it definitely was. What was wrong with him?

He'd done this before with Gina, too, he suddenly recalled. Just inviting people to stay in his home as long as they wanted.

Gina had probably been more deserving it, though. When it came



down to it, he still didn't really know all that much about the Sparrows or Pauline herself.

Eh, but it would be aboveground. After all that craziness they'd been through together in Lorent, he felt like she was pretty trustworthy.

Hmm.

He scratched his neck. ""Well, if I were to give you your own, er, spot here, what would you need in order for it to be comfortable?""

""Ah, wait a minute. Trying to use my desire to leave home as a means of learning more about my kind, is that it? That's rather underhanded of you, Lord Goffe. I thought you were the more straightforward and earnest type.""

Um. That hadn't been it at all, but now that she mentioned it, it didn't sounded like a terrible strategy. She obviously found her father a bit stifling, and he did want to learn more about the Wrobels.

Still, though, that wasn't his priority. ""...Look, I just want my castle to be as impregnable and cool as possible. And having a Sparrow around seems like it would help with that.""

"2935

Her gaze lingered on him for a moment, eyes seeming somehow sharper, almost as if they'd turned into her true avian ones. ""My father would not be pleased to hear any of this, I'm sure.""

Hector gave a shrug. ""I'd be happy to make a place for him here, too.""

She frowned, then sighed. ""Of course you would...""

He couldn't help chuckling a little at that reaction. ""Did I just cause you to decide against it?""

""Perhaps.""

He pressed his lips together flatly, not sure how else to convince her. He kinda doubted that Hanton would actually want to stay here, but he also didn't want to promise not to let him do so. Warrenhold was a fortress, after all. If Gray Rock was ever invaded, the Lord Gaolanet

might have need of the protection that this place could afford him.

As would many others, Hector suspected. And in such circumstances, he didn't intend to turn anyone away without a good reason.

Her avatar straightened and took a deep breath. ""I guess you'll have to entice me with an especially nice room, then.""

Uh-oh.

""First of all, it has to have a good view. I want to be able to see really far away. Most of Gray Rock, preferably. Secondly, I want a nice, big cushion to sit on. It should conform to the shape of my body without being too squishy. And definitely don't just throw together a pile of sticks, okay? I'm not that kind of sparrow. My feathers are too big, and branches will just get stuck in them. Third, I want an open ceiling that also has a hanging perch. Sometimes I like to sleep like that. Fourth, I want a steady supply--""

""Should I be writing this down?""

""--of seeds. The good stuff. Safflower, sunflower, golden millet--oh, and walnuts. I like those. Even if they're still in the shells, that's fine. I also like my water slightly below room temperature. Cold but not too cold. Brisk, I would say, not icy. And yes, I would be writing this down if I were you.""

"2936 -- CCLVI.

## Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Six: 'Thine intervening ambitions...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

For what must have been the thirtieth time today, Francisco Elroy hit the dirt with a heavy thud. He decided to stay there for a while longer. He wasn't prepared to give up quite yet, but the thought grew more tempting each time he found himself kissing the ground like this again.

He was exhausted. And sore all over. His vigor had worn off a while ago, which should have been his cue to go rest, but he wanted to make the most of his training while he still could. For as much as he disliked Damian Rofal, Cisco had to acknowledge that these sparring sessions were invaluable.

And once he and Dunstan escaped, they might never be able to receive this level of instruction again.

Crazy as it was to consider, a part of him thought that maybe it would be better not to escape. To just let the old bastard have his way. To make use of these messed up circumstances for as long as they might continue.

The worst part was, it actually made sense. He could see the logic in it.

And maybe a bit more than just logic...

Now that Damian had taken him and rest of the Rofals away from that damn cabin in the mountains, things were quite different. He'd brought them out to Melmoore.

To the front lines of the continental war.

It had barely been a week since they'd arrived, and he'd already witnessed more real combat than in the rest of his life combined.

Witnessed, but not exactly participated in. The amount of actual fighting he'd done was still comparatively minimal. Why Damian had bothered to bring them to a war zone if he didn't intend to make them fight, Cisco had no idea.

He wasn't necessarily complaining about that part, though."  
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"2937

Damian had also been disappearing with surprising frequency. One minute he would be there, and the next, he'd vanish.

At first, Cisco and Dunstan had thought that would be advantageous for making their escape, but they'd attempted it five times already, and Damian had always caught them without fail. One or both of them would suddenly stop moving. Or their reapers would come floating up out of the ground, seemingly paralyzed after trying to flee on their own.

And then the old bastard would insist on another sparring session and beat the daylight out of them both.

Damian never seemed to get angry about their attempts to flee,

though. If anything, it looked like he found them amusing. And he never stopped giving them tips, either, even while smashing their faces in.

""All tuckered out?"" came the old man's voice again. ""Ready for bed?""

Cisco groaned and rolled over. He saw Dunstan a couple meters away, also struggling to get up again. Their respective reapers, Dennex and Rezamaar, were suspended in midair behind the old man.

""Have you thought about making a break for it when I'm asleep?"" said Damian, sounding genuinely curious somehow.

Rezamaar answered him. 'Well, yeah, but Feromas will sense us and wake you up immediately.' She couldn't move, but she could still speak, apparently. She didn't sound terribly upset about the situation, either, come to think of it.

""True."" Damian paused for a chuckle. ""What if I make him promise not to wake me up, then?""

'Why would you do that?' said Reza.

""Why wouldn't I? Could be fun.""

'Don't let him bait you,' said Feromas. 'Even if I agreed to that, it wouldn't work. He can sense you in his sleep.'

""Aw, don't tell them that! It was gonna be a surprise!""

'Try being more subtle next time, then.'"  
"2938

Subtlety didn't seem like one of Damian Rofal's strong suits, Cisco thought as he finally managed to heave himself up onto all fours. Actually standing up wasn't looking too likely, however. His sense of balance was taking so long to return that he was beginning to worry it might not come back at all.

""Let's call it there for today,"" said Damian. Perhaps he'd grown tired of waiting for them to get back up. ""Better luck next time, boys.""

Cisco could hear a bit of laughter from the peanut gallery on his right. Several of the other Rofals had gotten into the habit of observing these sparring sessions with obvious delight. They never seemed to grow tired of watching Dunstan in particular get smacked around.

They weren't all like that, though. The littler ones mostly just seemed curious, and the grandmother, Damian's wife, kept trying to tend to Dunstan's wounds. Dunstan just kept brushing her off.

Cisco, however, didn't mind taking her up on her offer. She was a loony old lady, to be sure, but she had her moments of tenderness, he'd noticed. Plus, none of these people were undead. To Cisco's mind, that fact alone afforded them some leeway.

Servants were supposed to look after non-servants, even when they were assholes who might not necessarily deserve it. That was how he'd been raised to view this power of theirs.

Maybe Dunstan viewed things differently, but Cisco felt that way more strongly than ever. It was embedded into his heritage as a Rainlord. If he let that go, he would be a disappointment to both himself and his ancestors.

Dennex was allowed to hover over to him again, but Cisco didn't have him invoke the regeneration or numb his pain. Better to let wounds like this heal naturally for as long they could. Less of a hangover later."

"2939

He made his way out into the crude veranda of the house that they'd been squatting in. All of the homes in this neighborhood had been abandoned, but with the Melmoorians having pushed the Ostrans back up north, there was a chance that the residents might be returning to this little suburb soon.

Maybe. Dennex seemed to think it would still be a while yet. After having been pushed out by the encroaching war front, the reaper suspected that the people who fled wouldn't be so eager to come back until the conflict was fully resolved.

Which made sense, Cisco supposed. But it also made sense to him that those people wouldn't want to just abandon their entire lives in this place, either. And from the sound of it, this war might continue for quite

some time. Or at least, that was what he'd been overhearing from Reza and Feromas. They both agreed that, with so many active fronts, the tide would probably shift many times before the end. If one side started losing in Melmoore, they could divert forces from another front in order to pick up the slack and mount a counteroffensive.

Cisco had been trying to pay attention to any details like that. Damian wasn't sharing the reasoning behind his decisions--assuming he even had any--so Cisco had to make due with what the reapers were saying and whatever he could piece together on his own.

Feromas probably knew more than he was letting on, but then again, this was Damian they were talking about. Cisco wouldn't have been surprised to learn that even the old bastard's own reaper was being kept in the dark.

'Why don't you just ask him directly?' Reza was saying.

Dunstan was hunched over in his chair, resting his face on a small white table. He hadn't bothered to wipe off any of the dirt or blood yet, and he didn't look like he'd have the energy to do so anytime soon, either.

Her question went unanswered. Aloud, at least. Perhaps Dunstan was talking to her in his head.

Reza had a habit of not keeping private conversations private, Cisco had noticed."

"2940

Cisco collapsed into the seat across from Dunstan. He didn't plan on asking Reza what she was talking about, but Dennex did, apparently.

'Ask who about what directly?' the reaper said.

'Ask Damian about what his plans are,' said Rezamaar. 'I kinda feel like he'd just tell us if we demonstrated interest, y'know?'

'Are you serious? There's no way he'd do that after we've tried to escape so many times.'

'Yeah, but I don't think he's too worried about us actually managing to get away. So by extension, he wouldn't be worried about us telling

anyone else about what he's up to, right?'

'Well, that man's mind is a mystery,' said Dennex, 'but I'm sure Feromas would never allow it.'

'Ah, yeah. The party pooper. We'd have to ask when he's not around, probably.'

'They're always together, though.'

'We'll have to figure out some way of separating them, then.'

'That seems impossible.'

Cisco stopped listening and rubbed his throbbing temples, but on the whole, he had to agree with Dennex. And while he appreciated both of the reapers' attempts to make their little quartet here feel like it had any agency whatsoever, he was a bit on the pessimistic side when it came to their current circumstances.

Perhaps it had something to do with how many beatings he'd taken over the last few days. Freedom was beginning to feel like a distant luxury that he would never be able to enjoy again.

And yet.

He wasn't prepared to give up, either.

He was a Rainlord. He didn't need hope in order to keep trying.

And he finally had a lead. He had to make it to Matteo Delaguna in Lorent. Or Atreya. Whichever one it was, he'd figure it out. Matteo could help him find his family. He was sure of it.

He just had to get away from Damian Rofal."

"2941

The longer he stayed with these Rofals, the more entrenched he would become in their affairs--and the more motivation Damian would have to prevent him from leaving.

Or to hunt him down.



Agh. That might actually be the worst-case scenario, Cisco thought. If he somehow managed to slip away, he didn't want Damian to come looking for him. He knew his father was powerful, but Cisco didn't know if even the famed Water Dragon of Sair would be able to stop this crazy old man.

He definitely didn't want to bring the problem of Damian home with him.

And in that sense, maybe it would be better to remain totally ignorant of whatever Damian was planning. If Cisco didn't know anything, then Damian wouldn't worry about him leaking sensitive information.

If only it was that simple.

By now, it was clear that they weren't going to escape by any normal means. Brute force was obviously out of the question, and stealth wasn't looking too great, either. And as such, they needed to bide their time and gather more information.

That was how Dennex had explained it a few days ago, anyway.

And yeah, going by that logic, it might've seemed a bit stupid to keep up the escape attempts, but there was more to their reasoning. The escape attempts were still useful as a way of gathering their own kind of information--as a "limit testing" strategy, Dennex had said.

With each attempt, they tested the extent of Damian's capabilities. Thus far, it didn't seem like they'd gotten close to even making him break a sweat, but in time, that could change. They had to approach each attempt as a learning experience unto itself. The more they understood what they were facing, the better they could prepare for the next attempt."

"2942

The way Damian could disappear, for example, was very odd. Even the reapers couldn't sense him approaching or leaving. It was perhaps their largest problem right now, because it created an air of fear around them at all times. He could be right there without any of them knowing. He could be eavesdropping on any of their conversations.

It was a form of psychological manipulation, Dennex said--a way to

make them second guess everything they were saying, and by extension, everything they were thinking. And of course, the thought that he could pop up anywhere at any moment would also make them more reluctant to try and flee.

Cisco didn't know if he agreed on that point. He thought the reaper might've been giving the guy a little too much credit. Damian was terrifying, sure, but he was also a chaotic mess, and that type of ploy seemed a little too calculated and cerebral for him.

Plus, Damian still had those big, underground worm monsters at his beck and call. Cisco had first heard about them from Dunstan--and thought him crazy, at the time--but he'd seen them a couple times with his own two eyes since then.

If nothing else, those things made it about a hundred times more difficult for the reapers to flee underground. Not that Damian even needed the help.

Lakefire. Come to think of it, Cisco was starting to wonder if Damian actually had any reason for bringing them to Melmoore. Maybe this was all just some random whim of his with no real justification behind it.

Would that be for the better or worse?

With Damian's constant vanishing, there was no way to know, really. He could've been going off and doing all sorts of things, talking to anyone, or even stealthily involving himself in the war. Sabotaging one or both sides, perhaps.

Hmm. Yeah, that seemed like something Damian would do."

"2943

Feeling his exhaustion weighing him down in his seat, Cisco considered just letting himself drift off to sleep right then and there. It was barely past midday, but they were prisoners, so what difference did it make? Dunstan seemed to be having the same idea. The guy hadn't moved in minutes.

As he was on the cusp of embracing that warm and familiar darkness, however, he felt something there on his right. A presence. Very large.

And very near.

He scarcely opened one eye before noticing the form of a giant animal standing there next to him. A wolf. A white one. As big as a car.

And it was staring at him.

Cisco's eyes were suddenly stuck open, his fatigue forgotten. Had he fallen asleep? Was this a dream? What was he even looking at?

The dog was already quite close, and now it stepped even closer, raising its massive snout up to his face and sniffing audibly. The air being sucked into its nose was loud enough at this distance that it sounded like a small wind tunnel.

'Cisco,' came Dennex's urgent echo. 'No. Sudden. Movements.'

That wasn't a problem. Cisco could do little more than blink, anyway. But the reaper was seeing this, too? So he wasn't hallucinating? Perhaps he would've felt relief if he'd had the presence of mind for it.

Then the wolf licked his cheek. Its giant tongue was so coarse that Cisco felt like the peach fuzz on his face might get ripped off, but the drool it left behind probably prevented that.

Well, he was most assuredly awake now, at least.

'Hello there,' came Reza's voice from somewhere. She sounded a lot more composed than Cisco felt.

The wolf didn't acknowledge her, instead remaining focused on Cisco and even nuzzling its head against him now. It smelled like it had been rolling around in dirt, though its fur coat looked pristine.

A man, however, appeared from behind the animal and responded to Rezamaar. A man with a single horn on his head. ""Hello. Please excuse our intrusion.""

"2944

'Not at all,' said Reza. 'I'm sure I speak for all of us here when I say that we're pleased by new company. Been going a bit stir crazy lately, you might say.'

The wolf was still pressing his head against Cisco's.

It was all too weird and sudden to process, but impulsively, Cisco couldn't help himself. He started petting the giant pupper.

Heh. The fella seemed to like it behind the ears a lot. He sat down next to Cisco's chair but was still so tall that he had to hunch over to stay around head level with the young man.

The horned man, meanwhile, was giving them a look and exhaling a weary breath. ""Apologies for my friend here, cedo. He is a bit quick to become attached to young ones like yourself, and he has been starved for affection ever since we dropped Durendia off.""

Cisco wasn't listening, though. He was too busy being awestruck. And quite pleased.

What species was this, he wondered? Judging by the relative height of the ears, length of the snout, and pure white coat, it looked like a Northern Ardoran wolf--perhaps a Jariki tundra wolf or a Katoa Mountains wolf, to be more precise--but this size was absolutely absurd.

Hmm, he supposed it could've also been an albino Western Eloan wolf--Dantean, maybe--but he thought albinism was associated with smaller-than-average sizes, not larger. Yeah, Northern Ardoran was the safer bet, he figured.

But still, he couldn't get over the enormity of this handsome fella. Wolves this size weren't supposed to exist. Not anymore, at least. It was like something out of prehistory, back when mammals were still competing with dinosaurs.

And what was that other smell, beneath the dirt one? Kind of ashy? Like smoke? Had this guy been near a fire recently or something?"  
"2945

Cisco's fascination with the animal consumed his attention even while the conversation among the others continued. It wasn't his fault, though. Honestly, he'd always wanted a dog, and this specimen right here was one of the most incredible creatures he'd ever laid eyes upon. A part of him wanted to ask the horned guy if he could have him--along with any number of other questions.

'So who are you two, anyway?' Reza was saying. 'And what brings you here?'

""Oh, we are just a couple of travelers,"" said the horned man. ""We are searching for someone. A man named Damian. Would you happen to know where he is?""

'Y'know, I had a feeling you might be looking for him,' said Reza. 'Are you old friends of his?'

""Yes. You could say that.""

'I see, I see. Well, he has a tendency to just disappear. We're not sure when he'll be back. He kinda just shows up whenever he wants.'

The stranger's gaze lingered on Rezamaar for a moment, then shifted to the wolf. The pair seemed to share a silent exchange, and then the stranger said, ""That is interesting. So you have no idea where he is right now, then?""

'Nope,' said Reza, still perfectly casual. 'He seriously just disappears. It's kinda spooky, actually. But hey, if you'd like to leave a message for him, I'd be happy to deliver it for you whenever he shows back up.'

""That is kind of you, but what I have to say is something that must be said in person.""

'Mm, I see. Sounds important. Hope it's nothing too serious. Y'know, with all the craziness going on in the world, right now, I find myself becoming something of a worrywart. Which goes against my better nature, by the way.'

""Oh, I'm sure that's not true.""

Reza paused. 'Which part?'

The stranger gave her a look but didn't answer. Instead, he said something entirely different and unexpected, no longer addressing the reaper, seemingly. ""Please, show yourself. We did not come here for a fight, but if you keep hiding for much longer, I'm going to start thinking that you intend to ambush us.""

Cisco was paying full attention now, as was Dunstan, who'd finally raised his head off the table."

It wasn't entirely clear who the stranger was talking to, but Cisco could only suspect Damian. Was this guy implying the old man was already present but invisible or something?

Hmm. That... might explain a few things, actually.

Regardless, no answer arrived, leaving only uncomfortable silence behind.

""Koh can smell you, you know,"" said the stranger. ""He never forgets a scent.""

Ah, was that the name of the wolf? How interes--

Wait a minute. Koh?

Cisco had heard that before. Of course he had. ""Did you just say Koh?"" he asked, eyeing the beast anew.

The stranger regarded him for a moment, looking rather uninterested in him or his question, but then the man paused and tilted his head at him. ""Why, yes, cedo, I did. Do you perhaps recognize his name? Or has he simply piqued your curiosity?""

At the insistence of his mother, Cisco had memorized the names of the most famous Vanguardians and Abolishers in the world. Oftentimes, that had made for tedious study, but the name Koh was one that had been easier to remember. Because it supposedly belonged to a giant, wolf-like monster.

At first, he'd thought that was super cool. He loved dogs, so he'd been keen to learn more. But when he'd discovered that Koh was also known as the Man-Eater of Melmoore and the Silver Devil of Dante, Cisco's enthusiasm had quickly been replaced with dismay--especially as he continued to learn more about him.

This wolf was, among many other things, a prominent member of Abolish.

Which meant that this one-horned guy was almost certainly the same.

Hmph. Fine. He wasn't about to let something like a name make him lose composure.

""...What does Abolish want with Damian?"" said Cisco. He didn't expect this weirdo to actually answer that question, but the real purpose of it was to let everyone else at the table know who they were talking to. Maybe the reapers already knew, but judging from the expression on Dunstan's face, he didn't."  
"2947

And indeed, the stranger did not answer him. Instead, he merely returned a smile.

A very striking smile. It had a warmth to it that was difficult to describe. Cisco had never seen the like before. What an odd feeling.

The stranger looked between Cisco and Koh for a moment. ""What is your name, cedo?"" he asked.

Cisco didn't quite feel like answering that. ""What's yours?""

""Heh. You remind me of someone, cedo.""

He wasn't sure what to make of that, so he said nothing.

The stranger turned toward Dunstan and stepped closer. ""In any case, I came to meet with Damian. If he does not wish to reveal himself, then that is a problem."" He raised a hand toward the other young man.  
""Would you mind assisting me?""

Dunstan's thick, furrowed brow suggested that he would mind. But he, too, chose to say nothing.

""I won't hurt you,"" said the stranger. ""I ask for but a trifle. A moment of your time, only."" His hand moved closer.

Cisco was intensely uncomfortable all of a sudden. Like the whole world was abruptly turning upside down or inside out, like everything was no longer as it should be, like he should speak up. Intervene. Anything.

Yet his whole body hardly seemed to be listening to him. And thoughts arose in his mind as if from nowhere, both for and against that nebulous feeling.

Something was wrong. Everything was fine. Do something. Relax. This horned guy was creepy as hell. He seemed kinda nice, actually.

Dunstan was just sitting there, too. And the reapers weren't saying anything, either. Surely, if this situation was so odd or disturbing, then one of them would do something, no?

It would all be over soon.

There was nothing to worry about.

The stranger's hand stopped, mere inches away from Dunstan's face.

Damian Rofal was standing there, gripping the stranger's wrist.

""Ah. There you are, old friend.""

"2948

Cisco blinked upon seeing Damian. His head felt odd, but the warring thoughts abated, allowing him a kind of tired peace. He didn't let his attention waver too much, though. He'd never seen such a grave expression on Damian's face before.

""What do you want, Germal?"" the old man said. His tone was not at all the jovial one that Cisco had come to know.

""You're looking well, all things considered. I'm glad.""

""For a dead man, you mean?"" Damian released his grip on the other man's wrist.

'Where is Nerovoy, you monster?' said Feromas. The reaper, too, sounded shockingly different from his usual self. Where Damian sounded flat and cold, Feromas now sounded like he was barely containing his anger.

The stranger, apparently named Germal, regarded the reaper with an icy look. ""You should not ask questions you do not want the answer to, old friend.""

'And you shouldn't be using that body or that voice, outsider. If you think your tricks will work here, you are sorely mistaken.'



""When will you accept that I am Germal truly?""

'Never. Act like him all you want. Fool as many others as you like. Damian and I know what you really are. Until you bring Nerovoy back, there is no hope for a viable union between us again. Of that, you can be sure.'

Germal broke for a sigh. ""I had hoped that all this time would have allowed you to cool your head, but I see that is not the case.""

'You devoured my best friend of two millennium, you unholy son of a bitch. If you think that's something I'll ever--'

""And what if your other best friend were to become endangered?"" said Germal. ""At the hands of the Mad Demon, no less. Would that give you pause?""

Feromas fell silent."

"2949

Damian folded his arms. ""You seek an alliance now, of all times?""

""I seek to rekindle what we once had,"" said Germal. ""You do not trust me. That's fine. Verify for yourself that what I say is the truth. Parson and Overra are in Morgunov's clutches. You, more than any living being on this planet, know what that means. The danger they face.""

Damian's wrinkled face was like stone.

""If you would consign them both to a fate worse than death, then so be it,"" said Germal. ""The bond between us will be well and truly dead, then. And I will go to rescue him on my own. But you should be aware that if I, too, am captured, then it is only a matter of time before he comes for you, as well.""

""Hmph. Perhaps it would be better to have you take my secret to the grave, then,"" said Damian.

At that, Koh turned his massive head toward Damian and began growling.

And the air grew so oppressive that Cisco suddenly found it difficult

even to breathe, much less move.

""...Hah. If you think you are capable of killing me, then feel free to try. I came prepared.""

""I'm sure you did.""

A long period of heavy silence followed, until at length, Germal broke it.

""Does no remnant of camaraderie remain within that broken heart of yours?"" the horned man asked. ""If not for me, then for Parson, at least?""

""You tell me,"" said Damian. ""You're the expert on feelings, aren't you?""

""Damian..."

""What? Is this not what you wanted when you tried to make me your puppet?""

""For the last time, that was not my intention. I was foolish and lacked experience with my--""

""Save your excuses. And don't apologize, either, for that matter.""  
Damian paused for a throaty chortle. ""Y'know, in a way, you granted me freedom. Going half-mad has had its perks.""  
"2950

To say that Cisco was surprised to hear Damian saying such things was an understatement. The old bastard knew he was crazy this whole time? And it wasn't all just an act, either?

The man's tone was different, too, to the point where it almost sounded like someone else was speaking, like he was using his vocal chords in a way that Cisco had never heard before.

Damian was so... calm. And severe. In an odd way, Cisco was reminded of his own father. The overall mannerism was just similar enough.

Germal sighed. ""Do you really mean that? If you would just remain by

my side, as Koh does, then your madness would never trouble you again. I swear.""

""You think I forgot?"" said Damian. ""Or are you just playing dumb, as usual? If it's a choice between being insane or being your puppet, then that's no choice at all.""

Germal shook his head. ""My old friend... you would not be my puppet. I assure you. We would be companions. As we were always meant to be. Even if I wished otherwise, I do not have the power to bend you to my will in that way.""

""Hmph. The Liar of Lyste, indeed.""

""Why would I lie about that? I'm not the monster you think I am. If I were, why would I not simply force you to come with me?""

""Because it's not that easy, and we both know it,"" said Damian. ""Your tricks are messy. And the more powerful the subject, the messier they become. But just because it's difficult for you doesn't make you harmless, old friend.""

Germal turned away and paced a few steps back, scratching his head. ""We're getting sidetracked. I didn't come all this way to have an argument with you.""

""Hmph. How did you even find me?"" Damian's gaze shifted to the wolf. ""Was it really his doing? Or was that another of your little white lies?""

"2951 -- CCVII.

""If you will not believe a word I say, then is there any point in me answering you?"" said Germal.

""Good question,"" said Damian.

Another bout of tense silence arrived.

This time, it was Feromas who broke it. 'Overra. She has truly been captured by Morgunov?'

""Yes,"" said Germal. ""Even if you think I am lying, that fact will be simple enough to check on your own.""

'Hmph. And are we also to believe that you have some sort of plan to rescue her?'

""Indeed.""

'How? If Morgunov has her, the only way she'll make it out alive is if he decides to let her go. Don't tell me that's your plan. To convince that lunatic to release her?'

""That would make things easier, to be sure, but no. Any plan that involves that man's cooperation is a last resort, at best.""

'Then I ask again: how?'

""Can I count on your assistance, then?""

'If this sounds at all feasible, perhaps. If not, then you might as well turn around and walk away, right now.'

Germal took a long, slow breath. ""...What do you know of Project Blacksong?""

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Seven: 'O, kindling desire...'

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Hector watched with quiet marvel, hardly able to believe his eyes. He'd seen a lot of crazy shit recently, but the Forge sputtering on and off ranked pretty high up there.

Abbas Saqqaf was just standing there, eyes closed with both hands pressed against the spherical glass.

And a whiff of light kept appearing and disappearing within the giant orb.

Functionally speaking, it wasn't all that different from a simple light bulb, Hector supposed--a thought which might have dulled the spectacle a bit--but he couldn't help being amazed, all the same. The light was just... suspended there within the glass, like a blinking star that had been plucked straight out of the sky.

The light was too fleeting to get a truly good look at, and yet he was beginning to see what Abbas had meant when he had described the fire of this Forge as being 'gentle.'

That light had a warmth to it that Hector could feel with his very soul, somehow. Or maybe with his aura. He wasn't too sure about that, actually, because Garovel didn't seem to be able to sense it."

"2951 -- CCVII.

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"2952

Still, it was an encouraging sight, to say the least. Clear progress being made. The Forge wasn't yet fully operational, unfortunately, but whatever the heck Abbas was doing seemed to be working. And the fact that Abbas was even allowing him in the general vicinity in order to show him this was also a good sign. Before, there'd been significant concern from the Lord Saqqaf and the reapers that any observers would be endangered during such work.

Something about having their souls sucked out of their still-living bodies and consumed in their entirety.

Didn't sound like a fun time.

Abbas wasn't worried about that anymore, though, it seemed.

""This isn't that kind of Forge,"" he said. ""It wishes only to stoke

growth in its environment and abhors harm--perhaps even to a fault. The lack of aggression makes it safer to use but also limits its overall creative potential in certain ways. A fair trade off, I suppose--and one that I am more than happy with, given the circumstances. We will just have to accept the fact that the items born from this beauty will have a certain 'characteristic quality' to them. However, that in no way means they will be less useful.""

'I see,' said Garovel. 'Were you able to discover its name?'

""I was,"" said Abbas, drawing himself up and smiling somewhat. ""It was known as Agrian's Candle."" His smile spoiled a little, however.

'Emphasis on WAS,' added Worwal.

'What do you mean?' said Garovel.

""That was most definitely its name. Of that, I am sure. And normally, a Forge's name is supposed to be a kind of 'key' to discovering almost all of its mechanical properties and intended method of operation. But this Forge... I do not know how to describe it other than that it has, in part, rejected its own name.""

What in the world?

""I believe that may be why it was abandoned,"" said Abbas. ""It no longer identifies with its own name and has therefore been rendered all but powerless. You saw how it flickered? It is like an engine that refuses to start.""

"2953

Garovel hovered to and fro behind Hector. 'So we'll need to give it a new name, after all, is what you're saying.'

""Yes and no,"" said Abbas. ""I believe the word Candle is still accepted by it. It is the word Agrian's that it has a problem with.""

'Ah...'

Hector felt like he was beginning to get the picture.

""Worwal and I have been talking about who this Agrian person might have been,"" said Abbas. ""Unfortunately, he does not remember a

famous integrator by that name. We were therefore hoping that you might know more, Garovel.""

Hector's reaper was quiet as all attention shifted to him.

They had the room all to themselves, just the four of them. Abbas had made sure to send his own attendants away, and now Hector understood why. If this information turned out to be sensitive in some way, then they didn't want it getting out. Surely, if they asked every reaper at Warrenhold if they recognized the name Agrian, one of them was bound to know something, but that could also be a risk--maybe not right now, but in the future, once the reapers inevitably began to disperse back out into the world.

Abbas and Worwal wanted to play things ultra safe here, and he didn't blame them. Indeed, their next words confirmed as much for him.

'If you don't know anything, that's fine,' said Worwal. 'We were just thinking that the fewer people we have to bring into this little circle of trust, the better.'

'I understand,' said Garovel. 'And the truth is... I do know of Agrian. I find it a bit difficult to believe that he could have been the one to create this Forge, but... at the same time, it makes a strange sort of sense.'

Worwal folded his skeletal arms in front of his black shroud, long scythe poking out to his side. 'Don't tell me you knew him personally.'

'No, no,' said Garovel. 'But during my time as a Prime Archiver, many stories from around the ancient world came to my attention.'

"2954

That seemed to pique Abbas' interest. ""I did not realize you were a Prime Archiver.""

'It's not something I like to advertise. We didn't part on the best of terms.'

""I see...""

'In any event, Agrian was indeed a powerful servant in his day, but the stories about him were always... shall we say, embarrassing? He struggled desperately--and sometimes pathetically--to distinguish



himself from his much more famous mentor. And sadly, it would seem he never quite managed it, if even the two of you haven't heard of him.'

""Who was his mentor?"" said Abbas.

'Skapa,' said Garovel.

Abbas head reared back a little. ""That is good news, then, surely. Skapa made several of his own Forges.""

'Sure...' Garovel did not sound terribly convinced. 'Only, the stories about Agrian tended be more... cautionary in nature, rather than praiseworthy. Few of them involved him creating something that actually worked, and even in those, he was usually upstaged by one of his peers and made to look like a bitter fool by the end.'

'Wow,' said Worwal. 'I must say, you are not painting a very prestigious picture of our dear Forge's creator.'

Garovel paused for a brief sigh. 'Yes, well, I don't want to give you a false impression of him. But on the other hand, if he really did manage to create this Forge, then he must have been more skilled than the tales let on.'

Abbas brought a hand to his chin as he thought. ""His personality may explain why the Candle rejects his name. Or perhaps there was a particular event that made it turn against him. Either way, it clearly does not wish to be associated with his memory.""

Worwal gave a harsh laugh. 'That's quite the slap in the face. Abandoned by his own masterwork. Makes me feel a bit sorry for this Agrian.'

'I wouldn't rush to his defense too quickly, if I were you,' said Garovel.

'Oh?'

"2955

'Near the end of his life,' said Garovel, 'Agrian reportedly came to have such a vindictive nature that any perceived insult he suffered caused him to fly into a rage and level entire buildings before calming down again.'

'Ah...' Worwal's tone shifted to one of tired familiarity. 'He resorted to slaughtering innocents, then...'

'Well, er, actually, no. Not quite. According to several different sources, he went out of his way to never kill a single person directly, even his enemies.'

'What?'

'The stories disagreed about why that was, but none of them disputed its historicity. Some said he was, despite all appearances, quite softhearted and simply incapable of taking a human life, while others said that it was actually a strange sense of cruelty that motivated him in this way. They said that he preferred to destroy or otherwise remove all of a person's worldly possessions, leaving them with nothing.'

'There was one tale about a king who insulted him over supper by saying that a locket that Agrian had gifted the king's mistress ""had the craftsmanship of a drunken child."" Agrian kidnapped him in the middle of the night and abandoned him in the wilderness, telling him to ""try crafting something better."" The king survived and made it back to his stronghold, which apparently wasn't what Agrian had in mind, because he kidnapped him and did it again.' Garovel broke for a pregnant pause. 'The king didn't make it back a second time. No one ever saw him again.'

Geez, Hector thought.

""Hmm, "" hummed Abbas. ""Forgemakers are notoriously eccentric. That story rings true to me. And it would require a truly strange contradiction of a man to create a Forge that rejected its own creator.""

'You might be right,' said Garovel. 'Though the term ""eccentric"" is a bit generous, I think. He had many similar stories that did not involve kings, stories where he would simply burn down someone's house and tell them to ""start anew.""'

""Ah... ""

"2956

'Do you know what happened to Agrian in the end?' asked Worwal.

'His reaper released him, supposedly,' said Garovel. 'Against his will,

that is.'

'Mm. And the reaper's name?'

'Cantorix. Ever heard of him?'

'Afraid not.'

'Shame. If by some chance the reaper is still alive, he might prove useful in getting the Candle back up and running.'

'I admit I was thinking that as well,' said Worwal, 'but it would be incredibly unlikely.'

'Of course. If Cantorix had survived, then this Forge would almost certainly not have been abandoned.'

'Yes. It would have probably become a national treasure of Lorent, instead.' Worwal's hollow eye sockets fell to Hector for a moment, but he said nothing further.

'That, or it would've been destroyed,' said Garovel. 'In fact, I'd say that would've been the more likely scenario. How many Forges have there been throughout history? And how many have survived to this day?'

'Fair point.'

""Regardless, the Candle requires a renewed name,"" said Abbas. ""I thought the two of you should decide, seeing as it is technically not my Forge.""

'Wow,' said Garovel. 'That's... astoundingly honorable of you, Lord Saqqaf. Were you not tempted to give it a new name and claim ownership for yourself? Would've been a real dick move, but Forges are insanely valuable, and we wouldn't have been in a position to stop you. Hell, you might've even been able to keep us in the dark about the whole thing and act like nothing had changed.'

Abbas' expression remained blank as he met the reaper's gaze steadily. ""I would have to be quite the heartless wretch to stab you in the back after all you have done for me and my family.""

Garovel chuckled. 'I'm glad you feel that way, because I've known many people who would not agree with you.'

""As have I.""

"2957

'Well, this is quite a bit of pressure,' said Garovel. 'Whatever name we decide on right now could end up spreading across the entire world one day. It might even end up outliving all of us.'

Hmm. Damn. Hector had been racking his brain for a decent name a moment ago, but suddenly he felt like he shouldn't be the one to decide, anymore.

Worwal decided to chime in again. 'Allow me to suggest a name, then. I know the perfect one.'

Hector noticed a flat look cross Abbas' face.

'Alright, let's hear it,' said Garovel.

'The Candle of Reestablished Quietude.'

For a time, no one responded. They merely exchanged glances with one another.

'Bit of a mouthful, don't you think?' said Garovel.

'Hmm? Really? Well, how about the Renewed Candle of Glowing Radiance?'

Hector could see Garovel's skeletal expression twist, not wanting to shoot his fellow reaper down twice in a row.

Abbas saved him, however. ""Truthfully, Worwal has never been very good at naming things. Which is another reason why I wanted the two of you to do it for us, by the way.""

'Oh, here we go again,' said Worwal. 'Please don't slander me in front of our allies.'

""It's not slander if it's true,"" said Abbas. ""I offered to let him name one of my sons. Do you want to know what he suggested?""

'Oh, very much, yes,' said Garovel.

""Meteorite. He wanted my son to be named Meteorite Saqqaf.""

'I still want him to be named that, quite frankly. It's a great name. Very

distinctive. Instead, you went with Nadim. How many other Nadims are there among our kin, huh? I'll never understand how all these repeated names don't drive everyone crazy.'

""You didn't even suggest the Valgan word for meteorite.""

'Because it would be that much more unique.'

Abbas just shook his head."

"2958

'Hmm,' mused Garovel. 'I'd like to take some time and think about this name for a while, but we probably shouldn't delay, should we? You need the name in order to continue your work, don't you?'

""Yes,"" said Abbas.

'But you also mentioned something about the name being able to affect the Forge's capabilities, didn't you?'

""Theoretically, yes. In minor ways. A name will not change its fundamentally gentle nature, for instance.""

'I see. And a bad name could end up being rejected by it a second time, I assume?'

""Indeed. Worwal is therefore disqualified from this exercise.""

'I shall carry this resentment for the rest of my days,' said Worwal.

Garovel chortled but then fell quiet, thinking deeply no doubt.

Hector tried to do the same. This was probably the kind of thing that a proper lord should take seriously.

A good name for a big ass candle in a big ass tree... capable of creating objects of untold power...

Uh.

Uhhh...

""Hector,"" said Abbas, making the young man look up at the man again. ""Perhaps I can assist. Come."" He turned and stepped toward

the Forge, motioning for Hector to follow.

Uh-oh.

Hector did as he was bid and found himself standing incredibly close to the Forge's enormous glass bulb again. Not since discovering what it was had he dared to approach it like this. While he appreciated what Abbas had said before about it not being the ""type"" of Forge that would suck out their souls and devour them, he couldn't help feeling pretty fucking anxious, regardless.

Abbas placed a hand on his shoulder as they stood there together. ""Relax. It is dormant. It cannot possibly harm you. And your apprehension will do you no favors in witnessing the truth of its character for yourself.""

""...Okay."" Hector took a deep breath as he tried to steady himself. He watched Abbas place a hand on the glass and then look toward Hector expectantly."

"2959

He followed the Lord Saqqaf's lead and gently placed his bare hand against glass.

""Now concentrate,"" said Abbas. ""Close your eyes, if it helps. Take hold of your soul and slowly press it into the Forge. Use your soul to try and sense the object's shape, its volume. Then look more closely, if you can. Don't rush it. This may take--""

Hector was long gone.

He'd lost track of Abbas' voice almost immediately--and he wasn't too bothered by it, either. Perhaps he should have been.

But this was so strange.

And yet so familiar.

The darkness all around him was like a warm ocean. Soothing. Reassuring. It was welcoming him. Like an old friend.

He didn't have many of those. In fact, he might've had literally none. His memories felt a little foggy. Distant. Requiring real concentration to

summon them.

Hmm. That didn't seem good.

He felt a little too... loose, somehow. His mind was stretching, going everywhere. But there was nothing to hold onto in here. Just the darkness. An endless expanse.

He refocused. No wandering. That seemed dangerous.

His thought processes were all feeling a bit sluggish, weighed down in this darkness. But if he concentrated all of them on the same thing, he felt fairly normal again.

Yeah. That was better. Clearer.

Where was he? Inside the Forge? Something like that, probably.

This felt an awful lot like when he'd first encountered Rasalased. That probably wasn't a coincidence.

And just like that encounter, there was probably something here that he wasn't yet picking up on. When Rasalased had been totally dormant, that space within the Shards had felt entirely empty.

So what was he missing here? Hmm. Obviously, Abbas had wanted to show him something. The ""true character"" of the Forge or whatever.

He could try meditating more deeply. That was what had allowed him to reach Rasalased. Seemed like it might work.

But he wanted to try something else here."

"2960

He was reminded of his recent efforts to speak with Rasalased, of the ""emotional command"" that it had required. Maybe this was similar.

He'd been thinking that the issue was his emotional control, that was difficult for him manipulate his own feelings in such a way. But he'd begun to think that perhaps that wasn't it--or at least not entirely.

Perhaps it was ""command"" part that he'd actually been underestimating. It had seemed simple enough to just think about what

he wanted, to concentrate on trying to reach Rasalased--or in this case, the Forge--but what there was more to it than that?

Thinking about what he wanted wasn't quite the same thing as actually issuing a command, after all. It was the difference between hoping for someone to do something and ordering them to do it.

That was a difference that a proper lord should be thoroughly aware of.

Probably.

It seemed pretty fucking weird that he would need to give an order to the Shard or the Forge to do something like that, but then again, nothing about them was normal. This was the territory of souls and ardor and... aura? Or will, maybe?

Or some combination thereof, perhaps.

Willpower. Hmm. When it came to issuing commands, the concept of willpower felt like the more relevant thing. And he hadn't forgotten what Malast had said about him having ""the Supreme Will.""

Hector had been trying to connect that particular dot with a whole bunch of others for a while now, but it was a stubborn puzzle, to be sure. And frankly, Hector found it hard to believe that he, of all people, could possess something that sounded so... well, supreme.

Honestly, half the time, he felt like he had one of the weakest wills imaginable, like he preferred to just be a total doormat and let everyone else have their way. He'd been trying to work on that, but it was still a constant struggle.

As for the other half of the time, though...

Uh.

Well.

Hmm."

"2961

In any case, he tried to keep that in mind as he concentrated here.



Because this was important, he reminded himself. In fact, there might not be anything more important in his entire life, right now. This Forge could be the difference between Warrenhold's survival and its destruction. Between Atreya's survival and destruction. Between Garovel's. Between the Rainlords'. And the Sandlords'. And everyone he'd grown to care about so much.

Everything might be riding on this, he felt.

So if he needed to harness his Supreme Will or whatever the fuck it was in order to make this Forge listen to them, in order to make Rasalased listen to him, then fine. It was certainly worth a shot, at least, no matter how weird or unfitting or embarrassing it might feel to him.

When he reached out again with his soul, he tried to pour all of his focus into it this time. All his concentration. All of his effort. And determination. And certainty. And gravity.

And he issued the command.

""Show yourself,"" he said.

Those two words resounded through the dark sea around him. He had no idea how. Where had those words even come from? Where was his mouth? How was he hearing anything?

Hmm. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that he was feeling them, rather actually hearing them.

In any case, he also felt something there. Something waiting in the black.

Indeed, just as he thought, it was not empty.

He tried again.

""Show yourself to me, Candle.""

The darkness shuddered this time, bending inward. And a sound arrived, though he couldn't make it out. Too distant. Muddled. Could've been words. Could've been music.

He was about to try again when Abbas' voice arrived.

""Hector! What in the world are you doing?!"" The Lord Saqqaf's soul was suddenly there next to him, hovering in the darkness. ""Why did

you go off on your own?! How did you go off on your own?!"

Oh.

Uh.

Those were all pretty good questions, actually.

A pretty good answer came to mind, though--or what felt like one, at least.

"I'm just looking around."

"2962

"Looking arou--? Hector, agh, I don't even know what to say that, to be quite honest. But you need to stay with me. If you make one wrong step, then your soul could become lost in here forever."

"Wait, what? I thought said that this Forge wouldn't do that."

"It won't, so long as I am able to guide you. But if you go wandering off by yourself, then anything could happen."

Anything, huh? Hmm. "...That kinda makes me want to do it even more now."

"Hector, please! This is no laughing matter!"

"Okay, sorry," said Hector. He couldn't help laughing just a bit, though. He felt like he'd been doing just fine a moment ago, but even so, he figured that he should probably listen to his elder on this one.

"Lead the way."

The Lord Saqqaf's soul seemed to relax a little, perhaps from a sense of relief. "You had me worried for a minute there. Now allow me to show--"

"Young Hector, what have you gotten yourself into now?"

"Who in the hell is that?!" said Abbas.

Oh geez. "Uh, that's, er--"

"Ah, Young Abbas. You can hear me, can you? How wonderful."

Abbas' soul was back to its rigid, bristling form. ""Who's speaking?! Identify yourself!""

""Ah--, no, that's Ra--""

""Be at ease, Young Abbas. I mean you no harm. Long have I wished to converse with you in this way."" And then he said something in Valgan that Hector didn't understand.

Abbas responded--also in Valgan and much more intensely.

Then Rasalased said something else. Then Abbas. Then Rasalased again.

Hector wished he had Garovel here to translate. ""Hey, guys, would you mind--""

Abbas shouted something. He was not calming down, it seemed.

""Er, is everything okay?""

""Yes,"" said Rasalased.

But not Abbas. In fact, Hector waited for him to say something, but the man was dead silent.

""...Abbas? You alright?""

""I have partitioned him off on his own,"" said Rasalased. ""I believe he requires a moment to settle down. Do not worry. I will continue to explain the situation to him in tandem. In the meantime, let us continue our exploration.""

"2963

""Our... exploration?"" said Hector.

""Indeed. It has been some time since I have been able to visit a new space. This is quite refreshing. And perhaps a bit unsettling.""

Hmm. ""It's been some time, huh? But Rasalased. Time is not time, right?""

""Aha. Indeed, that is so. Especially in this place. The flow is entirely

distorted, varying wildly depending on where we go. That is assuredly the major peril to unwitting souls that venture here. One wrong step, as Young Abbas put it."

Hector might've blinked if he could feel his face. "Ohhh... I think I understand. You're saying that if we pass through the wrong area, our perception of time will become totally skewed? Meaning we could... lose, like, entire years outside while in here it'd only feel like seconds?"

"An extreme example. But not outside the realm of possibility. And also not the worst that could happen, either."

"Wait, really?"

"Of course. Because time is not time, that is a solvable problem. Perception, you see, is the thin rope on which the false idea of time dangles. When that rope becomes tangled, one of two things may occur. You may fall into an endless myopia of existential self-destruction. Which is indeed terrible. Or, you may learn to overcome the falsehood--to see through the great ruse that is time--and remake yourself anew, free of its linear vice grip."

"Uh..."

"Compared to that, having this hungry furnace of creation tear your soul apart like a starving Storm Bear would be much worse. Shredded hellishly into countless pieces of struggling cognitive misery. Do you not agree?"

"That... does sound pretty bad..."

"Yes." A beat passed. "But I am sure you will be fine, Young Hector."

"Ah, yeah, thanks..." At times, Rasalased had a really horrifying way with words, Hector was realizing."

"2964

"Let us not delay," said Rasalased. "Speak as you were."

"Are you sure Abbas will be okay?"

""Of course. Do not let him distract you, Young Hector. Speak as you were. With your soul's priority in hand.""

Uh. Hmm. ""You're being kinda pushy, Rasalased...""

""Am I? My apologies, then. I have not felt so eager in an Age. My curiosity may be getting the better of me. I mean not to alarm you, Young Hector.""

Hector stuck on that. ""In an Age, huh?""

""Indeed.""

That was a peculiar statement to make, Hector thought. Having only recently become more interested in history, Hector may not have been fully knowledgeable about the subject of Ages, but he did know that they were currently in the Seventh Age and that the Sixth Age--a.k.a. the Late Imperial Age--had been marked by the collapse of the last great empire, the Mohssian Empire.

As he understood it, Ages were not demarcated by a specific amount of time passing but instead by major historical events. The Seventh Age, therefore, did not yet have a similar nickname of consensus among historians--and probably wouldn't until the Eighth Age rolled around.

However, no Age thus far had been less than six hundred years, and they were currently only on the 291st year of the Seventh Age--or 291 7A--so it was a fair bet that this one would last for a while longer yet.

As Hector recalled, according to Garovel, Rasalased was well over a thousand years old but not more than two thousand, which would've placed his birth pretty deep into the Sixth Age but not quite the Fifth, a.k.a. the Conquering Age.

It was perhaps a strange direction for Hector's mind to wander off into, but it did put things into perspective quite a bit. And it made him want to ask Rasalased all sorts of questions about history.

Heh. Then again, he did have an even older reaper to ask. He had a feeling Garovel might get jealous if he started consulting Rasalased about history, instead."

"2965

""Rasalased,"" said Hector, ""an Age is a really long time, you know. What exactly has you so curious here? I mean, what do you hope to find?""

The Dry God fell briefly quiet. ""A way forward,"" he said.

Hmm. He'd been meaning to ask Rasalased what he knew about Fusion Forges for a while now, but there was still one other matter that he felt to be more pressing. ""Hey, uh... while I've got you, do you think you could locate the rest of the Sandlords?""

""Ah... you would seek out my scattered kin and protect them, too?""

""Er. Yeah.""

""Very kind of you. And quite bold. You invite much danger with such an endeavor.""

""I... am aware of that.""

""Heh. Or perhaps you are hoping to bring them to heel while they are weak? To make them not only dependent upon you, but forever grateful for it, too?""

""Rasalased, what--?""

""I jest. I know your heart, Young Hector. Your mind may be a mystery to me now, but I shall not forget what I saw of you during our first encounter.""

Hector didn't know what to say to that.

""I speak in jest, but others will not. Should you continue down this path, there will come much turmoil.""

Mm. What else was new, Hector thought?

""I warn you. My kin are greatly fractured now. This most recent blow has struck them deeply. At their faith in one another. I fear they may not recover.""

That surprised him. ""Really? You think it's that bad?""

""No, I do not think it. But I fear it. As many of them currently do. Their souls wither in isolation and doubt. I sense their collective sorrow from afar, and it bleeds into my own. A great mess of confusion.""

""I'm... sorry to hear that."" He didn't much care for this pessimistic streak from Rasalased, though. ""But your people have come back from worse. A lot worse.""

""Indeed we have. But not for many, many years.""  
"2966

""So are you saying that you'd prefer I didn't try to reunite everyone?""  
said Hector.

No answer arrived.

""...Rasalased?""

""I... I do not know, Young Hector.""

And again, Hector found himself surprised. Rasalased was uncertain?  
And openly so?

That was new. And worrying.

Hector could appreciate his honesty, though. ""Do you think it would be better to leave them alone for a while?""

""Perhaps. Or perhaps not.""

Ah, Hector had been wondering when he would pull that card again.

""You are the more mystifying factor, Young Hector. I cannot tell if you would be able to get through to them.""

""Hmm. Well, I wouldn't really need to. Abbas would be the one who got through to them.""

""...No. He would not.""

""What?""

""I do not think that Young Abbas would be able to bring my kin back together. In their current state, they would reject him and maintain isolation.""

""Are you serious? Even with their own subjects being in such

desperate need of their help?"

"They would not view it that way. They would see only certain death."

Oh, fuck. "But Abbas could..." Could what? Hector didn't know how to finish that thought.

"Eventually, yes, Young Abbas would get through to them, I suspect. After this war has reached its conclusion, perhaps."

That... actually made sense, Hector thought. After suffering such a horrific loss, it was entirely reasonable that the Sandlords might want to keep their heads down and wait out the storm. They had families to think of, after all. They could try to pick up the pieces after everything calmed down. And if they thought that Abbas would try to lead them back into the conflict in order to retake Sair right away, then...

He didn't like how believable that line of thinking was. And understandable, too. Hector couldn't exactly blame them for prioritizing themselves, right now.

Rasalased was not done talking. "You, however, would be an unpredictable element. Heh. As ever, it seems. I do not know how your presence might affect their spirits. Perhaps you would also fail. Or perhaps not." "2967

"Well, I wouldn't want to pressure them into rejoining the fight," said Hector. "I just want them to be safe. And if they're already safe where they are, then that's fine, too."

"I see. Such an attitude may see you perpetually involving yourself in the problems of others, Young Hector."

"Ah. Well. Maybe so. But that's better than waiting until those problems involve themselves with me, I think."

"Heh. Perhaps. Or perhaps not."

"So it sounds like you actually CAN locate the other Sandlords for us, if you want to."

"Yes. But please allow me to think it over. I will decide whether or not



to assist you in this effort soon. For now, let us concentrate on the task before us."

"Alright, then. Thanks for your consideration, regardless of what you choose."

"Speak as you were, Young Hector. With force. I shall assist you."

Hector gathered his focus again. It was a little weird without his body. No eyes to close. No breathing to steady.

Hmm. Speaking with force, huh? That was one way of putting it, he supposed.

"...Show yourself to me, Candle," he said. And weirdly enough, he heard Rasalased echoing each word with a slight delay.

Was that what he'd meant by assisting? Hector didn't get the chance to ask.

The deep expanse around them pulsed. And kept pulsing. Like a heartbeat at first, but then quickening into a more constant thrumming.

And then an impact arrived, something that he felt with his very soul. He didn't know how to describe it, other than that it was forceful and sudden. It didn't hurt, exactly, but it definitely felt strange.

"Ah," came Rasalased's voice again. "Worry not. I will shield you from any assault."

Assault? What assault?

"Good Candle!" Ras called out more loudly. "Do not fear! We would see you mended and resurrected!"

The thrumming intensified and soon reached an overwhelming degree. It sounded at once muffled and all-encompassing.

"No! Your creator did not send us! We discovered you by chance alone!"

More thrumming, this time with varying rhythms.

Hector began to understand. Rasalased was... talking to it. Somehow."  
"2968 -- CCLVIII.

The unintelligible noises continued, changing wildly. It sounded more like a broken subwoofer or something than a spoken language. How in the world could Rasalased comprehend any of this?

""Excellent,"" said Ras. ""If you wish to be made whole again, then please, embrace us. I know little of your kind, but I am certain that the process will be made much easier with your cooperation. Young Abbas here will guide you through it.""

Oh, hey, he could sense Abbas' soul beside him again.

""Uh--ah--y-yes, I shall do my best?"" That definitely wasn't a question, but Abbas' obvious uncertainty made it sound like one.

More thrumming arrived.

For quite a while, this time.

Hector could sense the darkness trembling more than ever now. It felt like he was in a bubble with heavy rain falling upon it--or a meteor shower, perhaps.

""...Oh,"" came Rasalased's voice again. ""Well... ah... I do not think that will be necessary. You are not yet whole, after all. A full retelling would be strenuous for you. And you have my assurances that these young souls are worthy of your trust. They would not--""

The rhythmic sounds cut him off, growing still more intense.

""Ah. You do not trust me, either... of course... I only meant--""

And the bubble shattered.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Eight: 'A walk in the Dark...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Everything was truly black now. Hector couldn't sense a thing. No Abbas. No Rasalased.

Even his own soul was questionable. Was he still here? Where WAS here, even?

The world rose up all around him, ascended from the seemingly infinite pit below him. All within a few moments.

He was outside. In a field. A thin, ethereal fog covered everything, making him feel like he had to squint.

Ah, he could feel his body again. Or could he? The fog covered his own hands, he noticed. Like the fog was part of him. Or he was part of the fog.

Hmm."

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Ah, he could feel his body again. Or could he? The fog covered his own hands, he noticed. Like the fog was part of him. Or he was part of the fog.

Hmm."  
"2969

Well, this was a new experience. This place felt somehow familiar, but he couldn't tell why. It was just an empty field. A forest in the distance.

Was the Forge showing him this? And if so, why?

A figure melted into existence in front of him. Once it was fully formed, though, it appeared more real and lively than he did.

He'd never seen clothes like those before. The ornamentation on them was elaborate, lined with silver and bright crimson, and yet there was still something primitive about them, too.

Hector was reminded of the vision that he'd seen with Pauline Gaolanet. This whole thing felt different than that, but not by much. And if this was a memory from the Forge's past, then was that an ancient person standing there in front of them?

It was just a guy. In a field. Looking around.

Hmm.

Not very informative.

Then the figure melted out of existence, but only briefly. He reappeared a few feet away, crouched down this time, seemingly to inspect the ground. Then he disappeared again, only to reappear another few feet away, now with shovel in hand, digging.

The hole expanded quickly as the figure kept flickering in and out of existence around it.

A time lapse, Hector supposed.

The hole grew deeper and more narrow as the man worked. Hector stepped closer to the edge for a better look. The figure's clothes kept changing between flickers, as presumably the days also were. Weeks or more must have passed by the time the man finally set his shovel down.

And the hole was enormous now. Big enough to fit an entire house, certainly. Maybe even two.

The flickering didn't stop there, though. The man kept blinking in and out of existence, only this time he was almost always on all fours with his sleeves rolled up and his hands in the dirt, sometimes elbow-deep. And the dirt itself was gradually changing, too, turning a darker, richer brown color. Where before it had been hard and riddled with rocks, now it was beginning to look quite soft and even."

"2970

Hector observed the stranger's work with increasing interest. Could this be the Forge's creator? Agrian?

He tried to get a better look at the guy's face, but the constant teleporting made it surprisingly difficult. The dude seemed to have a receding hairline and a pudgy face, along with a scowl permanently etched into it.

The vision slowed down to a normal speed, and just as Hector began to wonder why, a new figure appeared at the edge of the hole.

This one was more finely dressed, with a chiseled jawline and perfectly coiffed blond hair. He said something in a language that Hector didn't understand, but Agrian, who was still toiling away in the dirt, ignored him. The man said something else and began laughing.

That clearly got under Agrian's skin, as he stopped working, and Hector could see his shoulders trembling. From the back, it might've appeared like he was crying, but looking at his face, no, that was anger.

Rage, actually.

Agrian didn't do anything, though. He went back to work, and the stranger went away.

Hmm.

Hector supposed he didn't need to know exactly what had been said in order to get the gist of what was going on here. The vision sped up again, and Agrian's work leapt forward. Seeds were planted; the hole was filled; and a tiny tree sprouted forth.

Once it was growing, he seemed to be monitoring it constantly, watering it and continually tending to the soil all around it.

Then Hector noticed that all of the grass around it died, leaving only dry, cracked earth. Even in the distance, the forest was brown and dwindling, with dozens of trees fallen over or momentarily on fire.

Hector worried for a second that the growing Forge might've been the cause of all this, but as he watched Agrian trying to shield the sprout from a punishing sun, watering it constantly, even hunching over it with his own body after the tent he erected blew away in the wind, Hector changed his mind."

"2971

Even after the apparent drought ended and greenery returned to the rest to the area, Agrian's trouble did only seemed to worsen. He started working on some sort of cabin or primitive shelter, presumably to take up permanent residence next to the sprout, but before he could finish it, the thing went up in flames.

Hector spotted a group of unknown figures in the background, all carrying weapons. They were gone before he could discern much else about them, and only Agrian remained, covered in blood as he sat cross-legged, apparently meditating in front of the sprout.

He built another shelter. This one lasted a bit longer before being struck by lightning and going up in flames, too. So he built still one more shelter, this one even more primitive than the first two, probably because he didn't expect it to last very long, either.

And the vision slowed down again, showing Hector a scene of the man holding back a literal flood. He'd raised giant walls of dirt and rock in a big circle around the sprout and wooden hut, but the water was so high that some of it was still splashing over the top.

Hector spotted the blond man again, high in the sky this time, just hovering there and watching the scene unfold. Not lifting a single finger to help. And smiling wide, too.

That particular sight was enough to make Hector wonder if that blond dude was somehow the cause of all this crazy weather.

The vision sped back up again, and the insanity continued. Windstorms. Another drought. Hail the size of baseballs. Lightning crashing down in huge clusters. A dozen tornadoes. More flooding. A fucking earthquake.

Even as he watched it all happening with his own two eyes, Hector still wasn't sure how the sprout was surviving so much shit."

"2972

And it was all back-to-back, too, Hector noticed. If they were talking about a span of like two thousand years or whatever, then yeah, sure, all this stuff was bound to happen sooner or later, but the sprout was still barely up to his waist. He may not have been a botanist, but didn't that mean that all these disasters were taking place within like five years of one another or something?

The vision slowed again, this time on a raging wildfire. The forest in the distance was already consumed, lighting up the the entire horizon. The grass was alight, too, and the flames were approaching quickly.

Until they weren't.

The vision slowed too much, perhaps. Everything was reduced to a crawl. Flames mid-flicker. Smoke mid-billow. Countless glowing embers wafted in place, as if stuck in glass. There was one right in front of his face, and Hector couldn't help reaching out to try and touch it.

His fingers phased right through it. No surprise there, he supposed. Super weird and kinda awesome, but no surprise. He wasn't actually here, after all.

How trippy, he thought. The world in slow motion. A raging inferno, too.

Hmm. He didn't know what else he could do here other than admire the spectacle. Why had the vision slowed down so much? This seemed a little excessive. Was the Forge trying to show him something that was particularly fleeting?

He looked carefully, but nothing looked all that strange, really. Agrian was there. The sprout was there. And the flames all around. He couldn't even see the blond dude around, this time.

After a spell, however, he heard a new noise. The vision had sounds of its own, but they'd all slowed down so much as to become a kind of low, background hum at this point.

This new sound did not belong. While the world remained slow, this sound was much more recognizable to his ears--in terms of speed, at least. He couldn't fully place what it was, though. Maybe like a combination of cloth ripping and glass tearing. Repeatedly.

Then a dark hole appear in front of him. Several of them, in fact. All in midair."

"2973

Was the vision breaking down, Hector wondered? He sure hoped not, because he had no idea how to fix it. But hmm--Rasalased had mentioned something about a ""retelling"" being ""strenuous"" for the Forge, hadn't he? Was this what he'd meant?

Agh. So confusing.



The holes in the air kept growing. And distorting. Seemingly bending space--or the image of space, perhaps--around them.

Until at length, pitch black hands began reaching out of them.

And at that sight, Hector could only gape.

Inhuman figures emerged from their dark depths, crawling out like spiders with too-few limbs. They flopped onto the ground in mushy heaps, writhing there in apparent silence. Their forms were so strange that Hector's eyes had a hard time holding onto them. They seemed to have arms--kind of --but where were their heads? Or their torsos, even? In one moment, they looked vaguely humanoid, and in the next, they looked more like a pile of black sludge.

Not entirely unlike a worm of the Undercrust, he thought.

But not entirely like them, either. He could sometimes catch sight of horrified faces buried buried beneath their dark, slimy flesh, as if people were trapped inside their bodies, struggling to get out.

What in the fuck was happening here? How were these things involved with the wildfire?

The vision began to speed back up again, but only to real time. The inferno came alive in all its terrifying fury. Hector could feel the searing heat and smell the choking smoke as well as if he were actually there.

Agrian and the sprout were only a few steps away, and the illusion was so complete that he almost felt as if he might actually be able to go over and touch them. Maybe his hand wouldn't simply phase through the image this time--or at least, that was his what impulses were telling him.

He kept a solid grip on his faculties, though, trying to pay attention."  
"s 2974

The weird slime monsters were creeping closer, seemingly unbothered by the flames.

Agrian slapped the ground with both hands, and a massive tidal wave of dirt flew up in the distance, blanketing half the fire on the horizon in an instant.

Hector was amazed, but within moments, the flames had somehow returned. And for some reason, Agrian didn't seem to notice the inhuman abominations coming his way, either.

Man, this looked bad. Hector wished he could help. He wondered how the hell Agrian was going to get out of this shit.

And damn, this heat was crazily realistic. He knew from firsthand experience. On many occasions, he'd been this close to a raging fire--typically whenever Garovel had led him to a burning building while out on patrol--and it felt exactly like this.

The Forge really knew how to create convincing illusions, didn't it? Well, fire was apparently its specialty, after all. It made sense.

...Right?

As he continued watching the scene unfold in real time, he couldn't ignore the growing question in the back of his mind.

This was all an illusion, wasn't it?

Obviously, the Forge didn't have the power to send him back in time or some shit. That wouldn't make any sense. It'd cause one of those paradox things that would destroy the fabric of the universe or whatever.

Admittedly, he wasn't exactly an expert on this stuff. His certainty waned by the moment.

Because, even if it made no logical sense to him... what if, somehow, it was real? And he ended up just standing here like a stupid asshole, gawking the whole time?

Agh.

Just as a test, he tried putting his hand out and summoning an iron javelin to skewer the closest slime monster.

No iron materialized.

The monster, however, still recoiled and shriveled away from him as if it had been hit."

"2975

Hector looked at his open palm, even more unsure of what had just happened than ever. An iron javelin probably wouldn't have been enough to repel the monster like that. It would've just stuck into it like a pincushion, probably.

So did that mean his iron was working differently in this place? Or was this just some other kind of power entirely? Granted to him by the Forge for this vision, perhaps?

Or maybe this was all him. The effects of Domain. Or Focus. Or the Supreme Will. Or whatever.

He didn't have the luxury of standing around and mulling it over, unfortunately. The monsters were multiplying, he noticed.

Their sludgy bodies quivered grotesquely before splitting apart--but the strangest thing was that they didn't seem to lose mass when doing so. Not like those worms from the Undercrust did. It was more like these things were making up straight up clones of themselves. And some were starting to walk on too legs, raising their arms up toward Agrian.

And toward Hector, too.

Agrian was still busy working on suppressing the flames, throwing dirt around like a dark ocean against a stubborn, burning coastline. Whether he'd noticed the monsters--or could even see them in the first place--Hector couldn't yet tell.

Hector attacked with his ""iron"" again. This time, he tried to imagine something more effective against sludge than a javelin. A big iron cylinder with, hollow inside to keep the sludge contained, but also with a perfectly-fitted block shooting down through it from the top.

A kind of makeshift hydraulic press, was what he was going for.

Instead, the chosen monster simply splattered apart like it had been hit with a bomb.

Hector blinked as black goo flew everywhere, even making it all the way over to him and hitting him in the face."

"2976

One surprise after another. So he could actually feel that, too? He wiped the slime off with his other hand, glad that not much had actually flown this far.

Agrian had been hit by it, too, and had stopped what he was doing to look around. Yeah, okay. He was definitely noticing the sludgy abominations now. And as he was looking around, his eyes suddenly stopped.

On Hector.

Oh.

Okay.

So this was happening now.

The surging flames reacquired both of their attentions. The creeping monsters weren't far behind in that regard, either.

Another tidal wave of dirt doused the entire western horizon, and Hector wondered if he might be able to accomplish anything remotely similar with this weird new power.

He put his hand toward the eastern horizon and imagined a tidal wave of iron blanketing all the fire there.

And... to his own amazement, it actually worked. The flames vanished in seconds, as if the oxygen had been sucked right out of the atmosphere or something.

Then a row of rock pillars sprang out of the ground, surrounding every abomination at once. They began trying to squeeze through, and then the pillars all connected to each other with nets of spikes, shredding the monsters like so much cheese.

And Hector was in awe again. There'd been dozens of them mere moments ago, and now they were little more than piles of trembling goo on the ground. Maybe Agrian didn't need any help, he thought.

Until, that was, he saw the fires that Agrian had just put out flare up again. Hector put it out for him with a simple wave of his hand. Then he turned, expecting to see the eastern horizon alight again also, but... it wasn't.

What the hell, man?

Well, whatever. He suppressed the flames to the north and south, too, feeling a bit like some sort of fire god all of a sudden."

"2977

Smoke still filled the area, making it obnoxious to breathe. Hector could see the scattered piles of sludge struggling to regather themselves. They weren't succeeding, though. Agrian's earthen cages were maintaining a solid grip on them.

The danger seemed to have passed.

Wow.

If only all his battles were this easy, Hector thought.

Agrian turned toward him again, sizing him up. The man said something, but there was no way in hell Hector could understand whatever language that was. Nykeirian, maybe? That was the language the books in the tree had been written in, right?

Boy, a reaper sure would've come in handy right about now. Hector wondered how Garovel was faring through all of this.

The vision began to speed up again.

It accelerated much faster this time, judging by how fast the sprout was growing now. And the natural disasters seemed to stop, too.

Hmm. Yeah, they probably hadn't been very natural at all, had they? But why'd they stop? He had a feeling that it wasn't because of his intervention. Maybe the blond dude had died in some distant country or something and therefore left Agrian alone, finally.

Hector could see him doing something to the sprout as it continued to grow. He placed some kind of bulbous orb in the middle of it, which seemed pretty weird until Hector realized what was happening.

The trunk of the sprout gradually expanded outward, around the orb. And Agrian kept replacing the orb with wider and wider ones, until finally he placed a big, wooden slab there.

This must've been how he'd managed to create such a huge room in the middle of the tree without killing it. He hadn't dug all that space out after the fact. It had been hollow from the beginning."

"2978

Watching Agrian work was kind of amazing, Hector felt. Seeing the tree take shape, knowing what it would eventually become--he couldn't pull his eyes away.

Well, he was a sucker for construction, too, so maybe that factored into things a bit.

By the time the vision slowed down again, the sprout had grown into a full blown tree--not quite the gargantuan one that Hector had come to know in the modern day, but still pretty damn impressive. And the room that would contain the Forge had finally finished taking shape, too.

Agrian was already working on the Forge, as well. The base was about halfway complete, which was somewhat surprising in its own way, Hector thought.

The base of the Forge was just a big stone slab--or that was what it had looked like, at least. But at this incomplete stage, Hector could see a cluster of living roots inside it, seemingly pulled up from underground. Agrian was pouring a murky, dark green liquid in there, too, and as he did, the roots therein began to flex and glow with an ethereal white light.

That kind of light was familiar, Hector thought--specifically, because it wasn't touching its surroundings. It was like the way that reapers could glow in the dark without actually lighting up anything around them.

After he finished pouring, Agrian started doing something to the stone. Touching it all over. As if giving it a massage or something.

Pretty weird, but at this point, Hector had expended just about all of his bewilderment. Honestly, he felt like nothing else about this vision would be able to surprise him. He was prepared to just accept whatever crazy shit happened next and roll with it.

That notion was soon proven wrong, however, when he watched

Agrian take a break from his work and step outside the tree, perhaps for a breath of fresh air. There, he witnessed a new figure approach Agrian.

A hulking, feathery figure."

"2979

It was a Sparrow, Hector saw. It looked at once familiar and strange to him. Familiar, because at a glance, he could've absolutely mistaken it for Hanton or Pauline Gaolanet. And strange, because he began to notice many subtle differences.

Its huge body was still quite plump and round, but its plumage was noticeably sharper. Not so soft and fluffy. The overall color was similar as well, aside from a slightly more golden tinge.

And the head. A cluster of feathers protruded from its temples, almost like a crown, fluttering with each movement the bird made.

The real question, though, was if its telepathic abilities were any different. Hector still remembered what Rasalased had told him about Wrobels being ""the worst of all possible enemies.""

Were these the ones he'd been referring to? And for Ras to have said that, just how powerful had these guys been?

Agrian did not appear surprised by the bird's sudden presence. They faced one another for a long time, with only Agrian saying anything aloud.

Hector couldn't help wondering why he was being shown this scene in the first place. Did the Forge expect him to understand what they were saying? Even when half the conversation wasn't coming through the vision, and the other half was in a language he'd never heard before today?

Hmm.

Maybe he should try talking to the Forge again himself, Hector decided. ""Hello?"" he said aloud.

His voice carried no weight, however. He felt it in his mind, but it was like the sound didn't reach his ears. Not the like the sounds of the

vision were.

Ah, wait, had he not put enough willpower into it or something? He tried again.

""Candle,"" he said aloud. ""Hello? Can you understand me?""

That was better. The sound definitely carried that time.

How weird."

"2980

The vision stopped, as if the entire world had been put on pause.

Then arrived those rhythmic pulses that he'd heard before, the ones that Rasalased had been conversing with.

He still had no idea what they were saying, but hey, it was something. It meant that the Forge had heard him, at least--perhaps even that it had understood him.

Maybe he could work with that.

""I'm sorry,"" said Hector. ""I can't understand what you're saying. Can you understand what I'm saying?""

More unintelligible noises.

Hmm.

""Uh... Okay, let's try this. If you can understand me, then beep once for yes, twice for no.""

There came a period of silence. Then a single beep.

Holy shit, Hector thought, exhaling an amazed laugh. What the fuck, that actually worked? He felt like he'd just made contact with an alien species or something. ""O-okay, well, uh..." Shit, he could start asking it all sorts of questions now. Where to start?

His eyes fell upon the motionless Agrian. Maybe they should start off easy. Confirm a few things. He pointed at the man. ""Is that Agrian?""

Two beeps arrived.



Hector blinked. Wait, what?

He needed to ask that again. ""That man there,"" he said, pointing with more fervor this time, ""the one who worked so hard to keep you safe, is that Agrian?""

Again, there were two beeps.

Oh shit...

Hector rubbed his forehead, suddenly having to rethink everything he'd just seen--and partially lived through. If this dude wasn't Agrian, then who the hell was he?

Agh. Didn't seem like he'd be able to ask anything other than yes or no questions here.

He wondered if the others were having better luck than him. The Forge was probably showing them similar visions, right? So maybe they were way ahead of him in terms of communicating with it by now."

"2981

Oh well. No point in worrying about any of that right now, Hector supposed. He needed to focus on what he could do--just in case this opportunity to learn more about the Forge didn't come around again, for some reason.

""This man here is your creator, isn't he?"" asked Hector.

One beep in the affirmative.

""...So is that why you don't like the name Agrian's Candle, then? Because it gives credit to the wrong person?""

Another lone beep.

Aha.

But then there two more beeps arrived.

""What? Did you just say yes and no?""

A single beep.

Hmm. What could that mean? Yes and no...

Needed more information. Coming up with more questions like this was kinda tough, because he kept thinking about all the things that didn't have a simple, one word answer.

But hey. Maybe he was going about this the wrong way. This was an artifact of untold power, apparently capable of creating enormously elaborate visions. It didn't necessarily have to answer his questions with words, now did it?

""...Can you show me who the real Agrian was?"" he asked.

Another affirmative beep arrived, and the vision sped forward. The tree grew to even greater heights, and the Forge was nearly complete.

But something had definitely happened in the intervening years. The images had flashed by so quickly, but Hector was sure that he'd caught a glimpse of some crazy shit in there. Lots of fire or something. He'd have to go back and check on that afterwards, if possible.

In front of him, he saw a man standing under the tree. His back was to Hector, but that wasn't the first thing that Hector noticed.

The tombstone was.

Hector stepped closer for a better look, unsure what to expect. The tombstone had an inscription on it that he couldn't read, but as he circled around the guy, he was surprised to see a familiar face.

It was the same blond dude from before, the one who'd seemingly been harassing the Forge's creator."

"2982

And Hector looked, but no one else was around. So this asshole was the real Agrian, then? He'd kinda suspected as much. What he hadn't expected, though, was the expression on the guy's face.

He almost looked like a different person. Not quite older, exactly, but definitely more haggard, like most of the life had been drained out of him. The smug smile that had seemed a permanent fixture on his face before was nowhere to be found now.

And actually, Hector could see that he was crying.

Damn.

Hector's gaze fell to the tombstone. He couldn't read the inscription on it, but he had a pretty good idea who it must've been for. He just wished he'd gotten the poor guy's name. Maybe Rasalased or Abbas would be able to tell him later.

But the Forge wasn't yet complete, Hector recalled. And the only one here now was Agrian, who seemed to be pretty torn up about the original creator's death. Did that mean...?

As the vision began to speed up again, Hector saw Agrian lingering around the tree for many days. Months, maybe. The man just seemed to be examining everything closely. Hector wasn't sure what he was doing until Agrian finally set to work.

Perhaps he'd just been trying to understand his friend's creation this whole time.

Had they actually been friends, though? Hector had to wonder.

Hmm. Life could be weird like that, he supposed. Old enemies being future allies.

But wait a minute. Didn't this mean that Agrian still tried to name the Forge after himself? Even after all the shit the original guy went through?

It did, didn't it? Wow, so he really was an asshole, then. Hector had been prepared to give him a bit of sympathy, but now that was all dried up again.

But he supposed that did technically mean that the Candle had two creators. Hence the Forge's confusing ""yes and no"" answer."

"2983

The next question on Hector's mind was whether or not this Forge had ever actually seen any use. If Agrian had finished it but also fucked it up by naming it improperly, then had Agrian even been able to make anything with it? Had the thing ever been turned on, for that matter?

As he kept watching, he was a bit surprised to see that Agrian had indeed managed to create something.

Some sort of lantern, it looked like.

Hector lingered on the scene of him pulling it out of the Forge for quite some time. Apparently, the big glass orb could split itself open like an egg in order to let its contents be retrieved.

Even more than that, though, Hector was interested in the actual creation process. It looked like the base of the Forge functioned as a receptacle for materials. He saw Agrian tossing things in there rather haphazardly, chunks of metal and glass, rocks and oil, followed by a final topping of a melted, red hot material before closing it back up again.

And as Agrian worked, tree roots came up through the base, extending through the giant orb like tentacles as a warm glow appeared in the center.

Hector watched closely, asking the Forge to keep rewinding and playing the scene over and over for him.

As far as he could tell, it was the roots that were doing the heavy lifting here. They seemed to operate with fine motor precision, handling objects delicately, while Agrian merely held his hand to the glass and kept his eyes closed. They would sometimes grab two or more separate pieces out of the base and then wrap them in a wooden cocoon. The sphere's glow would then pulse more greatly for a period of time--maybe a few hours, maybe a few days--and then the cocoon would fall away, revealing its work. Either the previous pieces were now fused together as by welding, or they were completely different, as if blended entirely into one, new material."

"2984

Other times, the roots didn't bother with a cocoon. They molded things in front of his eyes, shaving away at metal as if it were no more resilient than a bar of soap. Or they would slot shaped pieces together--and not always successfully, either. He could see that it was a slow process, sometimes relying on simple trial and error.

That was probably the result of the user, though, right? Agrian looked like he was just standing there with his eyes closed, but he must've been controlling the roots with his mind.

All in all, it was hard not to be impressed. Being able to see the Forge in action for the first time was pretty amazing. He hoped Abbas was able to see this, too.

Overall, though, Hector figured that creating something would probably take a really long time, especially if the desired item was super complicated. Plus, Agrian had probably been more skilled with the Forge than Abbas currently was.

Yeah. He should keep a handle on his expectations here, Hector felt. Even with all this new information at their disposal, it would probably be a while yet before Abbas was pumping out any crazy artifacts of power.

But hmm.

There was obviously still plenty more to learn here. Not just about the Forge, but about the history surrounding it, too.

Thousands of years.

Thankfully, the vast majority of it probably involved the tree just sitting here, abandoned in an empty field. That would make going through and observing all the important parts a bit easier. Hopefully.

Regardless, Hector didn't intend to rush. As much as he wanted to get back to reality, he wasn't about to waste this opportunity. Rasalased seemed to have a habit of kicking him out of conversations prematurely, so perhaps Hector was a little more reluctant than he otherwise would be to let go of this treasure trove of historical details in front of him."

"2985 -- CCLIX.

Hell, for all he knew, this whole vision trip could be a one-time thing. Perhaps after the Forge was fully functional, he wouldn't be able to communicate with it directly like this anymore.

He wanted to think that was unlikely, but then again, there was at least a good chance that Abbas would be using the Forge around the clock.

And certainly, crafting items of potentially limitless value would take priority over future trips down memory lane like this.

So he took his time, wanting to get as much out of this vision as he could. Maybe that wasn't necessary, since the others were probably all learning way more than him, but eh. There was no harm in going the extra mile, he felt. That, and he was honestly just curious.

As thoughtful and careful as he was trying to be, however, he did not realize what he was getting himself into.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Nine: 'The abiding rumble...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Abbas sat on the edge of the ancient bed, leaning forward with his hands folded in front of him. He rocked himself slightly back and forth as he waited, trying with some difficulty to have patience.

It had been hours already, and Hector had not returned to himself. The boy was just standing there, still as a statue with his hands pressed to the glass of the Forge.

The questions that had previously raced through his mind in an endless loop had finally settled down, giving way to little more than silent concern.

At first, the waiting had been a bother. Then quite obnoxious.

Now it was just worrisome.

He hoped with every fiber of his being that he had not unwittingly led the young Lord of Warrenhold to his doom. If his soul had become trapped or lost within the Forge... Abbas did not know what he would do."

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"2986

Conventional wisdom would dictate that he should dive back into the Forge himself and try his damndest to retrieve Hector as quickly as possible, but that was not an option, at the moment.

He'd been shut out. By Rasalased, no less.

He couldn't even sense the flow of ardor within the Forge, anymore. And Rasalased had stopped talking to him, too. Whether that was because the Dry God no longer COULD talk to him or because he simply wished not to, Abbas did not know.

But the last thing that Rasalased had said to him was to ""sit and have patience.""

And Abbas was doing his best to listen to his revered ancestor.

But holy Oasis, it was growing more difficult by the minute.

He had not expected Rasalased to show up like that and completely throw a wrench into everything. If he'd known this was all going to happen, he never would have suggested that Hector touch the Forge in the first place.

Garovel, for his part, was shockingly calm. He was just hovering there next to Abbas and Worwal, waiting quietly. The expression on his ethereal, reptilian face had remained unchanged this whole time.

'Are you not concerned?' Worwal had asked him.

'Eh, not really,' said Garovel. 'I'm used to these sorts of things happening. This is just Hector being Hector.'

Abbas didn't know if he could really believe that. Reapers often liked to put up a veneer of self-certainty and confidence, in part to help put those around them at ease and in part, perhaps, to stroke their own egos. So maybe the reaper was just acting.

But if he was, then Abbas had to admit... Garovel was damn good at it.

And it made a degree of sense, as well. Abbas had known there was something strange about the young Lord Darksteel. Even if he wasn't as old as he pretended to be, that didn't mean he was weak or harmless."

"2987

But if Hector was fine and there was nothing to worry about, then what in the world was taking so long? Surely, Hector would not have been



making him wait like this intentionally, so it could only have been Rasalased's doing.

Or the Forge's.

The fact that the Forge had a will of its own was no great revelation, of course. Abbas had known that it was at least half-sentient since the moment he first dove in to inspect its ardor.

But this was... unexpected, to put it mildly. Abbas had no prior experiences to rely upon here. The Earth Cruncher had never done anything even remotely similar to this. Capturing someone's soul and speaking to them directly for hours at a time?

Assuming that was really what was happening.

He couldn't imagine what else Rasalased or the Forge would be doing in there with Hector's soul. It had to be some sort of information exchange, right?

Abbas tried to use the time wisely and meditate or have Worwal read a few of the books that were left, but neither attempt panned out. He couldn't concentrate, and apparently neither could Worwal.

'In retrospect,' the reaper said privately and in Valgan, 'perhaps it was unwise to allow one of the Shards of the Dry God to come into contact with a Fusion Forge.'

When he put it like that, Abbas felt like a bit of an idiot. 'Agh... but it didn't come into contact with it. Not directly.'

'Yes, it had a human being serving as its connecting rod. Is that better or worse?'

Abbas stifled a sigh. Frankly, he'd forgotten that Hector was carrying a Shard around with him at all times. Among the many oddities about the boy, that had perhaps been the first one that Abbas had learned of. That, from a conversation with Asad back in Sair, which seemed somehow like a lifetime ago, now."

"2988

He had taken Asad at his word, of course, that this Hector Goffe of Atreya had somehow become bonded with one of the Shards and that

it would be foolish and cruel to take the Shard away from him... but still. Perhaps on some level, Abbas had harbored doubts. If there hadn't been so many other pressing matters at the time, he may have even put up more of a fight and insisted that Hector remain in Sair with them while they studied this mysterious bond.

Looking back, he was quite glad that he'd been too preoccupied at the time.

Having actually heard Rasalased's voice himself now, any lingering feelings in that regard were well and truly crushed.

Hector Goffe was indeed a most suitable ""Shardkeeper,"" as Rasalased had laboriously explained.

Abbas rubbed his forehead. To think that he'd had a conversation with the Dry God... and that, furthermore, it had been such an absurd conversation.

Rasalased was not an easy person to talk to, Abbas had learned. And apparently, Hector had been doing this for a while now. What kind of saintly patience must that boy possess?

Even now, reflecting on it all, Abbas wasn't sure if he had learned anything truly novel or useful. Rasalased had showered him with strange compliments and vaguely ominous warnings.

""Be ever mindful,"" the Dry God had told him. ""Our horizon dims in the shadow of many perilous futures. Rest well but not easy.""

And that had been one of the more coherent things.

It should have been an absolute honor and privilege to be able to speak directly with Rasalased in such a manner, but honestly? Abbas was kind of hoping that it never happened again.

Maybe he was just tired, though. It had been a long and messy day."  
"2989

Between that and all the talk about patience being ""not merely a virtue but a liberating necessity,"" about ""Young Hector"" being a ""budding Gartanas,"" and about ""time not being time,"" Abbas didn't know where his own mind was, right now. Perhaps the smartest thing to do

would be to lay down on that ancient bed over there and have Worwal knock him out.

The thought was certainly tempting. Maybe the world would make sense again after he woke up.

Wishful thinking, most likely.

No, he wanted to hear what Hector had to say after he returned from his ""journey"" through the Forge. That was more important than his fatigue.

Ugh. He had so many questions, but they were all muddled together in his mind. If nothing else, he would have to begin studying--

Hmm?

What was that?

A light in the Forge. Within the glass orb, it was faint but there.

And it was sustaining itself, too. Not like before, when it had only flickered and sputtered.

Abbas stood up slowly, eyes unblinking as he took in the scene before him.

The Forge had reactivated.

--++--++--

Raul Blackburn sure hoped this was going to work.

It probably would, he kept telling himself. He just had to keep his head. To stay alert. With Invisibility as his disposal, the chance of failure here was virtually zero.

In theory.

The VMP couldn't possibly have any Invisibility-penetrating detection technology on their hands yet, right? This power was still too new. Abolish might have developed their own countermeasures for it already, but from all the intel he'd been gathering over the last several days, the VMP and Abolish were not directly working together in that way.

Phew.

If someone had told him a day ago that he would be single-handedly breaking into a heavily fortified compound belonging to the Vantalay Military Police, he would have told them they were insane.

This had not been part of the plan, to say the very least of things."  
"2990

But then again, nothing had really gone the way it was supposed to ever since they arrived in this crazy land. Originally, they'd only been sent to gather information on the Sword of Unso and possibly retrieve it. But then the war broke out, and they were suddenly tasked with checking on the little town of Miro. Then his brothers were captured. Then reinforcements arrived to help him rescue them. Then a rather secretive group of strangers appeared and gave them aberration-harvested Invisibility rings.

And even after all the action they'd seen, even after recovering his brothers Adan and Esai, the stalemate over Miro had not changed.

That was why they had decided to adjust their tactics. The Blackburn Triplets had been tasked with gathering intel again while the rest of the group remained behind to hold Miro.

It was a risk, of course. The Lady Evangelina Stroud had not seemed terribly pleased with the idea, and Raul couldn't exactly fault her for it, either, considering two of them had gotten captured before. She had every reason to be worried about a repeat of that scenario.

But it was still the right move, Raul felt, and he was glad his elders had decided to go for it. The Triplets weren't all that useful in holding Miro. That was largely up to Leo and Cousin Melchor. The brothers' talents were better utilized this way.

And he didn't just feel that way because it had let him return to Ridgemark for a few days and enjoy a bit more of that luxury. That had certainly been a nice bonus, though, after camping under the stars almost every night and participating in pitched battles with a bunch of violent psychopaths.

Sadly, Ridgemark had proved more difficult to indulge in this time."  
"2991

For one thing, just knowing that his kin were still stuck in Miro was kind of a downer. It was tough to relax even for a moment when he knew that he could've been working, instead. Time was precious, after all.

And for another thing, the city itself seemed to have changed. It had become significantly tenser, Raul thought. At first, he thought that the battle at Miro might somehow be responsible for this shift, but he soon learned otherwise.

It was the RPMP. The Ridgemark Private Military Police. They had begun openly clashing with the VMP near the city limits. And as a result, the RPMP's presence within the city had increased dramatically.

They were worried about spies and saboteurs.

Plus, there were both Vanguardian and Abolish forces in the city, too. They weren't fighting, but that was only because of the RPMP. If that grip loosened, then Ridgemark would almost certainly turn into a battleground, too.

All things considered, it was a nutty situation, Raul knew. Four different armies, all in such close proximity. Five, including the Rainlords. How the RPMP had managed to keep the peace this long, Raul had no idea. It was certainly impressive, though.

And to top it off, the city was still accepting tourists like everything was fine. Every casino Raul visited was packed with people, even more than he remembered.

It was not, however, merely due to his own skill as an intelligence gatherer that he was able to learn so much about the difficult situation in Ridgemark, at the moment. That had been part of it, of course, but he couldn't rightly ignore the more obvious reason.

The RPMP had made contact with him directly.

He didn't actually get complete confirmation that it was them, but it was the only thing that made any sense. Of the other three factions in the city, only Abolish might have been able to identify him at all, and even that was unlikely. He had almost never removed Invisibility during the fighting."

"2992

Plus, if Abolish were the ones to identify him, they wouldn't have sent someone to talk. They would've sent someone to either kill or capture him. Probably the latter. Then they could've used him as leverage against his brethren in Miro.

Not that he would have allowed that to happen, of course. He'd sooner destroy his own brain and be sent back to Warrenhold than let this mission become compromised in that way.

He knew that would most likely mean being unable to return to Vantalay, as his elders probably wouldn't green light a second trip here, considering the circumstances. But it would still be worth it, if it came down to that.

All that being said, Raul was still hoping to use this mission to prove himself as reliable to the elders. And to Lord Goffe.

He knew his brothers felt the same, too. After their time as Abolish captives, they'd been in rough shape. The only reason Abolish hadn't killed them, apparently, was because they weren't sure if Adan and Esai were actually servants or not. His brothers had played the vulnerability card--and quite well, apparently.

But that hadn't saved them from multiple daily beatings and worse.

Much worse.

Abolish had ripped their fingernails off, one by one. They'd branded their faces with cattle prods. They'd taken Adan's left ear, and Esai's right. They'd whipped them a half-dozen times and then flayed the skin off their backs. They'd threatened to kill Miroans in front of them. They'd poked out Esai's left eye and started pulling out Adan's teeth with pliers. And apparently, Abolish had been planning to slowly saw

off their feet next, followed by their entire legs.

Raul had never seen his brothers in such terrible states. He'd wanted to send them back to Warrenhold, but they wouldn't hear of it.

""We're still breathing,"" said Esai. ""We can still help.""  
"2993

He was concerned for them, but he'd also never been prouder of his brothers.

Truthfully, Raul wasn't entirely sure if he would've been able to endure such torture without cracking. It was tempting to think that, yeah, of course he would be able to withstand it. He was a servant, after all. The psychological threat of death or irreparable damage was all but non-existent.

But there was more to it than just that, he knew. The effects of that much pain on the body? Along with the sweet temptation to just tell the interrogators what they wanted to hear and let it all be over?

Plus, it wasn't just about endurance, either. It was also about performance. If his brothers had endured it too well, that might have tipped off their captors, too. They had to play the part of true non-servants.

Raul had a feeling that he would never really know whether or not he could handle such a situation until he was face to face with it.

But there was no doubt that his brothers had conducted themselves remarkably well. When their fellow captives from Miro discovered that the two of them were, in truth, a part of the rescuing force, the surprise on many of their haggard faces was unmistakable. They'd been convinced, too.

And they were full of praise for his brothers, as well. For Esai, in particular. He seemed to have bonded with the Miroans quite quickly, Raul noticed. A small family among them had apparently been the target of one of the crueller Abolish bastards, until Esai managed to draw attention away from them and onto himself. He'd even managed to slay the monster when battle first broke out by catching the reaper off guard.

That was the first time Esai had ever killed a reaper.

And Raul knew the strangeness of that feeling. His own first had been at Dunehall, which wasn't all that long ago."

"2994

Esai had been noticeably quieter since then. He was probably replaying things in his head over and over again, wondering if it could have gone differently.

Or perhaps just reveling in the accomplishment.

That was how it had been for Raul. A bit of both. Conflicting feelings.

He shouldn't feel good about taking a life. But it was well justified. Abolish had it coming. Absolutely.

Why should he feel bad or guilty about delivering justice? Someone had to.

But that line of thinking was a slippery slope, he knew. He had to keep a clear head about these things. All those stories about servants losing their minds after so many years--he was already starting to see why that might be the case.

Power really was a terrifying thing, wasn't it? And he didn't even have that much yet.

Perhaps that was why Cousin Melchor had always refused to lead House Blackburn. The man already had enough power and didn't want more.

If so, then Raul could admire that decision.

Regardless, none of that was on his mind at the moment. The only thing that concerned him right now was getting through this VMP installation without alerting anyone to his presence.

It made for quite the imposing sight, too, as he approached. Nestled between two cloud-tipped mountains, the compound was blocking the only passage forward for a hundred miles or more. There was no way he could climb those sheer cliffs without undead vigor or his alteration ability over friction--and the latter would involve creating about a



hundred landslides and avalanches in order to reshape the terrain.

Which wouldn't be very stealthy of him. And would almost certainly kill any hapless bystanders in the area.

He thought about provoking a landslide nearby just to draw some of the personnel out of the fortress before sneaking through it, but eh, that would probably be more trouble than it was worth, he figured. And sure, this area seemed pretty desolate, but it would still be dangerous."  
"2995

This was fine. With the aberration ring, he was able to just wait for the front gate to open and walk through. There was semi-regular traffic through here, due to this being the only road through the mountains.

Lo and behold, his patience paid off. Less than an hour of sitting next to the entrance was all it took for the huge metal gates to start creaking open.

A group of soldiers came out first, not yet allowing the line of waiting vehicles to pass through. They were going to check each and every one, Raul figured, but he didn't intend to hang around and watch. He stepped softly through the small opening in the gate and made his way inside.

Wow, the place was bigger than he expected. And there were even more soldiers around that he thought there would be, too. The VMP wasn't hurting for manpower, apparently.

Hmm. It wasn't a straight shot to the other side, apparently. The only reason he'd come here was because he wanted to use the pass through the mountains, but it looked like the layout of this installation was going to make that simple goal a pain in the ass.

Which was a bit strange, he felt. This gravel road was clearly meant to accommodate motor traffic, so why did they make it wind around so many buildings and go off in weird directions?

Ah, perhaps it was for security. The place was currently serving as a military checkpoint, so they probably didn't want people trying to blow through it at top speed. A labyrinthine design definitely made it more defensible.

Unfortunately, that meant Raul ended up wandering around for quite a while just to get his bearings. And with so many soldiers around, it only got more nerve-racking as the time dragged on. Sure, they couldn't see him, but they could still hear him. Or bump into him, if he wasn't careful."

"2996

As he tried to find his way through the compound, he overheard a surprising variety of languages. Valgan, Mohssian, Gishi, and even a bit of what sounded to him like Tharish.

Raul was only fluent in Mohssian and Valgan, but he knew a little Gishi, too. Along with Kotaka, Maricot, and Vaelish. If that was really Tharish he was hearing, then did that mean they were hosting foreign guests here? As far as he knew, Tharish wasn't even spoken on Eloa. It was an Ardoran language.

He hadn't come here to spy on the VMP, but he was suddenly growing curious. His current objective was merely to keep making his way north, but his overall purpose here in Vantalay was to gather information, so maybe it wouldn't hurt to listen a little harder for anything interesting. At least until he managed to find the exit, that was.

Most of the conversations were just the soldiers talking to each other, usually to complain. Hmm. Morale didn't seem very high here.

Maybe the war wasn't going well for their side.

The VMP was the primary armed force of the Vantalayan government. The VMP, therefore, was the main aggressor in the invasion of Vantalay's neighbor, Czacoa. Supposedly, Abolish was here to support them, but Raul had yet to see any actual evidence of that. So far, he'd only seen the bastards attempting to exploit the civilians in Miro.

Maybe things were different in northern Vantalay, closer to the war front with Czacoa. In the south, at least, he suspected that the reason Abolish wasn't moving to help the VMP was because of the Vanguard's presence in Ridgemark. If Abolish started giving obvious support, then the RPMP would be more likely to side with the Vanguard against them instead of merely remaining neutral."

"2997

It was also clear, however, that the RPMP really didn't want to side the Vanguard, if at all possible. Why else would they have decided to help the Rainlords run Abolish out of Miro? They were probably worried about inviting the Vanguard in and then never being able to get rid of them.

Like what had happened to Sair.

That was Raul's interpretation of events, anyway. But even after all the intel he'd gathered over the course of this mission, he was sure that he was still missing some of the big picture here.

So he couldn't help himself. When he happened upon a tall building marked ""Officer's Quarters,"" he decided to give it a closer look. He had to wait for the door to open, but that was no great issue. The facility was bustling with activity.

The conversations therein were a bit more interesting to him than the ones outside. There was talk of the war in here, of the progress being made. The officers' morale seemed a bit higher than that of the rank and file. Maybe that wasn't abnormal, though. Raul didn't have much experience with this sort of thing.

Arumoro did, however. Perhaps he would ask the reaper's opinion later, once he wasn't trying to concentrate so hard on listening to a half-dozen other conversations.

At length, he overheard one by the stairs that piqued his curiosity.

""--we don't depart soon, their situation will worsen,"" someone was saying in Mohssian. ""Graves could move against them at any time.""

""I disagree,"" said someone else. ""If he abandons Ridgemark, it would allow Abolish to join us there and overrun the RPMP. He wouldn't risk losing the entirety of the South to us.""

""You underestimate the capitalist swine. Between the Jailer, the Black Artisan, and the Linebreaker, they have more than enough power to hold Ridgemark without the Vanguard's help.""

"2998

""Don't be absurd,"" said the other voice. ""Their spirits are weak and corrupt, driven only by greed. They would stand no chance before even Whitehand alone, but there would also be Riev, Jorga, Mikas, the Killer, the Tiger, the Seeker, the--""

""Hmph. It is precisely that kind of overconfidence that worries me.""

Hmm. That was first time that Raul had actually managed to get some specific names or monikers. Apart from Graves and the Killer, he only recognized a couple of them.

The Seeker might've been referring to the Seeker of Ardora, an infamous ""treasure hunter"" of Abolish. The name sounded less menacing than it should have, which was probably by design. The guy had a reputation for procuring treasure by any means necessary, including but not limited to kidnapping and homicide.

If that was really who they were talking about, then Raul found that strange. The Triplets had come to Vantalay in search of a treasure of their own, the Sword of Unso, but it was already in Abolish's possession, specifically in the Killer of Krohin, Thaddeus Croll's possession. Did that mean the Seeker wanted it, too? That seemed unlikely.

But not impossible, Raul supposed. Trying to discern an Abolisher's motive for doing anything was perhaps a fool's errand. There could have been any number of unreasonable explanations for their actions.

The other one he'd heard of was the Linebreaker, but he could've sworn that nickname belonged to a Vanguardian who was famously gigantic. The name supposedly came from his ability to charge headlong into a defensive formation like a bull and still make it back alive. If he was working for the RPMP now, then it must have been a fairly recent change. Not more than a few years, probably.

In any event, it was decent intel. Maybe he should stick around here for a bit longer."

"2999

He kept eavesdropping for a while and heard similar discussions being

held. Different perspectives on who should do what and how they should do it. The way some of these guys talked, they made it sound like if only they were the ones in charge, then the war would've already been won.

But one thing was consistent, at least: their hatred of the RPMP.

These VMP officers were believers in their cause--that was for sure. And the RPMP, being led by a small group of powerful companies in Ridgemark, represented the exact opposite of what these guys were supposedly fighting for.

Raul had already heard about the ideological divide between Vantalayan government and Ridgemark many times, but hearing it from this side was a bit different.

""Burns me up,"" said one officer among a small crowd eating at a table. ""Selfish bastards. And for what? To fill their coffers? Our brothers fight and die, sacrifice their lives for the future of our country, and those traitors in Ridgemark have the gall to claim that they're the ones fighting for the people?!""

""Aye,"" said the one next to him. ""They only care about money. Hallick's got it right. They're inhuman. No compassion in them. No sense of right or wrong. At this point, I wonder if they even have red blood in their veins.""

Graham Hallick was the Vantalayan Prime Minister. He was the one who'd been spearheading the effort to centralize almost everything in the country over the last few years. The banks, agriculture, entertainment--one industry at a time, every company in the country had been forced to employ a ""team of government liaisons"" who would ensure that ""the needs of the nation came before the needs of the company.""

And apparently, economic growth had been explosive. Until Ridgemark broke away, that was."

"3000

If he were to take a cold, detached stance as neutral third party, then Raul could empathize equally with both sides' perspectives. For the RPMP, they were just defending themselves against an oppressive

government. And for the VMP, they were just trying to enforce the law.

Ideologically, though, it was a bit murkier for him. He didn't really have strong opinions either way regarding economic systems, nor did he harbor much love in his heart for large, money-grubbing corporations.

But at least they weren't working with Abolish or invading their neighboring nations. And unlike the rest of the country, Ridgemark was actually protecting its citizens from violent exploitation. On those points, actions spoke quite a bit louder than words, Raul felt.

These VMP officers seemed to think they were fighting for the sake of the people, but having seen what happened to Miro--and several other villages on the way here--Raul had to disagree.

Unlike Miro, most of them had already been abandoned. That might've implied that the VMP had successfully helped them evacuate, but Raul had seen the decimated homes, the overturned vehicles, the rotting corpses in the streets.

And the mass graves.

If he was feeling generous, then maybe he could argue that the VMP wasn't directly responsible for all that stuff, that Abolish was acting without their knowledge. But that didn't mean the VMP was free of blame, either.

And frankly, he wasn't feeling generous.

In fact, the more he listened to these officers talk, the more irritated he became. Did they really not know what was happening out there? Or were they just so wrapped up in their ideological war that they'd become blind to the atrocities being committed against their own countrymen?

If these had been Sairi soldiers, he would've been ashamed to even associate with them."

"3001

He had to maintain his composure, though. Getting riled up here was pointless. Finding useful intel was the only thing that mattered. If this place couldn't help in that regard, then he should just keep heading north.

It had been a long trip so far, walking cross-country on foot like this. His friction power let him move much more quickly over sufficiently level terrain, but Vantalay was so huge that it would still be a couple more days before he reached his destination, barring any unforeseen complications.

His actual objective for this journey was not merely to gain intel, however. It was to reach the town of Kristol, where the infamous Bridgewater Prison was located. According to his contact at the RPMP, that was where the man named ""John Wright"" was being held.

That whole situation had been a mess of its own to unravel. When the request came down from Lord Goffe himself to look for this Wright character, the Rainlords hadn't really known what to do about it. Apparently, Lord Goffe said that it wasn't a priority, but hey, it was an opportunity to go for bonus points. And the Blackburn Triplets loved bonus points.

So Raul decided to risk asking the RPMP about him. The guy's name wasn't actually John Wright, after all. It was Donald Elias. So using it wouldn't expose his Atreyan ties.

It might give the RPMP the impression that they were working with Intar, however, because apparently, John Wright was captured with a group of Intarian spies some fifteen years ago.

So yeah. A mess.

He'd gotten permission from his elders in Miro, though, so that was a plus. Unlike the last time, when the Triplets had sorta-kinda gone off without telling anyone, resulting in two of them getting captured, he had actual approval for his recklessness, now."

"3002

Which was pretty surprising, honestly. When he'd asked if he could go, he'd thought for sure that they would say no. But for whatever reason, they hadn't.

True, he'd technically only said that he wanted to go there in order to gather more information about this Atreyan spy, not to break him out single-handedly.

But that had been mostly bullshit, and they probably knew it. If it genuinely looked too difficult to bust him out, then yeah, Raul wouldn't risk it.

He had a feeling that it would look quite doable, though. Especially with Invisibility on his side.

All things considered, these rings were pretty ridiculous, but they did have their limitations. They couldn't cover nearly as much area as the living aberrations at Dunehall could. Those bastards had been able to cloak dozens of people each, whereas these rings could scarcely go beyond his own body. If he wasn't touching it, then he probably couldn't make it invisible, and if the object in question was large enough, touching it didn't matter.

That was one of the reasons he was making this trip on foot. Cloaking an entire car was too difficult, and even if it wasn't, the noise it made would still be too much of a problem when trying to make it through checkpoints like this one.

His primary concern, therefore, was not if he would be able to break the spy out of prison. Rather, it was how he would be able to get the guy all the way back to Ridgemark. Even for him, an undead servant, making this trip on foot was pretty rough. He wasn't sure how well a non-servant would be able to manage it, even with his help.

He could worry about that later, though."

"3003

He made his way up the nearby staircase, careful not to walk on the center of any of the wooden steps. The edges were less likely to make noise, he'd always thought, and he didn't want anyone hearing his footsteps. It helped that there were so many other people roaming around below, but he was still mindful of foot traffic on the higher floors.

It was quieter up here, which was both a good and bad thing. He didn't have to worry about bumping into anyone accidentally, but they would also hear him coming if he made any sounds at all.

Slow and steady, he thought.



He was looking for the largest quarters. He didn't know much about how the VMP laid out their buildings, but logic would dictate that the higher-ranking officers would be in the larger rooms.

He'd only planned to eavesdrop from the other side of closed doors, but on the top floor, he discovered a much more inviting prospect. One of the doors was ajar, and he spotted a group of people therein, all standing around a bed-ridden man.

Most of them seemed to be nurses or doctors, tending to him and fiddling with medical machinery. The man himself was only wearing an off-white gown, but there were three sharply dressed officers in front of him, all talking to him with obvious deference.

Two of them left just as Raul was settling in to listen by the door, making him curse his timing. The one remaining officer, however, said something that most certainly caught his interest.

""--my contact within the Vanguard."" The green-suited officer spoke Valgan with a deep, almost grinding voice. ""You recall the deal I mentioned a while back?""  
"3004

""Oh, not this again,"" said the man in bed, also in Valgan. ""I told you before: they can't be trusted. Negotiating with them is pointless. As soon as they have our confidence, they will betray us in order to attack Abolish. This much should be obvious.""

""Ritter, just listen to me for a minute, will you? My contact is reliable. She wouldn't bring me this if it wasn't worth our time.""

The man sighed but didn't argue further.

""They're saying they can get Graves to pull his forces out of Ridgemark in exchange for a simple prisoner transfer.""

Raul blinked. Whoa. That was massively valuable intel, if true. It didn't sound like this Ritter fellow was going to go for it, though.

""Absurd. They expect us to believe that they would leave Vantalay entirely for the return of a few of their prisoners? Do we even have any of their men?""

""Ah, no, it would not be that kind of exchange, actually.""

""Hmm? What kind would it be, then?""

""They don't want prisoners of ours. They want to hand some of theirs over to us for safekeeping.""

""What? Why?""

""They're having operational difficulties, at the moment. Their forces are spread thin all over the continent. They're trying to free up manpower, no doubt. This would eliminate two birds with one stone. They could pull their troops out of Vantalay and also retask those prison guards as soldiers.""

""Hrm.""

""It's a great deal for us, Ritter. We should take it before they change their mind.""

""So eager. You truly have no reservations about it? It's highly irregular. Why would they trust us to look after their prisoners? Why not one of their allies?""

""Because they're afraid their allies might release them. And perhaps make it look like an accident, afterwards.""

""Why would they do that? Who are these prisoners?""

""The Rainlords of Sair.""

"3005 -- CCLX.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty: 'O, wicked shifters...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

When Loren Lighteyes stepped off the boat, he was only too glad to finally have solid ground beneath him again. He would have much preferred to simply fly back to Eloa, but apparently, there were huge dogfights going on all across the skies of the Luthic, and even Abolish didn't want to risk transporting anyone by plane unless they were to serve as reinforcements.

Concealing themselves among civilian boats, however, was somehow not a problem. He'd even seen jets patrolling the shipping lanes. Each time he saw one, Loren had expected it to open open fire on their big, lumbering tanker, but that thankfully never happened.

What exactly the fighting was about, he still didn't quite know. Popular sentiment seemed to be that it was some kind of proxy conflict, related to the Vantalayan war effort. Perhaps Czacoa and its allies were trying to prevent Vantalay from bringing in support from overseas.

Loren didn't think that explained why the fighting spanned such a wide swath of the Luthic, though. It was the largest ocean in the world. If they were only concerned about the Vantalayan region, then why had Abolish shut down all aerial transports out of eastern Ardora?

In any case, it was an enormous hassle. And while he didn't hate the ocean quite as much as he used to as a child, he was still far from in love with it. Perhaps the gills that he had mutated onto his back would one day change his opinion in that regard, but if so, he had a feeling that it would require many, many years.

And it didn't help, of course, that those gills still needed some work. They weren't exactly his proudest effort. While they did technically allow his body to breathe underwater, they were horribly inefficient, and he would still drown eventually--after a few hours or so."

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"3006

~~Valentine's Day Special - (page 1 of 8)~~

Moreover, servants didn't actually need to breathe underwater. Their brains didn't require oxygen. It was just a matter of comfort and convenience, really. Plus, his mutant predisposition was for birds, not fish. It was a pretty dumb mutation overall, and at times, he found himself regretting it.

Maybe he'd take another crack at refining it one day, though. His whole reason for even attempting it in the first place was to help him overcome his fear of the ocean, and he supposed in that sense, it had proved somewhat helpful.

A Vaelish boy afraid of the sea? It was an absurdity. Or should've been. If his people's culture hadn't been shredded nearly to the point of extinction.

Agh.

His heritage hadn't mattered for a long time. It was stupid to get

sentimental about it.

But that was what the ocean did to him. Reminded him of the past, of life he barely remembered.

Just one more reason why he hated it so much.

This port town of Ritoro was a welcome sight, at least. He'd never visited Steccat before. He could see why the eastern Eloan coast was so praised for its beauty. Pale white sands filled the oceanic horizon, and scores of slender palm trees lined most of the buildings and sidewalks.

When departing from Eloa to Ardora before, he'd flown out of Vantalay, but with travel there having become so difficult, Steccat was apparently the next best option.

Most of this country was rich and well-guarded, and he'd always thought that Abolish's influence here was limited, but if they were able to waltz into it so easily, then maybe that wasn't the case.

Perhaps this was the Freeman Fellowship's influence. They were obviously far from normal Abolishers.

And he was now one of them. Or soon would be. He wasn't too clear on that point, yet. He'd technically accepted the invitation from the Gentleman of Palei, but there was probably some sort of induction ceremony that he had to go through first."

"3007

~~Valentine's Day Special - (page 2 of 8)~~

If nothing else, it soon became clear the Freeman had something going for them in this country. The vehicle that rolled up to receive them was a midnight black Revenant M77 Phasma. As far as limousines went, it was one of the most handsome models on the market--and a beast of a machine, besides. Its long, sleek hood was hiding over seven hundred horsepower, and its on-demand four-wheel drive was a rarity among such vehicles.

The reason he recognized it immediately was because it had a sports car sibling that he adored, the Revenant L90 Kingswraith. If he ever managed to strike it rich, that beauty would be one of his first big

purchases for sure.

That wasn't likely, though. He'd learned how to drive from many combat-focused teachers and was experienced behind the wheel in such circumstances to boot, but he'd never actually owned a car before. It was a nice dream with little practicality. He simply traveled too much for Abolish.

Heh. If the Freemen could somehow change that, too, then he would become a member for life. Assuming Rezolo let him, that was.

He gazed out the window as they drove. The other Freemen were too busy talking to Zahi Rambata to bother him with questions, which Loren actually appreciated for once. He had plenty of experience ignoring Zahi's incessant motormouth. He did not have experience with being pleased by Zahi's company, however. That was a new feeling.

In terms of design, Ritoro looked like a pleasantly simple town. Long, straight roads in a clear grid framework. Not too many tall buildings. Hard to get lost in and therefore easy to escape from in a hurry.

That would also make it difficult to hide in, though. Big cities with confusing layouts had their own sorts of advantages, he knew.

The ride didn't last long. They soon pulled into the parking lot of a colorful building with unlit signs all over it, making them difficult to read.

A night club, he realized as they made their way inside--though it wasn't yet nighttime."

"3008

~~Valentine's Day Special - (page 3 of 8)~~

The place wasn't open, but it was still abuzz with activity. And Loren quickly realized why.

Dozens of large, ethereal geckos hovered in the air, unaffected by the club's low lighting.

Reapers.

'There are quite a few familiar faces in here,' said Rezolo in the echo of privacy.

Loren was already scanning the crowd for any signs of recognition. If these were all Freeman, then that was unlikely.

Zahi had already peeled off to go converse with one of the several groups that dotted the main room, and the trio of Freeman who'd brought him headed over to a corner, not waiting for him.

Loren found himself gravitating toward the bar area, instead. He wasn't a very heavy drinker, but there was a veritable buffet of snack foods that attracted him over. Hmm, did they have those little hot dogs wrapped in bread or whatever it was? Maybe some crackers with that white, lumpy shit on it?

Okay, so he wasn't exactly a foodie, but he knew what tasted good and what didn't.

A conversation in his ear caught his attention as he was looking over his prospects.

""Think he'll go for it?""

""No idea.""

""I thought he was all about achieving glory on the battlefield.""

""Can't believe everything you hear, I guess.""

""Hrm. I suppose if he wasn't receptive to the idea of joining us, then he wouldn't have showed up out of the blue like this.""

Loren's brow lowered as he stuffed his face. They weren't talking about him, were they? No, he'd only just arrived--and with an escort, too. Must've been referring to someone else.

He considered interjecting into the conversation to ask directly, but they answered his question without him having to.

""Having the Marauder of Calthos on our side would be a huge get.""

""Yeah, no shit.""

Loren paused mid-bite."

"3009

The Marauder was here?

Truth be told, there were very few Abolishers whom Loren harbored any kind of actual respect or admiration for. That was just the nature of things when working under so many violent lunatics. But Caster Egmond might have been an exception. Possibly. Loren had never actually met the guy, but there was one particular tale that had piqued Loren's interest.

It was a story from the Vaelish Civil War. He'd only heard about it secondhand from other Abolishers, but supposedly, the Marauder of Calthos had conducted himself differently from his peers during that conflict. When tasked with the annihilation of an entire city, Egmond had first gathered up all of the children therein, intending to have them join Abolish.

That alone was already enough to set him apart from his contemporaries, but when word came down from Vanderberk that they had no use for so many children, that they should simply be executed instead, Egmond had purportedly gone against orders and allowed the kids to escape.

At the time, Loren had never heard of anyone daring to go against Vanderberk's orders. That vile bastard always made sure that everyone did as he said, no matter how far out of his way he had to go. And he didn't take insubordination well.

The rest of the story was more well-known. Everybody heard about it when Vanderberk arrived at the city of Loya, looking to make an example of Caster Egmond. Whether that example was to humiliate him or to outright kill him, no one had been entirely sure, but either way, the resultant duel leveled the already-ruined city into dust.

And the Marauder barely came away with his life. If not for the sudden appearance of Jercash, Caster Egmond would have most certainly died. Or so the story went."

"3010

If that was all true, then it might make sense why the Freeman



Fellowship would be interested in recruiting him.

Loren had to wonder if that tale was really true, though. For all he knew, Egmond and Vanderberk could have fought for completely different reasons. But at the very least, he wouldn't mind meeting the Marauder and seeing for himself. As far as commanding officers went, Egmond sounded like one of the least terrible ones.

Not like Natia or Laredo or Itoya--or the Void forbid, fucking Vanderberk himself. Loren truly did not know what he would do if he were somehow transferred into one of that monster's sects. He'd been forced to work together with them before, and it was an absolute nightmare every time. How much more horrible would it be to work for them instead, he wondered?

Within the entirety of Abolish, those people really were the worst of the worst. Which was saying a lot.

Compared to past experiences, this club full of Freemen felt about as rowdy as a teenage slumber party.

Or what he imagined a slumber party to be like, anyway. He hadn't even finished elementary school before he'd had to start hunting wild animals with sticks and rocks just to fill his belly. But he'd seen movies. They were mostly realistic, right?

Man, these miniature hot dog things were good. He was starting to get thirsty, though. He didn't want to drink around a bunch of strangers, so he went for pitcher full of ice water at the end of the bar.

Another hand grabbed it at the same time as him, and he looked over to see that it belonged to a rather small man who was eyeing him right back.

""And here I thought I was the only one not drinking,"" the man said, letting him have the pitcher."

"3011

~~Valentine's Day Special - (page 6 of 8)~~

Loren's gaze lingered on him, however. He didn't recognize his face, but there was something... heavy about him. Something that Loren had felt before in the presence of extremely powerful servants.

And he'd heard that Caster Egmond was on the shorter side... but this couldn't actually be him, could it? Just sitting here at the bar by himself?

The short man tilted his head at him. ""Hmm. You're the one they call Lighteyes, are you not?""

Loren took a seat as he poured a glass for himself. ""I am. How'd you know?""

The man smiled. ""Lucky guess.""

Hmm. Really? That made Loren want to take a guess of his own. ""You... wouldn't happen to be Caster Egmond, would you?""

""Ah. How'd you know?""

""Must be our lucky day.""

""Heh."" Egmond took the pitcher and refilled his own glass.

Both men took a long swig.

""I'm surprised you've even heard of me,"" said Loren.

""It's a poor commander who doesn't pay attention to his men.""

Loren threw a glance at Rezolo, who was still by his side. He was quite certain that they'd never worked for Egmond, but from the way the guy had said that, he almost wanted to double check with the reaper. He decided against it, though.

""I don't think I've ever had the honor of serving under your command, sir.""

""My, you're very polite, aren't you?""

Loren certainly didn't want to come across otherwise. Not right now, at least.

Egmond gave Rezolo a look now, too. ""Found yourself a good one, you think?""

'He has his moments,' said Rezolo.

Wow. That might've been the most praise the reaper had ever given him.

'What brings you here, anyway?' the reaper asked.

Egmond took another swig. ""Good question. I guess you could say I'm a new man. And as such, I'm looking to make a few changes.""

"3012

~~Valentine's Day Special - (page 7 of 8)~~

'Changes that involve the Fellowship?' said Rezolo.

""Possibly,"" said Egmond. He looked around the clubroom for a moment before returning to his ice water for a sip. ""I'm in the market for new, reliable subordinates.""

Loren's interest was sufficiently piqued. He waited for Rezolo to ask another probing question, but when the reaper remained silent, he decided to jump in himself with a comment. ""Those are difficult to come by in Abolish.""

""Indeed.""

""You think the Fellowship has the kind of men you're looking for?""

""Well, I know they have different men, at the very least. They've been trying to entice me to join for years, but I've always been reluctant to take the plunge.""

""Why?""

Egmond paused for another swig. ""Truthfully? My reputation was everything to me. And joining the Freemen would have meant gambling with it. Some doors might open, others might close. I was, to put it nicely, a bit risk-averse in that regard.""

Hmm. Egmond made it sound like it had been entirely his own decision. Loren didn't see a reaper over his shoulder, and the man wasn't speaking in two voices, either. There was no telling if Egmond had even brought his reaper here. It would make sense, Loren supposed, if he'd come alone.

'And you're not like that anymore?' said Rezolo.

""As I said, I'm a new man.""

'I see. What sparked this sudden change in you, then?'

""Why do you ask?""

'Professional curiosity.'

Egmond set his drink down and looked at Rezolo, then at Loren. ""Join me and find out.""

Loren's eyes widened. He wanted to say yes straightaway, but he knew it wasn't that simple. Even Rezolo probably didn't have the final say on a decision like this.

'We've only just joined the Fellowship, ourselves,' the reaper explained.

""Is that supposed to be a problem?"" said Egmond.

'I'm not sure we'll have the latitude to choose our own assignments quite yet.'

""If I ask for you, they won't refuse me.""

"3013

~~Valentine's Day Special - (page 8 of 8)~~

'You're that interested in recruiting us?' said Rezolo.

""I'm interested in giving you a chance. If the feeling is not mutual, then by all means, stay where you are.""

'You really have changed. Where is Kalikos? I should like to speak with him.'

""Nowhere nearby. But I will be returning to him soon, if you wish to accompany me.""

Loren glanced at Rezolo. 'You know Egmond and his reaper personally?'

Rezolo ignored him. 'We would need to join you first, is what you are saying.'

""No. But it would be a rather long trip to make purely to have a

conversation. And there would be a few detours.""

'Who else have you recruited?'

""Not a single soul. You two would be the first.""

'Ah.'

Silence arrived, threatening to kill the conversation there. Only the background chatter of the Freeman remained.

Shit. Loren had a feeling that Rezolo would refuse now. It was hard to know what the reaper was thinking, even after all these years together, but he didn't think the Rezolo would want to gamble like this. If the reaper was going to be convinced, then they needed to pull something more concrete out of Egmond.

""...Does this 'new you' have a particular goal in mind?"" asked Loren.

""Yes.""

Great.

Loren waited for elaboration, trying to have patience.

Thankfully, it did arrive. ""I've spent so long destroying things. Now there is something I would like to build.""

'Oh?' said Rezolo. 'What would that be?'

""A tower.""

-+-+--+

Hector stumbled back, and before he could process anything else, he was on the floor, trying to move and finding that he didn't have the strength.

His head was pounding, and he could scarcely hold onto a single thought. He was fairly sure that someone was talking, but that was about the extent of what his faculties were able to tell him.

That, and he was tired.

Fucking exhausted, actually. Holy shit."

"3014

Wow. In a secondary thought process, he was able to assess his own sorry state. How trashed his body felt. How clouded his thoughts were. How disorienting everything was. How flat this floor was. Hmm.

Beyond that, though, the thought process wasn't good for much else. The world was a gray blur around him.

Well, maybe that was okay. Maybe he just needed some sleep or something.

Or something? What did or something mean? What was comparable to sleep?

Nothing, probably. But it did feel kinda weird, because had he not been sleeping a moment ago? Where had his mind been? Hell, where was it now?

Confusing.

Come to think of it, he wasn't sure if he was actually awake, right now. His body and mind both felt sluggish enough that he could have been asleep. Maybe this was a dream.

Nah. He almost never had dreams. Oh, or maybe he just never remembered them?

Nah.

Maybe he was just stupid. Yeah, that seemed fairly likely.

His head was swimming with images. And feelings. Sensations.

""--ctor? Hector? Come on, Hector, look at me.""

Hector? Wait, he was named Hector. Whose voice was that? It didn't sound like his own.

""Say something, Hector. Just let us know you're all the way back. Then I'll let you sleep. As much as you want.""

Back? Back from where?

Oh, right.

That's where all these images were from. All these sensations.

The Forge.

He'd seen so much.

Too much, probably. All this information. All these memories. They weren't his. They didn't belong in his head.

Who knew a tree would have so much to tell him?

He wondered if he was even the same person, anymore. How long had he been in there? Maybe the voice would be able to tell him. If he could figure out how his mouth worked again.

Ugh, that seemed like a pretty tall order, right now."  
"3015

Why was it so freaking difficult to concentrate? He had the blessing of Focus going for him, didn't he? Wasn't that supposed to help with shit like this?

Or was it? He couldn't remember.

He felt himself say something. He had no idea what it was, though. It sounded like he was speaking with a mouth full of cotton. Hopefully it made more sense to whoever was listening.

After that, he just kinda drifted for a while. Thoughts were too difficult to hold onto. His secondary thought process was a bit aware, but it was like being trapped in a murky, gray box. He could sense the box just fine, but that was about it.

He needed rest, probably.

Which was kinda weird, wasn't it? Was Garovel not around? The reaper could've relieved his fatigue in an instant, couldn't he?

Hmm, maybe he couldn't. Hector had never felt fatigue quite like this before.

His soul felt tired.

Maybe that made no sense. He wouldn't have even thought such a thing was possible. But that was the only way his half-conscious mind could describe it.

Eventually, he slept. Or was fairly sure that he did, at least.

It didn't feel normal. At all.

For Hector, sleeping was always just this warm, welcoming darkness. Thoughtless and comfortable. A blanket that wrapped itself around him completely.

But now, he saw things. Scenes. Unfolding before his eyes.

From the Forge's memories? That seemed likely. He couldn't hold onto any of them, though. Even as he watched them, they slipped through his mind like water through his fingers. He didn't have the awareness or strength or whatever was necessary in order to understand them.

It was just... different.

When he awoke, he was in a bed.

His bed.

The one in Warrenhold.

Uh-oh.

He sat up in a rush, looking around."  
"3016

Well. This was definitely the master bedroom in the Tower of Night. Everything looked the same. Why in the world did they bring him all the way back here? There was a bed near the Forge, right? They could've just let him sleep there.

Hmm.

His head was surprisingly clear, he realized. He didn't feel groggy in the slightest. Almost like when Garovel made his fatigue disappear. Except he didn't see the reaper anywhere.



Which was the first thing he needed to check on.

'...Garovel?'

'Hector! You're awake! Finally!'

'How long was I out?'

'It's been almost a whole month now, I think.'

Hector's eyes widened. '...This is the part where you tell me you're just fuckin' with me, right?'

'Afraid not, pal.'

Aw, shit. He rolled out of bed. Well, at least he had clothes on. Holy god, he stank, though. And he was so fucking hungry. He wasn't sure his stomach had ever felt so incredibly empty before--which was saying a lot, because he had many examples to compare it against.

Other than that, however, he actually felt pretty good. Light on his feet. Not sluggish at all. Ready to go somewhere and do stuff.

The first destination should probably be the shower, he figured. He made his way over to the bathroom while Garovel kept talking.

'Half of that time, you spent just standing there in front of the Forge. The other half, you spent asleep. In a fucking soul-coma.'

'A soul-coma?'

'Yeah. Figured that was a good term for it, since I kept trying to wake you up. Unsuccessfully, that is. Which was really obnoxious, by the way. Please don't do that again.'

'Yeah, er, I'll try not to.'

'Y'know, at first, I wasn't worried at all. You do weird and dumb shit like this all the time, so I was fine with just waiting. But I gotta admit, after that second week rolled around, I was becoming slightly upset. Peeved. Miffed, you might say.'

'Uh... huh...''

"3017

'And also, congratulations on helping me invent a new term. Soul-comas weren't a thing until you came along and scared the shit out of everyone.'

Hector just showered in silence, unsure how to respond. The reaper sounded pretty upset, actually. Not necessarily with him so much as with the strangeness of the circumstances.

But maybe also with him. Kinda.

'And y'know, seeing as our souls are connected as per this whole reaper-servant situation we've got goin' on, you would think that something like a soul-coma would affect me along with you. But no. Apparently not. I've felt just peachy this whole time.'

Hector scratched his head at that as he applied shampoo. Oh hey. Yep. His hair had definitely grown a bit. 'Er... are you implying that you're upset about NOT being in a coma with me?'

'No. Maybe. A little bit.'

'Garovel, I'm touched. But that's stupid. Like, really stupid.'

'Yeah, well, maybe I'm just curious about what the Forge showed you.' A beat passed. 'And don't you dare tell me that it didn't show you anything or that you don't remember.'

Well, now, he was kinda tempted to say both of those things.

'You were standing in one place, motionless, for two weeks. And I've been waiting for some damn answers for another two weeks on top of that. So you better have some juicy-as-fuck details for me about what the hell happened back there.'

'Uh...'

'Hector...'

Frankly, he wasn't sure how to explain. Or if it was even possible to. What had the Forge shown him? What hadn't it shown him? There was enough information swimming around in his head right to fill a book. Or ten books. Or more, maybe.

Holy shit, he thought.

But it was all a mess. Disordered. And foggy, in places. Just concentrating on it was difficult, like trying to look through a dim window.

It wasn't supposed to be there, he was pretty sure."

"3018

'Listen, eh... can we talk about that later? I'm not really sure how to explain it all yet, and I feel like you should bring me up to speed on the past month, first.'

'Oh, I see how it is. You like leaving me in the dark, don't you?'

Hector's face flattened as he lathered himself in soap. 'Garovel.'

'Alright, alright. I mean. Yeah. There's. Some stuff. That I should probably tell you about. It might be kinda surprising, though. Just a tad bit.'

Hector waited. Recalling how many difficult situations he'd been worried about before his ""soul-coma,"" he tried to brace himself for bad news.

'Hey, are you sitting down? You're not, are you? You're too busy washing your junk.'

'Garovel, just tell me.'

'Okay, well, first off, the Rainlords found their captive brethren.'

His head twitched. 'What?!'

'They're in Vantalay.'

'You're shitting me. Wait, who's in Vantalay? Tell me everyone didn't just leave Warrenhold while I was out.'

'No, no, nobody's left yet. But they've definitely been thinking about it. A lot. It's practically all they've been talking about this past week.'

'Shit... so the other half of the Rainlords are being held captive in Vantalay, right now?'

'Mhmm. Apparently, one of the Triplets happened upon the intel while sneaking through a VMP base.'

It took Hector a second to piece all that information together. 'The VMP? I thought the VMP was working with Abolish. Why would they have intel on Vangaurdian prisoners from a totally different country?'

'They ARE working with Abolish. Mostly. It's a big ol' mess. It would appear that the Vanguard has made a secret deal with them to take custody of the captive Rainlords in exchange for pulling their forces out of Vantalay.'

Hector blinked. 'What the fuck kind of deal is that?! Wouldn't the VMP just hand them over to Abolish and be done with it?!'

'Supposedly, it's a temporary arrangement. The Vanguard would come back for them once the war is over and take custody again. But who knows how true that is?'

'Agh, fuck...'  
"3019 -- CCLXI.

'It's good that you're awake now,' said Garovel, 'but I also have a feeling that one of the reasons the Rainlords haven't made their move yet is because they were waiting for you.'

'I kinda doubt that, Garovel.'

'Do you? Hmph, well, of course you do. Look, I'm not saying it's the only reason. They're definitely trying to pick their moment. They wouldn't tell you this in so many words, but I get the impression that they're terrified of running in half-cocked and letting even more people get captured.'

That was somewhat relieving to hear, at least.

'Obviously, it would be best if the team that we already have in Vantalay was able to free the other Houses without us needing to send any more reinforcements.'

'Would that even be possible?'

'That's what the Rainlords have been trying to figure out. It's a

complicated situation with a lot of details that I need to tell you. Before we got too deep into it, I'm sure there other things you're curious about, hmm?'

He was right, Hector knew. 'The Forge. What's been happening with Abbas and the Forge?'

Garovel fell silent a moment. 'Heh.'

Hector paused, listening even more intently all of a sudden.

'It's up and running. Abbas has been working with it nonstop.'

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-One: 'O, riving serpent...'

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Raul Blackburn had been busy.

The situation in Vantalay was more precarious than ever, but his determination to not let everyone down was stronger than ever, too.

The moment he'd heard that his captive kin would be coming here, everything had changed. His priorities. His strategy. His entire attitude toward this operation.

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"3020

Everything he did, every breath he took, meal he ate, moment he spent--it was all leading toward one thing, right now.

But it wasn't a straight path. He'd realized that very quickly. He couldn't

just run in and try to break everyone out. Even if Cousin Melchor and the others were with him, that wouldn't be the right way to go.

It was an open question as to whether or not they currently had enough power in the country in order to overwhelm the VMP with brute force alone, but even supposing that they did, there was the much more pressing issue of getting everyone out of the country safely once they were free.

These Invisibility rings were profoundly useful, but they wouldn't be able to conceal hundreds of people. And once they made a big splash, the VMP would be all over them--and most likely Abolish, as well.

They had to be especially mindful of all the non-servants among the captives. The entirety of Houses Redwater, Zabat, Garza, Stroud, and Merlo were all there. Once their servants were free, they would be a huge help in a fight but not necessarily in matters of stealth.

Great care was required here. Any mistakes could mean the death of his kin.

That was why he had decided to break the Atreyan spy, Donald Elias, out of prison first.

In that regard, the timing couldn't have been better. Between the new prisoners they were importing and the intensifying siege on Ridgemark, the VMP had its hands completely full, right now. They didn't have their attention on Bridgewater Prison.

It had certainly looked imposing from the outside with its high walls and watchtowers. But as expected, it hadn't done much good against the power of Invisibility."

"3021

Now, Donald Elias was sitting across a campfire from him, deep in the Vantalayan wilderness.

It was actually kind of terrifying how easy it had been to break the guy out. Invisibility really was dangerous. Even with the ring's limitations, being able to just waltz into a hostile stronghold unchallenged was just insane.

The more time he spent with this Invisibility, the more impressed he

was by the fact that Lord Goffe had apparently been able to fight off dozens of invisible enemies single-handedly back at Dunehall.

It made sense, though. He'd heard a rumor that Lord Goffe had unusually sharp senses--as if he had eyes in the back of his head, some said.

Raul could at least rest a bit easier knowing that Warrenhold wouldn't be caught off guard like Dunehall had. With Lord Goffe and all the Houses being well aware of the threat posed by aberrations with this type of power, he had confidence that anyone who tried that tactic on them a second time would be in for a rude awakening.

Unfortunately, the rest of the world wasn't like Warrenhold.

Donald, for his part, was a gray-bearded man with a deeply sunken gaze. His pallid face looked like it hadn't seen sunlight in ages, and he was so thin that he bordered on malnourished.

The man was sharp, though. When Raul had appeared in front of him, the guy hadn't made a fuss, asked any questions, or otherwise looked a gift horse in the mouth. He'd cooperated as easily as could be. But once they were a safe distance away from the prison, he'd been full of probing questions, not all of which Raul could answer.

The man was up to speed by now. For the most part. Raul hadn't explained that he was a Rainlord, only that he was an ally of Atreya, working under Lord Goffe.

Donald had no idea who that was, apparently, which Raul found surprising, but whatever."

"3022

Such details were unimportant, right now. The only thing that mattered was to free his kin. Raul had hoped that Donald would be able to help with that task, but he hadn't been holding his breath, either. The man was not a servant, and he'd been in prison for a decade and a half. After everything he'd been through, it would've been entirely reasonable of him to want no part of a second jailbreak. Raul was prepared to run him all the way back to Ridgemark on foot, if that's what the man had his heart set on.



But it wasn't.

""...Yeah, I can help you with your problem.""

""Really? I was hoping you would say that, but, ah... how, exactly?""

Donald regarded him for a long moment, the campfire flickering brightly in his attentive eyes. ""Would I be wrong in assuming that you're still relatively new to this business, son?""

Raul didn't answer, instead just tilting his head at him. What business was he referring to, exactly?

""Would you like some tips from an old hand?""

Oh. He was talking about spying, Raul realized. ""Ah... sure.""

""The key to any extended operation in a foreign country is acquiring local support,"" said Donald. ""Whether they know your true identity or not, never underestimate the importance of having someone nearby to rely on when things go all twisty on you. That's the only reason I've been able to survive all these years.""

""How do you mean?"" said Raul.

""I made myself an asset to a number of different groups around here. Not all of them are still around, but the ones that are have grown pretty powerful in their own right.""

That made Raul curious. ""How'd you make yourself an asset while imprisoned?""

"3023

""Well, for most of them, it didn't happen while I was in prison,"" said Donald. ""This was work that I did beforehand. Meeting folks. Making myself useful. Building friendships. Surely they taught you a thing or two about that, eh?""

He didn't know who ""they"" was supposed to be referring to, but yeah, Raul wanted to think that he did indeed know a little about those strategies.

""But yes, I did manage to finagle a few new allies for myself while

behind bars."" Donald paused for a low laugh and rubbed his neck. ""Bridgewater is infamous for a reason. All told, the men in there could probably take over this country if they worked together. Not that I imagine they would.""

""Are you saying the VMP is right to be afraid of them?""

""From a strategic perspective? Without a doubt. Their collective influence would be unstoppable. But they're also leaderless, and half of them are true criminals, not just people with the wrong politics. If they were free to go where they wanted and do as they wished, I can't tell if they would manage to successfully organize themselves and overthrow the government or just destroy each other through infighting first. I hope the prisoners that you're after are different.""

""Oh, they are.""

""You really believe they can protect Atreya during this war?""

Raul had been a little surprised at first that Donald even knew about the continental war, but apparently even Bridgewater hadn't been able to keep that news from him. Good thing, too, because it seemed to be a key factor in motivating Donald to help him. ""I do, yes.""

Mr. Elias was still looking at him with a fair amount of skepticism, though. ""How can you be so sure? These prisoners are superhumans like yourself, I assume, but Atreya is so small and so far away from here. This Lord Goffe of yours has their allegiance, too?""

"3024

Raul frowned and scratched his head, knowing this would be difficult to explain without revealing his heritage as a Rainlord. Difficult, or just impossible, perhaps. Hmm.

Now seemed like a good time to resort to his tried and true strategy.

He gave the man a big smile. ""Well, to be honest, it's all kinda complicated, and I don't really understand it very well myself, dude! But I'm sure it'll work out! You'll see!""

Donald Elias just kind of stared at him, blinking dully.

Raul filled the silence with a hearty laugh. ""I've always found that it's

best not to sweat the small stuff, ya feel me? Lord Goffe is a trustworthy man, which is pretty much all that matters at the end of the day, I think.""

""...That's a very laidback attitude for a spy,"" said Donald. Raul couldn't tell if that was doubt or disapproval on his face.

""Well, I'm still pretty new to this whole gig. Maybe that'll get beaten outta me eventually. I hope not, though. I feel like I'm being true to myself this way, y'know?""

""Mmhmm..."

Raul knew that he probably wasn't convincing the guy of much, right now. But that was okay. That was a job for his elders if they so decided it--or for the Atreyan Queen, maybe. He just wanted to avoid getting bogged down in unnecessary details, right now. ""Listen, bruh, I will vouch for these prisoners with my life, okay?"" He paused to suck air through his teeth. ""Plus, we, uh... we might kinda need their help in order to get outta the country safely, anyway.""

""Oh?""

""I mean, maybe we won't. Maybe we could just make a break for the border right now and skip across it, no problem, but, uh... things are real messy in this country, at the moment. Lotta dangerous jackholes runnin' around.""

"3025

""Jack... holes. I suppose that is one way of putting it, yes. And I would prefer not to walk back to Atreya on foot. Do you already have a better escape route in mind?""

Raul bobbed his head. ""Sorta. Ridgemark is the only place still letting civilian craft come and go freely, so it'd theoretically be our best option, but it's also where the fighting between the VMP, Abolish, and the RPMP is the strongest. Now that the Vanguard has pulled out of the country, I expect Ridgemark to be pretty dangerous.""

""Hence why more superhumans would come in handy,"" concluded Donald.

""Yup.""

The other man gazed into the campfire for a long moment and stroked his scraggly beard. ""Do you know where they're being held?""

""A place called Logden,"" said Raul.

""Ah... that's unfortunate.""

""How so?""

""I wasn't kept exclusively at Bridgewater all these years. Been transferred plenty of times. Spent a fair few of my years in Logden. Huge facility. Deep in the mountains. Beautiful vistas, though. I enjoyed my time there a little more, actually.""

""I'm not hearing the unfortunate part, dude.""

""The mountains make it extremely difficult to escape from. Heard about several guys who tried during my time there. All were caught, shot, or fell to their deaths. Mostly the latter, since they didn't have enough guards to watch everyone, but it seems like they won't have that problem this time. I was wondering why Bridgewater's security seemed to have lightened so much recently. Makes sense if they were being transferred over to Logden for the influx of new prisoners there.""

""A little climbing shouldn't be too much of a problem,"" said Raul, stretching the fingers of his right hand. Difficult terrain was something of a specialty of his, he felt. ""I'm more concerned about getting everyone out of the building safely. And quietly, if possible. There'll be normal people mixed in with the superhumans, and we need to keep them from getting shot at.""

"3026

""Mm,"" hummed Donald. ""And that's why you chose to spring me first, I take it? To see if I might be able to help you with that problem?""

""That, and it's a lot easier to spring one than three hundred. But like I said, if you don't know how to help, that's okay. I'll find a way to get you back to Atreya safely first. You don't need to feel compelled to come along just because I broke you out.""

""That's very kind of you.""

Eh. It wasn't really about kindness, actually. Raul just didn't want to

give Donald any extra motive to betray him. If the man thought that the only way to get out of Vantalay quickly was to lie and give Raul the slip, then that would only cause problems.

Plus, he still wasn't entirely convinced that Donald would actually be able to help. So far, the guy hadn't really shared any concrete plans with him. Wasn't he supposed to be some kind of hyper competent spy? Well, Raul couldn't exactly blame him if he wasn't up for this. Fifteen years in prison had to have dulled his skills.

Raul kept his opinions to himself, though.

""...Are you hoping to ally with the RPMP?"" said Donald.

""To escape through Ridgemark you mean? Maybe.""

""Having so many superhumans on your side would be quite the bargaining chip during negotiations. If they're really fending off both the VMP and Abolish without the Vanguard's help, then they would probably be quite welcoming of your assistance.""

""That would mean getting mixed up in this civil war of theirs,"" said Raul. ""And potentially the continental war, too.""

""Indeed. Hence my curiosity.""

Ah. He wanted to know if they were going to drag Atreya into these foreign conflicts. It was certainly a reasonable concern."

"3027

""Well, that's not really up to me,"" said Raul, ""but I'm sure it wouldn't be our first choice. I only see that happening if we can't find any other way out of the country."" He paused for a moment, thinking. ""Or... if something else happens, I guess.""

""Hmm? Something else? Like what?""

""Ah..."" He didn't want to lie to the guy. Maybe that was a bad quality for a spy to have. But eh. ""How much do you know about the ongoing humanitarian crisis in this country?""

Donald's back straightened for a moment as he gazed across the campfire at him. Then he settled forward again. ""Not much, but I can

guess.""

""Mm. Well, um. Dude. If we see something really horrific unfolding right before our eyes, it'll be difficult not to get involved, at least a little. That's just the kinda people we are.""

""I see...""

Raul had to wonder if he really did. Perhaps he should just admit that they were Rainlords already. Donald would probably understand right away, if he did. And he would almost definitely find out eventually.

Agh. Raul was torn.

But there were more important concerns, right now.

""Well, in any event, if we're to get all your friends out of Logden, then I have a few of different strategies for you.""

Oh? Raul was listening.

""Option one: we turn the guards against each other. That would create the conditions for a mass jailbreak. It wouldn't exactly be quiet, but it would give us tentative support from the other prisoners.""

""How in the world would we be able to make the guards turn on each other?"" said Raul.

""By stirring the pot among their factions.""

""Factions?""

""Mmhm. The guards aren't all VMP, and even the ones that are have subgroups of their own. Factions within factions, you could say. There's the Prison Guard's Union, the United Worker's Union, the Vantalay Law Enforcement Union, the Anti-Corruption League, the Red Dogs, the Hoppers, the Winders--""

""How do you know all this?""

"3028

The man breathed a short laugh and shrugged. ""I've had a lot of time to read and listen to people.""

Damn.

""Anyway, in order to stoke a violent confrontation between them at Logden, we would have to enact a two-step process. First, increase tension to new heights. Second, spark a related incident at the prison itself. All in all, preparing that first part would likely require a couple weeks, at least. And the second part would also require a bit of prep work, too. If it fizzles out and doesn't cause the kind of conflict we need, then the whole plan fails.""

Raul just kind of nodded along.

""So that's option one. Elements of it are flexible, but for most part, it's a big, loud prison break that'll conceal our involvement with pure chaos.""

""Right...""

""Option two: we somehow trick the guards into releasing everyone for us. Admittedly, this one sounds impossible to me. The only reason I mention it is because I've seen it done before, but circumstances were different, and it sounds like these prisoners are too high-profile for that to work. But if you've got an idea how to pull it off, then by all means, let me know.""

Raul gave a shrug. ""I dunno, dude.""

""Fair enough. Option three: we take it slow. Using that power of yours, we sneak everyone out, one at a time like you did with me. This'd obviously take a while, but it might just be the safest bet to avoid anyone getting injured.""

Hmm. ""Wouldn't they realize something was wrong when some of their prisoner start going missing?""

""Probably. But if they have no idea where they went, then the only thing they can do is beef up security to make sure no more escape. And that won't help them against an invisible man, now will it?""  
"3029

""It'll make my job progressively harder,"" said Raul. ""And if Abolish is there, then they might have some means of detecting me through my

invisibility."

"Ah..."

"If I thought I could sneak them all out on my own, then I wouldn't have gone for you first," said Raul. "No offense."

"None taken." The man stroked his beard again, then gave a nod. "Option four: we start a fire. Standard prison procedure is to evacuate the building in such an event, which would make it much easier to reach our targets and free them."

Interesting thought. Hmm.

"Downsides include potential danger to the captives, relatively small window of opportunity, and as you already mentioned, if Abolish is there, they might complicate things. Their superhumans may put out the fire too quickly and ruin everything."

It wasn't terribly different from the plan that the Triplets had come up with during their initial attack on Miro. Instead of a fire, though, they'd utilized landslides. Creating an emergency situation to disrupt the enemy's defenses was a perfectly rational strategy.

But it hadn't worked before, and he had a feeling that it wouldn't work now, either. Mostly for the reasons that Donald had just listed.

"Any other options?"

"Option five: we tunnel our way in. That's a favorite tactic of you superhumans, isn't it?"

Raul nodded. "You're not wrong, and for that reason, we usually have safeguards against that."

"Like what?"

"Underground detection networks," said Raul. "Sometimes that means guards. Sometimes it just means sensors. But if they brought in a bunch of extra manpower for this, then it's a fair bet that it'll be guards this time."

"Mm. Or both."

"Yeah."

"So you think Abolish will be waiting for us underground?"



""Probably."" There was also the issue of reapers sensing their souls while tunneling in, but he didn't want to bring them up, especially when it would be mitigated by the Invisibility ring. The less he had to tell Donald about the way that the power of 'superhumans' actually functioned, the better."

"3030

""Alright,"" said Donald. ""Option six: we draw manpower away from the prison.""

""How would we do that?""

""By applying pressure to the VMP elsewhere in the country. Somewhere that they are more vulnerable and might need to call in reinforcements. Relatively nearby, preferably.""

""Hmm. Could be helpful. I don't see it solving all our problems on its own, though.""

""Indeed. A hybrid plan may be best. But the more complicated the plan gets, the more difficult it will be to pull off with only the two of us.""

That was a damn good point, Raul felt. ""In that case... maybe we start with option three. Try to sneak a few key people out so that they can help us free everyone else.""

""That is what I was thinking as well, but I don't know your prisoner friends or what their abilities are like. Do you already have an idea of who you would like to start with?""

Now there was a tricky question. The temptation, of course, was to go for the most powerful servants among the captives. Octavia Redwater and Rayen Merlo. Without a doubt, both of those old ladies would prove invaluable here.

But the enemy would surely know that as well. Those two would be the most well-guarded, for sure. And even if he managed to free one of them, it would probably cause the biggest possible commotion.

Which was not what they wanted if this was going to turn into a slow, grueling operation. Keeping Logden in the dark about what was happening for as long as possible would be better.

In that vein, it might be best to free a non-servant first, someone who would have the lowest level of security around them. But who among the non-servants would actually be able to help them?"

"3031

Crap. This was where House Blackburn's isolation over the last thirty or so years was a real problem. When it came down to it, he actually didn't know his kin from the other Houses all the well. Who was the smartest? Who was the sneakiest? Who was the best under pressure? Who was the most creative, the most tech savvy, the most experienced in the field?

For House Blackburn, he could answer all of those questions.

Tch. He needed to consult Arumoro here. The reaper had taken part in the House's isolation just as much, but even if he couldn't tell Raul who to choose, he could at least talk to others in Warrenhold and figure something out.

But it was a start.

And over the next couple weeks, he and Donald would have plenty of time to make their preparations.

The elders were surprisingly reluctant to act. He'd expected them to rush in, to dispatch reinforcements immediately. He'd even been afraid that they would have Cousin Melchor and the others join him up north in order to lay siege to Logden Prison.

He wouldn't have minded the assistance, of course, but it would've become an enormous mess. And he wasn't yet convinced that such extreme actions would be necessary.

Perhaps he'd been able to convince Arumoro to share his opinion, and perhaps Arumoro had then been able to convince everyone else at Warrenhold.

But Raul kinda doubted it. At best, his opinion was merely one small factor among a multitude of others.

Because apparently, the situation in Miro was evolving.

The RPMP had made contact with Cousin Melchor's group again. And this time, they were seeking assistance outright. No more playing coy like before. They wanted help repelling the joint siege on Ridgemark from the VMP and Abolish."

"3032

It was a big ask. Cousin Melchor's group had a difficult decision to make. They didn't want to get involved any further with the war than they already were. If they began openly supporting the RPMP, then there was no telling how that might complicate things later.

But on the other hand, they were already locked in a stalemate against the Killer of Krohin and his men. In all the time that Raul had spent away from Miro, the ongoing siege there still hadn't made much progress, apparently. Raul wasn't sure if that was a testament to the Killer's wisdom or to his cowardice.

In open battle, Raul was sure that Leo and Cousin Melchor would be able to win the day, but would they ever get that chance again? It seemed increasingly unlikely.

So when he heard that they decided to take the RPMP up on their offer, Raul was anxious about the news but not terribly surprised.

With the RPMP's help, they could safely move the civilians out of Miro and over to Ridgemark, where they could be either protected or taken out of the country.

But it also meant that Raul couldn't expect much in the way of help on his end. With everyone else busy protecting Ridgemark from being overrun and probably razed to the ground, manpower was difficult to come by.

But not impossible, apparently.

Raul got word that his brothers were coming to him. Adan and Esai.

Which was news that brought a faint smile to his face. It hadn't even been that long since he'd seen them, but somehow, it felt like ages. He wasn't accustomed to being on his own for even this length of time. It would be a relief to have them around again."

"3033

This was all business, though. No time for screwing around or enjoying each other's company. The only reason they Adan and Esai were being given to him for this operation was because of how important it was. The elders knew that if he could free the rest of their people, then the siege of Ridgemark would not be nearly as difficult of a problem to deal with.

A lot was riding on his shoulders here. Arguably, everything was.

And he was under no illusions that everyone was pleased about this situation, about him being the one in such a critical position, right now. In a perfect world, it would be someone else here. Someone stronger. More experienced. More qualified.

But it wasn't. It was him.

And again, he was calm. He had to be. At times, he felt like the world was spiraling all around him, enveloping everything except him in pure chaos. Like he was in the eye of a hurricane. A very small eye. One misstep, and the wind might just carry him off into some distant horizon.

Unable to do anything. Unable to be useful.

He had to keep his head clear. More than anything, he had to.

Their preparations progressed smoothly. Donald Elias knew the area even better than Raul could've expected, and he had old contacts all over the place.

Most seemed pleasantly surprised to see him walk through their door, and hardly any of them used the same name for him. John, Caleb, Fred, Marcus--Raul wondered how the man was able to keep track of so many aliases. It seemed a bit risky to be using so many different ones all within the same country, but if they hadn't been burned over the last fifteen years, then the guy must've been doing something right."

"3034

Almost none of Donald's contacts had any idea that he'd been in prison. Only the ones who called him John seemed to know, and even they didn't know why. Donald didn't bullshit them, though. He just left key information out. The ones who called him John, he told them he'd escaped and needed supplies.

It apparently didn't matter that he had no money. More than once, they told him that he was good for it, that he could pay them back later--or that he didn't even have to, that they would be insulted if he tried.

Raul was in awe. When they were alone, he asked Donald how he was able to gain the trust of so many people, many of whom didn't look like they extended their trust very easily.

""You're thinking about it the wrong way,"" said Donald. ""When you've got years of friendship and correspondence under your belt, it's not about gaining their trust or tricking them. It's about being trustworthy. I didn't convince them to be my friends. They are my friends.""

""But what if you have to betray them, someday? What if it jeopardizes your mission, and you're forced to choose?""

""Questions like that will poison your mind, son. It'll infect your behavior, make you feel like you're lying even when you're just having a normal conversation. It's not that complicated. In fact, it's the simplest thing in the world. Don't psych yourself out.""

Half or more of that sounded like bullshit to Raul, but he supposed the man still had a decent point. Overthinking things wasn't going to help.

When his brothers finally made contact with them, the preparations were just about complete. The look on Donald's face when he saw the three of them standing together for the first time was just as enjoyable as Raul had expected. Donald asked if this was another of his superpowers, which made the Triplets laugh in unison.

That only seemed to make Donald more disturbed, however. Which also kinda made it funnier."

"3035 -- CCLXII.

Raul made sure to clarify the situation, eventually. But truth be told, once they'd settled back down, he was a little surprised that Donald

could even tell that the three of them shared the same face-- particularly Adan, who was still missing his left eye. The boys hadn't made contact with their reapers yet, so their wounds from being tortured by Abolish at Miro hadn't regenerated yet.

His brothers were in good spirits about it, though. Adan kept saying that he was thinking about letting the eye stay gone.

""An eye patch would make me look more distinguished, don't you think?"" he'd said. ""Like a grizzled warrior.""

""You could wear an eye patch without actually giving up the eye, y'know,"" Esai told him.

""Bro. That'd make me feel like a giant douche.""

""You mean you don't feel like one already?""

As their preparations neared completion, the pressure was beginning to mount for the task they were undertaking. Their scouting efforts were the real point of alarm for Raul. As they'd feared, they could see reapers hovering all over Logden prison, which almost certainly meant that Abolish was indeed present here.

That, or the VMP had a lot servants of their own. Which wasn't out of the question, actually.

Either way, it was terrible news.

Even worse news arrived, however, right as he was readying himself for his first attempt to infiltrate the building.

'Raul,' came Arumoro's echoing voice. 'Be very careful. We just got word that Vanderberk is in Vantalay.'

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Two: 'As an archdemon digs...'

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Man, those tattoos were a tough nut to crack. Just flaying the skin off of the little Lion of the Desert's bones was not enough to nullify their effects. Physically, they were destroyed, but their soul-signature remained, bonded directly to the lad's soul."

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"3036

Frustrating though it was, it did make for an interesting puzzle. How many years had it been since he'd found a lock that he couldn't break? It was a fun exercise in its own way.

Qorvass sure wasn't cooperative, though. As was to be expected, he supposed. Several times, Morgunov had broken Asad's body down to more than little fleshy piles, and Qorvass kept trying to refuse regenerating him.

'I won't help you torture him,' the reaper told him.

No doubt, he was worried that Morgunov was just trying to drive the kid mad, and no amount of explaining could change that stubborn little mind, it seemed.

How did Qorvass not understand he was doing them a favor? They'd be able to contact their precious Rasalased once this was over. Surely, that was more valuable than any momentary discomfort.

And okay, yeah, maybe an entire month was a pretty long moment, but hey, time was relative. In fact, depending on who you talked to, time might not even be a real thing.

Qorvass didn't want to see reason, however, so Morgunov resorted to ol' reliable. The tactic that never failed.

Threatening to kill the other hostages if he didn't cooperate.

To the reaper's credit, he tried to remain strong even then, tried to play it off like the loss of all these Vanguardian generals and their reapers would be no big deal to him.

But Morgunov knew better, of course. Qorvass might've had the appearance of a broken clock, but he was no machine. Not even close. The reaper was a big softy when it came down to it. That was one of his more endearing traits, actually.



And sure enough, Qorvass caved not long after that. It helped that his boys had brought some more Sandlord hostages in, but only in terms of speeding things along. No way ol' Qorvy would've let the Vannies bite the big one so easily."

"3037

Morgunov was glad. He didn't have the heart to tell the reaper that it wouldn't have mattered, either way. If the emperor really wanted to, he could've just compelled Qorvass to do what he wanted through sheer force of will alone.

That would've been way less fun, though. He greatly enjoyed making others wrestle with moral decisions. He always felt like he was observing a primitive alien's thought process when he did that.

It was adorable the way they never seemed to understand how meaningless their ethical struggles were. And not just because he had the power to overturn any choice they made, either.

Morgunov was trying to be more careful with Asad's body now, though--like he had been at the beginning, before one of the Roberts had brought Qorvass to him. After having thought the reaper had escaped, that little present had been quite the pleasant surprise. Especially because Parsey Boy was still under the impression that Qorvass had gotten away.

He liked being able to keep another secret from him. That cunning monkey was fun to play with, but dangerous. But fun. But dangerous. But the danger was also what made him so fun. The longer Morgunov let him live, the more threatening Parson Miles would become. But the more fun, too.

Eheheh. It was a real pickle of a situation with that guy.

He could probably put it off for a few more years, at least. Or maybe just let him see how far he could go. Maybe he'd usurp ol' Sermey, one day. Wouldn't that be neat?

Morgunov wondered how Parson would've handled Qorvass' little dilemma. The lad had a callous streak, that was for sure. Learned from Overra and Iceheart, no doubt. Which was yet another of Morgunov's playthings, at the moment."

He hadn't had this many new toys in ages. He sometimes found it difficult to choose between them.

Lamont the Iceheart was undoubtedly the most deadly among his current captives, and so it was no surprise that Jercash had been messaging him constantly about it, telling him to at least kill Iceheart, if no one else.

But ol' Jerky didn't understand. Not everything was about military strategy. Sure, it would've been the wisest move as far as this continental war was concerned, but there was a bigger picture to think about. Test subjects like this weren't so easy to come by.

Lamont would be invaluable for limit testing the next upgrades for the Roberts. Morgunov planned to start with the Robert that had retrieved Qorvass. That was a deserving boy if ever there was one, eheh. Recovering a lost reaper was no minor feat. And for as long as Qorvass had been missing, that chase must've lasted for hours upon hours through solid rock. It wouldn't surprise him if the Robert had ended up tunneling all the way through to the Undercrust while following him.

The gap did leave a bit of a mystery, though. Theoretically, Qorvass could have contacted someone during that time. Not for long, obviously, if he was being chased, but it wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

Which meant that someone might have followed Qorvass and the Robert back here.

It was unlikely, of course. He'd personally canvassed the area a half-dozen times by now and found no such evidence, but still. He hated little, nagging possibilities like that.

Even he couldn't be entirely free of an emperor's paranoia, it seemed.

Agh. So irritating. He didn't want to share that quality with the others. He was different from them. He was the Mad Demon. He didn't let things like that bother him."

He should just relax. If a surprise arrived and tried to kill him, then that would just make things more interesting.

Rgh.

Only if he was fully prepared for surprises. Was he? That was the big question. He hated being unprepared. If he lost a fight, then sure, yeah, that'd be a big ol' pain. But if he lost it because he had overlooked something?

Now that was frustrating beyond measure.

He had to hold himself to a higher standard. The young ones were looking up to him, after all. Even the Vannie ones, he suspected. Just a teeny bit. They'd probably never admit to it, though.

He could tell that this war was going to be a big transitional period for both Abolish and the Vanguard. With so many Vannies currently at his mercy, the counterstroke would need to arrive soon. In fact, he was a little surprised that it hadn't happened already. Were they trying to lure him into a false sense of security, perhaps? Make him think that they no longer had the strength to reply after their loss at Uego?

Hmph. Nonsense.

Sermung. What were you up to?

Supposedly, Jercash had ""something"" that could keep the Crystal Titan busy, but to be quite blunt, Morgunov didn't believe the lad. Maybe in more peaceful times, whatever trick Jerky had up his sleeve would work, but now? With all these Vannies' lives at stake? With the Vanguard pressed as it was?

No. And Jercash had to know better than that.

Maybe this Project Blacksong of theirs would be their answer. But did they even know what they were doing with it, anymore? By all accounts, it had grown far beyond its initial premise and into a confused and tangled beast. Certainly, they couldn't expect to have kept it a secret from Abolish after all this time. He hoped it wasn't just another disappointing smokescreen, just another facade in the eternal war of disinformation between them."

"3040

Briefly, he'd thought that perhaps the Vannies had finally made their big move when he got word that Crowe had been killed. That had certainly come as a surprise. Crowe and Bloodeye had been pushing Abbas Saqqaf for days, if not weeks at that point, so Morgunov had thought them wise enough to not get caught off guard by him. He'd even been in a weakened state, thanks to an earlier tussle with the Roberts.

But no. The wily, little Sunboy led them right into a group of reinforcements.

Non-Vanguard reinforcements, apparently. And they made enough of a difference that Crowe and his reaper had been unable to escape.

Bloodeye was the only one present for the battle, and his report was spotty, at best. Not that Morgunov necessarily blamed him for that. Battles were chaotic. Even with a reaper's help, it was often tough to keep track of everything that was going on.

But Bloodeye and his reaper, Arzil, both seemed fairly certain that it was not the Sunsmith who struck the killing blow. They said it was some new young buck named Darksteel.

So Morgunov decided to read the kid's file. Unsurprisingly, there wasn't much there.

But there wasn't nothing.

This little Darksteel fella, Hector Something-or-other, had interfered with Abolish operations twice before, making this the lucky third.

The first instance had been a thwarted coup in the kid's apparent homeland, which was one of those tiny spits of land on the other side of Lorent that barely anyone ever bothered thinking about. All in all, a nuisance of an operation that probably hadn't mattered that much, either way.

But the second instance? That had been when Abbas Saqqaf managed to capture Ivan. And now this Darksteel had been present for the slaying of Crowe, too?

Morgunov disliked coincidences."

He knew from experience how dangerous new players on the board could be. Without a clear track record or reputation from which to judge, they could be hiding all manner of surprises.

The big fear, usually, was that it might be a so-called ""secret emperor's"" coming out party--that was, one of those folks who thought they could cower in the shadows for a few centuries and then just step out onto the world stage as one of his equals.

Nevermind the fact that true strength required so much more than just age. They never seemed to grasp that part, probably because their delusional reapers were too busy filling their heads with nonsense.

A coward could never be an emperor.

And Saqqaf was indeed a coward. Time would soon tell if this Darksteel was, too.

Bloodeye was out for revenge. He wanted Morgunov's blessing to go hunt Saqqaf and Darksteel down. Which was odd, because he and Crowe had hated each other's guts, as far as Morgunov recalled. Maybe they had built up a secret camaraderie over the years while he hadn't been looking, but Morgunov doubted it. More likely, Bloodeye just felt humiliated by their loss and wanted to save face.

Plus, if Bloodeye made it sound like he was doing it for Crowe's sake, then Crowe's men might be more receptive to the idea of following him as their new commander.

Eheh. If Bloodeye played his cards right, he might soon be able to stand alongside the likes of Vanderberk and Ivan.

Probably not Jercash or Gohvis, though. Those two seemed to be reaching new heights of their own now.

At last, the hierarchy of power between the strongest was slowly becoming clear again. Morgunov appreciated that. It had been ages since the last proper shakeup. It was important to keep everyone on their toes."

Even just a few years ago, there'd been no obvious winners among the top boys. Jercash, Gohvis, Gunther, Dunhouser, Ivan, Vanderberk. They certainly had their own opinions about who was stronger than whom, but as far as Morgunov was concerned, none of them had truly been tested for the last century.

The Battle at Lac'Vayce, for example, might've gotten plenty of attention around the world and been seen as a rip-roaring success for Abolish, resulting in over a million casualties, but what actual shift had taken place?

None. Lamont and Jackson versus Jercash, Ivan, and Gunther. And yet they'd all walked away unscathed in the end. Sermung had come in at the last minute and rendered the whole dialogue moot, as he was wont to do.

Which was why Morgunov had not been particularly impressed by their little achievement.

He never liked to play the role of party pooper, but still. It had become only too clear that, for some of his boys, this whole contest was nothing more than a numbers game. As long as they killed enough non-combatants, they felt like they'd won.

It was embarrassing, quite frankly.

To see them so happy like that, so content with their own mediocrity.

But that was the past. Gunther was now dead, and Ivan, still captured.

And Jercash was at last beginning to achieve his true potential.

The war front in Hoss was all down to him, and he was handling it well so far. He had to deal with three marshals simultaneously. Kane, Grant, and Carson.

And he'd already slain Carson.

Finally, some news to be proud of. Morgunov had begun feeling like the only one in Abolish who could actually do anything. It was nice to see that wasn't so.

Now if only Dozer would get off his wrinkly ass and start making

headlines again."

"3043

Morgunov knew the Old Man was up to something. He'd sent a sizable chunk of his men to Ardora for some reason, which wasn't exactly a normal decision during a war that was exclusive to Eloa. Morgunov was greatly tempted to pop over to Ardora real quick, just to spite Dozer and crash whatever little party he had going.

It would probably turn into a huge mess and almost certainly jeopardize the war effort in the process--but it would also be lots of fun, he was pretty sure.

Eh, maybe later.

First, he was determined to solve this Asad problem.

If the tattoos were baked into the lad's soul, then the only way to remove them was via direct manipulation of the soul. Which, they were actively preventing. It was like a safe with the keys locked inside it.

A pretty damn good binding mechanism, all things considered. By any conventional standard, no one could undo it.

Except...

Asad was a servant. And every servant's soul had one key weakness.

Ironically, if he were a normal human, then the soul-binding would actually be more secure. It would probably even protect him from things like Domination, unless the aberration using it had evolved. And that was still debatable.

But no. These tattoos were a perfect lock, apart from one fatal flaw.

Qorvass. The reaper.

The problem with trying to prevent direct manipulation of the soul was that reapers were doing it all the time. It was kind of their whole thing, in fact. Even if the tattoos protected the soul from all other forms of manipulation, they had to allow Qorvass access, else none of Asad's undead powers would function.

But using Qorvass would be a real pain, Morgunov knew. And kinda dangerous. Messing with reaper souls was sketchy work. They were durable in many ways, and yet so flimsy in others. One slip up, and he'd kill Qorvass, rendering all the time and effort that he'd put into this whole thing wasted."

"3044

Moreover, in order to get to Asad's soul through Qorvass, he would need some specialized equipment. He wasn't even sure that anything he currently possessed would do the trick. He might just have to make something brand-spanking new. And doing that meant making a trip all the way back to his biggest, most secure workshop, where he kept the Clown Pit.

Ho-hum, ho-hum. Might be worth the bother, though. He hadn't created anything truly new with the Clown Pit ever since pausing development on the Roberts. All the items that he'd tried to make after that had failed tragically, thanks to those dang feldeaths and their unbelievable stubbornness.

He'd get his revenge on them, one day. Buncha jerks. Maybe he'd tame Exoltha, too, just to really show 'em who's boss. Break the Eternal Storm. Make the whole continent habitable again.

Eheh. He wondered what the world would think if he did that. Right now, they were terrified of him. Would something like that make them change their mind? Shower him with love and affection?

How hilarious would that be? And how much would it piss off Sermung?

That thought alone might make it worth doing.

People were so silly, sometimes. So flip-floppy. Worried about the funniest things. Good or evil. Right or wrong. Cats or dogs. Soup or salad. And then when something actually important happens, they forget all that philosophizing they just did and make entirely emotional decisions or just react without even thinking. Yesterday's villain could become today's savior at the drop of a hat.

Human beings. Hard to believe he was one of them.



Eheheh. More than once, he'd wondered about that little idea. Maybe he actually wasn't human, hmm? Wouldn't that be a neat discovery? He'd always felt so different, after all. It didn't seem so illogical that he could've been something else. Perhaps his memories of childhood were false! Perhaps he was an alien! Or a machine! Or an alien machine!"

"3045

Or maybe he was created by a future intelligence and sent back in time! In order to help bring that same intelligence to life! A future god that brings about its own creation!

Because what better definition of a god would there be than something that creates itself? A paradox, sure, but what was a paradox to a god?

That was his funnest theory, anyway. If it somehow turned out to be true, he'd be absolutely ecstatic. It wasn't impossible. But how many more centuries would he need in order to create a true god with his machines, he wondered?

Eheh. Maybe not even one, if this whole god-hunting business panned out the way he hoped.

But that was unlikely, he knew. Big things like that rarely ever went according to hopes or plans. That was no reason to get demoralized, though. No matter what happened, Morgunov was certain that he would be having a grand ol' time in the process.

Which was another thing that nobody seemed to understand.

It was about the journey, not the destination. Until you got to the destination. Then it was very much about the destination, at which point disappointment was practically inevitable. But that just made the journey even more important!

But yeah, these tattoos were a real toughie. He'd been trying various other strategies like aura and willpower to compel the soul into a more malleable state, but the tattoos were simply too strong.

He really would have to invent something new for this, Morgunov realized. Something that required the Clown Pit.

Meh. He supposed it was for the best. This makeshift workshop that

he'd taken from the Sandlords was charming in its own way, but it wasn't the most conducive to his needs. And he was having to keep Qorvass at a separate location, since he might've been compromised during the time that Morgunov had lost track of him."

"3046

Yes, the wisest course of action was to move. Even if it was a pain. Taking all these captives across the continent would be quite the hassle. Sure, the Roberts would make it much easier than doing it himself, but still. Perhaps it would be best to just... thin the crowd a little, first.

It wasn't like he needed all of these Vannie generals, right? And they'd just become a thorn in his side the longer he left them alive, anyway.

Bah. It just seemed like such a waste of valuable resources. He'd planned to hold onto them all for years, if need be. He would've gotten around to experimenting on them, eventually. But making such a long trip with all of them would be strategically disadvantageous.

In fact, that might've been what the other Vannies were waiting for. He'd be much easier to attack while in transit and carrying so many prisoners. There was a fair chance that some of them might escape.

But surely, there had to be a way to quickly get some scientific use out of them. Something that he could take care of in a single afternoon, perhaps? He could have them fight the Roberts again, but he was pretty sure that would just end in another trouncing. Not much new data to be gathered there, if any.

And it might just give them hope of escape, too. Which'd be needlessly cruel.

Ah. But wait a minute. Of course.

There was that feature still to test, wasn't there? Yeah. The Robert Mk. VI's most recent addition.

Mk. I through V were all stable. Every piece of technology in their arsenals was now quite well-tested and reliable.

The Mk. VI, though, had a feature that he'd dubbed the Omnivore Drive. In theory, it could be his crowning achievement, greater perhaps

than anything else he'd ever created.

He hadn't yet gotten it to function as it was intended, though."

"3047

Yep. That was the ticket, he decided.

He made his way over to the room that he'd been using for everyone. He hadn't wanted to just leave them all sitting there in the hangar with all that military ordnance and hardware lying around. He wasn't too worried about them using any of it to escape. He just wanted the option to play with that stuff himself.

Which he had, by the way.

He'd very much wanted to make it so that the Roberts were capable of transforming themselves into one of those fighter jets out there--or a close approximation of one of them, at least--but that was quite the tricky endeavor. It wasn't impossible, he thought, but it would require more time than he was willing to spare, right now.

Maybe he'd take a few of those jets with him when he left. He doubted the Sandlords of Calthos would mind. They weren't nearly as stingy as the Sandlords of Sair. Unlike the Hahls of the Golden Council, the Calthosi Sandlords knew their place and could surrender gracefully instead of scattering like cockroaches when things didn't go their way.

Though, admittedly, Morgunov did admire that Sairi grit. Just a bit. That Sunsmith would make for a fun addition to his servant collection, if he ever found the time to go after him. And the space to keep him.

These ones were more than sufficient for now, though.

He asked their reapers to begin regrowing their bodies from scratch. The chamber was relatively small, but also entirely mechanical. The only one who might stand a chance of breaking out of it was Iceheart, but Morgunov had a special container for him, elsewhere in the facility. Iceheart was still too valuable to waste on an experiment like this."

"3048

The reason the reapers needed to regrow their servants was two-fold. One, Morgunov hadn't wanted to bother feeding and caring for so many hostages. That was always the trouble with prisons and the like. And two, he'd already played with them a bit over the last month, and none of them had survived it particularly well. Or at all, really.

Apparently, a simple obstacle course was too much for them. Sure, he'd built it out of machines that could analyze their movement patterns, adjust positioning on the fly, and also shred their fleshy bodies into tiny pieces with thousands of soul-strengthened blades and lasers--but c'mon. What sense of accomplishment would they have gotten if he'd gone easy on them?

Plus, it had given him a pretty good measure of their comparative threat levels.

Parsey Boy had done quite well for himself, surviving for six whole minutes. The one who performed the best, however, was Redmond Jules. Which was a bit surprising, because despite carrying the rank of captain general just like Parson, Morgunov had never been particularly impressed by his exploits. Perhaps the lad just had never gotten the opportunity to really shine.

Some folk were like that, after all. Even at this level of strength. Slow and steady climbers. Not given to making big, flashy displays of power. And there was certainly logic in that, too. They would be better poised to take their opponents by surprise at a critical moment, which was no small advantage. It could save their dang life.

But it was just so boring. Strength was meant to be used. To be witnessed. Without grand spectacle, the world would be so much poorer.

Counter-intuitively, though, it made Morgunov want to keep Jules alive. To see what the boy was really made of. And to test out some other stuff on him. Mainly the latter, actually."

"3049

He might've needed to thin the herd a bit, but once he was back at his favorite workshop and able to use the Clown Pit again, he wanted to have plenty of test subjects at his disposal.

When was the last time he'd tried throwing a living person into the Pit? Decades, at least. Eheheh. Hadn't ended so well before, but practice made perfect, after all.

For here and now, though, the generals who'd performed the worst in his obstacle course would make for the best candidates. If they died--which, honestly, there wasn't really much "if" about it--then it would be no great loss.

And to his mind, those individuals were Captain Generals Melinda and Meris. While they technically hadn't had the worst times out of everyone, Morgunov also had to weigh their scores against their ranks. Lieutenant Generals Wes and Kehl, for example, had done the best within their tier, so even though they didn't outperform Melinda and Meris, it seemed a bit unfair to punish them for it.

And Morgunov was all about fairness. When he felt like it, anyway.

He told the corresponding reapers to begin regrowing their servants. He'd learned their names, but he couldn't be bothered to actually summon them into his mind. They were just reapers. Interchangeable, for the most part.

He did feel a teeny-weeny bit bad about having to kill them, though. While it was largely true that reapers had stopped piquing his interest a few centuries ago, he could still appreciate their rarity and utility.

At the end of the day, there were only a few hundred thousand reapers left in the world. And that number was dwindling all the time. Such as right now.

At this pace, how many of the little buggers would be left in another hundred years? Or two hundred?"

"3050

The subject of reaper extinction had been yet another area of interest for him at various points in his life. And he'd had his doubts about it, too. Reaper had a way of exaggerating their problems, of trying to elicit sympathy. Sometimes it helped them to acquire influence and power. Other times, it was just in hopes of receiving mercy.

Tricky devils, the lot of them.

Even now, their tricks were still somewhat effective on him, of all people. Just a bit. He was ever so slightly reluctant to actually take their lives. Reapers were a precious resource. So how much more convincing would their rhetoric be to those who weren't as enlightened as he?

A lot, was the answer.

The truth was, the world was almost certainly better off without more reapers in it. Sure, there was the ever present threat of feldeaths and the concerns over departed souls decaying endlessly into pure misery. But there were already quite a lot of feldeaths in the world. In fact, those stubborn jerks might actually be the ultimate end state of all life.

The supreme beings.

With regard to the geologic timescale, that was. It was hard to know for certain, of course, but feldeaths could very well be the destination that they were all headed toward, eventually. There wasn't even any real evidence that the ""ferrying"" of souls actually prevented new feldeaths from being born. It seemed to, but without knowing where all those souls were actually being ferried to, there was no way of knowing if the feldeaths weren't just yanking departed souls straight back into reality.

Morgunov didn't necessarily subscribe to that theory, himself, but he didn't entirely discount it, either. He was reasonably certain that departed souls were ferried into the Void.

But where did they go after that? Did they just stay there in the Void forever?

He doubted it."

"3051

More likely, they were eventually cycled back into the planet in the form of ardor through some as yet unknown process. And then, of course, that ardor would in turn give rise to new souls.

So in a sense, he believed in a kind of reincarnation. Or rather, he thought it was the most logical explanation for the way the world functioned.

Academically, not many agreed with him, though. There was currently no evidence to support the hypothesis that souls returned to Eleg in any form whatsoever or that ardor could transform into a soul. Both of those processes were still so mysterious that most of the credible ""scholars"" out there regarded them as hardly even worth thinking about.

Which was stupid, quite frankly. But alas, the scientific community had always been that way. Unable to make known their bolder theories. Afraid of destroying their reputations.

And not many of them wanted to be associated with any ideas that the Mad Demon agreed with. Eheheh. Idiots.

So many of them still seemed to believe that he cared even one iota about his own reputation, that they could do anything to seriously impact it. So what if he'd become the poster boy for fringe science and kooks over the last couple centuries? That was where all the fun was. And if anything, that was also the kind of company that he preferred to keep.

Many of his apprentices over the years had gone on to do remarkable work in their own right.

Well.

The ones that survived the apprenticeship, at least. Admittedly, he may have been a bit too hard on some of them.

But hey. Impressionable young minds needed to be met with resistance somehow. He couldn't very well allow them to go on thinking that the world was their oyster, just because they were kinda smart. That wasn't how things worked.

Also, some of them were jerks."

"3052

Ah, maybe he'd check up on some of the survivors, soon.

Heck, maybe he'd check up on some of those who didn't survive, too.

It never hurt to be extra sure of something like that. Historically

speaking, servants and reapers had a pretty good track record when it came to faking their own deaths. Even to people like him.

Lozaro, for example, definitely should've been gone forever after being tossed through the Red Rift mere moments before its destruction. And yet somehow Morgunov had seen the guy, alive and well, a little under a century ago.

What a surprise that had been.

Unfortunately, Lozaro hadn't been in the mood to catch up at that time--and indeed, the slippery fellow had been running away from him ever since. Which was totally unnecessary, by the way. Morgunov had no intention of removing him from this plane of existence a second time. He just wanted to chat. Ask him what it was like on the other side. And how he found his way back. And maybe a few other things.

And there was also Yaki, one of the very few female apprentices he'd ever taken. His contemporaries at the time had told him that it was a mistake to allow a woman to study under him, but he'd always been quite pleased with her progress. Until, that was, she started trying to sell secrets to those Vanguardian vultures in the so-called ""Grand Scientific Initiative.""

Talk about a dagger to the heart.

So he'd vaporized her and her reaper--or rather, he thought he had, until he found her some six decades later, working out of an underground laboratory in Qenghis. Surprisingly, they'd been able to make peace and part on more amicable terms that time. Which was nice."

"3053

He'd asked her how she'd managed to survive the vaporization, and apparently, she'd rigged up an illusory double for her reaper, having anticipated that Morgunov might discover what they were up to and kill them.

Neat trick, for the time. Had to give her credit, but it wouldn't work on him these days.

And then, of course, there was ol' Hamish. Now there was a guy who'd



pulled off a surprising escape. One of his brightest students ever, in retrospect. For the longest time, the lad's only real problem was his ego, but Morgunov had been sure to beat that out of him. True, it took a while, but Hamish eventually got the message.

And the kid's work in theoretical physics was truly something special. His ideas formed the foundation of the Red Rift that Lozaro got thrown into.

So it was a real bummer when he told Morgunov that he wanted to leave and go make a name for himself independently. And yeah, perhaps Morgunov had overreacted a bit, yelling at him like that. And threatening him. And all his loved ones.

But still, the lad hadn't been ready to strike out on his own yet. Just a few more decades wouldn't have been too much to ask. Plus, there'd been a big, messy war going on, and it just wasn't the right time.

Which was, presumably, why Hamish and his reaper decided to gamble everything on a battle with a feldeath.

In the ensuing chaos, Morgunov was sure that he saw them both get obliterated by an energy beam that was as wide as a building.

But apparently, the reaper just barely survived. And the feldeath that they'd antagonized was so bloody powerful that Morgunov hadn't been able to stick around and make sure that no traces of them remained."  
"3054

All of that was merely to say that Morgunov, in the back of his mind, always had reason to believe that perhaps some of his ""dead"" students might one day reappear before him.

In an attempt to kill him, for example.

And in that regard, the most prominent candidate in his mind was one Damian Lofar.

That little trio had been in his thoughts quite a bit, recently. And it began with Damian--or more accurately, with that whole mess that went down at Bellvine. Damian was the entire reason that he'd even been there, after all. That was the memory that had reminded him of interest in acquiring a pet ""god,"" which in turn was what had

motivated him to set off this whole continental war.

And then, coincidentally enough, who crossed his path next? Parsey Boy. And before any of the other Vannies got there, too.

That had to have been Germal's doing. Morgunov was convinced.

And if those two were back in action, then it somehow didn't seem beyond the realm of possibility that Damian might show up again, too.

Maybe that was just wishful thinking, though. Morgunov rarely ever regretted killing anyone, but little ol' Damian had been one of the few exceptions.

When Morgunov had first learned about Damian's power, about his control over a totally unknown force, he'd been ecstatic by the mystery it presented. It was exciting just thinking about what discoveries might be made by studying it. And as Damian had grown more powerful, that excitement had slowly but steadily increased along with him.

The boy could manipulate space, waves, and matter in ways that Morgunov had never quite seen before--certainly not all at once.

And gradually, Morgunov became convinced that Damian was the key to understanding the relationship between the three on a deeper level than ever before."

"3055

So it was a shame that the boy had lost his damn mind and forced Morgunov to put him down. Out of mercy, really. He'd been a danger to himself and everyone around him. In fact, it was like he'd wanted Morgunov to do it. Like he was just barely sane enough to realize what was wrong with him but not enough to do anything about it himself.

Tragic.

And even the lad's reaper had become irrational about it. Refused to release his soul. Didn't seem to believe that Damian was truly beyond saving at that point. Which was pretty nuts, since even Parsey Boy had agreed that he was too far gone.

But then, Parson had become a pretty cold and callous little bastard by that point, hadn't he?

Almost made Morgunov proud. He might not have ever technically been Morgunov's apprentice, but there was something akin to that kind of relationship between them.

A rare and unspoken understanding.

If only the kiddo could see the error of the Vanguard's ways. Morgunov was sure that they could've had a beautiful friendship, if not for that one sticking point.

As for Germal...

Well.

That thing had considerable protection. Dozer, Gohvis, the Beast of Ardora. If Morgunov wanted to mess around with it, he couldn't do so lightly.

All in due time, though. He couldn't very well let Germal get away with sending Parson to interrupt his plans. Sure, it had ended up being more fun as a result, but it was the principle of the thing.

Morgunov was the one who played games with people's lives, not the other way around.

Case in point.

These Vannie generals weren't doing so hot against the Mk. VI. Even working together, it was like watching a group of schoolkids taking on a heavyweight boxer."

"3056

He felt kinda bad, actually. He almost wanted to help 'em out. Revive some more helpers for 'em. Or maybe even jump in there and give 'em a hand, himself. That'd be funny, if only to see the looks on their faces.

And on any other occasion, he might've indulged such whims. But not today. Time was a factor, thanks to the question of whether or not Qorvass had managed to contact anyone.

Sadly, this was a no fun zone, at the moment.

So he had the Mk. VI get on with it.

The hulking metal body split apart down the middle, creating one massive pair of jaws. And out came a whirlwind of extra tentacles. The ones that were attached to the outside of its body became visually lost in the shuffle as the room filled with squirming machine parts.

Six Vanguardian generals at once were caught and bound, as were each of their reapers. They struggled vainly against the snaking metal, and some of them even managed to break through a few of the tentacles.

But it didn't matter, of course. Where one tentacle was severed, ten more were there to replace it. And even the broken ones were quickly wriggling their way back toward reattachment.

And then, the tentacles all retracted, and the Mk. VI devoured them.

In an instant, all the noise--the whirring and scraping, the muffled cries and scream--came to an abrupt an end.

Except the grinding. Deep in the bowels of the Mk. VI's bulbous body, those people were being diced up, crunched down, and digested.

Still, even that was surprisingly quiet. Morgunov would've expected that the mangling and mashing of six whole people would be a lot louder than this. Hmm. Perhaps the sheer density of the Mk. VI's overall design had caused it to become an unexpectedly effective sound dampener.

Neat!"  
"3057

He waited.

The Omnivore Drive should kick in soon. Its function was to break down any material given to it, analyze its molecular structure, and then attempt to integrate any power-producing components that it detects into its own design.

A kind of self-upgrading mechanism. Similar in concept to the way that certain worms could absorb the abilities of those that they ate. That was where he'd gotten the idea from, at least.

He kept watching, crossing his fingers as the Mk. VI kept churning and grinding. It was thinking. Processing. C'mon...!

The noises all stopped. The machine settled. The pulpy, liquefied remains of its victims began oozing out from its bottom, forming a big red puddle.

Hmm. Nothing, huh? Just another mess.

Dang it.

He couldn't be too disappointed, though. This was what he'd expected to happen. He would've been surprised if the Mk. VI had actually come up with anything. The problem, most likely, was that the system was still not able to figure out what a ""power-producing component"" actually was.

As he'd feared, the Mk. VI would require more than just molecular analysis in order to achieve that goal. First, he would have to figure out how to make a machine that was capable of analyzing soul power and ardor.

A tricky problem, that one. He'd been trying it for ages with no success.

Maybe he needed go all the way back to the drawing board with this one.

Oh well. Nothing to get discouraged about. Failure was just one more step on the stairway to success.

In the meantime, he had plenty of other things to occupy his attention.

Thinning the crowd by only six probably wasn't enough, though. He decided to let the Mk. VI grab a few more. It was a bit of a waste, knowing nothing would come of it, but oh well."

"3058 -- CCLXIII.

The trip to his favorite workshop would be a long one. It was all the way over in Ardora.

Jercash wouldn't be happy about him leaving Eloa, but eh. The sly boy didn't need his help. In fact, Morgunov might just have to start thinking

of him as the sly man from now on.

Hmm.

Nope, that was too weird.

Still, he supposed he could at least send some extra assistance Jercash's way. It would be a pretty big downer if Jerky got overwhelmed by an uncharacteristically competent group of Vannies all of a sudden. A bit of insurance for his best boy wouldn't hurt.

Ooh, and maybe he could pay Dozer's forces a visit while he was in Ardora. It would be a little tough to make time for them, but his curiosity was sufficiently piqued to warrant the extra effort.

Now if only he could find the time to pay a visit to Exoltha, too. He wouldn't have minded going over there and giving Gohvis a swift kick in the butt for not helping out with the war effort. Germal might also be hiding out there, but Morgunov doubted it. That punk was probably runnin' around out there, gettin' up to all sorts of mischief.

Which Morgunov could respect, at least a little.

Didn't change the fact that he intended to do everything within his power to ruin that creepy little thing's day the next time they saw each other.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Three: 'Bright steward, flash and burn...'

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Abbas couldn't even remember the last time he'd slept. Physical exhaustion just seemed like a way of life at this point. His body protested every movement he took, but he was barely even aware of it.

Mental exhaustion was not his problem. His mind was constantly racing. New ideas, old idea in a new context, new problems, old problems. This could be fixed. That could be attempted."

"3058 -- CCLXIII.

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Didn't change the fact that he intended to do everything within his power to ruin that creepy little thing's day the next time they saw each other.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Three: 'Bright steward, flash and burn...'

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Abbas couldn't even remember the last time he'd slept. Physical exhaustion just seemed like a way of life at this point. His body protested every movement he took, but he was barely even aware of it.

Mental exhaustion was not his problem. His mind was constantly racing. New ideas, old idea in a new context, new problems, old problems. This could be fixed. That could be attempted."

"3059

A working Fusion Forge at his disposal. It was truly magnificent.

There was so much to learn and do. The potential spurred him on. He'd have to rest at some point. Probably. But for now, he was entirely consumed.

And loving every minute of it.

In here, the outside world mattered so much less. He was still aware of the urgency of his tasks, of course--they were perhaps the largest aspect of his motivation. But it was a process. It couldn't really be rushed. Urgency had no real weight.

He'd had to test the Forge's capabilities, first and foremost. Barring an imminent attack from Abolish, nothing else could have possibly pried his attention away from this place.

It began with merely trying to fuse simple materials together. Small, molecular bonds. Could the Forge create water from hydrogen and oxygen, for example?

And the answer to that was yes, though it had taken a few tries for him to get the hang of it. But that was a relief. He'd had a feeling since the beginning that this Forge specialized in organics, so it would have been quite the problem if it couldn't even synthesize water. Sure, he could've just synthesized it himself--a trivial task for even a mildly experienced integration user--but it wouldn't have boded well for the Forge's more advanced capabilities.

Which he was finally beginning to get glimpses of.

The giant glass globe was apparently an all-purpose chamber. Everything happened in there. Collection, analysis, breakdown, fusion, refinement--and perhaps more that he hadn't yet discovered.

Even now, a month later and with a whole host of assistants at his beck and call, Abbas felt like he'd only scratched the surface of what this thing could do. Half the time, he didn't know whether he was frustrated or excited beyond words."

"3060

Thus far, his actual creations were quite modest things.



And yet, not at all. Depending on how one looked at them, they could have been regarded as remarkable accomplishments.

He made a plant. It was just a tiny sprout, but still. It was an organism. Life. Created from nothing but raw elements and his own imagination.

On a technical level, it was incredible. Not something an integration user could do unaided, certainly. But on a pragmatic level... maybe not so much. That tiny sprout wasn't about to help them retake their homeland from Abolish, now was it?

He knew he had to be patient, but it was difficult when there was so much at stake. This pressure that he felt weighing on him in the back of his mind--it was nothing new. He'd felt it for years. But never before had it been quite so intense.

A constant reminder of just how much everyone was relying on him.

Hence the lack of sleep.

Thankfully, he'd also been able to make other, non-organic things. The sprout was arguably the most impressive creation, but only as a proof of concept. The most useful creation thus far was undoubtedly the enhanced shield that he had crafted for Hector.

The Amir-9 prototype shield that Hector had gifted back to him at Warrenhold was the ideal material for testing the Forge in this early stage. It was sophisticated enough that unaided integration on it was unfeasible, but it was also easily replaceable if the testing process proved too stressful and destroyed it. The young Lord Goffe had a whole room full of them, and Abbas didn't hesitate to help himself. He was reasonably certain that Hector wouldn't mind.

As a result, he'd been able to develop the Amir-10 prototype. Though perhaps it was deserving of an entirely new naming scheme, now."

"3061

The Amir-9 had featured four vertical lines of tungsten carbide while the rest of it had been composed of steel and titanium. The Amir-10 now boasted four more lines that crossed those horizontally, creating a checkerboard effect.

It may have been wiser to simply replace everything with tungsten carbide due its remarkable strength, but Abbas believed that alternating the chosen materials might one prove helpful against violent chemical reactions. Hydroflouric acid, for example, would eat through tungsten carbide more quickly than it would through steel.

Plus, there was the weight to consider. The shield was already quite heavy, thanks to tungsten being so much heavier than steel. The titanium was meant to counterbalance that, as it was lighter than steel, so it was tricky change to make. While weight wasn't necessarily an issue for the superhuman strength of a servant in battle, there was still the matter of lugging the thing around outside of combat.

Abbas doubted that Hector would be able to annihilate and rematerialize the Amir-10 at will like he could with the Amir-9. In fact, a part of him didn't want Hector to even try. It was entirely possible that Hector might simply annihilate the part of the Amir-10 and then simply rematerialize an Amir-9 as normal, rendering all his hard work useless.

But admittedly, another part of him was curious to see what would happen. Theoretically, the Forge's transmutation of the Amir could have made it so that Hector was no longer capable of annihilating it at all. Fusion Forge's were unique in that ability, but it was impossible to be sure without testing the shield directly.

This exact problem was one of the major reasons why the use of materialized elements in construction was a historically contested subject. The idea that someone might materialize an enormous amount of something, sell it all off for a tidy profit, and then be able to go around sabotaging projects as they pleased--that had caused considerable problems in the past."

"3062

The worst instances, naturally, had come from Abolish. Instances of dematerializing elements that belonged to critical infrastructure. Power plants. Farming equipment. Water pumps. All bringing terrible consequences with relatively minor effort on the saboteur's part.

There were more terror-striking examples, too. Bringing down a skyscraper with people still inside had been a popular one when Abbas was a child.

And that was just Abolish. There were economically motivated saboteurs to worry about, too. More than once, someone had flooded the continental market with a precious metal. They'd made a killing on their initial sales, which drove down the price as supply shot up. Then they waited, and after a sufficiently inconspicuous amount of time had past, all that supply would begin to mysteriously disappear, which would drive the price back up again. And the cycle would repeat, to the detriment of millions of people.

The Vanguard and others had long since formed various watchdog organizations to help prevent such crises, but even to this day, it would occasionally still happen. It certainly didn't help that materialized elements were indistinguishable from naturally occurring ones.

Abbas recalled hearing about some of the more authoritarian members of the Vanguard who wanted all materialization users in the world to be placed on a registry. That way, if any element was suspected of being used to manipulate the market, they would know who to investigate. And of course, any materializer who did not register would be subject to criminal prosecution in an international court.

Some countries had even agreed, Jesbol and Melmoore being among the early adopters. And Intar had hotly debated it a number of times. Perhaps in the future, a comprehensive registry of Eloan materializers would come to fruition.

For his part, however, Abbas had no intention of going along with such an idea."

"3063

Not that it mattered very much at the moment. He wasn't ruling Sair, right now. He was barely ruling his own Hahl.

But still. As long as he lived, Sairi independence was a priority, and submitting his country's citizens to the will of any international court system--much less one presided over by the Vanguard--was not going to happen.

If anything, recent events had only made his feelings about that even stronger.

And besides, he didn't believe that such a registry would even work. In

the long-term, all it would do is give the government another means of persecuting law-abiding citizens. Anyone crazy enough to abuse the continental market or conduct acts of terror was not going to be deterred by a simple list. The only thing that would stop maniacs like that was real, attentive watchmen. Actual detective work.

But politicians didn't want to hear that. Or they thought that the public didn't want to hear it. Either way, the outcome was the same.

Plus, as far as Abbas concerned, a registry like that would go entirely against the Vanguard's purported belief that it should not involve itself in politics. Increasingly, that seemed more and more like lip service than a deeply held ideal. He did not wish to contribute to that trend.

Regarding the Amir-10, however, he had managed to make additional improvements to it. Its self-repairing mechanism now worked more quickly. About fifty percent faster, in fact. Quite a shocking gain, he felt. Most likely, it was due not just to the Forge facilitating the process but also because it had been a few years since he and Haqq had last worked on the Amir-9. The progression in their skill was undoubtedly a factor.

Abbas had also wanted to reactivate the Amir-10 with the soul-enhancing property that the Amir-9 used to have, but that wasn't to be, apparently. Whatever Rasalased had done to the Amir-9 had well and truly removed that ability."

"3064

Technically, it would have been possible to just give the Amir-10 that property again simply by starting over from scratch, but that would have required months and months of work. There was an incredibly slow ""leeching and baking"" process that would need to be done in conjunction with his own soul, and he just couldn't spare that amount of time, right now.

It was disappointing, to be sure, and in order to help compensate for that loss, Abbas had decided to work extra hard and give the Amir-10 an entirely new feature.

A transforming property.

He'd gotten the idea from observing Morgunov's death machines,

though this wasn't nearly as crazy. And still quite different, as well. Those were entire machines reorganizing themselves into different, still-operational designs. This was a reorganizing of the shield's physical structure, controlled by the wielder.

The greatest assistance in accomplishing this new development, however, was actually Garovel. One day, when Abbas allowed the reaper to observe his work and listen to his intentions, Garovel revealed that he and Hector had discovered an ancient item that was already capable of such a thing.

The Shifting Spear of Logante.

One of Hector's subordinates was holding onto it, and with a bit of polite asking, Abbas had been able to borrow it.

And what a boon it had been. The ""Spear"" could transform itself into a sword, an axe, a staff, a dagger, and perhaps others that had been lost to time. All via voice commands. Truly any incredible feat of craftsmanship.

Garovel mentioned that the weapon had failed to impress Hector, though. Which was not particularly surprising for a materialization user. Hector could simply use his own ability to achieve the same effects. But for Abbas' purposes, the Spear was ideal. A magnificent blueprint, of sorts."

"3065

It still amazed him, sometimes, the fact that integrators of old could have created such things. Going by conventional wisdom, the knowledge that integrators possessed should have progressed in the same manner that normal technological innovation did.

But it didn't.

And precisely why that was... remained unclear, even to a rather old integrator like Abbas.

There were various theories, of course. One of the biggest was that it was simply a problem with integrators themselves--that as a group, they tended to jealously guard their secrets, lest that knowledge be used against them one day. Or alternatively, because they were too

self-absorbed with their inventing to bother with things like teaching.

That explanation seemed the most plausible to Abbas. Integrators were infamous for their various eccentricities. In fact, a part of him felt that he himself was far too boring to be one.

Perhaps he would become a better inventor if he went mad.

Another popular theory for why so much integration knowledge seemed to have been lost was that someone--an organization of some kind--was actively suppressing it. That was a bit too conspiratorial for Abbas' taste, but he'd met quite a few people who believed it over the years. The motive, they usually said, was to keep humanity itself in a kind of perpetual darkness. To prevent them from solving essential problems via technology.

Heh. And if that was true, then the conspirators must have been quite frustrated over the last few centuries. Comparatively speaking, technology had surged forward by leaps and bounds, thanks in no small part to the work of integrators. Abbas had little doubt it would continue this way, as well. The compounding nature of technological progression meant that--at least in theory--it would only accelerate over time."

"3066

But it still begged the question. How much knowledge had been lost over the many long years? And how much of it might yet be rediscovered?

He supposed that the Amir-10 was now an example of this.

Abbas was able to use the Forge to help him examine the Shifting Spear of Logante, and as a result, he discovered the key factor to its voice-activated transformation commands.

That being, a pseudo-consciousness.

The Spear held within it a kind of semi-aware cluster of soul power. On its own, it could do nothing, but when it connected with a living body, it gained a reactive property. In a sense, the soul of the wielder was like a switch that completed the circuit of the Spear's soul power.

Abbas had never seen a pseudo-consciousness quite like this one

before, able to recognize and react to auditory stimuli. It was quite advanced. The tricky part was that the voice commands had to be stored somewhere in order for the Spear to recognize them in the first place.

But where would that be? The Spear didn't have a computer built into it like his powered armor did. It was just metal.

And that, perhaps, was the greatest revelation of all.

The information was being stored within the Spear's soul. Or its ""half-soul,"" such as it was. It wasn't alive. The pseudo-consciousness had a memory structure built into it for the purpose of holding the commands.

Abbas had no idea that such a thing was even possible. The ability to store data within a constructed pocket of soul power?

The implications were mind-boggling. With that alone, he could completely redesign his powered armor. And countless other inventions from over the years.

It was an overwhelming realization. Like he'd been overlooking something that should've been painfully obvious for the past fifty years. Or perhaps longer."

"3067

Of course souls could be used as memory. Reapers were living proof of it. Their immaculate memories were perhaps the best example imaginable. He had just never thought of that concept as comparable with more modern ideas of data storage.

Which was not to say that it had all been smooth sailing since having that epiphany.

He had not had an easy time trying to create a memory structure out of nothing but soul power. Even with the Spear as a blueprint, the task proved incredibly difficult. Several long sessions of meditative construction were required before even a glimmer of progress had been made with the Amir-10.

As a new prototype, he wanted its transformations to be simple yet still useful. He knew only too well about how easily a project could spiral out of control when pursuing an overly ambitious goal. Countless

""inventions"" from his youth had failed before even reaching the testing phase because of that very problem.

Brainstorming was arguably the most fun part, which was also why it was the most developmentally dangerous. Without the self-discipline to know when to stop fiddling with ideas and start actually getting the work done, an inventor was doomed to a career of disappointment.

So the Amir-10's transformations were primarily just in terms of size. Its default state was no different from the Amir-9, but it had three more variants--one smaller and two larger. Plus, there was an additional code word that would toggle a deeper curve in the face of the shield.

The smaller variant was primarily just to aid in portability, but it was limited by the fact that the weight of the shield would remain the same no matter what size it transformed into. The smallest variant was the thickest, while the larger ones were progressively thinner."

"3068

Abbas figured that if Hector's soul could not be enhanced directly by the shield, then the next best thing was to make it so the shield could protect his entire body--or one side of it, at least.

The curved variable was meant to help with that, as well. At the largest size with the curve toggled on, the Amir-10 would be like a half-cocoon, of sorts. Its thinner structure would also mean that it wasn't quite as durable as the smaller versions, but given Hector's deceptively young age, the protection that it provided would still be quite useful to him, Abbas felt.

The boy's comatose state had certainly been a cause for concern. Explaining the situation to the Rainlords had been a total mess.

Abbas could hardly believe how angry they'd gotten. More than once, it seemed like the situation would come to blows, which should've been the absolute last thing on any of their minds after everything else that had happened.

If not for Garovel's calming presence in that conversation, Abbas didn't know what would have happened. It was a marvel how the reaper could sound so self-certain when literally none of them knew what was going on.



But Abbas appreciated the assistance. Clearly, he had underestimated just how much the Rainlords cared for Hector. Which was doubly surprising, because he'd already thought they cared for him quite a bit.

What in the world was happening in this little corner of the world? In the domain of the young Lord Darksteel?

Even Abbas could feel himself being pulled in. He'd barely gotten to know the kid, and yet...

The notion that Hector might not wake up anytime soon... or ever...

Well, it was incredibly distressing. Perhaps a bit more than it should have been. Abbas would've been lying if he said that wasn't a major reason why he'd decided to work on the Amir-10 instead of some other project. He wanted to be able to present Hector with it when he woke up."

"3069

In any case, Abbas hoped to use this new understanding of pseudo-consciousness in future projects.

In fact, that might be the exact path he needed to follow in order to bring his dream of a new armored warrior class within the Sandlords into reality. He was very reluctant to get his hopes up too much, but at the same time, the burgeoning ideas in his mind were too tantalizing to the imagination.

The main problem with the prototype suit was that in order for it to be efficient, it needed to drill directly into the brain. Obviously, that wasn't viable for non-servants.

But if the suit could harbor this same kind of reactive pseudo-consciousness? Perhaps more than one, even? The amount of problems that might solve was...

Hmm.

Well, it was still too early to tell how far the idea would take him. He doubted that any single concept would make the dream achievable. But it was a step in the right direction. A big one, potentially.

The suit was a bit of a sensitive issue, though. It was the single most important weapon in his arsenal. In the event of another attack, Abbas needed the suit to be ready for deployment on a moment's notice. And as such, making any major changes to it would make that difficult.

But at the same time, anything he could do to further improve its systems might just be the difference between the survival and extinction of his Hahl.

Especially if the Mad Demon himself showed up.

That was Abbas' single greatest fear, right now. That Morgunov would invade Callum and then Lorent. Or worse, that he'd just skip through Callum entirely in order to attack them first.

Now that the suit was fully functional again, he was confident that it could handle anything short of an emperor.

Well. Mostly confident."

"3070

If Bloodeye dared to show his face here without Morgunov at his back, then Abbas would make sure that little monster never bothered anyone ever again. But Bloodeye probably knew better, which would explain why there had been no news of an invasion this past month.

Instead, it seemed that Abolish was trying to solidify its grip on Sair. The Vanguardian forces had apparently just lost Agquarey and were having to retreat ever farther back into the Wetlands.

By all accounts, that should not have happened. Field Marshal Jackson had supposedly survived the disaster at Uego, so in theory, he alone should have been able to hold off the Abolish advance in Morgunov's absence.

So something was very wrong. Either Morgunov was still in play, or Jackson wasn't. Even with the Rainlords' scouts reporting paying close attention to the conflict, there was just so much misinformation being thrown around.

It would certainly help if they had Sandlord scouts out there, too. But on the subject of reuniting the Hahls, no progress had been made at all. Abbas couldn't really spare the time to reach out to them himself,

so he'd left it to his sons, but thus far, they had only received silence or even outright refusal in response.

Abbas didn't blame them for their fear.

This was his fault. As the de facto leader of the Golden Council and the most powerful servant among his kin, it was his responsibility to keep them all safe. If he was in their position, his faith in the Golden Council's ability to protect everyone would be shaken.

The Sandlords had not been ousted from the Drylands in over a millennia. Worwal had mentioned that fact to him multiple times now, and every other Hahl had reapers who had witnessed that time period first hand, too. They would be advising the respective leaders of each Hahl about what kind of situation this was.

About how everything was now in flux. Even the hierarchy of power within the Hahls."

"3071

Abbas didn't want to kid himself. His ""ascent"" within the Sandlords was still relatively recent. Even disregarding the leap in fame he'd gained after defeating Ivan, his leading influence on the Golden Council only went back a mere twenty years or so.

It was tough to pinpoint an exact moment when he'd become the ""strongest"" among his kin. The nature of his power compared to that of the others was a bit odd. Sure, he'd been the oldest Sandlord since Mahir Dagher died and the oldest servant in all of Sair since Bernardino Blackburn died, but age alone wasn't the determining factor. Increases in soul power had diminishing returns, after all.

Regardless, in the grand scheme of things, twenty years was nothing. The blood of the Sandlords of Sair went back nearly two thousand years--or more, depending on how one was measuring.

Some within the other Hahls would no doubt see this situation as an opportunity to establish an entirely new precedent. The weakness of Abbas Saqqaf had been made plain for all to see. If someone else managed to succeed where he had failed, then why should Sandlords not follow their new leadership?

The Golden Council itself could be restructured or even discarded totally.

Whoever managed to retake Sair first would have so much leverage over the others that they could do practically whatever they wanted. They could rule. And their children could rule.

In a way, they might see this situation as a gift of the gods.

But of course, actually retaking Sair--or even just the Drylands--was easy to fantasize about but not so much to accomplish. One had to go in prepared for a fight against the Mad Demon of Abolish. And how in the world was that to be done?

Abbas just hoped that none of the other Hahls were foolish enough to try and parley with that lunatic."

"3072

That was, perhaps, Abbas' next greatest fear, at the moment. If one of the other Hahls thought they could rule over the Sandlords at the Mad

Demon's decree, then the resulting conflict would be just as bad as fighting Abolish directly. Or even worse.

That would, without a doubt, fracture the Hahls irreparably. There was no way in the black hells that Abbas would allow his children to ever be made subservient to the Mad Demon, and he was quite certain that several of his ruling kin felt precisely the same way. Hasan Duxan, Yusef Shihab.

And Asad Najir, of course, if he still counted.

Those men would sooner die than work for Morgunov. Abbas would've liked to say the same about the others, but...

These were trying times. When it came down to it, he honestly didn't know how the remaining four heads might react. Hamza Dagher, Navid Kattan, Tariq Haayen, Rahat Mateen. When so many lives were on the line? When so much power was waiting to be seized?

The War of the Three Sands had certainly proven that the loyalty among the Hahls was not above reproach. That conflict may have been long before his time, but Abbas didn't intend to ignore the lessons from it.

The last thing he wanted was to fight a war for the soul of his kin.

But if that was what had to be done, then he would not back down, either.

Freeing Asad would go a long way toward preventing that, he hoped. The man may have become something of a black sheep in recent years, but Lion of the Desert still meant something to his kin. Even if many of them today did not hold to the old ways very strongly, he suspected that most of them would still not wish to go against such a sacred figure in open war."

"3073

But of course, freeing Asad was borderline impossible at this time. It might be even more difficult than taking the whole of Sair back.

If it was to be at all doable, however, then Hector would be key. His connection to Rasalased might be the only way to even discover Asad's current location.

Just another reason why Abbas felt suddenly and inextricably bound to this young lord from Atreya.

He wasn't often given to dwelling on what the gods had in store for him or the world at large. Generally speaking, he saw no value in such questions. Whatever would be, would be. He preferred to focus on the material. On the scientific. On the things he had the power to affect.

But sometimes, when events were strange enough, his mind did wander into that realm. Sometimes, he felt like he might've caught a glimpse of what his ancestors called the Great Chain. The invisible bond of Fate. The guiding rope of the gods.

Back when Hector had let go of the Forge, after having been standing there motionless for two entire weeks and just before falling unconscious, the young man had said something that Abbas barely caught.

""Cocora's Candle welcomes you, disciple of the Fury.""

The amount of strange things within that statement had only seemed to grow the more he thought about it.

Despite how little sense it made, when Abbas checked, Cocora's Candle did indeed turn out to be the Forge's new name. That was the missing piece he'd needed in order to get it working.

In fact, it had nearly started up all on its own after that. Abbas had insisted on reexamining it several more times first, which turned out to be quite the wise decision, as he discovered several spots in which the flow of ardor needed repairing. Nothing too serious, thankfully, but still. Better to not to take unnecessary risks when dealing with a Fusion Forge."  
"3074

But there was also the other part of what Hector had said. Disciple of the Fury.

Abbas had been thinking about what that meant over and over again.

Particularly that word. The Fury.

It stuck with him because he'd heard it used in that way once before, many years ago. One of his mentors, Dolf Rachman, had uttered it during one of his many barely-coherent rambles near the end of his life.

The very last time that Abbas had seen him, actually.

Dolf had always been half-crazy. It was part of his charm. And his genius. But on that particular occasion, ""half-"" had not been the word for it. Abbas remembered listening to him and thinking that the mentor he loved so dearly was all but gone.

""The life, the risk, the time, the shift. Displaced and distraught, the mind wanders and breaks. Words too meager, thoughts too thin, souls too fragile. Chaos cools against the Fury, the Fury. Chaos cools, and the Fury burns. It burns. It rages. It builds with anger and genius. Don't you see, Babo? The Fury is us. It's us. And right now, it is me. I am the Fury, Babo. I am the Fury, and the Fury is me.""

Babo had been Dolf's nickname for him. Abbas had hated it, but Dolf never stopped using it, and now, looking back on it all, he kind of missed it.

But that was beside the point, of course. As far as Abbas was aware, no one else had ever heard that conversation. Not even Worwal. Only he and Dolf had been there.

So how in the world could Hector have uttered those words? How could he have possibly known to call him a disciple of the Fury? How could even the Candle have known to call him that?"

"3075

It begged belief, quite frankly. Which was why, when he got the news that Hector was finally awake again, Abbas became quite distracted from his work. He needed to talk to him again.

He was so distracted, in fact, that he considered just leaving for Warrenhold. With his suit of armor, it would be a rather quick trip.

But no. He was quite certain that Hector would come to him--and soon. No doubt, the young man would want to check up on the Candle. And Abbas very much wanted him to see it in action, too. That couldn't be

done from Warrenhold.

So he waited. And tried to stay on task. Tried to keep his eye from wandering over to the Amir-10 as he again wondered what Hector would think of it.

Not really an adequate gift, Abbas felt. For the man who had almost single-handedly saved his entire Hahl? No. But it was a start, he supposed.

But on the plus side, Abbas didn't have long to wait. Perhaps Hector had already been en route to the tree the time Abbas received word of him waking up, because scarcely two hours passed before the young Lord Goffe arrived. And after so much anticipation, Abbas was more than ready to receive him.

Surprisingly enough, though, it was just him and Garovel. Abbas would've expected a whole host of Rainlords to join him. Instead, Hector landed with only slightly more grace than he had on his last visit. The running crater he left in his wake wasn't quite as deep or long, and if he had broken or dislocated any bones this time, it wasn't obvious.

Abbas and his various assistants merely waited at the tree's entrance as he shuffled quickly over to them, not bothering to dematerialize his armor."

"3076 -- CCLXIV.

"It is a relief to see you up and moving again, Lord Goffe," Abbas called out. He already had the Amir-10 ready for him. "There is much I would like to show you. Progress has been--"

Hector waved his arms at him in manner that seemed almost dismissive. "No, no, listen, listen. Abbas." His footsteps became more certain as he drew closer, and it didn't appear like he was slowing down, either. The group had to part down the middle for him as he walked through the door and toward the Candle. "I have to show you how to use this thing."

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Four: 'Thy scrambled visage...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)Okay. Perhaps



that had been the wrong thing to say. Hector supposed he couldn't blame Lord Abbas for giving a look like he was out of his mind.

Because. Well.

Maybe he was.

It was hard to explain. And probably too much hassle, right now. From everything Garovel had told him, time wasn't on their side.

There'd been so much to catch up on. Seeing the restoration of Warrenhold leap forward from when he last remembered it was a marvelous sight. They'd been working on the Bell Tower before, and now it was complete. They'd moved on to the Book Tower, which would probably be done soon, too, because it hadn't needed that much renovating in the first place.

And the Bank. Oh god, the Bank.

The pressure on Madame Carthrace had magnified dramatically over the past month. The influx of new clients had slowed, and without him around to give the go ahead, she'd been struggling with the decision of whether or not they should branch out into Lorent. Not to mention, rumors had apparently begun to circulate about where he was, which didn't exactly help build confidence with their investors."

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The pressure on Madame Carthrace had magnified dramatically over the past month. The influx of new clients had slowed, and without him around to give the go ahead, she'd been struggling with the decision of whether or not they should branch out into Lorent. Not to mention, rumors had apparently begun to circulate about where he was, which didn't exactly help build confidence with their investors."

"3077

That was why one of the first things he'd done was give her a call and tell her to move forward with the expansion. It wouldn't solve all of her problems for her, but it would give her some room to breathe, at least. And a quick, very public trip through Gray Rock would help with that other issue--which was why he'd dropped by City Hall and a few other places before heading all the way here.

That had caused quite the stir. Fortunately, there'd been camera crews already hanging out at some of those locations, and once they saw him, they seemed only too eager to drop whatever they were doing and start asking him questions. He hadn't actually answered very many of them--in truth, he'd only managed to say ""hello"" and ""yeah"" and ""I've gotta go"" a few times--but that was alright.

Hopefully. They got footage of him running off and flinging himself into the sky with his materialization, so that should've been proof enough

that he wasn't some doppleganger or something. He wished he could've been more amiable and ""lordly,"" but those were fucking television cameras, goddammit. Some of them might've been broadcasting live. He supposed it was good enough that he hadn't made himself look like some kind of stupid asshole.

He hadn't, right? Ugh. He'd been trying not to think about that, but it was difficult.

He wasn't really sure what the public perception of him was like, these days. He hoped it was positive, but he could also understand if everybody thought he was just some fuckin' weirdo with scary powers. And just the idea of appearing on TV and having to actually talk in full, coherent sentences--agh, it was enough make his stomach feel like it was doing flips."

"3078

Regardless, he didn't expect all of the Bank's troubles to be solved in the handful of hours that it took him to do all that, but he figured that he could have a sit down with Amelia later, and they could go over everything in more detail then.

Because there was a lot other stuff to worry about, right now.

Like, for example, that damn war still going on. It would've been too much to expect for that whole mess to have sorted itself out while he was asleep, he supposed, but it sure would've been nice.

According to Garovel, the Vanguard had suffered another major loss. Field Marshal Carson had been killed by Jercash during the Kavian invasion of Hoss.

Which was a big surprise, to say the least. Garovel had discussed the matter with the other reapers at length, and no one had expected Jercash to pull off something like that. Apparently, he'd been alone against three marshals, and not only had he held his own, but he'd even managed to kill one of them.

Not exactly the most comforting news.

And hearing it reminded Hector of something Garovel had mentioned a while ago, back when he first heard about Abolish taking over Kavia.

Garovel said that the Vanuguard's loss at the time might be warning sign that something was wrong. That was when Abolish had been taking a beating, internationally, losing first in Atreya--albeit on a small scale--then in Horsht to Jackson, then again in Sair with Ivan's capture. The Vanguard was supposed to have had both momentum and the numerical advantage on their side at that time.

Boy, how the tide had changed since then. Now it was undoubtedly the Vanguard on the backfoot."

"3079

Garovel, however, seemed to think that there might be more to the Jercash story than what was being reported. According to his logic, even an emperor would struggle to take on three marshals simultaneously, so unless Jercash was suddenly emperor-class himself, there must have been some other factor at play there.

Most likely, Garovel said, Jercash had tricked them in some way. The guy was known as the Devil's Knife, after all. He had a reputation for catching people by surprise. And Garovel also suspected that Jercash was in the habit of taking credit for his subordinate's accomplishments, which would in turn suppress their notoriety and make their enemies misjudge their threat level.

'Normally, that's not really an option,' Garovel had told him. 'Abolish is full of greedy, glory-hungry maniacs who would sooner desert than allow their superiors to take their credit. Reapers included. But I've been gathering information on all the major players within Abolish for months now, and Jercash's followers are strangely devoid of mid- and high-tier threat. People like Bloodeye, for example. Jercash should have several guys like that working for him, but no one seems able to identify them.'

'So you think Jercash is able to control his men better?'

'That's one way of putting it. When it comes to Abolish, though, I'm not sure how much it could be about ""control."" His subordinates might just believe in him more than others. So they don't even mind if he gets the credit for everything. Like they're just THAT on board with what he's trying to do.'

'Hmm.'

"Whatever the case, it creates a huge problem for the Vanguard. He could have some insanely dangerous people working under him. Even if the Vanguard is able to pinpoint their exact abilities--materialization, alteration, whatever--it won't be that helpful if they can't gauge the current strength of said abilities. I guess what I'm saying is... Jercash could already have one or more marshal-level servants working under him, and if they're playing along with his game, then no one would even know it."

"3080

"Wouldn't the other two marshals who survived the fight be able to tell everyone if Jercash hadn't actually been the one to kill Carson?" asked Hector.

'In theory, sure,' said Garovel. 'But eh. I feel like there are any number of ways that Jercash could manipulate things. Could be that he's just controlling the flow of information out of the country better than the Vanguard is, right now. Or it could be that the support he gets from his followers is stealthy enough that even Kane and Grant weren't able to determine the whole truth of things. To them, it might've seemed like Jercash was the only one doing anything.'

'Hmm.'

'Like if Jercash was getting support from, oh say, a genius integrator, for example.'

'He already has Morgunov, doesn't he?'

'Oh, that's definitely a possibility, too. A likelihood, in fact. But I just meant that he could have a second integrator all his own. One that nobody even knows about yet. Integrators are a pretty sneaky bunch, after all.'

Garovel was basically talking about someone around Abbas' level, Hector knew. Maybe even higher.

And yeah. Someone like that helping out an already powerful monster like Jercash would make for a horrifying complement.

The more he heard about the war, the more terrifying it seemed to become. The potential consequences of it. The idea that the Vanguard

might just lose the whole war--or more specifically, that Abolish would win it.

Frankly, after everything he'd seen and heard regarding the Vanguard's treatment of the Rainlords, Hector didn't have a whole lot of affection for it as an organization. He was sure that certain people within it, like Harper Norez, were great and deserving of admiration, but as far as the continental war was concerned, Hector wasn't so much rooting for the Vanguard as he was against Abolish."

"3081

He didn't even want to imagine a world in which Abolish was able to take over the entirety--or even the majority--of Eloa. If the current state of Sair was anything to go by, that would be absolutely catastrophic.

And now he had his fingers in two different war-related pies. Here, with a possible attack from Bloodeye on the way, and in Vantalay, where apparently fucking Vanderberk had just showed up.

That last bit of news had been quite unpleasant.

With the Rainlords sending even more people over to Vantalay, that place was primed for all sorts of mayhem. But if they were able to free their captive brethren, then Hector felt that, together, they might be able to handle someone like Vanderberk.

Maybe.

Agh.

The situation with the VMP and RPMP also muddled those waters a bit, but eh. The fact that there was another faction for each side kind of split the difference, Hector thought.

He'd wanted so badly to go with them to Vantalay--and to take Abbas, while he was at it--but the situation here was still too tenuous. Abbas needed to stay in case Abolish showed up and also to hone his skills with the Candle as fast as possible. Both of things were the topmost priorities, right now.

Ideally, Abbas would be able to pump out some kind powerful item that might give them the edge they needed in this war.

And Hector had the knowledge to assist with that last bit. Kinda. Probably. That was why he'd come here so quickly, after all.

""First, show me what you're currently able to do with it,"" said Hector.

Abbas and his team all just kept staring at him for a moment.

Then the Lord Saqqaf stepped closer and said, ""Do you think you are able to use the Candle yourself?""

"3082

Hector returned a confused look. ""What? No, it requires integration powers, You should know that, shouldn't you? Only integrators can harness the power of Fusion Forges.""

The others all exchanged looks with one another, reapers included.

""That is true,"" said Abbas. ""Though I am a bit surprised that you know that.""

Oh. Was that weird knowledge to have? Hmm. Yeah, Garovel had never told him that, had he?

""And I thought you might have become an exception to that rule,"" added Abbas.

Ah. Hmm. Man, what was up with those looks everyone was giving him? Was he acting crazy, right now? Were they worried about him? Was that what those expressions were? Worry? What did worry even look like, anyway?

Ugh, his mind was racing. It felt like every thought process was firing constantly. Moreover, he wasn't even sure how many processes there were, anymore. He recalled struggling with three, not so long ago. But he also recalled maintaining three fairly well, a bit later on.

Kinda. Hmm.

Were there four now? It sorta felt like four. Why was it so difficult to count them?

His head was everywhere. This definitely wasn't ideal. He'd been trying to organize his thinking throughout the trip here, but with so many

different things to worry about, it was only too easy for a spare thought process to just pick something up and start going.

One of the processes was definitely more disorienting than the others, thought. Something about it. Was just. Off. Foggy and distant. And creeping into the others. Scratching for their attention, too. Trying to distract him totally.

It was the one that he'd assigned to the Candle's memories. The one trying to sift through and organize them.

A bit of an overwhelming endeavor, to say the least. That poor thought process. It was like assigning a worker ant to a mountain of quicksand. It was no wonder the others were struggling not to get sucked into that pit of information."

"3083

"Are you alright, Hector?" said Abbas, standing quite close to him now, right in front of the big glass orb.

Whoa. Hector hadn't even noticed most of those steps. His immediate memory of Abbas walking over here was like a slide show.

Okay. Maybe he was trying to do too much here. He decided to cut that one thought process some slack and abandon the organization effort for now.

Not that it was trivial to do so. The Candle's memories were their own brand of invasive. He had to "lock" them away in a kind of vault within his own mind, away from his conscious attention.

Thankfully, he knew of a mental technique that seemed perfect for the job--one that Emiliana Elroy had told him about. "Sto," she'd called it. A mental storage technique.

He'd tinkered with it a few times ever since she'd explained how it worked, but he'd never actually found a use for it. Until now, that was.

His head cleared up almost immediately. Which kinda surprised him, actually. Prepping Sto on the way here had been the right call, it seemed, even if it had made the flight a bit more turbulent at various points.



""Yeah, I'm fine. I just, er... have a lot to process."" Hector motioned toward the glass. ""Show me.""

Abbas still looked like he had about a dozen more questions for him, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he pulled a metal slab out from behind his back and handed it off to Hector.

Hector just kind of took it without even thinking. What even was this? Wait, a heater shield? With a checkerboard pattern? What the--?

The glass orb lit up with a soft glow.

Oh, Abbas was just going now. Hector paid close attention."  
"3084

His entire reason for coming here was to watch how Abbas was handling the Candle, because he had a rather strong feeling that--even for someone as smart as the Sunsmith of Sair--this thing was a bit difficult to understand.

And Hector had seen its entire life. The memories might've been stuck in a weird, hazy vault right now, but in the short time that he'd been sifting through them, he'd been able to recall the single most important thing from his time spent within the Candle--what his overall goal had been, why he'd spent so damn long in there.

He'd wanted to understand the Candle's creation process as much as he possibly could. He'd watched and rewatched Agrian work with it countless times. He'd burned those scenes into his mind, trying to break down every conceivable thing he had witnessed.

He'd figured that he probably wouldn't get another chance to dive directly into the Candle's memories like that, so he'd decided to make the absolute most of the opportunity.

And boy had there been a lot. Even discounting all the time that the Candle had spent dormant--which was a fuckload, by the way--there had still been a ton of stuff to go through.

Agrian had used this thing precisely sixty-eight times. And Hector remembered them all.

Well, okay, a lot of those scenes were currently sitting in Sto, so if he

wanted to go over them again with a fine-tooth comb, he'd have to open up that metaphorical vault, but he still retained the gist.

Not every single use of the Candle had resulted in a successful creation, and not every success was the final product. Many of them had just been for material synthesis, fusing things together for an item that wasn't fully realized until much later."

"3085

When all was said and done, though, Agrian created seven different artifacts with the Candle before it stopped working for him. Toward the end, it had been nothing but failures each time, and Agrian's frustration had been obvious. He got so mad, in fact, that the very last thing Hector saw him do was light a torch and hold it close to a dangling branch, like he was about to set the whole tree on fire.

For some reason, though, Agrian changed his mind and then just walked away, never to return.

Hector wasn't even sure if fire could destroy something as powerful as a Fusion Forge. Then again, if Agrian had soul-strengthened it, it probably would've done some damage.

Either way, Agrian's decision to abandon the Candle instead of destroying it was interesting. Hector had to wonder if it was out of some lingering sense of respect that the man had for the Candle's other creator.

To his profound disappointment, Hector had never been able to figure out what that original dude's name was. He would've very much liked to rename the Forge after him. He was quite certain that the Forge would have approved.

But Cocora's Candle would have to do. It seemed like the next best name to use, because after going back and observing the original guy's life more closely, Hector had eventually come to the conclusion that the dude was a devout follower of the Goddess of Light.

There were a few clues that gave it away. The reading materials, for one. Many of them had the iconic symbol of the Shining Sun emblazoned on their covers or spines. That was kind of Cocora's thing, even in the modern day. Plus, Hector spotted him praying on a fairly

consistent basis--or, looking like he was praying, at least. It looked different from when the guy was meditating, anyway."

"3086

Hector's memory of actually renaming the Forge was a bit of a blur, however. He couldn't tell if that was because the memory was foggy like so many others or if the experience itself had simply been... blurry. He certainly recalled how fucking weird it had felt at the time.

His ability to communicate with the Forge directly had improved dramatically over the course of his stay, though he'd never been able to understand actual words from it like Rasalased could. It was just a matter of teaching the Forge to beep, pulse, or screech at him in increasingly sophisticated ways. By the end of their time together, he and the Forge had worked out quite the elaborate little code.

Now that he was out here again, Hector doubted he would ever be able to dive back into the Candle, but it had been nice while it lasted. Their code had been the key factor in allowing him to ""rewind"" and ""fast forward"" through all the memories as he pleased.

But again, the renaming... that was peculiar.

In retrospect, why had he even done that? Why had he even known that he could do it? Abbas had told him all about how important it was, about how naming it wrongly could ruin everything.

And yet, he'd just... done it. Like it wasn't that big of a deal. Like he shouldn't let Abbas handle it.

Why?

Because the Forge wanted him to.

Yeah. That was it, wasn't it?

In that particular moment, he'd come to know the Forge in a way that was inarticulable. For that briefest time, he'd felt as if... as if he was the Forge, and the Forge was him. There'd been no need to communicate anything. He could just... tell. What it felt. What it wanted.

Hmm. And the reverse had probably also been true, hadn't it? It could see everything about him.

All his private thoughts and shit.

Agh. Dang it."

"3087

Well, in any case, it was a relief to see the Candle actually up and running. Given everything that had happened, he would've been disappointed but not surprised if half or more of those memories had turned out to be part of some crazy fever dream.

But hmm.

Abbas was just standing there as he worked. The glass orb was lighting up nicely, sure, and he could see materials hovering into the center and swirling around, but the Candle was capable of so much more.

Hector tapped the Lord Saqqaf on the shoulder. ""Can you summon the roots up from underground?""

The glow faded away as Abbas turned to look at him. ""What do you mean?""

Crap. How to explain? He couldn't exactly show the man what he was talking about. He pointed at the stony base on which the giant orb rested. ""The roots of the tree can be summoned out from there and manipulated directly. Kinda like surgical tools, I guess. You can do very intricate work with them.""

Abbas eyed the Candle anew, looking it up and down.

Hector still had a lot more to say. ""Also, if you move around the big globe while you're working, you might be able to improve the quality of your products, too. I saw Agrian circling around it--and even climbing up all over like a spider monkey, sometimes. Whenever he did that, it seemed like he was able to achieve a much brighter 'flame' inside. Or 'glow.' Oh, and that's another thing. Can you create sparks and fire within the orb?""

Abbas blinked a couple times, scratching his cheek. ""Ah, n-no. Wait a moment. You're saying I should climb onto the orb itself?""

""Yeah.""

""But. Would that not be too dangerous? For the Candle, I mean? I do not wish to damage the glass.""

"3088

""Oh, you don't need to worry about that."" Hector rapped a knuckle against the orb. ""This thing is pretty durable. Actually, now that you mention it, I remember seeing Agrian punch the hell out of it a few times. I think that was more out of anger than, like, an advanced technique, though.""

""I... see,"" said Abbas.

Hector walked around to the side of the Candle that was nearest the door. ""One time, he actually hit it so hard that he cracked it. He was super pissed."" Hector looked for where said crack would have been but as expected, he couldn't pinpoint the exact location. ""Somewhere over here. It healed itself over time.""

""Ah. That is good to know...""

""But yeah, I wouldn't recommend being too rough with it. The Candle stopped working for Agrian after a while, and, er... I suspect that his poor treatment of it was a contributing factor.""

Abbas followed after him. ""Do you know if there were other factors?""

Ah. Tough question. He had to stop and think about that one. ""...I think so. It probably had something to do with how the Candle felt about him. As a person, I mean.""

""But it allowed him to use it in the beginning, did it not?""

""Yeah. It changed its mind about him over time.""

""I... did not think that a Forge could have such an advanced degree of sentience as that. You truly believe that it passed judgment on him? On a moral level?""

Man, there was a lot of context to explain. Hector didn't quite know where to begin. ""Uh, kinda...""

Agh. Talking. His old nemesis.

Abbas waited a moment for him, perhaps expecting elaboration, but when Hector's struggling took too long, he spoke up again. ""Well, we can discuss that later. There was something more pressing that I wished to ask you about.""

""Hmm?""

"3089

""When you first returned from your... trip within the Forge, you told me its new name, Cocora's Candle.""

Had he? Oh, maybe that would explain why Abbas was already able to use the Candle at all.

""But you also said something else,"" Abbas went on. ""You referred to me as 'disciple of the Fury.' Do you remember that?""

Hector had to stop and think about that one.

Uh.

Hmm.

""...Sort of?"" said Hector, squinting and scratching his brow. ""I remember saying something, but I think that, er... even at the time, I didn't know what was coming out of my mouth. I felt super weird."" He still kinda did, actually, but that was beside the point.

""I see. Do you have any idea what the phrase means? Disciple of the Fury?""

""Uh... well... no, I can't say I do.""

The Sunsmith's gaze grew abruptly more focused upon him. ""Are you sure?""

Hector didn't understand, but it seemed clear that the man was not asking this for shits and giggles. Something about this line of questioning was very important to him.

Maybe it was worth the hassle to clarify, then--or to attempt to, at least.

""Ah... actually, no, I'm not sure. I saw... a lot of stuff inside the Candle. Like, more than I even know what to do with. So I've kinda... locked some of it away, for now. In my head, I mean. In order to process it later."" Fuck, was any of this making sense?

Abbas' curiosity seemed piqued, and he returned a sidelong look.

""Locked away? Do you mean with a meditative technique?""

Hector was surprised that Abbas had picked up on that, but given the guy's age and station, it probably wasn't so strange for him to have such knowledge. ""Yeah. It's called Sto. Are you familiar with it?""

""You have mastered Sto?"" said Abbas."

"3090

Hector was starting to get accustomed to seeing that look of surprise on Abbas' face. ""Er. Well, I don't know if I'd go so far as to say I've mastered it, but, uh...""

""Hector..."" Abbas turned to look at the others in the room, their audience. Members of the man's own family.

They seemed to intuit that Abbas wanted some privacy and began exiting the hollow tree in single file. Even the reapers among them followed suit, save only Worwal and Garovel.

When everyone was gone, Abbas rounded on him again. ""Hector. I may not know the details of your life thus far, but I do have some idea of how young you truly are.""

Oh. Hmm.

""So how in the world have you learned Sto already?"" said Abbas.

Uhh. Ehh. It was a fair question, Hector supposed, but how the heck was he supposed to answer it? ""It's... hard to explain.""

""Try. Please.""

Hector reached inside his armor and retrieved his Shard of the Dry God. ""Er, well...""

""Surely you are not about to tell me that Rasalased 'taught' it to you,""

said Abbas, already sounding incredulous.

""N-no. But, uh. I mean, would that be so strange if he had?""

""Yes! It would!""

Ah. Yeah, maybe it would.

""Hector, Sto is an incredibly difficult thing to learn. It requires hundreds or even thousands of hours of meditative training. In my entire life, I have met very few people who could use it in non-trivial ways like what you just described. No matter how wise Rasalased may be, I do not think that he could have helped you overcome that problem by any conventional teaching method. You would still have to put in the hours.""

Mm. Well, Rasalased may not have taught it to him, but from the sound of things, the Dry God had definitely played a role in him being able to learn it so quickly. Hector had suspected as much, but this was quite the confirmation."

"3091

""Well, uh... technically speaking, I guess it was... Gohvis who taught it to me. Sorta.""

Abbas didn't even react this time. He just returned a flat stare.

Worwal picked up the slack for him. 'Gohvis taught it to you,' he said, his tone thick with doubt.

This was getting messy, Hector felt. Maybe he should've tried to explain about blessings first, instead, but that didn't seem like it would've been much easier.

Not to be outdone, Garovel decided to pitch in for his servant, too. 'You've heard about Emiliana Elroy, haven't you? How she was kidnapped by Gohvis?'

'Ah, yes.' Worwal's skeletal gaze settled slowly onto Hector. 'Qorvass did mention that. She was also bonded to Rasalased. And you and her are able to communicate through the Shards.'

""I remember now,"" said Abbas. ""That was why Asad decided to let



you keep your Shard. As a means of maintaining contact with her. A favor for his friend Zeff as much as for you.'"

'And quite the extension of trust, as well,' added Worwal. 'He all but granted you the formal status of Shardkeeper.'

Asad. A background thought process lingered on him, reminding Hector of how worried about the guy he was. And with a whole month gone by now, too. He dreaded to even think about how Asad was faring in Morgunov's clutches, right now.

Fuck.

His main thought process, however, took note of the term Shardkeeper. That was the first time anyone other than Rasalased had said it to him. It made sense that Worwal would be familiar with it, of course, but Hector still found it a bit surprising.

And he kinda felt like Rasalased would disagree with the reaper on that point, too. Asad wasn't the one who could grant statuses like that. Even the whole Golden Council probably couldn't, as far as Rasalased was concerned.

Hector decided to keep that thought to himself, though."  
"3092 -- CCLXV.

""So you mean to say that Gohvis instructed Emiliana Elroy in Sto, and she, in turn, instructed you?"" said Abbas.

""...More or less.""

""That still does not explain how you managed to master it in so short a time. Unless you are also telling me that you have spent hundreds of hours honing that particular technique in your meditations.""

Well, he'd definitely spent hundreds of hours meditating overall. That probably didn't count, though. ""It was more like... two or three hours, actually.""

""What? Impossible.""

Hector exhaled a breath, not wanting to get into it. He'd already told Abbas about so many different secrets that he'd been holding onto. It'd

probably be fine to tell him about blessings, too...

But it also seemed like a pain in the ass to explain. And he was fairly certain that it would just provoke even more questions.

""Look, we're getting kinda sidetracked here,"" said Hector. ""You should stay focused on the Candle.""

Abbas gave him another look but didn't argue. ""You have more to tell me about its operation, I take it.""

""Yes, I do.""

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Five: 'O, slumbering Dragon...'

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The timing of everything couldn't have been more awkward or more uncomfortable. The news that his brethren were being held captive in Vantalay, that there was finally a visible path to freeing them--that was incredible.

But then there was Hector's coma. And the threat of war coming to Atreya, to Warrenhold specifically.

Zeff Elroy was torn. Again.

It seemed like he always was, these days. It felt like he had a thousand reasons to leave, and a thousand reasons to stay. His captive kin. His still-missing children, Francisco and Gema. His best friend, Asad. But also his two youngest, Marcos and Ramira. His sister, Joana, and her children. And yes, even Hector."

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"3093

He felt like he was needed everywhere and therefore letting someone important down no matter what he chose.

He felt like he was useless.

But he was also tired of agonizing over his decisions. After everything that had happened, maybe it didn't even matter which path he took. He was too old to be getting lost in his angst. One way or another, consequences would follow.

How he dealt with those consequences was what really mattered.

Irritatingly, he was reminded of his time working under Parson Miles. Zeff hated that bastard with every fiber of his being, but he still remembered when that wasn't so, when he actually thought the man to be a surprisingly wise teacher.

""Worry is a double-edged sword, Zeff. It'll help you prepare for the worst, but it'll also drive you crazy. At some point, you have let go and take decisive action, lest decisions be made for you.""

And as much as it pained him to admit, he had come to agree with that sentiment. One way or another, he had to do something. Waiting around for news was driving him mad.

The only other decisive action he could think to take... would be to take Marcos and Ramira and leave Warrenhold behind entirely. To go off on their own, far away from all this madness. To abandon the other Houses in order to take care of his own.

And that obviously wasn't going to happen.

But why? That's what he'd been forced to ask himself. Because his fellow Rainlords would hate him? Disown him?

No.

Because his kin were in need. It really was that simple, wasn't it?

So he'd made his decision. Maybe it was the wrong one. Maybe it would cause him no end of misery in the future. But at least he'd made it.

And that was why he was on his way to Vantalay, right now."

"3094

Marcos and Ramira were staying back at Warrenhold, where he hoped they would be safer.

He had to be a part of this push to save everyone. He had to. If he'd stayed behind, and then the rescue effort failed? If everyone died in some distant land while he sat on his hands?

He wouldn't know what to do. His soul might just break in half.

Assuming it hadn't already, that was.

As he gazed out the window of the plane, down through the scattered clouds and out across the Gulf of Emerson, he tried to keep his mind clear. To remain calm. And surprisingly, it was working. Maybe he was becoming accustomed to the stakes being this high. And years of meditation had to have had some benefit.

How they'd gotten their hands on this airplane, he still didn't entirely understand, but it wasn't the only one. Somehow, they'd cobbled together a small fleet of variously sized aircraft for this trip. He'd heard something about a group of Sebols who'd been squirreling them away in isolated locations all across Eloa, but he'd yet to inquire further.

The current plan was to land on an island to the south of Vantalay, and then have Dimas Sebolt carry everyone who couldn't carry themselves the rest of the way.

They'd gotten clearance from the Ridgemark Private Military Police to land in the city if they wanted, but they decided to take extra precautions. If the RPMP ended up betraying them, the airplanes would be an easy pressure point. Plus, the city limits were a war zone, which meant the city itself could become one at any moment, too.

This whole endeavor was an enormous risk. Everyone knew that. They'd dispatched almost all of their best warriors now, leaving Warrenhold with barely anyone left to defend it in the event of an attack.

Which was all the more reason why they had to succeed. No matter what."

"3095

'Ax,' said Zeff as he continued staring out the window.

'Yes?' The reaper was clinging to his shoulder. There'd been some contention over whether or not Axiolis should accompany him or stay behind to look after the kids, but they'd eventually reached the conclusion that Zeff needed to have access to pan-forma in the battle to come.

'Do you think... that everything that has happened to our family might be... some sort of divine punishment?'

The reaper was quiet for a time.

The question had come out of nowhere, it felt like. His mind had been largely clear until it just popped in there. Moreover, it had been years since he last talked to Axiolis seriously about anything spiritual. He'd been quite comfortable with his secular worldview, and even now, he didn't feel particularly different about it.

But...

Maybe he'd been thinking about it, on and off, for a while now. It would've made a kind of sense to him, he supposed. And perhaps, it would've explained the inexplicable. If only a little.

The reaper's slowness to answer surprised him, though. Axiolis had always been quite upfront about how he still believed in the old water god--and about how he didn't care if he ended up being the last one in the entire world who still held onto that faith. He always said that it was a travesty that the modern Rainlords had let go of their roots by allowing such old and cherished beliefs to slip away from them.

So he would've expected Ax to jump at that question, to tell him that yes, of course it was punishment--or whatever else. In a way, it might just vindicate everything that the reaper had been saying for years.

But Ax didn't do that. 'It is the eternal folly--and yet also the eternal responsibility--of man to struggle for an understanding of the divine,' the reaper said."

"3096

Zeff didn't avert his gaze from the window. 'What does that mean?'

'I don't know if Lhutw? is punishing us for turning away from Him,' said Ax. 'I doubt it, but I don't know. Either way, I believe there's a reason this is all happening to us. We are His favored people. Whether this was a direct punishment by His will or just one more trial in the long history of our kin, it makes little difference. In the end, He wants what is best for us. For everyone.'

'...That's a convenient way of looking at it, don't you think?' said Zeff. 'If it's punishment, it's for our own good. If it's just rotten luck, then it's a test of our resolve or purity or whatever else.'

'Perhaps. But it is also the correct way of conceptualizing problems. You fix nothing by lamenting your ill fate or cursing the Heavens for doing this to you. The only way forward is to think seriously about what you can change and then go after it like your entire world depends on it. Because sometimes, like right now, it does.'

Zeff made no response, just let the reaper's words stew there in his mind.

'And to that end, it's crucial that we figure out how to improve ourselves as servants of Lhutw?. I've thought our people have been going astray for ages now. So if you're asking whether I think we should turn to the old ways for answers, then I think you already know my response.'

Zeff did. '...What old ways do you have in mind, exactly?'

'Many. Mandatory military service for non-servant subjects. Building newer, stronger fortresses. The protection and nurturing of the madega trees.' The reaper paused for a sigh that sounded partly like a growl. 'We never should have allowed the Vanguard to occupy Rheinhal, where a madega had been transplanted. That was sacrilege.'"  
"3097

Zeff had to think back. The madega at Rheinhal? He recalled seeing it, but only just. It had only been there during his very last visit to the fortress before the fighting broke out, when he and Ax had met with General Lawrence and Dergoz.

When the Vanguard's betrayal had become clear.

'...If I'm remembering correctly, that madega hadn't been at Rheinhal before the Vanguard moved in,' said Zeff.

'Yes, I think you're right. So they transplanted it themselves. Which is even worse. Only Rainlords should handle madegas--and even then, only when necessary.'

Zeff knew what he was getting at. Axiolis had taught him about this when he was younger.

Shortly after the mass slaughter of House Elroy, in fact.

Axiolis told him that, in ancient times, the people of the rain believed the madega trees carried within them the souls of their ancestors. As long as the madegas stood, the noble dead could remain in this world and watch over their children while still enjoying their well-earned eternal rest. Like windows from the afterlife, was how Ax had put it.

It had been a mild comfort at the time, thinking that his family might still be watching over him. He wasn't sure when he'd stopped believing that. Maybe he never really had in the first place.

How did one distinguish genuine belief from wishful thinking? Even all these years later, he couldn't tell.

Now that he was older, though, he felt able to take a longer view of things. He could look at that belief in a different way. Instead of just questioning whether its truth value was determinable, he wondered whether there was any utility in believing such a thing. From a communal perspective.

And he felt... as though there was. Perhaps."

"3098

If he were to truly believe that his ancestors were watching over him, that was obviously comforting during difficult times. But also, there was the notion that his ancestors might be judging his actions. What other reason would they have for observing?

They would want their honorable legacy to continue, would they not?

And he, therefore, should do everything in his power not to disappoint them.



He wondered if Mariana was there now, watching him. Would she disapprove of his recent decisions?

Heh.

Perhaps in the opposite manner to what he had previously been thinking. She probably would have wanted him to depart much earlier, to leave the children alone so that they could grow and mature without him smothering them all the time.

She'd been a rather cold woman, hadn't she? But that had also made her moments of warmth all the more special. And she had always shown him respect, especially in front of other people. She'd firmly believed that it was her job as his wife to always try to make him look dignified and respectable, both as a lord and as the father of her children.

God, he missed her. For so many reasons.

He sure could've used her help in maintaining that dignified facade, these days. With each passing day, he felt like he was turning into more of a barbarian. Having the kids around had allowed him to stifle that sentiment, but only sometimes. It was more like putting a lid on a boiling pot, instead of actually turning the heat down.

Which made him feel even worse.

Marcos and Ramira should have had more of a calming effect than that. He loved them with all his heart, didn't he? Was that not enough?

How many more ways could he fail as a father?"

"3099

He wondered what he was becoming. He felt like an entirely different man from even just six months ago. It was frightening to think about.

But it didn't feel wrong.

Which was perhaps the most terrifying thing about it. A strong part of him didn't want to remain the same. He'd obviously been too weak before. Change was much needed.

He just hoped he wasn't deluding himself. Was this what it felt like when all those other servants he'd heard about over the years suddenly snapped and went on their killing sprees? They probably thought their actions were well-justified all the way up until their reapers were forced to release their souls, didn't they?

He was on a thin rope. It used to be a narrow road. It had always been difficult to stay on the correct path, but now it felt like any slight misstep might just be the end.

And yet.

If this was all according to Lhutw?'s will, then perhaps there was a certain amount of relief to be found. Somewhere.

Truthfully, he'd never much cared for his title as the Water Dragon of Sair. The thought that he was somehow Lhutw?'s ""chosen one"" among all his kin--that had just never sat right with him. And it still didn't. The more he thought about it, the more he saw candidates who were far more worthy than he of such prestige. If his power was the result of divine intervention and not that of a random genetic lottery, then why him? Why not someone more competent? More stable? More...?

Fitting.

He supposed that was where the whole ""faith"" side of things came into the equation. Having faith that Lhutw? had put him on this path for good reason--that one day, in this life or the next, everything would make sense."

"3101

His mind drifted between each of his children for the full length of the flight.

Gema. Where in the world was she during all this? Could Parson have been telling the truth about her when he said that she was working for him? Zeff found it hard to believe anything that had come out of that man's mouth. But maybe it didn't even matter. Truthfully, he had no idea what he would say to her when he saw her again.

When he saw her again. Yes. Not if. When.

As for Francisco, well... at least Zeff would be able to recover him during this trip. Cisco had been taken away by the Vanguard, so he should theoretically still be with the other captives. Unless those Vanguardian bastards had separated them for some reason. Zeff was trying to temper his expectations, but it was difficult.

Marcos and Ramira might've been ""safe"" at Warrenhold, but that wasn't reason enough to stop worrying about them. He just had to keep reminding himself that as long as Hahl Saqqaf was so close by, they would be fine.

Hahl Saqqaf and also... Hector, he supposed.

Honestly, Zeff still couldn't really believe it. Even a month later. The news that Hector had not only rescued the Sunsmith's entire Hahl but also been the one to slay the Man of Crows...

And then he'd fallen into a damn coma while activating some kind of powerful forge for Abbas? What in lakefire was going on with that boy?

Zeff had gotten to talk to him briefly before leaving. The kid seemed in perfectly good health again, which wasn't so surprising for a servant, but still. It was confusing. Was there a term for being both proud of and worried about someone at the same time? If so, Zeff needed to learn it."

"3102

If nothing else, though, Zeff did have to give credit where credit was due. If the young Lord of Warrenhold was actually able to contribute in a fight between warriors as powerful as Bloodeye, the Man of Crows, and the Sunsmith, then perhaps... well, perhaps he could worry about Marcos and Ramira just a tiny bit less.

Hector had certainly proved that he would go above and beyond to protect not just them, but all Rainlords.

Which was another odd matter unto itself.

The way Zeff's brethren had been treating Hector. They'd grown so attached to him so quickly. Perhaps to an unhealthy degree, even.

When the Saqqafs informed everyone that Hector had fallen into some kind of strange coma, the others had not taken that news well.

In fairness, though, Zeff hadn't taken it so great, himself. He just wasn't accustomed to being one of the least angry people in the room. He'd certainly understood them being upset, but the last thing anyone needed right now was a fight between allies.

The Blackburns and Delagunas had gotten particularly riled up, which was especially surprising considering that those two Houses had largely been avoiding one another so as not to provoke a fight of their own. To see them actually finding common ground on something...

Well. It was its own kind of progress, Zeff supposed. Still strange, though.

He couldn't help wondering how the captive Rainlords were going to view their young Lord Darksteel once they were free. Zeff had a disquieting feeling that they wouldn't be well-pleased at the way everyone else fawned over the boy.

Historically, Rainlords didn't appreciate being told that they had to follow some foreigner. If they came to see him that way...

Bah.

A problem for a future day, Zeff supposed. Getting everyone out of Vantalay safely was the only thing he should've been worrying about now."

"3103

By the time they landed, Zeff was more than ready to go. Being alone with his thoughts was becoming something that he greatly disliked. Too much sitting around and contemplating was liable to drive him crazy.

Well. Crazier, he supposed.

The tropical climate on this island wasn't exactly what he was accustomed to. The thick, muggy air and blindingly bright sun didn't suit Rainlords at all. Frankly, he'd never understood the appeal of such places as tourist destinations. People thought this was beautiful and not just obnoxious? To his mind, the ideal weather was that of a bright but still overcast sky accompanied by a very faint drizzle, gentle enough that it felt more like a cool and pleasing mist against one's

skin.

He'd learned that about himself as a young man during his travels with the Vanguard. He'd seen much of the world in that span of time, but nowhere had he ever found more desirable weather than at home. He'd quickly grown to miss it back then, and judging from this place here now, he soon would again.

The little island that they'd chosen to use was barely even capable of receiving their small fleet of aircraft. The tiny airfield was already over capacity before the last of them touched ground. Dimas Sebolt used his gravity manipulation in order safely move a few planes out of the way, parking them outside the simple chainlink fence that encircled the compound.

It was inconvenient, but the seclusion of this place was the important thing. If they'd chosen a large airport as their landing destination, then it would have complicated matters significantly with Vantalayan authorities.

At least, that was Zeff's understanding of it. He was no pilot.

The short trip to the mainland took a few more hours. It was hard not to be impressed by Dimas' ability to carry so many people through the air like this. The man was noticeably slower than when flying alone, but the sheer utility of his power was undeniable. He'd not been neglecting his training, it seemed."

"3104

Zeff could've carried himself--and been much faster, to boot--but the point here was stealth, and a giant jet stream of water soaring through the sky was perhaps not the best example of that.

Hector had apparently been developing a method of flying using materialized armor--which did admittedly pique Zeff's interest--but now wasn't the time to be experimenting, he felt. He'd have to poke the kid's brain the next time they saw each other.

So he let himself be just another of the young Lord Sebolt's passengers.

Only two others within their group elected not to do the same. There

were various materializers and transfigurers who could achieve flight, but it almost always required great effort, risk, or bodily sacrifice. By and large, it was better to just let Dimas handle it, so those two exceptions were all the more notable.

Mario Delaguna and Isela Sebolt were among their younger warriors--not much older than Hector, in truth--but that didn't stop them from making a show of their abilities. In fact, perhaps that was why they were so clearly full of energy and ambition.

Mario was one of the few well-known integrators among the Rainlords, but his mild fame was generally due more to his eccentricity than his inventions. He'd apparently taken inspiration from Abbas Saqqaf's mechanized armor, because he'd created a flight suit for himself. It wasn't anywhere near as advanced, of course, and looked rather haphazard--more like a gliding wingsuit than a true, self-propelling machine--but to the lad's credit, he was at least managing to keep up with everyone.

Isela was less surprising to see. From the moment Zeff had heard that a young Sebolt girl had manifested an alteration ability over density, he'd expected her to one day make quite a name for herself."

"3105

From the look of it, though, she wasn't quite there yet. She was keeping pace with the group well enough, but Zeff could see her wobbling to and fro quite often. From what he'd heard of the girl, she'd experienced much difficulty learning to control her power in its nascent form--a common problem for servants but especially for alteration users.

But if they could keep her alive along enough, Isela might just become one of their strongest warriors.

That was nine-tenths of his job, Zeff knew. Buying time for the next generation.

A year ago, Zeff would've argued adamantly against bringing such promising youths with them on such a dangerous mission like this. Now, though? It pained him to admit, but... shielding them too greatly from these battles would not do them any favor in the long-term. They needed their opportunities to grow. And not just from emergence,

either. The experience was just as important, if not more so.

He felt like he'd forgotten that, at some point. Perhaps because it was so easy to. As an immortal servant, the feeling that he would always be around to help and protect the young ones was quite strong. Servants never really expected to die, after all. And this centuries-long stalemate between Sermung, Dozer, Morgunov, and Sai-hee was probably also a contributing factor.

But he was a Rainlord. That type of thinking was particularly foolish for his kin. Their blood-soaked history was one of generational change. Even their most triumphant tales were often accompanied by the death of one or more of their greatest warriors from that era.

Sacrifice was what it meant to serve, after all.

Soon, the enormous towers of Ridgemark came into view, and Zeff could all but sense the tension heightening among his kin. Dimas took them higher, and as they drew closer, they began to see the battleground at the city limits in the distance. The RPMP vs the VMP and Abolish."

"3106

The individual combatants on the field weren't visible from this far away, but Zeff could make out the shapes of organized battalions on the hills there, along with the odd spark or explosion.

Zeff had heard that, in terms of sheer numbers, the RPMP was at a rather enormous disadvantage, with only about four thousand total members, the vast majority of which were not even servants. Plus, it was keeping many of said members away from the fight in order to maintain peace within the city.

Compared to the ten thousand or so that the VMP had reportedly brought, it was impressive how well the RPMP was managing the situation. Warfare wasn't all about numbers, of course, especially when servants were involved, but still. That was no trivial difference.

Dimas led the group to their rendezvous point, which happened to be one of the tallest buildings in Ridgemark, the Ruby 88 Hotel & Casino. The tower's owner was a man named Vino Vance, and as one of the primary benefactors of the RPMP, it had been he who brokered the

deal with the Rainlords.

In exchange for aiding in the defense of Ridgemark, the RPMP agreed to help the Rainlords protect the Miroan refugees.

The RPMP had already held up their end of their bargain, at least in part. From what Zeff had heard, just getting the refugees to Ridgemark had been quite the undertaking. Thaddeus Croll, the Killer of Krohin, had ambushed their convoy along the way. Melchor's team had already been skirmishing with him for weeks, and they'd managed to keep him subdued even if they couldn't finish him off, but this time, Croll had reinforcements with him. Powerful ones.

Raga Marda and Jan Cross, a.k.a. the Demon's Tiger and the Whitehand, respectively."  
"3107

Fortunately, the RPMP's own Kristof Raynor, the so-called Jailer of Ridgemark, had been there to back them up. Zeff had not heard of this Jailer before, but from the way the battle had been described to him, most of the Miroans would have perished if not for that man's presence.

And even though Zeff was not familiar with him, several of their reapers were. Izio! Dimas Sebolt's reaper, made sure to lead the charge in informing everyone about what an asset Raynor would be as an ally.

Apparently, the ""Jailer of Ridgemark"" was still a relatively new moniker, and Izio! had instead been more familiar with the man's exploits as an aberration hunter for the Vanguard. Raynor had supposedly been the first person to fight and survive against the most powerful aberration ever recorded, Abraham Maximilian--or Max the Merciless, as he had come to be known.

Octavia Redwater had used a sword made from his bones during the Siege of Rheinhal.

Where that weapon was now was anyone's guess. The Gargoyle of Korgum had no doubt taken possession of it, but there was no telling what she might've done with it. Zeff highly doubted that it would be with Octavia here in Vantalay.



Regarding Raynor, however, IzioI claimed that the man's efforts against Max had been instrumental in bringing to light just how dangerous the aberration was. Ultimately, of course, it had been Sermung who slew him, but without Raynor, IzioI said, the casualties could have climbed into the millions before Sermung ever even heard Max's name.

Naturally, though, learning about the man's past ties to the Vanguard had been some cause for concern--especially because Raynor wasn't even the only one. But Vance had given the Rainlords assurances that not only did the RPMP have no affiliation with the Vanguard but that several of their members, Raynor included, ""despise that organization with the passion of a thousand burning public school teachers.""  
"3108

Zeff had to wonder if that passion had anything to do with why Field Marshal Graves had decided to pull out of Ridgemark.

That whole decision was still bothering him. It had worked out in the Rainlords' favor, of course, but did the Vanguard really think that abandoning Vantalay was a strategically wise course of action? If Abolish sunk its claws fully into Ridgemark and seized control over all its resources, that would spell disaster for this entire region. Vantalay would almost certainly succeed in its invasion of Czacoa, and the other neighboring countries would likely fall soon thereafter.

Abandoning Ridgemark meant abandoning this entire warfront.

Unless, that was, the Vanguard actually believed that the RPMP could handle it. Which Zeff very much doubted. The Vanguard wasn't exactly known for having faith in other groups.

More likely, Zeff thought, the decision was just an indication of how desperate the Vanguard was becoming. It was no secret that the war wasn't going their way. Perhaps they were thinking that they needed to take bold action in order to turn the tide before it was too late. A few of the reapers had theorized as much during their analyses back at Warrenhold.

But if that was really the logic behind the Vanguard's strategy, then Zeff was even more concerned. ""Bold action"" was basically just a

euphemism for doing something incredibly risky and probably stupid. Moreover, it wasn't even necessary.

There was a lot more to winning a war than just ""turning the tide"" with a ""decisive battle."" Typically, when the scale of things grew this large, it wasn't at all clear whether or not a battle had truly been decisive until long after the fact--perhaps even after the war itself was over. Such terms were a luxury of historians, who had the benefit of hindsight."

"3109

No, if the Vanguard was going to win this war or ""turn the tide,"" it would most likely be through logistical adaptation. Proper, intelligent planning and reorganizing. And despite how much he hated the Vanguard, Zeff hoped those bastards still at least understood that much.

If the cowboys were running the show after the loss of so many top officers at Uego, then they were already doomed. The Vanguard itself might've been ancient, and Zeff was sure that it would endure no matter what kind of idiots took over, but that didn't mean it couldn't still lose the war and be sent into hiding for the next century.

Not to mention the millions upon millions of lives that would be lost all over Eloa.

Agh.

The fact that, even now after everything they'd put him and his kin through, he still had to root for the sons of bitches to win... that just made Zeff hate them even more.

The rooftop of the Ruby 88 was as luxurious as Zeff had ever seen. A kempt garden lined a gazebo, stone footpath, and hot tub. Palm trees and tall bushes shielded the area from the wind, as did a tall fence. If not for the military personnel standing around, armed to the teeth, Zeff might have thought they'd come to the wrong place.

There was plenty of space for them to land, but Dimas decided to set everyone down in a tight cluster regardless. With so many strangers around, it was probably for the best.

From the wall of black-clad soldiers arrived one larger than all the

others, a man that could rival even Salvador Delaguna in terms of height and weight. A few of the Rainlords glanced over at Salvador, as if wondering if some unspoken challenge was about to be made between them.

Salvador, for his part, looked entirely unfazed."  
"3110 -- CCLXVI.

""Welcome to Ridgemark,"" said the giant stranger in a soft voice that didn't quite match his bulk. ""Mr. Vance has been awaiting your arrival. If you like, you can follow me to meet with him right now, or you can take a few hours to rest from your trip first. Personally, I recommend the latter. I think you'll find the Ruby 88 to your liking, if you do.""

The Rainlords exchanged looks with one another. They hadn't come here for generosity or pleasantries, and the offer seemed doubly strange considering the fact that there was a battle raging only a few kilometers away, if that.

Zeff stepped forward to speak for everyone. ""We'll meet with Mr. Vance first, thank you.""

""Alright, then. Follow me, please."" The giant turned, and the wall of soldiers behind him parted again, this time staying open for the Rainlords to proceed through as well.

They soon reached a staircase flanked by an elevator and chose the prior, since there was no way an elevator would be able to carry all of them in a single trip.

As they were descending, Mevox, the reaper of Salvador, decided to speak up. 'You're the Linebreaker, aren't you?'

The large man kept descending until he reached the next intermediate landing, then turned around to look up at all of them again. ""I am. Heard of me, have you?""

'Only your moniker,' said Mevox. 'What's your real name, if you don't mind me asking?'

The giant waited a moment, perhaps wondering if he should answer that. ""...My name is Linus Maximilian.""

## Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Six: 'The breaker on the ridge...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Linus eyed the Rainlords, gauging their reactions. He wasn't in the habit of telling people his last name like that, mainly because it often prompted so many unpleasant responses, but he'd decided to make an impulsive exception here. Truthfully, these Rainlords intrigued him. They'd left the Vanguard, too, so perhaps they would understand him.

And from all he'd heard about them over the years, he highly doubted that they would be afraid of a mere name."

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"3111

He could see the confusion and curiosity on their faces. But no shock or horror.

Good. He hadn't made a mistake, then. Wouldn't have been very good if he scared them off before they could be of any help.

He did expect some questions, though. Having the same last name as one of the most dangerous lunatics in modern history tended to provoke them.

'Well, it's good to meet you, Linus. My name's Mevox. And this big fella here is my servant, Salvador Delaguna.'

No probing questions, huh? Well, it was probably just a matter of time. ""Nice to meet you. All of you."" He kept going down stairs.

'You wouldn't happen to be related to Max the Merciless, would ya?' said Mevox.

There it was. ""Yeah,"" Linus said flatly. ""He was my nephew.""

'I see, I see,' said Mevox. 'And does that have anything to do with why you're no longer part of the Vanguard?'

""Sure does.""

'Is this a sensitive subject? Would you rather not be asked about it?'

""You aren't the first to ask. Won't the be last, either. Fire away, if you're so curious.""

'Sounds like you're very well-adjusted. But I don't wanna be nosy. Goes against my nature.'

Linus knew almost nothing about this Mevox, and yet somehow, he still knew that was a bold-faced lie. The snort from Salvador was a pretty affirmative clue, too.

'If I WERE to inquire further, though,' Mevox went on, 'I would probably want to know more about why you decided to work for this Vance fella. Guy like you? Can't just be about the payday, can it? Not that I'd think less of you, if it was.'

He exited the stairwell and entered a long corridor full of polished silver tiles and soft amber lighting. He stopped and turned to make sure that their guests were following.

To his eyes, the reapers were tall, gangly things--humanoid in shape but ethereally pale and far too slim. They had no mouths or noses, either, and their faces instead were full of extra eyes."

"3112

It didn't escape Linus' notice, however, that that this Mevox was a slightly different color than most reapers. A bit darker, not quite so pale. Over his many years, Linus had seen several other reapers like that, ones with some kind of clear visual differentiation.

And they always meant trouble.

But not always the bad kind.

It was just so strange, because it highlighted the fact that, technically

speaking, almost all reapers looked identical to one another. He'd heard as much from other servants, as well. No one ever had trouble telling them apart, but when it came to actually describing their visual features, it was a lost cause. Usually.

""I'd be lying if I said the money didn't matter,"" said Linus. He started walking again as the Rainlords finished filing into the hallway. ""But Mr. Vance is an honorable man, doing important work here. This city would've been ransacked a hundred times over if not for him and his wealthy friends funding the RPMP.""

'Vantalay also wouldn't be in the middle of a civil war if not for them, no?'

""Hmph. Sure. But it would still be at war with its neighbors. You're not about to tell me that you've decided to switch sides, have you?""

'Not at all. Just playing a bit of devil's advocate. It's a healthy exercise. Keeps us reapers sharp in our old age.'

Linus didn't press the issue further. They arrived at the end of the hall, and he knocked once on the door way.

""Enter,"" came Mr. Vance's voice from the other side.

Linus led everyone in. There weren't enough places for everyone to sit, but the enormous office had plenty of space.

Mr. Vance wasn't at his desk. Instead, the man was by the large windows on the far wall, overlooking the Ruby 88's square-shaped central plaza. The man had a good view of all thirty-four stories from here, and this was far from the first time that Linus had seen him standing there."

"3113

""Thank you for coming,"" said Mr. Vance as he turned around. He was a man of quite advanced years, and it showed. Gray hair, gray mustache, hunched posture, wrinkled features. His right hand gripped a cane, and he was missing an eye. Even in that sharp suit of his, he never really looked to be in the best of health. There was a reason that his enemies had taken to calling him the Shriveled Donkey.

Mr. Vance just seemed to find the name amusing, though.

Linus, not so much.

One of the Rainlords in front began speaking, a raven-haired man with steel gray eyes and harsh features. Linus hadn't yet learned all of their faces, but he was fairly certain this was Zeff Elroy, the one they called the Water Dragon of Sair.

""How's the battle going?"" the man asked.

""There are good days and bad,"" said Mr. Vance, stepping slowly over to his desk. ""Thankfully, we were able to push Abolish out of the city before the VMP's reinforcements arrived to assist them. We've managed to keep the fighting away from any civilians.""

""If you're not asking us to head straight into combat, then you must feel that things are currently under control,"" said Elroy.

Mr. Vance gave a mild nod. ""Yes. I was thinking of keeping you here as a secondary force, in case they breach the city. But if you would prefer to head to the front lines, that could be arranged, too.""

""You are very accommodating,"" said Elroy.

""I understand that your situation is somewhat difficult at the moment,"" said Mr. Vance. ""You would prefer not to make too large of a splash here in Vantalay, no? I don't mind thinking of you as an ace up my sleeve, if you'll pardon the gambling analogy.""

Elroy made no response."

"3114

""You would be honorary members of the RPMP,"" Mr. Vance went on, ""and as such, I would prepare a suitable stipend for the duration of your stay here. That, too, is negotiable if you would prefer some other form of payment. Something with less of a paper trail, perhaps?""

Still, the Rainlords persisted in silence.

Mr. Vance tilted his head at them. ""Well? I'm not getting any younger over here. Do you find those terms agreeable? If so, let us begin hashing out the details.""



""...No,"" said Elroy. ""We do not wish to prolong our time in Ridgemark any more than necessary.""

Mr. Vance leaned back in his chair. ""Oh? You have pressing business elsewhere?""

""You could say that.""

""If you are willing to share what it is, then perhaps I could provide assistance--or at least point you toward someone else who can.""

Elroy fell quiet again.

From his position beside Mr. Vance, Linus could see several of the Rainlords exchanging small glances with one another, particularly the reapers, as if they were conducting a silent conversation. Obviously, the reapers could speak telepathically with their own servants, but not with each other, so it made for a peculiar sight.

It made him wonder if perhaps Rainlord reapers actually could have private conversations. Heh. Maybe that was why they were such a tightly knit community.

More likely, though, they just understood each other incredibly well.

At length, Elroy spoke up again for everyone. ""Logden Prison. You know of it?""

Mr. Vance paused to think. ""Logden? Yes, I know of it. What is your interest in it?""

""We have people there. We want to get them out.""

Mr. Vance gave Linus a look.

Linus knew what he wanted. A tentative assessment. Would it be possible to help the Rainlords with such an endeavor? A simple nod or shake of his head was all Mr. Vance was looking for here."

"3115

Unfortunately, Linus couldn't give him either answer. Without knowing more about the nature of the operation that these Rainlords had in mind, he could not in good conscious commit to assisting them, even

tentatively.

But it was still an interesting idea. He decided to give his boss a kind of uncertain half-nod.

Mr. Vance seemed to understand. ""We can help with that.""

Okay, maybe he hadn't understood. Shit.

Linus didn't get the chance to take Mr. Vance aside and explain, because Elroy spoke up again first.

""Ideally, we would be able to get them out before the battle here is decided.""

""Ah, do you think these people would be willing and able to aid in the defense of the city?""

""Absolutely,"" said Elroy.

""Excellent,"" said Mr. Vance with a smile.

Linus was clenching his jaw as Mr. Vance turned to look at him again.

The meeting didn't get much better for Linus from there. The discussion turned to one of logistics and intel-sharing with regard to the enemy. Several times, Linus wanted to interject and perhaps walk back their claim of support, but no clear opportunity for it ever arrived.

And frankly, it probably wouldn't matter. Whether intentionally or not, Mr. Vance had committed the RPMP--or his part of it, at least--to helping them. Trying to undo that commitment would just make him look weak and foolish.

Ugh.

As the meeting drew on, Linus found his mind already wandering to the more pressing issue of who the hell he could spare for this mission. Maybe he could convince Kristof or Daro to send someone from their divisions, instead. With the promise of future reinforcements on the table, one of them might agree.

Probably Daro, most likely. Kristof was already up to his eyeballs on the front line. Yeah. The more Linus thought about it, the more he felt like Kristof wouldn't want to spare even a single patrolman--not without a major concession on Linus' part, at least."

By the time the Rainlords left, Linus was in a foul mood. Mr. Vance must've been able to tell, because he asked him to stay and talk instead of escorting them to their rooms. Granted, that was grunt work, but still. If the Rainlords decided to go crazy and start attacking people, Linus might've been the only person in the building who could stop them.

"I want you go with them," Mr. Vance.

Linus didn't understand. Go with them? The man had just asked him to stay behind and talk. "What?"

"To Logden Prison," he clarified. "Take some men with you, if you want, but I want you to accompany the Rainlords personally."

Linus blinked. "Sir, what are you talking about? I couldn't possibly leave Ridgemark, right now. If the VMP breaches the city, this place would be all but defenseless. You'd be defenseless."

"I know."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Had the man lost his--?

Hmm.

Actually, no. On second thought, Linus could believe it just fine.

Vino Vance had been acting strange over the last few months. He'd been making decisions that he never would have a year ago, taking risks that he never would have.

Just last month, for instance, when that first group of Rainlords arrived, Vino had asked him to send a group to negotiate with them. This, when a Vanguardian field marshal had been only a stone's throw away from here. It had worked out for the best in the end, of course, but it could have easily turned into gigantic mess for a variety of reasons.

And there were subtler changes, too. Vino's appetite wasn't what it used to be. Linus barely ever saw him eating, anymore. It didn't help that Vino's natural appearance had always been rather pale and sickly, either."

Rather than feigning confusion or disbelief, Linus' expression settled, and he sat down in front of the man's desk. He let the silence linger for a while longer, finding it almost impossible to look him in the eye. Linus didn't want to inquire further. But at this point, he had no choice.

""...Talk to me, Vino. What's been going on with you, lately?""

Vino took his time answering. Perhaps he didn't want to have this conversation, either. ""I'm dying, Linus.""

The words washed over him like a sudden haze. His worst fear, realized in an instant. It wasn't painful. Not yet, at least. It was too sudden. Quick and precise like a knife.

It would hit him eventually, though. Linus had been through this type of thing many times before. His entire family was dead, after all, most from old age.

The impulsive part of him wanted to deny what he'd heard. Or rebel against it, at least. A man of Vino Vance's resources? They could almost certainly secure a reaper for him after he passed. And if not, Linus had plenty of contacts, as did his reaper, Dijara.

But it wasn't that simple, of course.

Linus had known Vino for ages, since long before he'd chosen to come work for him. Despite the professionalism that Linus tried to show in front of others, the truth of the matter was that Vino was his oldest and dearest friend.

When they first met, Linus was little better than a greenhorn in the Vanguard, and Vino was just a boy living in abject squalor here in Vantalay. Those horrific conditions had been a contributing factor to Vino's physical frailty throughout his life.

But he'd lived a long time, despite all that. Eighty-five years and counting.

Linus didn't yet have the heart to ask how much longer he had."

""You don't seem surprised,"" Vino observed.

Linus didn't know what the proper response here was. Was there one? Over a century of life experience, and he was still lost for words. He'd never been all that good with them in the first place. That was one of the reasons he enjoyed working under someone like Vino.

""I guess you figured it out awhile ago, eh? Always were sharper than you liked to let on.""

Linus still couldn't look at him. He wanted to tell Vino not to be stubborn, to become a servant. But he already knew Vino's feelings on the matter. The subject had come up many times before over the course of casual conversation.

This was anything but casual, though. Maybe he should try broaching it again. Couldn't hurt to try, right? What was there to lose?

Linus finally looked up at him. ""...I'm sure I could find a reaper for you, Vino.""

""I'm sure you could, old friend.""

That tone didn't sound like one of agreement. ""Is there time enough for it?""

""Probably.""

""...But you won't do it.""

""Come on, Linus. How many times have we talked about this?""

Something about Vino's tone annoyed him. ""As far as I'm concerned,"" said Linus, ""those were all warm up conversations for the one we're having right now. This is your life we're talking about, Vino.""

""Yes. My life. Not yours. Not some reaper's. Mine.""

""Is that really why you're being so stubborn? Because you don't like the idea of putting your life in someone else's hands?""

""Not at all. My life has been in your hands more times than I can even remember.""

""Then what is it, exactly? Why not give it a shot?""

""Linus, please. You think I want to be immortal in this body? I didn't want it when I was still young and... relatively virile, let's say. Why would I want it now that I'm an infirm old man?""

""Because you're about to die.""

"3119

Vino shook his head. ""I've lived my life the way I wanted. And I'll die the way I want, too. Though my fearful heart might waver, my mind does not. I refuse to act impulsively now.""

Linus sighed and stood up in order to step away from the desk.

""You're just being prideful and stubborn. Not courageous.""

""Maybe. But I've never thought pride was such a terrible thing.""

Agh.

He needed to try a different approach. An appeal to Vino's sense of responsibility, perhaps. ""Ridgemark needs you, Vino. Now more than ever. This war... it threatens everything you've built. Everything you love.""

Vino gave a noticeable pause. ""I'll admit, the timing could be better. I would've liked to go when things were more peaceful...""

Linus perked up a little, seeing an opening. ""Then we can do that. You could become a servant just until the war is over. Or for however long you deem fit. Who knows? You might be surprised how much you like it.""

Vino just looked at him, expressionless.

""The important thing is that you would be able to go out on your own terms. Whenever you want.""

Vino's gaze drifted to the side, somewhat.

Was that... a tinge of uncertainty that Linus saw? Maybe Vino could be convinced, after all.

Vino closed his eyes for a moment and took a long breath. ""Wouldn't that just be a delusion? This war may be the largest in a century, but it won't be the last. There will always been another excuse to prolong my departure.""

Well, yeah. That was kind of what Linus was hoping for here. He decided to keep that thought to himself, though. ""But it wouldn't be a fixed decision, Vino. You could change your mind at any time. Just give it a chance. Please.""

"3120

""No, Linus. There's no point. My mind is made up. I've already made peace with it. I hope you will, too.""

Irritated, Linus started walking back and forth across the room. ""Vino, this is absurd. You're giving up, and that's not like you. Not at all. Any number of things could happen in the time you have left. I don't know how long that is, but if you would just open yourself up to to the possibility that--""

""I have about three months left. Or so my doctor tells me.""

Linus stopped pacing, his back toward Vino. He didn't turn around. Something about that bit of information and the tone of Vino's voice made him feel like there was nothing at all that could be done--even though there most certainly was.

For a while, Linus just stood there, silent and stewing in his thoughts.

He was already feeling it, he suddenly realized. The death of his closest friend.

In the past, when he'd lost people, it usually took him a few days to process, to get to this point. But now...

It should've been the opposite, shouldn't it? After experiencing this so many times before, he should've built up some manner of tolerance to it.

But it wasn't like that at all. If anything, he felt worse than ever. More powerless than ever. More hopeless than ever.

More alone than ever.

He supposed it was a testament to just how much Vino meant to him. If he had the presence of mind for it, he might've tried to take solace in that thought a little more.

But he didn't. It passed through his mind like rain through a window screen and was gone.

And instead, a far stupider thought manifested in his mind, something that he already knew made no sense but that nonetheless felt so incredibly appropriate at the moment. ""Well, maybe I'll just let myself die along with you, then.""

"3121

Vino was quiet a moment. His next words came out very softly. ""If that's what you want, then I won't be able to stop you. But I'm hoping that you'll keep living for a while longer yet. Because I'm leaving everything to you.""

Linus turned to look at him again. ""What?""

""In my will, I mean,"" said Vino. ""You're getting everything.""

Linus was speechless.

""Do whatever you want with it all. Tear down the Ruby and turn it into a landfill, if that's what'll make you happy.""

At that comment, Linus' expression flattened a little. ""You know I'd never do something like that.""

A wry smile crept across Vino's wrinkled face. ""Yeah, I do. That's why I'm leaving it to you. I know you'll take care of everything--or do your best to, at least. And that's all I'm asking for.""

Linus just sighed again. The man already sounded so resigned to his fate, as if his own legacy hardly even mattered to him.

Or maybe he was just at peace with everything. Linus found it difficult to tell the difference between surrender and acceptance. One sounded a lot healthier than the other, but was there any actual nuance to speak of? He wasn't sure.



Maybe it didn't matter.

Heh. Maybe nothing did.

Dijara would have some choice words for him if she heard him say that. He wished she was here now, but it felt too late to call her over. He could talk to her later.

Perhaps Linus' silence was beginning to bother Vino, because the other man decided to pick the conversation back up again without waiting for him to respond. ""You're not really thinking about dying with me, are you?""

Honestly, he wasn't sure. He just turned away and rubbed his forehead.

""Linus. You still have so much to live for.""

The irony of listening to this man say that made Linus want to laugh in Vino's face--and maybe also punch him. He resisted both urges, though."

"3122

""I suppose you must think that sounds pretty hypocritical coming from me,"" said Vino.

Yeah, no shit.

""But Linus, listen. You're not like me. You're, what? Twice my age or so? And yet you don't look any older than the day I first met you."" Vino paused for a breathy laugh. ""You still have your health. Your youth. Even if I were to become undead like you, I couldn't reverse aging. I'd still be old and tired and full of chronic pain whenever my poor reaper wasn't around. But you? You could go out there and start a brand new family, if you wanted. And show them the world. Teach them all sorts of things. You're wiser than you give yourself credit for, my friend.""

""So you're telling me that if you could somehow reclaim your youth, you'd change your mind?"" said Linus.

At that, Vino hesitated. He looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it and averted his gaze.

""Yeah, I thought not,"" said Linus.

""Look, we're not talking about me.""

""Yes, we are.""

""Linus. I'm just..." It was a rare instance where Vino seemed to struggle for his words. In all their time together, Linus hadn't seen this very often. Vino took the opportunity to sigh heavily before continuing. ""I'm just ready to move on. That's all.""

""To move on,"" echoed Linus dryly.

Vino gestured broadly around him. ""From this life. Or this world, maybe. I'm ready to see whatever comes next. Truthfully, I'm kind of excited about it.""

Linus just stared at him for a moment. Somehow, this wasn't surprising. Thinking back to all their conversations over the years, the topic of what happens after death had come up quite a number of times. ""...And what if there's nothing to discover?""

Vino all but rolled his eyes at him. ""You would ask that question of a dying man, you callous jerk. Would it kill you have some tact for a change? Honestly.""

Linus wasn't really in the mood to lighten things up with insults or banter. He just kept looking at his friend, waiting for an answer to his question."  
"3123 -- CCLXVII.

Vino exhaled through his nose. ""I don't think there'll be nothing,"" said Vino, ""but if I'm wrong, then, well. At least I won't have to listen you saying 'I told you so.'""

Linus just shook his head. He couldn't understand how Vino could be so casual about it.

Though, at the same time, a small part of him had to admire the man, too. All these years, Vino had told him over and over again that he believed in an afterlife. Linus had never entirely thought that he was serious. He'd always sort of suspected that Vino might've just been

posturing. Trying to convince himself as much as Linus.

But listening to him now?

Linus couldn't think that way anymore. Vino was really putting his money where his mouth was.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Seven: 'Thy strongest bonds...'

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Warrenhold hadn't felt this empty in a while. With so many of the Rainlords having ventured off to join the fight in Vantalay, there was a certain tension in the air that Hector couldn't quite describe.

Maybe it was just him, though. The remaining Rainlords didn't let any nervousness show. Even with most of their warriors away, they managed to look quite calm and collected, like it was just business as usual.

But it wasn't, of course. No one knew that better than Hector.

The fight could come at any time, and more than ever, he wanted to be ready. The reconstruction effort had shifted, partly because half or more of their helpers had gone off to fight and partly because Hector felt that there were new architectural priorities to focus on.

Hector had been making more shields again. The storage room full of Amir-9 prototypes was a good start, but he needed more. He intended to line the whole castle with them--or at least the important choke points, if nothing else."

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"3124

The last time he'd done this was in the Undercrust, back when the Rainlords had used his shields in order to line the climate-controlled pods that were being used by the non-servants for the trip. It was still a pretty slow process, since he had to move each newly created shield out of his own sphere of influence before he could make another one, but he was doing it on his own now, more or less, whereas the Rainlords had assisted him before.

He'd created a kind of makeshift trebuchet to make things easier. He would materialize an Amir-9 onto one end of a long beam, then a giant boulder onto the opposite end. It had taken several attempts and refinements before getting a design that didn't just explode when the boulder hit it, but once he'd gotten it working, it was actually pretty fun.

The key, he found, was to materialize the boulder into a big receptacle that was very securely attached to the beam so that it didn't just fall down and snap the beam like a toothpick.

All in all, it actually looked quite a bit like historical trebuchets. Apart from the sling, perhaps. He couldn't materialize the rope or cloth that would be needed for that, and he also felt like the Amir-9's shape would make it get snagged in such an addition, anyway. Instead, he just made a simple, round launching platform for the heater shield to rest upon, and then bam. Off it went flying.

Roman Fullister was gracious enough to be helping him out on the distant receiving end, making sure that none of them got lost.

In a way, they were playing the world's most intense game of catch.

And to aid with communication, Voreese was hanging out with Hector while Garovel followed Roman around.

'How much farther do you think you could make it go?' said Voreese, eyeing their most recent shield as it sailed off into the sky."

"3125

Hector squinted, already unable to see it in the distance. Even the midday sun and clear weather didn't help. ""Farther? I'm wondering if we're not already sending it too far, as is.""

'Nonsense. Roman hasn't missed a single one yet. We gotta try harder. Give him something to think about.'

Hector gave her a look. ""You realize the whole point of him and Garovel being out there is to make sure that we don't lose any of these shields, right?""

'Yeah, but wouldn't it be kinda funny if they fucked up? I know I'd laugh.'

""It might not be so funny when one of my shields ends up on the black market.""

'Oh, c'mon. You think someone's gonna reverse engineer it something? The materials are what make it so valuable, not the craftsmanship. Nobody but you will be able to replicate it and sell it for loads of money. Which, by the way, is something you should think about doing.'

It had crossed his mind once or twice before. But the idea of selling these shields in bulk--whether on the black market or not--wasn't very comforting to him. He didn't like imagining what his shields might end up being used for or by whom.

Plus, he wasn't terribly confident in the legality of it. Selling materialized objects? Items that he could go around and annihilate at his own leisure? Seemed kinda like a scam, though he hadn't actually discussed the logistics of it with Garovel yet.

Voreese still seemed to think it was a good idea, though, so maybe there was something to it.

Eh. Maybe one day, he'd give it a more serious look. Right now, it didn't matter, because he needed every shield that he could make. He would need hundreds more--maybe even thousands--if he was going to enhance Warrenhold's defenses with them."

"3126

Hector allowed the trebuchet to reset its position, then materialized another Amir-9 onto the launching platform and sent it flying, too. He looked over at Voreese again, waiting on word from her.

'He got that one, too,' she said after a minute. 'Come on, Hector. Change it up. Throw him a curveball. Or a fastball. Or a speedball.'

""A speedball? I'm pretty sure that's a drug thing, not a baseball thing.""

'Look, I don't follow sports, okay? Just do something different. Give him a challenge. Think of it as training. For the both of you.'

""Training, huh?""

'Yeah.'

""Hmm..."" He scratched his cheek, thinking.

'Unless you don't think you can get one past Roman. If you're afraid of a little healthy competition, I understand. I won't think less of you. Much.'

Hector tilted his brow at her. ""You're barking up the wrong tree, Voreese. I'm not a competitive person. Like, at all.""

'Oh, so you ARE scared, then.'

He sent another shield flying, just the same as before. He waited for the contraption's metallic groaning and scraping to quiet down before answering her. ""Petrified.""

'Wow. Okay, then. That's fine. I won't try to pressure you or anything. I'm just surprised to hear that the great Lord of Warrenhold is secretly a little bitch, that's all. Don't worry--I won't tell anyone.'

Hector chortled and shook his head. ""You were better off trying to get me think of it as training. You were starting to convince me, but now I just wanna refuse on principle.""

'Ah, shit, really? Well, it WOULD be training. That's basically what all healthy competition boils down to. Hence the term 'healthy' being included.'

""Uh-huh.""

'Roman's getting really good at flying, but he could use an extra push. Something to really challenge him, y'know? Without actually endangering him. Or me, preferably. Think you could provide that?'  
"3127

""Hmm. Maybe."" Hector held off on launching the next shield as he weighed his options. It might be kind of annoying if he ended up having to go hunt down a lost shield, but... maybe that would actually be a good exercise in an of itself.

First, he'd have to get a shield past Roman, though. And if this was

suddenly a competition, then it wouldn't really be fair if just lobbed one on the opposite direction or something.

""Alright,"" said Hector. ""I'll step it up a notch. But you have to warn Roman that I'm about to go harder.""

'I do? Why? Wouldn't it be funnier as a surprise?'

""You're the one who specified 'healthy' competition.""

'Yeah, but the first one could just be a prank. The healthy part could come after.' She drew herself up a little, looking suddenly a bit haughty. 'And frankly, Hector, I don't think you'll be able to get one past him, even without warning. So I'm giving you the advantage.'

""Just warn him, please. It's only fair.""

'Ugh, fine.' She paused. 'There, he's been warned. Now hurry up. I'm not getting any younger over here.'

For a second, Hector just took her at her word, but then he decided to consult Garovel, who confirmed his suspicions. ""No, you didn't.""

'Wow, I can't believe you checked up on me. Where's the trust, man?'

""The same place the truth went, probably.""

'Okay, okay, I warned him. For real this time. Satisfied, you little party pooper?'

After consulting Garovel a second time, he was. He gave her a nod.

Regarding how to proceed, Hector had a few choices. Simply upping the scale of the trebuchet might do the trick, but it would require entirely new refinement of the contraption's structural integrity. Most likely, it would collapse in on itself or worse several times before he got all the ratios correct. And while that might make for a fun exercise, he wasn't convinced that it would be enough to get past Roman. Voreese did seem pretty confident in him, after all."

"3128

Of course, there was also the option of the orbital technique. He could simply coat the freshly materialized shield in iron and then launch it like



he'd done so many times before. But that didn't seem like it would be very good practice. He already felt quite comfortable with that technique.

And frankly, he felt like that would be overdoing it. That technique, more or less, had been what killed the Beast of Lorent. While Hector didn't want to underestimate his good friend Roman, he also didn't want to turn the guy into a bunch of meaty chunks.

So he decided to try something new, something that had been rattling around in a brainstorming thought process for a little while now.

A heat-assisted pressurization chamber.

With the advent of his ability to manipulate temperature, Hector had been trying to think of less conventional ways that he might be able to make use of it. One of the things he learned when reading up on the physics of heat was that it could increase the pressure in a given system.

He couldn't exactly claim that his understanding of it was complete, but from what he'd been able to discern, higher temperatures caused particles to move faster, making them bump into each other and thereby increasing pressure when in a contained environment. That was why heat caused things to distort and expand.

And when he got to thinking about pressure, that started giving him other ideas. Because, for example, wasn't it possible for him to create a vacuum? Quite easily?

All he had to do was make a simple iron cube, then hollow out the middle. There would be no air inside."

"3129

A vacuum wasn't necessarily useful for his purposes here, but the mere idea that he could so trivially manipulate air pressure had been enough to get the gears turning in his head even more. Because for instance, what if he did the opposite? Instead of creating an airless chamber, what if he purposely captured air and began compressing it?

It seemed relatively simple to do. Just materialize an open box, then seal it off. From there, he could shrink the hollow space inside, causing

the air molecules trapped within to be pressed closer and closer together.

Theoretically, he could do this as much as he wanted. The only problem, he thought, would be in how much air pressure the iron itself could withstand. At some point, the air pressure would likely grow too powerful for the chamber to contain, and his iron would tear itself apart with explosive force in order to release said air.

And therein lay the foundation of his idea. A compressed air explosion. If it worked, then he was pretty sure that he would be able to find all sorts of uses for such a technique in combat.

He wasn't entirely sure it would work that way, though. Thus far, he hadn't found the occasion to actually test it.

And now that he did, he was abruptly more concerned with Voreese's safety than with the experiment itself. He supposed she'd be fine as long as he didn't soul-empower anything, but that would also lessen the value of the experiment. In a real fight, he would almost certainly want to employ soul power.

Ah well. Maybe it was better to take things easier the first time, anyway.

He was already materializing an open iron chamber by the time his spare thought processes were finishing that internal debate. He needed it to be large enough to shoot an Amir-9 out of it, and since there was no soul power to threaten Voreese, he figured that he could go a bit overboard with the physical specifications."

"3130

He made it as big as a truck--a giant metal tube, propped up at an angle so that the open end was pointed up toward the sky in Roman's direction.

Then he grew the iron over the opening, sealing it shut. From there, he grew the iron walls slowly inward.

Simple enough.

He didn't really know when to stop, though. Without being able to actually see inside of the sealed chamber, he was working entirely in

his head here, materializing based only on what he imagined the dimensions to be.

It was a massive tube. He'd made the iron quite thick. And up until the moment it was sealed, he'd been able to sense the exact shape from the inside using the Scarf of Amordiin. He just had to hold onto that memory, relative to slowly shrinking one in his imagination.

For this first test, he hadn't put the Amir-9 inside the tube, but a spare thought process began to wonder if perhaps he should. He was sure that it would be able to withstand just about any amount of pressure that he could create, but he didn't see much point to exposing the shield to it when he could just lay the Amir-9 over the sealed opening instead.

The idea was to let the pressure continue to build, then either weaken or just reopen the seal, allowing all of the air to escape in the desired direction. In this case, the sky.

But there was a problem.

He could feel it. With his materialization.

It was a difficult sensation to describe. He couldn't see inside the tube or know how much space was left, but he could feel that his materialization had stopped working.

He'd materialized so many different things before on so many different occasions, and he could just sort of... tell. There was a certain mental ""feedback"" that he got whenever he materialized something. A new kind of sense, perhaps. Like a quiet presence that should have been there but wasn't."

"3131

He'd never really given it much thought until now. It hadn't felt all that strange until it was no longer there.

Why wasn't it there? Had he ever felt this before?

Hmm. Maybe.

That time when Rasalased had reset his materialization--that had kind of felt like this. Sort of.

But this wasn't that. His ability hadn't reset.

There was something else.

This was more like... ah. Yeah. This was more like when he tried to materialize something into a solid object. It didn't work, because materialization couldn't accumulate within a physical space that was already occupied by something else.

That was one of the fundamentals of materialization. It was why he couldn't materialize an iron spike already in the ground, for example. He had to materialize it first, then puncture.

So was that what this was, then?

Hector circled around the tube as he contemplated, sizing his work up and down. Voreese was saying something, but he wasn't listening, even with a spare thought process. All of his mind was devoted to the problem in front of him.

He'd been thinking that he could just keep growing the iron inward, continually compressing the air therein to greater and greater extremes, but perhaps that had been foolish. Maybe once the pressure passed a high enough threshold, materialization within that space became impossible, no different than if it were a solid object.

Yeah, that would make sense, he supposed.

If so, then it kinda poked a giant hole in the viability of his experiment. The tensile strength of iron could be too high compared to the maximum compression that he could achieve with this technique.

Hmm. So no explosive decompression, then?

Dammit. That sucked.

Well. All hope wasn't lost just yet, Hector supposed.

He still hadn't integrated temperature into the equation yet. The plan had been for a heat-assisted pressurization chamber, after all."

"3132

From his research, he understood pressure and heat were linked. An increase in pressure corresponded with an increase in heat and vice versa. So what would happen if he used temperature manipulation to add even more heat to the system? What would happen if he began annihilating and replacing parts of the tube with molten iron?

Or near-molten, perhaps. If it were all gooey and soft and melting through the iron around it, then that probably wouldn't bode well for the project's overall structural integrity.

He'd have to be quick, too. Rapid annihilation and materialization was something that he'd practiced many times before, but never quite like this. If he was too slow or just chose his spots poorly, the iron walls might rupture.

He added some extra outer layers to the tube in order to help brace it, then he set to work.

The inner walls were replaced with heated iron. Emotional commands. Hot as he could imagine them without becoming molten in his mind.

From the outside, there was no visible change. The big tube of iron just lay there, unmoving. How much pressure would be required for it to shake or jostle?

He kept going. More replacements. More heat.

And to be on the safe side, he weakened the seal a bit more. If the walls did fail prematurely, he wanted it to be where the seal was. That way, it would at least explode in the intended direction. The Amir-9 was already position there, just waiting to be launched.

And still, there was no outward sign of movement.

The anticipation was getting to him a little. Just how big was this explosion going to be, exactly? Or was it even going to explode at all? The tensile strength of his iron wasn't too strong, still, was it?"

"3133

The longer this took, the more concerned he became. The pressure had to be building up in there. Maybe it still wasn't hot enough?

Molten iron, then?

Hmm.

Alright, fine, molten iron.

He started on another round of replacements, this time with as much heat as he could muster. He decided to weaken the seal a bit more, too. Maybe that would be enough. And he was already wearing a bit of armor but not much, so maybe he should--

The explosion came so fast and so loud that, even after waiting for it this whole time, Hector couldn't help being taken by surprise. The boom arrived and shot the Amir-9 into the air like a cannonball, and Hector, standing off to the side, was thrown off his feet. The whole tube lurched backward and skidded briefly across the barren field, tearing up dirt and rock as if starting to dig a trench.

Hector managed to catch himself before falling on his ass, at least, but his hearing was definitely gone, and his vision was taking a few seconds to come back into focus. He didn't need his ear drums to hear Voreese's voice in his head, though.

'Sweet, juggling titty twisters, Hector! I know said not to hold back, but damn! What did you even do just now?'

He tried to explain, but it was kinda difficult when he couldn't hear the words coming out of his own mouth. His whole head felt like it was filled with cotton or something. He decided instead to ask Garovel to come heal him, to which the reaper replied that he was already on his way.

Apparently, the blast had been so loud that Garovel had been able to hear it from where he was."

"3134

Voreese was still talking to him, but Hector just kind of motioned with his hands and she seemed to intuit what he was trying to say. While they waited, he took the opportunity to examine the aftermath of his iron cannon.

It was all contorted and bent out of shape. Molten goo was seeping out through visible fissures in the iron near the exit, and all the lingering steam looked like would've been sizzling quite loudly if he could hear it.

He annihilated his work in pieces, wanting to understand the internal damage a bit better instead of just dematerializing everything at once.

Garovel arrived first, phasing up through the ground and grabbing Hector's ankle to invoke the regeneration.

Not long afterward, Hector sensed Roman's approach with the Scarf, and then the man's voiced arrived from above. ""Excuse me, sir, but what the fuck was that shit?""

Hector pressed his lips together flatly, fighting back a smile as he turned to look. ""Are you okay? I hope, er--""

Roman's right arm was missing. It wasn't bleeding, though, having apparently been cauterized already. Voreese flew over to help him, and it soon began regrowing. His pale, sweaty face regained color, as well.

'He did warn you,' said Voreese publicly.

Garovel hovered over to Hector, saying nothing but eyeing the truck-sized iron tube nearby as molten goo spilled out of it, visibly distorting the area with a heat haze.

Roman's feet touched ground with a slight thud, and then Hector noticed the collection of shields hovering in behind him. They'd been at this all morning, so there were quite a few of them.

'You didn't miss that last one, did you?' asked Voreese.

Roman exhaled a ragged breath. ""No, I got it."" He waved his hand and brought one of the shields closer, into his left hand and held it up."  
"3135

It took Hector a second to find the right words. ""Er. Sorry about that.""

""Don't be,"" said Roman, rolling his shoulder and stretching his neck. He was eyeing the spent cannon now, too. ""Would you say that was more powerful than that orbit-y technique of yours or less?""

Hector scratched his forehead. ""Uh... well, a few minutes ago, I would've said it was definitely less powerful, but now I'm not sure. I'd have to do some testing and refining, I think.""

"I see," said Roman. "Well, I'm up for taking another crack at it, if you don't mind. That made for some pretty intense practice."

Hector knew he was fine, but he still felt kinda bad.

And maybe Roman could tell as much from the expression on his face, because he said, "Is that pity I see? C'mon, this is no big--" He cut himself off, however, and his expression froze, eyes glancing at Voreese for moment before returning Hector. "...Oh, actually, agh, man, that really hurt, y'know? Damn." He dropped the Amir-9 he was holding in order to grab his right shoulder and present his bony, still-regenerating hand. "Ow. Gosh. Wow. Woe is me. This sure hurts."

Hector just cocked an eyebrow.

'Geez, Hector, that was pretty uncool,' said Voreese. 'How could you do that to Roman? So cruel, especially after all we've done for you, y'know? Man.'

Now Hector was just suspicious. He'd felt bad but not that bad. What were they playing at here?

'But y'know, if you'd like to make it up to us, we wouldn't mind getting maybe, perhaps, a nice little somethin'-somethin' from that Forge of yours. As like an apology gift.'

Ah.

Hector couldn't help but give a nodding laugh. "I suppose that could be arranged. Is there something specific that you have in mind?"

"3136

Roman and Voreese exchanged silent looks. From the combative expressions on their faces, they were probably arguing.

'Well, sure, I've got all sorts of ideas,' said Voreese, turning to Hector again, 'but it'd really depend on what the Sunsmith is able to pump out. We of course understand that it's a difficult and time-consuming process, full of nuance. At this stage, it'd be totally irrational to have our hearts set on any one thing in particular. Whatever you're able to provide us with would be perfectly--'



""She wants a compass,"" blurted Roman.

Voreese hissed at him.

Hector was mainly just confused, though. ""Why a compass?""

""A magical one,"" Roman went on. ""Not terribly unlike that Tuning Orb of Creamy Spaghetti you already have.""

'Karugetti,' said Voreese. 'The Tuning Orb of Karugetti. It's named after one of the most brilliant men who ever lived, you ignorant mouthbreather.'

""Whatever.""

'This is the first time we're hearing of your interest in the Orb,' said Garovel. 'Why didn't you mention it before? We wouldn't have given it to the Vantalay team if we knew you wanted it.'

'Eh, as long as someone's getting good use out of it, that's all that matters,' said Voreese. 'And besides, the Tuning Orb probably sucks. It wasn't actually invented by Karugetti himself. It was invented by Arkos, who was like Karugetti but shit. Karu-shitty.'

'Wasn't he Karugetti's apprentice?' said Garovel. 'He probably named it that to honor his master.'

'He should've honored him by not being such a lameass.'

'Do you have some sort of personal beef with Arkos? This isn't the first time you've ragged on him, as I recall.'

'I just think he's a bit overrated, is all. Dude's gotten all sorts of fame and fanfare over the years, while so many other great minds throughout history have gotten the shaft.'"

"3137

'His reputational success didn't necessarily come at the expense of others, you know. As far as I'm aware, he was never branded as an idea thief or anything like that.'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm sure he was a swell dude. Gave to the poor and rescued lost kittens in his spare time, probably. What a homie. I'm just

tired of hearing his name all over the fuckin' place.'

'Hmm. I feel like you're disproportionately upset at this guy for some reason.'

'Pah. He's long dead, so who cares if I talk shit on him? Who am I hurting, huh? His reputation has enjoyed plenty of overblown adoration already. What, was he a personal friend of yours or something?'

'Well, no, but--'

'Then fuck 'im!'

'Those aren't the words of a well-adjusted individual, Voreese.'

'Am I supposed to give a shit about that?'

'Ideally, yeah, kinda.'

The reapers' conversation kept devolving for a while, and Hector waited for them to circle back around to the topic of that ""magic compass"" that Roman and Voreese wanted, but they never did.

Instead, the reapers went abruptly silent, and then Garovel said something that Hector was not at all expecting. 'Ravi Zaman is here.'

That certainly caught Hector's attention. Ravi had never visited Warrenhold before--or even Atreya as a whole, as far as Hector was aware. The fact that the man was suddenly dropping by like this, totally unannounced, was actually quite alarming, Hector felt. Ravi was an important political figure in Lorent with not very much spare time on his hands, and even though Hector was on good terms with him, the courteous thing to do would have been to make known several days in advance that he intended to visit.

And Ravi was nothing if not courteous.

So Hector couldn't imagine that the man was going to have pleasant news for them."

"3138 -- CCLXVIII.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Eight: 'The approaching bloodstorm...'

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Indeed, Hector's hunch proved correct. The news had been just about the worst thing he could've possibly imagined, right now. Or close to it, at least.

Abolish was about to launch a major offensive into Lorent, apparently.

""I'm sorry we can't provide direct assistance,"" Ravi was saying. His reaper, Beldorix, hovered right behind him, his skeletal face looking somehow even more dour than it normally did. ""This warning is the best I can provide. I don't have the authority to go against Bloodeye's sect.""

'That right?' said Garovel. 'A member of the Freeman Fellowship lacks the freedom to do as he pleases? Bit of a misnomer, in that case, don't you think?'

Ravi returned a strained look but made no response.

'Look, if you're just scared to fight him, then fine,' said Garovel. 'I wouldn't even blame you. He's a scary son of a bitch. But you don't need to dress it up in political excuses. This isn't Riverton Hall.'

""Th-that's not what this is,"" said Ravi.

Hector had never seen the man look so disheveled before. His normally pristine suit and tie were scuffed and misaligned; his dark hair, untidy.

It certainly wasn't a comfort, seeing him this way. The man had never presented himself to Hector as anything less than confident and secure.

'If we raise a hand against Bloodeye and his men,' said Beldorix, 'it won't just be Ravi and I who reap the consequences. The entirety of the Fellowship would be threatened. Our status within Abolish is still greatly contested. We have countless peers who would like nothing more than to finally be given permission to treat us as enemy combatants. If we fight alongside you, we would be providing them with the excuse they need in order to do exactly that.'"

"3138 -- CCLXVIII.

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The timing couldn't possibly have been worse, Hector felt. It was so bad, in fact, that a part of him had to wonder if Bloodeye somehow knew about their current lack of manpower here at Warrenhold.

Most likely not, Hector decided, but it was still quite the troublesome and nagging thought.

'Well, thanks for the warning,' said Voreese. 'If that's all you've got for us, then you can go now.'

Beldorix gave her a look but said nothing. A silent exchange seemed to take place between him and Ravi, and then the two of them turned to leave.

Hector felt a little bad about how curt she was being, but he could also understand why Voreese was in a rush to get rid of them. If this attack was imminent, then there was no time to waste. They would need to begin strategizing immediately, and having two Abolishers present for that meeting wasn't necessarily a wise idea.

But he had one more question for them before they left. ""Have you told Mr. Rondel about this yet?""

Ravi and Beldorix both paused.

Carl Rondel was the Vanguardian advisor to the Lorentian President, much like Ravi was the Abolish advisor to him. Hector knew that there wasn't much love lost between these two men, but if the fate of Lorent was suddenly on the line here, then none of that should've mattered at the moment.

Right?

Ravi was hesitating quite a bit, though. ""...Not yet,"" he finally admitted.

""Ravi,"" said Hector, trying not to sound too disappointed in him.

""I will tell him as soon as I return to Riverton Hall.""

""Can't you just call him?"" said Roman.

""This is not information that can be shared over the phone,"" said

Ravi.

""Sure, but time is of the essence here,"" said Roman.

""Then I will go fast."" And without another word, Ravi grabbed his reaper and blasted off on a metallic platform, high into the sky. From there, he surged off into the distance within some kind of liquid jet stream."

"3140

It wasn't at the forefront of his thoughts at the moment, but Hector was impressed by Ravi's apparent skill with materialization. The ability to fly like that wasn't easy and required great mastery over velocity states and possibly also temperature states, depending on what his element was.

That alone wasn't enough information to truly judge from, of course, but if he had to hazard a guess, Hector would place the man somewhere around Zeff's strength tier.

After he was gone, everyone started back toward the door to the Entry Tower. It was a bit harder to locate these days, thanks to all of the iron buildings that Hector had been materializing as part of Warrenhold's aboveground ""decoy"" castle, but thanks to the Scarf of Amordiin, Hector had no trouble finding it.

Maybe that was why everyone was following so closely behind him. This decoy castle may still have been relatively small, but it was already something of a maze. One day, when his volume limit allowed, he wanted it to become a full blown labyrinth up here, but maybe that would be taking things a little too far.

'We have to call back the Rainlords immediately,' said Voreese.

'Can't,' said Garovel. 'Not the ones in Vantalay, at least. Their mission there is too important to them. They'll never agree to return until its complete.'

""First things first,"" said Hector. He was using an iron platform behind everyone in order to bring their collected pile of Amir-9s with them.

""We need the scouting team to confirm what Ravi told us.""

""You think he was lying?"" said Roman.

""No, but I've been wrong before,"" said Hector. ""And I don't want to walk into a trap.""

'You should probably also call Rondel yourself,' said Garovel. 'But give it a few hours and see if Ravi actually tells him first like he said he would.'

"3141

The reapers for the various teams around the world had their own floor in the Tower of Night. Generally, they just stayed there, reading books or watching television while they waited for updates from their deployed servants. They had a rotating group of young servants and even non-servants to do the channel surfing and page turning for them.

Hector checked in with the scouting team in Callum first.

""Any updates on Abolish's movements?"" he asked.

The lead reaper's name was Krigoth, partnered to Isaac Sebolt. It took him a moment to retrieve an answer for Hector. 'Everything's quiet. Why? Something wrong?' The entourage of visitors and urgency on their faces must have tipped the reaper off.

""We have it on good authority that they'll be launching an attack on Lorent soon,"" said Hector. ""We'd like confirmation on that, if possible.""

'I see,' said Krigoth gravely. 'Well, there's been no reported change. I'd like to say that we would have noticed any major troop movements, but if they're using Invisibility again, then I have to acknowledge the possibility that they could have slipped through Callum unnoticed.'

Hector was afraid of that possibility, too, but from what he understood, the Sandlords had come up with a few countermeasures to that tactic. And while Hector had been in his little coma, Hahl Saqqaf had been kind enough to share their tech with the Rainlords. Isaac's team shouldn't have been totally blind, but that was far from a guarantee.

They had to prepare for the worst, Hector knew.

Problem was, how to go about that? Lorent was huge. If Abolish

slipped into the country, they could launch surprise attacks anywhere they pleased. It all depended on what their objective was. If they just wanted to terrorize the populace, that was one thing, but if they wanted another very public conquest like they'd done to Sair, then they might not care about stealth at all."

"3142

Perhaps the best strategy was to try and draw Abolish's attention to him, but that, too, could cause problems. Where exactly would he wish to draw their attention to? He didn't have a fortress in Lorent yet, and he certainly didn't want them to go anywhere near the Candle.

As that internal debate raged in a background thought process, Hector also remained focused on the conversation with Krigoth. ""Does Isaac's team have an eye on any Abolish encampments, right now?""

Krigoth took a moment to check. 'Yes. Three. And they're all still on the other side of the Callum-Sair border. But they're close. If they wanted to invade Callum, they could cross the border in under an hour and be halfway to Lorent in under a day.'

'Assuming those encampments are not decoys, that is,' said Garovel. 'Can Isaac's team see activity in them? Can they still identify specific combatants like Smith, Konig, or Toro? Or Bloodeye himself, ideally?'

'I'll have them check again,' said Krigoth. 'Give us some time.'

'Alright.'

Instead of just waiting around for Krigoth to get back to them with an answer, however, Hector moved on to the other rooms where the other teams' reapers were waiting.

""Call everyone back to Warrenhold,"" he told both groups. The reapers had questions, of course, but Voreese and Garovel were ready to field them in Hector's stead.

Those two teams had been dispatched to Qhenghis and Ardora, so the return trip wouldn't be very quick, especially with so much of Eloa at war now. When they'd first departed, the continent was still at peace, and air travel hadn't been so heavily monitored--or even outright banned--in so many locations.



But it was the right move, Hector felt. Everyone not in Vantalay needed to be here now. Treasure had to come second."

"3143

Hopefully, the progress they'd made with their respective hunts wouldn't be totally lost. With any luck, they would be able to pick up where they left off once this whole mess was sorted out.

Hmm. Sorted out? A spare thought process wondered about that sentiment. Wasn't it a bit assumptive on his part to think that way? So casually? This was a fucking war. The sovereignty of Lorent and probably also Atreya were on the line here, as were the lives of everyone in both countries.

And yet...

He was not afraid. He wasn't even all that worried, actually. He felt exceptionally calm.

He hoped he wasn't becoming arrogant. There was no reason to think that he could defeat Bloodeye in a normal fight. And for all they knew, Morgunov could show up, too. By all metrics, Hector should've been nervous as fuck, right now.

But he wasn't. His head was clear. Seemingly clear, at least.

He hardly felt like himself, though. Hell, he hardly even knew what ""himself"" was supposed to feel like.

All the crazy shit that he'd been through lately made this situation feel somehow smaller. Less terrifying. But it was that last trip through the Fusion Forge that had really messed with him. He wondered if he was even the same person, now.

Bloodeye. Also known as the Red Devil of Horsht. Full name: Neville Cornelius Roy. Born in Horsht 133 years ago. Regarded as one of the most dangerous men in the world.

How in the world had Hector learned all of that? He looked the guy up on the internet, only to discover those little details were indeed accurate.

There was so much information rolling around in his head now. Taken

from the Candle itself. But it seemed incredibly strange that the Candle would know something like that despite having been half-broken and dormant for eons."

"3144

How could the Candle have even been aware of someone like Bloodeye? Sure, the guy had been around for a long time, but compared to the Candle, 133 years was nothing. As far as Hector could recall, Bloodeye had never personally visited the Candle, so where the hell did this information come from?

There was something about the nature of memory that he wasn't understanding here. Something about the nature of aura. The nature of souls and ardor, too, perhaps.

Well. That wasn't such a surprise, at least. There were tons of things that he didn't understand.

Regardless, the next thing on his to-do list was to inform Abbas Saqqaf of the news. A simple phone call probably would have done the trick, but because Ravi had chosen to come all the way out here to Warrenhold instead of doing that, Hector felt he should avoid phones, too.

Much of Hahl Saqqaf was already in Lorent, holed up at a few different locations, but thankfully, there were a handful of Saqqaf reapers hanging around here who could pass on a message.

After that, it was a matter of handing out Amir-9s for as many warriors to use as possible. Most of the stock that he'd been building up had gone into lining the castle walls--including that of the cavern in which Warrenhold stood--to help make the place even more difficult to break into, but obviously, that would only prove helpful if Abolish came here. He made sure that everyone coming to Lorent with him had a shield at their disposal, too.

As for who he actually intended to bring along, well... he'd hardly seen any of them in actual combat yet. All of the Rainlords' most seasoned warriors were in Vantalay at the moment, and even most of their intermediate warriors were abroad on missions. Which left him with a group that wasn't much older than himself.

His actual peers, in terms of age."

"3145

They certainly weren't looking at him like he was their peer, though. They were looking at him like he had all the answers, like he was above reproach or question.

The only outliers were Roman Fullister, Matteo Delaguna, Joana Cortes, Silvia Blackburn, and Nere Blackburn. For whatever reason, the Blackburns had decided not to take Nere with them to Vantalay, and with her being such an important figure in the family, Silvia had been chosen to stay behind and watch over her.

Joana, meanwhile, being the head of her own little House, had chosen to stay behind of her own volition. ""Someone should be here to look after the children,"" she'd said.

Ostensibly, she'd been referring to all of the children from all of the Houses, but Hector had a suspicion that she was doing this especially for Zeff and his kids. He was her brother, after all, and she must have known how worried he would be to leave them here.

A part of Hector was still surprised by the fact that Zeff had elected to join the Vantalay rescue team. After everything that man had been through? Leaving Marcos and Ramira here where he couldn't protect them must have been a tough call to make, even for the sake of the other Houses.

Man. If Zeff knew what was happening right now, the news that Hector had just received... it would tear him apart.

He absolutely could not let Zeff down here, Hector thought. Or any of the other Houses, for that matter. There were dozens of very young children here in Warrenhold now, their parents having all gone off to fight in a war and rescue their kin.

Hector was determined. No matter what happened, as long as he was still alive, nothing was going hurt these little Rainlords."

"3146

He made the call to Carl Rondel next. He was relieved to hear that Ravi had kept his word.

<""Yeah, I just heard,""> said Carl. <""I'm mobilizing my forces now. How long until you can get here?"">

""To Riverton, P.J.?"" said Hector. ""I'm not sure that's where I should be going.""

<""Hmm? You have somewhere else in mind?"">

""Not yet. But I doubt Abolish would hit the capital first. And if all our forces are consolidated there, then our response will be equally slow whenever they do show up.""

<""You planning to just sit on your ass in your castle, then?"">

More biting words as usual from Mr. Rondel. Hector almost wanted to retort immediately, but he caught himself.

He wasn't obligated to tell Mr. Rondel anything about his plans. And in fact, he didn't even trust the guy all that much. It might've been better to keep his own movements to himself. If Abolish somehow found out that Hector wasn't at Warrenhold and decided to attack it while he was gone...

Well, that was a worst-case scenario that needed to be avoided at all costs.

But he also didn't want to outright refuse to say anything, either. That'd be unnecessarily hostile towards a potential ally. Maybe a little white lie would be better, then. ""Yes,"" said Hector. ""For now, I'll continue to wait here and observe. If P.J. gets attacked, I promise I'll dispatch reinforcements immediately, but I expect the first place that needs help will be somewhere else.""

<""Hmph,""> was all Carl said.

Which was a bit surprising, actually. Hector had expected the man to give him a piece of his mind. ""Any word on extra reinforcements from your end? Like from Jackson?""

"3147

<""Hah! If there was, I wouldn't tell you,""> said Carl. <""It's far too early to be sharing privileged information like that with an outsider like you. We still don't even know if this attack is real. Zaman could be bullshitting us as part of some larger scheme. You shouldn't be so quick to trust that snake in the grass."">

Ah, that was more like it. ""How about reinforcements from a private security firm, then? Last I checked, the Lorentian Security Council was talking about rehiring Greenworth for exactly this reason. Did that deal ever get approved?""

<""No, but I've advised the President to push it through using his emergency war powers."">

""Think he'll listen?""

<""Doubt it. And even if he does, I don't think Greenworth will be too eager to work with Lorent again. With the war on, mercenary groups will have their pick of clients, right now. And the last time Greenworth was here, our damn media raked them over the coals, which hurt their reputation internationally, no doubt. Other firms won't find that type of treatment too appealing, either, I'm sure."">

Damn.

<""Still, if we manage to land a new contract, I'll be sure to let you know."">

Hmm. That almost sounded nice of him. ""Thanks.""

Carl didn't have much more to tell him after that. Hector asked about how many he had available to defend P.J. and what their relative levels of strength were, but no matter how diplomatically he tried to phrase it, the man wouldn't provide him with details.

Hector hoped that was just because Carl was a stingy bastard and not because the guy was afraid to admit how weak they were."

"3148

It was probably the latter, though. If Carl had that much power at his disposal, then he would have been able to take care of the Beast of Lorent all on his own. Sure, it was possible that the Vanguard had only

very recently sent him more troops or something, but Hector doubted it.

It sure would've been nice if Jackson himself decided to show up to help, though. If the guy's reputation was anything to by, then Hector wouldn't mind meeting him. Plus, there weren't very many Rainlords around at the moment, so it might actually be safe to talk to him. Maybe.

The most recent rumors about Jackson weren't quite so pleasant, what with him supposedly having been gravely wounded by the Mad Demon, but that was a while ago. No matter what Morgunov's machines had done to him, Jackson had to have recovered by now.

...Right?

Hector tried not to linger on that particularly question too much. Hell, even if Jackson just sent some of his troops their way, that'd be great. The guy must've had tons of strong dudes working under him.

Eventually, Krigoth got back to him about Garovel's earlier question. Could the scouting team identify specific combatants in the enemy encampments?

'No,' was the reaper's unfortunate answer. 'Isaac's team has been looking for nearly an hour now, but none of the big names have appeared out in the open.'

'So the camps really could be decoys, then,' said Garovel. 'We have to assume that the major players are already on the move. Let's get everyone into the Tower of Night. It's the safest place for all non-combatants.'

Hector could only agree, and soon enough, everyone was moving. It was a bit overly cautious, he knew, since the attackers were almost certainly going to pop up in Lorent before Atreya, but if ever there was a time to be overly cautious, it was now. And besides, with so many people abroad, the Tower of Night had more than enough space. They wouldn't be cramped in here at all."

"3149

Food and water weren't concerns, either. Hector had been worried

about the possibility of an attack ever since news of the war first broke, so he'd of course tasked Ms. Rogers with ensuring that they would have everything they needed in case anything happened. Hector checked on it just to be safe, but sure enough, he found the Tower of Night's storeroom filled to the rafters with non-perishable food and supplies. If they needed to, they'd be able to last months in here, no problem.

Assuming the walls weren't breached, that was.

Hector had to wonder how strong this nightrock really was. Thus far, he hadn't seen anyone actually break through it, despite multiple attempts from various Rainlords during construction, but that also wasn't quite the same thing as enduring an actual siege. Would Bloodeye or any of his men be able to break through?

Bloodeye had several notable names under his command. The biggest threats were Otto Konig, Banda Toro, Kyle Charge, Jonathan Smith, and Tomi Rika. They each had rather menacing monikers by which they were internationally infamous. On the bright side, though, Hector had plenty of intel on them, thanks to Hahl Saqqaf, the scouting efforts of Isaac's team, and also Gina.

Still, that was six big names right there. Any one of them could probably kill him in a one-on-one fight. Hector felt like the only reason he'd managed as well as he had in the fight against Bloodeye and the Man of Crows was because all his allies were around to help take the pressure off. He couldn't go into this with the same mindset.

The next fight would be far more dangerous, especially if Abbas didn't show up in time."

"3150

That was where his mind was at as he was prepping to leave. The current plan was to seal off the Tower of Night as tightly as possible, then make for the Candle and speak to Abbas directly in order to figure out their next move. It was a bit early, but Abbas might have some tools that would come in handy.

Plus, Hahl Saqqaf constituted the majority of their fighting force now, so they would probably want to rethink how everyone was distributed. Having some extra fighters here at Warrenhold would definitely help

give Hector peace of mind when heading out to fight on the front line, which would presumably be somewhere in eastern Lorent.

As he'd just about finished packing a bag full of clothes, however, Hector's phone beeped at him. It had taken quite a bit of wizardry from Gina and her team of tech savvy people in order for cell phones to get reception so deep underground like this, but he was quite thankful for it now.

The message was from Pauline Gaolanet. When she'd asked him for his number, he'd been a little surprised that a Sparrow could even use a phone, but apparently, she was quite an active texter. And she didn't take too kindly to it when he was slow to respond, which he almost always was, especially when compared against her speed.

Usually, she sent him weird memes. Or a message about how bored she was. Or a new demand for the ""roost"" that he was making for her here at Warrenhold. Or just random personal questions.

But none of those were the case this time. Instead, it read: Hey, there's a bunch of invisible people hanging around outside your castle."

"3151 -- CCLXIX.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Nine: 'O, defending lord...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector's brown eyes stuck on the message as he took a moment to process what he'd just read.

And then his body was moving. Without even thinking, he was already going somewhere. Where? Strange he had to ask himself that.

The Entry Tower, he realized. The tower that bottle-necked up to the surface.

He needed to warn everyone, though.

'Garovel,' he thought urgently, 'Abolish is already here.'

'What?!'



'I don't know who or how many, but they're here. Make sure everyone is in the Tower of Night.'

'Alright, but--'

Garovel had more questions, of course, none of which Hector had the answers for. He didn't want to just ignore the reaper, though, so he split his focus between that conversation and texting Pauline back.

How many? r u safe?

He waited impatiently for her response as he sprinted across the main courtyard, splitting his focus another time in order to catch whatever the Scarf of Amordiin could tell him about the space directly ahead of him. Empty so far.

He armored up, too. Full plate. Familiar and comfortable.

Her reply arrived.

27. Not including reapers. And yeah, I'm fine. I just got here, but they can't sense me. I'm in my roost. These guys aren't supposed to be here, I take it?

Twenty-fucking-seven? When had they arrived? If they'd been casing the place for a while, then Hector would have sensed them when he was up there earlier.

And if they were using Invisibility, then they must have been trying to be careful.

Goddammit. They were really already here in Atreya? Fuck. Agh. This was no time for incredulity. He had to focus on the problem in front of him. Explanations could come later.

prolly abolish. b careful

He didn't know how she managed to have such immaculate grammar when texting, but he wasn't about to try and match her when he had so much other shit to worry about."

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He reached the bottom of the Entry Tower and blitzed up the stairs, glad to see that every floor was already empty of people. It took a while to reach the top, and he probably could have been moving faster with creative use of materialization, but he wanted to be able to sense everything ahead of him beforehand.

Once he reached the big double doors that led out onto the surface, he stopped. They were still closed, but he didn't need to open them. They weren't airtight, so the Scarf could sense what was on other side just fine.

The area immediately around the entrance seemed to be clear. He concentrated, trying to sense as far away as possible.

Still nothing.

Hmm.

He decided to text Pauline again.

how close r they?

Her response was fast, as usual.

About a hundred meters or so.

Oh. That was pretty far. And with the decoy iron castle up there, he could probably exit the Entry Tower just fine without being detected.

He opened the doors and stepped out, pouring all of his focus into the Scarf. The wind wasn't all that strong, but it helped a little. He could sense the full shape of the decoy castle, small as it was. No one was that close by yet.

'They're east of your position,' came Pauline's telepathic voice.

Ah. She no longer felt the need to text, huh? Hector searched for her with the Scarf and soon found her. She was indeed in her roost, just as she'd said.

That was helpful. She might actually prove invaluable in this situation, Hector thought. Hell, she kinda already had.

He moved east as she said.

When he neared the edge of decoy castle, he began to sense it. A small crowd in the distance, just standing there.

No, wait. Some of them were inching closer."  
"3153

They were being cautious. They didn't know what to expect.

Hmm. What to do here...?

In all likelihood, this was just a scouting party, maybe not even intending to attack Warrenhold and instead just trying to gather intel and report back. And with twenty-seven enemy combatants, the odds weren't exactly in his favor, either. Plus, if even one of Bloodeye's top guys was in that group, then a straight fight would probably not go well for him, Hector thought.

It might've been best to leave them alone and wait to see if they left of their own volition.

Agh. But they kept getting closer.

Obviously, he couldn't let them get inside Warrenhold and discover how empty it was. That would almost assuredly invite an attack from Bloodeye himself.

But then again, maybe that would be good in its own way, countered a spare thought process. Warrenhold was the most defensible position, after all. If Bloodeye was busy attacking Warrenhold, then he couldn't attack random, helpless citizens in Lorent.

Would it really be that simple, though? And what if these

motherfuckers got inside Warrenhold and just started attacking shit instead of leaving to report back?

No.

Definitely couldn't take that risk.

Had to do something about them now. He put a few cubes into orbit around himself as he deliberated. Thanks to the decoy castle, he was already near his volume limit in this area, so if he wanted to do something huge, he'd have to annihilate some of it first. Perhaps small, sneaky attacks would be better here. At least until the enemy knew where he was.

'I could freeze them in their tracks, if you want,' came Pauline's voice again.

That was true, he supposed. Sparrows did have that power, didn't they? Could she really do that to all of them, though?"

"3154

Hmm. Well, even if she only got some of them, it would certainly help to thin their numbers out.

He didn't want to risk responding to her vocally, so he texted her instead.

how many can u get?

'Mmmmm... dunno,' she said. 'Hard to say. Odds are, some of them will be naturally resistant or even immune. And the more I freeze at once, the weaker the effect becomes. Soooo... if I had to guess, then I'd say, maybe... somewhere between ten and twenty?'

Holy fuck.

It was a risk, of course. If they became aware of her presence, that could create all sorts of problems. Hector didn't know Abolish's exact policy regarding Sparrows, but Hanton had belabored the general point enough for him to worry about what might happen if word of a Sparrow's nest in Atreya got out into the broader world.

If he allowed Pauline to get involved directly, he would be playing with fire.

But then again, Abolish was on his fucking doorstep. Probably. Technically, there was still a slight chance that these trespassers weren't with Abolish, in which case a lot of people might get hurt for no reason.

Agh.

He supposed he shouldn't play the Sparrow card just yet. He texted her his response.

only do it if they atk me

'Mm, okie dokie.'

In the heat of battle, it would be easier for her to conceal her abilities, Hector felt. Hell, the enemy might even think that he was the one doing it. Human psychics were a thing, too.

Wait, they were? Where had he learned that from?

Eh, didn't matter now.

Hector sensed someone behind him, coming up through the Entry Tower. Was that Joana? He wasn't familiar enough with her spatial outline to tell for certain just by the Scarf alone, but it seemed like her. She had a few others behind her, too. Oh, hey, that was Roman there.

Good."

"3155

The trespassers were still coming closer. Hector knew he'd have to make a decision sooner rather than later. Were they hostile? Were they not? If he gave them a chance to explain what they were doing here, he'd be giving up the element of surprise, which could lose him the fight. And by extension, all of Warrenhold. And all of Atreya. And Lorent, too, for that matter.

Yeah. Those stakes were a little too high.

Abolish or not, if these people didn't have ill intentions, then they shouldn't have been trying to sneak up on him like this.

Hector inched a bit closer without coming out from behind the last iron wall that stood in between himself and them. Technically, there was one more wall but it wasn't iron. It was Warrenhold's original wall, the

old and dilapidated one made out of crumbling stone. In fact, once they passed that broken wall, they would officially be too close, Hector decided.

He put a few iron cubes into orbit around himself as he waited for them to cross that arbitrary line. He removed the Amir-10 from his back and fitted it over his left forearm.

It was a bit of a pain to carry the thing around with him all the time since he couldn't materialize it like he could with the Amir-9, but hopefully, he'd get used to having it there.

The first of the trespassers crossed the broken wall, Hector sensed.

Hmm.

Maybe he could test these fuckers before going all out. See how they reacted to a sudden noise behind them. A small clattering of iron pebbles.

Ah. The sound made them all stop and turn to look. The iron was already dematerialized, though. Nothing to see over there, guys.

They didn't immediately attack the noise, at least. That was something. Not much, but something. It meant they were calm. Not jumpy.

Experienced, most likely."

"3156

They were taking their sweet time before resuming their trek toward the decoy castle.

Hmm. Hector wondered if he might be able to make them paranoid enough to turn around and leave. That was supposed to be an issue with older servants, right? Paranoia.

What was the most unnerving thing he could think of?

Maybe a countdown. A sound like a ticking alarm clock, starting off slow and then getting progressively faster and faster. If they heard that shit, how would these guys react? They were still just standing there, waiting. Ah, no, he could sense their mouths moving, too, as they whispered to each other.

Before he could even ask the question of her, Pauline told him what they were saying.

'They're discussing whether or not they should abort their mission.'

Wait, what? Seriously? Just because of a tiny clattering of metal that they'd just heard?

'They're worried they might have sprung some sort of trap. A tripwire alarm. Or a... a ""reactive dust beacon."" What the heck does that mean?'

Mm. Hector actually had a pretty good idea what that was, but this wasn't the time to explain it to her. He texted her one more time.

r they saying nything that confirms they r abolish?

'Oh. Uh... no, I don't think so. One of them just called the guy at the front ""Banda,"" though. Does that help?'

It definitely did, and Hector's eyes widened. Banda Toro, the Raptor of Kortan, was one of Bloodeye's top men.

Shit.

Well, that was one problem solved. He almost preferred being uncertain, though.

If Bloodeye himself was 133 years old, then Hector guessed that his top guys would have to be pushing seventy, at least.

No one here at Warrenhold right now was that old. Nere Blackburn might've been the closest. Hector was fairly sure that she was somewhere around fifty. Maybe."

"3157

Better not to kick this hornet's nest unless he absolutely had to. If there was a chance that they could avoid a fight here altogether, then Hector needed to take it.

And to that end, he went with his countdown strategy. He materialized tiny clumps of iron in a wide radius around the Abolishers, letting them



fall down and make more noise. He made sure to add little iron platforms below them as well, just to guarantee that the noise was crisp and loud. Wouldn't do if the clumps fell quietly into the dirt or one of Warrenhold's few patches of grass.

It was definitely catching their attention.

The clear, little tinks of metal moved around the group clockwise, drawing their looks each time. And once it made a full revolution, Hector added a second tink to each beat. Then a third. And a fourth.

The shift in their body language was obvious. Many of them were trembling as their heads darted to and fro.

They weren't doing anything about it yet, though.

That was fine. He could keep adding more, keep ramping up the noise. Garovel and the others had no doubt sent word to Abbas already. He might've had the numerical and age disadvantage, but a waiting game was in Hector's favor.

At length, however, after the tenth or so iteration, one of the Abolishers broke formation and bounded away from the group.

He was caught immediately and pinned against the ground by a lanky figure, the one who'd previously been at the front of the party. Was that Banda, Hector wondered?

Judging from the figure's mouth movements, more words were being exchanged, but Hector of course couldn't make out what was being said.

'You've successfully freaked 'em out,' said Pauline. 'Banda is threatening the one that tried to run away.'

"3158

This was good. And also not.

Hector liked knowing that these guys weren't impervious to fear-based tactics, but at the same time, it seemed like Banda Toro was going to make things difficult.

Hector could scare the hell out of them all day long, but if Banda was

there to call his bluff every time, then what difference would it make? Eventually, the rest of them would catch on.

Unless Hector made good on some of this fear.

And perhaps he could do that.

They still didn't know that he could sense them. They didn't even realize that he was up here aboveground. And as Pauline had mentioned, they were worried about a ""reactive dust beacon.""

To Hector's mind, that could only be something like what he had seen from Leo in the Undercrust. A material that had been imbued with a reaction state. These Abolishers were scared that they had triggered some sort of reaction-state-based alarm system.

Obviously, he didn't know how to use reaction states, as they were an incredibly advanced materialization technique, but these intruders didn't know that. So what if he took that a step further, then?

Couldn't he create some pretty wild shit and disguise it as being part of a reaction state?

He could use the enemy's own battlefield expertise against them.

All those thoughts raced back and forth across multiple processes in his head, and Hector arrived quite quickly at the conclusion that, yeah, he liked that idea. It certainly sounded better than waiting around for them to make the next move.

He'd never had cause to create anything like an iron puppet before. From a purely practical standpoint, it just never made much sense. Anything that the puppet would do, he'd have to think quite hard about in order to accomplish via the rules of materialization in order to give the appearance that it was actually moving autonomously. In normal combat, it was far more efficient to simply launch attacks himself.

This was clearly not normal combat, however."

"3159

If he could make them believe that an iron puppet really was moving autonomously, as part of some incredibly elaborate reactive trap system, then that might just scare the living crap out of these

motherfuckers. And theoretically, he'd be able to launch attacks with it, too, if necessary.

He materialized the puppet right in front of them, wanting its appearance to be obvious. For its design, he didn't have long to dwell on it, so he just based it on something he'd seen once before. A rock golem from the Undercrust. The one that he'd seen fighting a feldeath in Himmekel.

This iron golem wasn't nearly so huge, though. He made about twice the height of an average person, feeling that was more than enough. And he gave it molten globes for eyes, too, so that it would have a glowing, menacing stare.

All in all, it was just a big lump of iron, one that happened to look humanoid, if rather bulky and too tall.

Hector held his breath as he waited for Abolish's reaction. If they realized that it was essentially nothing more than a scarecrow, then this was going to get very messy very quickly.

Hector could sense Roman and the others moving up behind him, all carrying Amir-9s with them. He held a hand without turning around, wanting them to wait. They all seemed to understand.

The Abolishers, meanwhile, still weren't moving. Hector could sense that all their heads were pointed straight at the golem, watching it intently as they were perhaps wondered if it was about to attack them. But they weren't taking the initiative. They weren't attacking it first or backing off, either."

"3160

Were they still hoping that they hadn't been detected? Hector couldn't sense any of their mouths moving, and Pauline wasn't telling him anything new, so they probably weren't talking to each others.

Hmm.

Hector still had some room left with his volume limit. He could probably make another golem. Maybe even two or three more.

He decided to text Pauline again, first.

can u tell me which 1 is the aberration?

Normally, he would've just been able to rely on Garovel for picking aberrations out of a crowd, but that couldn't be done against Invisibility, which rendered them entirely undetectable to reapers.

Hector couldn't recall if he'd ever talked to either Pauline or her father about aberrations before, though. There was a fair chance that she wouldn't have any idea what he was talking about.

'The one on the far left,' she said. 'Can you sense him?'

Ah. Well, that was a relief.

The one on the far left, huh? The Scarf of Amordiin was describing a lanky figure with fluttering hair and a long knife in one hand.

Truth be told, Hector still wasn't entirely sure how Invisibility worked. Did the ""shadow"" of aberrations like this function in the same way that it did for others? Could they still wield it as a weapon? If so, then what was the point of that knife, then?

Regardless, the aberration was the easiest pressure point. If this turned into a fight, he would want to eliminate the Invisibility as quickly as possible in order to help everyone else see the enemy, too.

He still didn't want to strike the first blow yet, though. The ideal scenario here was to make them retreat."

"3161

And since they weren't budging, Hector went ahead and made a second golem. This one, he positioned on the left, close to the aberration. Ideally placed for launch a soul-infused barrage of iron spikes, if need be. Unless the aberration was really powerful--and Hector suspected that it wasn't--that would probably be an instant kill.

The Abolishers took immediate notice of the new golem, and this time, their formation shuddered noticeably. They clumped together a little more, backing slightly away from the second guardian.

Banda, whose aerial outline Hector had made sure memorize, moved through the small crowd and pulled the aberration into the middle.

Hmm. Damn.

Perhaps he'd just given up a valuable opportunity. The aberration would be much harder to kill now.

Bah. He made a third golem, this time on the right.

The group of Abolishers compacted further. They had to realize that they were almost surrounded now. There was only one direction remaining. The direction opposite of Warrenhold.

C'mon, you bastards. Leave. Get the fuck out of here, already.

Hector honestly didn't know if he would be able to win this fight. Conventional wisdom suggested that he stood no chance against someone as old as Banda, but at the same time, he felt like it wouldn't be impossible, either.

And perhaps that dangerous thinking. Perhaps that was the psychological problem of emergence that Garovel had told him about. The slow build up expectation reduced stress and therefore the likelihood of emergence.

Hector tried to remind himself that he had to be exceptionally careful here. His reputation was built on a mountain of lies and half-truths. If he started buying into it himself, that would very likely spell the end of everything."

"3162

Another one of the Abolishers bolted. Banda was there again to stop them, but two more followed suit this time and managed to break away from the group. Then another two, and another three, and then they were all just scattering.

Hector blinked to himself, hardly able to believe that his plan had actually worked. He could sense them fleeing. Twenty-seven enemy combatants, all running away. Wow.

Except.

Ah.

Not all. A few were returning.

Now Hector understood. Banda had thrown the aberration over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes while trying to keep the others pinned down. He'd probably wanted the aberration to keep as many people invisible as possible before they got too far away. Hector was fairly certain about that much regarding Invisibility, at least. It had a limited range, like a bubble.

Poor Banda. He didn't realize that he was wasting his time. If the guy wasn't an infamous, mass murdering psycho, Hector might've felt a little bad for him.

Banda only managed to round up thirteen others in the end, some by force and some who simply never left his side to begin with.

Hector had to be particularly mindful of those latter ones, he felt. Those men were loyal and unaffected by his intimidation tactics.

But the numbers had been thinned. Thirteen down from twenty-seven. Not bad.

'Banda's pissed,' said Pauline.

Yeah. Hector could guess as much just from his gait. The anger and intent was clear with each decisive step the man took toward Warrenhold. They started circling around the three golems that he'd erected earlier.

Okay. Hector felt like he'd done just about all he could with intimidation alone. There was probably no scaring off this Banda motherfucker. Things were about to get real bad.

But he had had one last tactic in mind."

"3163

He put an end to the ""alarm"" system that he'd been using with the little clumps of metal, and silence finally returned. Banda and his men took notice, pausing at the sudden change.

Hector made the three golems' heads snap-turn in unison--dematerializing then rematerializing in an instant. Little cubes full of molten iron began orbiting around their bodies, readying themselves to be launched.

Banda's group hesitated again, watching the golems for a long moment.

Perhaps Banda could tell that this wasn't an empty threat now. Even if the man didn't exactly know what he was looking at, the intent had to be quite clear, no?

Controlling the orbiting cubes at a distance was certainly more difficult than just making them orbit around his own body, but it helped that the golems were immobile. And that the cubes were small. They wouldn't pack nearly as much of a wallop as the most powerful version of this technique, but they would almost certainly be more than enough to shred through that aberration like tissue paper. And with the thinned crowd, Hector had a pretty good lock on the aberration's location.

If Banda still felt bold enough to keep walking forward, Hector would fire off a warning shot.

And wouldn't ya know it, Banda did exactly that.

At that first step, Hector fired off a molten cube right in front of Banda's face, exploding the rocky ground a few short meters away from the man.

Banda turned toward the sight of the explosion, perhaps to assess the damage done as the cloud of dust dissipated, then looked toward the golem that had fired the shot.

Hector made the missing cube regenerate as Banda watched.

And for a long time, no one moved."  
"3164

Banda just stood there, staring, as did all his men.

A part of Hector wanted to walk out there and ask them what they were thinking, maybe try to add to the intimidation factor by showing up in person. But no. This was fine. The longer they waited, the more time Abbas would have to get here.

Then everything happened very quickly.

A glob of something hawked up through Banda's throat, and the man spat it out at the nearest golem with the force of a cannon. The flaming phlegm hit dead on and melted through the iron as if it were butter, but Hector still managed to launch three of the orbiting cubes from before the golem collapsed.

And from the other two, Hector launched everything at once, riddling the enemy group full of explosive holes.

The field instantly erupted into chaos. The thirteen enemy combatants scattered--or tried to, until half or more of them suddenly stopped moving. Frozen in place by a psychic assault from Pauline, as expected.

Hector was locked on the aberration, though. Banda had been shielding them with his body, but after that first barrage, the man had abandoned the effort, perhaps deciding that the Invisibility was not worth it since it clearly had not worked as intended.

The aberration went down immediately, torn to shred just as expected. And the Invisibility shattered.

Still, however, Hector motioned for everyone behind to stay. They could join the fight at any moment now, but he didn't want them to be put at risk until it was clearly necessary. He still had two golems remaining, and he was working on remaking the third.

Hector knew from Hahl Saqqaf's intel that Banda had the power of osmium transfiguration, capable of creating highly toxic and flammable compounds."

"3165

Given the man's age, that would probably be bad enough to deal with on its own, but considering what happened with Bloodeye's weird transforming powers, Hector had to expect some kind of nasty surprise with this guy, too.

An enormous smokescreen filled the area around Banda, a tactic that the man probably didn't realize would not help him against the Scarf of Amordiin. Hector could still sense the man's location within it just fine.

So Hector riddled him with holes. Or tried to, at least. They didn't



entirely take, instead getting stuck partway through his body and oozing out molten iron like blood.

Still, that had probably surprised him. And perhaps Banda learned a lesson from it, too, because he vanished into his own smoke. Becoming his own smoke, Hector realized. Just like he had watched Xuan Sebolt do with the power of pan-rozum.

Only three of Banda's men were still moving, the rest having been caught by Pauline. They were going after the golems and getting quite close. Hector had no way of knowing who they were or how dangerously their abilities might be, but it didn't entirely matter, because the golems still shredded one of them to pieces before being brought down.

And by then, the golem that Banda had destroyed was already regrown and revving up more molten cubes. He started regenerating the downed two, in new locations this time, spread farther out.

All things considered, Hector didn't mind this state of affairs too much. Banda was definitely going to be a problem, but they'd whittled his forces down from twenty-seven to three, including Banda himself. And the bastards were stuck playing a deadly game of whack-a-mole that was clearly not in their favor."

"3166 -- CCLXX.

Hector decided to annihilate a bit more of his decoy castle on the opposite side to which the battle was taking place. With even more of his volume limit freed up, he could go to work on more golems. Instead of trying to make three at a time, he tried to make five.

And he succeeded. Soon enough, he had constant suppressing fire on the remaining three Abolishers, which became quickly became two.

At length, however, Banda had apparently had enough.

Bright flames engulfed the horizon with an explosive force that shook the earth and made the decoy castle quiver. The iron wall in front Hector shuddered visibly, and Hector's hearing was gone. He felt Garovel's hand grab his shoulder and the regenerative vigor course through him in that familiar way.

He had to text Pauline again, even while he reached out with the Scarf to try and sense what what remained of the battlefield.

fumes r toxic

He didn't really know how deadly Banda's osmium could be, but he certainly didn't want her to get caught up in it accidentally.

When he sensed Banda again, however, the man was different. No longer smoke, no longer man.

Indeed, just as Hector had feared, they were facing another monster.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy: 'The Raptor of Kortan...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Banda was sick and tired of this shit. This was supposed to be an easy job. Simple reconnaissance. Go in with Invisibility, report back on what they found. All the men that Roy had foisted upon him? An unnecessary precaution, Banda had said. They'd only slow him down anyway, Banda had said. If anything, they'd just make the job more difficult, Banda had said.

And lo-and-fucking-behold, the situation had now devolved into a total clusterfuck."

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And lo-and-fucking-behold, the situation had now devolved into a total clusterfuck."

"3167

Look at those dumb shits, just standing there like morons. What kind of men had Bloodeye chosen for--?

A chunk of metal, bigger than any of the previous ones, clobbered Banda in the face, sending him tumbling back in the air.

Agh, motherfucker. This shit was ridiculous. He so badly wanted to just cut his losses and leave already.

But he knew that if he reported back without having even set foot in this stupid fucking underground castle, then Roy would throw a goddamn hissy fit. Plus, he'd never hear the end of it, having lost so many men already.

He should've just ignored orders and come alone.

Another chunk of metal arrived, but this time, Banda was ready. He caught it in his massive jaw and gulped it down like so much popcorn. It didn't matter if it was materialized or not. It didn't even matter if the materializer was on the field. Once it entered his belly, it was his forever.

Another ingredient for the brew. They could always use more ingredients.

He still wasn't entirely accustomed to this form, truth be told. These scaly bodies with shifting flesh and fluctuating temperatures--they were difficult to control. It sometimes felt like it had a mind all its own, like it wanted to rebel against him.

He loved it, though.

The name Raptor truly fit him now. He wondered if he might be able to make it spawn some feathers for him, one day. These kinds of dinosaurs were supposed to have feathers, weren't they? And thanks to his smoke form in pan-rozum, he could already fly, so it only seemed appropriate.

Agh, that was the reaper half of his mind talking. Always far too pleased with himself. With everything. Really knew how to enjoy life, that one. Good for Grigozo. The dumb fuck."

"3168

Banda breathed deep. He inhaled and inhaled and inhaled and still kept inhaling. More air than was ever physically possible. His lungs bulged. His belly bulged. His entire body bloated up. And then he devoured it all.

More ingredients for the brew. Always good to collect. Never knew when it might come in handy. Especially for transfiguration.

That was the trouble with their kind, with transfigurers. They were limited by their own bodies. Never could bring their elements to the fullest use, since they didn't have access to everything that the elements could do.

Or so the tale had been spun.

For how long? Banda didn't know. Hardly mattered. But it made them underestimated. Which was good.

Sometimes. Not always. Because it also made them undervalued. Underappreciated.

Not by Bloodeye, though. And not by Jercash. They understood. They had the vision that others lacked.

Banda reached deep within, searching for something to use. That enormous air bubble that he'd just put in there could be combined with all manner of things. He could take a sliver of it right now, in fact, combine it with his osmium, and create a nice, classic mixture of osmium tetroxide. A staple of his arsenal since youth.

But made so much more potent in this form.

The leverage that this body granted him over his creations was so, so good. Anything he wanted, anything he could dream up--where was the limit? Hard to say, really.

He could strengthen or weaken bonds. He could enhance or slacken reactivity. He could increase or decrease density, even.

The laws of physics? They could suck a fat one.

And he just felt so... powerful. So strong. As if nothing in this world could stop him.

Finally. He could be free. To just enjoy himself."

"3169

Another chunk of metal came for him, and he caught this one, too. How silly. It tried to grow spikes and skewer him, but they just broke against his scales like sticks against stone. He devoured the metal. More for the brew, as ever.

What was this metal, anyway? Hmm. Tasted like. Iron? Yeah. Iron. Very flat. Could use some spice. Oh well, though. Everything was appreciated.

But what to do next? Hmm, hmm. Just flying around up here was so

much fun.

Ah, he was becoming lethargic. This form. And pan-rozum. Together, they had strange effects on him. Made his mind wander a bit. Probably Grigozo's fault, really. The dumb fuck.

What was he doing?

Oh yeah, the mission. Dammit, this was just supposed to be scouting, and now he was fighting. Well, fighting was better in its own way, he supposed. Nothing to get too upset about.

He just needed to make his way inside the stupid underground castle, then report back on its layout. That was all. Simple, eh? Entrance was a bit difficult to find, though. What was that down there? A fucking maze?

Agh.

Hey, wait a minute. What was that smell?

His nostrils flared as he sniffed. Again and again. A familiar scent. Old and familiar. Hmm?

Ah, another chunk of metal. He caught it in his mouth. Oh, a big one. This would make a nice addition to--

It exploded into molten iron and splashed all over him.

Agh, fuck! It burned!

He spiraled through the air, trying to fling it off of him with an accelerating spin. An unintended whirlwind whipped up around him. Messy. Molten goo flying everywhere.

No, no, he just needed to focus on the cold. That was the correct way to handle this. Mind over matter. It would fill his body with icy goodness and battle the searing pain for him.

Yes. Yes, that was better.

Mmm, soothing. Hot and cold together. Nice and even. Complementary. A treat for the senses. Ahhh."

"3170

Yes. The sensations of this form were what he loved best about it. The deluge of extra information. And the malleability of those senses, too.

His sense of smell, for instance.

He may have primarily based his Chaos form on various different pterosaurs, which had not, in fact, had very good senses of smell, but he had been able to fix that little problem by borrowing additional information from the good ol' Tyrannosaurus Rex.

His form wasn't perfect, of course. That was only natural. It involved Chaos, after all. And it was still quite new to him, besides. The melting, distended shapes that emerged from within this body were to be expected. Reaching through Eleg's memory in order to distort reality was no minor feat. It had its consequences.

And Banda could feel them. The anguished souls of this world, lost and forgotten within the infinite river of Chaos. Within the Void. He could feel how badly they longed to seize this body from him, how badly they longed to be free.

Ahaha. Pathetic ants. They deserved all their misery and more. Every soul did. And they knew they deserved it, too. They had to know. The idea of innocence? A farce. Denial. Nothing more than insects trying to take comfort in their own inadequacy, to ignore their failures out of some misguided conception of "fairness."

To him, therefore, their torment did not feel like torment at all. It felt like joy beyond measure. This form, Lozaro's discovery, was an affirmation of everything Banda had already believed to be true in this world. He might just have to thank the crazy bastard the next time he visited Jercash.

Ugh. Banda supposed he should concentrate on the fight. Grigozo's half of the mind wanted to be flighty and relaxed, but they were wasting time. And this Darksteel bastard was clearly quite dangerous, wherever he was. If he actually showed up in person instead of letting his puppets do his dirty work for him, Banda might be in trouble."

"3171

Better to stop screwing around, then. He had to concentrate hard in

order to bring Grigozo's mind under control.

Another iron assault arrived, and Banda decided to avoid this one instead of trying to devour it. As much as he like adding materials to the brew, that last meal had been a bit too spicy for his tastes.

His powerful wings allowed him a magnificent degree of control in the air, and the ability to become one with his own smoke made attacks trivial to dodge. If he couldn't get out of the way, he could instead just let it pass right through him.

Moreover, the smoke would make it easy to infiltrate the castle and have a quick look around. It would've helped even more if Grigozo's reaper senses could give him some advanced warning of what was down there, but unsurprisingly, the place was guarded against that. No doubt, Darksteel had someone constantly reinfusing it with soul power, assuming he wasn't doing it himself.

He just had to find the way in.

What the hell was up with these aboveground structures, anyway? If he hadn't been told ahead of time that Warrenhold was an underground castle, he probably would've mistaken these things for the main location.

Ah, but wait. There it was again. That smell. Old and familiar. With regard to whose memory, though? Banda's or Grigozo's?

Well, it must've been Banda's, of course. Grigozo was a reaper. He hadn't smelled anything in millennia. It was silly to even humor--

Banda stopped in midair, his slit-eyes widening suddenly as the realization struck him.

No. It was Grigozo's memory.

Of a wrobel.

He smelled a wrobel.

Madness. If he hadn't been using both pan-rozum and his Chaos form at the same time, he never would've picked up on it. Access to Grigozo's memories was necessary, as was this monstrous sense of smell from his elongated snout."

"3172



Regardless, a wrobel was a major problem.

He hadn't thought about them in many, many years. Or Grigozo hadn't, rather. But that smell. It brought everything back in an instant.

With the benefit of hindsight, Grigozo's encounter with wrobels had been a supremely rare event. It certainly hadn't felt that way at the time, though.

Being enslaved by them for half a century had left quite the lasting impression on the reaper. As a young, still-living man, Grigozo had been pulled from his family and into their thralldom. For years, the Sparrows used him for all manner of errands. Cooking for them. Washing their feathers. Cleaning up after them. Fetching items for them. Lying for them. Helping them hide from the rest of the world.

A hellish existence, with only fleeting moments of freedom here and there. Little glimpses of himself as he once was. Able to control his own body for a few precious minutes. Only to have it all ripped away from him again when the Sparrows realized their slip up.

In the end, Grigozo finally used one of those fleeting moments to stab himself in the heart with a kitchen knife.

He'd thought his nightmare done. And yet, it wasn't the end at all. Because he revived as a reaper. And his slavery continued, though the wrobels had to find new uses for him.

It wasn't until the eldest Sparrow in the nest eventually died of old age that Grigozo found his opportunity to truly escape. He fled into the ground. Down and down and down. All the way into the Undercrust.

Those memories came readily into Banda's mind, needing little to no time for him to process them. More than anything, they were instincts now. Emotions more than ideas.

And everything made sense."

"3173

He looked back toward the stupid lackeys that he'd brought. They

weren't just a bunch of good-for-nothings. Well, okay, yes, they were. But on this occasion, it wasn't entirely their fault, at least. The Sparrow had gotten to them.

And he knew from Grigozo's own experiences that a Sparrow was capable of so much more.

He needed to neutralize that threat right now. In all likelihood, the Sparrow was trying to remain hidden despite involving itself in the battle, so it probably didn't yet realize that he knew it was here. Clearly, it didn't know that he could detect it by smell, else it would have undoubtedly blocked his mind from registering that little bit of information.

That was how their psychic powers worked. Direct mental manipulation to prevent all forms of detection.

Utter bastards.

He inhaled deeply through his giant, reptilian nostrils, searching for a direction. Yes. To his left. Far below. Somewhere among those annoying metal towers with their blinding glare from the late afternoon sun.

He moved in closer, avoiding more metal assaults with ease, letting them phase through his smokey form as he kept sniffing the air.

Ah. The bird was moving, wasn't it? Trying to keep its distance from him now. Did it think he was onto it? No, probably not. His sense of smell hadn't been blocked. If it realized, the bird would be able to disappear entirely.

Unless, that was, he resorted to an entirely different sense. One born of Chaos. One that was too dangerous to use all the time, because it came with the unfortunate effect of empowering the damned souls clawing at him from within.

Lozaro called this sense ""mementori."" It was, in short, the ability to detect auras--and with greater levels of aptitude, to decipher the memories hidden therein."

"3174

The trouble was, a skilled wrobel might still be able to conceal itself

even from mementori, especially if it had experience fighting other wrobels.

But it wouldn't be quite so clear cut as with the other senses, either. With those, Sparrows had an indisputable advantage so long as they realized what senses needed to be blocked. Why they didn't simply block all senses all the time, he couldn't rightly say. Perhaps it was more taxing for them. Whatever the case, mementori was at least contestable for him. Even if the wrobel realized what he was doing and tried to block him, he would be able to fight back.

Because aura was everywhere. In all things. Around them. And complicated still further by time. The bird could try to conceal itself within one aura, but the disappearance from its memory would leave a noticeable trail. And plus, one aura would in turn impact those around it. The auras of the trees. Animals. Even in the atmosphere itself.

The cascading ripple effect would be difficult, if not impossible, to fully hide. Only the most powerful wrobels in history would be able to accomplish such a feat without flaw.

According to Grigozo's memories, that was. Banda hoped the reaper wasn't wrong about that as he took the plunge and activated mementori.

Immediately, his body began to burn. A consuming flame over the entirety of his being. Damned souls trying to tear his flesh apart from the inside, to claw their way to freedom, to seize his conduit away from his mind.

He suppressed them with vitriol. Raw anger. Old and long-tempered. Burning hotter than any of those wretched fools could. It required all of his and Grigozo's concentration. One had to maintain mementori, and the other had to remain aware of the environment around them, of the unfolding battle."

"3175

The entire area morphed within his mind. The auras filling the area, bumping into one another, clashing, blending, interacting with one another in countless indescribable ways.

And sure enough, there the Sparrow was. A blurry blob soaring

through the air. Not even that far away, really. At this distance, if he just lunged for it at full speed, he might be able to catch the bird before it realized what was going on. That would be important. Sparrows were damned fast fliers, after all. This might turn into an obnoxious chase if he didn't end it straight away.

As he was about to make his move, however, his mementori shuddered. He sensed something down below, concealed among the metal towers.

A terrible aura.

What in the fuck was that?

Its form was certainly different from all the other auras in the area. It wasn't another wrobel. In fact, it kept following the bird, tracing the path with its own.

And it was reaching up toward him, too. Spiking up toward him, even. Poking holes into Banda's own aura like a rapier through wool.

One spike reached all the way to his body and pierced his chest. It didn't hurt, of course. It was just an aura.

But he definitely still felt something. The intent behind it. The underlying mind.

It was the presence of a courteous demon. Threatening him gently yet darkly. Wrapping its amorphous hands around his beating heart and squeezing ever so slightly. Just enough to let him know. What he would be facing. If he chose to proceed.

Never had he felt the like before.

Since acquiring mementori, Banda had experienced several overwhelming auras before. Among allies, there was Bloodeye, Lozaro, Jercash, Morgunov, and Dozer. Among enemies, the Surgeon Saint, Vernon, Kane, and Grant.

This was different from all of those. And yet frighteningly similar, also."  
"3176

To Banda's mind, there were only two people who could have an aura

like that. Either Darksteel or the Sunsmith. One of them was already here, he realized.

And from all reports, the Sunsmith was a very aggressive combatant, flying around in a suit of mechanized armor and attacking head on. This aura did not seem fitting to him. Darksteel, on the other hand, still had a general air of mystery surrounding him among Abolish's reports. Plus, there were the deadly traps that his men had succumbed to, as well.

This ominous aura had to be Darksteel, Banda thought. It just made more sense.

The most unsettling thing, however, was how the damned souls within him were reacting. Their thrashing and screaming stopped almost entirely. Their sudden unease was palpable. It was as if they had been nothing more than rowdy children at a dinner table, now becalmed and obediently eating upon the arrival of their stern father.

Madness.

These were tormented souls trapped within Chaos itself--the vicious embodiment of endless suffering. Malice incarnate, literally.

Or so he'd come to believe.

Why would they suddenly begin behaving this way? Was his understanding of these damned souls mistaken? Was there more to them than Lozaro had said?

In midair, Banda found himself hesitating.

What in the world was going on here? Darksteel was down there. Somewhere. Why wasn't he attacking? Even the lazy assaults from his puppets had ceased, Banda realized.

Yes, it had to be Darksteel, didn't it? He was more sure than ever, now. The Sunsmith wouldn't be pulling this shit, surely. Booby traps and mind games. Using Sparrows and auras to mess with their heads.

Was it all an illusion? Even the way the souls within him were reacting? Impossible."

"3177

As he hung there in the air, smoky wings flapping, Banda wasn't sure what to do, anymore.

Fear was not something that he had felt in many, many years, but the uncertainty in this situation was honestly terrifying. Banda had just celebrated his 141st birthday, and Grigozo was well over a thousand, but here and now? They felt like nothing more than ignorant children. Even with their blended minds working the problem together, it made no difference.

Ah, but no. The fear was mostly coming from Grigozo's end, wasn't it? Of course. That only made sense. Reapers tended to act far more courageous than they actually were. Deep down, most of them were cowards, Banda knew. The only reason they managed to keep their facades up as well as they did was because of their immense levels of knowledge and experience.

When they encountered something truly unknown, however--that was when their true characters revealed themselves.

Agh. What a damn hassle. Grigozo's mind was already a big enough pain in the ass without an infection of crippling terror.

He looked over the glimmering towers another time. He needed to think clearly.

At this point, it was beyond obvious that the mission was a failure. They had yet to gather any intel about Warrenhold's layout. And Darksteel himself was down there, just waiting for him to make a move. To overextend. To make a mistake.

No.

The intelligent thing to do now was to pull back and report the failure. It would sting, of course, and he'd no doubt have to deal with all sorts of shit from his more insufferable peers, but that was the correct move.

Because then they could prepare for a real fight. Not whatever this mess had turned into."

"3178

A real fight. Yes. Something proper and orderly. Yes. Intelligently

conceived and thought-through. Yes. As Jercash would want, surely. Yes.

Yes...

No.

The Chaos in him burned. Rebelled.

Not the beings born of Chaos. Those had been quieted by Darksteel's aura.

No. The Chaos within him. His half of the mind. The Chaos that had always been there, since his earliest days. Silent and furious. At the world. At, perhaps, even existence itself.

That part of him still had a say in things. As much as he wanted to be rational, to break the mold set by his many obnoxious contemporaries in Abolish, Banda Toro still had to face up to his own nature. The nameless judge within himself.

The divine font of the Void, some called it.

Wouldn't it be a shame to flee now? Before even getting so much as a look at this Darksteel? Wouldn't doing that actually empower Darksteel more, in some ways? His reputation? Wouldn't it be contributing to his growing mystique as that of yet another bogeyman to Abolish?

Surely, they didn't need another one of those.

That's right. There were reasons to stay and fight. Fairly intelligent and rational ones, even. Yes. That was how the Chaos functioned. It might have been fueled by emotion primarily, but emotion was highly motivating to all sorts of ends, wasn't it? Rationalization could certainly be one of those ends. Motivated thinking was still thinking.

Heh.

The Raptor of Kortan was a mess. A ferocious, distorted mess. But that, of course, came with the territory when accepting Chaos so literally into one's flesh. Lozaro had warned them all of this.

""Chaos takes no sides,"" he'd said. ""Or rather, you might say, it takes all sides. It will work both for and against you, if you let it. It will twist your mind. Put you at war with yourself--even whilst it empowers you against your foes with abilities that even I am only beginning to

understand. That is why you must will it into submission, first.""

He was losing control here. That was what all these conflicting thoughts meant, Banda suddenly realized. It was not unlike pan-rozum in that way. He had to maintain focus. Control.

He had to eradicate indecision.

Yes.

That was a poison in this form.

Nothing for it, then. He could delay no longer. To fight or to flee? Which would it be?

He made his choice."

"3179 -- CCLXXI.

## Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-One: 'Beware the Doormen...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector sensed a change immediately. He couldn't tell why or how. It wasn't his eyes that alerted him. Nor the Scarf. By all accounts, Banda was just sitting up there in the air, flapping his smoky wings and biding his time.

But there was something very off. Hector could just feel it in his mind and in his gut. Banda was suddenly different, somehow. Not in any visible way.

Was it aura? He might've asked Pauline if there'd been time for it.

Unfortunately, there wasn't.

Up to now, Hector had been hoping against hope that the guy would just fucking leave already. It hadn't looked likely at first, but with the way that Banda had been edging farther and farther away from Warrenhold, Hector had slowly been starting to believe that all these silly tricks and mind games might've actually been working on this monster. Slowly but surely, perhaps.

This new feeling changed all that. And when the Raptor of Kortan



loosed such a thunderous, inhuman cry that the iron walls of the decoy castle shuddered, Hector knew for certain that he was right.

This fight was not yet done.

Banda surged back downward, an arrow-like cloud of smoke and flesh, coming straight toward him this time.

Hector still hadn't revealed himself, but that probably didn't matter at this point, did it? Banda could sense him, couldn't he? There was something in the Raptor's disposition or aura that made that so obvious.

Banda was coming for him. The intent might as well have been a shimmering blade for how apparent it was.

Alright.

The very thing that Hector had been trying to avoid this whole time was now happening. He couldn't stop it, anymore.

So he had to face it. There was no choice.

A direct fight with an enemy that he was not at all a match for. An enemy that he stood no chance against, quite frankly.

There were other ideas in the back of his mind. Of course there were. He could try to buy time. Maybe Abbas would show up and save him. Word should have gotten to the Sunsmith by now, surely. It wasn't impossible.

Hector wasn't rejecting that plan totally. It sounded pretty great, honestly.

But there was something else at play, too. These auras, he supposed it was. His and Banda's. They were throwing a wrench into everything. He didn't understand them, but he knew they were affecting him. Threatening him. Trying to consume him."

"3179 -- CCLXXI.

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The very thing that Hector had been trying to avoid this whole time was now happening. He couldn't stop it, anymore.

So he had to face it. There was no choice.

A direct fight with an enemy that he was not at all a match for. An enemy that he stood no chance against, quite frankly.

There were other ideas in the back of his mind. Of course there were. He could try to buy time. Maybe Abbas would show up and save him. Word should have gotten to the Sunsmith by now, surely. It wasn't impossible.

Hector wasn't rejecting that plan totally. It sounded pretty great, honestly.

But there was something else at play, too. These auras, he supposed it was. His and Banda's. They were throwing a wrench into everything. He didn't understand them, but he knew they were affecting him. Threatening him. Trying to consume him."

"3180

Even his own aura was not harmless. It wanted to respond to the heat and fury that he sensed from Banda. It wanted to influence his thoughts, to urge him into a direct fight with the Raptor of Kortan as a challenger to be met.

Which was absurd. They were not equals. Not in the least.

But there was something so moving in it. So motivating. And convincing, too.

Because if he ran, if he stalled, if he failed to meet Banda's challenge head on, then Banda would know.

Everything would be laid bare. The aura would give it away. How true and feeble the deception had been all this time. And then Banda would really attack Warrenhold. That wicked red smoke would go down into the Entry Tower and search all throughout the fortress, learning its shape and its secrets, devouring any of the defenseless residents that it could find. Sure, they should've all been gathered in the Tower of Night by now, and yeah, maybe its nightrock walls would be able to offer some protection against such an infiltration, but still.

That was no guarantee. Not at all. That was a hope and a prayer, at best.

In many ways, this flash of a feeling was impossible to articulate. The auras made it so.

Instead, Hector merely felt that he needed to be more than even he himself thought he could be, right now. He needed to be the thing that Banda's aura was searching for. Testing for.

He needed to be Darksteel.

There was no avoiding it. Banda Toro would know if he tried. And then, not long after, Bloodeye would know. So even if Banda left them alone, the next assault would come very swiftly--and be much, much worse than this.

At best, it would be a true siege. At worst, a total slaughter.

Yes. Hector felt certain of these things. Beyond certain, even. As if he had lived through such experiences before.

And so, to everyone else, it probably made little sense, what he was about to do. There was no opportunity to explain his thought process to them. Hell, even if there had been, he probably wouldn't have been able to. So he didn't try. He just turned back to the others behind him, to Roman Fullister and Joana Cortes."

"3181

"I need you all to stay here," said Hector. "If he makes it past me, retreat into the Entry Tower and bury the entrance as best you can."

"What're you--?"

"Abbas will be here soon," said Hector. "Just hold out until then."

'Hector, wait a--' Garovel tried to say.

Hector clapped an iron orb around the reaper. 'I'm really sorry,' he told him. He caught the orb with both hands and then tossed it over to Roman. "Take care of him for me, please."

More words were said in response. Some of them quite upset, from the sound of it. But Hector had already tuned them all out. Maybe that was a stupid thing to do. It was certainly rude, at least. But he had to. The auras demanded his full attention.

Banda Toro demanded it.

The man would not be dissuaded from this fight, Hector knew. He was coming for Darksteel, and nothing was going to get in his way.

In full armor, with his still-rather-haphazard ability to fly, Hector leapt away from the ground and soared up to meet him there in the sky.

For a moment, it crossed his mind that, perhaps, Banda would want to talk to him first. And Hector wouldn't have minded. It would've meant more time for Abbas to show up.

But no. That notion was destroyed as he grew closer to Banda's aura. The heat in it. The hostility and viciousness. It didn't want to talk. Not with words, anyway. It did want a dialogue, of sorts, yes. It wanted to know him through his actions.

And on some level, Hector could appreciate that. It was absolutely horrible for him, but he could appreciate it.

He decided to open with a volley of iron javelins. The first word of the conversation. It wouldn't do much, he knew, but he intended to put a little twist on it.

He made them icy cold, and when they pierced the red smoke of Banda's body, he added an instant molten coating to them. The sudden extreme temperature difference made them explode.

It wasn't doing any actual damage, Hector knew, but it was a way of testing the waters and dispersing some of the smoke. Pockets of Banda's red form burst apart, though not for long.

The return fire from Banda was far more deadly.

A giant, dagger-toothed maw formed out of the smoke, and from it, a white hot pillar of fire shot out like a laser beam."

"3182

Hector barely got out of the way in time--and even that wasn't quite enough. The flame didn't actually touch him, but it still melted most of his breastplate. He could feel his chest burning as he rushed to annihilate and rematerialize the front plate.

His flight was chaotic. He didn't yet have the kind of well-practiced control that he needed to be fighting a battle in the sky like this. But he

did have the power. The speed.

That would have to do.

He didn't hold back in his movements. Subtle and nuanced went out the window. When he needed to go right, he surged right. When he needed to go left, he burst left.

His body could barely take it. He could feel bones cracking with each explosive turn. He could feel blood pooling quickly to one side of his head and limbs before violently shifting to a different side. It would've certainly been enough to make him sick and disoriented to the point of delirium, if he hadn't been so focused.

On the fight. On Banda.

The Raptor's smoking form was so difficult to keep track of at this range. It moved so strangely and unpredictably. The Scarf of Amordiin helped, but not as much as usual. Air currents could pass right through Banda's body with only the faintest whiff of information being sent back to Hector's mind.

He had to pay closer attention than ever before. He couldn't let some little puff of red smoke sneak up on him, lest it turn suddenly into a blade through his helmet.

But it wasn't like all the other red smoke in front of him could just be ignored, either. Snapping maws and thrashing claws kept materializing from the smoke, lurching at him in a flurry of ceaseless attacks as the smoke billowed after him.

And the ranged attacks, too. Some of the mouths mixed in more beams of white fire, each one threatening to end him in an instant.

Hector had the Amir-10, though--the new version of Haqq's shield that Abbas had gifted him. The beams broke upon it like water upon rock, splashing out in all directions around him.

Still, this was far from an ideal situation. He had to hit back--and hard, too. As hard as possible.

But his most powerful technique would prove useless here, Hector felt. Orbiting cubes launched at high speeds would just pass right through Banda's smoke-based body. Soul-empowering them wouldn't matter, either, he was pretty sure."

"3183

That was why he'd opened with those exploding javelins. As a proof of concept, they'd been successful. Explosive force could indeed displace the smoke. Now he needed to scale up the intensity. Would've certainly helped if he'd ever practiced this technique before, but oh well. Learning mid-combat was something he'd been doing since day one, it felt like.

Rather than trying to disperse the smoke with one big burst, he went with a flurry. More javelins. Dozens of them, flying all at once, followed by an immediate second and third wave.

Molten coatings for all of them as soon as they touched the smoke.

A stream of explosions, bursting the smoke apart in clusters, not unlike bubbles in boiling water.

It wasn't doing much, Hector saw. Banda was still plowing through it all, chasing after him relentlessly.

But it wasn't doing nothing, either. He followed up with fourth and fifth waves, and he could see the smoke dispersing more and more. Momentarily, he saw what he'd been waiting for.

A few whiffs of red, isolated from the rest of the smoke--and seemingly not of Banda's own volition this time.

Hector pounced on the opportunity, clapping thick iron orbs around the separated smoke.

This was how he'd defeated the worm in the Undercrust. Cutting it up into manageable chunks. Maybe Banda would--

No.

This was wrong, he realized. In the back of his mind, he could sense it with the Scarf. The volume of smoke wasn't like that of a worm. It was changing constantly, growing and shrinking as it pleased, whipping towards him, then slinking back to try to flank him.

Banda was in pan-rozum. Which meant he had access to materialization, too. His smoke couldn't run out until he reached his volume limit, which was probably gargantuan.

This wasn't going to work. Hector knew that much. Hell, the whole fight had obviously been hopeless from the start, but if he didn't think of something different to try, then Banda Toro was going to kill him soon.

And then everyone else, too.

And worse still, emergence wouldn't help. Even if he did achieve it again, what difference would it make? More powerful materialization wasn't the answer when he couldn't even touch this guy.

The problem was a fundamental one.

In background thought processes, while he concentrated on evading each deadly attack, these thoughts were stewing."

"3184

He cycled through all of his previous tactics and techniques, searching for anything that seemed useful. Nothing was really sticking in his mind, though. Bullets went right through the smoke. Coating didn't work on gases. Boxes were pointless. Walls would be torn through like tissue paper.

But they could still obstruct Banda's vision.

Maybe that would buy him some extra time to think, at least.

He went to work materializing giant slabs of iron between him and Banda. He made sure to soul-empower them as well, to aid with the blocking of reaper sight as well. It wouldn't be perfect for the latter unless he completely sealed himself in, which he obviously didn't want to do, but if it could just disorient Banda a little, then that would be enough. Hector just wanted to press the sensory advantage that the Scarf of Amordiin provided.

The chase grew even crazier. Hector had to be constantly aware of Banda's position relative to him and his own falling iron walls. He couldn't spare the time to worry about dematerializing them before they crashed down to the ground. They weren't directly over the decoy castle, so it should've been fine.

It didn't take Hector long to realize that these walls weren't doing much. Even his low expectations for them were not being met. The Raptor



wasn't getting disoriented at all, even when Hector started trying to curve the walls to provide more cover for himself. Banda billowed and weaved around each one, only bothering to punch through on occasion.

And then Hector realized why.

Banda always saw the shortest path to Hector. Whether it meant breaking the wall or going around it, Banda knew.

He could sense Hector some other way, couldn't he? Through his aura, probably. Obscuring his vision didn't matter, did it?

Agh.

Hector's mind raced for another solution as Banda kept the chase up. Aura felt like his only hope now, but that might've just been because it was still so mysterious to him. That hope was created by uncertainty, not by any sort of clear plan or idea.

Shit. It was about all he had, though.

There was definitely more to this aura stuff. He knew that much, at least. It was the ""product of his entire self."" That was what Rasalased had said.

Which meant--wait a minute. That meant that emergence actually would help, didn't it? Because emergence affected his materialization, and his materialization affected his aura. So technically...

A man-sized claw came for him, and Hector only just slipped out of the way. The wind it left in its wake was enough to rattle his armor."  
"3185

These attacks from Banda were certainly dangerous, but Hector couldn't help thinking there was something off about them, too. They were so straightforward. Not creative or sneaky at all. Banda wasn't throwing any feints at him or trying to distract him. The Raptor was just barreling headlong toward him like a rabid animal. Ferocious, perhaps, but mindless.

And yet, that didn't seem quite right, either. This feeling in his gut was telling Hector something else.

Banda wasn't mindless. That's what was so strange here.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, Banda was still in control of himself. Still thinking. Still rational.

Still testing him.

Banda wanted a clash. A direct conversation. For now, at least. He wasn't trying to kill him at any cost yet. He wanted to get to know Hector better, first.

This had to be the weirdest fucking thing that Hector had ever felt. He didn't even know if he should trust it. Reading his opponent's intent? Was this because of his own aura or Banda's? Perhaps all auras were like this.

Whatever the case, he had to come to a decision. He'd flown up here to have a ""conversation"" with Banda, but did this game of chase qualify as that? Were he and Banda learning about each other?

Somewhat. Definitely somewhat. Could Banda read his intent in the same way? Hector had a feeling that he could.

Which meant that the Raptor could perhaps sense his uncertainty. His hesitation. His struggle for solutions.

But not his fear.

No, not that. Because there was nothing to read. Hector was not afraid of this asshole. He was angry at him.

And learning more about Banda like this, about that calm mind beneath the storm of furious red...

It actually pissed Hector off more. Being able to sense that there was a real, thinking human being in there, that it wasn't just some crazed, psychotic animal devoid of all emotion and humanity fighting him right now--that made Hector begin to genuinely hate Banda.

Because Banda was choosing to do this. The Raptor of Kortan wasn't ruled by instinct and indulgence. Those things were there, of course--Hector could sense them, too. But the sentient control was stronger. Banda knew exactly what he was doing.

And to be honest, as much as it bothered him, things were probably better off this way. The apparent curiosity in Banda's aura was

definitely making him hold back, which in turn was giving Hector time.

But Hector still had to answer. Banda was posing questions to him now.

Can you do anything to me? What are you really made of? How dangerous are you, Darksteel?

Hector could all but hear these things."  
"3186

This was not a test he was prepared for. He'd known that when he decided to fly up here. But there was even more to the insanity of the situation than just that.

Because he already had a rather strong idea of how outclassed he was here. Thanks to Melchor Blackburn and the late Xuan Sebolt. And also Zeff, later on.

Hector had already witnessed a powerful smoke-based warrior in action once before. He'd had quite the front row seat, in fact. Xuan's fight with Melchor at the Blackburn fortress known as Marshrock had certainly been something to behold. And when Melchor gained the upper hand, Hector had been the one to carry and protect Xuan from him in order to give Xuan much needed time to recover.

That was the first time Hector had seen precisely how terrifying the gap in strength between servants could be. Melchor and Xuan were each one the deciding factor between victory and defeat for their side. Everything in that battle had revolved around them, around their clash.

And of course, in that fight Hector had further witnessed Xuan being nearly defeated by Melchor. So he knew now that smoke warriors could be defeated. They weren't simply invulnerable, thankfully.

How Melchor had done it, though, was the difficult part.

To Hector's eyes, the crippling blow from Melchor had appeared as essentially just a giant explosion. It pierced the smoke at its heart and then burst apart, dispersing it everywhere.

Not unlike the exploding javelins that Hector had been testing here. Just a lot more powerful.

However, Hector knew now that Melchor's technique on that occasion had involved more than making a really big boom.

Because he'd asked Melchor about it once, when the man happened to show up during one of his training sessions with Zeff.

""Ah, yeah, that was a pretty advanced little trick,"" Melchor had told him. ""Smoke can be very troublesome to deal with. You can't just punch it. And if your opponent has enough control over the form, soul power won't do anything, either. Because they can manipulate their body around your attacks at will. So what you do is concentrate your soul power into a single attack and strike at the enemy's most vulnerable point with something that can disrupt their form. Such as an explosion. Because they can't warp their body around that kind of attack. It's omnidirectional.""

But after he'd left, Zeff had more to add.

""First, you have to be able to sense soul power,"" the Lord Elroy had said. ""Without that, you won't be able to tell where your opponent's most vulnerable point even is.""

"3187

Zeff had gone on to lecture him about the importance of being able to intelligently evaluate one's opponent and determine whether victory or escape was the appropriate course of action. Which had been a very wise and important thing to bring up, of course.

If Zeff were able to read Hector's thoughts right now, the man probably would've been very disappointed in him.

Because escape wasn't even a consideration.

This was Warrenhold. It wasn't a place that you needed to escape from. It was a place you could escape to.

And there were dozens of non-combatants down there. They needed to be protected.

And right now, the so-called Lord Darksteel needed to come through for them.

In his mind, none of these thoughts were fully formed or articulated. They were just gut feelings at best, underlining every racing thought that passed through his head as he narrowly dodged or blocked every devastating blow from Banda Toro.

Hector knew that he needed to come up with something. And this aura shit was so overwhelming. As the fight drew out, he could feel it all the more intensely. In his mind. In his body. Everywhere.

Consuming everything around him. A suffocating and invigorating blanket.

It was a contradiction unto itself. Like struggling ferociously against an angry sea, yet also being able to breathe the very waters of that same sea, taking strength from the crashing waves even as they tried to batter him into pieces.

And in a different way, it was also familiar. When he'd talked to Rasalased and when he'd gone into the Candle--those experiences were both similar to this, albeit not entirely.

This felt more like a blend of those times with how he normally felt.

Like things were only half real, right now. Like reality itself was questionable but still present. Asleep and awake at the same time.

And Hector searched.

He didn't know for what. A solution to all his problems? Or to just this fight? For something helpful, at least.

There was definitely something here. In the middle of this fury. This storm. He could sense so many fleeting things. There was a fireworks show beneath everything else. A storm beneath the storm. It was there.

He just couldn't. Quite. Touch it.

But maybe he could see it. Just. Barely. In a way.

Banda's intent was part of it. The man's aura wasn't trying to hide that at all. If anything, it was like it wanted to be seen. To be acknowledged.

To be challenged. Yes, of course it did."

"3188

Banda was telegraphing everything--and not just with his movements. His aura, his intent, they made it clear as day.

The attack was coming from his right this time. He moved out the way with more time to spare than usual. The next cluster of long, red claws came faster, but Hector avoided those, too. With a second or two to spare, even.

Which felt like a lifetime in the middle of this fight.

Good. Great, even.

But this wasn't what he needed. He'd already been able to sense Banda's movements well enough with the Scarf and his own two eyes. This added an extra layer to things, sure--gave him some breathing room--but what he really needed was to find that point of vulnerability that Melchor mentioned.

If souls gave that information away, then aura probably could, too. Souls were a component of aura, after all.

He just had to concentrate. To look. To feel.

Melchor's attack had pierced Xuan's smoke at the center. Hector was looking as hard as he could, but he couldn't see, feel, or otherwise sense anything special at the center of Banda's smoke. Hell, it was hard enough to even tell where the center was most of the time. The way Banda's form shifted constantly in its pursuit. How was he even supposed to--

No, wait.

A glimpse. A glimmer. Hector thought he saw it. For a split second amid the chaos, just before taking another huge laser beam with the Amir-10, he thought that maybe it was there. As thousands of sparks and gushing flames jumped off his shield, Hector waited for another chance to see.

Yeah.

The fire dissipated around him. Banda was coming from the left, as subtle as a train, and Hector propelled himself out of the way. By now, he could feel multiple broken bones throughout his body from all this

""flight."" It was more like flinging himself through the air than actually flying, but that didn't matter. It was the furthest thing from his mind, right now.

Because he saw the center. The point around which all of Banda's smoke shifted and morphed. It wasn't always the actual center. That was the tricky thing about it.

It seemed to Hector that Banda's smoke was like a rubber band, and the center--the mind, perhaps--was like a nail around which the rubber band stretched and spun itself. At times, the nail was the farthest edge; at others, it was the closest part of the smoke to him.

In fact, it was coming closer more often than not.

Which made sense, Hector realized. Because Banda wanted him to do something. Dared him to.

So he did."

"3189

He'd already ""loaded"" up an onslaught of orbiting cubes in his mind for this. All tiny, no bigger than golf balls. All icy to the core. All soul-empowered.

From behind his shield, Hector thrust his gauntleted hand toward the perceived center of Banda's smoke, and the barrage of frozen iron bullets flew forth as if they were being shot out of a minigun with the trigger taped down. Sustained, not stopping.

They pierced the smoke with no trouble, but of course that wasn't the goal. The molten coatings that made the bullets start exploding was.

Frankly, he knew he didn't have enough control to add coatings to every single bullet that he fired. They were way too many moving way too fast. But that was okay. He just needed to get most of them. And the gushing heat from the new iron would cause other, nearby bullets to explode anyway, even without coatings of their own.

And he didn't hold the power back at all. The bullets were as cold as he could possibly make them, and the coatings were as hot as he could possibly make them. The explosions might not have been huge like Melchor's against Xuan had been, but they didn't let up and piled

on top of each other.

The result, therefore, was a continuous stream of white-hot fireworks tearing through Banda's red smoke and dispersing it with ease. Hector whipped the stream to and fro as he flew, cutting huge swaths through the smoke even as it slowed its pursuit of him.

He saw no reason to let up. He just kept going, trying to disperse as much of it as he could as quickly as he could.

Steam and black smoke mixed with the red, creating havoc in the storm and rendering it utterly impossible for Hector to tell where Banda's ""center"" was any longer.

He wasn't about to stop and try to reassess, though. The constant stream of explosions was certainly taxing on his mind, requiring two entire thought processes, but that didn't matter. As long as he could still see red, the bullets weren't going to stop flying.

He couldn't even tell if it was really working, but that didn't matter, either. Not yet, anyway. Because if it was working, he might not get a second chance to take Banda by surprise as he suspected that he had. He needed to go all the way here, providing no breathing room for this son of a bitch."

"3190

The next shift came suddenly enough that Hector barely had time to sense it. Through all the smoke and chaos and ear-splitting explosions, the change in Banda Toro's aura was almost lost on him.

No more curiosity. Just anger. But in a professional way, somehow. Respectfully furious, perhaps.

The next flurry of attacks were nothing like the last ones. They came from all sides, multiples jaws and slashing claws flying at him at once. And too fast. No way to get out unscathed, even as Hector saw them coming a split second before.

""Kabura!"" said Hector.

The Amir-10 responded. In an instant, it was as tall as he was and wider. It completely covered his left side as he flung himself out of the coming onslaught's path.



But it was also thinner now, too. Multiple claws dug into it, leaving streaks and poking holes large enough to see through. It did its job, though. For his left side, at least.

His right side took all the slashing and tearing with nothing more than his iron armor for protection. The Raptor's fangs tore through that like tissue and drew a geyser of blood out of Hector.

A long, streaking trail of red followed Hector as he pushed himself to fly faster, but it wasn't just smoke this time. The blood wasn't stopping, he saw. A third of his torso was missing, and his right arm was shredded and twitching.

He still had feeling in it, though. Boy, did he still have feeling in it. He probably would've screamed in agony if he wasn't concentrating so hard on not getting killed.

Because Banda was pursuing. Another heat laser came for him. He sensed it in time to block it with the shield, but the Amir-10 was still thinner and needed time to regenerate. Fire poured through the holes, widening some of them and melting chunks of his armor.

He kept flying, just focusing on not getting disoriented. He'd been forced to let up his attack in order to get away, but he still knew where Banda was. The Scarf and aura together made it obvious. Plus, Banda wasn't as smoky as before. The guy had solidified more of himself, which thankfully made it easier to--

There were three of him now.

Hector sensed it just as a cluster of red spears flew toward him. He managed to avoid them, but they exploded and sent him veering off his intended course."

"3191

Hector struggled to stabilize. No time to think. Three Bandas were coming for him, he knew. Where were they all? He could still sense two but not the third.

He couldn't dwell on it. Had to act. If they were solid enough for him to sense this clearly, they would be more vulnerable to bombardment. He loaded up more cubes in his mind as twin assaults of lasers and

exploding javelins pressed him down closer to the ground. He needed to keep track of his altitude on top of everything else.

More processing. More thinking. More concentration.

Ah. There was the third. Circling around to flank him. Not as solid as the other two. Much smokier. Harder to sense that way. Smart. Hector almost hadn't--

Oh shit, there was a fourth on the other side.

He needed distance. Speed. Couldn't let himself get surrounded. Even a few extra seconds would be useful for the Amir-10 to repair itself.

""Sagir!"" said Hector.

And the Amir-10 shrunk back down to its usual size. The holes in it were now smaller as well. The regenerating factor was supposed to be faster than the Amir-9 version, and Hector had no doubt that it was, but goddamn if it didn't still feel like a lifetime was transpiring in the middle of this fight.

Hector swerved out of the way of another slew of lasers, one of which he caught with the shield, making it bounce off and hit into the thin canopy of trees below. One of the poor trees took the full force of it and burst apart, setting the others around it aflame as splintered wood splashed up toward Hector.

A thought struck him, and he didn't hesitate. He dove down lower, into the trees. They wouldn't provide much cover, but some was still better than none. And the forest wasn't too dense. Even going as fast as he was, he didn't worry about crashing.

He wanted to press his sensory advantage--assuming he did indeed have one. If trees made it even slightly more difficult for Banda to keep track of him with his aura sense or whatever the fuck he was using, then that would be enough.

Aha, and the Banda clones were lagging behind now. Not losing track of him, necessarily, but definitely a bit slower to follow.

And he was getting another idea now.

Clones, huh?

Hector couldn't match that trick, but maybe he could pull off a bootleg

As he flew through the trees, he materialized a second copy of his own armor and dumped it behind him, making sure to empower it with his soul. It was just a rough decoy, not at all intricate or accurate, but it didn't need to impress. It only needed to distract. Even if for a split second, that would be enough. Because he intended to make more.

Making them move probably would've helped, but that felt like too much. His attention was already so divided, and he hadn't devoted any serious practice time to armored puppetry. And he didn't have time to mull it over now, either. The decisions were just flying. He had to trust his gut.

He dropped off more rough lumps of armor, all vaguely Hector-shaped, and kept going. The majority of his attention had to remain on the Bandas. Four of them. Still pursuing. Farther behind, sure, but not far enough for his liking.

And this forest wasn't that big, either. Gray Rock wasn't exactly known for its greenery.

Without warning, a massive bed of red spikes shot up from the ground, and Hector barely blocked it in time with the shield. Instead of being completely skewered, he was sent tumbling skyward, back above the canopy again.

Fuck. They were closing in again. All four at once. More attacks trying to smother him.

Still reeling, he didn't bother trying to stabilize again. He just launched himself in the opposite direction and loosed as many molten cubes behind him as he could. They were haphazard and inaccurate, but they just needed to provide some cover for him. To give Banda something to think about.

And he had plenty to spare. Even as he fired, he didn't stop loading new ones up.

These were bigger than the minigun-style bullets he'd shot earlier, but he wasn't trying to make them explode to disperse smoke. In that

sense, at least, they were easier to process and churn out.

But something was wrong. Agh. Another laser had clipped his leg. Half of it was gone.

That wasn't the problem, though. That was just a nuisance. Another distraction. No, he had to concentrate. The real problem was that those decoy armors hadn't worked at all. Banda hadn't gotten distracted even a tiny bit.

Another background thought process tried to create itself and search for an answer, even as his mind was already pressed so hard between flight, counterattacking with bombardment, and managing all of his sensory input. Three entire thought processes, each operating with maximum urgency, was already pushing it. A fourth on top of all that, even at a lower intensity, was definitely beyond his limit.

But he needed that answer.

And thankfully, it didn't take him long to realize."

"3193

Even with soul-empowerment, the decoy armors probably hadn't worked for the same reason that the walls from earlier hadn't. Because Banda wasn't just using vision and soul sense in order to track him.

It was aura, almost certainly. The armors had soul power added to them but not aura, and Banda could sense the difference.

So if he wanted such a tactic to work, he'd have to start pressing his aura into his work, as well.

If only he knew how to do that. Or if it was even possible to begin with. Pauline would probably know.

Agh, they were getting close to the city. To civilians. He couldn't keep going this way with Banda hot on his heels.

He swooped right, gradual and curving, aiming to turn back toward Warrenhold.

Red smoke began to materialize ahead of him in large pockets. They were simple enough to avoid, but they were getting closer each time.

Hector understood. Banda was trying to predict where he would be and materialize a deadly cloud right on top of him.

He had to mix up his movements, then. Be unpredictable. Flying in a straight line wasn't smart, but zigzagging everywhere also meant that the four clones chasing after him could catch up more easily. If they just flew straight, they'd have less distance to travel, comparatively.

Not good. His own chaotic movements made it even harder for him to aim his counterattacks. And he very much needed to be more precise with those, not less. It seemed like Banda was barely hindered by the flurry of molten cubes.

Time to change it up, then. No more flurry. Just concentrate and aim. The Amir-10 was mostly regenerated now, so he could take this risk. The closest clone was the best target.

Hector focused. Zeroed in on what the Scarf and Banda's aura were telling him.

The laser beams, exploding javelins, and angry red clouds grew suddenly more furious during the few seconds he eased up on his counterattack. Hector had to spin around and fly backwards so that he could protect himself with the Amir-10.

But he had it. The clone was clear.

He loosed a molten cube right at it, as fast he could make it fly.

It clobbered the clone through the torso. Smoke and fire exploded on impact.

That looked good, but Hector didn't get the opportunity to assess the aftermath, because there were still three more clones to go. He focused on the next closest target as he readied another cube.

But the clones were changing up their tactics now, too. Serpentine movements. Making it harder to aim.

So they were wary of eating another attack like the last one, then. That was good, but this sure wasn't. Damn clones were weaving into each other's flight paths, trying to disorient him even more."

"3194

Hector took aim again while flying backwards. He used precious seconds to focus in on the next clone. More attacks flew in his direction, enough so that he had to change course. With the Scarf, he could just barely sense the deadly red clouds ahead and avoid them.

He loosed another molten cube, but this time he missed. It sailed right passed the intended clone, and he grit his teeth in frustration. He didn't get even a brief reprieve from Banda's assault. If anything, Banda went harder. More lasers, more explosions, more gas.

And more clones. There were four Bandas again.

That wasn't good for his morale. Now it felt like he wasn't even making progress. Like everything he'd done up to now was pointless.

He put it out of his mind, though. How he felt about that didn't matter. Only the fight did. Only protecting Warrenhold.

He could feel Banda's aura more strongly than ever now. Its anger. Its domineering pressure. Its hunger.

Banda didn't just want to win the fight. He wanted to break Hector's spirit. Or put a different way, he wanted his aura to win over Hector's aura.

It was like a thousand invisible hands, all trying to strangle him or hold him. Trying to will him into giving up before the fight was even done.

He'd felt this before. Multiple times, in fact, and not just from Banda. So it didn't bother him.

But it was also more intense than he'd ever felt it before, too. The heat of the battle made it so. Banda's aura was growing feverish. Uncontrolled.

Animalistic.

And before his very eyes, Hector could see that same feeling making itself into a reality. Banda's clones were each shifting more solidly into that chaotic form from earlier, that dinosaur-looking thing. Their movements were becoming more unpredictable, too, as if instinct was taking over.

They weren't thinking and planning, anymore. Not strategizing. Just reacting. Just pursuing. Just trying to satisfy their appetite.

Perhaps these developments could've been good for Hector. If Banda wasn't thinking, then surely it would be easier to outsmart him.

But this deep into the fight, when he was already struggling to not be swarmed and overwhelmed, this might've been the worst possible thing to happen.

Because Banda was getting faster. The clones--the literal raptors--were getting closer. Hector had at least been able to keep ahead of them before with his barely-controlled flying ability, but now that wasn't the case. He could already tell.

Sooner or later, they were going to catch him."

"3195

He had to do something. That much was obvious.

But his mind was already being stretched beyond its limit as he tried to keep track of everything. That much was also obvious, just from instinct alone. It was this tenuous feeling in his head, like his own grip on himself--on his Focus, perhaps--was slipping. If he continued trying to push even further, would it all collapse? Would his Focus break apart? Lose track of everything? Or just destroy his mind entirely?

There was no way to know. But it was a terrifying sensation, as if he were standing at the cusp of a bridge that led into a wall of complete black. A veil into something wholly unknown or even unknowable.

Beyond here, there was no knowledge for, nor hope of, a capacity to return. If he took another step forward, anything could happen to him. He could be changed horrifically forever. He could simply disappear. Be swallowed whole by oblivion.

He didn't fear Banda. He didn't fear the battle. He certainly didn't fear death.

But he did fear this. Whatever it was.

In his head, everything seemed to slow to a crawl as he deliberated. Even his own thoughts felt sluggish, just barely faster than everything else going on around him.

Just barely enough to make a decision.

This fear. It seemed built-in. Part of the deal. He couldn't take that step without acknowledging it. Without accepting it. Ignoring it or trying not to feel it--those things were somehow out of the question.

And a million questions wanted to be asked at once.

Where did this bridge lead? Was this another form of emergence? Was this Focus? Domain? Both? Something else? The Candle's influence? Would he be changed? For the better? For the worse? Did it even matter? Did he have any choice at all?

But he didn't have the mind for any of these questions. Not enough space or awareness left. He only had enough to decide.

And of course he had to do it. The raptors were closing in, practically chomping at his heels. If this meant an opportunity to keep fighting, to protect Warrenhold and Atreya and everyone else, then he had to push onward.

He felt it begin to form. A fifth thread in his mind. A fifth thought process. The first for flight, the second for managing his senses, the third for counterattacking, the fourth for decision-making. And this was the fifth."

"3196

For a moment, everything was suddenly clearer. And slower again, too. But this time, his thoughts didn't feel so sluggish, as if he could step out of the chaos of the battle and assess the entire situation anew, utilizing all of the information being provided to and expended by the other four thought processes.

An extra, heightened layer of both awareness and decision-making combined into one: that is what this seemed to be.

He could think. He was still being overwhelmed, but he could think. What did he need here?

The fifth process could be freed up for another layer of counterattacking, too. But what would that accomplish? What manner of counterattack would help him here? Banda was swarming him.

No. He didn't need an extra attack. He just needed to make his current



attacks more precise. He needed them to actually hit and get the raptors off his ass.

So that's what the fifth process went towards. Aiming.

A raptor's claw scraped his shield and gouged out of a chunk of his leg armor. A beam of pure heat followed immediately, barely bouncing off the shield and searing the tip of his helmet. He had to clench his eyes shut in the desperate hope that they wouldn't be burned out of his skull.

But he had a lock. With the Scarf and aura combined, he didn't need his eyes. Plus, it helped that the closest raptor was very close.

The molten cube hit dead center, and the clone exploded into smoke and dropped away from him. Hector didn't hesitate to follow up, either. A second cube, a third. Both already locked on to the second and third raptors.

They hit, though neither was as clean as the first. The second was caught in the raptor's side, tearing a chunk out and leaving a trail of crimson smoke behind, but the monster was still flying. Still chasing. And the third was even better off.

Because it had actually swallowed the cube.

Granted, that raptor didn't look like it was enjoying itself after its meal as it thrashed and vomited up glowing iron, but it still wasn't slowing its pursuit very much at all.

And there was also the fourth, of course. That one was farther back but catching up quickly now.

Hector was tempted to let loose another flurry of cubes again, but no. Precision was the key here. While it might've been a stretch to say that this strategy was truly working, it was definitely doing something. Keeping the bastards off him, at least. Giving him much needed space. He just had to--

The world shuddered. Every thought process flickered at once, blacking out his entire mind for a second."

"3197 -- CCLXXII.

Hector found himself falling and scrambled to catch himself. The flight in his armor had faltered. Reorienting it took precious seconds that he didn't have.

Everything was off. His aim. His senses. His concentration.

His Focus.

And the raptors were closing in again. He'd only staggered for a moment, but that was more than they'd needed.

He tried to lash out, to throw anything he could their way, to buy himself time.

But the world shuddered again. Black. For what felt like even longer this time.

And then he was just tumbling downward. Plummeting. Had he taken another hit? Couldn't even tell. Two raptors were right there in his face.

He saw one of their massive jaws open up and stretch wide enough to swallow him whole. Rows of dagger-sized teeth lined its mouth, and a whirlwind was already sucking him in as Banda inhaled.

And Hector realized that it was too late. The fight was over.

He didn't accept it. He didn't give in. A million thoughts, emotions, and memories flashed through his mind, none of which he could hold onto, in part because he wanted to reject them. Right now, in this terrible instant, he wanted to reject everything.

Because he knew he'd lost.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Two: 'The onlooking Blaze...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

These days, there were a lot of things that didn't make sense to Roman Fullister. Particularly about Hector. In fact, he'd almost given up hope of ever feeling like he would have a true grasp of what was going on with that kid, anymore. The sudden leaps in power and influence? The changes in Hector's general disposition and apparent

knowledge base? And the leadership he'd been exhibiting with all these Rainlords?

It was all an ever-expanding enigma.

But what exactly was happening here and now, Roman wondered? He'd done as Hector had told them and returned to the Entry Tower, but with every second that passed, Roman questioned himself and his situation more and more.

He did trust in Hector's judgment, but still... as he thought back to that moment when the young Lord Darksteel had told them what to do, Roman realized that he hadn't questioned Hector's words or decisions at all. Even Voreese wasn't putting up a stink while they waited in here, which was more than a little odd, to say the least.

As he looked over their small group another time, he came to the conclusion that this wasn't right. Even if Hector himself was right, this wasn't. Even if this was the smartest play right now--to wait for Abbas Saqqaf to show up--Roman couldn't just keep sitting in here while Hector was out there fighting, alone."  
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Hector was out there fighting, alone."  
"3198

He'd already wasted enough time. Before the thought was even fully crystalized in his mind, Roman found himself moving for the exit.

"Mr. Fullister, what are you doing?" said Joana Cortes. "Lord Goffe told us to wait. We should trust his judgment, I think."

Roman turned to look at her. There was no doubt in her expression. No uncertainty. Just stern disapproval.

He didn't want to risk getting into an argument and so decided to fib a bit here. "I'm just going to check on things. If I'm not back in five minutes, please do as Hector said and bury the entrance."

She still looked ready to tell him off, but she merely gave him an admmissive nod.

Huh.

Well, in fairness, that did seem to be the resting face of all these Rainlords. Maybe he'd read her expression wrong.

He decided to hand Garovel's iron orb off to her, as well. The reaper was no doubt in a foul mood and would've preferred to come with him, but that wasn't the sort of risk that Roman wanted to take with someone else's reaper. Didn't feel right.

He proceeded outside, making sure to slide the hulking stone doors shut behind him.

Unfortunately, he realized a bit too late that Voreese had come with him. He gave her a disapproving look but said nothing more. This wasn't the time. And besides, her senses would probably be helpful here.

Because what the hell was even going on out here?

He could hear distant explosions, like an intermittent stream of fireworks, and he could feel the very air trembling now and then, too.

Voreese pointed him in the right direction with her little ethereal wing.

Roman started moving, but he didn't want to rush in headfirst. The goal here was to be helpful, not cause Hector problems by getting in the way. So he made use of the giant iron ""decoy"" castle that Hector had been working on in order stay out of the sight, following the labyrinthine walls in the direction that Voreese showed him.

It took longer than expected. Hector sure made this thing elaborate. And to think it wasn't even finished. Roman could've just hopped over the walls, but he was trying to be careful.

By the time he made it to the exit, he could feel the vibrations in the air more strongly than ever.

Due to the nature of his power, Roman had become a bit more sensitive to such things. He almost didn't need Voreese to guide him, now that he was thinking about it. The sound and vibrations together gave him a relatively clear picture of where the shit was hitting the fan."  
"3199

The fight was still quite far away, though. It was definitely happening in the sky above the thin forest ahead, but with the naked eye, all Roman could make out was some specks zipping around and explosions going off.

And again, just rushing in there headfirst didn't seem like the wisest course of action.

'Can you tell who's winning?' thought Roman.

'Not really,' said Voreese privately. 'It's a mess up there. Hmm. Looks like Hector's being chased, though. Uhh. Oh, yeah. You should probably go--'

Roman never liked it when she suddenly cut herself off like that.

'He needs help!' she yelled, touching his arm briefly to invoke his undead strength. 'Go go go!'

It was time to stop hesitating, then.

Roman blasted away from the ground, cracking it with an instant thoom. He didn't hold himself back, going full speed straight away. His

body could scarcely handle it as his bones creaked, muscles ached, and blood pooled in his feet. His passive soul defense wasn't quite up to par for this level of intensity, nor would it probably be for many years.

None of that mattered to him now, though. The only thing on his mind was getting to Hector in time.

'He just got eaten!' said Voreese. 'Swallowed whole! Get him out!'

What the fuck? Roman barely had time to process it, because he was already getting close enough to see for himself what was going on.

Not that it helped a whole lot.

There was the enemy. That crazy half-dinosaur looking motherfucker. But he looked even more fucked up than Roman expected.

The guy was twisting and turning over in the air, clutching his morphing head and letting out strained, agonized groans. And as if that wasn't confusing enough, he was shifting in and out between smoke, too. Dinosaur, then man, then smoke, then two at once--or all three, even.

It took Roman a second to regather his wits. He still had some distance left, and it looked like the guy was too busy with whatever existential crisis he was going through in order to notice him.

Lucky. Roman wasn't about to complain. He raised a hand to launch an attack, but another telepathic voice arrived first. One he'd heard before.

'Stop!' said Pauline Gaolanet. And her giant avian form melted out of the air next to him as her talons wrapped around his torso. 'You're too close!' She carried him back the way he'd just come, fast as an airplane."

"3200

""What're you--?!"" He didn't want to hurt her, but he also had to break free. Apparently, these bird feet of hers were pretty damn strong, so he had to put some oomph into it as he thrashed out of her grasp. One of the talons slashed his left arm open in the process, but at least he was flying under his own power again.

'Listen to me!' she yelled. 'Your mind will be shredded from this plane of existence if you go back there!'

Admittedly, that did make him stop and look at her. ""What are you talking about?!"

'It's their auras!' she said, only slightly more calmly. 'They're overlapping. Banda's aura is trying to fully suppress Hector's. Like digesting him. But, uh, I guess it's not going too well for him, because the guy's own aura is on the verge of imploding.'

None of that made sense to Roman. ""Is that good or bad?!"

'Both, maybe?! Mostly bad, though! If you try to get close again, you'll just get caught up in it whatever is about to happen to Banda. In fact, your aura added into the mix might even trigger his to implode! Which would kill all three of you! Or worse, probably!'

""You're not sounding very certain, right now!""

'Look, I don't know exactly what's happening, but I know auras aren't supposed to behave like this! I want to help, too, but we need to stay back until it's safe to approach!'

Roman just growled and looked back toward Banda. The guy was really thrashing up a storm, now.

And vomiting. A lot. And it was glowing, too. Bright orange. Was that Hector's iron? It dribbled out of Banda's mouth, then sputtered out for a second like a choking geyser, then went back to dribbling.

Banda clutched his stomach, which bulged and shrank in turns.

It seemed like a pretty good time to attack, Roman thought, but given everything the bird had just told him, he didn't want to risk it. But what if Banda just regained control? Was that not a much bigger risk?

Agh.

Banda looked his way, and Roman froze up. A sudden chill went all the way down his spine as he locked eyes with the guy from afar.

Even at this distance, Roman could tell. This motherfucker was no joke. Roman had known that, but now he could feel it. Too much so, in fact. It wasn't so different from those few moments when he'd caught a glimpse of Leo in a bad mood. But this was much worse. This was a



pure, constant stream of pressure. Not just some little spike of irritation.

This was hatred. Genuine. And not afraid of showing itself. Wanting to show itself, even."

"3201

Roman wasn't about to back down, though. Not because of some evil fuck like this. He didn't care how terrifying the dude was. Hector needed his help.

Banda twitched and bulged again, sudden and violent, but this time he seemed to suppress it. And when his gaze came back to Roman, it was different. Less threatening, somehow.

Less sure.

What in the hell was happening? Was he seeing this wrong, or was Banda actually scared now? And if so, why?

The questions barely even formulated in Roman's mind before being cut off.

Because Banda bolted.

In the complete opposite direction, he started flying away at rocket speed, red smoke trailing behind him.

For the life of him, Roman couldn't understand. This fucking monster was fleeing?

The sheer shock of it made Roman slow to realize and respond. Whatever the reason for it, this was still absolutely horrible. The bastard had Hector in his clutches and was now getting away.

Roman gave chase. It made no sense, but he did.

'The fuck is going on up there?' came Voreese's voice. 'Where the hell are you going?'

'Bastard's running,' said Roman, trying to stay focused on the chase. The guy was damn fast. Even pushing for max speed, Banda was still pulling away from him.

'And you're actually following?' said Voreese. 'What exactly are you thinking you can accomplish?'

'...I don't know,' Roman admitted.

There arrived a long silence.

The sound of the wind roaring in his ears consumed his mind. Mostly because he didn't want to think too much, right now. He already knew how stupid this was. Thinking about it any deeper might just make him lose his nerve, which was something he desperately needed at the moment.

'...You can't win, Roman. That guy and the reinforcements that he's probably falling back to right now are out of our league.' Her usual haughty tone was nowhere to be found. Instead, she sounded soft and somber, as if she were trying to talk him away from the edge of a cliff.

'They sure are,' was all Roman had for her.

At that, Voreese needed another moment to respond. 'And you're going anyway, because it's Hector.'

'He already did the same for me.'

She gave a silent sigh. 'Yes, he did. But you must also know that he wouldn't want you to take this kind of risk for his sake. He would tell you to pull back. In fact, he DID tell you to pull back.'

'Yeah, well, if I always did what he wanted, I'd be his slave, not his friend.'"

"3202

'This is a really stupid thing to do, Roman.'

He couldn't really argue with that. 'Do you actually want me to stop?'

'...Yes. But I get it. Just promise me you'll try and be smart about your stupidity.'

'Heh. Uh, sure.' He wished he could feel as lighthearted about the situation as he did about this conversation. Banda was still shrinking

from view. A couple more minutes like this, and Roman might not be able to see him at all, anymore.

'Hurry up, slowpoke.'

Talons wrapped around his torso, and Roman jolted forward, suddenly faster. The flesh on his face distorted as the wind screamed past him, and he was forced to either squint or shut his eyes completely.

He craned his neck up to try and get a look at Pauline, but it was difficult. He could see her wings, rigid and angled, not unlike those of a fighter jet as she carried him across the sky, higher and higher until they neared the clouds.

And soon, Roman realized that she was actually gaining on Banda. They were still keeping their distance, as she'd moved them much higher up, but it didn't seem like Banda was going to get away, now.

Damn. How fast was she going? It was hard to judge, but was this even faster than an airplane? It sure felt like it, but maybe that was just the enormous wind pressure playing tricks on him.

Either way, it was nice that he didn't have to concentrate so hard. He could just wait. And think about his next move.

Which maybe wasn't such a good thing, actually.

Because he had no idea what he was going to do.

--++--++--

For the tenth time today, Raul Blackburn crouch-walked down this long, stony corridor.

He kept pausing. Not out of hesitance or fear, but because he was being mindful of his footsteps. The acoustics throughout Logden Prison made it all but impossible to sneak around without making any noise. The brown-and-black floors were all concrete, as were many of the walls. Each footstep carried far and wide, and guards were everywhere, to boot.

So the trick, he'd decided, was to only move when others were moving--to mask his footsteps in those of the guards.

It had been working well so far. Progress was slow but steady. Thanks to this Invisibility ring, the operation to break out their captive brethren

from this prison had not yet escalated into a fight.

Yet, being the key word there."

"3203

There was essentially zero doubt in Raul's mind that it was only a matter of time until things went pear-shaped. That was why he was trying so hard to be careful. The more warriors they could free, the better off they would be once the inevitable battle came.

That was the gist of the plan they'd come up with, anyway.

Simply put, there were far too many guards for nobody to notice so many prisoners going missing. With over four hundred Rainlords needing to be freed and only a handful of Invisibility rings at their disposal, this was an enormous undertaking.

Thankfully, the warriors were actually a bit easier to free than the civilians, because the warriors were mostly just frozen heads. The guards weren't nearly as attentive toward the cold storage rooms compared to all the cells with living people in them.

From their initial scouting of the compound, they'd discovered that an apparent pencil pusher was the primary custodian of cold storage. It was a bespectacled, rail-thin man by the name of Arino. Twice a day, first thing in the morning and the last thing at night, Arino would make a round through each of the cold rooms, check on every frozen captive, and tick the corresponding name off a very long list.

Tedious didn't even begin to describe that man's job. He seemed perfectly content with it, though. Never complaining, always formal and polite toward his coworkers.

Arino wouldn't be the problem. It was the dozens upon dozens of guards around him that would be.

Many of them were servants. In fact, Raul suspected that literally all of them were, but they had no means of confirming that. It could've just been that their reapers were elsewhere, tending to other matters.

That was the trouble with servants. They could pass for civilians easily enough. Raul had taken advantage of that fact himself before, but it sure didn't feel good to be on the other side, becoming sick with

paranoia as he wondered who among all these sons of bitches was the most dangerous.

They had very little in the way of intel on the personnel within Logden Prison. He'd hoped that the Ridgemark Private Military Police would be able to help with that, but apparently, Logden was a trouble spot even for them. Activity here was constant, with guards being swapped out all the time. This place was closely linked with the Vantalayan Military Police and its many war fronts."

"3204

According to the RPMP, the VMP used this place as not just a prison but also as either a reward or punishment for the rank-and-file within their own forces. Being given a temporary post here could be considered a reward, since it meant getting away from the frontline fighting and enjoying the incredible mountain vistas, clean air, and decent food.

But it could also be considered a punishment, because certain jobs within the prison were terrible beyond words. Namely, cleaning the sewage system. Not only was it filthy, but it attracted the infamous Vantalayan dung beetles, which were as big as a man's fist and made horrible hissing noises when agitated. Not to mention, they had a tendency to bite. Hard. And such wounds were likely to become infected, of course.

Raul had firsthand knowledge of that, because he'd scouted those godforsaken tunnels already. It was only a minor point of weakness for the prison. There were still plenty of guards down there, mixed in with or even doubled up as part of the cleaning crew. Plus, it was a maze down there. Too easy to get lost. Raul knew the route himself quite well by now, but if he had to guide someone else, that would make things much more complicated.

They hadn't yet gotten around to sneaking out non-combatants, though. There had been much debate about whether it was better to go for them first or save them for last. On the one hand, going for the warriors first would allow for those same warriors to then provide assistance with the operation. But on the other hand, if a fight broke out, the non-combatants might be in more danger if they remained stuck in the prison.

At which point, the fight would become even more complicated.

But ultimately, that was what they had decided to go for. They needed the manpower. And going for the civilians first wouldn't guarantee their safety, either. In fact, a fight might be even more likely to break out.

The real trick, however, was getting to the captive reapers. Logden Prison had a special cell block for them, and the security in that area was far and away the strongest. The most notable guardsmen were stationed there.

The only upside was that gathering intel on those guards was made a bit easier, primarily because the normal guards loved to gossip about them, about the ""monsters of Cell Block Y.""

"3205

There'd been some skepticism at first about whether or not these ""so-called monsters"" were really that much of a threat. After all, what some random guardsmen considered to be monstrous was bound to be different from what Rainlords considered to be monstrous.

But they had been displeased to learn that there were indeed some quite infamous names stationed here, right now.

Niro Blatt was the one that Raul currently had eyes on as he proceeded down the corridor. The guy's cheekbones were sharp enough to cut with, and his beady gaze barely looked human as it passed over Raul's invisible form.

Blatt was mostly known for his habit of making grotesque examples out of his victims. Winning a battle was never enough for him, apparently. He had to put the losers on morbid display via crucifixion and flaying, only occasionally after they were already dead.

Not one to show mercy, in other words.

Raul wanted very much to take this opening and neutralize Blatt here and now. An ambush from behind--right to the neck--would probably do the trick.

But it was a gamble. And not just with his own life, either. If he somehow failed to kill the guy in an instant, then everything would go

to hell immediately. Or if another guard rounded the corner at just the wrong time, the same could be said.

So he just watched as the murderous bastard passed him by.

Cell Block Y was absolutely massive. Stairs led up and down in a stadium-like formation, where in place of seats there were cells. Rows upon rows of cells. All tiny, no larger than dog kennels.

But they were all sealed tight. They had to be in order to hold reapers. Any opening would allow their massless bodies to squeeze through.

And with so many cells to choose from, the trouble was finding out where everyone had been placed.

That had been the first task of the infiltration team. They'd scoured the prison for intel regarding prisoner placement.

Thankfully, the wardens of this infernal place were quite good with their recordkeeping. It would've been very easy to get lazy with such things and not bother logging any names. The reapers themselves could also be quite stubborn about that, no doubt. If they gave their captors the silent treatment, then logging would become that much more difficult. And perhaps for that very reason, not everyone was accounted for in the logs they'd found.

Or at least, they hoped that was the reason."  
"3206

Plus, there was the very real possibility that the Vanguard had simply not handed over all of their Rainlord prisoners. Raul certainly hoped that everyone would be recovered from this venture, but he and many of the others were trying to temper their expectations. It was already a miracle that they had managed to find any of their kin at all, let alone this quickly. They didn't want to get their hopes up too much.

Apart from the Lord Elroy, perhaps. Raul wasn't sure what to make of that man's state of mind during all this.

In the end, they'd decided that they would eventually free every single reaper they could find, Rainlord or not. It would be too easy to miss someone if they didn't. But before they could reach that point, they needed to be picky. Retrieving the reapers was only going to get

harder and harder as time went on, until a full scale battle broke out, so they wanted to exploit the element of surprise for as long as they could.

Thus far, the first reapers to be recovered had been the ones with servants of mid-level strength. Which was helpful, of course, but the real prizes were Wen, Lonogren, and Jostomere. They were the reapers of Octavia Redwater, Rayen Merlo, and Santos Zabat, respectively. Those were the three most powerful Rainlords among those who'd been captured, and it was no coincidence they were each the head of their House.

As far as Raul knew, that had always been the way of things, historically speaking. Rainlords led by strength. It was a relatively rare occurrence for the defacto strongest member of a House to not become the leader.

That was just one more reason why Cousin Melchor was so strange.

Raul had asked the man about it, once. About why he'd repeatedly refused to step into that role.

""Everyone has their place, but not many want to acknowledge it. Too often, people are either overly ambitious or totally insecure. I am neither. I know my worth, exactly. I know what I can do for this family, and I know what I cannot. My role shall always be only to support and advise.""

Even after Ismael's passing, Melchor had again rejected the call.

And many within House Blackburn had not been happy about that. For his part, Raul just tried not to worry about it too much. If the great Cousin Melchor's role was only to support and advise, then Raul's role must've surely been to just do as he was told."

"3207

The nearby footsteps stopped, and so did Raul. With the cloak of his Invisibility ring the only thing keeping him safe here, he couldn't help feeling the anxiety well up as his heart started beating faster. He hated having to wait out in the open. At any moment, it felt like one the guards might just suddenly be able to see him.



When the footsteps returned, he started moving again. He had been trying to make his way downward, to the center of Cell Block Y. That was where the guards were the most heavily concentrated, which in turn implied that their most important prisoners were there.

It was terrifying, to be sure, but he'd prepared for this. Talking with Donald Elias before the operation had helped. The old guy had a way of saying what people needed to hear, Raul thought.

""To successfully tackle a job like this, you need to get a handle on your mindset,"" Donald had told him. ""It's fine to be scared. In fact, that'll help you. Fear will sharpen your senses. So if you feel it, don't suppress it. Lean into it. Use it to your advantage and heighten your concentration.""

Yeah. More guards meant more footsteps. He didn't have to stop. He could just go. All he had to worry about was not bumping into anyone, which was simple enough. Some of these staircases were quite narrow, though, so--

He hit something. It nearly knocked him off balance, and he had to catch himself on the wooden handrail, which trembled under his sudden weight.

He scrambled for understanding. What had he hit? He was looking all around, but he was sure there hadn't been anything there. He hadn't been careless. He'd been hyper focused on every guard around. How could--?

Another Invisibility user?

The realization made his feet move. Away from the staircase. Into an early offshoot of cells, not quite at the bottom of the block.

This wasn't right. He knew there were other Rainlords using Invisibility rings, but they'd coordinated beforehand. None of them should have been here, right now.

That had been one of the problems with the rings that they'd learned about quite early on. Not being able to see each other while wearing them. They'd made a point of working around that.

So who the hell had that been, just now? He hadn't imagined it."

"3208

He needed to calm down and reassess. The guards were all over the place. If he didn't stay vigilant, he'd bump into one of them, too.

It just didn't make sense. Were they employing invisible guardsmen, too? For what purpose, exactly? Or had that been someone else entirely? A third party?

An impossible coincidence, surely.

Raul narrowly avoided bumping into a guard, getting so unintentionally close that he caught a whiff of the guy's cologne.

He finally stopped walking to steady his breath and get his bearings.

He was near the center. He knew that much, at least. The row of cells in front of him were just sitting there, waiting for someone to open them. Rainlord reapers could be in any or all of them. What was this row number? Two? Yeah.

Thinking. Thinking.

According to the intel they'd gathered, two of their reapers should be here. At least two, that was. Wen, Lonogren, and Jostomere had not been logged, but they must have been in here somewhere. If not in row two, then they were probably in row one, down below.

With so many attentive eyes around, though, opening even just one of these cells was going to be difficult. It would also help if he had the keys, but he could probably make do without them.

Hmm. Yeah. As he inspected the sealed doors more closely, he found what he was looking for. Weak points. Not by conventional standards, maybe. But by his? Sure.

Those massive hinges with bolts on them? He could deal with those just fine. A bit of friction manipulation would probably allow him to just slide them right out of their slots like pulling hot dogs out of their packaging. And once the hinges were gone, the door could be cracked opened from the opposite side it was meant to. The lock would likely still prevent it from opening fully, but a crack was all a reaper would need.

That would draw a lot of attention, though. He needed to create a diversion first. But he also couldn't make it too distracting, or else it

would alert the whole prison.

Something like a spill might suffice. Maybe a leaky pipe. He'd have to find a good--

""Watch it, fool!""

The sudden voice in Valgan cut through the low murmur of the guards like a knife, drawing his attention back in the direction he'd just come from.

""I didn't touch you! I swear!""

""Well, someone did! Who was it?! Fess up!""

"3209

Raul looked around again. This timing sure was convenient. Could the other Invisibility user be an ally?

Not likely, he decided. Even if it was, how could they have known to cause a distraction at just this moment?

He decided not to waste it, regardless. The cell right in front of him was the quickest and easiest candidate, so he went for it. There were four enormous hinges that he had to take care of. He gripped the topmost one with two fingers and concentrated. Just as he'd hoped, the bolt slid free with barely any effort, then he moved onto the second.

""This isn't funny! Reveal yourself! Whoever you are, touch me again, and I'll kill you!""

Man, that guy sure was sensitive about being touched. Raul did his best to stay on task, though. The third hinge came free.

""It was me.""

The new voice made Raul hesitate, because this time, it wasn't just a voice. It was a feeling, too.

A sudden, overwhelmingly oppressive presence.

And he turned in time to see a man melt into existence out of thin air. He wore sunglasses, flip fops, shorts, and a tropical shirt with barely

any sleeves to cover his toned, tanned arms.

Everyone else was staring at him, too.

""Well?"" the man said, taking a step toward the guy who'd been yelling a moment ago. He poked him in the shoulder with one finger. ""You said you'd kill me, didn't you? Sounds like fun. Why don't you go ahead and try?""

From this angle, Raul could only see the profile of the newcomer's face, but combined with that notorious attire, this sinking feeling in his gut, and the images he'd seen of Abolish's top threats, it was enough. Raul knew exactly who that was over there.

That was Vanderberk. One of the most powerful and dangerous servants in the entire world.

Instantly, this situation was changed. The Rainlords had of course already known that Vanderberk was in Vantalay, but he wasn't supposed to be here, at Logden. According to their most recent intel, he was supposed to be on the eastern front, pressing the assault on Czacoa. Raul had heard that information only a day ago.

All of Cell Block Y had fallen dead silent. These guardsmen seemed to know who they were looking at, too.

The guy who'd just been yelling didn't say another word, choosing instead to shrink away from Vanderberk.

Vanderberk smiled. ""Heh. Smart man.""  
"3210

It took Raul a bit longer of wide-eyed gawking to come to his senses. 'Vanderberk is in the prison,' he told his reaper, trying not to sound like he was shitting his pants. 'I have eyes on him, right now.'

'Get the hell out of there,' came Arumoro's response.

Raul couldn't think of a proper reply. He couldn't even will his legs to move. Hell, it was hard to even form a complete thought in his head. He just stood there with the fourth bolt in his invisible hand, listening like everyone else.

""Now that I have your attention,"" Vanderberk went on, ""I'd like you all to spread out and search the room very carefully for me. I believe there is a little rat scurrying around here. Invisible to the naked eye, like I was just now.""

Oh no.

""The first one to find this rat for me will be rewarded. Generously.""

'--listening to me?!' Arumoro was saying. 'Raul! Answer me! Are you still--?!'

'I'm okay,' he managed to say. He was still holding the bolt in his hand. Thankfully, it was also made invisible while in his grip. He decided to just pocket it. 'But he knows I'm here. He's having all the guards start searching for an invisible intruder.'

'Get out!'

'Not that simple. They're everywhere.' Quite literally, there was a man standing right behind him.

'Everyone is converging on your location. Cell Block Y, right?'

'No!' said Raul. His feet were finally moving again, though he wasn't sure where they were carrying him other than away from Vanderberk. 'That'll turn into a fight, and it's still too soon!'

'Just try to stay hidden until the others get there.'

He grit his teeth. He couldn't let Arumoro ignore him. 'Tell everyone to wait! I'm fine for now! I'll let you know if and when I need help!'

'Raul, don't be--'

'Everyone is riding on this! Don't screw it up just because you're worried about me! We both know I'm not that important! And stop distracting me, too! I have to focus!'

And thankfully, the reaper said nothing more. Raul had no idea if he would actually listen to him about the backup, though.

For some godforsaken reason, he found himself heading down the nearest staircase instead of up it, where the exit was. He was going to row one.

He didn't know why. He was just moving. Barely thinking. Which

probably wasn't a good thing, but it was helping him stay calm, at least. Kind of.

He could see all the guards searching around now. Spreading out. Feeling around at the empty air. Hoping to just randomly bump into him, he supposed."  
"3211

He stopped in front of the nearest cell. He craned his neck as a guard's hand hovered past his face. Raul could see some of the others resorting to using their powers, materializing clouds of smoke and dust. Fortunately, it seemed to be making matters worse for them, not better. All the extra crap in the air was conflicting with each other and confusing things further.

For now, at least.

Frankly, considering how many of them there were, the situation already seemed quite hopeless to Raul. He had a rather strong feeling that they were going to find him sooner or later. Probably sooner.

The reaper cells were an option. The only problem was how small they were. And how much attention it might draw if a cell door opened by itself.

But maybe he could use them to trick the guards. That was why he was already setting to work, loosening the hinges of this new cell door in front of him.

He didn't pull the bolts all the way free, though. He just wanted them primed for a sudden release. First, he stepped carefully away from the door and went to work on the next one over, still needing to dodge grasping hands.

Soon enough, the second door was primed, too, and he moved onto the third.

He had no idea how many he should go for. Planning at this stage wasn't really an option for him. He was just going. When the time felt right, he'd make all the bolts fall out at once.

He heard a commotion on the other side of the block, but the dust and clouds were so thick over there that they he couldn't tell what was

going on. From the sound of the yelling, it seemed like a fight might've broken out.

For a moment, he thought it might've been his kin. But no, the dust soon dissipated, he saw instead that it was just a couple of arguing guards.

More dust arrived, this time right on top of him.

Not good. It was still pretty disorienting with so many others around, but still. They might actually be able to see him now.

He went prone. Flat on his belly, he resorted to crawling. Most of the guards were looking around at eye level or even above the cells, perhaps thinking he might be perched on top of one.

This position wasn't bad but still far from ideal. Spidering his way across the stony floor didn't make it any easier to avoid bumping into these damn guards. So many moving legs. It was just matter of time until--

He bumped into someone.

""Hey, what was that?!""

"3212

Raul didn't stop to take stock of the damage. Instead, he scrambled faster and then did something drastic in order to conceal his mistake.

He slapped his hand down on the floor and turned it into an almost frictionless plane. Everywhere within the bottom layer of the cell block--save right beneath himself--became more slippery than an ice rink.

Immediately, guards started toppling all around him, falling over themselves and each other, creating utter chaos out of an already hectic circumstance.

It definitely got the job done, though. Everyone was sufficiently distracted.

He took the opportunity find an isolated corner and, again using his ability, skitter straight up the wall.

This trick was always hell on his palms. The increased friction may have provided sticking power, but it did nothing to counterbalance the weight of his entire body yanking against his skin. Plus, he had to alternate the friction on and off quickly, else he'd either get stuck in place or start to fall.

Thankfully, he'd thought to wear gloves, which made the trick slightly more difficult but also painless. An entirely worthwhile trade off.

He scurried up on to the row of reaper cells and then perched there. The view was quite good of the mayhem he'd just created. It was like a scene out of a silent comedy, dozens of men bumbling into one another, struggling to find their footing and repeatedly being unable to.

The guards who were higher up in the block quickly took notice, but they didn't seem to know what was happening or what to do about it.

Raul couldn't help feeling quite pleased with his work, but he needed to keep moving while the distraction was still working. He saw a line up to the next row and decided to go for it.

'Status, Raul,' came Arumoro's voice.

'Still fine,' he said.

The reaper probably wanted to say more but didn't.

The distraction below was working wonders now. He considered doing it again on the second and third rows as he passed them, but his instinct was telling him that it would give his position away. He couldn't tell where Vanderberk was, but he had a feeling that the man had gone invisible again.

He reached the fourth row, and it seemed like his head was finally working right. He could see an exit. It wasn't far. He could reach it. And he was actually heading toward it, this time, instead of going in the wrong direction. That was certainly an improvement."

"3213

He scaled another wall up to row five, then six, had to pause in between some more befuddled guards, then kept pressing. Seven, eight.



And then he found himself stuck. Completely.

No matter how hard he flexed his muscles or tried to move, he couldn't. He just trembled ever so slightly in place.

""Tsk, tsk, so close."" It was Vanderberk's voice, only a meter or so away by the sound of it. Raul couldn't even turn his head to be sure. Not that it would've mattered much, because a few moments later, Vanderberk melted into view right in front of him. ""Neat little trick back there. Quite the annoying power you've got. Mind telling me your name?""

Even if he could have, Raul had no intention of answering that.

And at this point, he knew he should inform Arumoro that he'd been caught. Operationally speaking, it was the standard procedure.

But if he did that, he knew that his kin would come storming in here like a whirlwind, and utter chaos would ensure. He didn't know if they could take down Vanderberk. A part of him thought, yeah, maybe they could.

However, he wasn't worth taking that risk. He wasn't worth much of anything, really. Just a nameless fool who could barely ever do anything right.

Vanderberk blinked and snapped his fingers. ""Ah, right, sorry. Here.""

And Raul felt the pressure surrounding his jaw slacken. The rest of his body was still stuck fast, though.

He elected not to make use of his newfound freedom.

""Mm, the silent treatment, eh? That won't do. I like to play with my food, you know. I'm a bit famous for it, in fact. So come on. Play with me, and maybe you'll get to live a little longer. Not a bad trade, right?""

Well. Raul did like to talk. ""Shouldn't you be over in Ridgemark or Czacoa, right now?""

The man smiled. ""Oh? What makes you say that? Been listening to some misinformed little birdies, have we? Good to know my efforts weren't wasted, then.""

Hmm. Maybe a bit of goading would prove useful here. ""The Jailer of Ridgemark is going to tear your forces apart without you there to help them.""

""Tsk. Y'know, I was kinda hoping he would be HERE, actually. Would only make sense, right? The Jailer? In a jail? Guess that would've been TOO fitting, huh? Hehe. Unless you're just trying to trick me, and he actually IS here. That'd be a real treat.""

"3214

""Well, at least you're in good spirits about it,"" said Raul.

""What, you think I'd be some kind of sourpuss? Some kind of Negative Nancy? Never. Now why don't you go ahead and identify yourself for me, hmm? Undo your Invisibility and lemme get a good look at ya. Pretty please?""

Huh. So this guy couldn't actually see through the Invisibility? How had he been able to catch him, then? ""I would, but you see, I'm terribly shy. And ugly, besides. I'd hate to scar you with the shocking ghastliness of my visage.""

Vanderberk chuckled. ""What if I promise not to make fun of you, no matter how hideous you are?""

""Ah. A kind offer, but I don't think so.""

""Hehe. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I really must insist.""

""And I'm afraid I must insist right back. Counter-insist, if you will.""

""You're pretty funny for a Rainlord.""

At that remark, Raul had no words. His mind froze up. So the bastard already knew.

""I didn't think you people had a sense of humor. Every time I've encountered one of you in the past, you always came across as such wet blankets. Which maybe was appropriate, given your namesake, eh?""

Still, Raul didn't know what to say. Did Vanderberk really know who they were? Or was he just guessing? Either way, Raul didn't want to confirm or deny anything.

""Why so quiet all of a sudden, friend? You were so chatty a moment ago. Could it be that you didn't realize how much I knew about you?"

Hope I didn't say anything too off-putting.""

He had to respond, Raul knew. ""...You sure sound confident about your information.""

""I do, don't I? But then, I'm a confident guy. One of my better qualities, I'd say. Which is saying a lot, because I have many good ones.""

Damn. Raul wanted to at least learn something useful from this situation, but Vanderberk wasn't giving much away. ""What makes you think I'm a Rainlord?""

""Multiple things, not the least of which is the fact that my boys have been duking it out with you guys for weeks, now. You didn't think your skirmishes with Croll would go unreported, did you? You woulda needed to kill him during your first encounter for that to be the case. Oh, and there's also the small detail of a whole buncha Rainlords being held here as prisoners. Doesn't take a genius like me to connect those particular dots, though it does help.""

So he already knew about the prisoners, too.

Fuck."

"3215

""That doesn't make much sense to me,"" Raul tried. ""Guy like you? Don't you have more important things to do than worrying over a bunch of prisoners?""

Vanderberk's gaze turned away for a moment, looking all the way behind him at the cell block's exit before coming back to Raul. ""Must be a real tough situation for you all, huh? Believe it or not, I actually sympathize. Getting betrayed by the Vanguard like that? Hehe. First time? That's always the roughest, isn't it?""

Raul didn't know what he was listening to, but it wasn't quite as horrible as he'd been expecting. Yet. And that was somehow more worrying, in its own way.

""You wouldn't happen to be an authority figure among your kin, would you?""

Raul made no response.

Vanderberk gave a nod as if the silence was answer enough. "I suppose if you were, you'd be putting up more of a fight already." He snapped his fingers again. "Maybe this is for the best. Do you think you could pass along a message for me?"

Oh god. Still, Raul was unsure and chose to say nothing.

"I'll take that as a yes. Tell whoever's in charge that I'd like to negotiate. That I'm open to a ceasefire. And maybe even the release of your prisoners, if you play your cards right. No fighting necessary. You go ahead and tell them that."

Raul couldn't believe what he was hearing. This guy, Vanderberk of Abolish, was infamously known for his cruelty, malice, and just generally for being the biggest asshole on the face of Eleg. Arguably, even Morgunov himself was not as widely reviled as this man right here.

And yet, he wanted to talk about a ceasefire? When he already seemed to have so much of an advantage with all these prisoners at his disposal?

It made no sense.

But then, it was also not Raul's role to dwell on or decide these things.

'Um, Arumoro?'

'Yes?'

'I'm speaking with Vanderberk, right now, and he's saying that he wants to negotiate for a peaceful resolution.'

'I'm sorry, what?'

He had to reiterate. Even after the second time, the reaper still didn't seem like he quite understood, and Raul didn't blame him.

'...Okay, just, uh, give me a minute,' said Arumoro. 'I have to bring this to the others.'

'Take your time,' said Raul, sighing quietly through his nose."

"3216

At length, Vanderberk seemed to be growing impatient. ""Well? This silent treatment isn't my favorite thing in the world. Are you passing my message along or what?""

But even that, Raul did not wish to concede. In the quite likely event that this was all some kind of twisted bullshittery on Vanderberk's part, Raul didn't want to admit to anything. So instead, he decided to take a bit of initiative and ask, ""Why do you want to negotiate? That's quite atypical for Abolish.""

Vanderberk was sounding less jovial and more annoyed, however. ""Are you asking just to stall for time, or is that an actual question on behalf of your elders?""

""Maybe a little of both?""

The man returned a flat look.

Perhaps now was not the time for cheek. Raul couldn't entirely help himself, though. Not when he was already pretty much screwed here. Might as well try and have some fun with it, he thought. ""Look, dude, you're not exactly known for your sterling reputation. You really expect anyone to take you at your word when you say stuff like that?""

Vanderberk's gaze drifted over to a crowd of guardsmen who were beginning to gather, despite still looking quite confused. ""So you're refusing to negotiate, then?""

""I didn't say that,"" said Raul. ""But without some sort of logical explanation behind this sudden, uncharacteristic behavior from you, it'll be pretty difficult to negotiate in good faith, ya feel me?""

""Uncharacteristic?"" said Vanderberk. ""You don't know the first goddamn thing about me. All you know is what you've been told. You have no idea what's characteristic of me and what's not.""

""I s'pose there's truth to that, but I've heard some pretty horrible things about you. You tryin' to tell me they're not true?""

At that, Vanderberk paused and looked over Raul's invisible form again, perhaps searching for his eyes. ""Well. Who can say what's true, really? I mean, what even is truth, when you get down to it?""

Yeah, this guy was definitely full of shit.

Thankfully, Arumoro's silent instruction finally arrived. 'Ask him his terms.'

'There's no way we can trust anything this dude promises us.'

'We know. Just ask him. And try to be careful with your wording. You're speaking as the voice of all Rainlords, right now.'

Arumoro sure knew how to pile on the pressure. 'Okay...'

'If you're uncertain of anything, ask me first.'

'Right.' Somehow, Raul felt like he'd just been given the worst promotion in the world."

"3217 -- CCLXXIII.

Chapter Two Hudred Seventy-Three: 'When thy Domain holds true...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector hit the ground with a rolling thunk and then slid for a long while. He didn't have the presence of mind for much of anything. His thoughts were too clouded, too amorphous, like he was half-asleep and just on the verge of waking up.

Man, he was tired. A bed sure would've been nice, right about now. Yeah. A bed. Not whatever this was beneath him.

Whatever this was? Mm. Didn't feel like dirt. Not rock, either.

No, it felt metallic, actually. Hard and flat and instantly familiar. Extremely familiar, in fact.

Ugh.

He tried to find his hands and feet, and while he was reasonably sure that they were there, everything felt off. He reached out with the Scarf for some semblance of awareness, balance, or anything, really--but no. It told him nothing.

Which was beyond strange.

He couldn't breathe, either. His lungs were not pleased with him.

Panicking within his chest, they were struggling to make the rest of his body do the same. If he wasn't undead, he surely would've been freaking out already. It didn't take long for those same lungs to settle down, though.

As he suffocated to death, that was.

Hmm. His thoughts could settle on the peculiarity of that, at least.

At length, his palms found the ground and pressed flatly thereupon as he prepared to push himself up. Yeah. That was definitely metal under him. Moreover, it wasn't just any metal.

It was iron. Somehow, he could just tell. The feel of it. The presence of it. As if it belonged to him. But he didn't remember materializing it.

He sat up into a cross-legged position and looked around. He was not prepared for what he saw.

A vast, barren landscape lay before him in all directions, flat and shiny as far as the eye could see, beneath a pitch black sky, save for one blazingly bright source. So bright, in fact, that it had to be the sun. But how could the sun be up while the rest of the sky was so dark? What's more, the sun even appeared to be in the middle of setting, as well. How could it still be that bright when half or more of it was already below the horizon? He had to turn his back to it before his eyes could fully cease squinting.

Hector could see his skin cooking under its brutal rays, too. Good thing he was already dead and hadn't noticed that pain while he was suffocating. That was really going to sting later, though, no doubt.

He tried to focus, though it was difficult. What in the hell was going on, right now?"

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"3218

He recalled being eaten. Devoured whole by the monstrous form of Banda Toro.

The sudden recollection hit him like a ton of bricks, and he became frantic. He had to get back. Warrenhold was unprotected. Banda was going to rip through it and kill everyone. He had to go back. Wherever the fuck this was didn't matter, right now. He just had to return.

It took him a while to settle down again. And when he finally did, it was mainly because he just didn't know what the hell to do.

No amount of freaking out about it was going to help his situation, it seemed. He was stuck.

He needed to think. Reassess.

So he'd been eaten. But this didn't exactly look like the inside of a stomach, now did it? And why was there no air, either?

He stood up and looked across the landscape another time, inspecting it more carefully this time, searching for signs of something or someone or... anything at all. Anything for his eyes to latch onto.

But there really was nothing, he soon realized.

It was just flat ground out there, all the way to the horizon.

Well.

Flat iron.

The ground was iron.

Why was the ground iron? And why did it feel like materialized iron?  
Like his iron?

It was a supremely odd sensation. The familiarity was at once comforting and unsettling. There was SO much iron. Far more than his volume limit would ever allow him to materialize, surely. Even if he achieved emergence a dozen more times, he doubted he would ever be able to create this amount.

Did that mean he couldn't materialize any more of it in this place?  
Because he was already capped out?

No harm in trying, he figured. Wasn't like he had any other leads to go on. He raised a hand and tried to summon a cube into it.

And for the second time, he was not prepared for what he saw. Not at all.

A cube did indeed appear, but not by materializing in his hand. Instead, a cube broke itself out of the flat ground in front of him and hovered over at a leisurely pace. As soon as his eyes locked onto it, though, it stopped dead in midair--or mid-space, rather.

It just floated there, suspended above the ground. Waiting.

On him?

For a while, Hector just kept staring at it, too confused to do or think anything else."

"3219

The cube had removed itself from the ground. It hadn't materialized. It had already been there.

His brain needed time to process that. His materialized iron hadn't materialized.

What in the world did that mean? If he wasn't materializing, then what was he doing?

Wait, was this a dream? He did feel pretty numb, though that was probably because he was already dead.

And wait a second. He'd been horrifically wounded in that fight with Banda, hadn't he? Entire limbs missing, as he recalled. But he was looking at them now, and here they were, already having regenerated. When had that happened, exactly?

So many questions.

And before he got too much further into dwelling on them, he figured that he should probably try to contact Garovel again. He was fairly certain that he tried earlier when he was freaking out, but he decided to try again anyway, now that he was calmer.

'Garovel? You there?'

He waited. And kept waiting.

'Garovel?'

No response arrived.

That wasn't good. It wasn't entirely unprecedented for him, however. He'd bumbled his way into pocket dimensions before.

With surprising frequency, now that he was thinking about it.

There was the Shards, the Candle, and then whatever that weird dream state was where he'd been able to talk to Rasalased. Either way, he was pretty sure that he hadn't been able to talk to Garovel in any of those, either.

Though, maybe he just hadn't tried? He couldn't remember.

Whatever this place was, it was definitely different from those other ones. For one thing, he could actually see stuff. With his actual eyeballs. Which felt dry as hell and like they might have been slowly boiling out of his head, but for the moment, at least, they were still working. He was again thankful for his numbness.

Regardless, the rules here were clearly quite strange. Materialization was strange. So strange, in fact, that he felt like he couldn't even call it materialization, anymore.

This felt more like telekinesis, Hector thought. Which was a peculiar thing to think, perhaps, because he wasn't even sure that he understood how telekinesis even worked, really. He'd only glimpsed it in action because of the wrobels.

Hmm. If he had to articulate his thoughts more fully to himself, then telekinesis was simply the ability to make objects move with psychic force. Like levitating a book or turning its pages, as he'd seen Hanton do.

But as he kept thinking about it, Hector wondered if that was really what was going on here. It seemed more than a little weird that he would've suddenly developed psychic powers for no apparent reason."  
"3220

He wasn't just moving the iron around, either. He was breaking it away from the otherwise solid ground. Changing its shape. Its structure.

Could he still affect its temperature, too?

He gave the iron cube an emotional command, demanding it to become hot, and sure enough, it soon came alive with a fiery glow.

Wow.

Not only could he affect the temperature, he could do it in real time. He didn't have to pick a new chunk of iron to "materialize," first.

He continued messing around with the iron for a time, wanting to test various things.

This was just straight up manipulation, Hector decided after a while. Not iron materialization. Iron manipulation. He could move it all about as he pleased, change its shape or state of matter. He could even connect two separate chunks and have them blend seamlessly into one solid piece. That feat in particular was something that he'd only wished he could do with materialization.

He eventually started to wonder if there was anything he couldn't do to it here.

This was utterly ridiculous to him. The kind of power that he could wield in this place... it boggled his mind, quite frankly. So many options. So much potential. Overwhelmingly so.

In a weird way, perhaps the limitations of the real world were kind of helpful. The restriction allowed him to problem solve more easily. With this, it was like... he didn't even know where to begin. 'Paralyzed with choice,' was what they called this type of thing, wasn't it?

Crazy.

The thought also crossed his mind that this might be some type of super emergence, but he just couldn't convince himself of that. Emergence was only supposed to increase his volume limit and make difficult tasks easier. It wasn't supposed to add completely new features like this. Plus, he hadn't felt any kind of noticeable "response" from his iron like he usually did. And if this had been a "super" emergence, then surely the response should have been more pronounced than ever, no?

He stuck on those thoughts and questions for a while. Something in that line of reasoning was bothering him. Something that he felt like he was taking for granted.

The response. The emergent response.

He felt like he understood it, but... actually, that wasn't true at all, was it?

What really was "the response" that he felt during emergence, anyway? It came from his iron? Did he know that for sure? How? And if so, why? Why did it come from his iron?"

"3221

He ended up sitting down and mulling things over for a while. There were about a million things that he could concentrate on or worry about, right now, but he wanted to focus on only one or two at a time. Maybe if he could come to a better understanding of his iron, then he would also come to a better understanding of whatever the hell this place was. And how to get out of here, hopefully.

Yes. He was sure that the emergent response came from his iron. The more he thought back on those moments, the more certain he became. He remembered the feeling so vividly each time. Coursing through his whole body for a brilliant instant. A flash of realization amid an electric surge.

He'd always kind of assumed that, ultimately, the response came from within himself. That the emergent power had always been there and just needed to be brought forth. Or something along those lines.

But perhaps that was a wrong assumption. Or an oversimplification, at least. If this place was the true home of his iron, then maybe the response wasn't coming from within. Maybe it was coming from here.

From this world of iron.

Or maybe this world was within him? Now there was a confusing idea. Did this world of iron exist within his own mind? Or his soul? And if that was the case, then how had he ended up here? Trapped in his own head? What sense did that make?

Hmm. Well, if he was in a realm of his own making, then it would logically follow that he wasn't actually trapped here. He just had to figure out how to free himself.

Unless... this wasn't a world of his own making at all.

Perhaps, instead, this place had always existed, and materialization merely allowed him to tap into it. To borrow its strength.

That... was more believable to him, somehow. Moreso than being trapped in a pocket dimension of his own unconscious creation, at least.

He wanted to reach out to Rasalased, but when he opened his mouth, no words came out. Because there was no air, he remembered. Right. The sound of his voice had no medium through which to be carried.

It was weirdly easy to forget that.

He tried reaching out telepathically, instead. Still no luck, though.

Eh, maybe it was for the best. He had a feeling that Rasalased either wouldn't know much or would be his typically cryptic self. Though, in fairness, the Dry God did seem to be getting a bit better about that, recently."

"3222

He needed to gather his thoughts. What was his priority, right now?

Getting back to the real world? That did seem like the most important thing, but without having any idea of where to start working that problem, it did not strike him as a solvable one.

But hmm. How did he get here to begin with? By getting eaten? Did that even explain anything?

Well. Actually. Hmm.

Banda had obviously been able to eat way more than his own body weight. And as he recalled, Bloodeye was the same way. The guy had literally pulled missiles out of his stomach.

So... was this how they were doing it? Was this place their own, personal storage dimension or something?

That would explain things, but for one snag.

There was nothing here but iron. No missiles or acid or anything else.

Then, maybe... maybe instead, this was just one of many elemental worlds. And all the things they ate were broken down to said elements for the purpose of storage? Which would mean... that when they pulled things out of their stomach, those things were being reassembled from their base elements?

Huh. If that was the case, then maybe Banda could still yack him back up. In fact, that last part was almost certain to be true, Hector felt. He could've been mistaken about everything else, but Banda had to be able to retrieve him, just like those missiles from Bloodeye.

Problem was, Banda had control. If and when Hector ever returned, it would be at Banda's whim.

...Right?

Hmm. Could it be possible to force Banda to return him?

Looking around at the empty landscape one more time, he supposed there was no harm in trying. He just wished he could think up a better plan of action than trying to get himself puked back into reality.

So he set to work.

It was time to really test the limits of power in this place. If the goal was to make Banda barf, then the only thing to do was to start creating havoc here. He had no real reason to believe that Banda would actually be impacted by anything he did in this world of iron, but at this point, it felt like his only hope.

Hector brought all of his concentration to bear, wanting everything this world could give him. He aimed to lift the entire horizon. If it truly was iron all the way out there, then he intended to see it move.

And it did."

"3223

An earthquake arrived. An ironquake. And he felt everything shift, more violently than expected, as if the iron was eager to listen.

A mountain shot up in the distance, cracking the world apart and sending visible chunks of iron spiraling into the black sky like a



volcanic eruption.

At the sight of all that, he fell on his ass and lost his concentration. He hadn't expected it to be so easy, and even the ground beneath him was still trembling for a long while after being allowed to set itself back down.

Hector was in awe.

Was his power really unlimited in this place? It sure felt like it.

He'd been so determined to create chaos only a moment ago, but now, as he lay there, feeling the lingering vibrations in the ground, he found himself questioning many things about his ability again.

If he wasn't more careful, he might accidentally kill himself.

Wait a minute.

...There was no way that would send him back to reality, right?

Agh. It might. But could he risk it? If it didn't work, then he'd really be fucked.

Yeah. That had to be reserved for his last resort, once he was all out of other ideas. For the moment, at least, he still had plenty more he wanted to try.

The main thing that was coming to his mind now was a result of his gaze falling upon his left hand.

His melting left hand.

That didn't seem good. All in all, he still felt perfectly fine and numb. But he wondered for how much longer. Would he eventually just dissolve into nothingness if he stayed here? He rubbed his chin and found it just as bad, able to feel his bare chin bone there. Kind of. The numbness made him slightly unsure, but it definitely didn't feel right.

He erected a quick iron barricade for protection against the still-setting sun's punishing rays. He doubted it would do very much, but it was better than nothing, he supposed.

There was another reason he'd looked at his left hand, though. A reason related to his ability.

With his left hand, he could materialize Haqq's shield, the Amir-9.

Up to now, he'd only been thinking about his iron, but he was suddenly very curious. How did the shield work in this place? Could he even summon it, still?

He tested it at once."

"3224

Something did indeed materialize. However, it was not a shield.

Instead, a blob appeared, dark and metallic in its sheen. It glooped onto the ground and began to slowly spread out like spilled pudding.

Very thick, black pudding.

...Huh.

That didn't seem right.

For a while, he just kind of stared at it, scratching his head and trying to understand what was happening. He crouched down for a closer look.

He was momentarily fearful that this black goop was not even his own material, that it was something else. It reminded him of not just the giant worms in the Undercrust but also those weird things he'd seen in his vision within the Candle. And maybe the Beast of Lorent, too.

But no. This wasn't any of those things, thankfully. The metallic shimmer was a very noticeable difference, for one thing.

And for another, he could just tell. He could sense it. As with his iron, it felt like it belonged to him. It had a familiarity to it.

Something was obviously wrong, though, if it was showing up like this. Why hadn't it materialized into its normal form?

In fact, this was doubly strange because he'd never even been able to make the metal of the Amir-9 into any other shape. But now he did it unintentionally?

Certainly, this place must have been the cause. How weird.

After a moment of deliberation, Hector wondered if perhaps his concentration was the issue. When it came to the Amir-9, he never had to think about it. At this point, the thing was so easy and immutable in his mind that it almost made itself, sometimes. Perhaps he'd just gotten it into his head that, because it couldn't even be changed, there was nothing even to think about.

In a way, he supposed the shield had come to feel more like an extension of his own body than an actual skill within materialization.

Hmm.

As he was about to annihilate the flattening blob and try again, however, he noticed something else.

The iron ground beneath the blob looked a little different. Maybe it was weird lighting or his own dissolving eyeballs, but it looked different.

Instead of annihilating the blob, he tried instead to move it around like he could with the iron here.

The blob just sloshed a little to the left and right, sluggish and not quite as he had imagined it to in his mind. But it had moved, at least.

Strange.

He tried again, more forceful this time, trying to push it far away from himself, to send it flying, even.

It hardly budged."  
"3225

Disappointed, Hector decided to try other things. Temperature manipulation was the first on his list.

That proved flatly impossible. With the iron, he could make it glow white hot without even remaking it. But this goop just stayed pitch black. He supposed that made sense, though. He'd had a lot more trouble learning temperature manipulation back in the real world than he had with velocity states.

What about something easier, then?

Simple shapes.

He wanted it to become a box. He concentrated hard, envisioning the exact form in his mind.

And it took a little while, but it did it. The goop gathered itself up and turned itself into a box with sharp, pristine edges. The sheen was even more pronounced now with its perfectly flat sides.

Heh. Cool. Hector couldn't help feeling pleased with himself.

Then he noticed the ground again. The goop had compacted itself so much that the ground that had previously been beneath it was now much more visible.

And it was changed. Darker like the goop. At first, he'd thought it was just a shadow, but no, upon a more thorough inspection, the iron itself had indeed gotten darker.

Had the Amir-9's goop... infected it? Transformed it?

Hector wasn't sure what to think.

Could this be... a good thing?

He tried to move the darker iron and found it similarly difficult.

Equally difficult, in fact.

Just as with the goop, he could manipulate its shape, but not without effort. He made this one a pyramid.

Then his vision flickered.

Uh-oh.

His eyes still didn't hurt at all, but they were probably not going to last much longer. And without any idea of how to get out of here or to help them, he wanted to start panicking.

But he didn't.

This place, it had a weirdly comforting presence to it. All this iron, all his iron--it felt too warm and welcoming. And besides, he'd already panicked earlier. It hadn't achieved anything before, and it wouldn't do so now.

So instead, he just closed his eyes, as if to ready himself for the darkness. Maybe that would protect them. Maybe it wouldn't. Either way was fine.

He was calm.

He was concentrating.

He was reaching out, trying to listen to all of his senses. No air for sound. No tactile feeling for touch. No eyes for vision.

And yet he was not without faculty. He could still sense the iron all around him. And the black stuff, too, actually. It was similar, yet distinct."

"3226

It was almost like the world itself was speaking to him. Trying to tell him all about itself.

And he wanted to listen. Despite everything else going through his head, all the concerns about what was happening back in the real world or how he was ever going to get out of this place, his foremost thought right now was to listen.

If the iron wanted to talk, then he needed to let it.

It was just so difficult, though. Like a whisper that he couldn't quite make out or a picture that he couldn't quite comprehend, Hector kept struggling there in his mind.

Man, he sure wished he could breathe. Controlling his breath was one of the best ways of controlling his focus, so without it, he felt like a key ingredient was missing.

Nothing for it, though. He had to push through. Learn something new, perhaps. A previously untried method of training. Of meditation.

Yes. That was the correct mindset. This wasn't a problem. It was an opportunity. For growth.

And besides, he'd experienced similar things before. Disembodied forms where breathing wasn't a factor, either. The only thing that made this different was that he wasn't technically disembodied, this time.

In fact, that may have been the difficulty here. The bodily senses were a distraction, in their own way. Meditating in Rasalased's pocket dimension had actually been quite easy, compared to this.

Agh, he was getting distracted.

A clear mind would help him listen. Meditation wasn't always about having a clear mind, but in this instance, it most certainly was.

He felt himself sit down. A smooth and easy motion. Right next to the cube and pyramid. They were both there. He could feel their presence.

Waiting for attention from him.

But they were formless. They didn't really have minds of their own, desires of their own. He could tell that much for certain, now. It was more like... they were a detached part of himself.

He was beginning to understand. They didn't need commands. They just were. If he tried to treat them like his normal iron, it wouldn't work very well. Ever. It would be a slow, difficult process, not unlike how his own body required consistent effort and exercise in order to slowly and difficultly change.

And they needed to be close to him. He could tell that, too. It was imprinted into their very nature. The farther away they were, the weaker his connection to them would become."

"3227

Ah... this was a matter of Domain, wasn't it? It had to be.

He'd been struggling for what felt like ages trying to figure out what the power of Domain truly entailed. He'd already come to the conclusion that aura was a major factor in it, if not THE factor, but considering everything he'd learned about aura from Pauline Gaolanet, it seemed to him that there had to be more to it. She told him that everyone had an aura, so if Domain was supposed to be some kind of super special blessing from Malast, then it stood to reason that aura wasn't the only thing involved. Otherwise, Malast would've just called it aura.

Right?

Well, maybe not. Malast had been quite the cryptic asshole, not entirely unlike Rasalased in that regard, though he might've differed greatly in execution.

Whatever the case, it struck Hector as logical now that Domain might also have to do with proximity. With the area immediately around him. Perhaps that, too, was just another component or incarnation of aura, but he felt it would make sense if they were independent of one another, too.

Maybe he was splitting hairs here.

What mattered was this metal. He felt deeply within himself that he needed to give it a distinguishing name, now.

Zeff had mentioned this to him once or twice. The naming of techniques helped to codify them in one's mind, making them even easier to perform.

Could this darker metal be considered a technique? Debatable. Would giving it a name help, anyway? Probably, Hector felt.

Calling it ""darksteel"" was certainly a temptation. It would've been both fitting and pretty cool, he thought.

But it would also be confusing, too. He was Darksteel. Increasingly, that was what people were calling him. Whether it was because Darksteel Soldier was too much of a mouthful or because Darksteel just sounded a bit cooler, that was the name that appeared to be sticking to him.

So calling himself Darksteel and the metal darksteel wouldn't be a good idea.

Plus, it wasn't steel. Or at least, not only steel. It was, as he recalled, a complex blend of steel, titanium, and tungsten carbide.

Though, it may not have even been those things, anymore. It had appeared here as goop, after all. And it felt so similar to his normal iron, now. He couldn't be sure that this place hadn't altered it dramatically.

So rather than naming the material, maybe it would indeed be better to name the techniques that he created with it.

The armor that he created with it.

For that was what this stuff was most suited to, Hector felt."  
"3228

Agh, he never felt very good at naming things. He supposed it didn't matter too much, though. This was just for himself, for his own ease of use when materializing. It wasn't like with the Candle, where picking a bad name might have negative consequences later.

...Or was it like that?

Oh fuck, now he was starting to worry. This place wasn't normal. This black metal wasn't normal. While he might've had a better sense of its nature, thanks to whatever the hell he was doing with his meditation right now, he still couldn't be entirely sure that something weird like that was out of the question.

Maybe he was overthinking. In fact, that was probably the case. He just needed to pick something that was fitting. And easy to remember. And short. It wouldn't do if he had to rattle off some long ass name in the middle of a fight.

Something like... Chaos? That was nice and short. Maybe not too fitting, though. The reason he'd thought of it was because the black stuff kinda seemed like it might be born from Chaos, like the Beast of Lorent supposedly had. So in that sense, it might've been fitting, but now that he was evaluating the name more... it seemed inappropriate for something that was supposed to protect him.

Hmm.

Well, maybe he could nail down the name later. There was still more to learn about the material itself, he felt. More to its nature.

It needed to be close to him. And it was strong. Difficult to move. Difficult to be moved. Stubborn, even.

Yeah. That was the word for it. Stubborn. It didn't want to give in to anyone or anything, even him. The only reason it made an exception for him at all was because...

Because it was him. Part of him.



Right.

He decided to make it move. To reshape both the pyramid and the cube.

He wanted to see if they could become goop again and ""infect"" more of the iron beneath them. It seemed as though, once they'd become solid, the infection had stopped spreading.

Maybe infection was the wrong term for it, though. That made it sound like a bad thing, and he was fairly sure that it wasn't. If it was increasing his volume limit with the Amir-9 metal like he hoped it was, then it would, in fact, be quite a good thing."

"3229

Even now, however, the metal was reluctant to listen to him. It melted back down, but only very slowly. Painfully slowly.

It was as if it had gotten too comfortable with its solid form and resented being made gooey again.

How weird. He had a sneaking suspicion that in the real world, it wouldn't listen to him at all. Maybe it was only malleable in this place.

Hmm. If that was the case, then he needed to make his time here count.

Which was a strange thing to think, he knew. He still had no real plan for escaping, other than causing a big ruckus.

But that was beside the point. He focused.

If he wanted it to become armor, then he needed to reshape it.

To reforge it.

Because that was what this process was starting to feel like. Difficult and slow, requiring full concentration. Thankfully, he could sense the full shape and volume of the goo in his mind now, giving him a clear, three-dimensional picture of it to work with. But actually making it do what he wanted was still so hard.

After a while, he managed to find a kind of rhythm. A grinding rhythm,

but a rhythm, nonetheless.

He had to strain his mind, at max intensity, in short and sharp bursts. Not unlike hitting it with a hammer. With each pass, the goop barely budged at all, but that was enough. Because each time, it stayed. It didn't settle back into itself.

It seemed to be growing even more difficult over time, though. More rigid and unwilling to bend. Hector couldn't tell if that was because the metal itself was becoming more resistant to him or if he was just getting tired.

Ugh. This wasn't a normal exhaustion, either. He'd felt it before, many times. This was an almost purely mental exhaustion. His numb body still felt fine, even though it most certainly wasn't.

But he couldn't stop. Not yet. If he allowed himself to fall asleep in this realm, he had no idea if he would be able to wake up again. There was a better-than-fair chance that his body would just dissolve into nothingness, he felt.

And now he was being reminded of all the shit he'd been through before arriving here, too. That fight with Banda hadn't exactly been a relaxing experience, either.

He stayed determined. He had to finish this armor, no matter how difficult it became. He knew beyond doubt that he would have great need of it if he ever managed to get out of here."

"3230

As he worked, he lost track of time. His focus was exclusively on the task. Helmet. Gorget. Pauldrons. Breastplate. Each piece needed refinement upon refinement. Rerebraces. Couters. Gauntlets. Faulds. Tasset. It was a good thing he had already spent so much time working on his normal iron armor and all its variants. Culet. Cuisses. Poleyns. Greaves. Lames. He had a perfect image of every piece in his mind.

It was just a matter of passing over each one, again and again and again. Until they were all done.

And it needed to be perfect, Hector felt. He didn't know if he would get

the opportunity to do this again. If he made a mistake now, it might just last forever.

No pressure, though, right?

At length, he finally began to feel like it was almost done. The shapes were all correct, at least. So with his eyes still closed, he set about trying to link them all together. And the best way to do that was put them on.

But after all that work, he was a bit worried that annihilating and rematerializing them onto his body would somehow go awry. What if they resisted even being dematerialized. Or what if they wouldn't rematerialize correctly?

Shit. No helping it, though. The entire goal was to be able to materialize the armor as needed. If that didn't work, then it was better to know now, he supposed.

He would've taken a nervous breath if he could.

He annihilated the gorget. That was the best place to start, he felt. Then he tried to rematerialize it around his neck.

It appeared. He felt it there. Exactly as intended.

Oh, thank fuck. That was one worry down.

He annihilated all the rest and began donning them, making to test all the links. And it was a good thing he did, because they needed fixing. At this point, his iron had become quite comfortable to wear and even quite easy to move in, and he intended for the same to be true with this stuff.

Every link, every connector, every interlocking piece was refined further. Until they were all perfect. They had to be. If they weren't, then both mobility and resilience would be compromised. Maybe in only minor ways, but if this suit was going to be the difference between life and death, then Hector didn't think anything about it right now could be considered minor."

"3231

So he spent even more time touching it up. And when he was finally

satisfied with all of his practical concerns, he was left to consider his aesthetic ones. Should he add some embossed flourishes? Some tracing lines around the edges, maybe? A filigree ornamentation for the breastplate?

None of that felt particularly important, and given how goddamn stubborn the material had now become, even a simple flourish would likely take several extra passes in order to get right.

Ultimately, he decided against it. If he wanted to add fancy shit, he could try some other time. And if he couldn't work with it anymore once he got back to the real world, then so be it. He could always just add an extra layer of iron on top for that kind of thing.

So he finally allowed himself to relax. That was certainly tiring.

But he was wearing a full suit of armor now, and it sure was nice. It definitely wasn't vacuum sealed or anything like that, but when he sank to the ground and lay down on his back, Hector just started to feel... better.

Thus far, this place had felt like it was slowly sapping his strength, probably due to the combination of no oxygen and a deteriorating physical body. But now, in this armor, things were different. It would've been a stretch to say that he was recovering, but he at least felt stable. Comfortable.

Protected.

Then again, maybe that was just the afterglow of finishing a difficult project. The feeling of accomplishment sure was pleasant. He wanted to bask in it for a while longer.

He took a long, deep breath as he tried to regather his thoughts. He needed to get back to--

Wait a minute, what?

His eyes opened, but there was nothing to see. Only blackness. He took another breath, now even more confused.

The Scarf of Armordiin. He'd been wearing it the whole time he'd been here, but he'd nearly forgotten about it, since it wasn't giving him any information.

Until now.

He could sense it. A pocket of air enveloped him, a bubble no bigger than a closet. When had that happened? His ears popped, too, intensely though not painfully.

This wasn't the work of his armor, right? That would make no sense. And the bubble went beyond the suit, so--

'Pardon me,' arrived an unfamiliar voice. 'This atmosphere is helpful to you, no? If not, I can take it back.'

"3232 -- CCLXXIV.

## Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Four: 'O, twinkling Visitor...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

With breath in his lungs and air all around him for his voice to carry, Hector spoke his first question. ""Who are you?""

'A reasonable thing to ask, but perhaps we should both avoid answering that.'

What the--? Impulsively, Hector wanted to ask why, but then he took a moment to mull it over. This voice didn't wish to identify itself? Why might that be? One reason came immediately to mind.

Perhaps the voice belonged to someone with a lot of enemies, and they feared that Hector might unknowingly be one. So they were trying to be cautious in their approach.

Maybe.

He could still press a little more before just assuming that, he supposed. ""Why? It's impolite not to introduce yourself, you know.""

'Rudeness is the least of your concerns, I should think. Unless I am mistaken and you came to be in this place intentionally?'

""Well, let's just say I'm wary of strangers no matter where I go."" It didn't help that he still couldn't see. As far as the Scarf was telling him, there were no physical bodies other than himself within this air bubble, so where exactly was this voice coming from? It felt very familiar to a reaper's voice in the way that it spoke directly into his mind, but it

wasn't quite the same, either.

It felt more like a Sparrow's telepathic voice, though he wasn't sure.

'Fair. Then can we at least agree that neither of us here is looking for a fight?'

""I never do look for fights,"" said Hector, ""but they always seem to look for me.""

'Hah. A problem I know well. Tell me, is this your first time in a Lower Realm?'

Is that what these things were called? Hmm. Hector didn't see any benefit in answering his question, though.

Wait, his? Yeah. The voice seemed masculine, somehow.

At his persistent silence, the voice continued on, 'Well, if it IS your first time, then allow me to proffer advice. As a general rule, anyone you meet in these places is not to be trifled with. I do not know your heart, but if it is that of a prankster or wicked man, then you should first be aware that any enemy you decide to make here will be no minor adversary.'

Huh. Sounded like Hector's guess had been right on the money.

""Thanks for the warning.""

"3232 -- CCLXXIV.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Four: 'O, twinkling Visitor...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

With breath in his lungs and air all around him for his voice to carry, Hector spoke his first question. ""Who are you?""

'A reasonable thing to ask, but perhaps we should both avoid answering that.'

What the--? Impulsively, Hector wanted to ask why, but then he took a moment to mull it over. This voice didn't wish to identify itself? Why might that be? One reason came immediately to mind.

Perhaps the voice belonged to someone with a lot of enemies, and they feared that Hector might unknowingly be one. So they were trying to be cautious in their approach.

Maybe.

He could still press a little more before just assuming that, he supposed. ""Why? It's impolite not to introduce yourself, you know.""

'Rudeness is the least of your concerns, I should think. Unless I am mistaken and you came to be in this place intentionally?'

""Well, let's just say I'm wary of strangers no matter where I go."" It didn't help that he still couldn't see. As far as the Scarf was telling him, there were no physical bodies other than himself within this air bubble, so where exactly was this voice coming from? It felt very familiar to a reaper's voice in the way that it spoke directly into his mind, but it wasn't quite the same, either.

It felt more like a Sparrow's telepathic voice, though he wasn't sure.

'Fair. Then can we at least agree that neither of us here is looking for a fight?'

""I never do look for fights,"" said Hector, ""but they always seem to look for me.""

'Hah. A problem I know well. Tell me, is this your first time in a Lower Realm?'

Is that what these things were called? Hmm. Hector didn't see any benefit in answering his question, though.

Wait, his? Yeah. The voice seemed masculine, somehow.

At his persistent silence, the voice continued on, 'Well, if it IS your first time, then allow me to proffer advice. As a general rule, anyone you meet in these places is not to be trifled with. I do not know your heart, but if it is that of a prankster or wicked man, then you should first be aware that any enemy you decide to make here will be no minor adversary.'

Huh. Sounded like Hector's guess had been right on the money.

""Thanks for the warning.""

"3233

'You are welcome. But you did not answer my first question. This atmosphere is helpful to you, no?'

What a strange thing to ask. ""Why are you so curious about that? Are you not human?""

'Yes, I'm human, but I wasn't sure that YOU were. And I didn't want to assume. Some traversers of these realms actually quite dislike atmosphere. And if that were the case, I wanted you to know that it was not an act of hostility on my part but an attempt to provide aid.'

What the hell? He was gaining new questions to ask by the second. ""How did you make this atmosphere, by the way?""

'Oh, I have my tricks. I'm afraid that's all I'm comfortable saying on that particular subject.'

Uh-huh. ""Okay, then who's the last person or... entity that you've met here?""

'You're being quite pushy, now. I have questions of my own that I would have you answer, first.'

Maybe that was a fair point. Hector felt like he should relax a little. ""Sorry. I wasn't trying to be mean. I'm just... kinda confused about what's happening, right now.""

'So it really IS your first time here, then.'

He supposed he could admit that much, at least. ""Yeah."" He paused, rethinking. ""Well, actually. Maybe not. But probably.""

'Now I am the confused one.'

""I guess what I'm saying is... I've had similar experiences to this before. But not the same, I think.""

'Interesting. Might I ask how you came to find yourself here?'

Hector had to think about that for a moment. The answer that came to mind was going to sound stupid, but. Eh. Whatever. ""...I got eaten by a dinosaur.""

'P-pardon me?'



""Well, technically, I guess it was only half-dinosaur.""

'That doesn't make your explanation any more sensible to me.'

Hector bobbed his head. ""I'm just telling you what happened. If I had a more sensible explanation, I would've given it.""

'Are dinosaurs... or half-dinosaurs common where you come from?'

""Not at all,"" said Hector. ""They're supposed to be extinct.""

'Ah. A shame. I would've liked to learn of a new realm in which dinosaurs still existed.'

""Well, the one I met was a real asshole. But like I said, he was only half-dinosaur.""

'And so, after being eaten by this creature, you found yourself here?'

""That's right.""

'...Now that I am thinking about it, I find that quite believable. And very worrying.'

""Oh? You know something about the dinosaur men?""

'Perhaps. I've not heard them described with such... curt terminology before, nor have I encountered them myself yet, but yes, I think I might know something of them.'

"3234

""Anything you could tell me about them would be appreciated,"" said Hector. ""I have a feeling that I'll be encountering them again, relatively soon."" Assuming he ever made it out of this place, that was. But he could ask about that next, he figured.

The voice took a moment to answer him, perhaps debating how much he wanted to say. 'I have heard talk of a recent... breakthrough among a certain group of transfigurers. Supposedly, they have been able to achieve some truly monstrous forms, akin to, as you mentioned, dinosaurs.'

He'd heard talk, huh? Hector doubted that the guy would tell him where from, but decided to ask, anyway. ""Where'd you hear that?""

'I'm afraid that might be revealing too much about myself.'

Well, at least he was straightforward about his refusal to answer. ""Do you know if they have any weaknesses?""

'I do not. If I did, you can be assured that I would tell you.'

Oh? ""So you're not on their side, then?""

And the voice paused again, probably thinking. '...No, I am not. Nor would it seem are you. We might have more in common than we realized.'

""Maybe so."" Hector was still wary of growing too trustful, though. And before he started asking riskier questions, he wanted to get some fundamental stuff out of the way. ""But first, can you tell me what this place actually is? You called it a Lower Realm?""

'Yes. Or a Foundational World, as some call it. A place where only a single element resides. A building block of the world of the living. The world that, I suspect, you and I both come from.'

Hmm. ""Does that mean there are Higher Realms, too?""

'I believe so, though I have yet to visit any of them personally. And I pray I never do, as should you.'

""Why?""

'Hyper time dilation,' said the voice. 'In the Lower Realms, time passes more slowly. MUCH more slowly. This factor alone can be of great benefit, though as I expect you've already realized, merely existing in these places puts a great strain on you. I would advise you to leave as soon as you are able.'

""Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that next, but go on. Are you about to tell me that the Higher Realms are the opposite?""

'Indeed. Time passes far more quickly. So if you are ever unlucky enough to find yourself there, it may well be the end of everything you currently know and love by the time you return. Hence why I have never had a strong desire to visit, though I admit they do intrigue me greatly.'

Holy shit."

"3235

'I speak, by the way, in terms relative to the normal world. If you were to visit a Higher Realm, you would not suddenly age fifty years in a day. I mean to say that after having spent a day in a Higher Realm, many months or even years might pass by the time you return home.'

""How do you know that if you've never visited one yourself?"" said Hector.

'Because I've known some who have. And also, as I said before, I have my tricks.'

Right. Sounded like this guy wasn't going to give him any more details, but it was at least nice to know that he wasn't losing tons of time while stuck in this place. He supposed in the back of his mind, he'd had a feeling that was the case. His first encounter with Rasalased had worked the same way, so it made sense.

'Now allow me to ask another question of you.'

""It's only fair, I guess. Go ahead. But since you're being a little cagey, then I reserve the right to be the same way.""

'Fair, indeed. I want to know if you have met a man with a big scar over his right eye.'

Hector had to think about that. He'd met a lot of different people, especially recently. Ravi Zaman came to mind, though he didn't quite fit the description. ""I've only met a man with a scar on the right side of his face. It's not over the eye.""

'I see.'

""Who is he? What's his name?"" Hector fully expected for these questions not to get answered, but the voice surprised him.

'Some call him the Godslayer.'

""Wow,"" said Hector. ""Now that's a nickname. I've never heard it before, though. Sorry.""

'That's alright. It was a shot in the dark. I would've been shocked if you knew him.'

""This Godslayer guy is an important friend of yours, I take it?""

'Yes.'

""With a name like that, he sounds pretty strong.""

'Quite.'

Hmm. Hector still had other questions he wanted to ask, but his curiosity about the current topic had been piqued. ""Is this guy lost or something?""

'That is debatable.'

Seemed like the voice was being stingy with the details again. Hector decided to push a bit more. ""How would it be debatable? Either he's lost or he's not.""

'It doesn't matter. Allow me to ask a different question.'

""Okay...?""

'Are you a member of Abolish?'

"3236

Hector paused. Truthfully, he'd been about to ask the same thing. Either that, or the Vanguard. He wasn't sure which one he would've asked after first. ""...No, I'm not. Are you?""

'No. But are you being truthful? It is okay if you are a member. It will not prompt me to attack you, if that is what you are thinking. I promise.'

""Yes, I'm being truthful. Are you?""

'Heh. Yes. In fact, I am quite the opposite of Abolish.'

Hector had a feeling. ""So you're with the Vanguard, then?""

'I am. Is that a problem for you?'

That was a loaded question with many ways of being answered.

Hector decided to keep things simple, though. Much like this guy here, he wasn't trying to make enemies for no reason. ""Not at all. Do you know Harper Norez?""

'As a matter of fact, I do. Charming fellow. With a good heart.'

""I can only agree. I consider him a friend.""

'That is heartening to hear. Might you be willing to tell me your name, now?'

Agh. That was a tough one. All things considered, it would probably be fine to say that much. It was only his name. But still, Hector was hesitant. He knew only too well that the Vanguard was not wholly good and trustworthy.

He decided to risk it. ""I'll tell you my name first, if you promise to tell me yours after.""

'A fair exchange. Very well.'

Hector didn't mind going first, because this way, if the guy reneged on his promise, then he would still learn something about the man's character. Namely, that he couldn't be trusted to keep his word. And that would be a much more valuable piece of information to have. ""My name is Hector.""

'Mine is Xander. Nice to meet you.'

""Same."" The gears in Hector's brain started turning as soon as he heard that. Xander? Xander... A Vanguardian named Xander.

It was familiar, though he wasn't sure where he'd heard it from. He recalled Garovel telling him about some of the Vanguard higher-ups. The most famous among them. Maybe it had been then. Because now he was recalling.

""...You're the Magician of Light,"" said Hector. ""The keeper of the Golden Hour.""

The Golden Hour was a Fusion Forge, one of the most coveted objects on the planet, just like Cocora's Candle. On second thought, maybe it was Abbas who'd told him about the Magician.

Or... maybe this was knowledge that the Candle itself had imparted to him. Somehow, his uncertainty made Hector feel like that might

actually be the most likely explanation. Which was a little worrying, in its own way."

"3237

'Oh, come now. You don't know that for sure. Maybe I'm a different Xander. It's a common enough name, I should think.'

""That was one of the least convincing things I've ever heard,"" said Hector.

Xander gave a mild laugh. 'Yes, well, I suppose I have never been known for my ability to persuade or deceive. Hence why I prefer to either be quite direct or simply say nothing at all.'

Hector could certainly respect that mentality.

'You are not a Vanguardian yourself, are you?' said Xander.

""No.""

'And yet you recently fought one of Abolish's deadliest warriors.'

""Banda Toro."" Hector felt like he could be a bit more forthcoming, now. ""You know of him? He's one of Bloodeye's men.""

'Ah, indeed. Then this is confirmation of the rumors I have been hearing. Lozaro has made a significant breakthrough in his research. That is most unwelcome news.'

Hector had to pause at that bit of intel. ""Lozaro? I've heard that name before, too.""

'Oh? That is surprising. He's typically quite the stealthy operator. I presume you did not hear that name in the most pleasant of contexts, no?'

""Definitely not. I mean, uh... I guess I could be mistaken, but... I'm pretty sure he brought a... monstrosity into the world that terrorized Lorent and devoured dozens of innocent people.""

'Yes, that sounds like him, alright. Never one to let the risk of enormous collateral damage or devastation to the general populace get in the way of his sick curiosity.'

A part of Hector expected Xander to glean more from what he'd just referenced. The Beast of Lorent had been an infamous enough problem that it wouldn't be surprising if some of the top Vanguardians had heard of it.

If he knew anything, however, he was deciding to keep it to himself, for now. 'How, exactly, did you hear the name Lozaro? That man has been a menace upon the world for more years than I care to remember, but very few have ever managed to learn of him.'

""Ah... that's a long story. And I'm not sure how to explain it, quite frankly.""

'That is fine, but please, I would be grateful for any clues you could share with me regarding Lozaro's current whereabouts.'

The apparent earnestness of the man's request caught Hector a little off guard. ""Are you hunting him down yourself?""

'I would leave this very moment, if I knew where to go.'

"3238

Wow. Hector scratched his head absently, having forgotten about the armor in the way. ""Uh... I'd tell you more if I could. All I heard was a name, and it was in reference to something that took place, I think, a century ago. So... not exactly current.""

'I see. That is unfortunate but not terribly surprising. And this was in Lorent, you said?'

""...That's right."" Egh. Had he just made a huge mistake in sharing that detail?

'Could you direct me toward where you heard it, exactly? Or show me, perhaps?'

Oh shit. ""Well, it was... um..."" Agh, how to word this? ""Okay, I said it was a long story, right? But I guess if we skip to the end, then, uh... I heard the name from the mouth of a... weird, inhuman, monster-thing.""

Xander took a pause at that. 'Ah... the same aforementioned

monstrosity?'

""Yeah...""

'It could speak, huh?'

""Yeah. Though, half or more of the things it said didn't make much sense.""

'I can imagine. Was there anything else that it said regarding Lozaro, specifically?'

He had to think back. ""I don't think so. Just that Lozaro summoned it into the world."" There were also the horrific experiments that he'd borne personal witness to in that vision he'd seen with Pauline, but Hector wasn't sure if that whole mess was worth going into, right now. Plus, he didn't even know how to begin explaining that shit.

'Unfortunate. And this creature is now dead, I assume?' said Xander.

""Yeah.""

'You slew it yourself?'

""I... did, yeah.""

'That sounds like quite the heroic effort.'

Hector didn't know what to say to that.

'In any case, thank you for the information,' said Xander. 'If you ever happen upon more regarding Lozaro, I would be most keen to learn it from you as soon as possible.'

Whoa. ""Uh. How would I get in contact with you again?""

There arrived another pause. 'There are various ways. Before we get into that, however, perhaps we should discuss getting you back into the real world, hmm? Or do you already know your way back?'

""I wouldn't say no to your help.""

'An interestingly vague answer.'

""Heh, you would know.""

'Aha, yes, I would. I suppose you have options, then. The easiest



method, as far as I am able to tell, is to bring you straight to me. But frankly, I hardly know you, and that would be an enormous extension of trust on my part, which I'm not altogether comfortable with.'

""Uh, okay...""

"3239

'Another method, though more tedious and difficult, would be for you to locate a point of geographic resonance within your current realm and open a portal yourself. Do you know how to do that?'

Say what? ""Uh... no, I don't. But I have heard that term before. A point of geographic resonance?""

'That's right.' But Xander did not elaborate. Perhaps he was trying not to share too much sensitive information again.

Whatever the case, it was not very helpful.

Hector thought of an important question, though. ""Would that allow me to get back to my home quickly? Or would it just poop me out at some other random point of geographic resonance in the normal world?""

'It would not be random. Well. Maybe a little. Or a lot, depending on how good your control is, I suppose.'

His control of what, exactly? Aura? It kinda felt like Xander was dancing around that word now, and Hector didn't know if he should say it first. ""I'd rather not risk that, if possible. I need to get back home and protect it from Bloodeye's men.""

'Are you sure that rushing back into the fight is wise?'

""Maybe not, but I can't just back down now. There are a lot of civilians there.""

'You said that Banda Toro was the one who ate you, yes? What's to stop him from simply doing it again?'

Hector had to bob his head a little. ""Good question. Hopefully, I nail down an answer before it comes to that."" He had a rather strong feeling that this new armor would help, but he didn't see much point in bringing that up now.

'I admire your resolve, at least.'

""I was thinking that, y'know, since Banda was my ticket here, then he might also be my ticket back?"" It wasn't exactly a question, but he asked it like one.

'Ticket back, you say? In what manner?'

""I mean, er... you might think this sounds stupid, but I was wondering if I could, like... make Banda puke me back out. Since he ate me, right?""

Xander fell silent.

Hector got the hint. ""...You do think that sounds stupid, don't you?""

'Stupidity and unconventional thinking are often mistaken for one another. Without knowing more about how the abilities of these so-called ""dinosaur men"" function, I can only speculate about the possibilities.'

Hector smacked his lips. ""You're not actually saying no, I'm noticing...""

"3240

Xander ignored him. 'There are also your own abilities to take into consideration. When you were initially eaten, for example, your body should have been broken down into its base elements, but that clearly did not happen, as you are still a whole, sentient being. Could you explain to me why that is the case?'

He almost just shrugged and said no. But he actually had a guess. And he supposed he couldn't put off asking about this, anymore. ""...Do you know anything about aura?""

Xander took his time responding. '...I do, indeed. And that would explain some things.'

It would? Hector would've liked to hear that, but he felt like he was already treading on sensitive ground with this subject. If he made it obvious that he was still quite ignorant about aura, then maybe Xander would be less inclined to speak about it. For operational security or

whatever. The Vanguard was like that, wasn't it? Especially because Sparrows and auras were closely related topics.

Maybe he should just come right out and say that he knows about Sparrows, too. Hector was virtually certain that the Magician of Light would know about them. Whether the man would actually share anything was another matter.

He decided against bringing them up. He didn't want to start fielding questions about why he knew about them. That would begin to feel like a betrayal of Pauline and Hanton's expectations.

'Are you familiar with wrobels?'

Welp.

Hector had to take a moment to process that question. It threw a rather large wrench into the turning gears of his mind.

It seemed like Xander didn't even need him to admit it, however. 'The fact that you are not immediately asking me what I am talking about is answer enough, I think.'

Fuck. Hector thought about trying to just outright lie his way through this, but considering how straightforward Xander had been with him thus far, that seemed wrong. And there was the fact that he couldn't think of a lie that sounded in any way believable.

So he elected to say nothing.

'Your silence is both understandable and admirable. They are magnificent creatures in need of protection and secrecy. I have been entirely truthful with you, so I hope you will believe me when I say that I am a friend to all wrobels. Even the surly, unlikable ones.'

Hmm. The guy said earlier that he wasn't good at being persuasive, but here and now, Hector was quite tempted to take him at his word."  
"3241

'Still, you stay silent,' said Xander. 'Perhaps that is wise. I ask to be told a secret that may not be yours to tell, after all. I ask because I have a feeling that it may be a point of commonality and building trust between us.'

""...You say they need secrecy, and yet you're the one bringing them up.""

'Yes. I am taking a bit of a risk on you, Hector. Know that I would not do this if we were meeting elsewhere and if I did not have very strong reason to believe you when you claim to be anti-Abolish. Those two factors together create a compelling case for allyship between us, in my opinion.'

Hmm. Maybe this guy knew more about him than he'd thus far let on. Again, it wouldn't be a huge surprise if he'd heard about that mess in Lorent, already.

The Magician of Light did seem like an incredibly good friend to have, at least in theory. Plus, there was the fact that the guy had knowledge of and experience with Fusion Forges.

But Hector didn't want to be too eager here, either. ""Didn't you ask me if I was a member of Abolish? And then say that it would be okay if I was? Now you're saying my anti-Abolish stance is super important.""

'I did say that. And it would indeed have been okay. I would not have attacked you, just as I promised. But I would also not have considered you a potential ally, either. Any bridge made between the Vanguard and Abolish can only be so wide, if you take my meaning.'

Hector supposed he could understand that. ""Alright, then let me ask you something else.""

'Go ahead.'

If the two of them were to be taking risks now, then this next question would certainly qualify. ""How is the war going, from your perspective?""

And again, Xander fell silent.

Hector didn't balk, though. He just let it linger, wanting to give the man ample time to think about his answer.

'...You ask much of me with that question.'

""Maybe so,"" said Hector. ""But you seem like an honest guy with a good view of things. I want your opinion.""

'A ""good view,"" you say. How am I to interpret that, I wonder? A

morally agreeable view? Or merely a view from an elevated position?'

""Mm, maybe a little bit of both?""

"3242

Xander gave him a mild laugh at that. 'The war is a difficult subject, as I'm sure you know. To speak details of it with you would be... an entirely different level of risk, I think.'

""Operational security,"" said Hector. ""I get it. But I also think we're on the same side here. And... well. There might be a thing or two that I could tell you about, if you're willing to do the same for me.""

'An exchange of intel, hmm? What is it that you think I do not already know about?'

A number of things, probably. Considering all the information that he'd been gathering from the deployed teams of Rainlords around the world, there was a decent chance that Hector had a fair few bargaining chips at his disposal, right now. The trick was figuring out which ones they were.

""Well, I can't just reveal my cards straight away. Is there anything in particular that you'd like to know about?""

'No, no. That is not how this works. I'm afraid I must insist that you go first. I will provide no hints.'

Dang.

There were certain things that Hector was determined not to talk about, no matter what. Sparrows, the Rainlords, the Candle, the Shards, Rasalased, and probably also the Sandlords.

The only reason he was at all considering that last one was because they were still technically allied with the Vanguard. But he very much doubted that Abbas would want him revealing anything of his kin to Xander here, considering everything Hector had heard Abbas say about them.

He supposed he'd already given the barest hint that he knew about the existence of Sparrows, but he also hadn't actually confirmed anything yet, either. And they didn't seem relevant to the war, anyway. And hell,

Xander almost certainly knew more about them than he did, so there was no bargaining power there to begin with.

He could, however, think of one thing that might be worthy. There was a good chance that Xander already knew about it, though. "'I assume you've heard about Morgunov's robotic nightmares by now, yeah?'"

'Indeed. That is far from a secret.'

""I've heard that Jackson was severely wounded at Uego.""

'I can make no comment on that.'

""Didn't think you would,"" said Hector. ""But has the cause of his wounds been determined yet?""

'That is a leading question, and I still cannot comment.'

Oh shit. ""Ah, sorry. What I mean to say is, if he is wounded and having trouble regenerating, then I know the cause.""

Xander made no response. Perhaps he was waiting for more."

"3243

As Hector mulled over his next words, he realized that he didn't actually want to hold this information back from Xander. In the off chance that the Vanguard didn't already know it, then they would certainly need to. It would've been a real dick move on his part to keep this to himself.

""Morgunov is using nanoscopic machines that can sabotage a servant's ability to regenerate,"" said Hector. ""And probably more.""

Still, Xander persisted in silence.

Hector decided to just keep waiting, though. He'd said what was needed. There was no point in psyching himself out now.

Eventually, the Magician did speak up again. '...Where did you come by this information?'

""I can't tell you that.""

'You sure? I already have a pretty solid guess, I think.'

Hector didn't want to read too much into that. "'Guessing is fine. But just as you said before, I can make no comment on that.'"

'I see,' was all Xander said.

Hector still didn't know if Xander had known about the nanobots already, and Xander probably intended to keep it that way. But considering how privileged the information might be, there was a chance that Xander was still impressed that Hector even had access to it in the first place. Which could bode well for this conversation going forward.

Hopefully. Hector was trying to be optimistic, for a change.

Eh, maybe it didn't suit him.

""So?"" said Hector. ""What's your opinion on the war?""

The Magician again took his time before answering. '...It is a disaster on nearly all fronts,' he said. 'And if you happen to speak with any members of Abolish on the matter, I would have you tell them precisely that, as well.'

Hector's head reared back a little as he processed that. ""Excuse me?""

'Hector Goffe of Atreya,' said Xander. 'I have found your file. It's a bit light, considering the means by which I've come to meet you.'

Aw, shit. This was all about to bite him on the ass, wasn't it?

'You've encountered hostile Abolish forces multiple times, it would seem. I believe you are not lying when you say that you are fighting them now.'

Well, that was good, at least.

'But you are also on friendly terms with the Abolisher known as Ravi Zaman of the Freeman Fellowship.'

Uh-oh. Hector could hazard a guess as to how that intel had ended up in his file. Goddammit, Carl."

"3244

'Care to comment on that?' said Xander. 'Or rebuke these claims?'

Hector didn't see much point in lying, especially because a different strategy came to mind. ""Actually, I'd like to ask you about Ravi Zaman. Do you have a file on him, too?""

'Mm, perhaps.'

""As far as I've been able to tell, Ravi seems like a pretty decent guy, but because of his ties to Abolish, I've been reluctant to place much trust in him. If you could tell me about his past or... anything, really, then that would be a huge help.""

'I am at least aware that this Freeman Fellowship is supposedly more peaceful than the rest of Abolish,' said Xander.

""So I've heard,"" said Hector. ""I'm not sure whether I buy that or not, though. It could just be a tactic to gain favor and then ultimately backstab people.""

'Indeed. Abolish has been known to do precisely that on many occasions throughout history. I would be exceptionally cautious around such a man, were I you.'

""I mean, he's also an important diplomatic figure in Lorent. Being mean to him for no reason would only cause problems, in my opinion. Which is something that Carl Rondel, your Vanguardian liaison in Lorent, doesn't seem to agree on. That guy's a real piece of work, by the way.""

Xander was quiet again, perhaps looking for the requested file.

Hmm. Maybe this was the real reason the Magician had been so intermittently quiet during this conversation. Instead of thinking super carefully about his responses, maybe he'd just been hunting down reports or whatever.

Hector had to wonder where the hell this guy actually was. If he had access to physical reports, then did that mean Xander was still in the real world? But what sense would that make? Didn't he say that there was some kind of massive time differential?

Hector wanted to ask about that, but he wanted answers about Ravi more, if he could get them. That man had been an enigma for long



enough in Hector's mind.

At length, Xander spoke up again. 'Ravi Zaman of Palei. Let's see here... It seems he has been active within Abolish for at least twenty years. He participated in the Korgum-Dozer war, the Vaelish Civil War, and minor skirmishes in Ardora and Qenghis.'

""A bit vague,"" said Hector. ""Has he done any specifically terrible things? Any crimes against humanity?""

'If he has, they are not listed here.'

"3245

Damn. Hector had been hoping for more than that. But then again, perhaps this was informative in itself. If Ravi really was a decent guy, then his deeds probably wouldn't be recorded, would they? Especially by the Vanguard, who weren't looking to write down praise for good behavior on Abolish's side.

'Ah, here's something,' said Xander. 'It would appear that Zaman has a history of collecting ransoms.'

Or maybe not. ""Say what?""

'After a battle at Demarkis, he ransomed five Vanguardian reapers that had been captured. After another at Ninoway, he ransomed three. At Carmino, he ransomed six. At Larudo, he ransomed ten. And a few more, elsewhere.'

Huh. Ransoms, eh? Of enemy reapers? Hector couldn't really see that as such a terrible thing to do when it came to war, especially when the alternative was to just kill them. Obviously, it would be different if he'd been kidnapping and ransoming random civilians.

It did make him curious, though. He needed to be careful how he phrased his next question, lest it come across as something that only someone very young and inexperienced would ask. ""How often has Abolish been ransoming your reapers in recent years?""

'Not often at all, as it so happens.'

""The practice goes through periods of flux, doesn't it?"" That was more of an educated guess than a knowledgeable comment, but

Hector tried to sound like he knew what he was talking about.

'Indeed. It is generally a good metric by which to measure the overall ruthlessness of the current regime.'

Which was to say that Morgunov and Dozer--or at least their subordinates--were currently quite ruthless, by historical standards. Not that Hector was terribly surprised by that, but it did put things into a slightly different perspective.

""I suppose that speaks well of Ravi's character, then. If only a little.""

'Yes. Only a little, as you say. Because perhaps his greed simply outweighs his bloodlust.'

""In the old days, that wouldn't be considered greedy at all,"" said Hector. ""That was just how warriors made their wealth."" Where had that come from?

'Hmph. I'm not sure if that change in sentiment has been for the better or worse. On the one hand, it can prolong conflicts by letting the enemy rebuild their strength, but on the other, a good ransom will help you rebuild your own depleted forces more quickly. And despite how rare the practice has become, the conflict between the Vanguard and Abolish doesn't seem to be having any trouble prolonging itself.'"  
"3246

""Are you saying that you'd like the practice of ransoming to make a comeback?"" said Hector.

'I do not know. Maybe. The problem is that so many of our enemies desire genocide. On a moral level, I feel it is difficult to justify a ransom when the captive in question might very well go on to kill thousands more civilians in the future. But that type of thinking, too, leads down a dangerous path of escalation and extremism.'

""You seem surprisingly moderate,"" said Hector. ""For such a high-ranking member of the Vanguard, I would've expected you to be... firmer in your convictions.""

'Is that disappointment I hear in your tone?'

""Not in the least. If anything, it's a relief to know that you're thinking

deeply about these things instead of just assuming you're always justified in everything that you do.'"

'I feel as though you may be alluding to one or more of my peers.'

Was he? Well, maybe he was. That hadn't been his intention, but now that he was thinking about it, he'd heard quite a bit about the extremist side of the Vanguard from Garovel and many of the reapers within the Rainlords. Hell, some of those reapers probably could've been considered fairly extremist themselves, still.

He didn't dare bring up the Rainlords, though. "'I worry about extremism within the Vanguard. You're supposed to be paragons of virtue that the whole world can look to and admire. I understand that's a big responsibility for you--and a tough balance to maintain--but when you stop trying to live up to that ideal, we all suffer for it. Everyone.'"

Okay, this didn't feel quite right. And yet, it also did. It felt exactly right, somehow. Half of these words seemed like they shouldn't have even been coming out of his mouth, but in his heart, they didn't feel wrong at all.

It was confusing--but also not.

'I agree with you in principle,' said Xander, 'but if I may take the counter position for the sake of argument, then I feel that even extremism has its place. At times, extremism is the only thing that can move the cultural needle in any direction. The passion that it summons out of people, the calls to action--these are things that moderates like us struggle to achieve. For better or for worse, it is not moderates who enact change in the world. But we are the ones who end up trying to find a new equilibrium once the extremists have finally settled down or been dealt with.'"

"3247

"'You think that extremism is a necessary evil in the world?'" said Hector.

'Necessary? Maybe not. But I think on the grand scale, its influence isn't always a bad thing.'

Hmm. Hector hadn't thought about it like that before. But it at least

made sense that a leading member of the Vanguard would view it that way, he thought. Xander probably had lots of comrades-in-arms who were much more extreme in their views than he. If he couldn't tolerate their opinions, then he likely would've left the Vanguard a long time ago.

He wondered what Harper Norez might say on this particular subject.

They'd gotten quite sidetracked, though. ""Alright, well... why do you want me to tell Abolish that the war is going terribly for you?""

'Because by all appearances, it is. If that can make them overconfident, then we would be foolish not to take advantage of the opportunity.'

""So you've got a plan, then.""

'Everyone has plans, don't they?'

He supposed that was true. But this guy was being evasive again. In the end, Hector didn't really expect Xander to share anything of real substance with him regarding the war. He decided to keep trying a little more, though. ""Do you think Intar will join the fighting?""

'As a matter of fact, I do.'

Whoa. That was surprisingly candid--and also a totally contrary opinion to what he'd heard previously. ""Really? Why?""

'Unless the war ends abruptly and soon, then Intar's entry is inevitable, I think. In all likelihood, the pressure in Sair will grow too great to ignore.'

""But Intar is politically deadlocked and very anti-war culturally, at the moment.""

'Every modern country is anti-war culturally,' said Xander. 'Aside, perhaps, from those led by Abolish, but even in those places, a strong argument could be made that they--the civilians, at least--are more anti-war than anywhere else in the world. They just can't say so publicly. Living under military dictatorships can have that effect on you.'

'No, Intar's hand will be forced, sooner or later. Steccat, too, if the Vantalayan warfront doesn't improve. I am not saying that things will be smooth sailing or that they won't get significantly worse before they begin to get better, but in the long run, this is a losing war for Abolish. It is plain to see even from the most uninformed perspective that the

actions taken by the aggressing nations are unjust.'

Wow. That was definitely one way of looking at things. ""...You're very optimistic.""

Xander laughed mildly again. 'That is what polite people say when they do not wish to call me naive.'

"3248

""Maybe I'm just pessimistic by nature. I hope you're right, though."" And before he missed the conversational opening, Hector wanted to make sure he pounced on the next subject. ""You mentioned Vantalay, too. You really think Steccat will step in over there?""

'I think it's quite possible, yes. But then again, Vantalay is dealing with a lot, right now. I believe that corner of the war is the most volatile, at the moment. Anything could happen.'

Hmm. Hector wished he could ask something more specific, but this was also extremely sensitive territory for him. There was absolutely no way that he could allow his ties to the Rainlords to be revealed. No matter how much the Magician was growing on him, that would be a bridge too far.

So he left it at that.

And Xander was the one to pose the next question. 'How is it that you ended up fighting Banda Toro, by the way?'

Ah. Hector had been wondering if that was going to come up. While his connection to the Rainlords couldn't be revealed, perhaps it would be okay to reveal his one to the Sandlords. Even Atreyan royalty had ties to them, so it wasn't like there was no precedent for it, either.

But Hector was still hesitant. This wasn't just his secret to share, he felt. If only he could've consulted Abbas, right now.

""At this point, it's hard to know exactly what they were thinking,"" said Hector. ""They are Abolish, after all. But as far as I was able to tell, they were on some sort of scouting mission, and a fight probably wasn't supposed to break out. But it did, anyway.""

'I see. Why would they be scouting Atreya, of all places?'

Hector had a pretty strong guess, obviously, so he didn't want to lie and say that he had no idea. He decided to just keep his mouth shut.

'Strange. Do you think you can handle Bloodeye's men once you get back there?'

That was the million to a question, now wasn't it? Hector honestly didn't know. A part of him wanted to feign confidence, but he just couldn't bring that out of himself at the moment, especially after everything he'd already admitted earlier. "'I'm not sure...'"

'Do you want the Vanguard's assistance?'

Oh shit. Uhhh. "'Er... can you even spare the men?'"

'No, quite frankly. Nor can I make any promises. But if your need is dire, then I can at least attempt to send someone to your aid.'

"3249

Hector had to think. What a fucking conundrum he was facing, all of sudden.

On the one hand, the Vanguard getting involved could prove quite problematic where the Rainlords were concerned. Warrenhold was supposed to be a safe place, away from the Vanguard's influence.

But on the other hand, if Bloodeye and his men stormed into Atreya, it wouldn't just be Hector and Warrenhold at risk. The entire populace could very easily become subject to the same horrific reality that was already happening to Sair.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of helpless civilians being slaughtered at Abolish's whim. Hunted down in the street. Homes invaded, looted, and burned.

Ugh. When he thought about it like that, it seemed like no choice at all. Hector couldn't gamble with the lives of so many, just because he was afraid of a complicated situation once the dust settled. There was too much at stake here. Maybe if he hadn't already gotten his ass handed to him by Banda Toro, he would be thinking differently right now, but there was no way he could simply ignore this.

""If you're offering help, then I won't refuse it,"" said Hector. ""But from the sound of it, I shouldn't hold my breath.""

'Sadly, yes, that is the case,' said Xander. 'We are already being stretched beyond our limit. I do not know if anyone will be able to help you, but I will ask.' And there was a pause. 'Actually, if you would like to plead your case yourself, then I could bring you to me so that you may do so.'

Hector might've blinked if his eyes weren't already shut. ""Didn't you say that you didn't want to bring me to you? That it would be too big of a risk?""

'Yes. But if you wish it, I am willing to take that gamble for the sake of saving your country. Either way, an enormous risk is being taken. If given a choice, I would rather choose the one that banks on you being the honorable friend that you currently appear to be.'

Wow. Hector had to admit that he was flattered. Xander didn't seem like the kind of the guy to say a thing like that without genuinely meaning it. But he still couldn't say yes here. ""Thank you, but I can't spend that kind of time away from home, right now. I need to get back as soon as possible. I feel like I've already wasted too much time in this place, as it is.""

"3250

'I understand. In that case, let us discuss how you might return more quickly. Tell me more of your encounter with Banda Toro. What were his abilities like? And please be specific.'

""Alright, uh. So he could transform into one of those flying dinosaurs. Like a pteradactyl or pteranodon, maybe. Oh, and his body could shift and stretch into a more T-rex-like head, too. And he could swallow attacks whole, just gulp down huge chunks of molten metal without much difficulty. In fact, uh... with the benefit of hindsight, I'd say that a lot of his power revolved around his ability to eat things.""

'Yes, that makes sense. What else?'

""Ah... well, I also fought Bloodeye not too long ago, and I saw him pull a live cruise missile out of his mouth. And it was definitely soul-strengthened.""

'A live missile...'

""He used it in the fight. It was stupidly powerful. I don't recall Banda doing anything quite that crazy, but I've got a feeling that he could have, if he'd wanted to. Their abilities seemed identical, though I assume Bloodeye is stronger overall.""

'Perhaps that ability requires significant preparation. You said that you thought Banda was on a scouting mission, no? That a fight was not supposed to break out?'

""Yeah.""

'It could have been the case, then, that he did not fully prepare himself for said fight. Meaning he would be even more dangerous if he did.'

Not the most comforting thought in the world, to be sure. ""Do you think if he swallowed something else, I'd be able to see it arrive here?"" Ignoring the fact that he was currently blind, of course.

'Not likely. And if you did somehow see something, it would have been reduced to its base elements, unlike you.'

Hector didn't want get off topic again, but he just had to ask something else now. ""Is this, uh, realm or whatever--is it shared between everyone? Or is this like my own personal realm where only my element resides?""

'That is something I have been trying to discover for quite a while now. Testing the material in these realms for some unique, identifiable feature has proven incredibly difficult. I still have a few ideas left for experimentation, but I've not been able to find the time, as of late. It seems there is always a more pressing matter or idea that steals my attention.'

Dang."

"3251 -- CCLXXV.

""Well, in any case, I don't know if there's much you can do help me just yet,"" said Hector. ""I'm gonna try to force myself back through Banda's stomach, first. If that doesn't work, then maybe I'll take you up on your offer.""



'How do you intend to ""force"" yourself back?'

Hector took a deep breath as he began to regather his focus on his materialization. Being able to breathe again might improve his concentration now, he hoped. ""I guess I'll figure that out, right now.""

'There is more I would tell you. Specifically, regarding how to get into contact with me again after you return.'

""Keep talking while I work, then.""

And the world of iron began to tremble once more.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Five: 'O, boiling Brew...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Banda Toro felt like absolute shit. His stomach had never ached so badly before.

And it made no kind of sense. None whatsoever.

In the middle of pan-rozum like this, he should have been unable to feel pain. The numbing factor provided by his reaper should have been built into his very being.

Yet this pain was undeniable. It was struggle enough just to maintain pan-rozum through it, to maintain his presence of mind. If not for Grigozo's help, they would have separated by now. The Chaos form was certainly unsustainable in this state. The threat posed by the damned souls within him would prove too great.

Hell, even now, he could still feel them. Perhaps that was the true source of this pain. In fact, perhaps that was the only explanation. The pain could not be physical in nature, surely. It had to be metaphysical. Imaginary.

But how, then, to escape it?

That was what Grigozo was thinking. Somehow, the reaper's mind was able to remain largely clear, even while Banda's own mind burned with agony.

This had to be Darksteel's doing. It defied explanation, but it had to be.

The pain erupted almost instantly upon devouring that bastard. That was obviously no coincidence, but then did that mean Darksteel was struggling to get out? Still fighting from within the brew?

Impossible. Utterly impossible.

He wanted to use mementori again in order to perhaps discern something new, but he didn't dare risk it in this state. The Chaos form was too volatile now. And there was a pursuer. That much, Grigozo could still sense. Someone was giving chase."

"3251 -- CCLXXV.

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"3252

Banda could only care so much about that, though. He had to get back to the encampment. To Bloodeye and their reinforcements. It was the only hope for a reprieve, right now, and even that was questionable.

Problem was, they were quite far. In Callum. He would have to fly all the way across Lorent in order to get there. They did have a couple of smaller encampments in Lorent, too, but those were only harboring one or two servants each. Not enough to provide him a proper place to rest, especially when being pursued.

Worse still, he feared deeply that a visit to Lozaro would be required,

which would be a much longer trek all the way over to another continent. But if this pain didn't alleviate once he and Grigozo separated, then that would be the only course of action left. The more time passed, the more tempted he was to simply separate right away and let the chips fall where they may.

He just. Had to. Hold on.

His face was caked with sweat, even as the wind howled past him and tried to dry it out, even as he shifted between his solid and gaseous forms in order to reset the moisture. It simply wouldn't go away, goddammit. He wanted so badly to resolve it with mind over matter. Years upon years of meditative training and experience--it all felt so worthless, right now.

And then it hit him.

A shooting pain in his gut that made him stop flying and double over in the air, clutching his abdomen as he writhed in agony.

This was too much. Far worse than before. He could feel it in his head now. In his mind. His soul, even.

He used his anger again. Tried to force it back down. Suppress it violently.

But it didn't help. It wouldn't listen to him. It wouldn't be ignored.

The Chaos form activated against his will.

The most dreaded scenario to his mind. The loss of control over his own body. He could feel the damned souls clawing against his flesh now, tearing at him from the inside, demanding to be let free.

Then it was his stomach again. No longer painful. Suddenly, there was relief from that. But not from something else.

Something there.

It didn't hurt, anymore, but he could feel the physicality of it now. Forcing open his stomach, his throat, and then his mouth."

"3253

What came forth first was a dark hand. A gauntlet. Then the arm. It bent down and gripped Banda's shoulder, as if needing the leverage to pull the rest of Darksteel free.

Banda could only watch as this armored figure emerged. He felt paralyzed in this moment, unable to make his own body listen to him.

It was a slow, horrible process. It was less like vomiting and more like Darksteel was peeling Banda's bloated, distorted form off of him. Removing a skin-tight suit in mid-air.

Halfway through it, Banda could no longer keep up his flight. His pterosaur wings bent out of shape and locked up, making him start to fall gradually, then sink like a stone.

By the time they neared the ground, Darksteel was free again. But Banda was also more in control, more aware of what was happening.

Banda Toro hit the dirt hard enough to leave an explosive crater.

But he wasn't altogether bothered by that.

Flat on his back as he looked up at the armored figure floating above, Banda Toro had regained enough of his senses that he was now primarily just... annoyed.

Extremely annoyed, as a matter of fact.

This Darksteel was proving to be a real son of a bitch. Sure, Banda had not possessed this Chaos form for very long, but never before had someone he'd devoured been able to climb their way back out of his brew.

What kind of power did a man have to possess in order to be capable of resisting digestion? Was this guy just that much of a stubborn bastard?

For a time, Banda just lay there, looking up at Darksteel. That armor had looked a little different at first--darker and shinier--but now it looked the same as before, if a bit bulkier.

Curious.

Either way, the fight was about to be back on. That much was obvious. Banda was prepared from the moment he hit the dirt, but he decided to wait. If Darksteel had anything to say to him, Banda intended to hear

him out. And if Darksteel just attacked instead, that was fine, too.

At length, though, Banda's curiosity began to get the better of him.

""How was it inside my stomach?!"" he shouted up at him.

Darksteel didn't answer, the rude bastard.

Banda growled, which turned into a snarl as he transformed again. He hoped that pursuer showed up soon so that he could kill both of them at the same time."

"3254

A cluster of molten iron flew toward him, but Banda was ready for it. He flipped out of the way, swirling up into the air as his wings expanded out and gained strength again. A surge of heat built up in his gut, preparing to spew a white hot laser at Darksteel in retaliation while perhaps devouring more iron chunks with an open mouth, too. He fully expected the iron to keep swarming him as he moved, following him up into the sky like machine gun fire.

Instead, he saw too late that Darksteel had chosen to close the gap and was now right in his face. The armored man crashed into him, elbow deep into Banda's scaly stomach, sending him shooting back down to the ground, bouncing and skidding across the dirt again.

The heat laser choked and died in his throat, burning and dribbling out of the sides of his mouth as Banda struggled to find his breath again.

What had just happened? Darksteel had changed tactics on him. He wanted to get up close and personal now? What, he wasn't afraid of being eaten again? Agh, why would he be? Damn him.

Banda didn't need long to rebound. He flung himself back up into the air and activated mementori again. That was a risk, as always, but he was in control again. He could suppress the damned souls. And he needed the extra sensory advantage, right now.

His body burned, but he didn't lose focus. Where was Darksteel? Where had he gone? He had to be--

Above. Banda sensed him at the last moment and narrowly avoided another pummeling. He lashed out with hand-sized claws, and the blow landed cleanly.

But it stopped. Bits of armor seemed to fly off, but the claws didn't pierce, didn't cut. What the--?

Darksteel went for the gut again, this time with a materialized blade. It didn't break through his scales, strangely enough, but the spot was still a bit sore, so it didn't exactly feel like acupuncture, either.

Banda resorted to his gaseous form. Darksteel wanted to fight up close? That was fine. He'd smother him with acidic red mist and burn him out of that little armored shell until the metal was all that remained.

Rage fueled him. Made his attacks hit harder. His acid more potent. His smoke more oppressive.

Until an explosion burst through his concentration, as if hitting him directly in his mind. The smoke faltered and lagged while he battled his own disorientation."

"3255

Darksteel slipped away. Banda could tell that much. He needed to focus on mementori in order to locate him again. Where was he?

Agh, what was this? It was like a fog. He could certainly sense Darksteel's aura, but it was unclear. Messy.

Concealed? Hiding itself? Those were the only things he could discern of its nature, right now. It didn't want him to know it. It wanted him uncertain.

And again, Banda barely sensed the next attack coming before it was too late. A full body tackle, it still clipped him in the shoulder and sent him spinning lower. He struggled to regain his bearings. Mementori wasn't as helpful as it was supposed to be. He turned to Grigozo's ability to sense souls, instead, but that was just as bad, if not even worse.

Frustrating. Fine. He'd have to rely on smell. His snout elongated as he demanded it of his Chaos form. With this, at least--

Darksteel slammed into his back with full force. Banda rocketed forward against his will, and he tried to look back, only to notice a shadow above him, instead.

An iron meteor was there. Too enormous for Banda to even process in the split second that he had to stare at it blotting out his view of the sky.

It fell upon him.

On impact, he lost all awareness. All ability to think or reason. It didn't hurt. There was no pain. Instead, it was like he blinked out of existence for a few moments and touched oblivion.

The meteor crashed to earth with all the power of a bomb. From his vantage point, Banda had no concept of how big it might have been, but he could certainly feel his body being shredded to pieces. And by the time he regained full awareness again, he could only see pitch blackness around him.

He'd been drilled so deep into the ground that he could hardly tell which direction was up, anymore. A mountain of rubble lay on top of him, pinning him down, all but telling him to give up. To simply stay down here. To admit defeat, even.

His body, however, was still regenerating. It may have been torn to pieces, but apparently, enough of it was still intact for him to remain conscious.

He decided to take his time.

After that last attack, Banda felt like he needed to reevaluate some things. Maybe everything, actually.

What in the fuck was happening here?"  
"3256

He could feel Grigozo's cowardice creeping to the fore, seeping into his reasoning.

Was he actually considering abandoning the fight, right now?  
Disbanding pan-rozum and letting the reaper flee underground?

No. Absurd.

Darksteel had surprised him, sure, but this fight was far from lost. And



besides, splitting up now was not traditionally considered a wise strategic move. There were too many ways for high threat warriors to chase an escaping reaper down and kill or capture them.

In fact, according to Bloodeye, that was precisely how Darksteel had managed to kill the Man of Crows.

Banda wasn't going to let Grigozo make the same mistake.

None of these thoughts were fully articulated in Banda's mind. They were flashing sensations, at best. Instinctual feelings. He didn't have the luxury of time to mull things over as much as he wanted. Confused as he was, he still knew that he had to be decisive and quick in his thinking here.

Especially when he felt the ground and rubble all around him begin to tremble.

Darksteel wasn't going to just let him sit down here and regenerate, it seemed.

The gaseous form was the only solution to Banda's mind. It allowed him to squeeze through the gaps in the rock and escape out into multiple directions at once.

He had to be careful here, though. In this depleted state, he didn't have much smoke to pull from, and he ran the risk of spreading himself too thin--quite literally.

That was the biggest danger when it came to learning and maintaining gas forms with pan-rozum. The gas had to be rigidly controlled with one's mind. It was already trying to spread itself apart and disperse by its own physical properties. If you let the gas thin out too much, then the pan-rozum merge would collapse and exhaust both the reaper and servant simultaneously.

Thankfully, he could add more smoke to himself through the materialization component of pan-rozum, but that also put more strain on the form--and was only a bandage on the problem, besides. The materialized smoke wasn't truly part of him, after all. Regeneration was still preferable.

But that was also an issue. In the gaseous form, regeneration was halted. He needed to get out of it as soon as possible in order to let the healing continue. Which was a risk, too, of course.

He made it aboveground with multiple different whiffs of red smoke. He rushed to reconvene them but sensed another attack coming and had to disperse again."

"3257

Controlling more than one whiff of smoke at a time was a difficult trick, but Banda had plenty of experience doing it, thanks especially to the cloning technique. Learning how to pull that off made this feel much easier by comparison.

Darksteel was still all over him, though. No doubt, the bastard knew that he'd gained the advantage and didn't want to give it up. Banda had four separate clouds of smoke that all wanted to regather, but Darksteel wasn't making that easy. The first and second ones were being shredded and dispersed by iron bullets while the third was being chased down by Darksteel himself.

But the fourth was largely free. With it, Banda could navigate the battle and soak up stray puffs that were otherwise on the verge of vanishing.

It was mayhem. Furious and constant over multiple minutes. Darksteel was trying to box the clouds, while Banda was trying to melt or puncture his way through each interfering bit of iron.

And it quickly became clear that Darksteel himself was a much bigger problem. These clusters of iron being materialized and flung around--Banda could deal with those. But that armored body was different. It shrugged off materialized osmium spikes and acid. It resisted coatings to slow its movement down.

And worst of all, it always seemed to know where to find Banda's core. His mind. That had to be the reason Darksteel was pursuing the third whiff so persistently. The son of a bitch just knew.

Banda managed to outlast the onslaught, though. The fourth whiff finally regathered enough mass to mount a proper counterattack, something that would at least get Darksteel to stop hounding him for a moment.

A mouth formed in the fourth cloud, and from it, a heat laser surged forth. Banda made sure to shoot from Darksteel's blindside, too, aiming for center mass.

As expected, Darksteel was still able to dodge in time, though not without leaving a scorch mark across his breastplate. That was fine. It gave Banda the time he needed.

The third merged with the fourth, and now he had more than enough mass again. His gangly wings sprouted back out as the gaseous form gave way almost fully to the Chaos form again.

He immediately went for more heat lasers. Three at once, shot from three different mouths grown out of his face, shoulder, and chest.

And now, it would be Banda's turn to chase."

"3258

Finally, he could swing things back in his favor. With the lasers alone, the amount of pressure he could place upon Darksteel would be more than enough to--

Hold on.

Darksteel dodged two, but the last one hit cleanly. And yet it didn't cut a hole through him like a bullet through gelatin. It bounced off him. Splashed off, really, reducing the heat laser to more of a molten ooze that geysered away from him.

Banda needed a second to process what had just happened; and so, too, apparently, did Darksteel. For a moment, they both hovered there in midair, confused and trying to reassess.

Darksteel was the first to start moving again, so even though Banda would've liked more time to think through the logical ramifications of what this meant for the rest of this fight, he didn't get it. He had to react.

Because Darksteel was torpedoing straight toward him again. Unafraid.

There would be no chase this time, it seemed.

Acid and claws were his instinctual answer. If the lasers weren't going to work, then he needed to eat away at that armor until it was weakened enough to break through, which his claws would be able to

do.

In theory. He didn't have the luxury of thinking about it more than that.

Darksteel cannonballed straight into him, but Banda was ready with a gaseous evasion. Darksteel passed through harmlessly enough and took a gob of searing acid to the back.

It didn't slow him down. He did a pinpoint turn and rocketed back, this time too close and too fast to react to.

Banda got his bell rung. An armored knee collided with his temple. It was certainly enough to leave him disoriented. He tried in vain to swing with a flurry of transfigured arms and claws. They all whiffed as he lost track of Darksteel for a second or two.

That was too long.

By the time he sensed his opponent again, his wings were being shredded to pieces by that damn cluster-fire technique of Darksteel's. If Banda had noticed a moment later, it would've been his head that got shredded, not his wings.

He surged downward, embracing the sudden freefall and resorting to more of his gaseous form in order to press for even more speed. He didn't technically need his wings in order to fly, after all. Pan-rozum could accomplish it, too, albeit with more difficulty."

"3259

He needed distance. Darksteel was following--and not letting up with that attack, either. Banda could feel pieces of his solid self being chipped away, as well as his gaseous self being dispersed under the flurry of iron bullets.

Agh. Distance wasn't going to work, either. Darksteel could keep up with him too easily.

His options were becoming very limited now. He was being pushed harder than he had in a very long time. If he'd had the presence of mind for it, he might've even been pleased. This was the very reason why he'd been so curious to test Darksteel in the first place. He'd wanted to see just how threatening this mystery man really was.

In this moment, however, Banda Toro was not pleased at all. Perhaps that was because of Grigozo's emotions spoiling things. The reaper wanted to flee. To panic, even. Banda could sense it.

The full Chaos form was the answer here. Banda hadn't used it much yet. In this fight, he'd only faintly touched it just before devouring Darksteel. The immediate agony thereafter had pulled him back out of it.

Should he really use it again, though? There wasn't time to debate.

He went for it.

No, he didn't. It was too dangerous now. They could lose control. It wasn't worth--

Yes, he did. Banda forced Grigozo down and assumed full control. He had to. The reaper didn't understand.

And immediately, his body came alight with new fury. Burning. Angry. Screaming.

The damned souls were there again, more violent than ever. And Banda's mind--it slowed, as did the whole world around him. He could hardly think. Hardly form complete ideas.

But he could see.

He could smell.

He could sense it all.

And he was hungry.

Beautifully hungry.

This state of being was its own brand of wonderful. Distinct and glorious. Pure.

Everything was simple.

Hunt. Eat.

This meal was fighting back, though. A series of blades flew at him. Banda avoided most, ignored the rest. The only thing that mattered was reaching his prey. Hunting. Eating.

His huge maw bit down. Found its prey. Crunch.

Rrgh. Not the right crunch. Crunch was supposed to be more satisfying. Supposed to feel bones snapping. Supposed to taste blood gushing out.

Something burned. In his mouth.

He ignored it. Clawed at the meal, instead. It needed to stop wriggling. It needed to give him the satisfying crunch. He thrashed his head, too. That was the best trick. Whip his neck around. Disorient. Break bones."

"3260 -- CCLXXVI.

It wouldn't stop moving, though. Meal was tough. Needed to be softened up more.

Vomit would do it. Flaming acid.

Mrgh. Something wrong. Stomach hurt. More than normal. Where claw go? One missing.

He bit down harder. Wanted crunch. Rrgh. No crunch. Why no crunch? Mouth hurt. Why hurt? Why not numb? No sense making.

Rrgh! Frustrating! Bite and thrash! Meal not stop moving!

Agh! Rrgh... Ooh...?

Spinning. Not right. World stretching. No sky. No ground.

NO! ENOUGH OF THIS MADNESS!

Grigozo?

Darkness.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Six: 'The victor's dilemma...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector couldn't stop panting. Or sweating. Or questioning how he was still able to move, considering how absolutely awful he felt, right now.

But the fight seemed to be over. Finally.

Fucking finally.

Even now, staring at the gray, smoldering husk of Banda's twisted, dinosaur-like form as he lay there on the ground, Hector was hesitant to believe that this dude was actually, truly dead.

It had happened rather suddenly, after all.

It was nice to be on the ground again, at least. For a brief period of time, Hector had started to feel like he was getting the hang of aerial combat, but he sure hadn't been feeling very good about himself toward the end there.

What an insane mess that had turned into. He was already reliving it and still not really understanding what the fuck went on back there.

Banda Toro just went nuts.

Quite literally, apparently.

'So?' said the amorphous blob of a reaper in front of him. 'Do you... accept my surrender? I've released his soul, as you can see.'

At least one of Hector's thought processes was in a total daze.

The enemy reaper had given up. Just like that. He'd melted out of Banda's body and started shouting at Hector, begging for his life. For mercy.

After all that craziness. Some of the most demented shit Hector had ever witnessed--which was saying a lot, at this point.

And this was how it was ending.

Hector had to think about this one. He didn't want to throw out a dumb answer and then have to go back on his word later after realizing just how dumb it had been.

But at the very least, he could tell that the reaper wasn't lying.

He could sense it. Banda's aura. Or the lack thereof, rather.

Banda Toro was no more. The giant corpse in front of him was empty.

And yet, that wasn't enough. Hector wanted to be more than sure. This aura thing was still new to him. He didn't want to have too much confidence in it. So he'd already called Garovel over.

But it was probably going to take the reaper a while to get here."  
"3260 -- CCLXXVI.

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But it was probably going to take the reaper a while to get here."  
"3261

There was, however, someone else already present. Hector only just now noticed the figure descending slowly from the sky over yonder. And even though he couldn't yet make out who it was with his eyes--which admittedly weren't working so well, at the moment--he could still tell who it was. Kind of.

He supposed it was aura again, but he'd never actually sensed Roman's aura before. Not like this, at least.

It felt more like an educated guess than actual knowledge. That warmth. That concern. That curiosity. Not to mention, the ability to fly? Yeah, that seemed like Roman. Hector waved him closer, since he seemed hesitant.

And indeed, Roman's approach sped up, and the man landed softly at his side. ""H-Hector? You... ah..."" His gaze went toward the reaper, and he said nothing more, perhaps not wanting to let something slip.

Hector appreciated that, but at this point, he wasn't sure it would've even mattered all that much. ""I'm okay,"" he said tiredly. It was a statement to himself as much as it was to Roman. He just had to hold it together for a little while longer. ""This guy says he wants to surrender.""

""I, uh... I see.""

'Yes. My name is Grigozo, and I am throwing myself upon your mercy. Please, I beg you. Spare my life. I will do you no harm.'

Roman scratched his temple, looking arguably even more uncertain than Hector felt. ""Just like that, eh? If the roles were reversed, would you have been merciful to us?""

'If it had been up to me, then yes, I would have. Perhaps you will not believe that, but it is the truth. But I will admit that you would likely not have been spared, regardless of my feelings. My relationship with my servant was... not like the relationships that you enjoy, I suspect.'

Roman gave Hector a sidelong glance. The expression on his face

looked at first doubtful, then perhaps just worried about Hector again.

Hmm. Did he really look that bad, right now? Well, he sure felt like it, so it wouldn't be that surprising. Was his neck broken? And maybe his spine, too? Agh, he didn't want to think about it. Better to focus on the conversation.

""Are you telling us that you were just a hapless victim this whole time?"" said Hector. ""That Banda Toro was the only one who meant us harm?""

"3262

'No,' said Grigozo. 'I will make no such excuses for my involvement. Though I was an unwilling participant for many years, it would be both naive and disrespectful to claim total innocence. In fact, if I were so innocent, then it would not be mercy on your part to spare me. It would simply be the right thing to do. Mercy, I feel, is a thing that can only be rightly granted to someone who has transgressed, as I have. So please, have mercy upon me, Lord Darksteel.'

Roman gave an audible sniff. ""When the fighting stops, all of a sudden you're a philosopher, huh?""

'I would not refuse such a flattering label,' said Grigozo. 'Though, the truth may in fact be that I am simply attempting to continue talking in the hope that my death will be prolonged even just one second more. I cannot claim to be in the most cogent of mind states, currently. Perhaps I am being foolish, but I cannot seem to stop talking. Is there anything you would ask of me? I assure you that I will be entirely honest, if only to increase my odds of survival by the barest margin.'

Holy shit.

'Please, anything you wish to know is fair game. Hold nothing back. Regarding me? Banda? Abolish? I will speak of whatever you wish. Nothing is off limits.'

Well, more info on Abolish certainly wouldn't hurt, Hector supposed. One thing in particular came to mind, actually. ""What can you tell me of Lozaro?""

'Ah. You know of him already. Yes, that is indeed a wicked man if ever

there was one. I have met him several times, though our most recent encounters have been far more memorable--and not for pleasant reasons. Are you perhaps curious about the monstrous Chaos form that Banda took during the fight? I could tell you quite a bit about that, too, if you are interested. Though, admittedly, it is still rather mysterious to me in many ways, as well. Perhaps I should not overpromise. Ah--'

Grigozo sounded strangely calm and articulate, despite how much he seemed to be floundering. The reaper's fear was still apparent, but Hector found it curious, nonetheless. He wondered what this reaper was like when he wasn't scared shitless.

'Lozaro, yes? You were asking about Lozaro. Indeed, I can tell you about him. But is there anything in particular that you would like to know? I, ah, seem to be having trouble summoning any specific piece of information to mind on my own, at the moment. If you would be so kind as to point me toward a point of interest, then I am sure I could--'

He was just going to keep going until someone butted in, wasn't he?"  
"3263

""Do you know Lozaro's current whereabouts?"" said Hector.

'Yes,' said Grigozo. 'Or at least, I know where he is most likely to be found. If you are to seek him out, however, then I would advise you to be exceptionally cautious in your approach. He is a man that has been on the run for many years from not only the Vanguard but also the Mad Demon himself. Lozaro is a man paranoid beyond measure. Any sign that something is amiss, and he will flee--and be quite difficult to pursue, I suspect.'

""So?"" said Roman. ""Where is this guy, then?""

'If you accept my surrender, and give me your word that you will not kill me, then I will happily tell you.'

""Uh-huh..."" Roman gave Hector another look. He seemed like he had plenty of questions for Hector, too, but now obviously wasn't the time for them.

Hector still wanted to wait for Garovel's input before formally accepting,

but... he was already feeling quite certain that he wasn't going to kill a defenseless, surrendering reaper. That just seemed flatly too cruel.

He decided to ask one more thing first, though.

""If I were to ransom you to someone, would you rather they were with the Vanguard or Abolish?""

At that, Grigozo seemed to finally struggle with finding his words.

Hector just waited, though.

'That... seems a loaded question to me.'

""Why?""

'You ask me to choose between certain death and a life of torment.'

""You really think the Vanguard would kill you when you have so much valuable information you could share with them?""

'Yes. If I were lucky, they would milk me for all I was worth and then put me to the sword. If I were unlucky, then I would be given over to one of the many malevolent idiots that infest their ranks, and they would simply skip to the end. Either way, it is not something I would choose.'

'Hector,' arrived Garovel's private voice.

Ah. Hector searched for the reaper's presence and found it, though it was still fairly far away. 'Garovel, I think I'm just going to accept his surrender.'

There came a pause. No doubt, Garovel was not pleased with being left out of the fight again and wanted to give him a piece of his mind, but the reaper stayed on topic. 'You sure about that?'

'Yeah. We can keep him prisoner, can't we?'

'We can. What's his name, though?'

'Grigozo.'

'...Alright, that's fine for now.'"

"3264

There was a certain degree of reluctance in Garovel's voice, and Hector couldn't exactly blame him. It was hard to cut Abolish any sort of slack. Maybe this was more than Grigozo deserved.

""Well, you can relax a little,"" said Hector. ""We accept your surrender.""

Garovel hovered up behind Hector's shoulder. 'Hello there, Grigozo. My name is Garovel, reaper to Lord Darksteel here.'

Hector could feel Garovel trying to find an opening in his armor, presumably to invoke the regeneration and numbing vigor, but the reaper was apparently having difficulty. Which was a bit strange. But after a couple moments, Hector just dematerialized his right pauldron.

Oh god, that felt better. And he could see clearly again, too. With his actual eyeballs. He'd almost forgotten that was even possible.

And to his mild surprise, Grigozo's blurry, blobby form didn't become much crisper like everything else in sight did. Perhaps it was the after effects of pan-rozum. Or maybe from releasing Banda's soul? Hector had never seen a reaper do that before, now that he was thinking about it.

In his foremost thought process, however, Hector had to confirm something with Garovel. 'Banda's soul isn't there anymore, right?'

'Yeah, it's gone. Ugh.'

Banda's leftover husk was now much clearer as well, and Hector could understand the reaper's disgust. The smoking, distorted corpse was even more grotesque than he expected it to be. The skin was already an ashen gray and beginning to flake off.

'Y-you...' Grigozo's form shuddered visibly, though Hector wasn't sure why. 'You were not even using pan-rozum during that fight?'

Oh.

Uh.

Hmm.

Garovel chose to skip past that question, which was probably the right

thing to do. 'You're not looking so good. I think we'll let you get some rest before we continue with the questioning. Unless, of course, there is something particularly pressing that you feel we should know right away. Such as another imminent attack, perhaps? Being forthright with that information would go a long way with us.'

'I... ah...' Apparently, Grigozo needed a few more moments to answer. 'I... could be mistaken, of course, as Bloodeye's mind is at times even a mystery to Bloodeye himself, I think. But with that being said, I believe that Bloodeye will not risk another attack on you any time soon. Truthfully, he should not have even bothered with this first attempt in sending Banda. When we do not report back, he will likely realize that this continued pursuit is not worth the resource expenditure.'"

"3265

Hector had to wonder if that was really true. Sure would've been nice if it was, but his natural pessimism made it all but impossible to believe it. And while he didn't know much about Bloodeye, the guy didn't seem like the type to let things go. ""You really think he'll give up just like that? I was under the impression that he wants the Sunsmith's head really badly.'"

'Oh, he does,' said Grigozo. 'You are certainly not mistaken about that. But even with the victory at Uego, the situation in Sair is still tenuous. If that country slips away from Abolish's grasp, much of the blame will fall upon him. A loss here, to you, will not likely affect his reputation much, but a loss there would be devastating.'

Hmm. When he put it like that, Hector was abruptly tempted to march over there and start raising hell. If most of the Rainlords weren't still in Vantalay, then he would've been more than just tempted.

The conversation didn't last much longer from there, as Grigozo's tone began to quickly sound more haggard and less focused. Perhaps the reaper was just faking it in order to persuade them to let him rest, but judging by Grigozo's visibly trembling form, Hector doubted it. He didn't have trouble believing that the exhaustion was simply catching up to the reaper now that the question of his immediate survival had been answered.

And so, they headed back to Warrenhold.

Banda Toro's ashen husk was not left behind, either. Maybe it wasn't appropriate to take his body with them, but leaving him there in the middle of an open field seemed pretty weird, too. Whether or not they would grant him a proper burial was also a lingering question in Hector's mind, but at the very least, he figured that some of their people might want to study his remains in order to learn more about this mysterious ""Chaos form,"" as Grigozo called it.

He expected Garovel to finally give him a piece of his mind on the way back, but the reaper merely remained quiet the whole time. Granted, it wasn't actually that far, so maybe Garovel was just waiting until they had more time and privacy.

But there was quite a bit to do before they would have that, it seemed.

Because Hahl Saqqaf had arrived in force while he was away. A couple of Abbas' sons met up with them before they even landed and began asking about the situation, as well as everyone's condition. Hector could sense Pauline lingering nearby, too."

"3266

Raheem Saqqaf was Abbas' eldest son. His square jawline might've at first given the impression that he was a stern, no-nonsense type of man, but Hector had come to know that he was actually quite tender-hearted, which perhaps explained the softness in his eyes--and why he was the first one to approach and ask after Hector's well-being.

Hector was still struggling to learn all the other names. Abbas had so many sons and grandsons that it was hard to keep track. He was glad they were all here, though, because it meant that Warrenhold had ample protection while he'd been away.

When he finally met up with Abbas himself, the man of course had questions for him, but Hector just wanted to know that everyone was safe, first.

""They are, indeed,"" said the Sunsmith as they arrived in the East Hall, the largest chamber in the Entry Tower. The man was in his own armor, which was quite a bit bulkier than Hector's, making it more of a task to navigate these narrow staircases. He made do, though. ""All have been accounted for. And it would seem you have already taken care of the battle for us. I feel a bit silly now for worrying so much.""



Hector exhaled a heavy breath. ""I'd say you were worried just the right amount. That fight was no picnic.""

""Ah... in that case, I apologize for not arriving more swiftly."" Abbas had been in turns eyeing the boxed-up husk and also Hector himself. ""New armor? When and where did you come by this?""

""That's, uh... I'm not entirely sure how to answer that, actually..."" Hector took a seat at a large table, and everyone else began following suit, save Abbas. He heard his poor chair groan under his sudden weight, then he decided he might be better off standing, after all.

Which apparently made everyone uncertain about whether they should sit or stand back up to, too.

Aw, shit. Uh. ""Er, no, please sit, everyone."" The awkwardness permeated the room, but they listened.

Hector removed his helmet. He had a little trouble getting it off at first, but it came free. He didn't want to just dematerialize it, in the hopefully off-chance that he wouldn't be able to rematerialize it again. He planned to have Abbas examine it later, but first things needed to come first. He looked toward Badat Saqqaf, the youngest of Abbas' great grandsons--or, probably the youngest, Hector thought. ""Would you mind running to the Tower of Night and telling everyone it's safe to come out?""

The fully-robed boy gave a furious nod and bolted off, disappearing down the staircase on the far side of the room."

"3267

A few at the table were staring at him with wide-eyes, Hector noticed.

'You're covered in blood,' said Garovel privately.

Ah. That made more sense.

This new armor had certainly done its job better than Hector ever could have hoped for, but even so, if he hadn't been undead, he likely would've ended up no more than canned meat by the time that fight had concluded.

But he could worry about that later.

Hector held up the iron box holding the captured reaper. ""This is Grigozo. He was the reaper to Banda Toro, whose empty husk is over there."" He motioned toward the much larger box behind him. ""Grigozo has surrendered and offered to tell us all he knows of Abolish or anything else. I was thinking of letting Hahl Saqqaf take the first crack at him, while I get some rest.""

Raheem perked up on the other side of the table. ""A generous offer, Lord. Thank you.""

Something tickled the back of Hector's mind, though. A thought or feeling that he couldn't quite recall but that still prompted him to say something more. ""He is still my prisoner, however. I will be upset if I find out later that he has been mistreated. Is that clear?""

Raheem settled back down a little, then looked toward Abbas.

""It is,"" said the Sunsmith, his expression unreadable beneath his armor.

""I'm sure Grigozo is still exhausted from the fight himself, so if he needs time to rest, then that's fine. I think we can afford to have some patience, now.""

""Very well,"" said Abbas. ""And why have you brought Banda's body back with you?""

""In case someone wanted to study it,"" said Hector. ""Your hahl is free to take first crack at that, too. In fact, now may be your best chance while most of the Rainlords are away.""

""Hmm."" Abbas took a step toward Banda. ""This fellow was like Bloodeye, yes?""

""Yeah. I figured that might interest you.""

""Interest may be a strong word. But if nothing else, I suppose I should take a look at his remains so that we might be better prepared to fight more of their ilk.""

Hector looked toward Raheem again. ""Would you mind taking Grigozo off my hands?""

""Not at all, Lord."" Raheem stood and came over to do exactly so.

""Where am I to take him?""

""The West Hall in the Star Tower should be fine. You can introduce him to Ericoros, if you want, but have some other reapers present, please.""

The man returned a firm nod. ""As you say, Lord."" And he was off."  
"3268

It felt more than a little strange to have a man who was probably three times his age or more being so polite to him, but Hector tried not to let it bother him. There were more pressing matters in the moment.

With Grigozo out of the way, he could talk more freely to Abbas. ""I'd also like you to take a look at this for me,"" he said, handing his helmet over to the Sunsmith.

Abbas took it, though not without hesitation. ""Why? You do not already know what it is?""

""I... have an idea, but I'm not sure.""

""Is it not simply an alternate isotope of your normal iron?""

At that, Hector had to pause. He supposed that was technically possible, too. Isotopes hadn't even crossed his mind. That was something he'd been planning to put more effort into practicing, but there were always so many other things competing for his attention. Plus, he wasn't sure how useful it would even be, at this point. ""...Actually, I think it might be composed of the same material as the Amir-9.""

""Excuse me?!"" said Abbas.

'What the fuck?' added Garovel privately.

'I've got a lot to tell you later,' thought Hector.

'Sounds like it.'

Abbas pulled him aside, though still not out of earshot of the others. ""How in the world could that possibly be?!""

Hector could sense the other Saqqafs leaning over the table, straining to hear. ""It's... uh... kind of hard to explain.""

""Hector. I'm beginning to notice a pattern with you...""

""What do you mean?""

Rather than answering, the armored man merely sighed.

""Oh, and there's a possibility that someone from the Vanguard might show up here in Atreya, soon.""

""What?!""

""They'll be looking for me, not you. But if you're concerned about them discovering your whereabouts, you should probably be extra cautious around here--at least until I tell you otherwise. I have to get in contact with the Magician of Light, first.""

""The Magician of--?!""

'Hector, what the fuck are you talking about?'

Okay, maybe he was info-dumping a little too hard on them here. He scratched his head, trying to rethink his approach. ""Look, everything's fine. I just... might've... slipped through a dimensional portal or something during my fight with Banda. And then some... weird shit happened, and, uh...""

""Oh!"" said Roman, who was suddenly standing there next to him.

""When you got eaten! So that's how you were able to claw your way back out, then? Because of some weird shit?""

""Uh...""

"3269

The conversation didn't get much better from there. Multiple times, Hector had to struggle for the right words, reiterate points, and even start over to try and explain things chronologically.

He told them about the fight, about the lower realm of pure iron, about the creation of the new armor, and about his encounter with the Magician. Then about the fight again thereafter. That part seemed to

create the most confusion, somehow. Probably because he sucked so bad at explaining.

But eventually, everyone seemed to understand. For the most part. Either that, or they simply grew too tired of trying to figure out what he was saying. They all had other things to be doing, after all.

They all went their separate ways, save Hector and Garovel, who headed over to his room in the Tower of Night so that he could get some sleep.

As they made their way across the high bridge that connected the Tower of Day to the Tower of Night, Hector couldn't help feeling like the reaper was being suspiciously quiet. He wasn't sure if he wanted to say anything yet, though.

The view, at least, was quite incredible from the tall, paneless windows along the bridge. All the little lanterns that now outlined each of the eight great towers and central courtyard below created a kind of starlit look to the giant cavern, as if the whole night sky had somehow been captured and brought down here.

Perhaps Garovel was too enraptured by the sight to say anything, at the moment.

Hector highly doubted it, though.

As they neared his room, however, the reaper finally spoke up, albeit privately.

'We need to have a serious conversation, Hector.'

He'd been getting that impression, as well. 'About you being left out of fights?'

'Yes. This can't continue.'

Hector exhaled a heavy breath and started up the final staircase to his room. 'Garovel...'

'Hear me out. I get it. You just want to protect me. And I appreciate that. I know it comes from a place of good intent. But I also can't just sit on the sidelines and let you go out there, alone. And yes, things have worked out well enough for you so far, but I'm sure that you yourself will admit that a lot of that has come down to either luck or things beyond your own control.'

Hector reached the top of the stairs and stopped. He could tell how important this was to Garovel, so he didn't want to just brush the reaper off.

But at the same time, he didn't know if Garovel knew how important this was to him. How important he was to him."

"3270

'There was no way I could bring you with me on this fight, Garovel. Not when I was so uncertain that I would even be able to DO anything. Exposing you to that kind of danger would've been pointless.'

'The point, my dear friend, is so that I could have helped you. Hector, I realize that you want to keep me safe, but you must also realize that I want to keep you safe, as well. And I can't do that if you keep pushing me away like this.'

Hector finished the journey to his bedroom and closed the door behind him. He flipped the light on and found it just as he'd left it. More space than he would probably ever need. His armor continued to clink as he went straight for his bed and sat down.

He didn't start taking off his armor yet, though. He just looked up at the reaper there.

At his best friend.

'Garovel, I don't...' Agh. How was he supposed to put this? He scratched his brow. 'Look. I'm happy that you care about me so much that you're willing to risk your own life in order to protect me. But... you also don't need to act like I am as important to you as you are to me.'

The reaper's skull reared back a little. 'What are you talking about? ""Act like?"" I'm not acting. You ARE that important to me, Hector. Do you not realize--?'

'No. It's okay. I'm not saying that to be mean. But let's be honest here. I'm just one of... twenty-two servants that you've had, right? So you've been through this song and dance before. Plenty of times.'

'Hector, that doesn't--'

'Listen! It's okay, Garovel! It really is!' Hector almost wanted to laugh. The reaper truly didn't get it, did he? 'I'm not saying that you think of me as just some tool to be used and thrown away or anything like that. Okay? I understand that you're concerned about me. But it's not the same from my end, Garovel. Not even close. To me, you are... you are more important than anything. I mean, you... you saved me.' He shook his head and laughed faintly. 'And I don't just mean with the whole undead thing, either. I mean... when I had no one, I had you.'

Garovel made no response.

'And you're still there for me. You haven't stopped being there for me this whole time. So to say that I'm as important to you as you are to me... well, that's just not true. Because it can't be. The impact I've had on your life doesn't even compare to the impact you've had on mine. Understand? Garovel, if something ever happened to you, like if you were to get captured by Abolish or something, then I... I don't know what I would do.'"

"3271

'Wow,' was all Garovel said.

Hector just waited, though. He didn't know how to follow up after saying all that.

Garovel seemed to be having trouble, too. 'Okay, well, um... I really wasn't expecting you to pour your heart out to me like that, Hector. I'm quite uncertain what to say now. How dare you say all of those nice things. You know I don't take sincere compliments well. You have to layer them with sarcasm or insults. Or sarcastic insults.'

'Oh, is that how it is?' said Hector. 'Well, maybe if you weren't so stupid, then you would've understood all of that stuff already and saved me the trouble of saying in the first place.'

'Yeah, okay, that's more like it. Thanks.'

'You're welcome.' Hector lay back on his bed. He still hadn't taken his armor off, save the helmet, which was with Abbas now. He didn't much feel like moving, was the problem. Taking this off was going to be a pain. Or perhaps even impossible.

'...I really mean that much to you, huh?' said Garovel. 'You sure you're not just saying that because the reality of the situation is that keeping me out of combat is the pragmatic thing to do?'

Hector arched his head up to look at the reaper again. 'Of course not. Although, that IS true. If I get killed, it's barely an issue. If you do, we're both fucked. I get that you want to contribute and be helpful, but you already are, Garovel. In so many other ways.'

'Mrgh.'

Hector cocked an eyebrow. 'Did you just growl at me?'

'Maybe. Y'know, it's really unfair when you make your case from both a rational and an emotional standpoint. How the hell am I supposed argue against that, huh? This is bullshit.'

Hector just laughed.

'Alright, you little jerk. Fine. I'll trust your judgment and stop causing a fuss when you run off all by yourself from now on. But I do think we need to train together more. In the event that I'm forced into the fight, it's best if we're prepared for it.'

'I can agree with that.'

'And besides, I'm increasingly coming to believe that the safest place I could possibly be is right there by your side.'

At that, he had to sit up again. 'I'd... like for that to be true, but I don't think I'm there yet, Garovel.'

"3272

'Of course you don't,' said Garovel. 'But c'mon, now. You just brought down Banda Toro in single combat. Frankly, you had no right winning that. And yet you did.'

'Well, eh... I mean, I didn't really win, though. His reaper released him before the fight could be decided, so--'

'Oh no, no, no. You're not going to get away with doing this again. You always try to pull this shit. Everyone else sees what you did and realizes that it's amazing, but then you constantly find things to nitpick



so that you can continue to feel all self-conscious and unworthy of all the praise you've just earned. Nice try, buddy, but not this time.'

'I... uh...'

'Yeah, that's right. You've got nothin' to say, because you know that I'm right and that you're wrong. Just take the win, Hector.'

This seemed like one of those things that Garovel was going to harp on and never let go, for some reason. And while Hector appreciated the reaper's fervor, he didn't feel like getting sucked into some kind of back-and-forth silliness, right now.

Maybe later.

'Alright, Garovel, whatever you say.' He started working on getting his armor off, starting with the gauntlets. They were being stingy, though, as if they were glued to him.

It didn't take long for Garovel comment. 'What're you doing?'

'Trying to get this stuff off.' Agh. Goddammit.

'Just dematerialize it.'

He kept struggling with the first gauntlet. 'This armor is brand new and super weird. I'm kinda worried that if I dematerialize it, I might not be able to rematerialize it.'

'You already rematerialized it, though.'

Hector paused. 'What? No, I didn't.'

'Yeah, pal, you did. When I invoked the healing, back when you were still talking to Grigozo. You dematerialized that shoulder piece there to let me touch you, then immediately rematerialized it thereafter.'

Hector paused again. And kept pausing.

'...Did you really forget?'

Hector puffed up his cheeks as he recalled. Then he exhaled through his mouth. Dammit, the reaper was right.

'Wow,' Garovel went on. 'I know you have the flawed memory of a filthy corporeal being, but goddamn, Hector. That was like twenty minutes ago.'

He dematerialized most of the armor at once. His clothes were shredded, save only the Scarf. 'Why is it that whenever I start to feel kind of smart, I always end up doing something that reminds me I'm actually a big dumbass?'

The reaper chortled. 'Does that really keep happening to you?'

'It sure feels like it!'

'Maybe it's the universe's way of keeping you humble.'"  
"3273

'Weren't you just telling me that I need to be more self-confident or some shit?' said Hector.

'That was different.'

'How was it different?'

'It just was. Stop questioning me.'

Hector snickered and shook his head. He rematerialized one of his gauntlets, just to make sure that he could. Yep. Worked just fine. That was a relief, at least.

He yawned. Man, he was exhausted.

And it was more than just his body, he realized. He'd felt this way before. It felt like his soul was tired. Or maybe his aura? Or neither? He had no idea how else to describe this sensation, whatever it was. He just knew he needed to sleep.

He lay back down after dematerializing the last of bits of armor on him. He could change his shredded clothes later.

Right as his head hit the pillow, however, his eyes eased open and stayed that way.

Because he remembered something else that he'd forgotten.

Multiple somethings, as a matter of fact. All assaulting his mind at once.

Fuck.

He sighed and sat back up. It was going to be a while before he was allowed to get some sleep, he knew.

He looked for his phone. It was there on the night stand next to his bed.

He called Carl Rondel, the Vanguardian advisor to the President of Lorent.

Thankfully, the man picked immediately. <""Yes? Any updates for me?"">

""My home was attacked by some of Bloodeye's scouts,"" said Hector. ""But it's been taken care of. What about you? Any news for me?""

<""They attacked Warrenhold?!"">

""Yeah, but we're all good, now. No casualties.""

<""But there's been no other attacks reported! Why would they skip all the way to your fortress in Atreya without invading Lorent first?"">

That was indeed a good question, Hector felt. ""It was a scouting party,"" he reiterated. ""Could be that they're still uncertain about whether they should invade Lorent or not.""

<""Then Zaman's information was off. The fool said a major offensive into Lorent was imminent."">

""It'd be nice if he was wrong, but it's a bit early to be feeling relieved. You're sure there's been no other activity?""

<""I'm certain. I have men stationed in almost every city in the country, providing constant updates and check-ins. If an attack is launched, I will know of it in minutes, one way or another."">

Hmm. Maybe Carl had more people working for him than Hector thought. ""Alright, well, call me if something develops, and I'll provide support however I can.""

"3274

<""Very well, then. But who was it that attacked you, exactly? Did you get their names?"">

""Banda Toro was their leader.""

There arrived a rustling sound. <""You fought Banda Toro?!"">

""Yeah."" Briefly, Hector considered mentioning the Magician of Light, too. It might be fun to hear Carl's reaction to that. He decided against it, though. He didn't know if Xander would appreciate having his name thrown around for shits and giggles. ""He brought a party of twenty-seven.""

<""Twen--?!"">

Not all of them had escaped or been killed. Some, Pauline had managed to capture with her psychic powers. What to do with them, Hector still had to decide. Thankfully, Warrenhold was not lacking space for prisoners, and he would likely have plenty more time to mull his decision over. Joana Cortes had taken point on handling them. He'd have to talk to her soon.

As for this conversation, however, Hector wasn't totally comfortable telling all of the details to Carl--specifically, the fact that he had captured Banda Toro's reaper. He knew only too well now that Carl was reporting on him back to his superiors in the Vanguard.

He could still tell Carl one more thing, though. ""Banda Toro is dead.""

<""You... you slew the Raptor of Kortan?"">

Egh. Technically, no. But he didn't want Carl to ask about the reaper. So he decided to ignore the question and move on. ""With their scouting mission a failure, I'm not sure what Bloodeye's next move will be. If he doesn't invade Lorent soon, then he may not do it at all, now.""

<""Ah... yes, perhaps. His attention is no doubt divided numerous ways. But a scouting party of twenty-seven seems quite a large commitment of resources. Were they all servants?"">

""...I'm not sure,"" Hector admitted. The thought that some of them might have been normal human beings hadn't even entered his mind, but he supposed it was possible.

He felt a bit worse about shredding some of them to pieces with iron.

And considering it was Abolish, could some of them have been forced into that mission against their will?

Maybe he would ask Grigozo about that later.

Those were all thoughts for background thought processes, though.

""You should talk to Ravi again. Ask him for an update from whoever his source is.""

Carl groaned. <""Fine."">

The Vanguardian had a few more questions for him, but Hector couldn't provide any answers. They soon ended their call, and Hector moved on to his next task.

Finding Pauline."

"3275

He also needed to update the Queen, of course, but checking up on Pauline's well-being was more pressing, he felt. While he was fairly sure that the Sparrow hadn't gotten hurt during the fight, he wanted to be certain. Plus, there were a few other things he needed to talk to her about.

The trek was annoyingly long, though. All the way back down the Tower of Night, across the courtyard. But before he could make it back to the Entry Tower, however, the Saqqafs found him again.

""You are not resting?"" said Abbas.

""I was going to, but I forgot to take care of some things,"" he said.  
""Did you need something?""

""I wasn't going to bother you, but while you're here--"" Abbas was still armored up, and he showed both of his empty hands to Hector, which was momentarily confusing. ""--the helmet you gave me to examine has disappeared.""

What? Oh. That was strange. Had he done that accidentally when he dematerialized the rest of the armor? He rematerialized it into his hand and offered it again. ""Huh. Sorry about that.""

Abbas took it, then held up an armored finger. ""One moment, please."" Then he leapt away from the ground, rocketing up toward the distant cavern ceiling, reaching all the way to the place where the Tower of Night met the gray stalactites. He hovered there for a second, then came quickly back down and landed in exactly the same spot.

Hector noticed instantly. The dark helmet was no longer in his hands.

""Yes,"" said Abbas. ""You did not do that, I assume? It appears to be dematerializing on its own once it is beyond a certain proximity to you.""

Oh.

Hmm.

""This material is clearly quite different from your normal iron,"" said Abbas. ""It even breaks the conventional rules of materialization.""

Hector scratched his temple. ""Well, that's good to know, at least. I guess I won't be making any spare copies of my armor, then.""

""It would seem so. And if I am to study this material, you must remain close to me.""

Dang. ""Then I suppose we'll do that later. The other things I have to do right now can't wait.""

""I thought you might say that,"" said Abbas. He nodded to someone behind him, then waved them closer. ""In that case, Haqq will follow you around and perform preliminary examinations on it for us.""

And Hector blinked as Haqq Najir stepped forward."

Haqq Najir, of course, was a man that he had met before, back at the Golden Fort in Sair. He was also the brother of Asad Najir. And in their last meeting, Haqq had not been particularly nice.

Hector had known that Haqq was with Hahl Saqqaf's entourage this whole time, but he had yet to actually have a face-to-face with the man again. Which seemed strange, considering how prominent of a figure Haqq was within the Sandlords. And Hector had been wanting to talk to him, too, if only to see how the man was handling the news of his brother's capture at Uego.

But Hector had just been so busy. And seeking Haqq out hadn't seemed that important.

Here and now, Haqq Najir was looking rather haggard--not very much like the busy, attentive man of science that he had before.

Perhaps that wasn't so surprising, though. His escape from Sair had no doubt been a harrowing one. In fact, the look on his bespectacled face reminded Hector of Salvador Delaguna, a man who had lost many family members recently.

Thinking about all that, it was hard to keep the concern from his voice, but he tried. ""Hello again, Lord Haqq,"" said Hector, offering a handshake.

It took the man a few moments to shake it and meet Hector's gaze. ""Hello, Lord Goffe..."

Hector felt like he should say something more, but nothing came to mind. And a brief silence arrived.

Abbas seized the opening. ""Well, it would seem that I am not needed in the defense of Warrenhold,"" he said, ""so if it is all the same to you Lord Goffe, I shall simply leave a couple of my sons here with you and then return to Lorent. There is more work that I would see done. Perhaps you could call me when you are prepared for the examination?""

Hector gave the man an affirmative nod. ""Alright.""

And since he was already heading in that direction, Hector ventured with them back up through the Entry Tower and saw them off.

Apparently, they'd brought a helicopter, though not all of them needed to use it.

Only a handful of Saqqafs remained behind, along with Haqq Najir.

Hector bid the others to go back down into the castle and make themselves at home, but Haqq stayed with him, as per his assignment.

Then it was just Hector, Haqq, and Garovel.

'...Where is your reaper?' asked Garovel."

"3277

""Sazandara has been captured,"" said Haqq.

Hector's eyes widened a little. That was news to him. ""Do you know where she is being held?""

Haqq shook his head. And after a moment, he seemed to realize something. ""Ah, but I should clarify. She was not captured by Abolish, which is a small mercy, I suppose.""

'If not by Abolish, then who?' said Garovel.

""Hahl Mateen."" Haqq's weary gaze became briefly sterner as the name left his lips. ""She was visiting them when word of the invasion arrived. A perfectly amicable meeting between old friends. Until that news changed everything. The Mateens went into hiding and took her with them, as their prisoner.""

A glum silence filled the air until Garovel's soft voice broke it. 'They must not want her feeding you information regarding their whereabouts.'

""That is what she surmised, as well,"" said Haqq.

Damn. Hector knew the relations between the Hahls were bad, right now, but taking prisoners? That spoke of an extreme degree of paranoia. Or even malicious intent, maybe. If they wanted bargaining chips for future negotiations, then reapers made for pretty strong ones.

""But at least I know they will not harm her."" The man sighed. ""Unlike my brother...""



Agh. Hector felt for him. He wished there was some way of helping Asad. Knowing that he was in Morgunov's clutches couldn't have been much more comforting than news that he'd been killed. ""Rasalased told me that he thinks Asad will make it through this.""

Okay, maybe Rasalased hadn't used those exact words, but that had been the general sentiment that Hector had inferred.

Haqq didn't look particularly comforted, however.

Hector decided to drop the subject.

Before they got any closer to Pauline's nest, Hector suddenly thought better of having Haqq present for this. He doubted that she would appreciate being introduced to more strangers.

Well, her father wouldn't appreciate it, at least. She'd probably be delighted, now that he was thinking about it.

Either way, Hector asked Haqq to return to the castle, too. The man protested, though not hard, and then was off.

Pauline's nest was in the center of the decoy castle, at the top of an iron tower. He planned to provide her with a better one, eventually, but thus far, she'd seemed largely satisfied with it.

Thankfully, he could already sense her there via the Scarf of Amordiin.

But she was not alone. Which alarmed him.

Hector sensed the outlines of many other people surrounding her."  
"3278

He clapped the dark armor back on and launched himself all the way up to her nest with a single, precise platform. The power behind the platform had to be just right in order for him to stick his landing with any kind of grace, but unfortunately, he didn't yet have enough experience using platforms while wearing this new armor.

He undershot it and just barely managed to grab the ledge before falling back down. He needed the aid of a hovering platform in order to pull himself over fully.

Dammit, said a background thought process. That was dumb. This armor was way heavier, so of course a move like that would be harder. He should've just raised a platform up like an elevator instead of trying to be all quick and flashy like a cool guy.

Pauline was invisible, as were all the people around her, but Hector could sense that she was staring at him now.

Well, that was embarrassing.

The invisibility melted away as she presumably realized there was no need for it.

And Hector could see the situation more clearly. The people surrounding her were rather odd-looking. They were still moving, though only just--and quite stiltedly, too. And their eyes--they were about as empty as could be. As if the lights were on but nobody was home.

'And here we have the Lord Goffe,' said Pauline. 'Wave hello, everyone!'

They all waved in perfect unison, though their movements were not smooth or natural-looking at all.

Hector began to get the picture ""...What are you doing?"" he said with a sigh.

'Oh, just killing time while I await some dashing hero to come check on me and make sure I'm not dead. What took you so long, huh? I get bored easily, you know.'

""I can see that...""

'Heh. Just thought I'd have some fun with our prisoners. I haven't played with humans like this since I was just a little chick.' Her feathers bristled for a moment. 'Because it's unethical to do on normal people, I mean. I didn't know any better back then. Hadn't yet developed into the mature and charming beacon of moral virtue that I am today.'

Hector abruptly felt stupid for having worried.

'Nice armor you got there, by the way,' she went on. 'Making a new fashion statement? Quite dark and scary. Oh, is it to intimidate your enemies? You should add some horns in that case. Or like an evil

face, maybe."  
"3279 -- CCLXXVII.

Casual though she sounded, Hector had to take pause at what she was doing here. It looked harmless enough, he supposed, but this was also the first time he was seeing a Sparrow using their mind powers to manipulate a person's body. ""Is that... just your normal telekinesis?"" he asked. ""Or are you actually manipulating their brains in order to make their limbs move?"" Perhaps that was a distinction without a difference, but to him, the latter seemed far scarier than the former.

Pauline tilted her head at him, taking a moment to deliberate. 'It's telekinesis. I don't think taking over the brain in such a way is even possible.'

Hector doubted that. Not her word but her opinion. Impossible? Unlikely. Such a power was far too similar to that of Geoffrey Rofal. Maybe he was mistaken and aberration abilities were not really comparable, but he had a feeling that there weren't many things that were truly impossible in this world.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Seven: 'O, pernicious Weasel...'

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Boy, these Vantalayans were a real mess. Both politically and psychologically, they were all over the place. Saying one thing, doing the opposite. Arguing over minutiae and trivialities for hours. Perceiving slights left and right. Reading the absolute worst into every single person who didn't share their heady opinions about how their government should function.

Vanderberk found them hilarious.

So easy to provoke. One little word, one little idea floated in their direction--that was all it took to set some of these people off.

He had to give them credit, though. They weren't cowards. They spoke their minds, even to their bosses. Even to their bosses' bosses.

Even to him.

Granted, the latter was none too smart on their part, but Vanderberk could respect it. Not enough to let the ones who annoyed him live, but he could respect it. He made sure they were properly buried afterward, at least. Courage deserved some kind of reward, after all.

This whole war front was quite the shit show. The Vantalayan borders were a constant battleground in both the east and west. Vantalay, alone, was fighting four separate nations in this war. Lyste in the west, and Naos, Yena Maria, and Czacoa in the east. Thankfully, those last three were tiny countries with scarcely enough independent military power to take down a few violent smugglers, let alone the Vantalayan Armed Forces."

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"3280

But they had support. From the Vanguard, most obviously, but also from other, quieter sources, Vanderberk knew. Possibly Intar, if the rumors were true, though he didn't know if he believed them. Steccat seemed much more likely to his mind, though he doubted he would ever find proof of that. Those elitist Steccacti pricks were as secretive as they were insufferable, but they had to know that if Vantalay won this war, it wouldn't be good for them in the long term. It would probably just be a matter of a few years until these gutsy Vantalayans decided to launch another invasion north.

And Void willing, Vanderberk would be there for that war, too.

Why Steccat hadn't joined in on the action already, he could probably

guess. Sai-hee was rumored to have a vice grip on that country's political landscape, and she hated getting directly involved in war unless someone forced her hand.

Not the best policy, he felt. But what did he know? She was the empress, not him. She probably had other reasons, too.

Other excuses, heh.

And then, of course, there were these Rainlords.

A bigger thorn in his side, he had not experienced in some time. They were entirely unpredictable to his mind, right now: the big wild card in this mess at the edge of the continent.

And in fact, there was an argument to be made that their decisions here could determine the course of the entire war. If the Vantalayan conflict found a decisive victor soon, the winner would then have considerable resources to send to the other fronts.

With Calthos on the verge of complete conquest and Kavia also doing well, help from Vantalay could quite easily push one or even both of those conflicts over the edge in Abolish's favor.

A decisive victory here might very well mean a decisive victory in three out of the five main fronts.

That was the best case scenario, though. Vanderberk knew better than to put all his eggs in that basket. Things rarely went so smoothly. And heck, even if they did, Steccat and Intar would be quite unlikely to standby at that point. Their hands would be forced.

Which, in its own way, would be enough for Abolish. Stirring up a war that involved all three of the Eloan superpowers? That was just about the best thing they could've hoped for, even if the tide then turned against them."

"3281

And even that was debatable. Even with Melmoore, Intar, and Steccat all teaming up against them, Vanderberk didn't think that Abolish would stand no chance, especially if the bosses decided to get more intimately involved in the war again. Heck, such a development might be exactly what was needed in order to prompt them into direct action.

Man, it sure would've been nice if Dozer stepped in, at least. Morgunov had already accomplished more than everyone else combined, so Vanderberk didn't expect him to come back and help out. No doubt, the Mad Demon would be profoundly disappointed in him if Vanderberk thought otherwise.

Morgunov had started this war for them. It was their turn to make him proud.

Dozer, though? Increasingly, Vanderberk didn't know what the others saw in the old man. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd seen or heard of Dozer achieving anything of significance. It was always just idle chatter. Talk of things that would likely never come to pass. Meetings that went nowhere and pushed nothing forward.

Vanderberk had sent word to him in Ardora, asking for his assistance here in Vantalay, but there had of course been no response. Not even a refusal. Just silence. The disrespect in that was palpable.

The Living Void, they called him. As if he were an incarnation of the Void itself, the all-powerful god that every true heart within Abolish loved and revered. Supposedly.

Vanderberk didn't want to doubt him. Didn't want to hate him. He'd admired Dozer since he was himself just a boy. And being able to meet him had been one of the most amazing experiences of his life.

But these days, he couldn't help feeling like all that praise over all those years might've just been undeserved. Compared to Morgunov, Dozer was... unimpressive.

Maybe it was a good sign that he felt this way, though. Maybe it meant that he was beginning to reach that dizzy height himself, and so the others who stood upon their own mountaintops had ceased looking so far away from him.

Heh. Arrogance, many would call that. Of course they would. He supposed he would just have to show them otherwise.

These Rainlords would be a good start, one way or another. Whether they decided to take him up on his offer or foolishly fight him, it was a winning play here for him. With that bastard Graves having already left Ridgemark, there was now no one in this country who could stand against him."

According to his spies and scouts, Graves was off to the Kavia-Hoss front, which was certainly not good news for Jercash, but Vanderberk had already sent word warning him. And even if he hadn't, Jercash probably would've been just fine. The Devil's Knife had a way of coming out on top despite all appearances to the contrary. No doubt, it had much to do with the powerful following he had cultivated for himself.

Now there was a man that Vanderberk felt he could still learn from. If he was being brutally honest with himself, the ability to inspire loyalty was something he'd always struggled with. Abolish's central goals of rampant destruction and genocide made that quite difficult in this modern world. How Jercash managed to pull it off as well as he did, Vanderberk very much wanted to know. The man made it seem so effortless and was always evasive when asked about it directly.

Clever bastard. He didn't want Vanderberk using his tricks to amass a force that could rival his own when the time eventually came for new leadership to take the reins of Abolish.

And in Vanderberk's mind, such a time was soon to arrive. At long last. The first Continental War had proved a similar catalyst. Morgunov and Dozer had hardly budged, of course, but the shake ups everywhere else had been tremendous. In fact, that war had been when Vanderberk first began to distinguish himself as a rising star within the ranks.

Now he was leading. Now he was the one looking for rising stars within his men.

But of course, that was dangerous, too. For some of his men, their concept of career advancement was slaying their superiors and seizing control for themselves. Vanderberk knew he had to be exceedingly cautious, especially because he was the newest and therefore the least respected among the Abolish high command. He would undoubtedly be perceived as the softest target, when compared against the likes of Jercash and Gohvis.

That was, in large part, why he had to be the most ruthless.

If he wasn't proactive in rooting out backstabbers, if he didn't temper



his subordinates' ambitions with fear, they would come for him first.

Here in Vantalay, there were several such dangerous candidates. Thaddeus Croll, Raga Marda, Jan Cross. And others, of course. In some sense, they were bigger threats in this conflict than the enemy was."

"3283

The most danger was when boredom took hold, when the enemy was too weak to even demand consideration. Thankfully, between the RPMP and the Rainlords, there were still a few famed opponents left who could keep his men occupied with their pursuit of glory. Darktide, Evangelina Stroud, the Water Dragon of Sair, the Jailer of Ridgemark, the Linebreaker, the Black Artisan. And a couple others whom had yet to be concretely identified.

Vanderberk rolled his neck while he waited patiently, a smile on his face and his feet up on the warden's desk as he also enjoyed the comfort of the warden's soft, velvety chair. The warden himself was standing on the other side of the room, arguing with his vice-warden over something, making yet another amusing fuss that Vanderberk had ceased paying attention to.

Marda was standing next to them and would soon handle whatever their conflict was, if they didn't handle it themselves. The Demon's Tiger was not given to speaking very often, but when he did, he was not one to be ignored, refused, or even argued with.

The little Rainlord young'un sat in the corner of the warden's office, observing silently. Not that he had much choice, of course. Vanderberk had no intention of letting him move a single muscle until this upcoming meeting was finished.

The Rainlords were certainly taking their sweet time getting back to him. No doubt, they were torn about making any sort of deal with him. This was where his infamy became more of a liability than an aid, but he wasn't too concerned, either way. If they couldn't bring themselves to bargain, then he'd be only too happy to make an example out of them, instead. And not just to the rest of Vantalay but also to his own men. It had been a while since he'd last made a big show of things. Wouldn't hurt to give them another reminder of why they should continue to fear him.

Of course, that wouldn't be ideal. The entire reason he was even making the Rainlords an offer in the first place was because getting them out of here with no further difficulty would afford him much more flexibility and resources for bringing this Vantalayan conflict to a swift conclusion, Ridgemark in particular.

Apparently, the RPMP was proving quite the stubborn group of rebels. Vanderberk had yet to encounter any of their three top warriors himself, but according to his men, they were the primary obstacles in the conquest of Ridgemark."

"3284

The argument between the wardens reached a suddenly heightened pitch, prompting Vanderberk to start paying attention again.

""There must be recompense!"" said the vice-warden in Valgan. ""The prisoner must be made an example of for all to see! Cell Block Y will not settle for anything less! They are already our most volatile guards! If we do nothing to soothe their anger, this problem will worsen!""

Recompense? For what? Oh, were they upset at his treatment of them, Vanderberk wondered? Fragile little egos for fragile little men. A tale as old as time. But wait. Who then was this prisoner they wanted to punish?

""Such a request is improper and unwise!"" said the warden. ""Cease your blustering! There is a bigger picture here!"" He turned to Vanderberk. ""Forgive my vice-warden, sir. He speaks out of turn and knows not the level of respect that you and anyone in your custody deserves.""

Oh, were they talking about the Rainlord kid over there? Vanderberk snickered. They wanted to make an example out of him?

Ah, that was right, wasn't it? The kid did make all of their veteran guardsmen look like fools, after all.

Idiots. Throwing a fit after the fact wasn't making them look any better. But perhaps the vice-warden was exaggerating their frustration. Middle management had a tendency to behave that way. Professing to do something for the sake of those below them, when in reality those

below them couldn't have given less of a shit.

No telling. Vanderberk saw Marda eyeing him, silently waiting for permission. Vanderberk gave him a nod.

The vice-warden spoke up again, but he didn't even make it through his first word before Raga Marda's thick hand found his neck. The vice-warden clutched at the hand, vainly trying to free himself as Marda dragged him out of the office and out of Vanderberk's sight.

This was far from the first time that Marda had handled things in such a way. Honestly, Vanderberk wasn't even sure what the Tiger did with all the people he'd dragged off like that over the years. At first, Vanderberk had thought he was just throwing them out like a typical bouncer, but he'd recently heard some rumors from the men that Marda was actually chopping them up and eating them. Or flaying alive. Or collecting their brains in jars as gifts for Morgunov. Or all of the above, perhaps.

Vanderberk might have to ask him about that later."

"3285

The warden rattled off a few more apologies and then shuffled out of the room. Hopefully, he didn't intend to follow the Tiger and try to get his vice-warden back, otherwise Logden Prison would be needing two new leaders come the morrow.

With everyone but the Rainkid gone, it seemed the entertainment was over for now. Vanderberk exhaled a sigh and eyed the briefcase by his side. He did still have plenty of reports to go over, so he supposed he should take advantage of the down time while it lasted. He usually hated paperwork, but recently, the reports had gotten more interesting, thanks to the war. Being able to get updates on how things were progressing across the continent made all the reading a bit less dry.

Let's see here...

This first one was about Czacoa. Ah. Risto and Voss had broken through the enemy lines? Finally. Oh, but wait, they'd been pushed back. Shit. So much for that. Who pushed them back? Looked like a man named... Harva Zon.

Hmm. Someone else to keep an eye on, he supposed.

The next report was from Melmoore. He prepared himself for bad news. They seemed to be struggling the hardest over there, which perhaps wasn't so surprising since none of their most powerful warriors had been sent to either of those two fronts--the logic being that they were few in number and shouldn't even have been needed, besides. Between Corrico invading from the south and Ostra invading from the north, Melmoore should have been among the easier conquests, even if it was one of the three so-called ""continental superpowers.""

At the outbreak of the war, there had been no prominent Vanguardians stationed there, other than the Surgeon Saint, and he didn't become famous because of his fighting ability.

But apparently, much like here in Vantalay, there were local warriors making an impact over there. And the Surgeon was being no pushover, himself. By now, he'd already decimated two major offensives into the country with little more than a handful of troops at his disposal. Plus, there'd been rumors of ghosts roaming around, haunting encampments, slaughtering men while they slept, and otherwise sowing terror among the ranks.

And indeed, this new report was not a welcome one, either. An informant had learned of a secret meeting to take place in two days between influential political leaders from both Corrico and Melmoore."  
"3286

To Vanderberk's mind, a meeting such as that would only be for one reason. Preliminary peace negotiations. Most probably, for Corrico's eventual surrender. Things were going too well for Melmoore right now for it to be anything else.

Damn, it was too soon. He couldn't leave Vantalay yet. Perhaps he could send someone to bolster Corrico's forces, but who? Agh. He wanted to wait until Graves' name popped up again before committing any men to such an endeavor. There was a decent possibility that Graves was headed to Melmoore, and if so, then sending more men there would be a waste of resources unless Jercash was also sending some. Or Dozer, that old bastard.

Agh. If the Melmoorian invasion was to be salvaged, then something

would have to be shaken loose soon, either here in Vantalay or one of the other fronts. Corrico surrendering so early would lead into Ostra being overwhelmed not long thereafter, and then the Vanguard would be able to divert even more men or resources to other trouble spots.

Such as Sair, where the next report came from. Bloodeye was still having difficulty pushing into the Wetlands, which was at once surprising and also not. The Vanguard presence in that country was so greatly diminished that the task should have been a simple one, but Bloodeye had been stuck for a while now, so the fact that there was no change could not be considered shocking.

The exact question of why was still a persistent one, though. According to various sources, they knew it wasn't Jackson leading the defense over there, at least not directly. So who was the one holding the Vanguard remnants together?

And what was this about a failed venture into Lorent? Banda Toro had been slain, too?

Everywhere they went, it seemed the same story was playing out. Local warriors causing headaches. It was hard to argue that Abolish's heavy focus on the Vanguard had made it all but blind to the many other threats in the world.

This was where Ivan's presence was sorely missed, Vanderberk felt. If he were still with them, then many of these lesser-known opponents would not have been able to take them by surprise. Jercash's replacements for the Salesman of Death could only do so much on such short notice.

As ever, many of these issues could in some way be traced back to Gohvis. If only he had listened to Vanderberk when they clashed and gone to retrieve Ivan. So much of this might have been avoided now."  
"3287

But no. The Monster of the East was too isolated and self-obsessed to see anything of the big picture. Or he just flatly didn't care.

There were many people whom Vanderberk hated in this world, but there may have been none moreso than Gohvis. And not just because the Monster had humiliated him, either.

The lord of the mutants was immune to reason--and a bastard, besides. How much better would this war be going for Abolish if that lazy piece of shit had actually gotten involved? Even just a little?

Vanderberk knew the root of the problem. Gohvis didn't see any of them as comrades or even peers. He placed himself on the same level as Dozer and Morgunov--hell, maybe even higher. Such was his overblown ego. Vanderberk so badly would've liked to see one of the emperors humble that unruly lizard. And the more time that went by, the more likely it seemed that such a clash was inevitable. Vanderberk only hoped that he would be there when it happened.

A knock on the office door arrived, and Vanderberk looked up. ""Enter,"" he said in Valgan.

A vaguely familiar face appeared. One of runners, though Vanderberk couldn't recall the name. There was usually no point. Here in Abolish, runners didn't last long enough to warrant remembering. It was probably among the deadliest jobs in the world.

""For you, sir."" The runner placed a note on the desk, gave a quick bow, and then was off again, satchel bouncing against his waist as he sped away.

Wise to not stay. Maybe that one would survive longer than most. Bad news tended to bring out the worst in him and his men.

It was not bad news, however. Just an update from the Rainlords. They had suggested another location to meet.

There had been an annoying back-and-forth between him and them while they tried to agree on where best to discuss things further. Obviously, if he'd let them have their first, second, or third choice of location, he would have been giving them an advantage. And while he did not fear them, there was no telling what kind of wily stunt they might try to pull here. Supposedly, they were too honorable for that sort of thing, but they were also wounded and desperate, right now. In a way, that made them more dangerous than normal, not less. It made them unpredictable.

So he'd been refusing their suggested meeting places, and they had been doing the same."

"3288

It wasn't just an annoying game, though. Their suggested locations told him something of their general state of mind, as his probably did in return. His first two tries had been populated areas. A baseball stadium in downtown Logden. A public park in the nearby town of Karina.

Typically, public settings were supposed to give a sense of comfort for meetings that might otherwise be uneasy. A way of ensuring neither party got any ideas about making a scene.

But these Rainlords knew better, of course. He hadn't really expected them to agree. They would've been placing themselves at a tremendous disadvantage, what with their hearts that bled for civilians and so-called ""innocents.""

Still, though, it would've been funny if they'd agreed. Careless and stupid of them, but funny. And it had been a simple way of testing them. If they'd said yes to those, then clearly they hadn't brought their best and brightest to Vantalay.

Naturally, their suggestions were the opposite. Isolated areas, far away from people. Truthfully, any of them would've been fine. Vanderberk was just fucking with them because he could.

But the news from Melmoore was troubling enough that he supposed he should stop being a dick already and get on with it. They were suggesting a place called Dakinsalla.

Oddly enough, he was already familiar with the name. It belonged to a waterfall basin, relatively nearby but still nestled deep in the mountains, just like Logden itself was.

He'd been there before. It was a favored spot of one of Gohvis' mutant followers. A real weirdo named Lucanus. The guy probably wouldn't be too pleased to find the place utterly obliterated upon his eventual return.

But eh, fuck him.

Vanderberk went over to the Rainkid. ""Tell them I agree,"" he said, allowing the kid to move his head again. ""Dakinsalla is fine. Nod if they've gotten the message.""

And he waited.

The reason the Rainlords had sent him a letter instead of just using the kid to relay their suggestion was because Thaddeus had crushed the kid's windpipe yesterday. Vanderberk still wasn't sure why. He only knew that there'd been a conversation, and Thaddeus hadn't liked whatever the kid had to say to him.

Vanderberk had not been pleased. He nearly sent Thaddeus back to Ridgemark. If he didn't want the Killer with him during the meeting, then he absolutely would have."

"3289

Combined with the revelation that Thaddeus had also been breaking the Rainkid's fingers one at a time during an even earlier conversation, it had quickly become clear that Vanderberk should not allow Croll to be alone with this kid, anymore. Whether it was because the kid didn't know when to shut up or because Croll just hated the Rainlords after doing battle with them for weeks, Vanderberk didn't know. Maybe both.

At length, the kid did indeed return the nod Vanderberk had been looking for. Good. They could finally get this show on the road.

He sent word to his men and began preparing to leave immediately.

The fact that the negotiations were not going to take place within the prison itself also posed a certain level of risk. The prison had been his third suggested location, which they'd also intelligently refused. He could have insisted--and perhaps should have--but between the prison guards and his own men, Vanderberk had plenty of power to divide between here and the meeting place. If the Rainlords decided to try something hinky like staging a prison break while he was distracted with negotiations, they would find themselves overwhelmed in both places.

And he would of course be keeping men at both locations who could deal with any Invisibility users. The Rainlords had probably learned their lesson already about using Abolish's own tech against them, but if not, then that would make for a nice surprise, too.

As they made their way down the narrow mountain pass in a line of military vehicles, the late afternoon sun cut a picturesque image across the uneven landscape on the horizon. One might've thought that they would be able to see quite far into the distance when they were this



high up, but no. The mountains here were so dense that the horizon was perhaps only two or three miles away.

The trip to Dakinsalla took longer than expected. The winding roads down and then back up the mountains made the journey thrice what it would've been if he'd just flown, but oh well. Not all of his men could fly, and the backup was necessary here.

He wasn't afraid of the Rainlords, but he didn't want to be overconfident, either. They could be a problem if they swarmed him while he was alone, especially since he was still lacking intel on some of them."

"3290

Only after a sudden break in the treeline did Dakinsalla come into view. From this low angle, the waterfall had the enormity of a skyscraper, and the roaring noise could already be heard over the sound of the vehicle's engine as they approached. It was even catching the sun just right and offering a pleasing rainbow for their arrival, which hardly seemed appropriate for these circumstances, but Vanderberk certainly didn't mind.

Everyone exited their vehicles.

Vanderberk was already in pan-rozum with his reaper, Elinox. He was in the habit of being exceptionally cautious with his reaper, even in the presence of his own men, whom he expected might try to assassinate him at any moment. Keeping Elinox close at all times was therefore a requirement. Usually, that meant tucking the reaper beneath his shirt like a concealed weapon.

Thankfully, Elinox had gotten accustomed to this strategy many years ago and rarely complained or even spoke up at all. Perhaps the reaper had even grown to enjoy hiding himself in plain sight and eavesdropping on many unsuspecting speakers.

The Rainlords, meanwhile, appeared not to have arrived yet, which was obviously suspicious. Vanderberk didn't intend to wait very long for them. The first thing he did was start making calls back to the prison. Marda, Cross, and then to the tower watchmen directly in order to be extra sure.

""If you see so much as a tree moving strangely, you call me and let me know,"" said Vanderberk.

""Yes, sir.""

If the Rainlords' strategy here really was as simple as trying to lure him away from the prison long enough to break their brethren free, then they were going to be sorely upset. While the trip here by car had taken a while, it would not take him long at all to fly back there in a fury and start raining hell down on them. He'd make sure to kill every single one of the hostages before the day was done.

But for now, all remained quiet. So Vanderberk decided to keep a cool head and give the Rainlords a few more minutes.

The natural beauty of this area might have been having a calming effect on him, too.

In terms of manmade structures, there wasn't much here to speak of. Only a modest viewing platform sat at the base of the river, though it did have a roof built over it to shield from the occasional mist of water that managed to make it this far. A little plaque sat in the center of it, describing the location's history."

"3291

In ancient times, the local people believed that Dakinsalla was a meeting place of people and spirits who were traveling between worlds. The exact spot where water hit water was said to be where one could easily break through into the afterlife, while the water and mist that splashed away allowed for spirits from the other side to arrive in this one.

Vanderberk couldn't help thinking that there was an obvious kernel of truth to that. If some fool decided to jump in there, seeking to find the afterlife, then he would indeed probably find it as the waters crushed and drowned him. Maybe these ancient people had a cruel sense of humor.

A part of him had been hoping to find Lucanus here. The extra bit of backup wouldn't have hurt. Hell, maybe he was here and Vanderberk just couldn't sense him. The man could conceal himself quite well in the wilderness, and as Vanderberk recalled, Lucanus had a leafy

shelter around here that blended in impossibly well.

It didn't take long for Vanderberk to begin growing impatient. A few more minutes transpired, and still no Rainlords had appeared. He checked back with his men at the prison, and there was still no word of their appearance there, either. He kept reaching out with Elinox's senses, too, but there was nothing.

Eventually, he turned to the Rainkid. ""Are they en route?"" he said.

An odd look crossed the kid's face, and his gaze went between Vanderberk's men, lingering on Croll for a moment who was watching the boy like a hawk. The kid gave a nod, though it seemed uncertain by Vanderberk's assessment.

Ugh. He hated this waiting. ""Tell them if they don't get here soon, I'm leaving.""

Another nod, this one with slightly less trepidation behind it.

A few more minutes transpired with no change.

And perhaps he was struggling with the boredom, too, because Croll decided to strike up a conversation with Vanderberk while they had a bit of distance from the others. ""You sure it was wise to split us up like this?"" he asked.

""Maybe not, but the enemy poses little threat to us, either way. And if we continued to do nothing, then they would, too. A stalemate would not have been of benefit to us.""

""Why not? You afraid of what's happening elsewhere in this country? Or elsewhere in the war at large?""

"3292

Vanderberk had still been admiring the view and not looking at Croll directly, but something about those questions made his eyes shift over to the man. ""It's not your place to ask why, Killer.""

Croll met his gaze steadily, not shying away as so many others would when he looked at them.

This was unsurprising. The Killer of Krohin was a man of unusual

intensity, even by Abolish's standards. He was unlikely to be intimidated by anyone, even emperors.

Vanderberk sent out an invisible wave of soul-empowered, pressurized helium. Combined with his reaper senses, the wave would tell him if there were any suspiciously empty spaces in the area.

Such as Rainlords cloaked with Invisibility, trying to sneak up on him while he was distracted.

But there was nothing. No one. Not on the ground, not in the air, not over the river.

""Keeping me in the dark won't benefit you in the long run,"" said Thaddeus. ""The more informed I am of your intentions, the better I can help you achieve them.""

No. This still wasn't right. Croll didn't make small talk. He didn't inquire about plans or idly speculate on things. He asked for orders or perhaps permission, then took action. Where was this change in behavior coming from? Had he done something? Was this conversation to stall for time?

Rather than answering, Vanderberk lifted his phone to call the prison again.

It fell apart in his hand, broken in two.

Vanderberk's eyes returned to the Killer, only to see the man sheathing his sword but not removing his hand from the hilt. ""You choose now to make your move against me?"" said Vanderberk. ""When our numbers across the continent are already so diminished?""

The Killer made no response.

And again thanks to Elinox's senses, Vanderberk could abruptly sense something wrong the other men he'd brought along for this meeting. They collapsed to the ground in unison, not moving.

How did Croll neutralize them all in an instant like that? One moment they'd been fine, and now they weren't. Stranger still, they didn't seem to be dead, and the Killer of Krohin certainly wasn't known for his ability to subdue his opponents without killing them. If he'd used his sword, they'd all be in the same state as his phone, right now.

For some reason, however, the Rainkid had been left untouched. The

boy was just standing there by the nearest vehicle, still unable to move.

Had Croll intentionally spared him? Or had it actually been Vanderberk's own invisible prison that protected him?"

"3293

""What's your plan here, Killer? Surely you don't think you can defeat me alone."" Was he banking on the Rainlords showing up to help him?

A sharp pain arrived in his skull, so sudden and intense that he had to endure it for a few moments before using Elinox's power to numb it. Which provided Croll with an opening to attack.

The Killer lunged straight toward him, unsheathing his blade.

In a blink, Vanderberk was bisected in two, straight down the middle.

If he wasn't already in pan-rozum, that might have been a small problem. The blade flashed again, and Vanderberk raised a hand to catch Croll's sword arm with a helium prison. Croll would be able to resist it, Vanderberk knew, but it would still be enough to slow or even deflect the attack.

It did nothing, however. Croll's attack continued, unabated, and sliced Vanderberk diagonally from shoulder to hip.

What the hell?

Croll didn't let up. He kept slashing away.

More confused than upset, Vanderberk resorted to his full helium form in order to begin dodging more easily. The blade whiffed or passed through his gaseous body as Vanderberk focused on creating space between him and Croll while he reassessed.

Several things were wrong here. The world around him seemed to slow as he sorted through them all.

One. Croll had not only betrayed him but done it stupidly. Alone, the man stood no chance here, so where was his backup? Vanderberk couldn't sense anyone.

Two. Vanderberk couldn't stop or slow Croll's attacks, as if he wasn't even feeling the helium interruptions.

Three. Where had that sharp headache come from? A psychic assault? Croll had no such power, as far as Vanderberk knew.

Four. Croll's attacks were sloppy. Despite how much power was behind them and how fast they appeared, these slashes were actually quite slow, by Croll's standards. Rather than cutting him into two, the Killer of Krohin should have been able to dice a vulnerable Vanderberk into dozens of pieces in that same amount of time. Vanderberk had seen Croll's swordwork countless times before, so unless the man was holding back, this made little sense.

Five. The other incapacitated subordinates. What had happened to them? They weren't dead. If Croll had really attacked them, they would be.

That was enough. Vanderberk came back to reality, having a new test in mind for his opponent."

"3294

No more invisible helium attacks. This time, a quite visible wave of solid blades was the strategy.

When it came to materializable elements, helium was a bit of a problem child. Vanderberk had struggled with it fruitlessly for many, many years, thinking that he could use it the way so many other materializers used their elements. Even after learning pan-rozum, that old struggle had been renewed in some ways.

Helium was a noble gas. Inert. It did not react to other elements. He therefore couldn't use the transfiguration aspect of pan-rozum in order to combine his materialized helium with the elements in his own body to create explosions. A common trick for pan-rozum users, but unavailable to him.

Helium also did not freeze easily. Even at absolute zero, it would stubbornly remain a liquid unless one also applied an incredible degree of pressure to it.

Which was why these blades of solid helium were so difficult to make.

And why he tended to go overboard when doing so. He'd trained too hard for them to be useless.

A tidal wave of helium blades filled his vision, shredding the quaint wooden viewing platform he'd been standing on into millions of flying splinters as they swarmed Croll.

He hovered in the air, helium legs keeping him aloft while fragments of wood were swept away by the river's current below. And he watched the utter mayhem of his attack unfold. The chunk of forest behind Croll had all but exploded, shredded trees toppling over each other or simply bursting apart on impact. In the chaos of it, Vanderberk nearly lost track of Croll's soul signature.

When the dust and splinters began to settle, Vanderberk saw Croll more clearly again. The man had been skewered near a hundred times but was still standing. Barely.

""Enough of this game,"" said Vanderberk. ""The real Thaddeus Croll would have survived that with nary a scratch."" Well, maybe that was an exaggeration. Tough to say without testing the Killer more extensively. But this imposter wouldn't know any of that. ""Who are you?""

Croll merely remained standing there, so disfigured by the blades that he seemed perhaps unable to respond--or do anything else for that matter.

Shit. Vanderberk hoped he hadn't accidentally killed whoever this was already. He still wanted answers. And a lot of them.

Hmm. Trying to stall for time? They'd stopped him from calling the prison again, so he supposed if they were still alive, they would be forced to stop him from returning there, too."

"3295

He was still hesitating, though. He kept expecting someone else to appear as if from nowhere. An attack from just outside his peripheral vision or sensory range. This couldn't really be the extent of his opponent's resistance. Had they simply underestimated him that badly?

Well. Maybe they had. Certainly wouldn't be the first time.

Paranoia getting to him again. Agh. He shook his head, knowing he needed to move quickly. The prison was due south--and close. If he flew at top speed, it would be--

A surge of wind cut him in two. Vanderberk almost hadn't sensed it in time. His gaseous body melted back together easily, and he looked down at the fake Croll again, as that was the direction from which the attack had arrived.

Sure enough, Croll looked normal once more. No longer skewered or disfigured in the slightest. Where had all the blades gone?

""Stay and play with me a little longer, Weasel of the Wicked Sight."" It was still Croll's voice and Croll's face, but the words and expression were completely wrong now. The imposter seemed to be enjoying this.

Vanderberk, however, saw no merit in staying. The attack just now had been toothless. He bolted straight up into the sky, intent on ignoring any follow ups from the fake and heading straight back to Logden.

Then the entire world went dark.

He saw the land above his head, arching impossibly toward him, as if within a twisted mirror. It was illuminated as clearly as day, despite the sun having vanished. And Croll's face appeared before him, disembodied and far too large.

""I'm afraid I must insist,"" said the illusion. ""Stay.""

Psychic tricks, rather obviously. More advanced than he'd seen in a while. But still tricks, all the same.

He flew higher, aiming to punch through the illusory land. Vanderberk would not be disoriented so easily. He still remembered where to go.

When he touched the land, however, he bounced off of it and was sent falling, spiraling back down.

What the fuck was that? No. He hadn't bounced off. It had just seemed that way. The illusion and the timing. Something had hit him. Clobbered him, actually.

An attack that he hadn't been able to ignore. Finally.

Croll faces were all around him, now, bobbing in the air with mocking



grins. That looked especially wrong. The real Croll probably didn't know how to smile."

"3296

"Alright," said Vanderberk, looking between all the different faces, "you've proven you're more than a mere illusionist. If you want to play, then why don't you begin by telling me who I'm dealing with?"

"Curious, are you?" said the face directly behind him.

"Too bad for you," said one to his right.

"Die in ignorance," said the one straight ahead of him.

The next attack came from behind. Vanderberk only sensed it via another pulse of invisible helium, empowered with his soul. It was an orb of some kind, moving at high speed. He avoided it simply enough, but when he looked to see what the thing actually was, he saw nothing. Regardless, he sent a blind assault of freezing helium in the direction it had come from, not expecting it accomplish anything.

His eyes were useless here. In fact, they were probably working against him. He closed them.

He chose to rely only on Elinox's soul sense, for now. With constant helium pulses going out all around him, he had a rather clear picture of the area in his mind.

Psychics could sabotage that sense, if they knew how, but they would still have trouble making gaps disappear. And that was how he was using it. He looked for where the soul power couldn't reach. Where holes appeared.

"What's the matter, Weasel?" came the voice again. It sounded less like Croll now, though maybe that, too, was a trick of the senses. "Not going to use that special ability of yours?"

Vanderberk ignored him. The gaps. He was looking for the gaps. Empty space would alert him to another attack, just like before. And then he could mount another counterattack based on its direction. He didn't yet need--

Something big smashed into him, sending him sailing through the air

against his will. It was a heavy impact. Enough to pancake a younger servant. For him, though, it wasn't enough to disorient him. He could still think clearly even as he was busy regaining control.

This shouldn't have happened. The psychic had interfered with his ability to sense even the gaps within soul power? He was not aware of any living psychic who would be powerful enough to accomplish such a feat, save perhaps the Weaver--and he could be quite confident that she was not the culprit here.

No. According to Elinox's memories, only the ancient Kingsparrows would have been able to pull this off."

"3297

Clearly, whoever this was had been keeping their abilities secret for a long time. Which told Vanderberk that they were not merely intending to stall for time here.

They believed they would be able to kill him.

How many times was he going to be underestimated before people learned?

And if his opponent was so eager to see it, then Vanderberk supposed he should oblige.

The power he'd acquired in Qenghis all those years ago was not something he liked to use freely or often. Such recklessness would've only made the enemy's job of gathering intel on him that much easier.

Not to mention, it was dangerous to himself, as well. The minute he stopped respecting it, he would be consumed.

Perhaps this illusion-slinger would make that mistake. Perhaps they would believe that the things Vanderberk was showing them were mere illusions, too.

It would be an understandable error, if also a deadly one.

Despite its entirely strange and foreign nature, however, Vanderberk had come to learn that his helium was quite complementary to it. Even though helium was seemingly quite limited compared to other elements, he had discovered certain key uses in his youth that were

still coming in handy with it to this day.

The ability to stealthily suffocate people had been quite the assassin's tool, back in the day. And of course, there were things like fire suppression and acidic immunity that often caught his more aggressive opponents by surprise.

More recently, though, there were the developments with pan-rozum. Since helium was invisible to the naked eye, that of course meant that he, too, could become invisible, not unlike an aberration.

His invisibility, however, was more refined in some ways. And quite necessary, for this next part.

He'd closed his eyes earlier in order to not become disoriented by the confusing, illusory mess that his opponent wanted him to see.

But now, he opened them again. And when he did, they were red as blood--and burning with ethereal fire.

In an instant, he brought all of his concentration to bear. The illusory world around him dissolved like ashes caught in a whirlwind, and for a brief time, he saw the normal world again. The green of the forest. The white of the waterfall. The Dakinsalla.

Then it was all replaced with black-and-white fire. With a million gangly, twisted arms reaching, grasping. With distorted eyes, searching. With bodies, headless and roaming.

With the Living Inferno."  
"3298

Even now, with all the experience he'd acquired using this power, Vanderberk could not rightly say what exactly it was. He had a sense that the things within the Inferno were not as they appeared to be--not sentient beings with minds and wills of their own, at least.

But he knew for certain that they were not illusions, either. That was why his invisibility was so important when using it. If he did not conceal himself, then the Inferno would attempt to devour him, too.

Not that invisibility alone was enough to wholly avoid the Inferno's attention. It just wouldn't go after him while a more obvious target lay in

front of it.

And while it might have been wrong to say that the mad, twisted forms that inhabited the Inferno were alive, the Inferno itself undoubtedly had a certain level of sentience. That was why he'd taken to calling it the Living Inferno, after all.

It always made its desires known to him. Its fury. Its hatred. But most importantly, its hunger.

Lozaro called them Devourers, the forms within the Inferno. And the name seemed apt.

""In a sense, you might think of your 'Inferno' as a single-celled organism,"" Lozaro had said. ""And the Devourers, are the constituent parts which allow it to function. Diverse though they may appear, they ultimately all serve one, singular purpose. To feed.""

""On what?"" he'd asked.

""Whatever you provide.""

He just had to be careful that he did not provide himself. For the Living Inferno was relentless. Until its hunger was sated, he would have a very hard time trying to deactivate it.

Here and now, though, Vanderberk was not yet worried. Perhaps the greatest utility of the Inferno was that it could sense things he could not. The Devourers would hunt his prey for him. Very likely, they would even kill his opponent on their own, but even if they didn't, then they would at least be able to point him in the right direction.

Because that was the real trouble with psychics. Their obnoxious tendency to hide. Rarely were they much of a threat once revealed. Most often, however, they did not work alone. He knew that it was therefore quite possible that he was, in truth, fighting multiple opponents, at the moment, and that the psychic was merely concealing the others.

He watched as the Inferno shuddered around him. Streams of Devourers swirled over to his right, their collective forms looking like rivers of mouths, arms, eyes, and teeth--among other barely distinguishable shapes.

He followed their lead."

"3299

The Devourers swirled with increasing fervor. They were nearing their target. Vanderberk needed to keep enough distance from them so that they didn't turn on him, but he also had to stay close enough to either see or sense the opponent when they finally revealed it for him.

When they began lunging, he knew that was the cue. He readied one of his most powerful techniques, the helium of his body beginning to bristle like needles with anticipation.

Before he could finally pinpoint where to attack, however, a flash of light cut through the sky, so bright and massive that it seemed to be rending the entirety of the Living Inferno in two.

The beam fell upon the collective of Devourers, making them howl and try to wriggle away--but they were stuck fast, as if being held in place by the light.

And then they began to change.

From their shifting forms that were little more than vague shapes and body parts... into something crystalline. And glowing, as if having absorbed the light into themselves. Legs and bodies became more obvious, more stable. Heads, too. Even faces, though they still did not look human.

And wings. Great crystal wings emerged from their backs.

Vanderberk looked on in disbelief.

The changed Devourers, if they could even be called that anymore, turned on the unchanged ones. They started slashing through them with their rocky, crystalline bodies--with claws and wings and horns and beaks. And their sunken eyes came alive with even more light, shining brilliantly as luminous boxes appeared around the unchanged Devourers, imprisoning them en masse.

Vanderberk was stunned on two fronts. The first because he had never seen something like this before, and the second because he could feel that the Living Inferno itself was shaken. Its desire was always made known to him, and right now, its desire was to flee. To panic.

And yet it was also asking him for permission. Never had the Inferno

felt more timid. It was like it was hoping he would protect it. Rescue it, even.

Vanderberk shook the Inferno's fear off. He couldn't let it infect him. And he attacked.

The crystal Devourers had to be subdued. That much was obvious. In an instant, he imprisoned them with pressurized helium coatings. With their movements sealed, they would be much easier to deal with--but apparently not neutralized.

Their eyes still glowed--and they all turned toward him at once."  
"3300

Vanderberk didn't wait to see what they were going to do. He increased the pressure on his helium coatings--as intense as he could muster.

Their crystalline bodies imploded and turned to dust, all of them at once.

That was one problem taken care of, at least, but Vanderberk was still unsettled. He didn't know how they had transformed. If the Devourers could be turned against each other like that, then his entire strategy here--

Another beam of light interrupted his train of thought, catching another group of Devourers and beginning the same process again.

No. Not the same, he soon realized.

Instead of each Devourer changing individually, their collective glow coalesced into one massive, winged creature.

A humongous avian monster of radiant crystal.

Vanderberk didn't hesitate to attack again, but in the back of his mind, he couldn't help hanging on the fact that they were turning to crystal.

Why crystal? Why? It couldn't be--no, if it was, then--

This couldn't be the work of the Crystal Titan, could it? Vanderberk didn't have the luxury of thinking it through. His instinct was telling him

no. Sermung hadn't been seen at all during this war, so why would he show up here, of all places?

No, no, no. NO. It had to be a trick. The enemy was a powerful psychic. Playing mind games. Trying to get to him. Make him panic.

This damn crystal bird was resisting the coatings. He couldn't seal its movements. Freezing wasn't accomplishing much, either, other than making it slightly more brittle, perhaps.

He shot an invisible pillar of pressurized helium at it. And somehow, the fucking bird almost dodged it. Instead, it took the hit on the wing, which exploded on impact, sending crystal shards raining over the entire area.

A solid white beam erupted from its beak and eyes, coming straight for him.

He couldn't avoid it in time. Even in his gaseous form, it hit him clean, right in his invisible torso, sending him down and down, pummeling him into the ground.

His gaseous form flickered, and he scowled as he sat up. He paid no attention to the gigantic crater of vaporized rock and dirt around him. He was only concerned about the bird. Where had it gone? It was so huge and obnoxiously bright. How could it have disappeared?

Unless--could it have been an illusion, too? Agh, of course it could have. But the Devourers. They were real. The Inferno. What was it telling him? He needed to listen."

"3301 -- CCLXXVIII.

Behind.

Vanderberk could sense it himself now. Yes. The Inferno was afraid, but it knew something was there. Instead of pursuing on its own, it was giving its knowledge to him. Its extra senses.

What were these? Vanderberk couldn't have described them, even if he'd had the presence of mind to do so. This had never happened before.

Didn't matter, though. He knew enough.

He attacked. And learned more.

## Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Eight: 'Coddled sprout, be uprooted...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Raul sprinted across the surface of the river, not wanting to look back but knowing that he had to. Vanderberk seemed to have finally forgotten about him, but that hadn't improved his circumstances nearly as much as Raul might've hoped.

Whatever the hell was happening in this fight right now made absolutely no sense to him. His eyes could scarcely even comprehend what he was looking at. What were those hellish abominations flying around all over the place? Evil spirits? Literal demons? And the crystal monsters? What were those? Golems? Angels?

Nothing made sense.

But then, he'd been warned about this. By ""Croll,"" no less.

When Thaddeus Croll had first shown up at Logden, Raul had thought it anything but good. But that began to change when the man started speaking to him telepathically.

'Listen to me, young Rainlord. I am not Thaddeus Croll. This is a disguise to fool Vanderberk. You do not know me, but I am your ally. Here is my plan. Convey it to your kin for me.'

And over the next day, the fake Croll fed him information. Raul hadn't exactly enjoyed getting his windpipe crushed or his fingers broken, but he didn't get much choice in the matter. He would've certainly been willing to feed Vanderberk lies, but perhaps the imposter hadn't wanted to risk relying on him for that.

It had been a bold plan, though.



To isolate Vanderberk and kill him. Meanwhile, the Rainlords were supposed to sneak into the prison again and finally rescue everyone.

There would still be plenty of Abolish fighters back at Logden, of course, but with Vanderberk busy and the element of surprise on their side, it seemed doable.

Raul would've liked to ask the fake any number of different questions, but the crushed windpipe had occurred too soon into the encounter for that. No doubt, the imposter feared him saying something stupid.

He had gotten a few answers, though."

"3301 -- CCLXXVIII.

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"3302

The questions that the fake had asked him had mostly been about

whether the Rainlord elders had gotten the message, if they'd agreed to the plan, if they needed more prep time--that sort of thing. And without being able to move his head, Raul had only been able to use his eyes to answer. Up and down for yes, side to side for no. And on top of all that, the imposter had to be careful not to be seen spending too much time next to Raul, too, which was why much of the questioning had been conducted while ""Croll"" wasn't even in the same room.

How, exactly, the imposter had been able to discern Raul's answers when he wasn't even looking at him... well, that was just another layer to the mystery.

But there'd been one string of questions that proved somewhat telling. The elders had proved understandably reticent to trust this random stranger who'd appeared seemingly from nowhere, saying all the right things--and sounding a bit too good to be true, honestly.

And after a while, the imposter began to pick up on their trepidation, which led to an interesting exchange.

'Tell Darktide that he should ""grip the torch with both hands.""'

And when Raul relayed the stranger's message, Melchor Blackburn had wanted to know how the man knew what his father used to say to him when he was young.

'Bernardino Blackburn was a good friend of mine, once upon a time. Please trust that I bear you and your kin no ill will. When all of this is over, if we are still alive, I promise that I will tell you my name.'

That had certainly gotten the gears turning in Raul's head. If the guy really did have old, friendly ties with House Blackburn, then it was quite strange for him to not just drop his name straight away and earn their trust immediately.

But then again, if the mission went pear-shaped, the guy could've been worried about his identity being leaked to Abolish by newly captured Rainlords. Such as Raul, for example.

And then there was that name.

Melchor's father, Bernardino Blackburn. Raul had heard it many times before. It was an important one in regard to the history of their House--and beyond.

Lord Bernardino--or Granpa Dino, as Raul had heard others call him--had been the head of House Blackburn before Lord Ismael took over. Moreover, he'd been an internationally famous warrior.

In the Vanguard, no less."

"3303

Unfortunately, Raul had never had the honor of meeting him personally, but the tales of the man were legendary. During the Jungle Wars, Grandpa Dino had single-handedly liberated the city of Maridol in Melmoore from an infamous sect of Abolish. Not unlike what the Rainlords had recently done for Miro.

So this mysterious stranger claiming to be an old friend... could translate into any number of things. Obviously, with Grandpa Dino having lived such a long and crazy life, he would've made plenty of friends outside of the Vanguard, too. But the fact that this stranger was also working against Abolish made for some compelling evidence that whoever this was belonged to the Vanguard.

Plus, there was the nature of the plan to consider. Ambitious was one word for it. Insane, another. Because in the end, it boiled down to single combat with one of Abolish's most powerful warriors.

Who would this stranger have to be in order for such confidence to be justified?

A few famous names came to mind, certainly, but one in particular made more sense to him than the others. If he'd been able to, Raul would've guessed it in order to gauge the imposter's reaction.

Here and now, though, in the middle of all this otherworldly mayhem, the identity of the stranger was the furthest thing from Raul's mind. He was only concerned about trying to survive a bit longer.

These weird demons or whatever they were--they thankfully didn't seem too interested in him, but they weren't completely leaving him alone, either.

He'd seen some of them spewing fire, smoke, and acid in his direction. Back when he couldn't move, he would've definitely been smothered and killed, if not for an invisible barrier that made their attacks splash

off harmlessly around him.

Raul could only guess that it was the stranger's doing. Why the man was bothering to protect him--a servant whose death here wouldn't even matter much--Raul couldn't rightly say, but he did appreciate it. Being boiled alive by acid would definitely not have been fun.

He wanted to contribute to the fight in some way, but his instinct was telling him that the more helpful thing to do would actually be to just get away. Making it so the stranger didn't have to worry about him anymore would probably be better than any ineffectual attack he might've been able to launch against Vanderberk.

So that's what he was trying to do now. Create distance."

"3304

The trouble was that this place had become so damn confusing. He sprinted across the surface of the river, but it felt like he wasn't getting anywhere. With the sky so dark, it was hard to tell where the river even ended. Plus, the hellspawn and crystal angels flying all over the place weren't helping him understand the situation any better.

A beam of light hit him, blinding him for several seconds and bringing him to a standstill. His legs sunk below the river's surface as his concentration faltered, but he caught himself with his arms and climbed back out.

He didn't get it. The light dissipated, and he felt fine. No change. He'd seen the way it transformed those demon things, but it apparently had no effect on him? Maybe it hadn't been intended to and had only struck him accidentally.

Ugh.

He felt so weird in this place. Sluggish. Heavy. And it was like... the space around him was distorted. Maybe that was the way the river never seemed to end.

He didn't know where to go.

But if he couldn't escape, then maybe observing the fight more closely was the smarter option. Contributing was probably still impossible, but he wouldn't know that for sure if he didn't pay attention.

It wasn't hard to tell where Vanderberk was, at least. The hellspawn were getting obliterated by the crystal beasts, and Vanderberk was the only thing countering them, punching through them like a man-sized cannonball or otherwise turning them to dust whenever they got close to him.

But they just kept coming. Hellspawn kept being born from seemingly nowhere, just appearing out of the thin, dark air. And rays of light kept converting them.

For a while, Raul was able to just stand there, watching it unfold. This spot down here on the river might've been a bit safer than he realized.

What an odd fight. It seemed a stalemate to him, at the moment. Neither side gaining any real ground.

How long could this go on for, he wondered?

The more he thought about it, the more he remembered various tales he'd heard of historic clashes between great warriors. In many of them, fights lasted days.

Having been in some pretty intense scuffles as a kid, he'd always thought those claims were exaggerated in order to sound more mythical or legendary.

But observing this fight here and now, he was starting to see how that kind of thing might happen."

"3305

Big battles were one thing. Battles between multitudes of people, all able to tag out and rest in order to continue fighting later. But single combat? How monstrous did such warriors have to be in order to continue on for such extended periods of time, alone?

But perhaps that was debatable here, too. Were these two truly alone? Vanderberk had his army of hellspawn, and the stranger, his countering army of crystal beasts.

Honestly, though, there were probably aspects to this fight that he wasn't even perceiving. It did seem odd that the stranger wasn't even showing himself, instead seeming to rely totally on his crystal minions.

Some of the light beams did chase or strike Vanderberk, but they didn't appear to do much to him, other than leave smoking trail behind.

Given everything else Raul had already seen, he had to imagine that the stranger was capable of yet more than this. Vanderberk, too, probably. So what were they waiting for? Some sort of opening to land a more decisive blow? Or maybe this was a battle of attrition? A competition of resources and endurance?

Whatever the case, as he continued to watch the fight draw out in this dark place, Raul Blackburn began to wonder if he was even in the real world, anymore.

--++--++--

<""So all is well, then?""> said the voice on the phone.

It felt a little weird to be hearing it with his ears this time, and it didn't quite match with the soundless one that he'd grown more familiar with before, but Hector supposed that was only natural.

In order to contact him, Xander had given him a phone number, four digit code, and also a pass phrase. The first voice on the phone had asked for the code, the second had asked for the phrase, and now, finally, he was apparently speaking with the man himself.

Hector had decided to use a burner phone for this call, just in case, though he didn't really think it would make much difference. If Xander wanted to find him, he probably wouldn't have a hard time doing so.

""I don't know about 'all' being well,"" said Hector, ""but yeah, Banda Toro was neutralized.""

<""That is quite good news, as I was unable to procure any aid for you."">

""Oh."" Welp. He supposed that was one less thing to worry about, at least. Though, it did feel kinda worrisome in a different way. ""You're that short on manpower, huh?""

"3306

<""Indeed. But it sounds like you have some free time on your hands now, eh? Care to pitch in?"">

Hector couldn't help exhaling half a laugh. "I don't think I should leave my home country, right now." He could see Garovel's skeletal face next to him, and the visible relief on it was almost enough to pull the rest of that laugh out of Hector.

"It was worth a shot," said Xander.

"If you need something that doesn't involve traveling, I might be able to help," said Hector.

"I'll keep that in mind, then."

"Oh, and uh, I found some information on your man, Lozaro."

There arrived a noticeable pause. "Truly? And so soon? Ah, from either Banda Toro or his reaper, it must be. I see. Which must also mean that you managed to neutralize them without killing them, no?"

Hector wasn't sure he liked how quickly this guy was able to connect dots. He wasn't about to confirm it, though. Even if he liked Xander, there was no point in giving the Vanguard any amount of justification to come here and try to take Grigozo into their custody. "My source will have to remain a secret, unfortunately. For now, at least."

"I see. Go on, then. What have you learned?"

Garovel had only just delivered the intel to him a few minutes prior, having gotten it from the Sandlords who were still questioning Grigozo. "Supposedly, he's in Ardora. There's a city called Vamor in the country of Targarith."

"I am familiar with it," said Xander. "Northeast of the vast Gettira Plains, as I recall. I shall head there soon."

"Are you sure that's wise?" said Hector. "You've got your hands full with the war, don't you? And my information could be wrong, you know."

"I will have an opening for such a trip shortly. And even if I did not, I would make time for it."

"From what I've heard, Lozaro is incredibly paranoid and will flee at the first sign of trouble."

"Oh, I am aware, but thank you for the warning. I'm afraid I must go now. Is there anything else you would tell me before I do?"



Hector sure hoped not, because he couldn't think of anything. ""No, that's it.""

<""Farewell then, my friend. Thank you for the information, and may fortune favor you in your next battle."">

And the guy hung up without waiting for a reply."  
"3307

Hector pocketed the phone.

'The way that guy talks reminds me of a Sixth Age aristocrat,' said Garovel.

""Is that a bad thing?"" said Hector.

'I suppose not. Bit odd, though. Makes me wonder how old he is.'

""Why? You're old as shit, but you don't talk much different than I do.""

'Excuse me, but just because I do not pontificate with the eminent magnitude of my lexiconic mastery during my frequent bouts of loquacious glory does not mean that I am any less of an esteemed and erudite gentleman than someone like him.'

""...What?""

'Just 'cuz I don't talk funny don't mean I ain't smart.'

""Oh. But I mean, that was kinda my point, wasn't it? The way he talks isn't necessarily reflective of his age. Just like with you, right?""

'Yeah, okay, sure, but I'm also a reaper. We have a tendency to be a bit more adaptable when it comes to social and cultural changes in the world. Unlike you stubborn corporeals who get all worked up whenever the youngins invent a new word that you never used when you were their age.'

""...I don't know if I'm old enough to really appreciate this conversation.""

'New words are great! Language is a fascinating thing, and honestly,

being able to observe its evolution firsthand over the ages has been one of the best parts about being a reaper, in my humble opinion.'

""I feel like all reapers must feel that way, considering how chatty you all are.""

'Pretty much,' said Garovel. 'Exceptions no doubt exist, but in general, I would say that in order for us to come to terms with the extremely strange nature of our own existence, we have to be able to take enjoyment in whatever ways we can. So even if we start out not giving a crap about things like conversation and culture, we'll eventually learn to love them. Or alternatively, get super fucking pissed off at all of existence as we know it.'

""Hmm. You talking about Abolish reapers, now?""

'Not all of them, but yeah. I'd argue that the origin of Abolish was probably reapers who simply could not find any way to cope with what we are.'

Hector felt like he'd heard Garovel talk about this before. And he hadn't understood it very well back then, how someone could reach a point where they wanted to destroy humanity or the world--or even all of existence.

But now, somehow, he could almost wrap his head around it.

Still seemed supremely stupid, of course, but it felt somewhat comprehensible, at least."

"3308

The problem, he was realizing, was that concept of ""hating existence."" It sounded simple enough at first, but he was starting to think that it wasn't at all. For one thing, how the hell could someone hate all of existence? What did existence ever do wrong? It was just an idea. A concept. What point was there in feeling that strongly about it?

But he had these memories now. This information. From the Candle, he was pretty sure. Plus his own memories, too, he supposed. He'd made plenty of those over the past year or so.

And they were telling him things. Reminding him of things. Stuff he'd experienced. Stuff he hadn't. Thankfully, he could at least differentiate

them in that regard. His own life was much clearer in his mind. The others were foggier. Like dreams, maybe. And a bit less potent, as a result.

But they were certainly not without their impact. The Candle had seen so much. Through so many different eyes. So many different places.

And a lot of it, he knew, had been abject suffering. Just people in utter misery. Experiencing tragedy after tragedy. The kind that turned their entire world upside down.

It was so strange to dwell on. An ocean of ancient sensations. Not ideas, exactly. At least, not yet. Maybe in the future, he'd be able to pick up on specific thoughts like that, but at least for the time being, all he could remember were vague scenes painted with emotions.

A great sickness, for example. Death all around. Everywhere. A stench that seemed like it would never go away. And such heart-rending despair.

Hopelessness. Heartlessness. Hatred.

At what? He wasn't sure. Maybe everything.

That was just one way in which it almost made sense to him. One avenue down which someone could arrive at such a dark place.

It made him wonder if he could ever get there, himself. Be taken there. If everything he'd come to care about crumbled around him? Everyone?

It hurt to think about. But it seemed necessary, too. If he was to continue down this dangerous path, fighting people who might very well be enveloped in this exact type of thinking...

Yeah. It definitely seemed necessary to think about. And important. Even if he never found answers--which he expected he wouldn't--it still seemed important.

He was reminded of Ivan's words to him.

""Take a good, long look at the world and try to see things for how they really are.""

"3309

With so much of the Candle's information in his head now, Hector could understand that sentiment a little better. And while in some ways, that made him more sympathetic to Ivan's perspective, in other ways, it had the exact opposite effect.

If you've had such awful misery visited upon you, then how could you, with such personal and intimate knowledge of what it was like, go out into the world and seek to visit similar feelings upon others?

Where was the sense in that?

There wasn't any. Because at that point, it couldn't be about logic, anymore. Or even survival or glory, as some might suggest.

It could only be about power. And maybe malice, by extension.

A desire to inflict pain for pain's sake. Because inflicting pain could at least make you feel powerful for change, and after experiencing so much horror, perhaps you'd grown tired of only ever feeling weakness.

That part, he was still struggling to wrap his head around. It was so antithetical to everything that he was trying to accomplish.

And yet...

He might've liked to believe that the idea was entirely foreign to him, that he couldn't imagine being so utterly filled with frustration and hatred that those two things became the only driving impulses in his mind.

But he'd felt it before. Most certainly.

He didn't want to lie to himself.

And if a timid wimp like him could reach a point where he felt that way, then it wasn't difficult to imagine other, more naturally vigorous people going through the same thing.

Then again, maybe in his case, it had been the timid wimpiness which had ultimately led him down the path to that feeling.

Or maybe not.

Agh.

Why did the world have to be so confusing? With everything the Candle had showed him, things should've been starting to make more sense, right? But every time he began to feel like maybe life wasn't so complicated after all, something else would come along and make him question everything he thought he already knew.

After his call with Xander, he made sure to call the Queen next and update her on things. He tried to keep it brief, but she ended up wanting all of the details. Which was understandable, he supposed. Unfortunately for her, he only had so many to give, and she was left sounding rather dissatisfied by the time their call concluded.

After that, he could've finally gone to get some sleep. And he certainly felt like he needed it, but with all these thoughts still brewing in the back of his mind, he suddenly wanted to stay awake for a while longer.

So he decided to go check on Grigozo and Ericoros."

"3310

Along the way, Haqq Najir accompanied him once again. Hector materialized the helmet piece for him to examine, which the man proceeded to do so in silence.

Hector couldn't help growing curious what Haqq thought of it. No doubt, it was too soon to get a proper assessment, and given how quiet Haqq was being, Hector supposed he'd just have to wait.

Garovel, however, had apparently not been thinking the same thing. 'So?' he asked. 'What do you make of it?'

Haqq didn't bother looking up. ""Too early to tell,"" he said, which made Hector feel somewhat vindicated. Haqq held the helmet up to his ear and rapped a knuckle against the side.

Hector recalled him doing that before with iron. He'd thought it a bit odd back then, but here and now, it was making a lot more sense to him. At this point, Hector knew the sound that iron made quite well, and that was clearly not it. Too thick. Dulled. Barely ringing, despite its relative bell-shape.

Whatever that metal was, it was dense. Haqq knocked it again, and the result was of course the same. The sound didn't really carry. Like

hitting a wall rather than a bell.

'C'mon, you must have SOME thoughts,' said Garovel.

Haqq ignored him and looked to Hector, instead. ""Make a copy of this out of iron for me,"" he said.

Hector did so. It appeared in his open palm, and he handed it off to the man.

Haqq put the other one under his arm like a football and then rapped his knuckle against the iron, listening closely again.

'Oh, so NOW you're interested in Hector's iron, eh? Why the change of heart?'

Hector gave the reaper a look. 'Garovel...'

'What?' said the reaper privately.

'Leave him alone.'

'Hmph. You forgive and forget things too easily, y'know that?'

Haqq banged the two helmets together, then held one up to each ear.

'There's no way that's actually giving him useful information,' said Garovel, thankfully still privately. 'He's just doing stuff to look busy.'

The trip over to the Star Tower was another long one. It was the tower that was technically the farthest away from the Entry Tower, but it at least helped that he didn't have to go all the way down into the courtyard first. In fact, the bridging walkways were the only way to enter the Star Tower, because the bottom half of it was still missing, so unlike all the others, it bore no entrance from the courtyard."

"3311

Up until recently, he'd been thinking of the Star Tower as the likely last target for the reconstruction. It being the tower in need of the most repair made it seem like the place that no one would be using for a very long time.

Then, apparently, Melchor Blackburn decided that he quite liked it in

there, which in turn meant that Ericoros ended up being kept there most of the time, as well.

And now, despite Melchor having gone off to Vantalay, the Star Tower was still being used for Ericoros--and Grigozo, too.

This was what happened when he just went with the flow, Hector supposed.

Not that there seemed to be any harm in it. The Star Tower was actually quite a neat little spot, in its own right. It hung from the cavern ceiling like a gigantic version of all the stalactites around it, so compared to the other towers, it felt quite a bit different when looking down over the central plaza from one of its windows.

Just knowing that you were floating there, suspended so high above the ground, gave the place a rather unique vibe. Enough so, in fact, that Hector was starting to wonder if he should try to keep it this way. The tower could still be refurbished in every other way, of course, but the idea that they might just... not rebuild the bottom half was becoming more appealing to him.

Especially because it could also be considered an added element of security. According to Voreese, the original purpose of the Star Tower was imprisonment, which was, more or less, what they were starting to use it for now. So if it was eventually going to turn into a proper prison again, then would it not make sense for it to have one less exit from which prisoners could escape?

Weird to think about. Even just a few months ago, Hector never would've imagined himself thinking about the architecture of prisons. But the value of it in the future was looking undeniable. He needed to take this seriously, which meant he should probably study up more before making any big decisions.

One more thing on the to-do list.

Hopefully, it wouldn't end up being too important too soon. For now, the Star Tower was perfectly functional for their needs. They weren't keeping the reapers in cells but rather just in the tower's single largest chamber, which didn't have a name until Melchor and Orric had started calling it the Moonlight Hall."

"3312

Why they'd chosen ""Moonlight"" Hall instead of ""Starlight"" Hall, Hector still didn't quite understand, but the name appeared to be sticking for whatever reason. Maybe Starlight Hall would've been too on the nose.

The Moonlight Hall was an impressive room, though. While it didn't match the Grand Hall of the Night in terms of size, it did match it in terms of being composed entirely of nightrack. Every one of Warrenhold's eight great towers had at least one chamber of nightrack, and this was the Star Tower's.

Hector found a few more people here than he expected. More Saqqafs had decided to stay behind than Hector realized.

""Ah, Lord Goffe,"" said Abbas' eldest son, Raheem, upon seeing him. He was holding Grigozo in his right hand. ""I thought you would be resting a bit longer.""

""Probably should be,"" said Hector. ""What about you guys? You've been at this for a while, already. Not getting tired?""

""Oh, we're fine, Lord. Not to worry."" After a beat, however, Raheem seemed to intuit more from Hector's words. ""But perhaps we could use a break, if you would like to take over.""

""Alright. Go get something to eat, if you're hungry.""

""We will do that.""

Raheem handed the reaper off to him, then motioned for the other Saqqafs to follow, which they soon did.

Only two others remained behind. Carlos Sebolt and his reaper, Olijas.

Hector hadn't seen Carlos at all during the fight with Banda, but that was because he'd been the one assigned to keeping an eye on Ericoros after Melchor left. And Hector was grateful to him. The decision to stay here in Warrenhold when almost every other Rainlord servant was going off to fight one of the most important battles of their lives--that couldn't have been easy.

Carlos was giving him a look now as if waiting for instruction. Perhaps he was expecting Hector to send him away like the Saqqafs.

""If you want a break, too, then I can take over,"" said Hector.



Carlos glanced at Olijas, probably exchanging silent words. Neither said anything, however, and they both ended up looking uncertain.

Hector decided to elaborate. ""You're welcome to stay, though, if you prefer.""

Carlos gave a nod. ""We'll stay with you, Lord.""

Man, this lording business was a bit too nuanced for Hector's liking, sometimes. He appreciated everyone trying to read the room and infer what he was truly saying, but it could also make things a bit more difficult when he really was just saying what he meant."

"3313

Hector exchanged glances with his own reaper, wondering what Garovel might've been thinking. Now wasn't really the time to get into it, though. He took a seat at one of the large tables that filled the Moonlight Hall and rested his elbows on it while holding Grigozo out in front of him. Carlos took a chair to his left, holding Ericoros much the same.

""Any complaints about your treatment thus far?"" said Hector.

'No,' said Grigozo. He sounded more tired than before.

""Would you like more time to rest?""

'Yes, but ask your questions, first.'

""Alright,"" said Hector.

The Sandlords had been interrogating him for a few hours, asking the more generally useful things, such as what Grigozo knew about Abolish's operations all over the continent. From what Hector understood, Grigozo's information had been fairly juicy, though still limited.

Which wasn't too surprising. No doubt, the Abolish heads were concerned about precisely this type of situation: one of their most influential officers or reapers getting captured and spilling their guts. It would've been quite weird--and perhaps suspicious--if Grigozo could tell them anything they wanted to know.

Regardless, Hector figured that he could leave those sorts of inquiries to the others. Instead, he wanted to take a different approach. ""What do you know of the Freeman Fellowship?""

'Ah. Them. An intriguing group. I was interested in joining them at one point, but alas... ah... it did not work out.'

""Why?""

'Banda was... shall we say, not quite the kind of person who qualifies for an invitation from them.'

Hmm. ""It's invite only?""

'Yes. From what I've heard, they take their image and reputation extremely seriously. The last thing they want is one of their own members doing something that reflects poorly on the rest of them, especially when Abolish as a whole is already doing a perfectly good job of that for them.'

""You seem to think pretty highly of them,"" said Hector.

'I had high hopes for them, perhaps. Without being able to join them, however, I do not know if they truly live up to the ideal I've formulated in my mind. I suspect not, as is usually the case with hopes and ideals, but I've not yet seen or heard anything that proves otherwise.'

""Really?"" said Hector. ""You've never heard a single bad thing about the Fellowship?""

'I suppose it would depend on one's perspective, but no, I would not say that I have.' The reaper paused. 'Well. Then again, maybe there was one thing...'

"3314

""Which was?"" said Hector.

'As I said, their image is very important to them. But that might've been quite the understatement, if the rumors I heard are true. Supposedly, there was another sect that the Fellowship was feuding with. I know not what it was called--and perhaps nor does anyone else, now. Because the Freemen annihilated it to a man. Wiped it off the face of

Eleg.'

Hector cocked an eyebrow at that information, but not because it was all that hard to believe. Abolish in-fighting was easy enough to imagine. The ruthlessness that Grigozo was describing, however--that did seem a bit contrary to how the Freeman Fellowship portrayed itself.

'It was certainly a strange rumor of questionable veracity,' the reaper went on. 'Among the other sects of Abolish, the Freemen are not well respected. People talk badly and openly about them all the time. And as a result, there are many sects which you could describe as ""feuding"" with them. But to my knowledge, they never seek retribution or violence of any kind based on those things. Except, apparently, in this one, debatable instance.'

""Sounds like there's not much reason to believe it, then,"" said Hector.

'I would agree, if not for the fact that in this instance, the feuding had been of a different sort compared to the norm. The reason the Freemen are not respected is because they are viewed as weak and cowardly. Or disloyal to the greater cause of Abolish, perhaps. These things, I suspect, do not bother the Freemen. But in this case, the talk had been virtually the opposite: that they were not the gentle, peaceful creatures they claimed to be. That instead, they were two-faced, vile, backstabbing, and violent.' Grigozo allowed a beat to pass. 'I do not think they appreciated that.'

""...So you think that in order to prove they aren't a bunch of violent psychopaths, they decided to murder everyone who was saying that about them?""

'Yes. Hence my one bit of trepidation. I must admit, however, that for me, such a rumor being proved true would not have been a dealbreaker in the slightest. When compared against all of my other peers, I would have probably still considered them saints.'

Huh.

'Perhaps you would feel differently, though.'

Tough to say without more context, Hector felt. It was hard to blame anyone for killing members of Abolish when so many of them were evil sons of bitches.

It did make him a bit uneasy, however. If they weren't truly as peaceful as they appeared to be, then that was not something that he should

just ignore."  
"3315 -- CCLXXIX.

## Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Nine: 'The Reckoning at the demonic Pit...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Fire and lightning lashed up and around the enormous chamber, casting off sparks that were so numerous and deadly that any normal person would probably have been vaporized on contact. The entire building rumbled more violently with each new geyser of electrified flame.

This level of danger while working was not something he had experienced in quite some time. Even the most intensive bits of creation involving the Roberts had not gotten this bad. Hell, perhaps not since its own creation had he seen such fury from the Clown Pit.

In moments like this, even he was not invulnerable here. The forge had that much power. He had to be in pan-rozum just to handle it, just to keep things under control.

One slip up would spell the end for the poor little Lion and his reaper, who were both currently at the center of the inferno. They were probably screaming in agony, but it was all being drowned out by the Pit.

The Pit itself was a gigantic bowl embedded in the floor, big enough to park ten or more cars. Plenty of space to move about and work, to interact with the inferno, to calm or stoke it at particular points, to tweak the raging ardor that flowed and swirled through each spark and flicker.

Delicate, delicate work. Made even more so by the Pit's rage.

The real magic, though, happened at the very bottom of the bowl: the center, where the subjects were being held fast as much by their harnesses as by the whirlwind of ardor currently encapsulating them. Because beneath them, beneath that whirlwind, was the Eye of the Pit.

The pitch dark hole with no bottom, where all of the ardor in the Pit flowed both from and then back into. It was a rift, of sorts, and that was where the Pit truly lived. Where it felt. Where it learned.

Where it decided whether it would work for or against him during the creative process.

This time, unfortunately, it seemed to have chosen the latter. Not that he was terribly surprised.

It didn't much care for organics. Especially people. It tolerated him, sure, but anyone else? No. It wanted to render them inorganic. It wanted to reduce them to dust.

So Morgunov had a fight on his hands. And not an easy one, to be sure.

But, thankfully, it was one he'd had many times before."  
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"3316

The key was to not be straightforward in his approach. Trying to overpower the Pit during times like this was a fool's errand. It had pride, which he needed to respect, or else it would rebel and attempt to establish its dominance over him.

He'd made that mistake only once.

It had taken him a year to fully recover, because it had ripped Bool away from him like the cheese out of a ham sandwich--and then continually used the reaper against him as a hostage. Getting the Pit to trust him again had been one of the most difficult and obnoxious things he'd ever done. It involved a lot of gifts and even more negotiating--and finally, another fight in which Morgunov had been able to reassert his own dominance again, thanks to many, many preparations.

That same trick wouldn't work on him again, of course, but Morgunov did not wish to test the Pit's ingenuity. Just as he had grown and changed over the years, so had the Pit. In fact, because he had grown and changed, so had the Pit.

At this point, it was most certainly a reflection of himself, in many ways. Disrespecting it meant disrespecting himself.

And he hated being disrespected.

So no. While Morgunov might normally consider something like this a challenge to be overcome, the Clown Pit was different. Special. Deserving of his fear and admiration. But also counterbalanced against his own pride, lest the Pit see weakness and try to reestablish its dominance again.

A difficult balancing act, to be sure.

Here and now, he had to guide the forge's raging energy rather than oppose or smother it with his own. A gentle touch. This spark here. That bolt there. This flame over there.

Walking through the inferno like this, time was almost a non-factor. It slowed. Or bent, perhaps. Stretched. In accordance with his and the forge's unified wills.

He let the flow speak to him. The Pit was telling him a story. He needed but listen. He needed to hold truth. To understand.

A memory. No. A fear? Yes. A memory from the future, one might call it. Easy to mix up.

He saw a great pillar filling the sky, rising up into the clouds. Where had it come from? He looked toward the base. Its foundation. Down and down. So far down.

At length, he recognized the area. It was this same place, the area around the compound that housed this very workshop."

"3317

Ah.

Yes. A fear, indeed. The great pillar was of crystal. Of quartz, by Morgunov's estimation.

Interesting.

The Pit was afraid of the little Lion, was it? Or rather, of the dormant power that Morgunov was seeking to unlock. It had picked up on the danger here. Of course it had.

Such a warning was unnecessary, though. Morgunov would certainly be displeased if his favorite workshop ended up obliterated, but this was a risk that needed to be taken. The Dry God was his best lead on the whereabouts of the Primordials.

Plus, Morgunov just really wanted to talk to him. Thinking about all the crazy things the guy might be able to tell him was making him more excited by the moment.

He had to cull those feelings, though. Right now, the task at hand required the entirety of his focus.

Heh. Perhaps the forge knew that and was seeking to distract him. Wasn't gonna work, but what a cunning jerk, if so.

If anything, he was more certain than ever that he was on the right path. The power depicted in the vision could obviously not come from Asad Najir and Qorvass by themselves.

He was so close now.

The flow of ardor shifted. He could sense it. Yes. Smoother. More efficient. Good. Fewer sparks. Fewer goutts of fire. Fewer cracks of lightning. The guidance was working. Slow but steady.

The current goal was to create a perfect flow. Optimally efficient. No cracks or leaks.



That was usually the main sticking point with the Clown Pit, due to the way he'd designed it. The open air above the bowl was the cause. That was why forges typically had some type of central containment, so that situations like this--where the ardor ran wild and threatened the user directly--could be avoided.

But Morgunov had wanted to try something different with the Pit. Granted, it was still technically contained by the greater chamber that was the entire room, but that was more to protect it from the outside world than anything.

Truthfully, he hadn't even been sure it would work. So much open space ran counter to all of the core design principles that he'd learned from his mentors. Perhaps that was why he'd wanted so badly to pull it off. As proof of concept, at least to himself.

And indeed, the Pit had been a real problem child during its creation. With the ardor able to flow so freely, it could whip up such furious energy storms that it threatened even to destroy itself."

"3318

But in the end, he had gotten it to work. And that incredible power, while certainly dangerous, could also be considered a boon. Like a wild horse, it was just a matter of taming it.

Plus, it came with the added security of no one else in the world ever being capable of using the Clown Pit against him. It would immediately reject and obliterate anyone who dared try.

He breathed in deep, taking some of the ardor into his own body. This, too, was a supremely dangerous tactic, requiring a well-practiced hand with ardor manipulation and also the kind of bodily resilience that only an emperor possessed. But it was worth the effort, because it allowed him to become part of the flow itself, meaning that he could even more easily guide it.

It was almost like making the flow of ardor an extension of his own will.

It was exhilarating. Euphoric. A raw feeling of power and freedom. Of living energy. If he could've stayed like this indefinitely, he very well might have.

Every time he did this, he recalled the tales from his mentors. Tales of the great inventors of old, of how they had used this very same technique to tap into untold power from the planet itself. Exceeding beyond themselves, beyond their own genius, into a greater height of knowledge than was perhaps otherwise possible on this plane of existence.

He'd thought that such tales were exaggerated. And perhaps they were. But in moments like these, he could see at least a glimmer of truth in them.

He didn't know about tapping into any genius beyond his own. That part still seemed hyperbolic to him. He never felt like new ideas were coming to him here. But the drunken feeling of power? The sheer potential? And the creative spark to go forth and build more wonders?

Those were all there.

The storm was calming almost totally, now. And it was beautiful. The lightning was gone entirely, but the fire was still there, though it was now orderly. A nearly perfect stream, flowing in repeating, algorithmic patterns all around the bowl, creating a visible containment field around Asad and Qorvass.

Tears welled up in his eyes, wavering against the encircling whirlwind.

This always happened to him. He couldn't help it. Witnessing the majesty of any fusion forge at the peak of its ability never ceased to move his heart."

"3319

The purity before him. The brilliance. The wonder. It took him all the way back. Hundreds of years. To the few, fleeting instances of curious innocence from his childhood.

That's what this felt like to him. Curiosity incarnate. A glimpse into a Higher Realm, perhaps.

It was what he lived for.

The flow was truly perfect now. He went over it slowly, taking his time as he walked the full length of the bowl, observing every inch of the containment field in order to be certain.

The fiery glow needed to be just right. Not for any calculational reason. He simply needed it to be. It was a matter of achieving perfection. So much had just been risked, and so much might now be gained. Rare moments like these needed to be savored to the maximal extent. It would likely be quite some time before he had a good reason to push the Pit so hard.

There. A coruscating red-orange glow with just a hint gold in the middle of each flaming stream. They were not unlike ribbons, tied into a great sphere, shining and otherworldly in their luster.

Almost done, now. A thought which saddened him. But he knew he should not linger too much more. The Pit could handle the load just fine, but it would grow antsy with him if he stopped working.

As much as it had in common with him, in this way it differed immensely. It cared not for its own magnificence. It wanted only to make progress.

Morgunov's normally silver gaze was now burning with red and gold as his eyes fell upon Asad and Qorvass. They seemed to no longer be struggling. If they'd fallen unconscious, then that was a shame. The perfected containment field would actually be neutralizing any pain now. Even the imminent removal of the little Lion's tattoos would not hurt. Instead, it would feel akin to a simple sensation of peeling. And perhaps even be oddly satisfying, too.

Theoretically, anyway.

Morgunov raised his hand and set to work. From the top of the containment field, one stream grew downward, snaking a red-gold path toward Asad Najir.

When it made contact with his skin, the glow magnified for a moment into a brilliant flash, then engulfed the man's body entirely.

The tattoos resisted. They, too, were of a golden hue, though darker and more intense.

Morgunov had of course seen this before and been expecting it. Those buggers were stubborn, to be sure, and were no doubt intending to block his progress yet again.

But this time was different."

"3320

This time he could get at the flow of ardor within the tattoos themselves. Where before, their secrets had been thoroughly concealed, now he sensed them. Through Qorvass, the Pit gave him an inroad.

Fascinating.

This woven flow. The way it could flex and bend... was it reacting to his observation of it? Didn't like being seen this way, eh?

Ah.

It was a memory structure. A pseudo-consciousness. Even more sophisticated than he'd realized.

Masterful work.

Rare were the times when he could look on and marvel at the accomplishment of another integrator, especially with how old he'd gotten, how much he'd seen before.

These patterns were something else. How were they so efficient? They looked a bit sloppy, but the flow was not leaking in the slightest. No ardor being lost. As perfect as the flow he'd just created using the Pit.

It made no sense.

Efficiency was not a trivial issue. In fact, where inventions were concerned, the efficient flow of ardor was arguably the most important subject of all. Many integrators would spend a hundred years or more just trying to master that one thing--and still die before managing it.

But this. This was something special. A perfect flow that did not appear so? How could that be?

He was missing something. Some element of its composition must've still been concealed from him.

Damn! Such an enticing mystery! Here?! Now?! He didn't have the luxury of time on his side. He needed to remove them.

But this magnificent structure... it would be a shame to destroy it. A

true shame. In fact, destroying it before uncovering the depth of its secrets would not only be a shame... but a crime, in Morgunov's mind.

An intellectual crime. Absolutely.

Yes. Abruptly, his priorities shifted. He could not allow these tattoos to be destroyed. Without a doubt, he had to, in some way, preserve them.

But how? Agh.

He racked his brain, thinking. Their flow's patterns were too complex to simply memorize with how little time he had. Well, then again, with the benefit of Bool's immaculate memory on his side, it might be possible.

But no. He had a better idea.

Rather than destroying them, the solution was to transfer them to a dummy body. Then he could study them at his leisure another time.

Or...

Or?

Or he could use his own body. Transfer them himself.

Eheheh... wouldn't that be astonishingly dangerous?

Why, yes. Yes, it would."

"3321

How scary. His better judgment was telling him not to do this. Which was a good thing, he supposed. Despite what the world thought of him, he must not have been totally mad. At least part of him still knew when he was thinking crazy thoughts.

And yet.

In the raging storm of his mind, his better judgment was not the prevailing wind. He could sense that much, too. In this fleeting moment, when his racing thoughts were bleeding into the swirling power of the fusion forge--with its emboldening, euphoric effects--Morgunov could tell that he was about to make a very unwise decision.

Because why shouldn't he, hmm? Was he not the Mad Demon of Abolish? The Maniac of Maludona? The Whackjob of Warway?

...The Lunatic of Lotorevo?

Yes. He had embraced such things long ago. Cowing in the face of danger now would be silly. Pointless. And a self-deception, besides.

Sure, this might well be one of those moments that historians liked to go on and on about, when a famed intellect finally went too far and ended up destroying itself. Hoisted by its own petard.

But such nattering ants would never understand, anyway. Cautionary tales? Playing it safe?

These were not how knowledge was accrued.

Morgunov breathed even more deeply than before--perhaps even more deeply than he ever had in his entire life, for that is how all of the ardor flowing into him made it feel. And with his mind, he seized control of the flow, both within himself and by extension, the flow all around him.

Like a fishing line, he reeled the flow in. More. More. More.

The flow within the tattoos was there. Part of the line. The part he was most interested in. Slowly, they peeled themselves off of Asad's body and followed along the stream toward Morgunov.

Such energy. Strength. Enough to make him sick.

No. He held. Had to.

Closer. Closer. Closer, still.

There. They were right there. Right in front of him. About to touch him.

He braced himself further. The first tattoo contacted his outstretched hand.

And the world went white.

But he was still aware. Still holding together. Not deterred. He couldn't see, but he could sense. The flow. The tattoos. The forge. Everything, actually.

The whole room. The whole building. The rocky land around it, and the

crust of the planet below him, extending down, down, down."  
"3322

So much information. The flow wanted him to see it all.

And impulsively, he wanted to let it. To absorb everything. But he knew better. He had to rein it in. He was in charge here, not it. He couldn't let it lead him by the nose, because it would try to take him everywhere and nowhere, which would disperse his mind and kill his soul. Bool's, too, if the reaper didn't realize what was happening and release him in time.

Not that the reaper even could when Morgunov was in full control like this. There would theoretically be a window--right at the end--in which Bool could pull it off, but the only way to know that for sure would be to test it. And doing that couldn't even be considered insane so much as just stupid.

So he solidified himself. His mind. Gathering his thoughts, emotions, sensations--his flow. He would not be repelled. The tattoos, glowing with a golden power, snaked their way up his arm and spread across his body.

Yes. That was better.

Now, maybe--

A distinctly feminine voice arrived.

""Malen'kiy Durak,"" it said.

And Morgunov stopped, frozen in place at the sound of those words. At their cadence. Their delivery.

So piercingly, hatefully familiar.

He'd not heard those words said that way since...

""As ever, you meddle where you should not,"" said the voice, now in Mohssian--or at least what sounded like it. And then again, in his old, native tongue, ""Malen'kiy Durak.""

And admittedly, it was difficult for him to maintain his composure.

Those words. Said in just that way.

No one should have known them. He never should have had to hear them again.

Because he had killed everyone who had ever spoken them to him in that manner.

Madly, his mind entertained the notion that this voice might actually belong to his mother. It was truly, utterly impossible. But in a single, trembling moment, he couldn't help himself, couldn't help the thought from entering his mind.

And then, hatred.

Hatred of a kind he had not felt in an Age.

It filled his mind.

Clouding his thoughts. Dispersing his reason.

Until he felt Bool there. Bringing him back. Returning his calm. Returning himself.

He breathed, finding clarity.

""That's a neat trick,"" said Morgunov, only just able to keep the anger out of his voice. ""Who are you? Where did you learn those words?""  
"3323

""I learned them the same way you did,"" the voice said.

Morgunov tilted his head, trying to lean more into his curiosity than his frustration. His vision was returning, at least. The world of white was fading back into the Pit Chamber.

He soon noticed that something was amiss, however.

The Pit was no longer active. The containment field made of pure fire and ardor was gone, and the only glimpse of the golden glow was now all over his body.

Asad and Qorvass were still there, both strapped down and apparently



unconscious. Good thing, too. The reaper might have been able to escape just now, while Morgunov was both blinded and distracted.

Strange. He hadn't told the Pit to power down. It could have decided to do that on its own, though, if it had determined that its job was done.

He didn't see any physical form for this voice, however. Not that he expected to.

First things first. He moved over to Qorvass in order to make sure the reaper was indeed secure.

Before he got there, the voice spoke up again. ""You wished to meet a god, did you not? A so-called Primordial?""

That made him pause. He didn't remove his gaze from Qorvass, though. This voice seemed to be coming from within the tattoos themselves, as he could feel the physical vibrations of sound carrying throughout his body.

Not telepathy, then. Which made sense. He built up his defenses against that long ago. He would've clocked a psychic intruder right away.

But then how did the voice learn those old words? And now these new questions? If the voice hadn't pulled the information out of his mind, then...?

""How did you know that?"" asked Morgunov.

""A dull question from a dull mind,"" said the voice. ""Ask something more intelligent.""

Hoo boy. Trying to annoy him, eh? Such tactics usually didn't affect him, but he had to admit, he was struggling. Whoever this was, she'd caught him off guard.

For the first time in a long while, Bool's mind was actually playing a significant role here. Keeping him balanced. He needed not to lose his cool.

""That won't work, little missy,"" said Morgunov. ""Deflect all you like, but one way or another, I'll find my answers. It'd be better for you in the long run if you just cooperated, otherwise I might get a bit vindictive later.""

"3324 -- CCLXXX.

""A threat from ignorance will do you no good, Little Fool.""

""Eheheh. Doesn't have the same impact on me when you say it in Mohssian."" His silver gaze shifted briefly to Asad, then returned to Qorvass. ""You wouldn't happen to be a relative of these two, now would you? Or a lingering remnant of such a person, perhaps? Hmm?""

""That is both correct and not. To explain would be an exercise in tedium, and I am sure you would still be no wiser by the end of it.""

""Oho, well, then. Perhaps you would be keener to tell me who you are in your own terms, then. Or who you want me to believe you are, at least. It's obvious enough that you're one of those tricky types. Prone to lying, no doubt.""

""Hmph. Little Fool. Again I say: you wished to meet a so-called Primordial, did you not?""

""Yeah-huh.""

""Then you should be rejoicing. For you have now done so.""

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty: 'Alas, siblings of the Current...'

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Morgunov blinked, then couldn't help snorting a laugh. ""You're tellin' me that you're a Primordial? Are you serious?""

""Indeed.""

His bullshit detector was practically exploding, but he kept it in check with another laugh, this time with more energy behind it. He was actually curious, now. ""Okay, then, little missy. I'll bite. Which Primordial are you claiming to be, huh?""

""It matters not. Your perception of us is so minuscule that my true name would either mean nothing to you or give you a completely false

impression of your current situation. ""

""Mm. Not one of the famous ones, eh? Don't want to be embarrassed when you reveal your big, scary identity and I don't even recognize you. I get it. That actually makes your claim more believable to me.""

""As I said. Ignorance.""

""So what, are you like Cocora's ugly stepsister or something? The one nobody ever pays attention to? That's a shame. Jealousy is a difficult monster to tango with. I feel for you.""

A glow arrived in his peripheral vision, and Morgunov saw that it was coming from Asad. From his torso, more specifically.

""Sister,"" arrived another voice, this one more masculine. ""There is no need to be so rude. This repulsive man has done us a favor, has he not?""

""And who is this now?"" said Morgunov, growing more curious by the second.

""I am Rasalased. It is interesting to meet you, Young Demon of Abolish.""

"3324 -- CCLXXX.

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""I am Rasalased. It is interesting to meet you, Young Demon of Abolish.""  
"3325

"Ah, so it's you!" said Morgunov. "Finally! You sure are a hard fella to reach, y'know that?"

"Indeed, I do."

"I've got some questions for you, mister."

"And I, you."

"Oh? Intriguing. But uh, wait a minute here. This angry lady is really your sister?"

"No," she said.

"Yes," said Rasalased.

"Mmhmm. Cleared that right up," said Morgunov.

"We have a complex relationship," said Rasalased.

"I've got a few of those myself," said the emperor. "But as far as I know, you're not a Primordial, Mr. Salad. You're a few thousand years too young for that, are you not?"

"This is true," said Rasalased. "But kinship is a thing more deep and vast than all the oceans of the world combined."

"Ooh, okay. Sounds like a bit of wishful thinking on your part, but I can't say I hate it! Your starry-eyed musings were one of your more charming qualities in life, so I'm glad that hasn't left you after all these years!"

"Hmm? You speak as if you knew me personally."

"Do I?" He sorted through his thoughts. "Oh, that's right. My reaper met you a few times. Perhaps you remember. His name is Bool."

"Ah. The name is familiar. But also not. Perhaps I remember. Or perhaps I do not."

"Mmhmm, mmhmm. I know the feeling. Don't worry about it. Bool's a bit touchy when it comes to being forgotten, but I won't let him say anything mean to you. He can be a real drama king, sometimes. Really needs to learn how to relax."

"I am familiar with such difficulties."

"Ehehe." Morgunov couldn't help smiling. "Alright, well, I've gotta admit, despite how much I'd like to ask my questions, I'm pretty dang interested to hear what it is that you want to ask! Especially because I'd figured that you would be more openly arrogant and hostile, like your maybe-sister over here. Instead, you're seeming like quite the gentleman! Haven't called me an ignorant fool once, yet!"

"I have always felt that a modicum of politeness goes a long way, even when talking to barbaric mongrels such as yourself."

"Methinks you haven't quite nailed it, but boy, do I appreciate the sentiment! So go on, then! What did you want to ask me about, eh? I've gotta know what a god would want to consult little ol' me for!"

"You are letting me go first? I thank you. In truth, there are several. First, I would like to know what your plans are for the current Lion.""  
"3326

"Aha. Concerned about him, are you? I suppose that's only natural." Morgunov paused. "Still a bit surprising, though, now that I'm thinking about it. I mean, do you really care about the little Lion? Or are you just going through the motions, 'cuz of your sense of duty?"

"Of course I care," said Rasalased. "Why would you say that?"

"Oh, c'mon. You're a god now, aren'tcha? You're above such base, mortal concerns, surely! Aren't you much more interested in the big picture, hmm? Things that we on this plane of existence can barely even glimpse, let alone comprehend?"

Rasalased made no response.

Oho? Had he unexpectedly hit the mark, Morgunov wondered? Truthfully, he'd just been saying stuff, rambling with whatever came into his head. Usually, when he did that, he discovered all sorts of new ways to piss people off.

Ehehe. Perhaps this “Dry God” was even more full of surprises than he’d hoped.

The still-nameless sister chimed in again. “You will not be harming Asad Najir any more than you already have, Little Fool.”

Morgunov giggled. “Ooh, that sounds like a threat. I admire your confidence. Unless it turns out to be arrogance, of course. Ehehe.”

This was music to his ears. Even though it was quite likely that this lady had simply been lying about being a Primordial in order to intimidate him, it would be absolutely perfect if she’d been telling the truth.

The fact was, he didn’t want a pet god like Rasalased. Someone amicable and courteous from the outset? No, no. He wanted someone mean. Someone egotistical.

Someone whose spirit he’d be able to take great joy in breaking.

Because after all, once that was done, courtesy and amicability could be taught. In fact, that’d probably be the most fun part.

She, however, did not immediately respond. Despite her rudeness, perhaps she still wanted to be careful with her words here.

Morgunov hoped not. That sounded boring.

Instead, Rasalased was the next to speak. “If you harm the Lion further, you will not find us cooperative with whatever it is that you want.”

“That’s one way of looking at it, sure,” said Morgunov, “but I could also pose the opposite perspective. If you don’t cooperate, then your sandy boy won’t be having a very good time in my custody.”

“Either way, the result is the same,” said Rasalased. “You must leave him be. In fact, releasing him and his reaper would be best.””

”3327

Morgunov smacked his lips. “I dunno... that’s a pretty big ask.” It wasn’t, really. At this point, he had no further use for Asad or Qorvass,

but they didn't need to know that.

Plus, he always liked leaving the door open for a senseless murder. Never knew when something like that might come in handy. Hostages? Venting frustration? Silly experiments? There were all sorts of ways to make use of things that had otherwise outlived their usefulness. Who didn't love a bit of recycling?

"I do not believe it is," said the sister. "Now that you have met us, you have no need of them any longer."

Dang it. "You don't know that," said Morgunov. "I've got all sorts of needs. And besides, the mere fact that you two care about them so much means that they're useful to me as leverage. So if you want 'em safe or even free, then maybe we can come to an agreement of some sort. I'm a reasonable fellow, despite what you might've heard about me."

"More lies," she said. "You only keep your word when it is convenient for you. Your overconfidence in your own power makes you have no qualms about betraying others. Any agreement made with you would have no weight or sense behind it."

"So harsh. I'll have you know that I keep my word for plenty of other reasons besides mere convenience. For instance, sometimes it's just funny. To see the surprised looks on people's faces, I mean. And heck, other times I keep it because I'm real mad. Tell me, what is convenient about hunting someone to the ends of Eleg for decades? Hmm? The convenient thing to do would be to forgive and forget! But no. If I give my word that I'll kill someone, then I do it, no matter how long it takes!" He paused. "Unless, maybe, they come up with a really good apology. Then I might change my mind. But that's not going back on my word! That's making a new promise!"

"You lie even to yourself," she said. "Rationalization masked as reason. You cannot tell when others see through you, because you cannot even see through yourself."

"You're not very fun to talk to, y'know that?"

"A spoiled child never enjoys being scolded."

He sniffed. "What about you, Mr. Salad? What say you about striking a deal with me?"



“Unfortunately,” said Rasalased, “I believe my sister is right about you not being trustworthy.”

“Ouch!”

“However, if you were to fulfill your end of a bargain first, then your trustworthiness would be a non-factor.”

“Oh? Hmm. But that’d mean opening myself up to being easily betrayed by you, instead.”

“It would, yes,” said Rasalased. “But that is the price you must pay for being of such ill-repute. Perhaps if you had lived your life more forthrightly, then you would be able to enjoy the accompanying privileges.”

“Mm, I both resent and doubt that. People are way too untrusting in general for someone to be given the benefit of the doubt with any sort of regularity.” He gave a shrug. “But anyhow, lemme hear what else you wanted to ask. Sounds like there might be room to negotiate for Asad and Qorvass’ lives, depending on how the rest of this conversation goes.”

“Very well,” said the Dry God. “Next, I wish to ask about your experiences with other realms. Have you visited any of them?”

Morgunov pursed his lips, thinking. That was a tough one to answer, actually. “Visited? Uh... hmm. What counts as visiting? Because I’ve definitely done a bit of otherworldly traveling in my day, but such events for me have always been more... ‘out-of-body experiences’ than anything.”

“I see. So your corporeal form has always remained here, in this realm?”

“That’s right,” said Morgunov. “I know a guy who had a more involved experience like what you’re talking about, but sadly, he’s too terrified of me and keeps running away before I can have a proper conversation about it. Real slippery bugger, that one.”

“So you are saying that your experience is comparatively limited, then?”

"I suppose so. It's a subject I'm interested in, though. Just haven't gotten back around to researching it in a long while. I like to save certain things for later, know what I mean? Always gotta keep another project or two lined up, for whenever the current one finishes. Lemme tell ya, I absolutely hate having nothing interesting to do. Start to get a bit antsy and stir-crazy, which tends to make me lash out. In fact, Bool used to try and make me bored all the time 'cuz of that. He likes it when I go out and make trouble for folks. He hasn't attempted that in a while, though, probably because he knows that I've got too many backup projects in mind, right now. Lost cause for him, at the moment.""

"3329

"But you have visited other realms, at least through mental projection," said Rasalased.

"Yep," said Morgunov. "Perhaps it was even similar to what the two of you are doing right now. Where are your corporeal forms currently, hmm? Do you even have those, anymore? Or have you supposedly 'ascended beyond the need for them,' as some of the old stories claim?"

"Indeed, we left them behind long ago," said the sister.

"HMMMMMMMM," mused Morgunov. "I wonder about that. Certainly, it would be quite the convenient thing to make others believe, wouldn't it? This idea that you are now totally intangible beings, no longer vulnerable in physical ways. That way, you don't have to worry about some maniac getting it into his head that he might be able to hunt down your little, fleshy bodies and capture them. Or kill them. Or otherwise use them against you, eh?"

"Believe what you will. It matters not."

"Eheheh. So aloof!"

"Tell me," interjected Rasalased. "During your travels among other realms, did you ever hear of a place called Saharazeem?"

The Great Desert?

Interesting. Morgunov had to think back. It was true that he'd seen

quite a lot of the realms beyond this one, particularly during that one time at Bellvine. But even now, a lot of the things he'd witnessed there were still jumbled or foggy, hardly better than nonsense.

He'd spent considerable time in the immediately following years trying to parse through all of that information, but he'd only had a modest degree of success with the effort. Largely, it had come down to simply journaling everything that he could remember and then trying to interpret patterns from the mess. Ideas, emotions, visions, sensations, names, and places.

It had seemed an endless ocean, at the time. The great and vast Void.

One of the most enjoyable experiences of his life, truth be told. But so confusing in retrospect, too. And above all, he despised being confused.

Mysteries were one thing. Discovering secrets, uncovering truth--those were wonderful. But merely being mixed up and dumbfounded? No. Absolutely not.

The name, at least, was familiar to him. He just needed to recall if it was from that time or if he'd simply read it somewhere.

Bool's assistance was appreciated here. Ehehe. The reaper hadn't felt this useful in eons. It reminded Morgunov of more innocent times, when he'd relied on the reaper for almost everything.

Ah, there it was.

Yes.

Saharazeem. It was from Bellvine."  
"3330

It had been but a glimpse, but now, with the added context of Rasalased being interested in this place, perhaps that was enough to interpret more.

Hmm. There were a few emotions and sensations associated with the glimpse. Longing. Satisfaction. Hunger. Pride. But most of all, thirst.

And there was an image, too.

A vast, golden landscape--not only sand but great pillars, too.

Pillars of quartz, unless he was mistaken.

Quite similar to the great pillar that the Pit had only just showed him.

Ooh. Morgunov had to admit: that was a little worrisome. That vision had most certainly been a warning, and here he now was, seeing it again, only this time without the accompanying sense of urgency.

"Yes," Morgunov finally answered. "I have heard the name. What is your interest in it?" He had a fairly good guess, of course, but there was no point in jumping to conclusions when he could simply ask.

"I seek the arasaba," said the Dry God.

Morgunov blinked. "Oh! Your mythical lion beasts! You actually believe in them? Your descendants certainly didn't seem to, last I asked."

"It is not a question of belief. In the realms beyond, all can be made or unmade. The impossible made possible. But you must already know this, surely."

"Eheh. I know of the claim, yes. 'fraid I'm a bit of a skeptic on that front, though. Only the Void could possess the kind of infinite power you're describing. And the other realms are not of the Void."

"Some are," said Rasalased. "Those in which souls reside must belong to the Infinite Current, which in your interpretation would be an aspect of the Void, no?"

Now there was a term he hadn't heard in a while.

"The Infinite Current..." Morgunov stroked his thin beard as he thought it over.

The Void, supposedly, had many aspects to it. More than were even knowable, perhaps. More than were worth keeping track of, certainly. Such was to be expected when trying to conceptualize the infinite infinities of nonexistence.

But two of the more popular aspects were Chaos and the Infinite Current.

Chaos was supposed to be the nexus point of all creative thought, perhaps even of all creation itself. A theoretical domain of mayhem,

madness, genius, and every conceivable idea.

It was also Morgunov's personal favorite aspect, as it so happened.

The Infinite Current, however, was something a bit different. The Great River of Souls, was another name for it."

"3331

It was supposed to be both the source and ultimate destination of all souls and ardor, which may have been one and the same thing. The Current was theorized to connect countless realms where life existed--and more. Many scholars throughout history believed that, wherever a reaper ferried a deceased soul to, the Current would eventually carry that same soul--or the energy that composed that soul, perhaps--back into this world.

An eternally recurring flow of imaginary power. Unfathomable in its strength and potential.

Morgunov, therefore, understood what Rasalased was getting at.

The ancient mythical beasts of the Sandlords could theoretically reside within a plane of nonexistence. And someone, therefore, might be able to ride the Infinite Current to such a place and meet or otherwise bear witness to them.

A truly ludicrous plan, filled with absurd danger. The Infinite Current, if it did indeed exist, would not be some leisurely route through scenic territory. The Current was supposed to be a force of literally unparalleled soul power and ardor. To endure through the Current, having your own soul constantly pummeled by such a force, while also attempting to guide your own path through it...?

Morgunov was not sure he could imagine a more impossible feat.

But perhaps that impossibility was precisely what made the plan worthy of a god's time.

He had to learn more.

"What do you want with the arasaba, exactly?" asked Morgunov.

"I believe they may be the progenitors of my kin," said Rasalased. "And

if so, then I must learn more of them.”

“Ahhh,” said Morgunov. “You want their power.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

The emperor snorted, then laughed. “Yes, I’m sure your interest in them is purely academic. Just like me!”

“If the arasaba hold answers regarding the origins of my kin, then they may also hold answers regarding the origins of all mankind.”

Morgunov bobbed his head. “Could be. But is that really so mysterious to you? If your surly sister here is truly a Primordial like she claims, then she should have plenty of juicy answers about all sorts of things, no?”

“Even if that were so,” said Rasalased, “I would not want her to provide them. There comes a point where one should not rely on the knowledge and experiences of another in order to continue growing. One must seek the truth for oneself.”

At that, Morgunov couldn’t help smiling. “A man after my own heart.””  
"3332

“And what of your plans?” asked Rasalased. “You wished to meet a Primordial, no? What will you do now that you have accomplished your goal?”

Morgunov tittered. “Still not sure I believe that I’ve really accomplished it. I need some type of confirmation that your big sis is really one of ‘em. Do either of you have a means of proving it?”

“If I did,” said the sister, “why would I bother providing it? Your satisfaction makes no difference to me.”

“Aw, c’mon. Don’t be stingy, now. You want the little Lion to keep on breathin’, don’tcha? I’d say that’s plenty reason to be cooperative.”

“You should be more concerned about your own breathing,” she said. “You act like you have full control over your circumstances, when you do not.”

Aha. Finally, they were getting down to it. Morgunov had been wondering when they would start to bare their fangs.

Since the beginning of the conversation, he'd been sending thoughts to his Roberts. He had hundreds of them scattered around the compound, patrolling the grounds, feeding him information via the network of biochips in his brain.

He'd been making more of the Roberts close in, surrounding the forge's chamber. By now, they were above, below, and all around, waiting to break through the ceiling, floors, and walls the instant he told them to.

"Well, if you're gonna talk big, I hope you've got some means of backing it up," said Morgunov. "I mean, I've allowed you to wrap yourself around me like an angry, little rope via these tattoos, so c'mon. If you think can do somethin' to me, then do somethin' already!"

"Let us not be--" tried Rasalased.

The world went white.

Crushing pressure arrived, all over his body but especially on his head. He could feel the intent behind. The desire to render him to dust. To put him in his place.

And it certainly hurt. Morgunov could not deny that. He sensed Bool wanting to numb his body, but he stayed the reaper's hand. Eheh. Just because he'd been letting the reaper pitch in for a change didn't meant that he was about to allow Bool to do whatever he wanted.

Because pain was an interesting thing. He didn't get to feel it very often, anymore. There'd been a time, of course, when he'd greatly feared pain and tried to avoid at all costs. But over the years, as he'd aged and aged, as boredom had started to become his fiercest enemy, he'd developed a certain nostalgic fondness for pain."

"3333

It was an important part of being human, he'd come to believe. Those rare few who couldn't feel it were missing out.

There was a popular sentiment that those who know pain are less inclined to inflict it upon others. And in Morgunov's experience, that

was true.

But it was also true that such experiences granted one the knowledge of where things hurt most. And from there, malicious intent could truly run rampant.

Knowledge was a funny thing. So many people throughout history liked to espouse the enormous benefits of education, of a learned populace, of knowledge in all its many forms dispelling ignorance around the world. And yet, Morgunov had increasingly come to believe that knowledge was also a prerequisite for evil to exist.

You could not intentionally hurt someone if you didn't know where to strike.

And perhaps, in a similar vein, evil was a prerequisite for the advancement of knowledge. Because ultimately, more knowledge would bring about more evil.

That was all very reductionistic, of course, but it was fun to think in simplified terms, from time to time. And necessary, too. He'd seen many intelligent people get so lost in their own sophisticated ideas that they began to overlook the obvious. He didn't want to be like that.

Which was why this attack from this so-called Primordial was interesting to him. Such a simplistic approach. Inflicting pain. No doubt, it was meant to be a test. She wanted to see how well he could take it. And once she'd gathered that knowledge, she would likely try something more advanced.

Unfortunately for her, she'd chosen her first attempt poorly. While Morgunov wasn't entirely certain that his next trick was going to work on her in the same way that it had worked on numerous powerful psychics, he had a pretty strong feeling that she wasn't going to be having a very fun time, here in a second. He just wanted to enjoy the pain for a moment longer, first. Mmm.

Okay, that was enough.

He concentrated.

As with many things in this world, it was mind over matter. Honed control over many years of meditation. Naturally, he'd gotten quite bored of the typical meditations that reapers were always asking of their servants, so when he'd started looking into various ways that he could spice things up, he'd been quite the happy camper for many



decades thereafter."

"3334

The thing about psychics was that they were frequently overconfident, likely because they associated their intellect with their psychic prowess--and there was perhaps nothing in the world more intoxicating to one's ego than the feeling of being intelligent.

But Morgunov had come to believe that intelligence and psychic abilities were, in fact, not directly related to one another. For example, psychics never seemed to realize that when they bridged their minds with his own, they were exposing themselves to a return signal.

And what was even worse for them, was that it was also possible to amplify said signal. Much like feedback from a microphone, the signal could be captured, made stronger, and then sent back to whence it came. That, in turn, would create a positive gain loop, amplifying the signal again and again, as fast as synapses could fire in the brain.

Of course, this was a bit dangerous on his end, too. The rapid amplification of the psychic signal would quickly feel like a splitting headache, soon followed by a knife in the brain, and then ultimately, a combusted skull. Unless, that was, the psychic realized what was happening and severed the link in time, which they usually did.

So it was a matter of the physical endurance of one's brain. And as a servant with ample passive soul defenses on his side, Morgunov was typically able to come out on top during such exchanges.

He couldn't be sure how this so-called Primordial lady would fare, but he intended to find out.

The reversal was a simple enough matter to execute. Well, simple after years of practice, at least. He merely had to empty his mind of all thoughts--admittedly not his strong suit--and then, while maintaining that emptiness, find the opening through which the signal was arriving.

He found it best to imagine the emptiness of his mind to be filling up with flammable gas. Then he could easily discover where the gas was coming from. A conceptual breach.

From there, he would imagine a spark, and the gas would ignite,

blowing back through the hole.

Ah, it was already working. He could feel the headache coming on. Hoo boy, what a toughie.

This kind of pain was impossible to numb, too, for it was not merely physical. Bool's half of the mind would be feeling it just as much as his half, if not more, which was why the reaper didn't care for this technique."

"3335

As the pain escalated, he couldn't help acknowledging the risk. How well could she handle this? Better than he could? He was about to find out.

Agh. Even for him, this level of pain was a bit much. Not enjoyable. Disorienting. Excruciating, actually.

Then it was gone. His mind relaxed. Phew.

She'd relented.

"A quaint trick," said the sister. "But you will need to do better than that, Little Fool."

Huh. No effect? Unlikely. She wouldn't have canceled her attack if that were the case. She was just putting on a brave face, trying to maintain her ego.

Good. He didn't want this to be too--

Something else stole his attention. A sudden influx of intel from the Roberts on the western edge of the compound. They were engaged in battle autonomously.

Intruders.

"Ohoho!" said the sister, sounding suddenly quite pleased. "Finally noticed, have you?! The truth of the matter is that there is little I can do to you from this distant position. But a distraction was very much doable."

Irritating.

A violent tremor arrived, freeing dust from the ceiling. He had a decision to make. Did he really need to go handle these intruders himself? The Roberts could handle almost anything on their own. So who--?

"Apologies for the use of trickery," said Rasalased. "I do hope you do not die this day, Young Demon. There is more I would speak with you about."

"Perhaps you will find these new opponents entertaining," said the sister. "I suspect, however, that you already know enough about them to make you suitably nervous."

What was she--?

Two of the Roberts just went offline at once. And more information was arriving. So much incoming data. Tough to parse through it all like this. The Roberts were swarming. Gathering intel en masse. And attacking. They needed guidance, though. More advanced and specific orders.

Uh-oh. Some of the intruders had already penetrated quite deep into the facility. Nearing the Vanguardian captives.

Couldn't allow that, now could he? He started giving them new orders as he moved to personally intercept.

Who the heck had managed all this, anyway? Sure, he'd been distracted, but not for that long. This timing was quite suspicious.

And those silhouettes in the camera footage.

Ah.

One of them, at least, was very obvious. And from it, he could infer the others.

But the obvious one was the most problematic, he knew. He'd spent quite some time trying to learn more about that blasted creature after his encounter with it at Bellvine. Much of that battle had been hazy in his mind, but he'd remembered enough for it to leave a lasting impression on him.

It was that damn dog."  
"3336 -- CCLXXXI.

## Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-One: 'The opening of the dark chorus...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Loren Lighteyes tapped his foot against the stony floor, trying to have patience and not quite succeeding. Joining up with Caster Egmond's new sect within the Freeman Fellowship had certainly proved to be a roller coaster so far.

In just the last two weeks, they'd visited half a dozen Abolish strongholds--and it wasn't entirely clear why, either.

Obviously, Caster had plans, but he apparently wasn't yet keen to share the details of them. And while being kept in the dark was nothing new to Loren, he still didn't exactly love it.

Loren's reaper, Rezolo, seemed to think that it was some type of recruitment drive. With Loren being the first one to join up, it made sense that Caster would want to gather more followers.

But if that was what he was doing, then he sure had an odd way of going about it. Because Loren was still the only one following Caster around.

Maybe the Marauder of Calthos was just being picky. That was what Rezolo kept saying, at least.

And there was some logic in that, too, Loren supposed. Viable candidates for the Freeman Fellowship were few and far between within Abolish, and if Caster wanted to be even more strict beyond that, then Loren had a feeling that they might never find anyone else to join up at all.

But the main reason he didn't entirely buy Rezolo's interpretation of events was because Caster wasn't just going around and striking up conversations all the time. That was part of it, sure, but there were also times when the man simply stopped, closed his eyes, and stood still for a while.

It was almost like the man had just suddenly decided to start meditating out of nowhere. Loren had never known anyone to meditate

standing up--and so randomly, too.

And when Loren asked him about it, Caster gave one of the strangest answers he'd ever heard.

"I am communing with the land," he'd said.

Loren had of course asked for elaboration, but he hadn't gotten it. Instead, Caster just promised that all would become clearer in time.

Pretty damn odd, this Marauder.

And then, of course, there were the arguments. Despite visiting so many Abolish strongholds, Caster wasn't exactly acting friendly towards their hosts. Sometimes, he seemed to enjoy antagonizing them. Other times, he clearly enjoyed it."

"3336 -- CCLXXXI.

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"3337

The two of them had gotten into more than a few scraps during this trip. And worse still, despite being the chief instigator, Caster was frequently fine with standing by and watching Loren do all the fighting.

"Just trying to get a measure of you, lad," he'd said. "I hope you're not planning on complaining. You need the experience."

Thankfully, Caster did step in whenever the situation began to look truly dire.

And while he had yet to see the Marauder ever get serious during a fight, it was now quite obvious to Loren that this man was far more powerful than he'd expected. And he'd already expected a lot.

The guy could lay opponents out without even moving a muscle. Somehow, he could just look at them, and they'd crumple like paper-- and not always in the same manner, either. Sometimes, they would just fall over and stay down, seemingly passed out cold.

Other times, it was less pretty.

One guy ended up looking as if almost every bone in his body had been snapped in two and folded together, like he'd been crammed into an invisible box. And for all Loren knew, maybe he had. Loren still wasn't sure how Caster's powers worked. Rezolo said that Caster was supposed to be a destruction user, but none of the stuff he'd seen so far had looked like destruction to Loren.

All in all, though, Loren couldn't say he was hating his time with the Marauder. This gig was definitely strange, but he knew from personal experience that there were far, far worse ones in Abolish.

It'd be nice if Caster could pick up the pace a bit, though.

This "communing with the land" business would've been a lot better if it didn't mean Loren had to stand around so much. And it was unpredictable, too. Caster could be done in a few minutes or a few hours.

On this occasion, it was the latter.

The man's reaper, Kalikos, was even stranger. Whenever Loren tried asking for elaboration or clarification on something from Kalikos, the reaper usually gave him some weird non-answer--or even a total non sequitur.

The oddest things that the reaper said, however, were the things that arrived out of nowhere, unprompted.

'I should like a puppy of my own, someday,' he said.

Loren's foot stopped tapping as he looked over at the reaper, hovering around the Marauder's short, motionless figure."

"3338

"'Twould be quite the hurdle, taking care of it while intangible,' Kalikos went on, 'but perhaps that would make it all the more worthwhile.'

Loren exchanged glances with Rezolo. They'd already discussed the other reaper's peculiarity at length. According to Rezolo, Kalikos wasn't like this the last time they'd spoken, some thirty years ago.

Which was worrying information. It would've been more comforting to know that Kalikos had always just been some kind of kook. Thinking



about how or why he might've changed... well, Loren didn't like where his imagination wanted to go.

Rezolo, bless him, decided to take another crack at a conversation. 'Kalikos,' he said, which didn't even manage to draw the other reaper's gaze toward him. 'Do you know why Caster is so interested in visiting these strongholds?'

Loren resisted the urge to shake his head. That was a question they'd both asked before, but from Rezolo's intonation, it sounded like it was being asked for the first time. Perhaps Rezolo expected Kalikos to have no recollection of it ever having come up before and was therefore trying to be more gentle or subtle in his approach, despite any frustration that he might be feeling.

If so, then Loren could certainly relate.

Kalikos, however, appeared not to even hear him.

Loren had never seen a reaper in such a state. He had to wonder if it might be some kind of act. Reapers did have a tendency to be deceitful, sometimes for no other reason than to amuse themselves.

If it was an act, though, then it was a damn convincing one.

Rezolo gave a silent sigh, wrapped in the echo of privacy.

Loren was still debating whether he wanted to ask Caster directly about Kalikos' apparent condition. It seemed quite a rude and awkward subject to bring up, and while he liked Caster more than just about any other boss he'd ever had in Abolish, that didn't stop the man from still being rather terrifying, in his own way. They hadn't been working together long enough for Loren to really know how Caster would react to such questions. Even if Caster didn't fly off the handle and attack him, it could still cause other types of problems in their relationship.

Yeah. Better to just keep his head down and his mouth shut, for now. That was what Rezolo usually told him to do, anyway.

'Won't be here for much longer,' said Kalikos. 'Best to take it all in while you still can.'

"3339

Rezolo kept trying. 'What do you mean? Why won't we be here for much longer? Where is our next destination?'

'No, no,' said Kalikos. 'You do not see. The Great Song is soon to be sung. And as such, many of these places shall be rent to dust. No way to know which may survive. Too many souls with too much gravity. And so communion must be swift. If any of these grounds be suitable, then they may be worth defending.'

What in the world? 'You catch any of that?' asked Lighteyes.

'Uh, not really...' Rezolo hovered closer to Loren. 'But it sounds like we might be in for a fight soon.'

'Oh yeah? What else is new?'

'What is this Great Song you speak of?' asked Rezolo, publicly again.

'That is indeed the question,' said Kalikos. 'A turning point of the Age, perhaps. Or maybe just a footnote. Much is at stake, whatever the case. 'Tis a wonder that the self-proclaimed protectors of this realm have not already given up the gambit, considering how much they have lost--and how much more they may yet. Fools, I say. But brave ones, to be sure.'

Loren squinted, feeling almost like he understood some of that. "Are you... talking about about the Vanguard, right now?"

'To be a fool is a terrible thing. But to be a great fool--that may not be so bad. In fact, it may be necessary on the greater path. Judge them not too harshly, though they may deserve it. But if they be worthy, they will surely be able to endure such criticism, no? A curious matter.'

'Yeah, he lost me again,' said Loren.

Rezolo attached himself to his shoulder. 'Let's go do some scouting, shall we? I have a bad feeling.'

'Is it okay to leave Caster and Kalikos alone?' he asked. 'What if someone attacks the reaper while Caster is busy talking to the dirt or whatever?'

'I think they'll be fine. I doubt Caster is that deeply incapacitated. Come on, now. Go put those eyes of yours to good use.'

Loren made no further argument.

This fortress, as he understood it, was one of the older ones on Eloa. It had traded hands many times between the Vanguard and Abolish--and likely others, too."

"3340

The place had a peculiar layout to it, no doubt due to the work of many different architects over many different eras, but its most prominent feature had to be the labyrinthine walls that surrounded the inner keep. The outer walls were normal enough, but the inner ones were full of branching paths, dead ends, booby traps, and bored-looking guardsmen standing atop crenellated turrets.

Whatever medieval lord had commissioned this horrific maze must have been quite the paranoid bastard. Perhaps that was why this stronghold had come to be called the Rat's Nest.

Not a very flattering name for a place that boasted such impressive structures. True, it wasn't the most... aesthetically pleasing castle Loren had ever seen, what with its mismatched stones and bricks and woods and lamps. But that still struck him as a bit unfair to the builders. He doubted any of them would've chosen such a name.

Thankfully, the maze was much easier to navigate when you had keys to the multitude of doors and gates that went straight down the center of it. And at the moment, most of the gates were up, probably because the guardsmen or perhaps one of the head honchos around here hated having to constantly wait for them to be raised and lowered whenever coming or going from the keep.

If Loren shouted for the guards to lower those gates, he wondered if they would even listen to him. He hoped he wasn't going to find out.

He made for the outer walls, taking the first staircase that he could find to the top.

From up here, the view was certainly something.

The Rat's Nest was a fortress within the nation of Corrico. And Corrico was currently at war with Melmoore. Not more than three months ago, Corrico and Ostra had both declared war by invading Melmoore, but here and now, it was the Melmoorian forces that Loren could see all the way out there on the horizon, sprawled across a number of tented

encampments.

Was that three separate battalions? No, four. A full brigade, most likely, commanded by a brigadier general. If they were marching, at this distance, it would likely be two full days before they made it here, but to Loren's eyes, there was not enough movement for that to be the case.

Yet.

None of this was news, of course. They'd known the circumstances of this place when choosing to come here, and from the sound of what Kalikos had just been rambling about, perhaps those circumstances were precisely why Caster had picked this place."

"3341

He searched for anything out of the ordinary. If a ground attack was truly imminent, then it would be obvious from this vantage point. That was one of the primary reasons why fortresses were built on mountains like this, after all.

But the age of this place did not do it any favors in the modern era. Naturally, an aerial assault was a very real possibility here, and in fact, it would almost certainly arrive first in order to soften the defenders up for the eventual siege. Long-range artillery was also quite likely, though he didn't see any at the moment, which was another sign an attack was not yet to occur.

He supposed a stealthy amphibious assault was still a possibility, though. There was a long river that snaked across the landscape, coming right up to the base of the mountain and wrapping partially around it before flowing into the eastern horizon. If he were the one tasked with leading a surprise attack, that was how he would approach it, but it still wouldn't be easy.

The Rat's Nest got its water from an underground well, deep in the heart of the mountain. If there was a path there from the river, it was not obvious and would therefore be quite narrow, making it easily defensible.

Assuming the defenders were actually guarding it, that was.

Maybe that was something he should look into while he still had the time.

‘Well?’ said Rezolo in the echo of privacy. ‘What do you see?’

‘Not much.’ His feet did start moving, however, back down the stairs. ‘Would they really mount an attack, now? What about those rumors of peace talks already going on?’

‘Unfortunately, they might just be rumors,’ said Rezolo, ‘but even if they’re not, talks do not equate to a ceasefire, much less a treaty. And if the Melmoorians are able to strike a major blow before anything is officially agreed upon, then that would certainly improve their bargaining power, now wouldn’t it?’

That was definitely not what he wanted to hear, right now, but he found it hard to disagree with the reaper’s perspective.

‘Where are you going?’ said Rezolo. ‘You only looked for a few minutes.’

‘I want to check something.’

The well, rather annoyingly, was back through the inner walls, on the other side the labyrinth. He kept a brisk pace as he returned, feeling increasingly uneasy the closer he got."

"3342

When he finally arrived, he stopped, suddenly rethinking. Supposing he actually did stumble upon a gaggle of attackers trying to sneak their way into the fortress, it would not go well for him all alone. Such a force would doubtless be composed of the enemy’s most elite soldiers.

Granted, this was the Melmoorian army and not the Vanguard, so maybe elite wouldn’t mean much, comparatively. But then again, the Vanguard might be sprinkled in among them.

He didn’t have any authority here, though. He couldn’t just order some guards to follow him. Caster could’ve, but he wasn’t--

“What’re you up to, Lighteyes?”

Loren just about jumped out of his skin before turning around and

seeing Caster standing there. He needed a second to compose himself. "Sir, ah..."

"Not planning on doing anything stupid, I hope," said Caster. "I can't afford to lose my right-hand man, you know."

Right-hand man? Was that really what he was to him? That was a hell of a compliment, but Loren didn't know how much truth could be in it. He didn't feel like he'd been doing anything lately to deserve it. Or anything at all, for that matter. "I, uh... I just wanted to check for a route through the well. If this fortress has any weakness, it might be there." Wait, why had Caster said all that just now? Had he already known what Loren was planning to do?

"Interesting. I'll go with you."

Loren blinked but didn't get the chance to respond.

Despite what he'd said, Caster was already moving ahead, not waiting for him.

Loren followed. He'd only had a vague idea of where to go in the first place. The well was certainly wide enough for a man to be lowered down, but there should've also been a staircase in the nearby keep that led into some underground caverns, to which the well belonged.

Probably.

Whenever they visited a new fortress, he'd always seen Caster pouring over maps and blueprints. Loren had tried to look over them, too, but now that his knowledge was actually being somewhat tested, he was feeling unsure of himself.

They made their way down together, drawing glances from various guardsmen as they passed.

"You could ask for more men, sir," said Loren. "They'd listen to you."

"They'd just get in the way," said Caster. "It'll be a tight fit down there, I'm sure."

"3343

Loren admired his confidence but didn't share it. "Sir, if the enemy has

sent someone to infiltrate, they won't be pushovers. Frederick himself could be among them."

"Doubtful," said Caster, "but if he is, that would be fortunate for us. I should like to speak with him."

Loren frowned. He supposed there was no point in arguing, but from everything he'd been hearing of these two Melmoorian warfronts, Captain General Fen Frederick of the Vanguard was most likely not someone that they would want to encounter. While there were definitely other men making names for themselves out here, the Surgeon Saint's reputation had risen the most.

Frederick was being attributed with the majority of Melmoore's success thus far. Whether that was actually the truth of things or not remained to be seen, but Lighteyes had seen and heard the fear that his name evoked in many of the men around here.

There was one particular story that had caught Loren's attention, too.

Supposedly, it happened in a place called Erimor, a little mountain town in southern Melmoore and one of the earliest conquests in Corrico's invasion. The town had quickly become a headquarters from which the Corricoans organized and coordinated their assaults on larger cities in the area. By all accounts, it had been a well-positioned, easily defensible location--and nicely hidden away, to boot. Even satellites couldn't spot it because of the way a certain mountainous cave arched over it.

The expectation had been that, even if their offensives failed or otherwise stalled, Erimor would allow their HQ to operate discreetly for quite a while, buying them plenty of extra time to regroup or implement various contingency plans.

And progress had been good. The invasion proceeded quite strongly.

At first.

Major cities were captured quickly--or just completely annihilated. The sphere of influence grew rapidly, with Erimor near the heart of it, well-protected on all sides.

Until Erimor went totally dark.

Word stopped arriving. No new orders. No new plans. No new intel. No new anything. And the cracks in the invasion began to form, until every

new assault failed, either because they were too unorganized or the enemy too well-prepared.

The rumors were still uncertain about how Erimor had been taken back so suddenly, but it was popular sentiment that Frederick was responsible, that he'd snuck into the town with a small force--or even alone, as some told it--and done something to all of the Abolish reapers there."

"3344

What exactly that something was, the rumors had difficulty pinning down. Some said he'd captured them all and now had a dozen or more high-ranking reapers as hostages.

Others said it was far worse, that he didn't just capture them. They said he'd turned them. Brainwashed them. Enslaved their minds and made them release all of their servants, just like that.

And still others said that no, it was something that was arguably even more terrifying. He'd simply convinced them to join him. With mere words. Didn't even have to brainwash them.

All-in-all, it sounded rather unlikely to Loren--or at the very last, greatly exaggerated. For one thing, how in the world would anyone here in Abolish have learned about him doing something like that? If all the reapers turned traitor, and all the servants were released, then there would've been no one left to relay what happened.

And whenever Loren had pointed out such things to the various soldiers who were gossiping about it, they began sounding abruptly less certain and less fearful. But some also tried posing some iffy explanations. Maybe one or two reapers had escaped, they'd said. Maybe the Surgeon had let them get away precisely for this reason, because he wanted Abolish to know.

Whatever the truth actually was, all of the rumors seemed to agree that Frederick was in an almost unassailably advantageous position now.

That this war was already lost, even.

Regardless of how Frederick had managed to pull it off, if he really did have so many ex-Abolish reapers feeding him intel, then that would



explain why every operation was a failure. Frederick knew what they were going to do before they did it. He knew their backup plans for their backup plans.

Needless to say, morale in this corner of the war was rather low. Over the course of Caster's little tour around the continent, Loren didn't think he'd ever seen it this bad.

The one saving grace, some said, was that the Surgeon Saint had a bleeding heart. A man renowned for his mercy. So if they were to lose, then at least they could be relatively certain that he would spare their lives.

That was why a lot the guardsmen and soldiers around here actually looked more bored than afraid. To many of them, the upcoming battles were already a foregone conclusion. It was just a waiting game, now."  
"3345

As they made their way down, the flat stones of the fortress gradually receded into uneven, natural rock. Caster led them through one final door, and then they were just in a narrow, winding cave. There weren't even stairs anymore, despite the fact that they were still descending.

And an eerie quiet arrived, broken only by their echoing footsteps. Almost no light was making it down here, either, which wasn't a problem for Loren Lighteyes--and apparently not for Caster Egmond, either, judging by the way he just kept on moving forward without even slowing down.

Kalikos was following closely behind Caster, having not said a word this entire time. It almost made Loren want to ask him another question, just to hear what random smattering of ideas might spill out again.

At length, however, the cave widened into a much larger space, enough so that it nearly looked like a manmade chamber.

A thick beam of light from above made it clear where the well was located. It must've been around midday, too, with how strong that beam was.

Loren could see a wide pool of water farther down, along with various

sunken paths through which it gently flowed.

Hmm. Apart from that, this place was a dead end. So he supposed if anyone was going to be sneaking in, it would have to be through one of those underwater holes. He wished he knew which of them, if any, led down to the base of the mountain. Hell, perhaps they all did.

"This should be far enough," said Caster, voice bouncing off the cave walls. "We'll wait here, for now."

"Wait for what, exactly?" said Loren. "To be attacked?" Didn't seem like much a plan.

Caster turned and looked at him for the first time in a while. "On the contrary, just the opposite."

"...What do you mean?"

"Twil be starting soon,' said Kalikos.

Rezolo was the one to ask the obvious question. 'What will?'

'The end of Abolish.'

Loren's eyes widened. He exchanged looks with Rezolo, who seemed equally bewildered.

"Perhaps," added Caster. "But perhaps not."

'You truly see them surviving this?' asked Kalikos.

"The ones here? Certainly not. But elsewhere? Many among them will be quite difficult to get rid of. You know that, Kal."

'Mm. Alas, you may be right. Wishful thinking may have gripped me.'

"Heh. Didn't think you were the type to take sides, anymore.'"

"3346

'You do not mean that, surely,' said Kalikos. 'It was by your design that I have become this way. Do not think I did not notice or have forgotten.'

Caster held up his hands defensively, though he was still laughing.

“Don’t be mad. You know we’re better off, now.”

And when Kalikos made no response, Rezolo took the opportunity to chime in. ‘You are truly rooting against Abolish in this war? Do you not still count yourselves as part of it?’

“We are Freemen now,” said Caster. “As are you, no?”

‘We are,’ said Rezolo, ‘but it’s my understanding that the Fellowship’s goal is to change Abolish from within, not annihilate it.’

“Yes,” said Caster. “But if our internal rivals were eliminated for us, then that task would be made quite a bit easier, wouldn’t you say? Or does that sound too cold to you?”

‘I suppose not,’ said Rezolo. ‘I’m just surprised. But either way, I doubt things will go smoothly for us. If our side does suffer losses as great as you are suggesting, then do you think the Vanguard will care to differentiate between Freemen and non-Freemen? If such a time indeed arrives, then I imagine they will be as ruthless as anyone in Abolish.’

‘Right you may be,’ said Kalikos. ‘Which is why we should preserve our strength. Manpower will be crucial in the days to come.’

Rezolo had no response for that, apparently.

Loren wanted to ask about who they planned on recruiting next, but a sudden tremor arrived, pulling trails of dust from the rocky ceiling.

“Looks like it’s begun,” said Caster, looking up. “We should be safe down here, though.”

Loren stared at him a moment. “...You came here in order to avoid the fighting?”

The small man returned a slight smile. “There’s nothing up there worth risking our lives for. In fact, we should probably just skedaddle. I hope you’re a strong swimmer.”

Loren’s mouth was open, but he didn’t know what to say. This wasn’t exactly what he’d been expecting from his fearless leader who also happened to be one of the most powerful servants he’d ever met.

Caster seemed amused by his reaction. “Are you disappointed, Lighteyes? I thought you were tired of me dragging you into fights all

the time.”

Well, he was. But this was different. Or was it? Loren was confused.  
“I... just... thought that the enemy might be down here...”  
"3347 -- CCLXXXII.

‘No,’ said Kalikos “Tis an aerial bombardment.’

Another tremor arrived, as if to accentuate the reaper’s words.

“How do you know that?” said Loren.

‘There is much being spoken of, if one has the patience to listen,’ said Kalikos.

Loren frowned. “That... doesn’t answer my question.”

“We have our own lines of communication,” said Caster. “I’m afraid telling you any more than that would not be a kindness on our part. Some knowledge comes with strings attached, you see.”

The chamber shook again, this time with much more violent force, making Loren stumble. Entire boulders broke free from the walls and plunged into the pool below, splashing water all the way up to Loren’s feet.

The trembling slowed but didn’t stop, and the continuous groaning of the cave was more than a little unsettling.

“It appears we’ve dawdled too long, already. Let’s get the hell out of here, shall we?” And without waiting, the small man bounded over the ledge and cannonballed into the water with Kalikos in pursuit.

Loren just followed.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Two: ‘Hark! O, dictator of the Empty...!’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It had been another long day. Covered in dirt and grime, rotten flesh and blackened blood, he wiped his forehead and took a long, deep breath before finally taking a seat on the nearest tree stump. It was

wide enough to fit ten men, at least. He rolled his shoulders as he looked around another time.

Felled trees of gargantuan proportions littered the horizon, splintered apart or wholly uprooted--or simply sliced clean through like the one he was currently sitting on.

The Jaskadan Forest wasn't looking too good, anymore. This portion of it. There was still plenty more left to go, though, east of here and north, as well. These rotting bastards were lucky the Ardoran continent was so vast.

Among the fallen trees lay also his fallen opponents. It took quite a bit for them to stay down. They weren't like normal servants--that was for certain. While they didn't appear to regenerate much at all, each one had the durability of a hundred-year-old servant, at a minimum.

Fire had seemed effective at first, but they appeared to have adapted, somehow. Freezing them never worked at all. Perhaps their rotten brains weren't even functional to begin with. Plus, they could move without need of their muscles, too, so the fight would continue long after a typical servant's body would have been rendered totally immobile."

"3347 -- CCLXXXII.

'No,' said Kalikos "Tis an aerial bombardment.'

Another tremor arrived, as if to accentuate the reaper's words.

"How do you know that?" said Loren.

'There is much being spoken of, if one has the patience to listen,' said Kalikos.

Loren frowned. "That... doesn't answer my question."

"We have our own lines of communication," said Caster. "I'm afraid telling you any more than that would not be a kindness on our part. Some knowledge comes with strings attached, you see."

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"3348

He'd hoped that engaging them in battle would allow him to learn more about them, but months had transpired now, and beyond the minutiae, the only thing he felt like he'd truly come to understand was how annoying these stubborn bastards were.

These Mendocava, as they were called.

Despite having little to no regeneration, they still had a tendency to keep getting back up, anyway. Even headless, their bodies would continue on without them, which was perhaps the biggest difference between them and normal undead. If they had a point of control at all, it was clearly not the brain.

Even now, after all these battles, he still wasn't entirely sure what made some of them eventually stop rising again. Annihilating them entirely worked quite well, obviously, but aside from that, it was uncertain.

He'd had his men dissecting their corpses day and night since the fighting began, but once they'd stopped moving, they appeared to be nothing more than normal, decayed bodies. No trace of ardor or soul power left.

He wondered if they even had any sentience whatsoever. It seemed so, considering the fact that they were clearly trying to prevent him from going certain places, but maybe that was just an illusion of their puppeteer.

Whoever that was, he was going to take his sweet time when he finally found them. Even disregarding the necessity of an interrogation, a quick death would be far more than they deserved.

The sound of crunching footsteps drew his weathered gaze to the left, and he saw his man there.

"Are you alright, Master?" he asked in Valgan.

Ichiro Itoya was a man of visibly advanced years, though not as much as himself. The flecks of gray in Itoya's sharp mustache matched well with his piercing silver gaze. He was not a man given to expressing concern trivially, either, so the question he'd asked must've been prompted by quite the vile sight.

"I'm fine," he said in two voices, also in Valgan. "Despite appearances,

they've yet to lay a finger on me." And he motioned to the dried viscera all over him. "This is just splashback."

"Of course, Master." Itoya had a fair bit of grime and gruel on him, too, mussing his normally pristine longcoat. "But you do look rather weary, sitting there like that. Perhaps they are not trying to win the war of the body but the one of the mind, hmm?"

"3349

"I'm not in the mood for your philosophizing, Ito."

"When are you ever, Master?"

A fair point, he supposed. He stood up and rolled his neck. "Any movement from the Dulvani?"

"Yes," said Itoya. "They appear to be evacuating."

"Smart. And a shame. It would have been interesting to fight them, too. With how secretive they are, I imagine they must have quite a few tricks up their sleeves."

"Would you like me to pursue them?"

He had to take a moment to think about that. On the one hand, Itoya was among his very best men and would no doubt see the job done to perfection, so long as precise instructions were given. But on the other hand, losing the manpower against the Mendocava would be more than just a nuisance.

Were the Dulvani worth it? Possibly. They could hold some of the answers he was looking for, but he doubted it. And even if they did, they would never willingly share them with him.

Not with the wicked one called Dozer.

In that vein, perhaps a different strategy was in order.

"No," said Dozer. "Send some of Germal's men, instead. We have a few here, don't we?"

"We do, Master. But I cannot recommend trusting them with such a task. They are often insubordinate or weak. Or both."



Unsurprising. Itoya got along with Germal about as well as water got along with oil, so any of the Liar's disciples were naturally going to incur a similar degree of ire.

But there was a reason why Dozer had allowed this so-called Freeman Fellowship to continue existing, despite all the hassle and infighting it provoked from many of the other sects. "Don't make me repeat myself, Ito."

"...Yes, Master." And perhaps the man could sense that he had overstepped, because he bowed and walked away without saying another word.

The Freeman. In many ways, they were the embodiment of what Abolish was frequently lacking. A delicate touch. The ability to see and appreciate nuance. And while it was certainly true that they were often too soft or hesitant for their own good, the rest of Abolish obviously made up for such weaknesses in spades.

If any of his men were going to get through to the Dulvani, it might be them. And if not, oh well. That was a problem for another day.

He looked up at the open blue sky and drank in the view. It was late enough in the day that he could already see some of the stars, even though the sun had not yet set."

"3350

Even after all these years, he could still look up and feel this same sense of awe. He didn't like to let the men see him like this, but in these silent moments of solitude, when it was just him and perhaps Engomat, he was able to relax just a bit and allow himself to feel that ancient feeling. The thing he'd felt ever since he was a child.

How long would he have to live in order to see his dream fulfilled? Or to see it even approached, for that matter?

Countless times, he'd wrestled with doubt. With impossibility. But countless more times, he'd persevered. He wasn't dead yet, much as the world might've wanted him to be.

And in more ways than one, perhaps.

Ah. He could see Adarius, already. That was unusual for this time of day on this side of the planet. Oh! Was that a comet?! What absurd luck!

Which one was it? He used Engomat to help rack in his brain, trying to recall the last time he'd read up on the subject. It was only a couple months ago.

Yes. He remembered reading that Aariah's Comet was supposed to be passing by soon. Wow. How could that have slipped his mind?

Incredible.

How long had it been since the last time he'd seen Aariah like this? He wasn't entirely sure, but it probably wasn't more than two hundred years. Aariah was a short-period comet, after all.

His mouth hung open a little as he marveled at it. Yes, now he did remember his last viewing.

It had been just before the Breaking.

Back then, he'd been unable to think of it as anything other than a herald of the gods: a fortuitous omen sent to bless his imminent foray into death or glory.

With the benefit of hindsight and an extra hundred and fifty-or-so years under his belt, Dozer had to look back on his younger self with a bit of disdain and disappointment. He'd truly thought of himself as the center of the universe in those days, hadn't he? A blessing from the cosmos? Laughable.

While the Breaking of Korgum had certainly left its mark on history and renewed fear of him throughout the world, in his mind it was nothing more than a pathetic failure. If only he'd been more patient. More methodical. Under him, Korgum would have become a far more beautiful nation in this modern age. Not like the cesspit it was now."

"3351

Part of him wanted to summon those old feelings again. There was something both freeing and invigorating in them. And they were still there, too. He could feel them in the back of his mind, daring him to indulge.

Seeing Ariaah again, now of all times--what if it wasn't a coincidence? What if it really was a herald of the gods? Now could be another turning point, a time to take bold action. Certainly, this little war of the idiots had set a rather tempting foundation.

He had of course sent many men to join in the fighting, in part because he knew what an obnoxious fuss they would make if he tried to forbid them. They would've whined incessantly or simply snuck off to join, anyway.

But no. Those feelings were wrong. The gods were wrong. Even if Ariaah really was a herald of their will, it didn't matter.

Only the Void's will mattered.

He'd known that back then, too--or thought he did, at least--but it had been so easy to stray. To get distracted. To become obsessed with other avenues of power.

Illusions, all.

Finally, after all these years, he felt more certain of his conviction than ever. No more wavering. No more humoring of morons.

This war would fade, like any other. He had no reason to involve himself or any more of his resources in it.

Unless, perhaps, Morgunov fell low enough to come begging him for help. That would be something to see.

Regardless, here on the other side of the world, he already had plenty of things to keep him busy.

The Mendocava were not in this place without cause. It was not an accident that his men had stumbled upon them in the Gettira Plains, nor was it a coincidence that the fighting had been carried all the way into the Jaskadan Forest.

This forest was as ancient as they came. Some academics even argued that this location might've been the true cradle of life for humanity, the place where they had evolved from mere apes into the much more deadly creatures that eventually went on to conquer most of the planet.

He didn't know if he believed that. The region of the Aruna River in

central Ardora was the more traditionally recognized location for that theory, and Dozer was not like Morgunov. He did not buy into new academic ideas easily."

"3352

He did have to acknowledge, however, that this forest was no normal place. He'd visited many times before, and during each venture, it felt quite different from the last.

This forest... it was more alive than most. He'd come to believe that perhaps it really did have a will of its own, as the Dulvani claimed. Perhaps Jaskadan was a slumbering giant, and tearing through it like he and the Mendocava had been doing was going to wake it up.

He hoped so. It would certainly clear a few things up. And maybe this giant could answer a few questions, if it harbored any sort of communicable intellect.

In any case, the fact that the Mendocava had retreated here was interesting. As far as was known before, they had no connection to this place. The Gettira Plains, sure. That was the site of a great battle, one that had decided the fate of four civilizations of the ancient world. The Arakonyc, or Great Apocalypse, was its historical name.

While the true origins of the Mendocava were still disputed, it was now his view that they were enthralled as a result of that conflict. Instead of dying, a puppet master had enslaved them--or what remained of them, at least.

But if they saw Jaskadan as a place of refuge, then perhaps their master was here. Or perhaps... hmm.

He recalled a tale of this forest, one he'd heard when he was just a simple lad with nothing more to his name than the ragged tunic on his back and the treasured buskins on his feet.

He remembered it because it was the tale of a fallen star.

One quiet night, when there was no moon to be seen, a brilliant light fell from the heavens and landed in the heart of a budding forest. A man called Skapa saw it from afar. Being unable to resist its radiant allure, he ventured into the forest to find it.

As he trekked through the forest, however, he saw it growing and changing all around him. Where before it had seemed a small, quaint place, it became a dense, labyrinthine maze full of wondrous colors and sights that he could not describe.

Little creatures began to appear before him. Wisps or fairies, perhaps. And they began asking him questions, wanting to know all about him, who he was and why he had come."

"3353

At first, he answered everything he could, as their curiosity was matched only by his own, and he wished to know more of them, as well. In time, however, their questions became so incessant that he resorted instead to trying to make them laugh.

Within the clutches of the forest, the sun was often not visible at all, because the canopy of leaves overhead was so thick. And in the company of the wisps, Skapa lost track of the days, but he began to notice that he never seemed to grow tired or need sleep.

He began to suspect that the ethereal, hypnotic lights of the forest were having an effect upon him. He worried that, perhaps, this place was not the beautiful haven that it first appeared to be.

But he was enjoying himself, nonetheless. The wisps harbored many secrets, and they seemed to care for him.

They shared with him their visions, images from their minds of beautiful places they hoped to one day visit or return to. They shared with him their dreams, feelings from their hearts of things they hoped to one day do or accomplish. And perhaps most importantly of all, they shared with him their Pool of Stillness, a secluded body of water and nectar that invigorated him as he immersed himself in it.

The longer he spent within the forest, the more enraptured he could feel himself becoming. Increasingly, his life outside the forest seemed a distant memory, a thing of so little value compared to what he had discovered here that it was hardly even worth remembering.

And he was torn. In the back of his mind, his concerns were growing, the stubborn vestiges of his past self. But another part of him wanted to let go, to simply be.

Eventually, the wisps grew to love him so much that they deigned to share with him their greatest secret, the thing they treasured most of all.

It was the fallen star. The very thing that had led him into the forest in the first place.

When he saw it there, shining even more radiantly than anything else he had seen within the forest, he was reminded of his deep curiosity, of his thirst to learn more about the unknown. In this way, the star embodied everything he missed of his past self and revealed to him a dissatisfaction with the comfortable life that he had come to find here.

So he stole it and fled."

"3354

From there, the tale split into different tellings. Some were clearly meant to portray Skapa more sympathetically, and others very much not. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell what the truth was, anymore, even with the benefit of reapers and their long memories.

The problem, Dozer thought, was that Skapa himself was simply too famous. At this point, he was more like a mythic hero than an actual person, because throughout the course of recorded history, he had been the center of many such tales, though admittedly the tale of Skapa and the Forest was likely the oldest.

It certainly didn't help that many storytellers seemed to have shoehorned Skapa into their fairy tales, most probably in an appeal to popularity or perhaps an attempt to give their story a greater sense of legitimacy.

Where this forest was concerned, however, many had long since come to the conclusion that the wisps from the tale were, in fact, the very same beings as the Dulvani.

And the Dulvani, rather unsurprisingly, hated that. They claimed to have no relation whatsoever--or that the tale itself was entirely fictional.

Dozer was obviously not the first treasure hunter to have come to this place, and the Dulvani had a reputation for being quite inhospitable to those seeking wealth from their forest. In fact, they were known to be

utterly brutal in their isolationism. Certainly not the soft, friendly, fairy-like creatures that they were too frequently portrayed as in stories about them. He'd heard they would execute hapless travelers who cut down even a single tree for a campfire during the winter.

And looking at the sea of felled wood all around him, there was no doubt in his mind that they would now be holding a grudge against him for a very long time to come.

So be it, though.

He was not here for their forest, but if it continued to get in his way, he would continue to annihilate it. And besides, he'd left the trees as stumps. He hadn't uprooted or burned very many of them. He just needed clear sight.

That was the real nuisance of Jaskadan. The ardor that flowed through it, obfuscating everyone's senses and disorienting them--or even, at times, projecting hallucinations. After losing three decent soldiers to the forest, he'd decided that enough was enough. He didn't need the extra hassle when the Mendocava were already being plenty annoying on their own."

"3355

He would've liked to have a bit more time to himself, but matters needed to be taken care of. After this latest battle, he wanted to check up on their supplies back at camp. While he trusted Jari to handle logistics most of the time, it was still prudent to look on things himself regularly. A ship ran best when its captain made his presence known, after all. And of course there was still the matter of the research team. Hopefully, they would have--

The ground quaked under his feet as he was standing up. It was violent enough to kick up splintered debris all around him, though it did not make him stumble in the slightest.

He was instantly reminded of someone he loathed. This feeling was all too familiar.

Was she here? Had she chased him all the way across the Luthic Ocean? Surely not. She had much more pressing concerns on Eloa, at

the moment.

But then again, he'd been thinking she might pop up for a while now, because her name had been conspicuously absent from most of the reports he'd read of the war. She should have been making ample trouble for his men over there, so the fact that she'd been quiet suggested that she was up to something. He'd thought maybe she would make a play on his country during all the chaos, maybe try to launch a counter invasion and finally end the stalemate while he was away.

He'd been hoping for that, actually. Such a move would almost certainly overextend her forces and make his eventual counter stroke that much more potent when he returned home.

He did not sense her yet, however, which was curious. If there was one thing about the Gargoyle of Korgum that he appreciated, it was that she tended not to bother concealing herself. It was likely too difficult for her, once she started making the ground rumble.

He leapt. His dirtied coat flapped wildly behind him as he arched high over the landscape, and he got a clear view of the distant horizon in all directions, save where the giants of Jaskadan still managed to touch the clouds and impede his sight.

His landing was soft, barely disturbing the dirt as his boots touched Eleg again. In a single bound, he'd made it all the way back to the encampment. Not such a difficult feat for him, despite how far today's battle had strayed from its origin point."

"3356

The encampment did not look as one might have expected. There were no tents or campfires to be seen, no gatherings of soldiers out in the open.

No, the encampments of the Living Void were different. He'd always preferred to travel in luxury. What was the point of being the most powerful conqueror the world had ever known if his entourage paled in comparison to those of the self-professed god-kings of the ancient world?

Here, they had mobile, multi-purpose buildings. Each one served as a



miniature fortress unto itself, able to deploy men or vehicles on a moment's notice, while also providing the comfort of a palace for Dozer and his chosen leaders. The rank-and-file were not entirely left out, though. They were able to enjoy the fully stocked kitchens and refectories, as well the various training facilities.

It was important not to coddle the men, but it was equally important to give them a view of what they might one day be able to achieve, should they prove themselves worthy.

There were also immobile facilities in this camp, as well. And they were no primitive structures, either, despite being made almost entirely by materializers. The artistry in some of these buildings could've rivaled any of the ancient kingdoms of Qhenghis.

Their pristine and prestigious nature was in large part due to Natia. She always obsessed over decorations, regardless of how temporary their stay. Once upon time, he'd found that obsession rather obnoxious, but over the decades, he'd developed a fondness for her attentive eye, even if it did end up going to waste more often than not.

She was the first one to greet him upon his return, though he could see a few of the men running about, no doubt having been ordered into positions.

"Master," said Natia with a welcoming nod. As ever, her perfectly calm voice and demeanor betrayed nothing of her thoughts, and nary a speck of dust was to be found on her brown-and-green fatigues despite all the debris around.

Another apparent after shock arrived, prompting Dozer's next question. "What's the source of this rumbling?"

'Uncertain,' answered her reaper, Akama, who floated close behind her. To Dozer's eyes, she was a dog-sized, black lump with no eyes or ears to speak of--only an oval-shaped proboscis that sported rows of bloodied, smoldering teeth. 'But it seems to be originating from deeper into the forest, from the direction of Kara'kuun.'

"3357

Kara'kuun? If these tremors were coming from the Dulvani capital city, then perhaps he should change tactics here. He'd told Itoya to send a

few men to negotiate with the Dulvani directly, but now he was thinking that he should go investigate this other matter himself, anyway.

Interesting.

He didn't like to act rashly, though. Increasing the number of scouts would be the more prudent thing to do.

Patience, then. As ever.

He'd heard that all his life, from reapers and mentors alike: that his patience was perhaps his greatest strength. How many enemies had he vanquished over the years simply by outlasting them? By waiting for them to make a mistake? By looking for an opening, no matter how long it took to find it?

Though, he'd heard the opposite, too: that he was too slow to act. Too scared of making a wrong step. Too cowardly for an emperor. Morgunov certainly liked to sing that tune. The man had an, at times, paradoxical obsession with the concept of cowardice. But then, that was just one more thing that made the Mad Demon live up to his moniker.

He instructed Natia and Akama to send more scouts to Kara'kuun, and then he retired to his chamber in the heart of the Obsidian Shell, the largest of the mobile fortresses in his entourage. Within its ridged walls slept enough non-nuclear firepower to raze an entire city in less than four hours--and without the need of a single superpowered individual.

There'd once been a time, not even that long ago by his estimation, when he'd thought that taking nuclear warheads along with him on these ventures was a good idea, but he'd since come to the conclusion that they were more trouble than they were worth. Containment and management alone made them logistical headaches, but on top of that, they were almost never needed--and even when they were, they attracted a prohibitively difficult amount of attention from the Vanguard.

Sermung did not often show himself, but the use of nuclear weapons was one thing that had almost always drawn him out. In some ways, that had been a useful tool, being able to both predict and manipulate the Titan's movements in certain ways.

But that song and dance had lost its luster by now. Eventually, Sermung grew wise to the strategy, and in retaliation, the man had seemingly made it his life's purpose to make Dozer regret it in a thousand other ways every time he deigned to use a nuke--until

eventually, he'd all but bled Dozer dry. Now such weapons were precious rare for him and certainly not worth risking on lengthy field operations like this one."

"3358

It would've also been of great help if he could get his hands on a new source of nuclear material, natural or otherwise. All the ones he'd been relying on over the last half-century were now either mostly depleted or dead.

Assassinated, in many cases, actually.

For all their moral posturing, Sermung and the Vanguard seemed to have no qualms about murdering Dozer's materializing sources, no matter how innocent they might've been. He still remembered a time when they at least tried to spirit the sources away and hide them from him. Their persistent string of failures must've become too demoralizing.

Dozer had always wondered if it was Iceheart's policy which had changed things, as many claimed, or if that was merely a smokescreen to help prevent Sermung's all-important public image from becoming too tarnished.

Whatever the case, the Vanguard's secret division of assassins was the real problem. Naturally, they'd made many attempts on Dozer's life over the years, and they always tried to strike when he was at his most vulnerable.

Such as when he was in the comfort of his own chambers. Not unlike this very moment, when he was in the shower at his most defenseless, washing off the grime of a long day of battle.

Sometimes, the killing attempt came from intruders with admittedly impressive stealth. Other times, it came from traitors who'd been in his service for years.

It had been a while since the last attempt. He wondered which type it would be this time.

He stood directly under the showerhead, letting the searing hot water massage his face for a few minutes longer than he usually did. If his

attackers were waiting for a window of opportunity, then perhaps they would think this was a good one. It certainly wouldn't have been the first of its kind.

At length, though, he shut the water off and looked around the black-and-gold tiled room, almost disappointed. With how hot he liked the water, there was plenty of steam to make visibility low, as well.

Fine.

He grabbed a towel and began drying himself off.

He knew that something was off tonight. It wasn't any kind of supernatural sense--or at least, he didn't think it was. Rather, it was just centuries of experience. Not something he could articulate.

The air? No. The stillness? No, not that, either.

There'd been a time, long ago now, when he'd thought this feeling was simply paranoia. And back then, maybe it had been. Hell, maybe it still was, to some extent. But now, he knew a bit better.

The difference.

Between a gut feeling.

And a long-tempered instinct."

"3359

Engomat's reaper senses weren't telling him anything. Of course they weren't. Even before the existence of aberration-spawned Invisibility, there had been various means by which assassins could avoid detection. It certainly hadn't helped, though. Dozer could've done without that little technological development from Morgunov's side.

Hell, despite all the breakthroughs they'd made, it seemed like half or more ended up being too much responsibility for them to handle. Of what use was some great new technology if it just ended up in the Vanguard's hands, anyway? He'd often pondered that question. If the Vanguard didn't have their own threatening inventors, Dozer would have ceased bothering with this hassle eons ago.

Maybe he would've even killed them all himself. Sometimes, he

thought that maybe Engomat was right about the advancement of technology, that their mission would be better off without the extra "help."

If not for his dream, Dozer probably would've been convinced by the reaper a long time ago.

He proceeded back into the bedroom and began getting dressed. Despite his apparent age, he had quite the physique. In fact, that was in large part the reason why he'd wanted Engomat to let him age so much.

When he was younger, he'd cared not a whit for his own musculature, but by the time he'd hit a point when a servant might normally stop the aging process, he'd developed a new fascination with bodybuilding. And unfortunately, one could not build muscle while aging was halted by a reaper.

These days, he'd never felt healthier or stronger. Nonetheless, people still took to calling him "the Old Man," like he was somehow past his prime.

Maybe they'd stop calling him that if he took his shirt off in public more often.

Bah. Silliness. He had no use for it.

Whoever was about to attack him, he appreciated that they were at least allowing him to look dignified for the occasion. He'd already experienced too many fights in nothing but a towel--or even stark naked.

Perhaps these assailants had some sense of honor about them. That would be a nice change of pace, though he doubted it.

He went for the gray briefs and black Domingo slacks first. The latter had a fine silver trim down the sides, which was perhaps a bit opulent for battle attire, but he didn't mind. Domingo was a master of his craft who knew how to blend function and form perfectly."

"3360

If only he'd been able to convince Domingo to design military uniforms for him. What a colossal disappointment that meeting had been.

Ah well.

Even if the man hated him with a burning passion, Dozer did not intend to stop wearing his clothes. If anything, it made him want to keep buying them out of spite.

Next came the white button-down. He rolled up the sleeves and picked out a silky black tie. He forewent the jacket. Jaskadan was too warm for that.

Next should have been socks and dress shoes, but he wasn't in the mood. Oddly enough, he rather preferred the idea of sandals, at the moment. They weren't battle attire, either, but honestly, nothing really was. He'd most likely end up barefoot by the end of the fight, either way.

Then he was done. Fully dressed. But still no attack arrived. He eyed himself in the mirror, not really looking and instead just thinking. Waiting.

Curious. Did these assassins have cold feet? Or were they perhaps hoping for some sort of backup to arrive first?

Or was this all just in his head? Had he finally gone senile and lost his mind to paranoia, as so many were already proclaiming?

That might've been amusing, were it true. Made things simpler, perhaps.

Well.

He couldn't yet tell where they were, whether they were near or far, inside the room with him or out. He only knew that the threat was imminent. That a clash of souls was soon to occur.

But if they wanted to keep giving him time like this, then he supposed he would just have to force their hand. Unless they stopped him, he was going to go back outside and start giving new orders to his men. The attackers wouldn't want that, surely.

He made for the door.

Then he felt it. The presence. They were in the room with him now. Had they been there all along? He didn't think so, but he couldn't be sure. His eyes still couldn't see them, but he had a rough idea where

they were. On the other side of the room, behind him.

He stopped and waited, still undecided about how he wanted to handle this.

Clearly, these assassins were not the usual sort. They'd waited for him. And even now, they still weren't attacking despite having every reason to. Perhaps they wanted to talk, first. If so, he intended to hear them out."

"3361 -- CCLXXXIII.

Such conversations were quite rare, these days. Not many within the Vanguard were both capable enough to seek him out and also willing enough to actually speak with him. It was usually one or the other.

However, he then sensed something he had not been expecting. At least, not here and now.

He sensed the assassin's full presence. Yes. Assassin. Singular. It was not a group, as was typically the case. It was only one man.

And it was an all too familiar one, at that.

He turned to see the enormous figure there, one with a profile so unique that it identified him instantly without need of any other information.

His supposed right-hand man. The Black Scourge. The Monster of the East.

Gohvis was here.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Three: 'The Melody in Black...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"...Why would you appear before me in this manner?" said Dozer. "You, of all people, should know how I would perceive it."

Gohvis made no response.

Dozer clenched his jaw. What was this, now?

The Scourge was admittedly not among those he'd been expecting to see, but it did make an unfortunate degree of sense.

For over two centuries, he and Gohvis had not been on the best of terms. The Scourge was a far cry from the little lost creature that Dozer had once rescued and decided to raise as his own child. Too much had happened. Those memories were of a different life entirely. Or maybe they'd grown distorted by time and nostalgia.

"...If you've come to kill me," said Dozer, "then why do you hesitate? I and many others taught you better than that, no?"

"I am still undecided," said Gohvis.

Dozer exhaled half a laugh through his nose. "At this late stage? It seems to me that you should have sorted through your feeling before showing yourself." But then, that had always been the lad's weakness, hadn't it? Ruled by emotion, no matter how hard he tried to protest otherwise.

Saying as much aloud would not have been productive, however.

"No," said Gohvis, rather unsurprisingly. "I am thinking that we may yet be able to find common ground again. Before it is too late."

Too late for whom, exactly? The lad had a knack for making veiled threats that were not so veiled. Pointing that out, too, would not have been productive. Dozer had to control himself."

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"3362

After everything they'd been through together, it was somehow much more tempting to say the things that he knew would irritate.

Perhaps, deep down, some part of him had been wanting this day to come. Wanting to see if Gohvis would truly go this far.

But no. Reason needed to win out, today. Too much was at stake.

"Very well," said Dozer. He moved for the large chair by his sprawling bed and took a seat. "Speak your piece. I promise to listen in earnest."

For a time, Gohvis was again quiet, no doubt trying to choose his words carefully.

Dozer just waited for him.

"...I have seen what you are looking for in this place," said the Scourge. "I can help you find it. But in exchange, you must agree to help me achieve my goal, as well."

Dozer cocked an eyebrow. "What you've just described was our original arrangement, no? And were you not the one who first declared that our two dreams were incompatible with one another?"

"...Yes," said Gohvis. "But I have since discovered new information which has changed my mind."

Dozer rubbed his temple with one knuckle. "Well, now, that is interesting, because I've heard you say it so often and for so long that I think I might've come to believe it, myself. So please explain to me what this new information is."

"I would be happy to," said Gohvis, "but not in Engomat's presence."

Dozer scoffed. "You cannot be serious."

"Unfortunately, I am. Please, Father. Disengage your hyper-state, send Engomat away, and I will explain. And perhaps, when I do you no

harm, you will finally realize beyond doubt that I am still loyal to you.”

“Hardly. You say all of that as if I would be entirely at your mercy without Engomat’s help.”

“No, Father. You are already at my mercy. You may not want to acknowledge it, but the truth is, my strength surpassed yours long ago.”

Dozer couldn’t help smiling a little. He had to admire the lad’s confidence, at least. “If that’s so, then why do you not simply force me to submit, then take the whole of Abolish for yourself?”

“Because that is a different matter altogether. I have never coveted your position. How many times must I say that before you finally believe me?”

“Words are cheap, son.”

“Then what of my actions? Never once have I moved against you.”

“Well, that is not exactly true, now is it?”

"3363

“I have only moved to protect what was mine,” said Gohvis. “That is not the same as moving against you.”

“Splitting hairs won’t help your case here,” said Dozer. “Taking responsibility for your actions might.”

The giant reptile shook his head. “Regardless, this is important, Father. I do not ask this of you lightly. I know how difficult it is for you to extend even a modicum of trust my way, at the moment, but in this matter, I must insist. Engomat cannot be privy to this information, at least until you’ve heard and processed it yourself. If you decide afterward that you wish to tell him everything I said, then that is fine. But you will need the option.”

“...Why?” said Dozer. “What possible reason could there be for that?”

“I am sorry, but if I explained any further while he can hear, it will likely defeat the purpose of secrecy.”

It was Dozer's turn to shake his head. "That is not good enough, son. You ask too much and offer too little."

Gohvis gave a heavy sigh, and for the first time, turned away from Dozer, pacing toward the far side of the room. He was so tall that his head nearly scraped one of the small, metal lamp fixtures that hung from the ceiling.

"To my mind, there are only two reasons you would ask such a thing of me," said Dozer. "The first is that you are simply lying and trying to make it easier to kill me. Which, amusingly, would not work even if I agreed to your terms, but seeing as you are clearly confident in your own ability, you must disagree with that assessment. Meaning that this explanation is indeed quite likely."

Dozer left space for Gohvis to respond, but the enormous dragon man said nothing, not even turning around to face him again.

"The second explanation," Dozer went on, "is that, somehow, you are being earnest, and you instead fear that if Engomat hears and understands whatever it is that you wish to say, he will then take some immediate, unpreventable, and irreversible action. Such as releasing my soul, perhaps? But what information would prompt him to do such a thing? And you must surely realize that while in a hyper-state, I am the one in foremost control. Have you forgotten that? Or is there some other action from him that you fear? If so, then I am having trouble imagining what it might be."

"3364

"It is nothing so conspiratorial as either of those things," said Gohvis, "but once I have explained, you will understand. So please, Father. If there is any amount of trust left within you, then let it be used here."

Dozer leveled his steely gaze at him. If this were anyone else, there would have been an obvious solution here. As a show of good faith, the traditional course of action would have been to exchange reapers with one another and then encase them both.

To put their lives in each other's hands, in other words.

It was a simple, ancient, and yet still quite effective method of creating a neutral environment for which negotiations such as this one could be

conducted.

Problem was, Gohvis did not have a reaper.

Because the infamous Black Scourge was not a servant.

For quite some time, that particular subject had been an enduring mystery. For as long as Dozer had known him, Gohvis had always possessed the same powers as a servant with mutation. But a reaper never appeared.

At first, Dozer had thought that, surely, the reaper was just hiding--that Gohvis' independence was merely an elaborate illusion. Even after Gohvis demonstrated his ability to invoke the regeneration on his own, without needing to be touched by any reaper, it had still taken Dozer many more years before he fully, truly believed it.

But as strange and obnoxious as it sometimes was, it also undoubtedly had proved very advantageous over the years. Reapers were the primary point of weakness for servants, after all. Gohvis being able to regenerate without one meant that he may've well been a true immortal.

Perhaps the first in history, even.

It was hard to know that for sure, though. As far as Dozer was aware, Gohvis had never been completely obliterated--never vaporized or atomized, for instance--so there was no telling if he could regenerate himself from such a state unaided. And rather understandably, the lad was not keen to test that out, either, because by all conventional wisdom, it was very likely that, no, he wouldn't be able to.

But then again, he could still regenerate from having his brain destroyed, so it wasn't entirely out of the question.

For the longest time, the questions that Gohvis provoked from others had been incessant. Naturally, many of their comrades eventually noticed that something was strange with him, and explaining his exceptional nature to them was not something that was in any way advantageous to him."

"3365

That was why Gohvis had gone to great lengths, at a relatively young

age, to acquire via mutation the power of telepathy. Because with it, he was able to speak in two simultaneous voices, one physical and one non-physical.

It certainly hadn't been perfect at first. But over time, he'd refined. And now, of course, he was of sufficient age that none questioned it, anymore. They all simply assumed--quite reasonably--that he existed in a perpetual hyper-state with his reaper.

These days, Dozer was one of only a handful in the entire world who knew this about him. Even Morgunov and Jercash didn't seem to know, though it was difficult to be certain of that. Those two both had their own ways of getting their hands on information that seemed otherwise unobtainable.

Just as Dozer himself did.

"If you truly wanted to have such a conversation with me," said the old man, "then this is not the way. And you know that."

Gohvis merely stood there, eyes as piercingly red as ever.

Then a thought struck him. "Or perhaps--hmm. Is this about the Dulvani? You did have a fondness for them, didn't you? If so, then cease your worrying. I have no plans to eradicate them." Unless they got in his way, of course, but Gohvis would already know that, too.

Still, the lad said nothing.

Mm. Hold on a minute... Yes, he would already know that, wouldn't he? So then...

"...You did come here for them, didn't you?" said Dozer, tilting his head. "Because you know that they have what I seek. Or some knowledge of it, at least."

"You are jumping to conclusions, Father. I'd not recommend doing that, today of all days."

Dozer squinted with one eye. "And what difference does the day make?"

"I'm not here for the woodfolk, Father. I'm here at the behest of the Vanguard. Of Sermung."

Dozer clenched his jaw. Invoking that name, here and now, was a

deliberate insult. But he maintained his composure. After all, just as he knew what to say in order to get under his son's skin, the opposite was undoubtedly true, too.

"And today is the day of their counteroffensive," said Gohvis. Despite his words, he did not sound smug at all. Just flat and serious, as ever. "My job was merely to keep you busy. They didn't even ask me to kill you, though I'm sure they wanted to."

"3366

Interesting. The fact that Gohvis chose to reveal all of this instead of silently attacking him was curious. Surely, there were other things he could have said if it was only a matter of keeping him preoccupied.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because as I said, I am wondering if we might not still be able to find common ground again."

"You are not entirely certain you wish to betray me yet, is that it?"

"In essence. You are my father, after all."

"How tenderhearted of you."

"Mock me all you like. Even if you somehow overpower me and go to the aid of the others, today will not be a good day for Abolish. Unless, perhaps, you can convince me to remain by your side and help."

Ridiculous. But he supposed this conversation was a long time coming, one way or another. They'd both avoided it in so many different small ways.

And he could see the lad's stratagem here. Gohvis had waited until the stakes were high enough such that Dozer could not merely brush him off or deflect--or otherwise try to delay this talk until another occasion.

Either it happened now, or it didn't happen at all.

That still did not explain, however, why the lad had been so intent on not wanting Engomat to hear this conversation. That part remained highly suspect. If Gohvis had any sense, he would at least not want to fight him at full power. Or perhaps he thought he could simply kill Engomat the instant they separated.

Regardless, Dozer did have to admit that Gohvis had a fair bit of leverage here. The lad's assessment of the situation was not without its merit. A major counterstroke from the Vanguard had been likely to occur for a while now, so if today was indeed the day, then it was no great surprise.

But it was, also, not necessarily Dozer's problem.

"You know I have no plans to further involve myself in Morgunov's little war," he said. "Keeping me busy would not be necessary. I would not have gone to anyone's aid in the first place."

"Mm. I told the Vanguard as much, myself. They seemed not to believe me. Which was understandable, I suppose. Trusting my word in these circumstances would have been of great risk to them, with comparatively little benefit."

Indeed, his son did understand. No matter how great this offensive from the Vanguard turned out to be, it could ultimately be considered just another test for the men.

As ever, the worthy would endure."

"3367

There'd been a time, of course, when he'd thought differently. When he'd thought that every war--every battle, even--was critical. He'd thought that any point could be the turning one, for the better or worse.

It had been a man named Suresh who had ultimately changed his mind about that, a man who also happened to be one of the most fearsome individuals Dozer had ever personally known--and an unparalleled source of knowledge, besides.

"We have stepped beyond the threshold, Medan. The world watches us, always. And while many tremble at our slightest glance, many others do not. Instead, they seek to use us. To manipulate and force us to move. They see all that we have built, all that we have inherited, and they think that makes us vulnerable, because it gives us something to lose.

"But it doesn't. And they are fools. Because we are monoliths. We do not move by the world's will or provocation. We move when we decide,



and everyone else must make way. Do not forget that, Medan, else you will soon find yourself dizzy at this new height of power.”

And indeed, Dozer had found that to be true. How many wars had there been since then? Too many to count, certainly. And they always felt like the most important thing in the world at the time. And in fairness to the people involved in them, perhaps they were.

But not to him.

No. He wasn't going to let himself get sucked into this nonsense that Morgunov had no doubt started on a whim. Even if the rest of world didn't see that obvious fact, he did.

“You surprise me, boy,” said Dozer. “Letting yourself get mixed up in the Demon's messes again. When you didn't budge from your library, I thought you'd finally learned your lesson.”

“This has nothing to do with him. And I think you know that.”

“No? Perhaps so. I thought you had a fondness for some of his men, at least. Betraying me means betraying them, as well. The rest of Abolish will not look kindly upon you as a traitor--or your followers. Are you prepared to risk their lives, as well?”

“Stop this. It is unlike you to speak of trivialities and pettiness. You are trying to throw out distractions, because you do not wish to discuss the real issue here.””

"3368

The real issue.

Ah.

Dozer remained quiet. The boy did have a point, though he still didn't want to admit it, even after all these years.

There was a particular incident that had caused the fallout between them, an incident that Dozer had been struggling to get past.

Maybe he really had gotten too old. Becoming too stuck in his ways. Unable to forgive and move on.

Eh, who was he kidding? He'd never been one for forgiveness.

"You still fault me for killing Suresh," said Gohvis.

"...Yes," said Dozer flatly.

And for a time, the lad just looked at him, a rare expression of surprise on his reptilian face. He'd not been expecting that, had he?

Hell, even Dozer himself hadn't. On any other occasion, he might've deflected or outright denied it.

The truth, that was.

It was supposed to be ancient history by now. How could anyone hold onto a singular grudge for so long?

But here and now, he wanted to acknowledge it. Finally. It was almost a relief--for him and his son both, seemingly.

The look on Gohvis' face melted gradually into one of somber exhaustion. The lad let out a deep sigh and sat down on the floor, wrapping his tail around and resting it on his own lap.

What now, he wondered?

This was what they called progress, he supposed. A step in the right direction, perhaps.

Or perhaps not.

"In killing him, more information was lost than in the sacking of Ethori. Or the destruction of Arkotesh. Do you understand? In that one act, you deprived me of incalculable value. Even if I were to annihilate your precious Erudia, the loss would not compare."

"Now you exaggerate."

"I do not. You simply did not realize the depths to which he was still useful to me."

"He was trying to kill you, Father."

"And he would have failed, son." Dozer almost laughed. "The more things change, the more they stay the same. Just as you thought me incapable of defending myself then, you still think that now. Only your reasoning has changed, it would seem."

“And you continue to not see my true worth,” said Gohvis. “I am now far more knowledgeable than Suresh ever was. Whatever plans you had for him, I can fulfill in his stead if you would but trust me.”

It was Dozer’s turn to sigh.”

”3369

“Tell me.” There was a rare tinge of anger in Gohvis’ voice now. “Long have I pondered these questions. Each time I have broached the subject in the past, you have evaded or deflected or denied me outright. So if you are finally ready to be candid with me, to acknowledge that it has not all been some insecure concoction of my own mind, then you must tell me the whole truth of it, Father. Have I not been a good son to you? What is the ultimate source of this distrust you have in me? It cannot merely be that man’s death, can it?”

And again, Dozer nearly laughed. He shook his head, instead, knowing all too well that his son would find such condescension nigh intolerable during a moment like this. If there was to be any hope of salvaging anything between the two of them, right now, then he had keep himself steady. He needed to not be indulgent. “...You freely admit to be working with the Vanguard, and yet you still wonder why I might distrust you?”

“No,” said Gohvis. “While that is what things have come to, I speak of before. In the past. I was never anything but loyal to you. Is it so strange that I should begin to consider other options when you have been so persistently impossible to please?”

Dozer bobbed his head. “It is not. I understand that part of you very well.” He took a moment to both measure his next words and also give his son a chance to respond again, but when Gohvis merely waited, he continued on. “And truthfully, on some level, I respect you for that decision. You are stepping out of my shadow, if only a little. Any halfway decent father should feel at least a modicum of pride in that.”

Gohvis just stared at him with those deathly red eyes of his. After the slight emotion they’d shown earlier, now they were back to being as impossible to read as usual.

He was waiting for more, Dozer knew. Because the main question had

still not be addressed.

Why did he struggle to trust Gohvis as he had trusted Suresh? Suresh, a man who had even become openly hostile to him toward the end.

Why should his son be held in such comparably low esteem to a man such as that? Especially when the two were quite similar in many ways?

He had to admit. The boy's confusion was understandable.

And tragic, perhaps."

"3370

But that was the real trick of it, wasn't it? The real danger here.

Gohvis was his son.

But also not.

Not truly.

It was a game. A story they'd both agreed to tell each other, long ago.

And for his part, Dozer knew that he'd allowed himself to soften too much because of it. He'd let himself indulge in the fantasy of fatherhood, as he'd done many other times throughout his life.

Despite how much some of his followers might have protested otherwise, Dozer was under no illusion that he was some flawless being. Fatherhood had frequently been his weakness. No doubt, it stemmed from a place deep within his psyche that he would never truly be rid of.

Fostering abandoned youth. Helping the helpless to see the truth of this world.

These things, in retrospect, had always been of little practical utility to him and his empire. But so often, he couldn't resist the allure.

And Gohvis here... was arguably the pinnacle of that weakness.

From an outside perspective, it would undoubtedly seem nonsensical.

He supposed he owed the boy an explanation, at least.

“Son... the truth of the matter is that this concept of ‘trust’ you are referring to... is flawed.” Dozer scratched his brow as he eyed the lad carefully, watching his stony expression and half-expecting him to launch into an attack at any moment. “I might have outwardly ‘trusted’ Suresh, yes. I will not deny that. But you see...” He couldn’t help breaking for a brief laugh, now. “That was because I never actually liked him, son.”

Gohvis’ reptilian stare did not budge. “...What?”

Dozer shook his head, wondering if it was even possible for the boy to understand. “Trusting Suresh was easy. Trivial, even. Because I knew that doing so wouldn’t weaken me. I knew that he was a threat and that, ultimately, any ‘trust’ between us could only go so far. But with you, it is different. You are my son.”

At that, the giant black dragon man opened his mouth, but no words came out. Then he closed it again and merely looked confused.

“You,” Dozer continued slowly, “actually have the power to weaken me, if I allow it. Which is why I must not.”

Silence arrived.

Dozer waited.

Perhaps there’d been a better way to explain it, but Dozer couldn’t think of it, even as he continued to mull his words over in his mind.”  
"3371 -- CCLXXXIV.

He wanted to say something more, maybe try to clarify a point or two, but nothing felt appropriate. Truthfully, everything he’d said was already far more than he’d ever intended. Hell, maybe he should try to take something back, instead.

Bah. No. Backtracking was unbecoming of an emperor, no matter the situation. And he’d said what he meant.

At length, however, Gohvis unwrapped himself from his tail and stood up.

“There is still much I must tell you,” the boy said. “That conversation without Engomat’s presence still needs to happen. But I suppose it can wait. For now, we really should go to the others’ aid before it is too late.”

Dozer blinked at him. It took a moment to fully understand. But even after he did, he decided to remain seated in his chair. “I already told you that I have no intention of involving myself in this war.”

“Unfortunately for you, you are already involved. Sanko is here, waiting to jump in and assist me in killing you, should I have needed it.”

“Mm. Yes, I thought I sensed her presence earlier. It must be hard for her to show even this much restraint. Shall we deal with her together, then? I should quite like to be rid of her once and for all, and with your help, the deed might finally become trivial.”

“No. I have no desire to kill her.”

Dozer nearly sighed again, resorting to a frown, instead. “You are either betraying me or betraying her. Which will it be?”

“A false choice. Think what you want, but I will move in accordance with my own dictations. Not yours or anyone else’s.”

Agh. The brat.

And yet, Dozer also couldn’t help smiling a little. Maybe it wasn’t just a story they’d been telling each other. Maybe the boy really was his son, after all.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Four: ‘Rumblings in the distance...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It had been another long day. Prince David of House Lumenbel was a guest in this country, but it increasingly felt as if that meant very little. The major political players within Intar seemed to view him as nothing more than a nuisance to be pushed off onto their assistants and secretaries. He’d been here for months now, and yet he’d still never gotten the opportunity to sit down and speak with any of the big names for more than five minutes at a time.”

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"3372

That had bothered him, at first--especially because it hadn't been that way during his previous visits here, back in his student days. When he'd merely been a foreign princeling with an amusing quip for every occasion, the big players had been more than happy to give him the time of day. To have him entertain their guests for them. And to try and mold him, too. To impress themselves upon an impressionable young mind.

But now that he was older and an official ambassador of Atreya, they were clearly less interested in him. More wary, perhaps. It didn't help that half or more of the people he'd been familiar with had been replaced, either. What an obnoxious system of governance. How was anyone expected to get anything done when they were constantly having to build new relationships after every election? And find new funding before each one? Even now, he almost found himself reluctant to get to know some of these people, seeing as any number of them could be gone within the next three years.

In that sense, perhaps their dismissiveness towards him was warranted. Perhaps they didn't want to bother building a rapport with him, either.

But again, that had only bothered him at first. The reason it didn't bother him anymore was because he'd learned to adjust the angle of his approach. And to see the reality of things, as well.

The terrible truth of the matter was that these supposed big shots didn't know what the hell they were talking about most of the time, anyway. They were elected to look like they did. It was the people behind them--sometimes even beneath them--who were actually thinking deeply about and trying to influence political policy here in Intar. The ones writing and proofreading speeches, the ones whispering in ears between meetings, the ones cutting checks during



fundraisers--those were the ones he needed to pay more careful attention to.

Optics in this country were truly a fascinating thing. Obnoxious and tedious beyond measure, but fascinating, nonetheless. Since his arrival, he'd had to learn almost an entirely new skill set in order to even begin navigating the political landscape here with any sort of success.

And to that end, being foisted upon assistants and secretaries wasn't actually so bad. These were the overlooked, the barely thought about--despite the fact that they were present for so many important conversations, silently observing and learning.

Lending these hard-working young folks a friendly ear was therefore no trouble at all."

"3373

"This Senator Garvey sounds like a real piece of work," Prince David was saying. "I never would've guessed, judging from how well he presents himself in front of cameras."

"Yeah," said the young man on the other side of the table, slumped forward in his chair and nursing an iced coffee against his temple while he rested his eyes. "I've had nightmares, you know, where all I hear is his voice, yelling at me from every direction. Oh... man... I feel like it's going to happen again tonight, too..."

"Hence the coffee in spite of the late hour, hmm?"

"Yeah... I have to be up in a few hours, anyway, so maybe I'm better off just staying awake..."

David frowned at the poor kid. "Perhaps there is something I can do to help."

The kid didn't even look up at him. "That's nice of you to say, but I don't see how. I've just gotta tough it out for a few more... years, probably." He groaned.

"You could find a different senator to work for."

"You make it sound so easy. Without someone from the other

senator's team to vouch for me, it's basically impossible. These jobs are hell, but that's only because the competition for them is so fierce. Honestly, I'm lucky to be here at all. At least, that's what they keep telling me..."

"If you could work for someone else, though, who would you pick?"

"...You mean out of anyone?"

"Mhmm."

The kid needed a moment to think about that, apparently. His name was Carlito Yavan, and while his current state might have seemed rather pathetic to any onlookers in this downtown bar, this young man right here was actually one of the most talented lobbyists David had ever seen. And not just when the kid was up there on the debate stage of the Congressional Hall, either.

Fortunately for Prince David, nobody else seemed to have noticed yet.

"...Well, I mean, the dream pick would obviously be Senator Jacobson. In five years' time, he'll be campaigning for the presidency--and probably winning, too, because both his policies and his team are rock solid. And of course, he's a great orator, which is a huge leg up over, uh... some of his likely competition. And on top of that, I hear he's actually a super nice guy, too, which is a bonus."

"3374

"Ah." This certainly wasn't the first time David was hearing that about Jacobson. It was always hard to know how true such rumors truly were, though. When it came to politicians, the ability to make friends was key, and when people thought you were nice, that task usually became easier.

It also made it easier to stab people in the back, perhaps even without them realizing it.

But Carlito's assessment carried a bit of weight to it, David felt. Perhaps it wasn't all nonsense, after all.

"You mention that last part as if it's not even that important to you," said David. "Surely, after the hell you have endured under Garvey, the general disposition of your new boss should be a higher priority to

you.”

At that, Carlito sat back up in his chair and eyed David for a moment. “...Eh. At the end of the day, I’d still rather work for someone who can make a real difference in the world than someone who is just nice to me.”

Heh. Yeah. This kid was definitely going to become a big name around here, one day.

Carlito slumped back down again. “Of course, ideally I could have both...”

David took a sip of his iced tea. “As it so happens, I know someone on Jacobson’s team,” he said.

Carlito’s head popped up off the table, though he didn’t say anything.

“I could put in a good word for you, if you like,” said the prince.

The kid’s eyes widened, and he blinked at him. “Y-you could? I... but I...” Then his expression rediscovered its composure. “In exchange for what, exactly?”

Prince David gave him a flat smile. “Why would it need to be in exchange for anything?”

Carlito returned a look. “Because nothing in this world is free.”

“Well, now, that’s just not true. Why, just the other day I visited the grocery store over on Nara Street, and they were giving away free samples of these lovely little fudge cakes.”

Carlito still just looked at him.

“You’re a very jaded young man, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.”

David smacked his lips and sipped from his drink another time. “That is something you’ll have to overcome, if you wish to make it much further in this business.”

“What do you mean?”

“Being jaded. Don’t get me wrong. It’s useful--and, in fact, necessary--to doubt people. To see through their lies or pick up on the subtext of

what they might be saying. Sure. But the most important skill for a politician to have is the ability to make friends. And a lot of people will find that jaded disposition quite off-putting, if you don't keep it close to your chest.""

"3375

The kid made another face like he didn't understand--or didn't want to, perhaps. "Regardless, what do you want from me? It's obviously not nothing."

David exhaled a curt breath. "What I want from you, Mr. Yavan, is good policy."

"What?"

"I want the right people to be in the right places at the right time." He paused for another swig. Damn, this place made good tea for a bar. "Sometimes, being smart is enough. Or being hard-working is enough. But other times, it's not. Other times, someone just needs a little helping hand in order to reach their full potential. And one day, if you ever find yourself in a position where you can help others out in a similar manner, then I hope you will remember this. Because it really can make all the difference in the world."

Carlito was silent, just staring at him.

David could no longer tell what might be going through the young man's head. Ah well. Maybe the kid needed a moment to gather his thoughts. David's eye drifted across the bar, landing on the television hanging in the high corner behind the bartender.

There was some kind of breaking news footage there, but it only held his gaze for a split second before Carlito grabbed his attention again.

"I see. You make it sound nice, but really, you're not doing anything different from Intarian politicians. A favor now in exchange for a favor in the future." There was no disgust or disappointment in the kid's tone. He was merely stating it as if it were fact.

David bobbed his head admissively but still had to counter. "Yes and no. I do want us to be friendly in the future, of course, but strictly speaking, politicking in the manner you're describing is... generally not

advisable, in my opinion. Doing someone a favor in exchange for some vague future promise is a good way to open oneself up to being backstabbed or otherwise let down, instead. No, I wouldn't do this for you if I didn't genuinely wish to help you or think that you deserved it."

The kid said something more, but David's attention had shifted back to the news footage. And stayed there.

Because what he read on the bottom scroll made his mind lose track of what they'd been talking about.

"Multiple Major Volcanoes Erupting Across War-Torn Eloa," it read."  
"3376

The accompanying footage was split between three different screens, each showing giant columns of black or gray smoke filling the sky.

Young Mr. Yavan took notice as well. "Seems the world has nothing to offer but bad news, lately."

And David kept watching. It soon became clear there were at least three eruptions currently accounted for, one each in the nations of Kavia, Melmoore, and Vantalay.

Somehow, Prince David doubted that was a coincidence.

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Of late, Hector had been dreaming more often. Almost every time he slept, in fact. And they were quite random, too.

But very real.

On this occasion, he saw the life of a simple farmer. Or what seemed to be one, at first. A man arrived on his land. A man of terrible power and influence. A man who'd brought an army with him. Because apparently, this was not the first visitation. The leader's subordinates had been pressuring the farmer for a while now without ever being able to make him budge.

There was fear in the army's ranks but not in the leader.

A long discussion was had. That comprised most of the dream, in fact.

“...To speak with such insolence, do you not know of me, farmer?”

“I do not. Nor do I care.”

“I am the new lord of your lands, farmer.”

“Congratulations. But I serve no lord other than the one who lives in my heart. If it is tribute you seek, you will have to look elsewhere.”

The lord laughed mightily. “I’ve not met a man as fearless as you in a long time! Or, perhaps, is it merely ignorance that makes you speak so?! Surely not! The army at my back must make your situation quite clear, no?! Or are you blind, as well?!”

“I see your army. Make sure they don’t trample my crops.”

Another mighty laugh. “If every man under me was as fearless as you, good sir, I’d have conquered the entire world by now.”

“Mm, but would you have conquered yourself?”

“Pardon? What do you mean?”

“To satiate one’s hunger, only a modest meal is needed.”

“Ah... you do not know my Hunger, then. For mine never seems to end.”

“I know of that well. The Hunger you speak of. That hunger is not of this world, and therefore nothing of this world can satisfy it, other than a corrected mind. A conquered mind.”

The lord was not laughing, anymore. Instead, he was listening carefully."

"3377

“Whatever mighty deeds you might perform, however many people might speak your name, whatever riches you might acquire, it will all become as valuable to you as dirt before long.” The farmer wasn’t even looking at him, now. Instead, he’d grabbed a shovel by a fencepost and started digging a hole in the ground by his cobble porch. “Until you have conquered yourself, you have conquered nothing at

all.”

After that, the lord was quiet. For quite a long while, in fact. He and all his men merely stood there, watching the farmer dig.

“...What is your name, farmer?” asked the lord.

The farmer, however, did not answer.

The irritation on the lord’s face was apparent. “Please, tell me. My name is Unso. I should like to know your name before you enter my service.”

“Perhaps you are hard of hearing. I serve no lord but my own.”

“You will enter my service, or I will kill you where you stand. In either case, I must know your name, for ‘twould be a shame if your tombstone had to remain blank.”

And what followed was a light so blinding and persistent that Hector thought the dream to be over. But when it finally abated, the lord named Unso had been torn asunder, head removed from his shredded shoulders. On the end of the farmer’s shovel, a reaper was skewered, smoking and dying.

The army was already scattering. Some of them had fallen to the ground and were scrambling back to their feet, though it didn’t look like the farmer had done anything to them.

Once it was over, Hector was able to continue watching the scene for a bit longer. It reminded him of his time within the Candle, the way it could manipulate visions of the past for him. He tried to do that here, to rewind or fast forward, but there was no response. The scene was merely played out, allowing him to wander about and look at things.

He tried to look at the farmer’s face in greater detail, to get a true picture of who the guy might’ve been, but it didn’t seem possible. His awareness in this place was strange. Being half-asleep was likely the issue. He felt like he couldn’t fully concentrate. Couldn’t really absorb details.

It was only after he awoke that he truly began to process what he’d seen, and even then, he wasn’t entirely sure what to make of it.”

"3378

It seemed obvious, however, that these dreams were--in part, at least--the things that he'd partitioned off in his mind after his trip through the Candle. The most compelling evidence was simply that he'd never dreamt much before. The timing was too strange, otherwise. All the memories and information that the fusion forge had shown him must've now been manifesting themselves in this new way.

He felt like this was a good sign. A sign of progress. Perhaps this would be happening with increasing frequency as his mind continued to process everything. Or maybe a dream was even an indicator that a particular memory had completed its processing.

Weird to think of it like that. Shouldn't he have known for sure? It was his brain, after all.

In any case, Hector's main focus for the time being was still Grigozo and Ericoros. Now that there was no immediate threat to Warrenhold to worry about, those two captive reapers were the most pressing subjects to Hector's mind. Plus, the castle was still mostly empty as they waited on word from abroad--in particular, from Vantalay.

From the reports he'd received, Hector was keenly aware that the situation over there was at its most tenuous. The Rainlords had been fighting for weeks now in order to find and free their brethren, and now they were on the verge of pulling it off. Only the final assault on Logden Prison was standing in their way, and Hector hoped to hear good news soon.

It was tough not to worry, of course, but these were the Rainlords. When it came down to it, he had quite a bit of faith in them. He'd witnessed their strength firsthand.

They weren't going to let anything stand in their way.

He did wish he could've gone with them, though. And now that Warrenhold was seemingly safe, the temptation to fly to their aid was stronger than ever.

But until he received word that was truly dire, he intended to stay put. The Rainlords would be fine without him. Warrenhold wouldn't. And sure, while it seemed like Bloodeye wasn't going to launch another attack just yet, Hector didn't think it was worth risking everything on that hypothesis.



But this was definitely an illuminating experience in its own way. Decisions like this weren't trivial--that was for sure. And he could only imagine how many more like it he might have to make in the future."

"3379

Choosing where to go and who to help. How to allocate his limited time and power. These were becoming increasingly important things to think about, and he was starting to get the feeling that this was--in some small way--how the big, famous warriors and influential people throughout history must've felt.

No matter how good his intentions or how powerful he grew, there was only so much he could do at one time.

'But that's all the more reason why we have to keep going,' said Garovel privately. 'And to keep pushing, too. It's important to remember that, no matter how crazy things might get, there are plenty of other people out there who are trying to do the same things we are. Trying to protect the world. And yeah, maybe we might not all get along or agree with one another, but ultimately, there's still a certain level of solace to be taken in simply knowing that it's not all on our shoulders alone.'

'...Do you think Sermung feels that way?' asked Hector. 'I mean... if anyone has the weight of world on his shoulders, it has to be that guy, right?'

The reaper paused. 'I can't claim to know how the Crystal Titan thinks or what he ultimately believes, but I suspect it's different from what most might expect of him.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, take this war for example. We've been paying close attention to the news from all over the continent, even deploying scouts to collect our own information and corroborate others'. And yet we've heard neither hide nor hair of Sermung's whereabouts. Conventional wisdom would tell us that Sermung should've popped up by now, at least when Morgunov made his move on Sair. But no. He's still quiet.'

Hector had to bob his head a little. 'Yeah, I suppose that's true... Do you think he's... busy with something else? Or that he just, er...?'

‘...Or that he just doesn’t care?’ finished Garovel.

‘I didn’t want to put it quite like that, but... yeah. I mean, if he’s really like six hundred years old or whatever, then I guess I could understand if he’s gotten... disillusioned with keeping up the fight. I’m sure I’d be different, too, after living that long.’

‘You’ve hit on quite a popular subject throughout history,’ said Garovel. ‘And not just in regard to Sermung, either. Whenever there’s a definitive “strongest” in the world--and they’re not an evil son of a bitch--those types of questions start cropping up without fail.’

"3380

‘So you don’t think Sermung is like that, then?’

‘I do not,’ said Garovel. ‘But I do think he has a very different view of the world than the rest of us. And I also think he deserves a bit of slack, too, after all he’s done for humanity. It’s easy to forget that he doesn’t ACTUALLY have an obligation to anyone or anything. It’s no individual person’s responsibility to save the entire world, nor should it be. But people constantly act like we deserve his protection and power, like he owes us, when the reality is the opposite. If anything, WE owe HIM. And in times past, people in his position have made that exceedingly clear, demanding tribute as an overlord, for example. The fact that he doesn’t try to pull that stunt makes him saintly enough, as far as I’m concerned.’

‘...Wow,’ said Hector. ‘I knew you liked Sermung, but I didn’t realize quite how much. You’re like a super fan.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that. I’ve just had this conversation many times before--and often with people who were much more argumentative than you. So I’ve developed strong opinions. Especially lately.’

‘Ah...’

‘I can only imagine how difficult it is to keep a level head when you’re in a position like his. And considering how long he’s been doing it for, I’m prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. If he’s deciding to not get involved in this war, then he’s probably got a good reason.’

Hector hoped he was right, but he didn’t know if he shared the reaper’s

point of view, either.

And at the risk of setting Garovel off again, he ended up broaching a similar subject with Grigozo and Ericoros later.

“What is Abolish’s general view of the war?” he asked. “Are they afraid of Sermung stepping in?”

‘I can only speculate what the higher ups have in mind,’ said Grigozo, ‘but I can say with relative certainty that the prevailing sense of morale has been high. Apart, perhaps, from the conflict in Melmoore. I heard that things were going quite poorly over there. But according to most reports, the men were optimistic about their chances of winning.’

Quite the difference from the Magician of Light’s assessment, Hector noted. But then, it only made sense that opposing sides would have opposing views.

‘As for Sermung himself,’ Grigozo went on, ‘there is always an underlying fear of him in everything that Abolish does. The men rarely speak of it, but it is there.’

"3381

‘That is no great surprise,’ said Ericoros, which surprised Hector. The reaper rarely chimed in, deigning usually to merely listen--at least while Hector was present, that was. ‘The emperors are all in a category of their own. Fear of them permeates every side of every conflict.’

‘Even among Sai-hee’s people?’ asked Garovel.

At that, Ericoros was quiet a moment, and Hector wondered if perhaps that had been too brazen of a question for the reaper’s liking. ‘...Yes,’ said Ericoros. ‘Exceptions no doubt exist, especially among the stupid, but for a certainty, there was always a subdued level of fear within our ranks. It would be arrogant and foolish to claim otherwise.’

Garovel merely bobbed his skull in acknowledgment.

Hector had a question for Ericoros now, too, though he wasn’t holding out hope that the reaper would actually answer it. “What is Sai-hee actually like?”

As expected, the reaper made no response.

Hector tried a slightly different angle. "I ask because Leo didn't have very nice things to say about her, but from what I understand, you don't feel the same way. I'd be interested to hear a more detailed opinion from someone who thinks highly of her."

Ericoros exhaled a nonexistent breath. 'I suppose that is fair...' He paused, perhaps to gather his thoughts. 'Sai-hee is... she is a very complex person. And it is true that my affection for her will likely never fade. She has a deep compassion for others that is difficult to fully articulate. Perhaps if you would consider Sermung to be a fatherly protector of the world, then Sai-hee might be thought of as a more motherly one. She is kind beyond measure and treats everyone like her children.'

Hmm. Well, he'd already heard a few counterpoints to that claim of kindness, at least. He didn't want to interject, though.

Garovel, however, apparently did not harbor the same reservations. 'Kindness, eh? I've never met her myself, so I'm not saying you're wrong, but the woman is known to have done some rather UNKIND things throughout the years. Her conflict with the Rainlords being just one example.'

'Ah, yes, the Richland affair,' said Ericoros. 'That was a horrible circumstance, yes, but it was not Sai-hee's doing. Rather, it was the fault of Ariana, who had always been impulsive and... "passionate," as some described her. "Emotionally unstable" might have been the more apt term, in my estimation.'

"3382

'Even if what you say is true,' said Garovel, 'that does not render Sai-hee without blame, no? A leader takes responsibility for her subordinates, especially in the eyes of the public. If this Ariana was such a loose cannon, then Sai-hee can at least be faulted for not dealing with her before the situation exploded into so many lost lives.'

'I do not mean to claim that Sai-hee is some perfect being who always makes the right decision,' said Ericoros. 'And your assessment is a fair one, even if there was considerably more nuance that is perhaps not worth getting into, right now. On the whole, I can certainly understand the Rainlords' perspective in that conflict.'

‘But with that being said,’ Ericoros went on, ‘the Lord Darksteel here asked about what she is like, not about what mistakes I think she may or may not have made in the past. When it comes down to it, I believe she is the best and most magnanimous of the current four emperors. But due to the other three, she is also constantly being put in impossible situations--situations, need I remind you, where she must take into account the safety of over two billion people who live under her protection.’

Garovel held up his skeletal hands defensively. ‘That’s completely fair. I’m not trying to say that she has it easy or that she could just snap her fingers and fix every problem in the world. I’m just trying to have a balanced view of things.’

‘I know that desire well,’ said Ericoros. His skeletal mouth twisted slightly and impossibly, looking a bit like a smile, which was a surprise to Hector. ‘You are trying to maintain neutrality. If anything, that makes me think that you would quite like Sai-hee, should you ever be fortunate enough to meet her.’

Garovel chortled. ‘I probably would. But then again, maybe that’s not saying much. I like most people. I’m full of love, me. Too understanding and benevolent for my own good, you know.’

Hector resisted the urge to roll his eyes, though he did smile. “Leo mentioned that she saved your hometown. Or that her people did, at least.”

‘Yes, and that is exactly what I mean when I say that she is the best of the emperors. While her goals may not be so lofty as “saving the world,” she nonetheless does more to protect innocent people than anyone else, in no small part because she fosters that same sense of stewardship and preservation in all of her followers.”

"3383

Hector could appreciate that--or the sentiment of it, at least. Previously, he’d thought that he and Garovel were more in line with the Vanguardian mission of proactively engaging the enemy, but after all they’d been through, he was starting to wonder if they might actually have more in common with the approach that Ericoros was describing.

Not that it always had to be one or the other. Context certainly made a difference, he felt.

‘At the risk of sounding like a contrarian,’ said Garovel, ‘I am not sure you can rightly say that she fosters those sentiments in ALL of her followers when we were just talking about how much of a problem Ariana was.’

‘Hmph. Yes, you are semantically correct. I should not have said all. But the broad point remains true. And I’m sure I do not even need to begin listing examples of how certain Vanguardians throughout history have not lived up to their purported ideals, either.’

‘No, you do not.’

The conversation continued on the same subject for a bit longer, with the reapers going back and forth but not really giving much ground or providing new details. Eventually, however, Garovel shifted topics with a new question, addressed to Grigozo.

‘Oh, by the way, I was meaning to ask, how old was Banda, exactly?’

‘One hundred and forty-one,’ said Grigozo. ‘Why do you ask?’

Hector’s eyes widened, and he blinked a couple times.

‘Just curious,’ said Garovel. ‘Do you know how old Bloodeye is, too?’

‘One hundred and seventy-six,’ said Grigozo.

Wait, what the fuck?

The reapers were still talking, but Hector had stopped listening. All of his thought processes were suddenly stuck on what he’d just heard.

Those ages.

Banda had been that fucking old?

But even more importantly...

Hector had thought he already knew how old Bloodeye was. One hundred and thirty-three. That was the information that he’d pulled out of the Candle. He still had no idea where the Candle had gotten that number from--and maybe he never would, either--but now that Grigozo was contradicting it...

What did this mean? Hold on. Didn't it mean... that...?

Oh god.

It meant that the Candle wasn't always accurate, didn't it?

So all the information that had been fed directly into his brain by the Forge...

He had to take it all with a grain of salt now, didn't he? It wasn't just some kind of magically perfect reservoir of indisputable knowledge, was it?

One of his hands slowly found his forehead as his gaze sunk to the nightrack floor.

Aw, fuck, dude..."

"3384

As he tried to come to grips with this earth-shattering revelation, the silent sound of Garovel's voice managed to regain his attention.

'What's the matter with you?' said the reaper, wrapped in the echo of privacy.

He didn't know how to explain, especially considering they were still in the middle of a different conversation. 'Egh... I'll tell you later.' And he tried to put it out of his mind--or at least into a background thought process.

But then he remembered that there was more to it than just the Candle being wrong. Naturally, when he'd first realized that details about Bloodeye already existed in his head, he'd made sure to double check that information against what was available on the internet. That, after all, was how he'd even come to conclusion that the knowledge had been from the Candle in the first place and not just some random, made-up bullshit that had come to him in a dream or something.

Of course, now that he was having more elaborate dreams involving historical figures, maybe his view of that latter part had also changed.

Ugh.

Why did this have to be so confusing, huh? Why couldn't more things just be magical and flawless? Sorting through all that information was already an enormous task, and now he had to factor in an extra possibility of error, too?

Hmm. Now that he was thinking about it, though, he supposed it was also possible that the Candle was right and that Grigozo was simply lying here, instead. Hector didn't see what reason the reaper would have for doing so, especially regarding such a seemingly minor subject; but hell, maybe there was more to it, somehow.

He decided to interject into the reapers' conversation in order to double check. "Ah--pardon me, but uh, regarding Bloodeye's age. You said he was one hundred and seventy-six, right?"

'Yes,' said Grigozo, sounding abruptly uncertain.

How to handle this question...? Ah. "I happened to read on the internet that Bloodeye was only one hundred and thirty-three. Is there some reason for the discrepancy here?"

There arrived a pause, and then the reaper gave a slight laugh. 'Are you serious?'

What? Hector made no response. He merely kept his face flat and his eyes steady.

Grigozo's mirth seemed to dissipate. 'Er--apologies. I would've thought it obvious that you should not trust publicly available information like that when it comes to highly ranked members of Abolish. Or the Vanguard, for that matter. Misinformation abounds. By design, no doubt.'"

"3385 -- CCLXXXV.

Hmm. Maybe that had made him sound dumb, but oh well. Hector wasn't about to try and argue that no, actually, he had really been trying to double check intel he'd gotten from the ancient, mythical Fusion Forge that he'd recently acquired.

He did still have another conversational line open to him, though. "Is there any way of corroborating the information that you're providing?" he asked. "I'm not entirely convinced that the internet is less



trustworthy than a reaper who was trying to kill me a couple days ago. No offense.”

‘Aha. None taken.’ Grigozo paused. ‘Corroboration... With regard to their ages, the only method I could think of would be to... ask other reapers who might know. As you’re no doubt aware, age is a sensitive subject for many servants.’

Hector was indeed aware of that. Increasingly, it was clear that public perception of a warrior’s strength was almost as important as the strength itself--hell, maybe even more so, in some cases. Hector didn’t think that was quite what Grigozo was getting at here, though. Unlike in his own case, Banda and Bloodeye’s true ages, according to Grigozo here, were actually significantly older than the public knew.

In a situation like that, Hector supposed the only reasoning behind it would be to make enemies underestimate them. Certainly, that factor alone might make all the difference in the world when it came to a life-or-death battle.

But it still seemed a bit weird, maybe because it was so exactly opposite to the problem that he’d been struggling with for what felt like ages, now. Ultimately, he wondered what the superior strategy was. To be feared and respected? Or to be underestimated?

At the moment, he couldn’t even imagine reaching a point where the latter was an option for him.

The conversation continued for a while longer, but eventually, the main doors to the Moonlight Hall swung open, and the arrival of Carlos Sebolt brought things to an abrupt end.

The man was looking directly at Hector, though he spared a glance for the reapers who would overheard what he was about to say. “News, lord. From... abroad.”

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Five: ‘O, sudden encounter...’

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It was a mess. As he knew it would be. As they all knew it would be. Once word arrived that Vanderberk wanted to “negotiate” with them, none of the Rainlords had been in doubt.

There could be no parley with such a man."  
"3385 -- CCLXXXV.

Hmm. Maybe that had made him sound dumb, but oh well. Hector wasn't about to try and argue that no, actually, he had really been trying to double check intel he'd gotten from the ancient, mythical Fusion Forge that he'd recently acquired.

He did still have another conversational line open to him, though. "Is there any way of corroborating the information that you're providing?" he asked. "I'm not entirely convinced that the internet is less trustworthy than a reaper who was trying to kill me a couple days ago. No offense."

'Aha. None taken.' Grigozo paused. 'Corroboration... With regard to their ages, the only method I could think of would be to... ask other reapers who might know. As you're no doubt aware, age is a sensitive subject for many servants.'

Hector was indeed aware of that. Increasingly, it was clear that public perception of a warrior's strength was almost as important as the strength itself--hell, maybe even more so, in some cases. Hector didn't think that was quite what Grigozo was getting at here, though. Unlike in his own case, Banda and Bloodeye's true ages, according to Grigozo here, were actually significantly older than the public knew.

In a situation like that, Hector supposed the only reasoning behind it would be to make enemies underestimate them. Certainly, that factor alone might make all the difference in the world when it came to a life-or-death battle.

But it still seemed a bit weird, maybe because it was so exactly opposite to the problem that he'd been struggling with for what felt like ages, now. Ultimately, he wondered what the superior strategy was. To be feared and respected? Or to be underestimated?

At the moment, he couldn't even imagine reaching a point where the latter was an option for him.

The conversation continued for a while longer, but eventually, the main doors to the Moonlight Hall swung open, and the arrival of Carlos Sebolt brought things to an abrupt end.

The man was looking directly at Hector, though he spared a glance for the reapers who would overheard what he was about to say. "News, lord. From... abroad."

## Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Five: 'O, sudden encounter...'

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It was a mess. As he knew it would be. As they all knew it would be. Once word arrived that Vanderberk wanted to "negotiate" with them, none of the Rainlords had been in doubt.

There could be no parley with such a man."  
"3386

While certainly, on a purely pragmatic level, it would have been beneficial to them to do so, there was far more at play in these circumstances than pragmatism alone could account for.

Between all of their collective histories and that of their reapers, they had too much experience and knowledge of the Weasel's exploits. No matter how reasonably the man might have wanted to present himself now, Vanderberk was a mass murderer who gave orders to other mass murderers.

And not only that, he was known for doing so gleefully.

To say that such a person could not be trusted to keep his word would have been the understatement of the century. And even if, somehow, that were not a factor, there was also the basic moral component of it to consider.

"The rain fears not the torch."

Those were their words, even now after all they'd lost. No. Especially now.

More than ever, they knew that they could not bend here.

And so, it had not taken them long in order to decide on their plan of

action.

They were going to fight.

The mission to retrieve all of their captive kin from Logden Prison had proceeded fairly well at first. There were roughly four hundred souls to account for, and considering how few of these Invisibility rings they had at their disposal, they made respectable progress the first day, retrieving almost fifty frozen heads from cold storage.

Fifty warriors who could contribute to the fight, in other words.

Everyone was nervous now, and Zeff Elroy was no exception. There were still so many non-servants in the prison. They were always going to be harder to free than a bunch of frozen heads, but now that Vanderberk was here and all the guardsmen were on the lookout for invisible infiltrators, the task was yet more daunting.

The potential for casualties here was very high.

Not to mention, part of Zeff's motivation for coming here was to recover his son, Francisco, who should have been among the frozen heads. But thus far, there was no sign of the boy or his reaper, Dennex.

At this point, Zeff was beginning to think that they might not even be here. And with how dangerous the situation was, he didn't know if that would be a disappointment or a comfort.

There was, however, one confusing piece of good news that arrived before the fighting broke out."

"3387

Apparently, they had an unknown ally in this venture.

Word arrived from the captured Raul Blackburn via his reaper, Arumoro. Someone had infiltrated Vanderberk's ranks--and not only that, they'd managed to disguise themselves as none other than Thaddeus Croll, the Killer of Krohin, who had been a problem for the Rainlords ever since the first team of them arrived here in Vantalay.

Quite the turn of events, to say the least. And naturally, Zeff and the others had not been keen to trust this new stroke of luck. Sure, maybe

they were due for it after enduring so much misfortune in recent months, but still. This seemed far too good to be true.

And if they were talking about luck as a resource, then surely they'd already used up too much when Raul Blackburn stumbled upon the location of their captured brethren in the first place.

Interestingly, however, Zeff's own reaper, Axiolis, was noticeably quicker to trust this new development than the rest of them.

'You will no doubt think I am talking nonsense,' the reaper had told him in private, 'but this has always been the way of our people, even back in the days of the Armans, before the great invasion from the East. Tribulation comes calling, and it threatens to destroy us utterly. But then, whether through our own unbending resolve, divine providence, or some combination thereof, the tide begins to shift. Quite literally, on some occasions, heh.'

And while Zeff certainly still had his doubts, the reaper was at least partly proven right when word then arrived for Melchor Blackburn.

'Grip the torch with both hands.'

That one sentence from the Croll imposter had shifted things rather dramatically.

They were words that belonged to Bernardino Blackburn, a turn of phrase that the man had been particularly fond of, apparently. Zeff had never known the man personally, but Axiolis did--as did, of course, Melchor and his reaper, Orric.

That connection to Bernardino was no minor thing.

And it sparked considerable intrigue in their minds, too. In the entire world, there could not have been many people left alive--servant or reaper--who had known the man well enough to not only learn that phrase from him but also to understand its significance to the Rainlords as a whole.

The imposter then promised to reveal his identity to him once the battle was done, but by Zeff's estimation, Melchor already seemed to know who it was--or have a very good guess, at least."

"3388

Axiolis, too, seemed like he might know, but the reaper was being obnoxiously cagey about it.

'I can understand Melchor's reluctance to come out with it,' said Ax. 'Depending on who it is, their identity could become a distraction for us, which is one thing that we most certainly do not need, right now.'

Zeff could only partially agree with that, considering how much of a distraction the mystery already seemed to be to some of the others.

But whatever. Personally, he didn't care all that much. If Darktide trusted this imposter, then that was enough for him. At the moment, the only thing that mattered to him was getting everyone out of Logden as quickly and safely as possible.

And to that end, the freeing of the reapers was paramount. While certainly, all the frozen heads they'd retrieved were an important starting point, without the accompanying reapers, those fifty warriors couldn't be revived just yet. No doubt, they would be in for a rude awakening when they started being resurrected in the middle of the fight.

The plan also became clearer as the Rainlords gathered more intel on the guardsmen--as well as the other servants that Vanderberk had brought with him.

They'd confirmed the presence of Raga Marda, Jorga Dahno, Riev Moros, and Mikas Cross among Vanderberk's personal forces. The guardsmen were considerably less threatening by comparison, but the Rainlords were still quite wary of the ones named Longvin and Kortell.

Thankfully, Jan Cross and the Seeker were not here, having been confirmed to be leading the assault on Ridgemark. Those two would have complicated matters considerably.

But on the whole, despite how threatening many of these opponents were, Zeff actually quite liked their chances here. With the likes of Darktide, Leo, Evangelina Stroud, himself, Dimas Sebolt, Salvador Delaguna, Diego Redwater, and even the Linebreaker of Ridgemark on their side, he felt they were more than a match for the enemy.

Sure, the opponent had plenty of hostages, but the Rainlords could choose when and where to strike. While infiltration was obviously made more difficult with the enemy being aware of their Invisibility, it was still far from useless.

And so, their first assault was timed to be in conjunction with that of the imposter's attack on Vanderberk. While the biggest threat was busy, the Rainlords were going straight for Cell Block Y, where all of the reapers were being kept."

"3389

They'd decided to divide their efforts into two broad teams. One team's job was to rescue and shield the captives, and the other team's job was to neutralize enemy combatants.

Zeff had been quite tempted to choose the latter team. He certainly had enough pent up frustration to make the task a cathartic one. But in the end, he and Axiolis decided to take more of an intermediary role between the two teams. An overseer role, of sorts. Being a materialization user, his power lent itself well to both endeavors. He could easily shield others at range while simultaneously distracting opponents.

Not to mention, this middle ground was a way of keeping himself in check. If he were to fully let loose and go entirely on the offensive, it would endanger the reapers. While he might have been confident that he could control his ability with great precision, even he had to acknowledge that he was not in the most emotionally stable of mindsets, at the moment. And fighting emotionally was not what this mission called for.

Even with all his years of meditative training, all the time spent honing his mental discipline, reigning in his emotions was a struggle. The trick, Axiolis kept telling him, was to not think about himself. To think only of the others around him, of what they needed.

'You are a ghost on the battlefield. You do not exist. You do not matter. What matters is everything else. Everyone else. Our kin. Listen and see them. React and think only for them.'

Easier said than done, to say the least.

But Zeff Elroy, the Water Dragon of Sair, did his best.

Pan-forma helped immensely. Being able to rely on Axiolis' reaper senses to keep track of everyone made the chaos feel much less so.

Plus, his awareness of the relative strength levels at work here helped him to prioritize which areas he should pay the most attention to. He didn't, for example, have to worry about anyone in close proximity to Darktide. That man would take care of everyone around him.

The same could most likely be said for Evangelina and Dimas. Salvador and Diego were perhaps the most worrisome, but Leo and the Linebreaker were obviously the biggest wildcards here. While they were both potentially Melchor's equals or even stronger, without knowing them personally, Zeff could not bring himself to consider them reliable."

"3390

The opening of the assault was arguably the most important. While the enemy was still scrambling and disorganized, that was the moment where they could recover the most reapers with the last amount of interference.

And Dimas Sebolt took full advantage, Zeff noticed. The man's power of gravity alteration lent itself quite well to the purpose of carrying others, and with a bit of soul power, Dimas was quickly able to acquire more than twenty reapers by himself.

In fact, that was the signal for everyone else to begin the attack. Dozens of reaper cells burst open simultaneously, and then madness ensued.

Cell Block Y might've been a massive chamber, but in the middle of the fight, it became instantly cramped. The feeling that one wrong step might get one's head blown off gave the room an oppressive sensation that stifled movement, but Zeff pressed through, regardless, cutting guardsmen down left and right with discs of bladed ice.

That alone wasn't enough to keep most of them down, though, which was why he took to attaching a frozen coating to their remains--or if he could spare the extra effort, clapping boxes around them instead, filled with supercooled, pressure-manipulated water.

That alone was enough to keep most of them down. A moderately aged servant did not typically have the defenses needed to withstand this kind of quick-freeze attack on the brain.



Which was why Zeff took particular notice of the ones who were able to resist.

Vanderberk's men were not yet here, though they were doubtless soon to arrive, so the two he sensed who were already able to withstand his attack were most likely Longvin and Kortell.

Their intel had been able to discover what they both looked like, but here and now, amid the chaos, there was no discerning which was which. Not until they started using their abilities, at least.

Longvin was a light-wielder. And one capable of using pan-rozum, no less.

Those were never fun to deal with.

But it was a tremendous help to know that ahead of time. All of the Rainlords knew that they could not let that man do as he pleased, and so their collective efforts fell upon him as soon it was clear who he was.

A bright light flashed, almost certainly in an attempt to blind everyone and conduct a concealed counterattack on many of them in the blink of an eye. But even before the light receded, Zeff could already sense that the man had been set upon by at least six different materialization users, one being himself.

Not to mention, the Linebreaker was there, too, with his huge arm through all of that material, having already gotten ahold of Longvin, apparently."

"3391

In the next moment, Linus was gone, as was Longvin--both disappearing in a flash of light.

Truth be told, Zeff had been skeptical of bringing the Linebreaker with them. Regardless of the man's prowess, Zeff couldn't help be suspicious of just about any non-Rainlord in their party. Having Leo with them was bad enough already, and now this guy presented another potential point of betrayal.

But even so, it was impossible to ignore how useful the man might prove to be here.

Having such a powerful light-wielder of their own in this battle was a fantastic boon. As obnoxious as light-wielders were to deal with from the enemy, they certainly made for great backup as allies. And if they managed to free Rayen Merlo soon, then their potency would double.

In the moment, however, Zeff was thinking none of that. He was focused purely on the battle, on trying to keep track of everyone positions and movements. Who among his kin needed help? Who among the enemy needed to be dealt with?

Enemy reinforcements were soon to arrive, no doubt, so he had to be on the lookout for those, too. The chamber only had the one entrance, but that was no guarantee, Zeff knew. The enemy could arrive from anywhere.

And indeed, when an enormous tremor arrived, he was not surprised. It shook the entirety of Cell Block Y with enough force to cause a momentary cessation of the battle as everyone tried to collectively understand who or what the source of it was.

Before a clear answer could be discerned, the ceiling cracked open like an egg and got sucked up into the sky, revealing a vast blanket of dark clouds. Zeff could already see a half-dozen twisters out there, surrounding the compound and crackling visibly with lightning.

Was that from the battle with Vanderberk? Or enemy reinforcements? Maybe both?

Impossible to tell for certain, but the reinforcements, at least--those had indeed arrived.

Axiolis recognized three of their soul signatures, making the fourth one easy to guess. Riev, Jorga, and Mikas were all obvious, so the last was almost certainly Raga Marda.

And Riev was coming straight for him.

Zeff had been expecting as much. He had a history with Riev Moros, the Stalker of Agvehl. They'd clashed once before, in Lyste. It had been one of the most grueling one-on-one fights Zeff had ever experienced, and even though he'd technically come out victorious in the end, it hadn't felt that way, considering how much destruction the Stalker had wrought while still managing to escape."

"3392

The second he'd heard that Riev was here in Vantalay, he'd known that this would happen. He'd even gotten word, multiple times over the years, that Riev was itching for a rematch.

And if that was truly the case, then Zeff had to assume that the guy had gotten considerably stronger since then. No one would want to fight the same person a second time after having barely escaped with their life unless something had drastically changed.

Sure, the man could've just been a completely insane idiot--which was fairly likely, even--but the fact remained that Zeff still had to assume the worst.

He was not about to underestimate his enemy and be caught off guard as a result.

So he didn't hold back in the slightest. When he sensed Riev making a beeline for him, Zeff did two things: he sealed Riev in a giant block of ice, and he began cooking up one of his most powerful techniques, the Drillburst.

That was the name he'd finally settled on for it, despite Axiolis' insistence that it be called the "Water Bomb Drill."

It was the first time he'd bothered naming a technique in many years. All the ones he'd named previously had long since become trivially simple to perform, and so using their names was a needless extra step.

The Drillburst, however, would likely require a very long time before that was the case. It was a technique that previously needed to brew in his mind for several seconds before it could be used, but with the name, that time was cut in half. And by using his hands to create a concentrated orb of howling steam in front of him, the wait could be shortened further still.

And of course, pan-forma helped, as well.

That was the real reason why he considered this one of his most powerful techniques, now. The speed of it. While he could almost certainly pull off something even stronger with enough time, being able to fire off the Drillburst in less than two seconds meant that he could

almost turn it into a barrage, already.

Which was what he did now.

Riev broke out of the ice block with obvious ease, but that was perfectly fine, because the Drillburst finished charging. The ball of steam in Zeff's hands vanished in an instant, and in the next, the thick, watery boom arrived right on top of Riev."

"3393

The man exploded into a cloud of blood, and the water that splashed outward from his position was stained a faint pink, drizzling the battleground.

Zeff was taken aback for a moment, having not expected that result.

That moment was too long, though. A blaze of soul-empowered gunfire caught him straight through the torso, tearing him open all the way up through his neck and threatening to detach his head.

Agh. How stupid. He couldn't help scolding himself even as he mounted a counterattack, materializing an icy spike in the apparent gunman's mouth and skewering him through the brain. The nameless man dropped instantly, and Zeff encased his entire corpse in ice.

Amateurish. Letting himself get distracted. And over something so trivial, too. If not for pan-forma aiding his regeneration, that might have been a far costlier mistake on his part. And with a clearer mind now, Zeff highly doubted that Riev was truly ended by that one attack, but it had bought him time to concentrate on someone else.

There were plenty of candidates to choose from, too. It seemed like more guards were funneling into the chamber now. Jorga, Mikas, and Marda were still the biggest threats, but the extra crowding certainly wasn't going to help.

He was much more mindful of the reapers being rescued, however. They were the priority. Anyone not threatening them could be ignored for a bit longer.

But Raga Marda was. The so-called Demon's Tiger of Abolish. With the aid of Axiolis' senses, Zeff could sense him already engaging with Diego Redwater and Dimas Sebolt both.

And it did not appear to be going well for them. In fairness, Dimas was doubtless more focused on shielding the reapers he'd just freed, but Diego had less of an excuse, having already lost both an arm and leg while accomplishing little more than scorching Marda's face and clothes.

The fight space was too cramped over there to resort to the Drillburst again. It would hit Diego and Dimas. But the Demon's Tiger was not someone he could afford to pull his punches on. According to their intel, this man was at least seventy years old, putting him on similar ground with General Lawrence--a fight which had not gone well for Zeff back at Rheinhal.

True, he'd made considerable leaps in power since then. But just how considerable? How much had he really grown?

One way or another, it was time to find out."

"3394

Every muscle in Zeff's right arm flexed in unison as he focused on it, making a boxing-glove-sized water jet surge forth from around his forearm and fist.

Typically, when it came to fighting much older servants who had far stronger passive soul defenses, Zeff was of the opinion that pinpoint strikes were the way to go. The magnified application of force on a smaller surface area was necessary in order to help overcome their armor-like flesh.

But of course, the problem with such small attacks was that, while they might've been able to pierce more easily, they still weren't likely to do much actual damage, especially to the undead. That was why he'd made this one fist-sized. A solid hit would do more than just puncture.

Zeff doubted Marda would let him get close enough for that, though, especially with how obvious his approach was. Raga Marda might not've been looking in his direction as he barreled through and bounded over various prison guards, but Zeff was quite confident that the man could sense him coming. Not to mention, the water jet was howling loud enough to draw plenty of extra attention, too, even over the battle's clamor.

This was by design. For one thing, he wanted to get Marda off of Diego, and for another, the jet was only half of the attack.

More than anything, attacks on servants needed to debilitate, at least for a moment, so that further pressure could be applied. And to that end, big and obvious water jets were not the best weapon. Too easy to avoid.

That was why the other half of the attack was a simple platform of ice, raised up instantly beneath the Tiger's feet.

It was one of the oldest tricks in the materializer's handbook, but there was a reason for that. Compared to most techniques, it was disproportionately effective for how easy it was to perform. Being able to make someone lose their footing whenever you wanted was quite frankly unfair.

Zeff's platform sent Marda airborne. As far as their intel was aware, Marda was a transfiguration user who frequently relied upon weapons and tools, so this was--

The man vanished in midair before Zeff could reach him. Zeff slashed at the empty space where he'd been, in case it was Invisibility, but the attack felt like it missed, meeting with no tangible resistance."  
"3395

Axiolis' senses couldn't detect him, either. Maybe it was Invisibility and the bastard was just damn fast on top of that.

Zeff landed atop one of the reaper cells, both feet almost sliding off before he caught the cage's rounded edge with one hand. He could sense Diego back up and mostly regenerated, but without knowing where Marda went, it was hard--

A blow struck him from nowhere, sending him flying up through the open ceiling. He toppled over himself as he sailed through open air, and disorientation was trying to annihilate his concentration. If not for Axiolis, it would have succeeded. The reaper's senses could give him an almost disembodied picture of himself as he tumbled upward.

The wind was so furious and chaotic that it threatened to carry him away from the prison entirely. The invisible attack--presumably from

Marda--hadn't even been that strong, relatively speaking. It was this damn sky that was doing all the work now, trying to toss him around like a rag doll.

He didn't have the presence of mind or the time to think it through, but instinctually, he felt that there was an underlying will behind this raging wind. Its fury seemed too focused and intense. But again, Axiolis' senses were telling him nothing of that.

Didn't matter, anyway.

The only thing that mattered to him here was not getting blown away. He absolutely could not allow himself to be removed from the battlefield where everyone else was still fighting, still in need of his protection.

So he killed the wind.

An oceanic torrent exploded outward in all direction, save that of the prison below. It shot up into the swirling clouds and washed them away like so much dust. For a lingering moment, a tidal wave blanketed the sky, undeterred by the cracks of lightning that it attracted.

And he surged back down toward Cell Block Y, chased by a rainstorm.

That was the ticket to finding Marda, he knew. He pressed his soul into his water and relied on Axiolis' senses once again. Even if the reaper couldn't detect an Invisibility user, he could certainly detect the gaps in the soul-infused rain. True, the mayhem of the battle made it more difficult, but with both of their minds focusing on it together, it was far from impossible.

There. Behind Diego. About to pounce.

Zeff put ice under his feet again, this time only to make him slip instead of launching him."

"3396

It did the trick. Raga Marda lost his footing, not enough to make him fall over, but enough for Zeff to fall down upon him with a one-handed, ice-fisted slam.

The floor cratered below the two of them as Raga Marda--still

invisible--took the attack, and the nearby prison cells cracked open or even burst apart. The force was more than enough to shatter Zeff's hand and most of his arm, but pan-forma would render that a non-issue.

The Demon's Tiger, however, hardly budged.

Zeff had been aiming for the head, but the invisibility had made such precision all but impossible. It seemed to have caught him on the shoulder.

Marda twisted to counterattack, but Zeff was already following up with his other hand, this one bearing the same water drill that he'd attempted before.

Now it landed, though not without trading. Marda's hand or claw or whatever it was--it tore through Zeff's torso and sent him flying back amid a flurry of blood.

Marda didn't escape unscathed, either, though. A hole ripped through the Invisibility, along with Marda's chest, and the rest of the man became slowly visible again as the presumed aberration item's power melted off of him.

Zeff needed a moment to recover, but he could sense that the others were seizing the opportunity to swarm him. Diego, Dimas, Salvador, and a half-dozen others pelted him with explosions and gunfire, and when Marda tried to push through it all like smoke, Salvador was there to shoulder check him through the far wall, opening up yet another hole in Cell Block Y.

Not bad.

Zeff reassessed. Marda was obviously not down yet, but was anyone else struggling? He sensed a couple Rainlords near the exit, trying to carry reapers to safety. A materialized barricade of ice gave them some extra cover before the guard on their tail could reach them.

After a second, the guards barreled through the barricade, so Zeff made another one, this time with spikes launching out of it.

That worked much better.

Another tremor arrived, causing the battleground to pause again, this time with even more uncertainty, because the entire chamber was starting to crumble now.



Where was that coming from? Zeff searched for the source, but he wasn't sensing it. The storm from before was still trying to regather after he'd washed it away, so he doubted that was related.

Then, he didn't sense it, but he saw it.

Through the vacant ceiling, the night sky in the distance came alive with a red-orange glow."

"3397

Whatever that was, it was too far away for Axiolis' senses to pick up on it, but in that moment, Zeff still felt a tremendous and familiar unease. Like a whisper of something in his mind, an idea that wasn't quite there--or maybe a memory that half-forgotten.

And he must not have been alone in that feeling, because the battle came nearly to a stop as everyone watched the sky.

It took everything he had to tear himself away, to remind himself that whatever was going on out there, it didn't matter one bit when compared against the current mission.

In fact, this was a golden opportunity, he realized.

He set to work. With everyone standing so still and dumbfounded, it was suddenly quite easy to sense the fullness of the space around him. Every gap between souls, every break in the soul-infused prison cells--and every Rainlord reaper therein. Axiolis' memory made it easy to identify them all.

He raised a benevolent wave to grab as many as he could, boxing them each in little icy cube for their own protection. With the wave, he could carry all of them to safety, just so long as everyone else stayed so distracted.

There wasn't enough time. Already, he could tell that some of the enemies were returning to their senses. The sudden flood waters at their feet had no doubt grabbed their attention. And some of them were noticing the cubes, too.

Counter spikes solved that issue. The malevolent noticers were skewered through each of their skulls, save one, who was proving

more tenacious.

Another quake arrived, the biggest yet, and even Zeff had to give pause again. He stayed on task, though. He could see in the corner of his eye that the sky was not just glowing, anymore. There was something blazingly bright there. But he had to keep everyone safe. He had to get them out of here.

Some of the other Rainlords had noticed his work, too, and begun helping. That was great, but this whole thing was hardly making any sense. Everyone getting so distracted in the first place. In the middle of a mission, no less? And not just any mission, but one of the most important they'd ever had?

This wasn't normal. True, the sky seemed to be on fire, but was that really--?

He saw it.

Not fire.

Lava. A tidal wave of lava. Heading their way."  
"3398

Others were scrambling now. Friend and foe alike, seemingly. All moving either away from the approaching wall or toward it in an attempt to impede its path.

To throw up defenses before it killed them all.

Because it very likely would. The reapers might've been able to escape underground, but every non-servant here would perish--and the non-servants who didn't die could still end up trapped.

The thing about lava was that it very frequently came up from deep within the planet, where untold amounts of ardor--the so-called "planet force"--flowed freely, empowering it without the aid of any servant.

That was why even very old servants were known to fear volcanoes. Sure, one might get lucky if the erupting lava happened to not be infused with ardor, but in the event that it was, there was not much that could be done.

Because the ardor added strength. Weight. Impact. Resilience.

Could the lava be redirected? Could it be shielded against? Could it be slowed or cooled?

It all depended on the force behind the eruption. A sufficiently powerful one was a death sentence for all but the most powerful servants in the world--and even they might still have trouble.

If naturally occurring dangers could all be categorized, then volcanic eruptions would be in the same category as feldeaths.

Every servant here knew that, which was why the battle was suddenly forgotten, why everyone was suddenly on the same side, trying to stop that certain doom headed their way.

And Zeff was no different. As much as he'd been focused on getting the reapers out just now, he knew that he had to help, too. His power might've been the one best suited to saving them all, in fact.

That was no guarantee, though. Ardor was known to be more potent than soul power. Even an absolutely colossal amount of water might not do enough.

But he tried.

He bounded upward on a platform of ice, needing to get above the attacks and walls of all the other servants who were trying to help. He wanted to douse the entire oncoming wall in water, and he needed a clear path to do so.

He summoned all of his concentration to create a tidal wave. He even manipulated its pressure a bit so that he could lower its temperature without freezing it--a particularly difficult technique when involving such massive volume."

"3399

The two great waves of water and lava collided, making the entire horizon come alive with steaming explosions. The ground quaked again, though Zeff couldn't tell if it was being caused by the clash itself or by the same mysterious source from earlier.

He wasn't able to stay on his feet. That was the downside of using icy

platforms. But it hardly mattered, because the quaking broke his platform apart, anyway, and he had to quickly to catch himself with aerial materializations, curving himself back up into the air like a bobsled making a vertical U-turn.

Then a hovering platform did the trick, though even that wasn't entirely stable. The lava wave was pushing through his water one, slowed but not stopped by the continuous steam eruptions.

Others were contributing, too. Melchor with gargantuan pillars of frozen mercury. Leo with powdery geysers of boron, creating huge goutts of green flame on contact with the lava.

Flashes of brilliant light punches holes through the lava--or attempted to, at least. Some broke through, only to be quickly filled back in, while others just seemed to be absorbed. All the water might've been playing a bit of havoc with that, too, but it was impossible to tell for sure amid the mayhem.

Even the guards were throwing everything they had at it. Material, explosions, liquids, countless freezing attacks.

Yet the lava neared, nonetheless.

It was clearly slowing, but would it stop before it reached the prison cells? It was already flowing over the outer walls, spilling forth like an angry orange landslide, smothering and devouring each building.

Zeff didn't stop. More water. More.

He hadn't hit his volume limit in a long time, but he hit it now. Not enough. He had to waste precious seconds dematerializing before he could make more tidal waves, each one feeling that much weaker than the last, since he was in such a rush and not able to ensure that he was dematerializing everything. When his materialized water was absorbed, it became significantly more difficult to find and remove.

The lava neared. And neared. And kept nearing, forcing the defenders at the front to retreat.

It reached Cell Block Y, reduced to a crawl but still not stopping. It gooped over the blown out ceiling and began to drip inside, setting the busted walls on fire and melting them down until they simply collapsed under the weight."

"3400

Many of the guards were simply fleeing now, having given up entirely. It made sense. It was simple self-preservation at this point.

But the Rainlords couldn't budge. They still had reapers trapped in here, not to mention the non-servants elsewhere in the compound.

They had to stop it. They could stop it. With. Just. A little. More. Effort.

Zeff saw kept pressing, kept dousing. Not letting up. From his overhead position, he could see almost everyone--their collective strength and work. Scores of servants, Rainlord and not, were all straining to push the creeping wall back. Many had even left the cell block entirely, having gone around the gargantuan lava mass to create street-sized trenches all along its flanks in an attempt to redirect its flow.

That seemed to be the work of destruction users, mostly.

The lava was still resistant to their efforts, though. The sheer mass and accompanying inertia, infused with an unknown quantity of hyper-potent ardor--it was almost like the lava had a will of its own. Like it did not wish to be moved by anything other than itself.

But even if that were the case, the Rainlords most certainly had a will to match it. They would not be moved, either. It may not have been at the forefront of his thinking, but Zeff could feel it instinctually, without a doubt.

Their collective intent. The Will of Lhutwë, perhaps. The Soul of the Rain.

It spurred him on. Resonated within his heart. Reminded of who he was. His duty. Of everyone he loved, of every single member of his kin here with him, right now.

And then, finally, mercifully, the wall of lava stopped. It still oozed around the rest of the compound, moving through dozens of freshly dug trenches, but the dripping down into Cell Block Y ceased, frozen in place.

He almost couldn't believe it, not enough to let himself feel any sort of relief, at least. And he obviously wasn't alone in that, because everyone kept trying to push the lava back even after it was clear that

they had turned the tide. Perhaps everyone expected it to be suddenly reinvigorated by a new quake--a concern which would not have been without merit.

Either way, the work continued, and no one slackened their pace until the lava had fully retreated from the block and been diverted into the trenches.

Only then did Zeff allow himself to take a breath, to relax his exhausted mind and begin dematerializing without immediately rematerializing.

Then the sky split apart."

"3401

Lightning ripped through the air, illuminating the horizon and shaking the world with thunder. The wall of still-cooling lava shattered, creating red-orange geysers to either side of the cell block.

And Zeff saw a path of ruin below, a running crater that had been drilled through not just the lava but also the prison, ending just outside of Cell Block Y. A small mountain of disturbed rock and uprooted trees lay at the crater's edge, along with a smoldering, motionless lump.

Was that... a person?

Yes, it took him a moment, but Zeff could indeed sense a living soul at the end of that destroyed path. And it took him another moment to recognize who it was, because the soul was noticeably distorted.

That was Vanderberk down there. The infamous Weasel of Abolish. One of the most powerful servants in the entire world, rendered into a smote pile of flesh.

Was he dead? Zeff genuinely could not tell, even with Axiolis' reaper senses helping him.

Which was supremely strange.

What in the world had been done to him? It was like the man's very soul had been twisted into knots.

Agh. Distractions. Whatever the explanation, it didn't matter now. The only thing that mattered was freeing the rest of the reapers. Thankfully,

the path that Vanderberk's body had carved through the cell block had not touched any of the remaining captives. Had that been intentional? Had their mysterious helper been able to--?

Another brilliant flash of light arrived, this time bringing with it a great, shining figure. A bird? An avian monstrosity of luminous crystal. Lightning crackled off of it and up into the sky, disappearing into dark clouds. When had those gotten there?

From atop his hovering platform, despite the fact that he'd been trying to avoid getting distracted only a moment ago, Zeff could only stare with wide eyes.

"Rainlords," came a great voice, seemingly from the giant bird. "Thank you for your help. Allow me to take care of the rest."

And what followed, Zeff could scarcely comprehend.

Scores of smaller lights sprang out from the bird, a sudden and almost silent display of fireworks, all arcing down toward the sundered battleground and raining down on everyone.

It was alarming, to be sure--and so fast that Zeff wasn't sure any of them could've responded to it even if they'd been prepared to.

But the light seemed harmless. For the Rainlords, at least."  
"3402

For the guards, it was a different story. The light swirled around them--or sometimes skewered them--and wrapped them all up in radiant packages, rendering them unable to move, apart from only two who were still struggling.

Raga Marda and Mikas Cross.

Zeff could sense them both trying to break free--and nearly succeeding, too, if not for the Linebreaker suddenly being there to ensure their suppression.

"Take your kin and go, Rainlords," said their mysterious ally. "I will clean up here."

And abruptly, Zeff could sense Raul Blackburn arriving--or more

specifically, being carried over to them on the crystalline wings of another bird. The young man was dropped off right next to Melchor, who's relief was visible.

There came a peaceable moment, as everyone was no doubt caught up in the same feelings of disbelief and uncertainty as Zeff.

Was the battle truly done? Just like that? Zeff struggled to reorient his mind.

Melchor was the first to break the strange silence, speaking up loudly enough for all to hear. "Archangel! Is that you?! It must be, yes?! Where have you been all these years?! Why did you disappear?!"

The luminous bird was quiet for a moment, then said, "I am sorry for all that you and your kin have been put through. But please know that not all within the Vanguard are against you. Some of--"

The sentence went unfinished as the great bird's head did a snap turn to the side, and then the light emanating from it grew suddenly bright enough to fill Zeff's vision, blinding him entirely.

And Zeff felt his whole body stop listening to him, as if being enveloped in a warm blanket and put forcibly yet gently to bed.

Almost.

His mind rebelled. Refused to fall unconscious.

The light did not yet fade, but Axiolis' senses still worked, so Zeff could tell what was happening to the battleground.

Everyone was being moved, shoved aside with urgency--and not for no reason, either.

Because yet another soul was arriving, and it would've barreled straight through the crowd of Rainlords on its way to its destination, which seemed to be Vanderberk's smoldering, questionable corpse.

Zeff's mind came alive with fury. With rage. It would not be brushed aside, put to bed like a child.

Because he recognized that new soul, and nothing in this world was going to prevent him from confronting it.

For that soul belonged to the man who had kidnapped his beloved daughter."



## Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Six: 'Mind of heaven, Mind of hell...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

It was mayhem. A torrent enveloped Zeff--a product of his own materialization and yet still almost involuntary. His rage was so complete and so blinding that he felt almost possessed. Moving without thinking. A mobile storm of water.

He went straight for Gohvis, sending a flurry of attacks ahead of him. Water drills. Spikes of ice. Blinding steam. Sudden platforms beneath the Monster's feet. And more that he didn't even have the awareness to articulate.

Everything. He just sent everything.

But it wasn't working. He could already tell. The drill hit ineffectually. The spikes bounced right off. The steam dissipated into nothing. Even the simple platforms of ice refused to materialize. Only harmless splashes of water appeared, wetting the ground around the dragon man's feet, instead.

Not that Zeff was terribly surprised by any of this.

Despite everything, the Lord Elroy still had enough awareness to know who he was up against. To know that this was certain to be a fruitless endeavor.

He simply couldn't control himself.

He went in with the Drillburst, aiming right at Gohvis' center of mass.

The Monster caught his fist and stopped him cold. And those impossibly red eyes found him, staring straight into his own. "Calm yourself, Water Dragon. You need not die, this day."

Zeff tried to pull his hand away, but it was stuck fast in the Monster's grip. He growled in frustration, trying to materialize more, but only sputters of water appeared around him, not at all as he intended.

"Return my daughter!" he yelled.

"In time," said Gohvis.

"Return her, Monster! Do not--!" The huge hand let him go, only to find his face instead, killing the words in his mouth. Truthfully, Zeff hadn't even known what he was going to say next. Incensed yelling was the only thing that came to mind.

"Calm yourself," said the Monster again, this time with a weight behind it.

A weight that, even in his current state, Zeff found somehow difficult to ignore. The words cut through the blind rage in his mind, not destroying it totally but still making a clear impression.

Zeff's flailing arms slowed, and he felt abruptly more in control of himself.

And the huge hand released him.

Zeff found his feet, blinking. He stood there, before the Monster of the East, still ready to attack again but at least no longer feeling the immediate, unignorable impulse to do so."

"3403-- CCLXXXVI.

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"3404

"As unpredictable as ever," came a familiar voice, requiring another moment for Zeff to realize that it belonged to their mysterious ally. "A second ago, you may have killed him and half his kin, had I not intervened. And yet now you show mercy? What are you thinking, Scourge?"

"They would not have died," said Gohvis. He leveled his crimson gaze up at the distant bird. "You, however, exist with an unfortunate level of strength. If we are to clash here, restraint is not something I will be able to risk."

"Ah. I shall take that as a compliment, I think."

"You should take it as a warning," said Gohvis. "I have no desire to kill you, Graves. So do not force me to."

What? Zeff looked up at the bird anew. That was Field Marshal Graves up there?

The bird spared another glance for Zeff before returning to Gohvis. "If you have no desire to kill me, then why have you come? To save the Weasel? Of all people? Please tell me otherwise."

Gohvis made no response.

“Out of every single human being in the entire world, that man right there may, in fact, be the least deserving of your help. You must realize that, surely.”

Gohvis gave a slight nod. “You might be right.”

“Then cease this interference. Truth be told, I have no desire to kill you, either, Scourge.”

Gohvis sighed. “Unfortunately, he still has his uses. I cannot let you kill him.”

The light from the great bird diminished suddenly, and its radiant form shrunk down quickly into that of a normal human being.

Sharp jaw line. Feathery blond hair with a curly mustache. A face that was entirely unfamiliar to Zeff, as he had never met Field Marshal Graves before.

But that overcoat. Black and gold. It did indeed look like the kind that all the marshals wore.

Zeff could still hardly believe it, though. They had known that Graves was in Vantalay, heading up the Vanguardian defense against Abolish here, but by all reports, the man had done almost nothing before leaving the country entirely.

Supposedly, there’d been some sort of disagreement between Graves and the Ridgemark Private Military Police, of which the Linebreaker was a leading member.

And indeed, Zeff had thought it supremely odd that Graves would simply up and leave this country to fend for itself when so many innocent lives would obviously be at stake, but now... if he’d never truly left, then did that mean...? This had all been some kind of scheme?

Zeff’s gray eyes returned to the half-dead lump of flesh behind Gohvis.

Hmm."  
"3405

“What in the world could a man like him be ‘useful’ for?” said Graves as he stepped closer to Zeff and Gohvis. His voice was soft and low,

and his intonation was so mild that it sounded as if he might be physically incapable of getting angry.

“Organization,” said Gohvis. “His foremost utility is bureaucratic. As despised as he may be, Abolish has precious few who could replace him--and even fewer who would want to after they understand the breadth of his responsibility, especially now that Gunther and Dunhouser are gone.”

Graves paused for a dull blink. “I must confess that I was not expecting such a banal answer.”

“Well, there is also the matter of defense against Vanguardian aggression. Abolish does still have need of his strength, as well, I suppose.”

“Okay, now that explanation, I know you don’t believe,” said Graves.

Gohvis gave a hulking shrug. “I have no use for his strength, true. But... some within Abolish may yet.”

“...You’re really just saving him because you’re a lazy bastard, aren’t you? Don’t want to have any of his operations lumped onto your plate, hmm?”

A beat passed as the Monster of the East returned a blank expression. “Yes.”

Graves shook his head and sighed. “I can almost respect your honesty, at least...”

“Imagine if I was trying to kill your Magician.”

“Oh, come on, that’s not a fair comparison, and you know it.”

“No? Perhaps Eckard, then?”

“That man is quite literally your captive as we speak.”

“Mm? Truly? A bad example, then. I will concede that. But you still see my overall point, yes?”

Graves scratched his nose. “Oddly enough, I... do. That’s a rough one, buddy.”

Zeff didn’t know what he was hearing. His anger was mixed equally with confusion, now. These two warring juggernauts were sounding

suddenly more like beleaguered middle managers who'd bumped into one another at a business conference.

"But if I can admit that much," said Graves, "then can you admit to sympathizing with the difficult position you're putting me in?"

Gohvis required a moment. "...I can, yes."

"Well, alright. Then maybe we can come to terms."

"Perhaps so."

What the hell? Zeff couldn't help taking another look around at all the devastation that still surrounded them in this conversation. Was he really the only one hearing this, right now?

Actually, it seemed so. It was a bit difficult to tell with all the rubble everywhere, but he didn't see, nor could he sense, any other conscious people here. Had Graves subdued everyone else?"

"3406

"Alright, how about this? You let me kill Vanderberk, and I'll give you the absolutely best secretary in the world. Someone so good that you'll never even have to touch any of the things that the Weasel was managing."

"What an offer," said Gohvis dryly. "You get to kill one of Abolish's top warriors and plant a spy within my ranks. I will have to think deeply about that one."

"Okay, fine. Let's say, I don't kill Vanderberk and instead just take him captive. Then we can negotiate for a prisoner exchange at a later date, hmm?"

Gohvis had to mull that over, apparently. "A more tempting offer, certainly. And yet something tells me that you would consider killing Vanderberk to be a greater prize than any Vanguardians whom might be returned to you."

Graves chortled. "A greater prize than Lamont? And more than a dozen generals?"

Gohvis' gaze narrowed. "Yes. Do not try to swindle me."

"Swindle you? Please. Of the two of us, I'm quite sure that I am the more trustworthy one."

"Mm. So trustworthy that you never show anyone your real face."

"That's not true, either. Plenty of people have seen my face."

"Any of them still alive?" said Gohvis.

"Definitely more than none."

Gohvis turned to Zeff. "Did you even know that this was Graves until I identified him for you?"

Zeff wasn't going to answer him, but Graves interjected, anyway.

"I would've revealed my identity to them once the fighting was over."

"How generous of you," said Gohvis.

"They need to know that the entirety of the Vanguard is not against them."

"Hmph. And where were you when your compatriots were backstabbing them in their homeland?"

Zeff could hardly believe what he was hearing. Never would he have expected the Monster of the East to be speaking up in their stead. Was this some sort of trick? Probably.

"As it so happened," said Graves, sounding abruptly annoyed, "I was quite busy dealing with some of your compatriots, Scourge."

"Of course. Ever the magnanimous defender of the innocent, aren't you?" Gohvis folded his arms. "Remind me again: how was it that so many of the Rainlords that you captured ended up here, in Vanderberk's clutches?"

At that, Graves was silent. His gaze lingered on Gohvis, and he tilted his head slightly.

Zeff hated to admit it, but the Monster had made a damn good point. And the Water Dragon of Sair had to say as much. "Answer his question."

"3407



Graves returned an irritated glare. "I could not be seen simply releasing them back into your custody. So, yes, I took advantage of the situation in order to spread Abolish thinner and isolate the Weasel. You may not appreciate being used like that, and I apologize for it, but please also understand that, here today, we have managed to finally eliminate one of the vilest men to ever walk the planet."

"Isn't that ever the Vanguardian's plea?" said Gohvis. "Just ends justify all else, no?"

But actually, truth be told, Zeff was finding himself more in agreement with Graves now. While he harbored no love for the Vanguard currently, the fact remained that he had himself been a member of that organization for almost thirty years--and not for no reason, either. Deep down, he still very much agreed with the theoretical aim of the Vanguard, and he knew how overwhelmingly important it was to bring down that mass murdering psychopath over there.

The only sticking point was that Vanderberk wasn't truly dead yet.

A point which Gohvis didn't hesitate to pick up on. "Nevermind the fact that you did not actually succeed in eliminating your target and have therefore endangered these Rainlords for no reason, even by your own biased metrics."

Graves squinted briefly, then smiled. "Things were so amicable between us a moment ago. I thought we might be able to get out of this without a fight, but you seem more intent on arguing than counteroffering. And on overplaying your hand, I'm afraid. Quite sloppy of you, old friend. A bit distracted, are we? Too much going on at once, even for you?"

Now Zeff was confused again. What was Graves talking about? Gohvis wasn't answering, either.

Before any coherent answer could be discerned, the scene before him exploded into a frenzy, and Zeff found himself relying on Axiolis' senses again in order to comprehend even part of what was suddenly happening.

Gohvis had moved. That much seemed clear, at least. He went for Vanderberk's body, perhaps in an attempt to grab it or shield it--or punt

it out of the current time zone, maybe.

But Graves had responded.

Light filled Zeff's vision, and in his mind, he could sense great pillars of seemingly pure soul power shooting up out of the ground, one coming up from right below Vanderberk, caging him in and carrying him high up into the sky."

"3408

Gohvis rocketed up the pillar, running up the ninety-degree angle as if gravity were of no consequence to him, even while being battered by a storm of brilliant crystals along the way.

The other pillars grew out and spidered together, creating an interconnected network--an enormous dome over the whole area, but also one that bridged each of the pillars. And then Vanderberk's cage shot along one of the bridges toward a different pillar, then to another pillar, then still another, moving so rapidly that Axiolis' senses quickly lost track of it.

The Monster of the East did not, however, and it was somehow easier to follow his movements amid all the sensory chaos, perhaps because his soul was so profoundly different to everything else that surrounded him. Like a pitch black marble in a storming sea of pure light--one that seemed entirely unimpeded by the ferocious waves.

Gohvis zigged and zagged throughout the great dome, apparently undeterred by any of the visual noise or confusing stimuli popping all around him. He didn't even seem to be following the pillars at times, just zooming through open air on pure momentum, instead.

Zeff wanted to help, to contribute to this clash some way, but he couldn't even begin to imagine how he might do so.

Then another surge of light arrived, this time with real force behind it--enough to throw Zeff off his feet and send him sliding across crumbling rock. He didn't stop until he hit the wall of the prison, which was itself already half gone.

He needed a moment to regather his wits, and by the time he did, the situation had greatly changed.

Gohvis was stuck. A cage of light had trapped him, too, and was compressing against his flesh like a tightening net. And the same thing was happening to Vanderberk.

Zeff could sense the intensity of the strain. The cages were emanating more soul power than ever before, and the rest of the dome--pillars and all--were quickly diminishing, as if all of their power were being rerouted to this one, singular task of crushing the two Abolishers.

And Zeff was incredulous. Doubting his own senses.

Graves had gained the upper hand? Could this be true? Zeff could hear the Monster roaring now, but the ropes of light around him did not budge.

Where had Graves even gone? Zeff had lost him in the shuffle of all the frenzying soul power and leftover ardor from the lava.

Ah, no, there he was. Much clearer now. Most of the soul power in the area was flowing through him, and even--wait.

The ardor, too?"

"3409

That was beyond strange. Even Axiolis could not recall an instance of a servant being able to manipulate the flow of ardor in such a way. To be channeling it through themselves with so much intensity? And have it be blending with or even amplifying their own soul power?

This was unprece--

No.

Axiolis did remember now. In the ancient past, there indeed was a certain type of person who could do such a thing.

Person... or creature, perhaps.

It was a vague memory. Blurry and distorted. Which was itself an incredibly odd thing. Reaper memories were never like that, normally. Only very recently had it even resurfaced into his mind at all, as though it had been suppressed for eons before.

And Axiolis had not thought that was a coincidence. Given how muddy and uncertain the matter was in his mind, he'd been reluctant to broach the subject at all, even with Zeff. But he'd first noticed it after learning about the existence of Sparrows.

Or re-learning about them, perhaps.

The reaper had an uneasy feeling that he'd encountered such creatures before--and not in an amicable context.

And now, here, witnessing what Graves was doing, Axiolis' memories were giving him that same uneasy feeling again. Only much stronger, this time.

Enough so that Zeff could feel Axiolis wanting to intervene. In favor of Gohvis. A dreaded, irrational impulse to aid Emiliana's kidnapper, of all people.

But Zeff kept them steady. He had to. He'd never felt this kind of fear from Axiolis before. Even the reaper didn't seem to know the full source of it.

The struggle before them continued for an uncomfortably long time. The cages kept squeezing Gohvis and Vanderberk, digging slowly deeper into their flesh. Zeff couldn't understand what exactly was happening here. It seemed to him that Vanderberk, at least, should have been toast long ago, what with him already being on the verge of death, but maybe it wasn't the simple.

Then the lines of Vanderberk's cage began to glow more prominently than that of Gohvis.

And the light spread.

The soul power and ardor spread.

Across Vanderberk's flesh.

Into Vanderberk's flesh.

Until Vanderberk himself was glowing as bright as the cage.

And then, suddenly, Vanderberk just... popped.

Out of existence.

Gone. Leaving only fleeting specks of light and soul power behind.

And that disquieted feeling in Axiolis' mind grew stronger than ever before. The ancient memory that it was tied to grew abruptly clearer."  
"3410

It came from a time when the world had been a very different place.

On the brink of absolute conquest.

By the dreaded Kingsparrows. The enemies of all humanity. A force so terrible that it united even the Vanguard and Abolish against it for nearly a century.

And Axiolis furthermore realized that this was not one memory. It was many. A whole lifetimes' worth, in fact.

It all came back to him in a rush. An overwhelming wave of recollection. Too much to process now, certainly.

And difficult though it was, Zeff did his best to suppress it. They could think through it all later. In this moment, his full attention needed to remain on the field of battle.

On the apparent demise of not only Vanderberk, but also the Monster of the East, too.

Zeff couldn't believe his eyes.

Gohvis could not break free of his cage. It took a while longer, but just as with Vanderberk, the lines of light graduated to a stage of slowly smothering him, until eventually, they enveloped him entirely.

And then he, too, disappeared. Vanished behind luminous particles.

The Water Dragon of Sair was dumbstruck.

He kept expecting one or both of them to suddenly reappear, to attack from some unseen angle at the edge of his vision.

But that didn't happen.

Graves, however, was still there.

But the land all around him had changed.

The mass of ardor-filled lava? Even the few trees and rocks that had managed to avoid being struck down or set alight?

In their places, only mounds of ash remained.

Even parts of the prison had been turned to dust, and Zeff was briefly frantic with the worry that some of his kin might have gotten caught up in whatever Graves had done, but he was soon relieved when none appeared to be missing. In fact, all the ash appeared to be distinctly around them, as if they had been deliberately avoided.

And the ash itself was something else. Something disturbingly strange. Axiolis could sense that about it, at least. It felt like a hole in the universe. No soul power or ardor to speak of, not even in trace amounts.

Before he could continue processing the unbelievable scene around him, Graves approached him, still in his seemingly human form while the ash made no noise under his boots.

"Be not alarmed," said the marshal. "The area is now safe."

Zeff had to struggle for his first question. "Did you... really kill them both?"

"3411

Graves paused for a smirk. "Would you be impressed if I said yes?"

Zeff did not answer. He merely returned his usual glare, though he couldn't quite keep the confusion out of it entirely.

Graves shook his head and sighed. "Gohvis is certainly not dead. Took me a minute to clock what he'd done, but that wasn't actually him. It was just a very powerful psychic projection. I suspect he has deployed one to each of the different war fronts in order to aid his allies... which would be absolutely disastrous for us, if I'm right."

A psychic projection? Ah. Zeff supposed a Sparrow would know all about that type of thing. He wasn't yet sure that he wanted to say as much aloud, though. Letting on that he knew didn't seem particularly beneficial, especially with Axiolis' new memories now stewing around in his mind, creating even more uncertainty about how trustworthy this

marshal before him truly was.

He did have something in need of clarification, though. "And Vanderberk?" said Zeff. "Is he dead?"

A strained expression crossed the other man's face. "I'm... actually not sure about that. I think I got him, but... he had some very strange powers at his disposal. Even more strange than I'd heard--and I'd heard some pretty crazy things." He scratched his forehead, blinking. "I'm just glad it was me who ended up facing him and not one of the others. I don't know if any of them would've had as favorable of a matchup as I did."

Hmm. "What, exactly, did you do to him?"

Graves paused again and leveled a stare at Zeff. "Curious, are you? That's only natural. Unfortunately, I cannot explain. And furthermore, I would ask that you not speak of me to anyone. Secrecy has proved to be one of my greatest allies over the years. Spreading word of my abilities, even among those you trust, could eventually endanger not just me but everyone whom I might otherwise be able to protect. Meaning many innocent lives. You understand?"

Rather than answering immediately, Zeff looked over the dusted battlefield another time, and his gaze went to his many unconscious kin strewn about. Only now was it occurring to him how odd it was that he, alone, should still be conscious. Whatever Graves had done to them hadn't worked on him and Axiolis.

"Not to worry," said Graves. "They are all unhurt.""  
"3412

"What did you do to them?" said Zeff.

One of Graves' eyebrows twitched. "...Do you truly not know?"

Zeff wasn't sure how to respond.

"Water Dragon," said Graves, raising his chin a little. "You know a thing or two about me, don't you?"

Zeff felt his skin suddenly bristling. A cold shiver down the length of his body.

He ignored it.

“What I know,” said Zeff slowly, “is that you’ve aided my kin here today. You have had the opportunity, multiple times now, to hurt us, and yet you have not. In fact, it seems to me that you have gone out of your way to protect us as best you can, despite quite difficult circumstances.”

Graves was quiet.

“You asked me to keep your secrets for you,” said Zeff. “I’ll do so gladly.”

A few more beats passed, and then a soft smile arrived on the other man’s face, twisting up his mustache. “...It would appear you have some secrets of your own.”

“I won’t deny it.”

“Heh. By the way, how was it that you came to learn that your kin were being held in Logden?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering if a little bird might have passed it along.”

A little bird? That seemed almost too on the nose, Zeff thought. Unless... was he not talking about another Sparrow here? “That would’ve been nice,” he said. “I’m afraid it was pure chance, though. What little bird might you be talking about?”

“You know the one, surely.”

“I genuinely do not. And you saying that is only making me more curious.”

“Truly? Why, your daughter, of course. Gema Elroy.”

Zeff blinked. More than once. He fumbled for his next question. “You... ah... do you know where she is?”

Graves returned a quizzical look. “Do you not?”

“No, she... we... we had a falling out, and she’s been... ah...”

“...I see.” The man scratched his chin. “Well, I could put her in contact



with you, if you like. Whatever transpired between you, I'm sure she would want to know that you are okay after everything that has happened."

Zeff was taken aback. "Yes, please! I would be eternally grateful!"

Graves seemed almost as surprised, himself. "Alright, well, uh, don't be too pleased with me just yet. It will take some time, what with everything going on, right now. Plus, she is... currently in the middle of something and will remain indisposed for quite a while yet."

"3413

"You seem shockingly well-informed about her, considering how new to the Vanguard she still is." It hadn't escaped Zeff's memory that Parson Miles once claimed that Gema was working for him. Every fiber of his being was now hoping that Graves here might contradict that and confirm that the bastard had been lying. "Has she been working under you directly?"

"Ah, no," said Graves. "I did meet the girl a couple of times, but I do not think she realized who I was."

"Hmm. Was that because you were in disguise?"

Graves just bobbed his head to the side rather than answering the question.

And something else occurred to Zeff. Their entire reason for deciding to trust this mysterious man in the first place was because he seemed to have some kind of personal connection with Bernardino Blackburn.

And moreover, Melchor had called him 'Archangel.'

But even according to Axiolis' knowledge, that was not a moniker associated with Graves. No, instead, the only moniker Ax knew of for Field Marshal Graves was the Pale Hawk.

And given everything that they had witnessed here today, both names seemed fairly apt in their own way.

"...What is your association with us?" said Zeff. "You knew Bernardino, obviously, but how does Darktide know you?"

"He doesn't know me."

"He called you Archangel."

"Yes, that was odd. I think he must have mistook me for someone else."

Zeff observed the man's expression carefully. It didn't look dismissive or callous, but then again, would such emotions even come through? If this guy really was a Sparrow, then the human image in front of him right now would've been an illusion. Graves could make its emotions look completely different to however he was actually feeling.

Or could he? Perhaps their projections didn't work that way.

Whatever the case, Zeff was suddenly quite suspicious. "...I don't believe you."

"That is your prerogative," said Graves. And he turned away. "In any event, things should be considerably easier to deal with here in Vantalay now. I'm sure the RPMP will still--"

"So if I go asking around about someone named Archangel in connection with one Field Marshal Graves, I won't discover anything interesting?" said Zeff.

"...As I said before, it would be a problem if you spoke to anyone of me. That context would not matter." The man still did not look back at him.

"3414

Zeff wanted to choose his next words carefully. "I already told you that I would keep your secrets. If you are lying for our sake, out of some sense or hope that it might protect us from your foes, there is no need. Especially when I am beginning to get the impression that the truth would be of much greater comfort."

"...What exactly are you implying, Water Dragon?"

Should he just come right out and say it? Hmm. Maybe so. "...Are you a Rainlord?" asked Zeff.

Graves made no response.

"It is either that," Zeff went on, "or you were a dear friend of the Blackburns, as Darktide seems to believe." In his head, he kept searching for some recognition of the name Archangel in Axiolis' memories. It felt like something was there, but he couldn't quite pinpoint it.

"Even if I were related to you, why would I admit it?" said Graves. "What good would that do, other than perhaps imperil your kin still further? You have worked within the Vanguard for many years yourself. You know our policies. Our ideas. You know the importance that we marshals must place upon our identities. Yet you ask me these questions as if you were plainly ignorant of such things."

It was certainly true that the marshals all took the secrets of their family history quite seriously, in large part because they knew that many within Abolish liked to make a sport of hunting down and killing any identifiable relatives or loved ones they might still have, regardless of how distant the relation might seem. And even among the marshals, Graves had always been known as the most mysterious, so it would come as no surprise to Zeff if this man took such secrets more seriously than anyone else he'd ever met.

But he still couldn't help wanting to know.

The Rainlords had lost so many of their kin over the years. And so many close friends, too, who might as well have been kin. The idea that one of them might have survived and been alive all this time... well, that was something that would've surely made his ancestors smile.

His ancestors. Yes.

He blinked.

Some years ago, back when he'd finally achieved his first hyper-state with Axiolis, it had been arguably the greatest day of his life. After having so much of his family taken from him when he was only fifteen years old, that moment of merging minds with his family's ancestral reaper had been... unparalleled in its importance."

"3415

He'd suddenly been able to look through and even almost experience the reaper's own memories about House Elroy, going back all the way to when they were still the Arman people.

Not to mention, it gave him a much clearer picture of what his more recent family had truly been like, too. His father. His mother. Uncles and cousins. It made him feel so much closer to them than he had even when they were still alive.

The only problem with it had been that it was unsustainable for long periods of time. The merge couldn't last long enough for Zeff to indulge in those memories nearly as much as he would have liked. It was much improved now, of course, but even all these years later, he could still occasionally discover something new about his ancestors from Axiolis' memories.

And one ancestor had become of particular interest to him, as of late. He'd been spending a fair bit of down time in pan-forma with Axiolis, trying to go through all that the reaper could remember of the man.

Agam Elroy.

Zeff had gotten a feeling, almost inexplicable in nature, that there was something to be discovered there, something that perhaps even Axiolis himself did not yet realize or fully recall.

Maybe it was because Sanko, the Gargoyle of Korgum, had mentioned his name just prior to their fight with her at Rheinhal. Maybe it was because Axiolis' memories regarding the man were so peculiar when compared to most of his other ancestors. Maybe it was something else entirely.

But here and now, in this Vanguardian marshal's presence, in this likely Kingsparrow's presence, Zeff's mind was returning to Agam for some reason.

Agam had been an uncle of Zeff's grandfather. Zeff had never met him, but Axiolis certainly had. The reaper had seen his entire life, from the moment of his birth, to the time when he was found dead in his great mansion that sat upon the waves of Lake Carria.

Even from a young age, Agam had shown signs of possessing an exceptionally eccentric mind--to the point that 'eccentric' perhaps no longer adequately described him, even.

His beleaguered parents once returned from a trip to find that all of the

family's staff had quit and left the boy alone, because young Agam had filled their ancestral home with so many wild animals that a window could not be opened without one escaping."

"3416

Most notably, however, was what Agam had done in his role as the eldest of all his siblings. Each time, when a brother or sister was born, Agam did something that bordered on criminal or even psychotic, but the explanations that he provided for his actions afterwards always seemed to be too strange for either of those two labels to entirely stick.

For Zeff's great grandfather, the act had been kidnapping. One night, Agam stole the boy away while everyone else was asleep. One of the other reapers, Ozolos, noticed the kidnapping quickly but decided not to alert anyone, for that reaper had himself been quite the notorious oddball--and indeed, eventually became the one who resurrected Agam at the age of fourteen.

According to what Ozolos claimed to have witnessed that night, Agam had taken the newborn child out into a particularly intense rainstorm in order to "baptize him in the lifeblood of a lhugleoth so that his line will be forever strengthened."

Which was quite the incredible justification by an eleven-year-old boy, Axiolis had always thought.

Agam, of course, had been punished severely and never treated the same way again when children were present, except perhaps by Ozolos.

And as Agam grew older, the stories about him only continued to grow stranger.

Here and now, however, in the company of this marshal, Zeff found himself wanting to ask this person about him.

Especially because... these newly unlocked memories from Axiolis regarding Sparrows... were adding something to the mix. Something that neither of them could quite detect, as of yet. It made little sense, because those memories seemed to be from a time long before Agam had even been born, and yet...

There was a similar feeling embedded therein. Somewhere.

“...Did you once know a man named Agam Elroy?” said Zeff, still with two voices.

“You ignore my questions and ask that instead?” said Graves, finally turning to look at him again. “Just how much of an inconsiderate asshole are you, Water Dragon? Did you hear nothing I said?”

“Oh, I heard. I heard very well, in fact. But did you? It seems to me that you have not been listening to yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“‘Grip the torch with both hands.’ That’s what you said. And that’s what you should do, too.”

Graves made no response.

“We do not need your protection,” said Zeff. “We are the Rainlords of Sair. The blood of the Armans. If you know even one thing of my kin, then you should know that.””

"3417

For a time, the field marshal merely met his gaze evenly, not saying anything. Then a smile crossed his lips as his eyes eased briefly shut, and he shook his head. “Rainlords...”

Zeff waited for elaboration.

“If nothing else, I suppose I can be relieved that the unshakable pride of your clan remains intact. Whether it’s warranted or not has always been the real question, though.”

Zeff decided to push. “You did know Agam, didn’t you?”

Graves seemed to be weighing him anew. “...I did, yes. He and little Dino Blackburn were both good friends of mine. More than good, in fact. We found ourselves on a... quest, of sorts, once upon a time. An adventure that I shall never forget for as long as I live.”

Hmm. “That sounds like quite the tale.”

"Indeed."

"And yet I've never heard it before," said Zeff. "A grand adventure between the three of you would have been passed down among my kin for generations, I should think."

"Well, there was a reason for that, too. But perhaps enough time has passed that I can safely tell you of it. And with both of them gone, their heroism deserves to be remembered." He broke for a curt laugh. "Tell me something. Is that gallery of grand paintings at Red Lake Castle still standing?"

"...I hope so," said Zeff, thinking back to his own memories of that place. Of Octavia Redwater showing it to him for the first time. "But I do not know."

Graves' mirth diminished somewhat. "Well, in my estimation, this would be a tale worthy of a painting or two."

Part of Zeff's mind was staying on Octavia, though. Her reaper, Wen, should've been around here somewhere. All of his brethren were still strewn about the sundered battleground, unconscious. Of course, they were all undead or reapers, so they would be fine, but the impulse to begin taking them all back to their encampment was quite strong.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to speak so candidly with a field marshal was too rare to pass up.

Just a little longer, Zeff thought.

"You've been to Red Lake before, then," said Zeff.

"Oh yes. And I should like to visit again, once you recover it for your people."

Zeff blinked at the sudden optimism. "I'm sure that could be arranged. And you are right to assume that we will be able to recover it, but I am surprised to hear you having such faith in us."

"Heh."

"3418

What a strange man this was. The way he talked. The way he

navigated around subjects instead of providing straight answers. And yet the way he was also quite warm. Not in a false manner, either. Or at least, Zeff didn't think so.

All at once, Zeff felt as though this man was some mad mixture of one of their greatest possible allies with an entity that they needed to be ever wary of, at all costs.

But perhaps it was too soon to be making such broad judgments.

Whatever the case, he wanted more information.

"So are you truly claiming to not be this 'Archangel' that Darktide thinks you are?" said Zeff. "Even if I don't bring up your name in the process, I will most definitely be asking him about that later, so you might as well tell me the truth."

Graves broke for a sigh, then shook his head again. "Fine. But don't go spreading this information around. And if you decide not to listen to me, then don't say I didn't warn you against it, either."

Zeff waited.

"Yes, I was once known as Archangel." He gave a mild shrug. "Bit of an overly grandiose name, I always thought, which I suppose is part of the reason I didn't mind giving it up. But yes, Melchor did meet me on a couple of occasions, when he was a child. When I became Graves, I left that name, and others, behind. For the safety of many innocent lives, you understand, not just you Rainlords."

"I see. So you are not a Rainlord yourself, then?"

"No," said the man with a laugh. "But knowing how deeply you lot care for one another, it is flattering that you were even humoring the idea."

"It would have explained why you are helping us so much."

"I am also helping myself, you know. Vanderberk has been my target for decades. Finally being able to put him down is more reward than all the treasure in the world."

"Perhaps, but there were other ways you might have gone about it. Ones that would've involved making sure that your Rainlord prisoners remained entirely out of our reach."

Graves bobbed his head to the side but said nothing.



“How did you learn of our presence here in Vantalay, by the way?” Had those bumbling Triplets let it slip when they first arrived, Zeff wondered? If so, then he supposed their incompetence was a good thing, in retrospect.”

"3419

Graves, however, paused for quite a while before answering. “...Trade secret, I’m afraid. That’s not the type of information I’d like spread around.”

Zeff’s eye twitched. More secrets, eh? He wasn’t exactly surprised, but something in the back of his mind was bothering him. Maybe he could still push. “That’s fine. No specifics, then. Just tell me when you noticed we were here.” Half of those words didn’t even feel like his own. Were they moreso Axiolis’? What was this disquieted feeling in his gut?

“Even that would be giving away too much, I think,” said Graves.

“Oh, come now,” said Zeff. “Surely not.”

“I’m afraid so.”

Zeff’s jaw tensed.

And he realized what was bothering him so much, perhaps with Axiolis’ help.

Because the reaper could recall a very clear timeline of events.

The when, in this case, was actually quite important.

When the Triplets first arrived, they’d all been alone and deeply concealed. In fact, they’d been chosen for their mission specifically because of how unknown they were to the outside world. So it was virtually inconceivable that the Vangaurd could’ve sniffed them out, unless the Triplets themselves had let it slip.

But if that had been the case, then there would’ve been no “trade secrets” for Graves to be implying were at play here. No reason to hide anything.

Then the Triplets went to Miro and learned of the situation there, which

prompted the Rainlords to send a few reinforcements, who were admittedly more recognizable than the Triplets but still trying to remain stealthy. Apart from one sketchy encounter with the RPMP, that team made no contact with any of the other forces in Ridgemark at the time--certainly not the Vanguard.

Then the skirmishing at Miro took place and they wrested the town from Abolish's control. And since they hadn't been able to achieve a decisive victory over Thaddeus Croll of Abolish, the team had been forced on the defensive in order to protect the Miroan civilians that they'd just rescued.

And it was during that time when the Blackburn Triplets had been redeployed elsewhere. Since they were not necessary for the defense of Miro, they were tasked with gathering information again.

Which was when Raul Blackburn had discovered the all-important intel that their captive kin were to be given away by the Vanguard.

So for any of this to make sense, Graves had to have learned of their presence before then, right? If it was the marshal's intention all along that the Rainlords would discover the scheme and go rescue their kin, then he had to have known they were in the country before Raul discovered that intel.

And yet..."

"3420 -- CCLXXXVII.

If all of that was true, then why had Graves asked how they found out about the captives being transferred? If that was part of his plan from the beginning, then shouldn't he have already known that? Unless he'd been playing dumb. Or deployed multiple attempts to inform them without knowing which had succeeded?

Why had he brought up Gema, though? Zeff had gotten completely distracted by the mere mention of her name.

Perhaps that had been the point.

Agh.

Zeff didn't like this suspicion filling his mind, right now.

Maybe none of these questions mattered. Maybe Graves had simply found out about them via some leak in the RPMP. Maybe Zeff should've just been focusing on getting everyone out of this godforsaken place, already. Maybe he should stop worrying so much about tangential factors. The only real concern here was the preservation of his kin, after all.

And yet...

In the ensuing few moments, one new question did involuntarily crystallize into his mind.

“When, exactly, was it that you replaced Thaddeus Croll?”

That was the question. Was it possible that Graves had, in truth, been the one fighting the Rainlords at Miro? None of the Rainlords who'd fought Croll had ever done so before, so none of them would have noticed any suspicious changes--and even if they had, there would have been any number of other rationalizations to help explain such differences away.

Not to mention, it might better explain how Thaddeus Croll had been able to stand up to the likes of Leo, Darktide, Evangelina, and more with minimal backup of his own.

But Zeff held his tongue. Here and now, he decided to keep that question to himself.

Because what was there to be gained from asking it? At best, a reassuring explanation that assuaged Zeff's suspicions. At worst, a suddenly hostile field marshal who would either kill or capture everyone here.

That risk was most certainly not worth the reward.

And with that in mind, looking back on the rest of this conversation and the fight that preceded it, Zeff Elroy came to the abrupt conclusion that he should probably stop tempting fate today and just accept the easy victory that had presented itself.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Seven: 'Resting Iron, breathing Steel...'

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It was a relief to learn that the Rainlords would be returning soon. And

a surprise, as well. From what Hector had previously understood of the situation over there, the Rainlords still needed to go to the aid of the RPMP in the defense of the city of Ridgemark, but apparently, they were quite confident that the battle would cause little delay now that they had recovered their lost brethren."

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"3421

Hector certainly had confidence in their abilities, but he hoped they weren't being overly optimistic with that prediction. Their opponents in that battle were the combined forces of the Vantalayan Military Police and Abolish. That didn't exactly seem like a trivial fight, unless he was missing something.

Which, maybe he was. The report had been relatively brief, all things considered. He would've liked more details, such as any casualties or if any big name Abolishers had shown up.

He wondered if perhaps they had left that stuff out because they didn't

want him jumping on a plane and flying to their aid. Knowing how proud they all were, that seemed like something they might do.

He figured not, though. Most likely, they were just busy, and things were fine.

If, however, a more detailed report didn't arrive in the next twenty-four hours, he was going to be pressing those reapers for more information. The last thing he wanted to do, right now, was leave Warrenhold, but if the Rainlords needed help, he was damn sure going to provide it.

In the meantime, though, he was almost not sure what to do with himself. How long had it been since he'd had any actual downtime like this? With so many Rainlords abroad, Warrenhold was so quiet. He'd apparently gotten accustomed to all the hustle and bustle of their presence without realizing it.

Not that he was entirely without matters to attend to, of course. There was always something he could be working on, if he really wanted to. He could check in on the bank or the Gaolanets or the Candle or the crazy world news going around.

But none of that was so immediately pressing that it demanded his attention at all costs, which was a nice change of pace.

He decided to take some time for himself to meditate. He felt like he'd been neglecting that lately, despite the fact that it might now be more necessary than ever.

All this stuff going on his head. The blessing of Focus. The sea of now-questionable information from the Candle. Not to mention his own, deeply flawed psyche. Whatever else was happening in there, that shaky foundation probably wasn't helping much.

Yeah. Meditation was much needed, he felt.

It was strange, though, because with his multiple thought processes, he was actually able to meditate with one or even two processes, while still thinking about things. Which might've been a bad strategy. He wasn't yet sure how he felt about that."

"3422

The more he'd learned of meditation--both from personal experience

and from reading up about the subject online--the more he'd come to think that it wasn't just this thing that he needed to do for the sake of improving his materialization ability.

It was important for the stillness that it could provide. The calm.

The world was so busy. So noisy and constantly moving. Constantly demanding his attention in some form or another. And his own mind, that was plenty busy, too. More than ever, as of late.

So it seemed to him that trying to multitask during his meditations was somewhat missing the point. And potentially counterproductive, even. After all, he'd never actually been able to feel whether or not the meditation was improving his skill with materialization.

Garovel said it did, and he trusted the reaper's word on that, of course, but the progression was only ever detectable after the fact, not during. And most of the time, even that was questionable, because what was really causing the increase in skill level? The meditation? Or the actual training that he was doing all the time?

And then there were these "altered states of consciousness" that Emiliana Elroy had told him about. They intrigued him quite a bit. When she taught him about "Sto," a so-called storage state of consciousness, he hadn't been able to come up with a good use for it, which made sense, since it seemed to be mainly designed for mutation users like her.

But later on, he'd found it to be quite useful indeed as a means of helping him compartmentalize all of the information that the Candle had poured into his head. Without the benefit of Sto, Hector felt like his mind would be an even more chaotic place than it already was, these days.

It was just such a curious concept. Altered states of consciousness. He wanted to ask Emiliana more about it and perhaps see if she'd learned a new one yet, but he also didn't want to bother her until the Rainlords returned. Then he could give her good news, too. Hopefully.

Maybe he'd ask Hanton or Pauline about it, instead. A sparrow's perspective might be interesting.

Here and now, though, he was content to simply indulge in the confines of his own meditative exercises. Increasingly, he was feeling like there was more yet to be discovered therein. About himself, perhaps. And beyond? Hard to say. What would that even mean,

really?"  
"3423

His meditations, therefore, had begun to feel a bit different. While he still wanted to keep to the core principle of clearing his mind, freeing himself of all distraction, Hector was also starting to feel himself... wandering a bit, in some sense.

He didn't know how else to describe it, exactly. If the purpose of his meditations was to create a vast, empty expanse within his mind, then it now felt like he was floating through the empty vastness. Exploring it, perhaps.

In search of something? Maybe so. But to what end? By design, there was nothing to discover. The point of the exercise was to make sure it stayed empty. So what point could there be in exploration?

That was an odd question. Why did there have to be a point in it? Couldn't the exploration itself just be... enjoyable on its own? The sensation of floating through his own mind was certainly... something. In fact, it might've been making it even easier to free himself of distractions.

It was like a new level of relaxation. So much so, in fact, that he sometimes had trouble telling if he was meditating or simply asleep.

And weirder still, he found himself feeling extra refreshed after such deep meditations. Almost like waking up from a full night's rest, despite only an hour or two having passed.

He read about some people being able to forego sleep almost entirely, in favor of deep meditation. It had seemed an exaggeration to him before, but maybe there was something to it, after all. If only a little. Even if his mind felt refreshed, he highly doubted that the rest of his body wouldn't still be dead tired after a heavy day of fighting or training, for example.

But hell, maybe this, too, could be considered one of those altered states of consciousness. A hyper resting state. Or something.

Eh, he was just making shit up at this point. Would've been neat, though. What might he call such a thing?



Re-Sto?

Ha. Probably not.

Aside from his meditations, there was also the matter of this new armor at his disposal. Haqq Najir had been following him around in order to study it and report back to Abbas, who was still in Lorent, working on the Candle.

Needless to say, Hector was quite curious what conclusions Haqq would arrive at; and yet at the same time, he also wasn't holding his breath. But not because he thought Haqq's skill was lacking.

Rather, there was just something... well, otherworldly about that armor. And he felt, in some strange way, that it might resist analysis."

"3424

And indeed, Hector's suspicions were thus far proving true. Despite how much Haqq Najir had been examining the different pieces of armor that Hector materialized for him, the man had not been able to tell him much.

"This metal defies explanation," said Haqq. "In many ways, it mimics the properties of your iron. Weight. Density. Electric and thermal conductivity. All almost identical. And yet its tensile strength seems to match, or even surpass, that of the metal that Abbas and I synthesized for the Amir-9 prototype."

"Surpass?" said Hector, doubtful. "What makes you think that?"

"I did say 'seems to,'" added Haqq. "That particular property is quite difficult to fully test. I would need more equipment to know that for certain."

"Okay, but what makes you think that could even be possible?" said Hector. "There's no reason to think that this armor could be any stronger than the Amir-9, is there?"

Haqq's nose twitched. "I took one of the many spare prototypes from your armory in order to compare and contrast it with these armor pieces. And by that, I mean I have been bashing them against one another for hours on end, among other crude tests. And while it was difficult to be certain, I thought I spotted the occasional scratch on the

shield but not the armor.”

That was news to Hector. He didn’t know if he believed it, though. “Are you sure about that?”

“No,” said Haqq. “That is my point. More extreme testing methods are needed.”

“...Extreme in what way, exactly?”

“I will require a hydraulic press,” said Haqq. “And a hydraulic drill. And a plasma drill. And a laser cutter.” He paused. “And an ECM machine.”

“ECM?”

“Yes.”

“...What does ECM mean?”

“Electrochemical machining.”

“I...” Hector suddenly had a feeling that he knew where this was going. “And how much would one of these ECM machines cost, exactly?”

“In your Atreyan troas? I’m not sure.”

“And in your Sairi escaltos?” said Hector.

Haqq stared at him a moment. “...Can anyone truly put a price on science?”

Hector’s expression flattened. “I don’t think I’m that curious to know just how ‘mathematically’ tough my new armor is.”

“My heart weeps at your lack of academic curiosity, Lord Goffe.”

“From the sound of it, if your heart isn’t doing the weeping, then my bank account will be. Can you not use the Candle for these sorts of tests?”

"3425

Haqq gave a sideways nod. “Perhaps. But I do not wish to interrupt Abbas’ work with it.”

Hmm. That was thoughtful of him, Hector supposed. And bringing up Abbas made him abruptly curious about something else, too, so he took the opportunity to try to change the subject. "You've gotten the chance to study the Forge a bit, haven't you?"

"I have."

"What's your opinion of its capabilities?" said Hector.

"It's a Fusion Forge. Obviously, it's extremely powerful."

"Lord Abbas mentioned something about it having a 'gentle disposition.'"

"I wouldn't be able to confirm or deny that," said Haqq. "Your Candle is the first Forge I've had the opportunity of even examining, let alone working with. Where such vague ideas as 'disposition' are concerned, you will have to defer to the Sunsmith's expertise."

Hector had to hold back a chortle. Somehow, this man still managed to sound slightly arrogant even when admitting that he didn't know something. "What do you know of other Fusion Forges in the world?"

"A dangerous subject, that. Are you sure you wish me to tell you? Learning more about them could be something you come to regret."

"Hmm. You mean because the people who guard them are so aggressive in preventing the spread of relevant information?"

"...Yes. I suppose I should have expected you to already be aware of that." And he paused, eyeing Hector a moment. "In fact... why are you even asking me about this? To test my knowledge? I find that rather insulting, if so."

Hector didn't balk, though. It felt like he might finally be getting accustomed to people thinking he was far older and more knowledgeable about the world than he really was.

And admittedly, it did help to have all those historical memories from the Candle stewing around in his brain.

"Every person is an entire world of information, all on their own," said Hector. "No matter how old I get, I hope I never forget that. If I ever start treating other people like they have nothing to teach me, then... learning new things will become a lot more difficult. And rare. Don't you think?"

Haqq merely stared at him blankly.

Shit, maybe that had sounded dumb. Agh. Hector just tried to keep his composure as he waited for a response. It took a while to arrive.

“...I know of only six Fusion Forges in the entire world,” said Haqq.”  
"3426

Six, eh? Hector had a feeling that there were more than that, though he couldn't be sure. The Candle seemed to have given him memories of many other Fusion Forges from over the eons, but without more time to sort through said memories and perhaps confirm their veracity, there was no telling which of those Forges might still exist in the modern day.

Apart from a few select ones, that was.

“The Golden Hour,” said Hector, blurting out the words without even thinking, “the Lantern of Doma, the Artisan's Anvil, the Clown Pit, the Red Rift, the Pool of Trenoy, the Silent Serpent.”

Haqq just looked at him.

Hector had to blink a couple times as he tried to process everything that had just come out of his own mouth.

“...Some of those names, I am familiar with,” said Haqq. “Others, not. The Clown Pit? That cannot truly be the name of a Fusion Forge, can it?”

Hector needed another moment to think about his response. Did he have actual details about that in his head? Where had all those names even come from, exactly? “I... think that is the name of Morgunov's Forge.”

Haqq's head reared back a little. “I suppose that would make sense. It sounds foolish enough to belong to him. But... how in the world did you discover that? I've not met anyone who could even confirm the existence of Morgunov's new Forge, let alone tell me its name.”

Ah.

Hmm.

Yeah, that probably wasn't the kind of information that Morgunov went spreading around, was it? Even a maniac like him probably wanted to keep any and all details of his Forge a secret.

So how had the Candle learned of it, then? Hell, how had it learned of any of the other Forges at all? It wasn't like it had traveled the world and visited them.

...Right?

Ugh. Hector was feeling a little woozy all of a sudden. It felt like his head had just been flooded with a little too much information at once, like a crack in a dam had formed.

He had to stop and concentrate before it worsened. Patch it up. Get it back under control.

Whew. Yeah. Sto. It was Sto. He could feel where it had started to fail. In fact, the visualization of a cracked dam seemed to be exactly right for assessing the problem. And thankfully, it was just as simple to fix it."

"3427

Or at least, it felt simple. With how strange this all was, he could only have so much confidence in his own perceptions.

"Are you alright?" said Haqq.

And Hector realized that he'd turned away from Haqq and was clutching his temple. "Yeah," he said, trying not to sound too disoriented. "I'm fine."

"Still feeling the aftermath of your battle the other day?"

Well, that wasn't untrue, so Hector decided to lean into that excuse. "It was a rough one."

Really, though, Haqq's guess wasn't entirely off the mark. There was one thing in particular that Hector couldn't forget about his fight with Banda Toro, just before getting eaten--arguably the reason he'd gotten eaten.

He'd pushed his mind too far. Tried to force out more thought processes. And his brain had blanked out on him.

True, he'd been pretty desperate at the time, but that didn't change the fact that it was a mistake that had nearly cost not only his own life but also the lives of everyone in Warrenhold.

And now there was this. Another worryingly weird thing happening with his mind.

The same mind that had been screwed with by two gods and a sentient super-tree.

Honestly, he'd been trying not to dwell on these facts too much, but it was becoming increasingly difficult.

What if his mind was becoming so twisted by all this crazy shit that it eventually just stopped functioning properly altogether? What if it just turned into a knotted mess of perpetual confusion?

When considering the long history of servants going mad, that was an especially troubling notion. And it was paired with another, which was perhaps equally troubling.

What if all this mind-tinkering was turning him into a completely different person? What if he ceased to be himself?

In some sense, that reminded him of what Malast had been trying to do. Offering him "godhood" at the expense of his identity. Maybe this was the same thing, just in a more roundabout way.

Obviously, though, he couldn't voice any of those concerns to Haqq here.

He felt the sudden urge to go meditate again. To take some time and regather his thought. He tried to excuse himself, but Haqq just kept following him and started steering the conversation back towards heavy machinery.

"If you're hellbent on frugality," the man said, "then perhaps you could use your considerable influence in this country to earn me access to the tools I need, free of charge."

"3428

Hector had a particular destination in mind for this next meditation session. He'd been experimenting with different spots lately, and his most recent one might've become his favorite yet. "No one is supposed to know you are here, remember?" said Hector. "And you're quite famous in your own right, aren't you?"

"So I'll be discreet," said Haqq. "A disguise and alias would be trivial to concoct."

"Sounds like a pain in the ass," said Hector, perhaps a little too bluntly.

"Ah, so you agree that purchasing the equipment for private use is the preferred way to go."

The conversation continued for the full length of their walk, and no matter how flatly Hector stated his refusal, Haqq remained perpetually optimistic that Hector would help him out, one way or another. Optimistic? Or insistent? Hector couldn't quite tell.

By the time they reached their destination, Hector wasn't even annoyed, anymore. If anything, he was actually somewhat amused by Haqq's persistence in playing dumb, like he somehow couldn't grasp the concept that Hector wasn't going to do what he wanted.

Thankfully, the sight of said destination provided another opportunity to change the subject.

It was Warrenhold's underground waterfall.

The noise here was something else. It was certainly loud, but surprisingly, not as loud as one might've expected. Even at this distance, they didn't yet have to shout in order to hear each other.

Hector suspected that was because of the way the caves in this immediate area were interconnected. The waterfall had one great cavern of its own--almost as massive as the one that encompassed the castle's main eight towers--but all around the waterfall were tunnels, even up on the ceiling. It seemed to him that they might've been funneling much of the sound away from the base of the waterfall, instead of simply creating one, big echo chamber like he'd originally expected.

Whatever the explanation, it had been a welcome surprise.

“Wow,” said Haqq, once the waterfall came into view. “That is quite something.”

“You haven’t been here yet?” said Hector.

“I have not.”

It was certainly a sight to behold, these days. Unlike when he’d initially found it, covered in total darkness, now the waterfall had large amber lamps lining it on both sides, bathing the entire massive chamber in warm light. And the waterfall itself rose to such a great height that it appeared almost like a vertical runway for aircraft to take off.

"3429

“I’ve been thinking this would be a good place to host visitors,” said Hector, “but it’d need a lot more work, first. And maybe part of me is worried about losing it as a prime meditation spot if people are constantly coming and going from here.”

“Meditation, eh?” said Haqq. “Never much cared for that. Don’t have the temperament for it. Mind is always too busy. Trying to force the calm just makes me bored, and boredom is one thing that my brain simply cannot abide.”

Hector found that curious. “That doesn’t sound right. If you’re feeling bored, then you’re not clearing your mind properly. You shouldn’t be feeling anything at all. Except maybe... peaceful. Or contentment. Which is the real point of it, I think.”

Haqq returned a dubious look. “The point is contentment, you say? Not the growth of your power?”

“I mean, that’s what reapers will tell you, sure. And it’s obviously a nice bonus, if true, but plenty of non-servants meditate, too, and they find value in it.”

“Mm. Sazandara has indeed tried to get me into meditation many times over the years. I was never able to stick with it.”

Hector scratched his nose. “I think that, too, is probably the wrong way of looking at it. You don’t necessarily have to stick with it in order to still get some use out of it.”



“No? I can hardly see how doing it only once or twice could prove beneficial. Isn’t the habit supposed to be what builds ‘mental discipline’ or what have you?”

“Well, yeah, there is that,” said Hector. “Building discipline would take time. But sometimes, I find that meditation is just... good for its own sake. To give yourself a bit of peace. Especially during times when... peace is otherwise difficult to come by. Know what I mean?”

Haqq met his gaze for a moment, then looked at the waterfall again. “Hmm.”

The man said nothing more as Hector moved closer to the waterfall and looked for a good spot. There were quite a few to choose from, as the rocks provided multiple ledges going up the full height of the cliff. Some were more eroded than others, though, so Hector had been trying to assess which ones would be easier or harder to meditate on, comparatively.

With Haqq looking like he was about to join him, Hector decided to go for the easiest he’d yet found.”  
"3430

And indeed, Haqq was still following him, even as he approached the roaring water.

He kept the Scarf of Amordiin on but took his shirt off, folded it, and set it on a nearby rock. Haqq did the same, which was somehow still surprising to Hector.

Before fully plunging himself into the water, however, a thought struck him, and he turned back to Haqq one last time. Now he had to shout in order to be heard. “If you find the water too disruptive, tap me on the shoulder, and I’ll make a dome for you!”

Haqq returned a look of dissatisfaction, but he did nod.

Then they entered the waterfall.

It was cold as fuck.

And heavy on the head and shoulders, of course. It felt almost like stepping into an entirely different world, where even the laws of

physics might've been altered.

Hector pushed toward the center of the ledge and took his spot. He could sense Haqq still there next to him, even as he sat down and started focusing on his breathing.

Having a meditation partner here made this feel a bit different, especially knowing that Haqq was inexperienced. It was hard not to worry about the guy a little, considering the very obvious fact that waterfall meditation was not exactly a beginner technique. The entire point of using a waterfall was to make it way harder, after all.

The extreme noise, pressure, temperature--everything was meant to disturb and distract, to make it that much more difficult to keep one's mind clear.

He couldn't help wondering if Haqq would even be willing to ask him for help. The guy seemed pretty damn prideful, though that wasn't exactly abnormal for a Sandlord.

Oh well, though.

He cleared his mind.

And the world fell away from him.

He loved this place. Indeed, the waterfall did make it much more challenging, but in a different way, it also allowed him to push even deeper into his own mind. Or rather, it forced him to, perhaps.

Tough to tell, really.

However, what he was able to discover this deep was not the perfect clarity that he was looking for. Or at least, not just that. Clarity was merely one of many pursuable options.

He felt as though he were standing in the middle of a great room with doors in all directions. Just how many were there? It seemed impossible to count them. Not because there were too many, necessarily. But because, perhaps, they didn't want to be counted. They refused it."

"3431

Hector took his time and tried to observe the doors, though they seemed to resist that effort, too.

But then again, this was his own mind, so maybe he was the one resisting? Hmm. Perhaps the knowledge that these doors didn't actually exist was to blame. It was like trying to study a dream in real-time. A bit of a fool's errand, maybe.

So he changed tactics. He stopped trying to observe them with his eyes--or whatever it was that passed for eyes in this heady place--and instead, he started trying to clear his mind again.

If this was his own mind, then everything he might want to know about it was already here. Right? So maybe it was just a matter of opening himself up to that information. Allowing him to "see" it. Or to understand it, at least.

Heh. To hold truth?

Maybe so.

Man, this was something. He didn't think he'd ever gone this deep into his meditation before. It certainly felt new enough. This place. These doors. What did he know of them?

No. That was wrong. He had to stop asking. Stop inquiring. Because he already had the answers. Hopefully.

Emptiness. Clarity. Peace.

Whoa. It felt like he was going yet deeper still.

But he wasn't. He hadn't gone anywhere. His body. His brain. His mind. The waterfall. The cold. The pressure. He could still feel it all. It wasn't a matter of desensitization.

Rather, it all just felt... less important. Not a priority.

Yeah.

The doors. There they were. Just standing there. Existing. But also not.

Yep.

That one over there. That door was a thread. A background thought process. So right now, it didn't lead anywhere, because he'd turned all

those off. For clarity.

Yup.

Were all the other doors thought processes, too?

Agh. Wrong approach. Again. Stop asking.

He had to find his clarity again. The blank space.

There.

Mmhmm.

And the doors. They were still there. Still part of him. Still standing.

That one over there. That was Sto. Led straight to it. An enormous reservoir of ancient memories--or dreams--that didn't even belong to him. Yeah. That was where he'd shoved all that stuff.

Huh.

A thought bubbled up. A question trying to be asked.

He didn't let it, though. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. Not here, not now.

Right.

In this place, Hector was.

And there was nothing more to it.

He simply was."

"3432

So many doors. All standing. Waiting.

That one there. It led to his own memories. Stuff from his own life. Stuff he liked. Loved, even. Warmth and fondness all but radiated from the cracks in its frame.

Not like the door next to it. That one was more neutral. It had stuff that he remembered blankly. Stuff that had just gotten stuck in his mind for

whatever reason. Catchy songs that he didn't even necessarily like. Information that he'd learned, sometimes through quite tedious means. Lots of school stuff in there, he felt.

Boring things. But not without their importance. A useful door to have, even if not a very fun one.

And then, there was the door next to that.

Oh, boy...

That door.

Yeah.

All the bad stuff was in there. Or most of it was, at the very least. Tough to believe that everything could've been in there. Maybe he was just being pessimistic, though. Overblowing his own past miseries.

Yeah, probably.

He did have a tendency of focusing on the negative. He always had. He might've liked to believe that he'd been able to turn that natural tendency into a useful tool, these days, but he didn't really know if that was the truth or just an excuse so that he didn't have to seriously contemplate trying to change it.

Even in this place, where he could be totally, brutally honest and blunt with himself, he didn't know which way the wind was blowing on that particular subject.

Hmm.

Well, that was okay.

The point here wasn't to come up with solutions to problems. It was to discover truths that, deep down, he already knew. If he genuinely didn't know something, then that was that.

Interesting, nonetheless.

These other doors.

Ah.

That one led to Garovel. Heh. Wow. How neat. Impulsively, he wanted to go through it and strike up a conversation. He knew it would work.

But no. He could do that whenever. It wasn't necessary here.

The one next to it, though...

That was Rasalased.

Holy crap. It was just right there. A door to the Dry God. Easy as could be to just walk through and have a chat.

That seemed wrong, considering how much he'd struggled to talk to the guy in the past.

But then again, it had been getting easier over time. And now... huh.

He was truly tempted now. But there was yet more to become aware of in this space, Hector felt. He'd have to remember this for later, though."  
"3433

Agh. His thoughts were becoming too full again. Too present. Too self-aware, perhaps?

No. Questions were bad. Yes, exactly. He tried to move on. The next door. Where was it?

Agh. Again, wrong. Why was this so difficult? No!

Dammit.

He had to take a minute. Or several. Or many more than that, even. It took as long as it took, and being conscious of the time was counterproductive, he felt.

He found his center again. His clarity. And the doors. They were still there.

Everything was familiar, he realized. All the doors. They were all his. In various ways. Leading to different parts of himself. Even Rasalased and Garovel--they counted, too. They were part of him now.

It wasn't a question. He could simply tell. That was the truth.

Huh.

And yet.

There was one more door. Not like the others. Quite different, in fact. Not immediately knowable to him. Mysterious, somehow.

Strange. Uncertain.

And those qualities were begging for questions out of him. Yeah. That was the issue he'd run into. Trying to focus on that particular door was way harder. Just perceiving it made him want to ask about it.

No. Not just that.

The door itself had a desire. He could feel it. The questions weren't just trying to emerge from within himself. They were stemming from the door, too. From beyond it.

It wanted to know about him.

Unsettling.

Very much so.

Enough to threaten his clarity. As it had done before.

But this time, at least, he held on. Held together.

Held true.

Yes.

That door wanted something.

And he didn't know what that was.

Which meant... that the door... either didn't belong to him like the others did... or... it led somewhere within himself that he was still not aware of, even in this place.

One. Or the other.

Ah.

Indeed.

That was not even a door, he realized. It was a staircase. Leading down.

Deeper. Deeper. Down and down.

Without even realizing it, he was already taking it. Down the steps. Winding, spiraling, circling down into a vast darkness.

There was fear here. Terror, even. He could already feel it. Growing stronger, becoming part of the very environment.

It was a struggle now. Maintaining clarity. Harder than ever before. Because this fear was familiar. An old friend, of sorts. The kind that knew all his sore spots. The kind that might not have ever really been a friend in the first place."

"3434

These feelings. This space. Hector didn't know what to expect. There was a certain strangeness here, too. It felt at once like a place that was deeply personal to him and yet also entirely foreign.

A dread came over him. A desire to turn back. To stop searching.

He didn't listen to it. Couldn't. There was something here that he needed to find. But he couldn't tell if it was even something about himself or not. Some long, lost memory. Some kind of suppressed terror.

Or something entirely different. Something outside of himself.

Something that wanted in.

That thought gave him pause.

On the staircase, he stopped. He still couldn't see the bottom. Couldn't feel it yet. Maybe it didn't even have one. Maybe it would just continue down forever, until he drove himself mad.

Hmm.

That could be a danger, too, he supposed. Madness. It had been on his mind more and more, of late. With everything going on, everything messing with his thoughts, his memories, his sense of self.

Ah...

Wait a moment.



Yes. That was the real reason he'd been finding so much extra motivation to meditate, recently.

Madness. Or rather, his worry over it. His deepest, most horrified worry.

With all the new memories granted to him by the Forge, all the history that he had been able to bear witness to in such an immersive, intimate way--the problem of madness was now much more concerning to him than it ever was before. Certainly more than he'd ever let on.

More than he'd ever realized, even.

He stayed there on the staircase for a long while. He looked up and felt another surge of fear arrive as he still saw only darkness. The hole through which he had descended, it was gone.

No.

Not quite.

It was only just visible, he realized. The faintest glint of light remained up there. He had to strain to see it. To feel it. But it was still there.

Himself. Who he was.

Yes.

That was what this place was, he realized. There was indeed no bottom to this hole. To keep descending would be folly.

And yet, suddenly, as he began to feel so deeply that all of these things were the truth, there arrived something new. Despite so much oppressive fear, such overwhelming dread, there was now also... a certain... longing.

Curiosity.

A desire to learn more, in spite of everything.

A dark temptation.

And somehow... that feeling made Hector understand this place even better."

"3435

This descent. This dark allure. Tempting him downward. Just keep going, it told him. See what you find. After all, if there truly was no bottom, then that also meant that this was an infinite space. Which meant it held infinite possibilities, too.

Infinite potential.

That was what this place was.

Potential.

An endless expanse. Limited, perhaps, only by one's ability to perceive and comprehend it.

Right. In that respect, maybe everything he could ever want could be found here. If he just kept descending long enough, he could find it. Eventually.

Hence the temptation.

Hector understood. In part, at least.

The Void.

That thing he'd been hearing so much about. Learning so much about. The Candle knew of it, too. Intimately. And there were so many historical examples of men and women searching for it. Of them discovering it, even.

And then going mad.

Seduced by this very same allure.

But there was so much more to it than just that. Of course there was. This was the paradoxical infinity of non-existence. Imagination, distilled. Nothing about it was simple.

Because the allure wasn't just some deception, some trick to capture the unprepared or unintelligent. No. If anything, those things might've made the problem worse.

Much, much worse.

Because the allure had merit. Hector knew that much.

This place was powerful. And knowledgeable. It really was... everything. And nothing. All at once.

He could grow stronger here. He didn't yet know how, but he knew that he could. It was all but telling him so. And the truth, he could all but hold it in his hands. Or--maybe he could even do that, too.

Wow.

So many emotions were trying to seize hold of him now. Some more powerful than others. Fear. Ambition. Anger. Greed. Pity. Curiosity. Sadness. Wonder. Hatred.

Pain.

So compelling. So convincing. So legitimate.

But Hector was still. He remained. Still.

Seeing them all at once like this was... something else. A unique experience. Something to be... felt. But not indulged.

He took a step. Up.

It was time to head back, he decided.

But the stairs. They were no longer. His foot found nothing to push against, and abruptly, he was dangling. From a rope.

Well.

This was a problem.

The vast hole below him was now more prominent than ever. He could feel it even more ferociously than before. It had desires, too. It wanted to pull him in.

Or perhaps... that was just... every emotion manifesting itself against him at once. Their collective will rebelling against his own."

"3436

Hmm.

Interesting.

Despite the apparent peril of this situation, dangling above an eternal pit of non-existence, Hector remained calm. Unmoved.

The emotions were not going to win. He would not allow it. In this place, they were separate from himself. Unruly creations spawning haphazardly out of his mind, trying to wrest control away from him. Ferocious and demanding.

But they still belonged to him. And he still had to acknowledge them, too. Accept them. As part of himself. Pleasant or not, they were all part of him.

So in order to bring them back under control, Hector didn't want to "command" them--though he did feel that he could. He knew that he could, in fact. But that would be the wrong approach, he felt. Not true to himself--to both who he was and who he hoped to be.

The right move here... was to bring them closer. To let them in.

As much as they seemed to be scratching and gnawing at him--behaving not entirely unlike monsters born of chaos--Hector knew that they were still his. And that he was still in control. And that ultimately, they couldn't hurt him, despite all appearances to the contrary.

In some sense, it was like giving every turbulent emotion a big, warm, welcoming hug. Until they found their proper place within his mind again. Until they realized that they were where they were supposed to be.

It took a long time. Forever, seemingly. He had to allow himself to feel each emotion more deeply than perhaps ever before. He had to give them all the attention they deserved, like children.

But it also got gradually easier, too. With each one being brought home, being integrated, he felt... invigorated. Even more in control.

Heh.

This endless darkness. It wasn't so scary. But it also wasn't where he needed to be, right now.

Before he knew it, the rope from which he dangled was no longer binding him. Instead, he had it in his hands. And with a firm grip, hand

over hand, he was climbing his way back out, toward that distant glimmer of light above.

It felt like moving at a snail's pace, at first. Like the light was not getting closer. Like it never would.

And he felt like he was being watched now, too. Watched and judged. From a million angles at once. A dark, invisible crowd all around him, rooting both for and against him.

But he didn't balk. And soon, the progress was clear. That light was growing nearer."

"3437 -- CCLXXXVIII.

## Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Eight: 'The Knife in the snow...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Ugh. What a splitting headache. How long had it been since he'd felt one this bad? He thought he'd overcome this problem long ago, but now, here it was again. Old and familiar pain. The kind that brought back memories along with it.

That made it the very worst kind of pain, as far as Jercash was concerned.

He rolled over, only then realizing that he was on the ground. And cold.

Damn cold. It took a minute for his vision to clear. Where the hell was he? The mountains?

What had happened? He tried to recall.

The last thing he remembered...

Ah.

The battle. Right.

Well, shit. That fight had taken place in Kandra, the capital city of Kavia. So if he'd ended up all the way out here, then it must not have gone very well.

Hmm. He remembered a volcano. Specifically, a volcanic eruption, blanketing the horizon. And he remembered--ah.

Gohvis, that wild bastard. Where'd he go? Showing up out of the blue like that and suddenly pitching in with the battle? It had been so out-of-character that it had actually, somehow, made Jercash more concerned about his situation, not less.

Yeah. That was it. The real last thing he remembered. Thinking that if Gohvis was deciding to pitch in, then things must've been even worse than he'd thought.

And he'd thought they were pretty bad.

This entire warfront had been left in Jercash's hands. And at first, it had been quite the endeavor. Jercash hadn't felt such unquestioned authority at his fingertips in quite some time--hell, maybe ever. With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps that feeling had gotten a bit intoxicating and made him a tad... overzealous.

Especially after he and his boys managed to slay one of the Vanguardian marshals.

Carson. What a self-righteous prick that guy had been.

The celebration after that victory had been the stuff of legends. A party in the capital city, quite literally dancing on the bastard's corpse, then parading it around the streets for all to see. The Kandran governor-general had not looked too pleased at the sight of Carson's smote body lying there, but Jercash and his men had made sure to correct that attitude of his.

No frowning allowed during a celebration. That was the Abolish way."  
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Yeah. That was it. The real last thing he remembered. Thinking that if Gohvis was deciding to pitch in, then things must've been even worse than he'd thought.

And he'd thought they were pretty bad.

This entire warfront had been left in Jercash's hands. And at first, it had been quite the endeavor. Jercash hadn't felt such unquestioned authority at his fingertips in quite some time--hell, maybe ever. With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps that feeling had gotten a bit intoxicating and made him a tad... overzealous.

Especially after he and his boys managed to slay one of the Vanguardian marshals.

Carson. What a self-righteous prick that guy had been.

The celebration after that victory had been the stuff of legends. A party in the capital city, quite literally dancing on the bastard's corpse, then parading it around the streets for all to see. The Kandran governor-general had not looked too pleased at the sight of Carson's smote body lying there, but Jercash and his men had made sure to correct that attitude of his.

No frowning allowed during a celebration. That was the Abolish way."  
"3438

Man. How could it have all gone so wrong after that? Agh. Pride before the fall, he supposed.

Amateurish of him, really. Letting a little success go to his head like that.

Well. In fairness, killing a marshal when three of them were hounding him day and night was more than just a "little" success.

But still. No excuses.

"You're awake," came that familiar double-voice of the Black Scourge. "I was beginning to think Grant had done some kind of permanent damage to you."

Jercash didn't turn to look at him yet. He hadn't sensed Gohvis there a moment ago, but now he did, and he was not surprised. The jerk always did like to sneak up on people. Like a little kid, honestly.

A giant, draconic, little kid.

"Grant..." The name fell almost involuntarily out of Jercash's mouth. That was right, wasn't it? He'd gotten into a pitched battle with that son of a bitch, one that he'd felt like he was about to win. He'd manipulated the battlefield in order to create exactly that scenario, after all.

Truthfully, Carson's death had been more luck than strategy, Jercash felt. While he certainly didn't mind taking credit for it in front of the men and the general public, he and his top guys all knew the truth. It was a routine assassination attempt. The kind people at this level had to deal with all the time.

It wasn't actually supposed have to succeeded. It was just supposed to



have bought Jercash time.

But then his assassins came back with wonderful news--and the physical proof of their success, to boot.

Jercash could not have been prouder.

The Little Assassins that Could. Led by the Bolt of Kavia. Or the Headhunter, as some had also started calling him. Or Karkash the Thunderbolt, as still others did.

Personally, Jercash preferred the latter, but he knew that these sorts of things tended to take on a life of their own. Whatever stuck, stuck.

He didn't yet know if the youngster was truly deserving of all the attention, though. Nor would he know for quite some time, he suspected. Unless he'd already gotten killed in the mayhem of the last battle, of course.

That was the way it worked with these meteoric upstarts. The ones that just exploded onto the scene, making big waves out of nowhere. Usually, it was just dumb luck that earned them that first wave, but time always told whether they could sustain themselves, eventually."  
"3439

But at the very least, Jercash certainly had his eye on him now. Karkash had already made a solid first impression on him back in Kavia, when Jercash's men finally tracked his little group down.

Apparently, the kiddos were the ambitious sort. Which wasn't exactly abnormal, of course. If you weren't ambitious, you didn't have a place in Abolish as anything other than a slave--or something equivalent to one without the label.

But it was still a rare thing to see someone enacting such risky plans without much apparent firepower to back them up.

Karkash and his little buddy--Desmond or something--had gathered a ragtag bunch of maniacs in order to start targeting locations that prominent Vanguardians were known to have some connection to.

A common enough tactic, historically, but Jercash had admittedly not seen it used in a while. Mostly because the Vanguard had cracked

down on it extremely hard the last time. These youngsters wouldn't remember that, of course, but that was no excuse for their reapers. It made him wonder if the sneaky buggers were concealing that tidbit of knowledge from them.

Part of him hoped so. It'd be amusing. Plus, he didn't want to open his big mouth and destroy their dreams. Abolish needed that type of eagerness.

And whaddya know? So far, they'd surprised him. If they kept this up, he'd have to promote them soon, regardless of their ages.

Not that they'd told him how young they really were. He could just tell. They had that air about them. That dark naivete.

And their auras weren't exactly up to snuff, either. But perhaps that was a different matter.

With the opening that their unexpected success in killing Carson had provided, Jercash's plans had been thrown off. With the benefit of hindsight, that was obvious, but at the time, he hadn't realized what a precarious situation he had been put in. That youthful eagerness had infected him, hadn't it?

Because naturally, with one of the three big names down, the other two would be looking for revenge, right? Which would make them overextend themselves, right? And of course, their overall might would be at its lowest since the war broke out, right? Therefore, the best course of action was to change tactics and start pushing forward in order to take advantage of a weakened, disorganized enemy.

Right?

Wrong, apparently."

"3440

Should've stuck with his initial game plan. Hit-and-run tactics combined with hostage-taking and purposely drawn-out negotiations. Along with a few of his special trump cards thrown in every now and then, of course. It had been slow progress, but it had been working.

Switching over to a more aggressive, ambush-focused strategy had not been the play, clearly.

Kane and Grant weren't fools, damn them. They'd closed ranks and done the complete opposite of what he'd hoped, apparently not bothered much at all by the death of their long-serving compatriot.

In retrospect, he supposed he should've known better. Heartless bastards, the lot of them. Truthfully, strange as it might've seemed, it was actually Abolish which was filled with soft-hearted, emotional thinkers. At least when it came to things like that.

The Vanguard didn't care about each other. The people they fought and died alongside. They only cared about the billions of planet-killing leeches who didn't give a single shit about them in return.

How absolutely ass-backward this world was.

"...So you rescued me?" said Jercash, turning to look at the dragon man.

"Yes," said Gohvis. "Though I'm surprised to hear you phrase it that way."

"Hmm? Why's that? Think I'm too proud to call a spade a spade?"

"...Yes."

"Hah! It pains me to learn even after all these years, you still don't know me better than that. I'm not one to scoff at a helping hand. Especially from an old friend."

"Mm."

"How'd you know to show up when you did? The tide turned so quickly that there was no way word could have reached you in time."

"I knew of their plan in advance."

Jercash's expression flattened, and he blinked dully. "Excuse me?"

"It was their long-simmering Project Blacksong. You must've heard something of it yourself by now, no?"

He had, but that was beside the point. "If you knew so much more about it ahead of time, then why didn't you warn us?"

The Monster was quiet a moment. "...I didn't feel like it."

Jercash's head reared back a little as he blinked a few more times. It was immediately obvious that Gohvis just didn't want to tell him the real reason, but that answer still left him baffled and offended all the same. He took a second to gather his thoughts as he sighed and rubbed his forehead with one hand."

"3441

"...You really don't make it easy to be your friend," said Jercash.

"You throw that word around as if it has merit," said Gohvis. "You know as well as I that we do not have the luxury of friends."

"Hmph. I know no such thing. The minute you start thinking that way is the minute that these long lives of ours start to seem like they might not be worth continuing. Friendship is a key component to retaining our sanity."

The Monster regarded him for another long moment. "...You honestly think you are still sane?"

From anyone else, that question might've sounded like a sarcastic taunt, but Gohvis' tone was one of genuine curiosity, so Jercash held back the biting retort that first came to mind in favor of something more serious. "Of course I do. It's the rest of the world that's mad."

"Mm. Or perhaps you were never sane in the first place and so have no basis from which to discern any difference."

"If that's the case, then there's no point fussing over it, now is there? I am how I've always been and clearly nothing will change that."

Jercash's gaze narrowed as he sized the other man up. "You, on the other hand, seem to be going through something... dare I say, transformative? Something that's making you behave quite strangely, at the very least."

The Monster made no response.

Jercash had to push. "What is going on in that head of yours? You went through a lot of trouble to help me out, and yet you're still acting so cagey."

"Abolish is on the verge of collapse," said Gohvis. "If I'd done nothing, the balance of power would have shifted enormously in the Vanguard's

favor.”

Collapse, was it? Jercash might’ve heard a thing or two about that. He decided not to mention it yet, though, in part because Gohvis was not done.

“Your Mad Demon has his back against the wall as we speak,” said the Monster. “I went to his aid as well, but it is not looking good for him.”

Jercash’s brow twitched. “That’s news to me. Is it Sermung’s doing?”

“No. I cannot yet see all angles, but it is not him.”

That was somehow a relief and also not. For this entire war, he’d been waiting on word of Sermung’s movements to arrive. His greatest worry had been that the bastard would decide to show up here first in order to try and get a swift victory for his stooges so that they could move on to a different battlefield, but that had never happened.”

"3442

In fact, that was part of the reason he’d been so reluctant to commit his forces to any major offenses early on. He’d wanted to keep plenty of resources stocked up so that he could quickly pivot if and when Sermung showed up. He had some extra special tricks up his sleeve, reserved especially for the Crystal Titan, but if the jackass never showed himself, then what good were they? He was just saving up for a rainy day that never came.

Perhaps the jerk somehow knew. Perhaps his continued absence was intentional for exactly that reason.

With Sermung, it was impossible to know. That much, at least, was certainly intentional. Each of the emperors went to great lengths in order to prevent their actions from becoming predictable, save perhaps Morgunov, who just seemed to do it naturally.

“Who could possibly be giving Morgunov that much trouble if not Sermung?” said Jercash.

The Monster scoffed. “Truthfully? I think he may have brought it all upon himself. Though again, I am not sure.”

Well, that was... quite believable. “When you put it like that, it makes

me not want to go help him.”

“You shouldn’t. You’d never reach him in time, anyway. At this point, either he survives or he doesn’t.”

“I could still do with a bit more detail, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“He’s been toying with ancient forces.”

“That’s nothing new.”

“Yes, but I think they may have found a way to toy with him back.”

“Oh?” Jercash connected the dots. “The Vanguard? You think one of these ancient forces has manipulated them against him?”

“Indeed. And by extension, against the rest of us, as well.”

“Ah... and what are these ‘forces,’ exactly?”

“Alas, I cannot tell. They are wary of my sight. Even from afar, they make great efforts to conceal themselves from me.”

His ‘sight,’ eh? Jercash had only rarely heard him mention that. No doubt, if he inquired further about it, Gohvis would refuse to elaborate, but over the long years, Jercash had been able to piece together a few clues about it.

It wasn’t aura sight--or at least, not just that. No, Jercash suspected that it was something more highly developed and powerful. Something that could see across great distances--and probably time, too.

And perhaps, even, into souls.

What that really meant, however, Jercash was not yet sure. Nor did he have any idea what the limitations of said ability might be. Clearly, the Monster was not all-knowing or all-seeing, but...

Perhaps that was the eventual goal."

"3443

Jercash paused for a deep breath as he thought about his next words. He'd largely been ignoring the magnificent snowscape that he and

Gohvis were both standing in, but now he took a moment to appreciate it. These mountains. This biting wind. Cold and lifeless and terrible--but beautiful, nonetheless.

One of the perks of being so old. Being able to stand in brutal places like this, unbothered by the elements--and therefore, able to instead admire the natural wonder of the world that much more.

"Where did you bring me?" he decided to ask.

"The Ridoas."

Jercash had to stop and blink at that. The Ridoas were the most famous mountains in the world, due entirely to them being the home of the highest peak in the world, Mt. Vinayoaka.

They were also in Luugh, on the other side of the Hardwick Sea, over a thousand miles north of Kavia and Hoss.

"...Bit far to take me, don't you think?"

"We were being pursued. And you've been out for days, by the way."

Oh.

Oh no.

He groaned. "Still. If it was mountains to get lost in that you wanted, the Wares were right there next to us."

"I sent decoys there, too. Some of which are still being chased, even now."

Huh. Well, that was another thing that Jercash had already known about the Monster. His mastery over illusions. Hell, in all likelihood, the Gohvis in front of him probably wasn't the real one.

"What about my men? Do you know how many survived? Or where they are?"

"Yes, but now that you've brought that up, I am reminded of something that I must ask you, first."

"Shoot."

"What happened to Koh?"

"Hmm?" Jercash needed a second to think about that. "The dog?"

"Yes. I lent him and Germal to you when you visited my library, but I did not sense them among your forces during the battle."

"Uh..."

Huh.

That was a good question. What had happened to them? He was having trouble recalling.

In fact... when was the last time he'd seen them? Even that was hard to remember.

He'd gone through all that trouble to get them under his command, so he would've noticed if they'd just upped and disappeared.

Gohvis was right. They definitely hadn't been involved in that last battle. Hell, had they been there for any of the battles?"

"3444

"I... ah..."

"You cannot remember?"

"...No, I can't. The last thing I can recall about them is... prior to seizing control of Kavia."

"Oh," said Gohvis, sounding abruptly surprised. "So you won the Kavian civil war even without their help. Impressive."

Jercash returned a flat look. "I resent what you are implying, right now."

"It was a compliment."

"Sure it was."

"In any case, it seems they have been missing for quite some time, then. I thought perhaps they had disappeared just before your incursion into Hoss, but if it was before you even finished conquering Kavia, then..."



“Then what? Finish that sentence, please. Why are you suddenly so curious about them?”

“Does this timing not strike you as strange?” said Gohvis. “A bit too coincidental?”

Jercash saw what he was getting at.

“It has been many years since someone last tried,” said Gohvis. “Is it not about that time again?”

That time again...

Yeah, maybe it was.

This was the way with Abolish. It had almost slipped his mind altogether. Which was perhaps the whole idea behind waiting so long.

Minor coup attempts were a common enough thing. A weekly--or even daily--occurrence, at times.

But major attempts...

Well, those were considerably rarer, now weren't they? Izalog had made sure to teach him all about that long ago, when he'd begun to approach this tier of power and influence. And with the reaper's help, he'd gone even further and discovered some generational patterns, reaching a few new conclusions of his own about the nature of would-be Abolish usurpers.

Going back all the way to Abolish's inception, it occurred roughly every forty years. A major internal event.

Sometimes, it skipped a generation. Other times, it happened a bit early or late. But by and large, the pattern was consistent.

And that hadn't changed during Morgunov and Dozer's rule. Instead, the attempts had simply failed every time.

There were several reasons why he and the others were not trying to wrest power away from those two. For some of them, like Jercash, they just didn't think it was worth the risk. This position was already quite the lofty one--and in some ways, more desirable than the zenith.

For others, though, it was because, time and again, they'd personally seen what became of those who tried.

And then, of course, there were still others, like Gohvis, who were just total enigmas, perhaps too interested in their hobbies or obsessions to care about things like ruling.

But at this point, Jercash supposed that type of mindset was now a bit outdated."

"3445

Because who all was near the top, these days? Just him, Gohvis, and Vanderberk.

Which reminded him.

"Do you know Vanderberk's current status?"

"Dead," said Gohvis.

Well, fuck. "How?"

"The Hawk got to him."

Graves, huh? Damn that bastard.

Truthfully, a part of Jercash had been expecting this. It was only a few years ago that the Hawk had been hunting the Weasel down--and not being very subtle about it, either. Jercash had to go to great lengths in order to protect Vanderberk, which eventually deterred Graves. Or seemed to.

With the death of Gunther and Dunhouser earlier in the year, Jercash's plan had been to keep Vanderberk close to him while he taught him a few things. But with Morgunov starting this war out of nowhere, Jercash had been forced to let Vanderberk go off on his own.

He'd told the stubborn son of a bitch to head for one of the Melmoorian fronts, but did he listen? Of course not. He wasn't afraid of Graves. The idiot never got it through his thick head that Jercash had been protecting him during their previous encounters with the Hawk.

Agh.

So much effort wasted.

Not that this was the first time.

"I have a feeling that you will see Vanderberk again, however," said Gohvis. "So if you do, do not be fooled."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Already, it appears that the Hawk is pretending not to have killed him. He even tried to convince me that he would just capture him, instead."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he intends to make use of his corpse in some way. As some manner of puppet, perhaps."

Double fuck. "That's some of the worst news I've heard in a long time. Are you sure about that?"

"Moderately. It is an educated guess. You do know that Graves is an illusionist, yes?"

"No. I did not know that. I would've warned Vanderberk about that ahead of time, if I did."

"Ah. Mm."" A beat passed. ""Too bad."

Jercash shook his head and sighed. "Gohvis... while I'm grateful for all this sudden assistance, I also can't help noticing that it's just a bit late. Is there a particular reason why you're only telling me all of this now?"

"Yes."

And when the Monster offered no further elaboration, Jercash deduced the rest on his own. "But you're not going to tell me what it is."

"Yes.""

"3446

"You're the worst friend I've ever had, y'know that?" said Jercash.

"I highly doubt that," said Gohvis.

He was right again, of course, but Jercash wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of admitting it. He took a deep breath as he began to

reassess their situation. "Alright, well, what are your plans moving forward? Do you intend to be more involved in this war now? Or is this it for you?"

"The tide has already shifted against us," said Gohvis. "I don't see much point in prolonging this conflict. We should pull all of our forces back and focus on recouping our losses."

That didn't exactly answer his questions, but Jercash was also not surprised by the Monster's opinion here. "You were never in favor of this war in the first place."

"Nor were you."

"True. But I'm also a very sore loser."

"You'll be much worse than sore if you pursue this much further. Neither Morgunov nor Dozer will come to our aid."

Jercash actually perked up at that. "Oh? 'Our,' you say? So you'll actually be sticking with me, then?"

"That depends. Will my staying incentivize you to do something stupid?"

Jercash barked a sudden laugh. Gohvis may have been playing coy, but he could tell that the dragon man had no intention of abandoning him here.

Finally, some good news after so much bad.

Jercash took a moment to regain his composure. "Well," he said, "what if I told you that I didn't plan on winning, any longer."

"Mm?"

"What if I just wanted to go and give the Vanguard one last kick in the testicles before calling it quits?"

Gohvis fell quiet for a time. "...Have you actually formulated a new plan of action, already? Or are you just saying that to amuse me?"

He laughed again, more faintly this time. "Oh, I've got something alright." More than just one thing, in truth, though he wasn't yet decided on which he wanted to go for.

"Elaborate."

Ah. He'd have to choose right away, it seemed.

Hmm.

Well, which one would Gohvis appreciate the most?

Oho. When he thought of it like that, the answer was abruptly obvious.

"When was the last time you met Lozaro?"

The Monster paused for a rare look of genuine surprise. "You have Lozaro?"

"That's right."

"For how long?"

He snickered. "The whole time. He came to me for protection straight away."

"3447

"Your boss will not be happy with you if he learns about this," said Gohvis.

"Eh, maybe," said Jercash. "But a part me think he'd be too excited to get angry with me. Either way, I'm not handing Lozaro over to him. Guy's too valuable."

"Why did he come to you for protection?"

"Heh. Well, it wasn't like he had many options. Couldn't exactly go to the Vanguard after all he'd done, and Sai-hee isn't particularly fond of him, either."

"That's not what I was getting at."

"Hmm? Oh, you meant why didn't he go to you!" Jercash broke for another laugh. "Don't be jealous, pal! I'm sure you were his next choice!"

"How puerile."

"That's rich, coming from you. Look, if you want people to approach

you with these sorts of things, then you have to be more approachable. Get it? This whole scary-dragon thing you've got going on is cool 'n all, but it invariably has its costs, y'know?"

"...Are you blackmailing him?" said Gohvis.

"What? No. How would I even do that? Everyone already knows he's one of the evilest dudes in the world. And I'm pretty sure there's precisely nothing and no one that he loves in that cold, black heart of his. Hell, sometimes, I think he even hates the very knowledge that he spends so much time trying to amass, strange as that might sound."

"You're holding him prisoner, then."

"Excuse me, but I'm quite capable of acquiring new subordinates without resorting to such things. He's with me of his own free will, thank you very much."

"Hmph."

"Speaking of my subordinates, how many of them survived the battle? Tell me where they are, already."

Gohvis exhaled a deep breath and began trudging through the snow, heading in the direction of the nearest mountain slope. "I will take you to them."

Jercash just stood there and watched him for a second before following. "Y-you're not... you're not actually going to walk, right? At this snail's pace?"

"...I'm thinking about it."

"Wow. How is it that so many people have come to look at you as their new lord and savior? Do you think they'd have a change of heart if they learned that the real you is just a giant baby?"

"Do you think your followers would have a change of heart if they learned that the real you is just more lucky than smart?"

"That's not an insult. I'm incredibly smart, and yet I'm even more lucky than that! Where's the downside, huh?"

"I should've let them kill you."

"...A big, fat, dragon baby."

"Shut up."  
"3448 -- CCLXXXIX.

## Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Nine: 'O, tempted Star...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

A small stack of papers slipped off the steel desk and splattered across the metal floor.

Jackson clutched his chest as the all-too-familiar pain shot through him anew. He grit his teeth and growled as he gripped the edge of the desk and tried not to fall out of his chair again. Flames whispered into life at the edge of his fingers, scoring the otherwise silvery metal.

Sudden and debilitating, that's what this pain was. And if he had Hyozen numb it for him, then something else would go wrong. A hand would stop listening to him. Or a leg. Or an eye.

By now, he knew what the cause was, but in those first days after the disaster at Uego, he thought the blasted Mad Demon might have genuinely cursed him, somehow.

At times, he wondered if a curse might have been preferable. Having his body infested with nanomachines that were apparently programmed to torture him for the rest of his life? That didn't seem like the more pleasant option.

He'd heard back from the Magician, who had managed to get his hands on various samples of Morgunov's work, and apparently, there were multiple different iterations of these damn nanobots in play around the world, at the moment.

"The ones that have a hold of you are the worst of the worst, by far," the Magician of Light had told him over a satellite call. "They're parasitizing not just your body but your soul, as well. That's why you can't just have Hyozen regrow your body from scratch and be rid of them. They will be regrown with you."

Jackson had been hoping for a solution from the Magician, but as of yet, all he'd gotten was an explanation. He tried not to let his disappointment with the man show too much on his face, but he probably hadn't succeeded. It was hard to even think straight,

oftentimes, much less control his emotions.

Agh. Poor Xander. He didn't need Jackson piling more pressure on him, right now.

The Magician of Light had been having a rough go of it himself since the outbreak of this war--and indeed, since long before it started, too. Xander's success as a younger man had come back to haunt him, it seemed. When people started calling him the ""Brain of the Vanguard"" or the ""most brilliant integrator since Skapa,"" they probably didn't realize the enormity of the burden that they were placing upon the young genius' shoulders."

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"3449

Now, well over a century later, people didn't say those things anymore. Instead, they whispered behind the Magician's back. Jackson had heard them many times. Talking about what a disappointment their ""best and brightest"" was against the likes of the Mad Demon. Talking about how incompetent or arrogant he must be, despite almost certainly having never met him.

Jackson hated the idea that, in his own moment of weakness, he might have added fuel to the inferno of self-doubt that he knew brewed within Xander Ulsmith. He was supposed to be a source of inspiration and encouragement for Xander, not the opposite.

He pushed the pain back down. Or rather, his perception of it.

Mind over matter. The age-old trick.

He'd been through fifteen surgeries in the last few months. And the

first ones, at least, had certainly helped. But now, they were starting to seem like a waste of time.

That was probably because the Surgeon Saint had conducted the first ones and then handed the project off to others once Jackson had begun to improve. Perhaps that man really was his best hope.

Jackson didn't blame him for stepping away, though. Fen Frederick had been instrumental to the Vanguard's success in Melmoore. Jackson couldn't justify keeping the man here in Intar for no other reason than his own personal convenience.

Plus, there was Project Blacksong to consider. Fen had his own involvement in that. And it was imminent.

Or had it already occurred?

Ugh.

His head throbbed again, despite his efforts.

Dammit. The slightest slip in concentration was enough to bring it back.

If this kept on indefinitely, he didn't know what he would do.

Well.

Then again...

That wasn't entirely true, now was it?

No, of course, the actual truth of the matter was that he already knew exactly what he needed to do.

He just didn't want to accept it.

"Stop," said Jackson through closed eyes and clenched teeth.

Still, he resisted. Of course he did. That was his nature. A part of what made him such a worthy vessel.

"Shut up."

No one was saying anything to him. No one but the silent voice in his head that he hated listening to, despite everything that it had given him.

“Given,” he echoed, his voice thick with resentment. “Everything you’ve ‘given’ me has come with a price. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

Well, that was one way of seeing things. The wrong way, but a way, nonetheless.”

"3450

Jackson just growled to the empty room around him. The pain was beginning to abate, but that might have been a result of his irritation more than anything else.

The voice in his head was not like that of a reaper. It was not distinct from himself. It was an inseparable part of him. And he knew it. He liked to pretend otherwise, to act as though these thoughts were not already his own, but deep down, he knew the truth. It was really just a matter of time until he finally gave in.

Or died.

In vain, most likely. Which would be a real shame, wouldn't it? When he absolutely had the power to make this problem go away.

To make all his problems go away.

Jackson clutched his forehead and tried to steady his breath, as if doing so would help steady his mind, too.

“Please,” he said, more weary than angry now. “Please, just give me peace...”

He already had peace, of course, so this made no sense. He was just being his own worst enemy, as often seemed to be the case.

Nonetheless, the part of him that knew better decided to relent. To let him return to his comfortable denial.

For a while longer, anyway.

When Jackson opened his eyes again, he saw that he had sunken all the way down to the floor without realizing it.

Agh.

How much time had he just lost? Hopefully not much. He checked his phone and was relieved to see that it had indeed only been a few minutes.

He took another deep breath and stood up.

Dull aches still lingered across his body, but at least his head felt clear again.

He found the papers that had fallen to the floor and took small comfort in the fact that he had not accidentally incinerated any of them, this time. That was something, at least. A bit of hope that perhaps he truly was regaining more and more control over himself as time went on.

It was hard to have too much confidence in that theory, though. Especially when those intrusive thoughts sometimes felt like they were growing stronger, too.

The intrusive thoughts of Avar, the so-called God of Fire.

Jackson had come to learn quite a lot about this new passenger of his. That was one of the reasons why he'd decided to come to Intar. The work of the archivers here rivaled even that of those in Luugh.

That, and he was on better terms with these ones."

"3451

Even these archivers might not be so forgiving, though, if he accidentally incinerated some of these priceless tomes. Hell, he might not even forgive himself if that happened.

But he'd needed to learn more about this Avar character. And about what it truly meant to become a "vessel" for a supposed Primordial.

Unfortunately, none of what he'd learned had made things any simpler. In a way, it might've been better if the stories about Avar had all been terrible, because at least that would have made everything clearer. But no. The tales were wildly varied. In some of them, Avar was a benevolent force for good--a warm, nurturing figure who went to great lengths in order to foster and protect those who'd found themselves in dire straits.

One such story told of how Avar bestowed the Secrets of Fire upon the Aruni--theorized by some to have been the first homo sapiens--teaching them how to wield it safely for warmth, cooking, and warding off deadly monsters. It told of how Avar quarreled with other gods, who thought him too enamored with humanity, too generous with his gifts and teaching.

But other stories were more brutal, telling woeful tales of destruction. Of Avar's flames becoming all-consuming, razing entire cities in a single night.

Such as the Tale of Vanwa. In it, Vanwa is a fishing village under siege from a larger village to the north. It is being raided constantly and having its goods stolen. And when Avar arrives--named Avarith in this story--he teaches the villagers of Vanwa to wield a magical form of fire so that they might defend themselves from their oppressors and protect what they rightfully own.

Which they do. And so Avarith departs, satisfied with the results.

But he returns many years later and discovers that Vanwa has become the oppressor. Where it was once a humble village, now it is a fortress town, possessed of a powerful military that uses the magic he gave them to subjugate its neighbors.

Incensed, he destroys Vanwa utterly, leaving not a single soul alive, not even the children.

And those were only the extreme examples. There were many others that fell somewhere inbetween, where Avar--or whatever the incarnation of him was being called--did not come across as good or bad, but rather just neutral.

It left Jackson feeling uncertain in all sorts of ways.

This business about "incarnations" was particularly curious, he felt."  
"3452

From what he'd been able to learn--both from archived sources and from his passenger directly--each incarnation was a distinct entity. They all had their own views and personalities that set them apart from those that came before--perhaps even because of those that had

come before.

Because Avar was the throughline that connected each new incarnation. According to him, he remembered all of his previous lives and therefore possessed their accumulated wisdom.

Wisdom which he was offering to share with Jackson.

The only problem being that Jackson, as he currently knew himself, would disappear into a newly merged entity. A new incarnation.

How, exactly, Avar had managed to get into his head in the first place, Jackson was still not entirely sure.

This voice speaking to him was certainly a new development, but truthfully, Jackson was beginning to wonder if Avar might not have been quite as “new” of a passenger as he’d first thought.

He wondered if, in fact, Avar might have been with him, silently, for a very long time already.

Perhaps since even before he’d met Hyozen and become a servant.

Because what had prompted Avar’s sudden arrival? The emergence at Jesbol? Why would that have done it? What sense did that make?

Not that things were making much sense, these days.

At the very least, it seemed clear that the emergence had been what brought this voice on. And these... memories. Ones that didn’t belong to him. Those hadn’t been there before, either.

It was to the point, even, where Jackson wasn’t always sure of what he was saying. Like only moments ago, when he told the voice that everything he’d been given had come with a price.

What price? What had he been given?

He felt like he knew the answers to those questions, and yet... he couldn’t quite put his finger on them. It was like he’d forgotten something but that it was also just on the tip of his tongue. If he could only remember.

Frustrating.

Meditation helped, though. He’d been neglecting that practice for years--decades, even--but he was suddenly finding it quite helpful

again.

Calming. Relieving. Giving him a bit of the peace he was in such dire need of. If only for a little while.

Yes.

Yes, perhaps Avar had been with him for a very long time, indeed.

Because for as long as he could remember, Jackson had always felt a kind of second presence in his mind. Not a voice, of course, until now. Never anything so clear as that. Or so unsettling, either."

"3453

Rather, he'd always thought of it as what people meant when they talked about one's "conscience." A guiding principle, of sorts. Something that seemed to have a life of its own.

But if that were the case, then wouldn't that mean that Avar truly was a benevolent force? That Avar had been quietly helping him discern right from wrong his whole life?

Mm.

Wouldn't that be nice?

Jackson was too skeptical, though. The more he thought about it, the more he was realizing that the simple truth of the matter here was that he did not trust Avar. Judging from both the folk tales of the Fire God and from Avar's own admissions to him, it was clear that Avar's past incarnations were very flawed beings.

And sure, perhaps that had been the human half corrupting the godly half, but wasn't it equally possible that Avar himself was the problem? He was the only common denominator, after all.

And ultimately, that was why Jackson was so resistant. It wasn't just about holding onto his own sense of self. It was about ensuring that he did not become some new, tyrannical incarnation.

Because he knew that he could. That was absolutely possible. And he would've been an utter fool to think otherwise, to think he was too strong of character or noble of heart to ever allow himself to go down

that path.

Hell, even without someone threatening to meld minds with him, the temptation to tyranny was plenty strong enough.

That was a lesson he'd thankfully learned relatively early in his career as a Vanguardian. Sermung had made sure to impress it upon him over the course of many lectures and elaborate field studies.

"Above all, we must refuse the call to conquer," said the Crystal Titan, once upon a time. "Down that road lies all manner of sweet songs and alluring rationalizations. Appeals to reason. Appeals to emotion. Appeals to ego. Appeals to simplicity. To tradition, even. But that is not us. We are defenders. We are the ones who stand against the conquerors and tell them that the world is not theirs. And if ever we forget that, then it will only be a matter of time until we become our own worst enemy."

Jackson believed that sentiment wholeheartedly. Believed in its importance. And in its reality.

Over the course of his life, there had been many times when he'd felt the exact "call" that Sermung had been referring to. The temptation to just... solve everything himself."

"3454

The complexity of the world was partially to blame for that, he felt. When things got messy. And tedious. And exhausting. That was when the temptation to "simplify" often arrived.

He didn't want to imagine how strong such temptations might be after becoming one with a "god."

His ego didn't need that kind of boost. It was hard enough to remain humble, already.

Though, his current circumstances were certainly helping in that regard. He hadn't felt this pathetic in quite some time.

While it was true that he'd never wanted to be a part of Project Blacksong, it was still tough being stuck here while everyone else was out there fighting so hard.



With so many of their leaders captured, it was impossible to deny the importance of Blacksong, right now. If things didn't go well... if they suffered another major loss here...

Not to worry.

Abolish was getting absolutely hammered, and not just by the Vanguard.

Jackson stopped and blinked again. Where had that thought come from? Avar?

Silliness. Still making a distinction when there was none. The information was already there. Available to him. If he would just allow himself to see--

Jackson cut the notion off with a shake of his head. Enough.

He returned to his papers. There were plenty to go through. Thankfully, even in his current state, he could still make himself useful.

And it was calming work, too. Perhaps because he'd never really grown out of those early years as an accountant. If anything, his passion for thorough record-keeping and organizational beauty had only ever seemed to grow stronger, much to the chagrin of many of his subordinates and contemporaries.

Where they all saw tedium and hassle, Jackson saw a slow, wonderful march toward perfection. So slow, perhaps, that it might not always make it there, but that was okay. Steady progress was itself satisfying.

For the life of him, he'd never been able to understand why so few others felt the way he did. So many of them wanted to skirt the rules, spend their time on "more important things," or otherwise avoid "busywork."

Meanwhile, this was what kept everyone accountable for their actions. And what kept everything operating.

Very few things were more important than that. In fact, maybe nothing was.

The logistics of this war were certainly nothing to take for granted. At the very least, he was glad for the opportunity to go over everything personally."

"3455

While he did trust the officers to do their jobs properly--especially since he'd appointed or promoted almost all of them himself--it was still good to take a hands-on approach with these sorts of things, from time to time. If he didn't, then he might begin to lose his touch.

And on this particular occasion, all this paperwork was helping to give him a better view of the war effort than perhaps anyone else in the world, right now.

Thus far, the war front in the best logistical position was clearly the defense of northern Melmoore against Ostra, though the southern defense against Corrico was a close second.

Most of the public credit for that seemed to be going to the Surgeon Saint, and judging from the books here, that wasn't undeserved.

In fact, most of these invoices had been signed by Fen personally. Jackson also noticed copies of numerous handwritten letters by the man, sprinkled among all the accounting records. Each one was providing detailed instructions to his men about where to go next, what to do, and how to do it. He gave information on enemy movements, their numbers, and their access to local resources.

Oil seemed to be of particular concern to Fen. And with good reason, of course. That region was famous for its oil reserves and mining operations, so keeping Abolish off of those deposits was an understandable priority.

It hadn't taken long for Jackson to begin questioning how Fen was acquiring his information. Usually, such impressive intel was an indication that Sparrows were being deployed, totally unimpeded by the enemy.

But Fen didn't have command over a team of Sparrows. Or not at first, anyway. Jackson had since sent him one, which indeed only improved things further.

And... maybe he'd also wanted that team to report back to him on Fen himself. To answer that important question about how the Saint was pulling off these not-so-minor miracles.

The answer, according to the team, was something quite unexpected.

Fen had somehow acquired for himself a privileged status within the Old Wardens.

A prestigious reaper enclave. In fact, the prestigious reaper enclave. The most famous one, to which many reapers in the world longed to become a part of.

And so Fen had been using this newfound status as leverage to turn enemy reapers away from Abolish with the promise that they could one day join."

"3456

Whether Fen could actually keep such a promise, Jackson was not sure. The Old Wardens were notorious throughout history for various reasons, not the least of which was their tendency to exile people from their community.

They were a curious bunch, to be sure. At various points, their reputation had gotten them into quite a bit of hot water, usually from excommunicated members looking to find a way back in or to simply take revenge.

Fairly recently, in fact, there'd been some confusion over whether or not they still existed. Rumors abounded that they'd been wiped out entirely, purportedly by some other enclave that they'd been feuding with for centuries.

None of that bad publicity ever seemed to impact their allure, though. Hell, it might've even helped it, in some ways.

Jackson couldn't say that he fully understood the appeal, but then, he'd never personally visited the Old Wardens and seen what all the fuss was about with his own eyes. He'd only heard about the supposed wonders that they kept all to themselves.

Libraries and debate parlors. Research institutes and theaters. Pools of ethereal water that even reapers could bathe in and enjoy. And countless guarded secrets that even exiled members had not been privy to.

Hyozen, for his part, was one of the reapers who was not particularly impressed.

'If even half of the things said about them are true,' the reaper had told him once, 'then their isolationism is the cruelest of insults to the rest of the world. Keeping such intellectual riches to themselves would serve no other purpose than to empower the few at the expense of the many.'

But then, Hyozen had also originated from a rival enclave, so his views weren't exactly surprising.

'Moreover,' the reaper had gone on, 'their exclusivity is extreme even by enclave standards. And whom does that serve? Not the world, certainly. The entire purpose of enclaves is to provide a safe environment for reaper families to nurture new generations in order to stave off our ever-dwindling numbers in the world at large. But if they never leave their enclave, then that purpose is moot.'

How Fen had managed to earn his way into their good graces, Jackson very much wanted to know. Assuming that was actually the truth, of course. Fen certainly wasn't the type to lie, but it was still rather hard to believe.

If it was a lie, though, then whatever house of cards that man had been building over there wasn't likely to last for much longer.

Which would at least be interesting to see, Jackson supposed. He just hoped it wouldn't be because of how disastrous it ended up."

"3457

Regardless, that was a problem for another day. The other war fronts were in greater need of attention.

The defense of Hoss had started out horrifically, of course. The death of Carson was a blow that would not soon be forgotten, even if Kane and Grant seemed to have gotten things back under control. With Jercash's forces routed, it was possible that not only Hoss had been saved but also Kavia, as well.

Jackson was hesitant about that conclusion, however.

Jercash had been in Kavia for months. By all reports, he and his men had had free reign in the capital, doing whatever the hell they pleased.

While it was possible that all they'd done during that time was celebrate their victory, Jackson had known Jercash for quite some time, now. And that man was not one to let an opportunity go to waste.

For that reason, Jackson had been taking an extra interest over there, keeping in constant contact with not only Kane and Grant but also many of their men.

The two of them didn't always appreciate that. And he understood why, of course. Especially lately. His peers didn't want him acting like their superior and ordering their men around.

Oddly enough, though, his poor condition seemed to be helping in that regard. He noticed the two of them behaving more empathetically toward him, if only a little. They probably realized that he wasn't about to usurp or upstage anyone while he was in this state.

Hmm. Or maybe they were just worried about him. As much as they butted heads, it was sometimes easy to forget that they were all still the oldest of friends, when it came down to it.

How odd.

The Vantalayan war fronts were all sorts of curious. While he couldn't say that Graves had mishandled things over there, it was certainly a mess and a half to keep track of. And it didn't help that, out of all the marshals, Graves was the worst about keeping up with proper documentation.

Jackson had chastised him countless times and appointed dozens of secretaries and accountants over the years to help him manage everything, but it never seemed to do much good. Jackson didn't think he'd ever met someone so disorganized. How that man's divisions managed to get anything done at all, Jackson still did not know."

"3458

But from what sparse reporting Graves' men had given, Vantalay seemed to be largely secured now. Abolish was on the backfoot after Graves routed Vanderberk's forces. Apparently, the Weasel himself managed to escape, thanks to the last-second intervention of Gohvis.

As ever, the Monster's movements were a surprise. Jackson never could figure out when that son of a bitch would actually do something. He'd been dormant for so long that it seemed like the rest of the world had all but forgotten about him.

And now he was making international headlines again, though most of the news outlets apparently didn't know that he was the reason behind all the volcanic eruptions.

It pained Jackson all the more to be on the sidelines, right now. He had to wonder if that had factored into the Monster's reasoning.

Probably. Morgunov must have told him something about it. Or perhaps he'd just known. In that obnoxious way of his.

Jackson knew he needed to stop dwelling on it. Whenever he allowed himself to think about Gohvis, he again felt that temptation welling up. That inner voice telling him to let it all go. To just embrace Avar's power and go set the world to rights.

Mrgh.

Bastard.

Of all the times to reemerge. They were long overdue for another fight.

No. He had to calm himself.

The war front in Sair was the worst off, and that was of course due to his own failure. His attempts to restructure things in the defense of the Wetlands had not gone over terribly well. They just didn't have enough men left who could lead in the field. Without that, it was all the more difficult to strike that already tough balance of protecting civilian lives and also communication and supply lines.

Honestly, it was a wonder that Sair wasn't already conquered. Apart from a few minor victories here and there, the remaining Vanguard forces had been in constant retreat. Jackson didn't understand why Bloodeye hadn't been pushing harder. It was like he was distracted.

Perhaps with the Sandlords? Reports about them were scant in detail, but it did seem unlikely that they would have been entirely defeated so quickly. They might have been giving him hell as best they could, still.

If only the scouts could make contact with them. Even just being able to confirm their survival would mean so much, right now."

"3459

The Sandlords had such a long and turbulent history. The idea that they might have been snuffed out as a result of his own inability to keep them safe...

Ugh.

He was being irrational again. Thinking the weight of the world rested squarely upon his shoulders. How silly. When it was obviously much more complicated than that.

And yet, also not. Because really, if he was so curious about their whereabouts, he could simply begin asking the right questions.

What?

Yes. The right questions. Of the world.

No.

Of Avar.

He growled.

His stubbornness wasn't doing anyone any favors, least of all the innocent civilians that he so wished to protect. If he was true to his convictions, then--

A knock at the metal door arrived, pulling him out of his own head.

"What is it?" he said loudly, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Sir, ah--Senator Jacobson is here to see you."

He blinked. Jacobson? Out of the blue? Well, there was no point in thinking about it. While he might've been past the stage where he was

afraid of accidentally harming those around him, he was still in no state to be hosting civilian guests. "Tell him I'm sorry but that I'm not taking visitors at this time."

"Ah--he's, er--very insistent, sir..."

He rubbed his forehead. Well, maybe it would be okay. "What does he want?"

"...‘To discuss foreign policy,’ he says."

Oh boy.

This was hardly the first time that a political leader had come knocking at his door, and there'd been various points in his life where he'd grown quite comfortable in the presence of such people.

It had been a while, though. Even disregarding his questionable mental state, he still felt a bit rusty.

But that name. Jacobson, huh? It was hard to keep track of all these Intarian senators, especially when so many of them didn't keep their positions for more than a few years, so the fact that he actually recognized this one was saying something.

He took a deep breath. "Alright, show him in."

"Yes, sir."

Maybe he was being an idiot. Or maybe this would be exactly the kind of distraction he needed, right now. He honestly couldn't tell.

When the door opened, a middle-aged man in a sharp suit walked through while smiling graciously at Delilah, Jackson's secretary, who closed the door behind him."

"3460

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice," said the senator, offering a handshake. "I know how busy you folk are."

Jackson didn't forget his manners and shook it.

You 'folk,' was it? These days, all of the politicians were well-



acquainted with the Vanguard, but Jackson was not in the habit of meeting with any of them personally. He typically left that sort of thing to his men.

Most of those men were currently quite busy fighting a war or being held prisoner, though.

"It's a bit strange for you to be dropping by unannounced like this, no?" said Jackson.

The man gave an airy laugh. "Strange is one word for it, I suppose. Persistent would be another. I've been trying to arrange a meeting with you for months. These last two weeks, I've resorted to coming here almost every single day in hopes of bumping into you."

That was news to Jackson. "Is that so? My secretary never mentioned that."

"Really? I'm sure she must have seen me. And taken my team's calls."

"Mm," hummed Jackson. "Perhaps I should have a talk with her after this." And maybe give her a raise.

"Ah, no--don't be too harsh on her on my account," said Jacobson. "I'm sure it just slipped her mind."

Jackson gave a laugh of his own. "Gracious of you." He welcomed the man over to his desk so that they could both sit down.

What an old and familiar feeling. This stilted politeness. Appearances, appearances. Worry, worry, ever weary.

Politicians. He supposed he counted as one, himself.

Maybe he wasn't as rusty as he thought.

"She said you wanted to talk foreign policy," said Jackson.

"Ah--straight to the point, then. I appreciate that. Yes, sir, I did indeed wish to discuss the matter of this so-called Second Continental War going on, among other things."

"Sounds like a long conversation."

"Might be, might be. Although--well, ah, actually--how familiar are you with Intar's official position regarding the war?"

He had to think a moment. It seemed rather obvious, so he was wondering if there was something he was missing. "Officially, you are neutral, yes?"

"Yes, but... everyone also knows that we are not truly so, since we are still providing considerable aid to one side. And the pressure has been mounting to make some sort of... formal announcement regarding our stance, one way or another."

"Okay."

At that, Jacobson hesitated.

But Jackson just waited. He did not see how any of this was relevant to him, nor did he wish to try and read into the other man's intentions, just yet."

"3461

Jacobson took a deliberate breath and shook his head, then offered another smile. "Perhaps I already seem like I am beating around the bush. Allow me to be quite blunt with you, then, Master Jackson. Ultimately, what I am getting at... is that I believe public support for your war would be much easier to achieve if the Vanguard took on a more visible role in the eyes of the people."

"Visible," Jackson echoed flatly.

"Yes," the senator went on. "And believe me, sir. I know how my words must sound, especially to one so old as yourself. The prattling of a pampered ignoramus. Or the badgering of an attention-seeking opportunist, perhaps. I know these labels and views of me well. But, sir, the only thing I want is to help bring this continental war to a swift conclusion before it grows any worse."

How noble. "There have been times in the past when we have taken on such a role as you are suggesting," said Jackson.

"Oh, I am aware, sir. The history of your legendary group has been of great interest to me since I was a child."

"Then perhaps you are also aware of the reasons why we no longer do so."

"I am aware of various arguments, yes. As I am also aware of counters to those arguments. Which I would like to provide, if you would be so kind as to hear me out."

Oh, boy. Here we go. He had to hold back a sigh. "I feel as though I might be able to save us both quite a bit of time here by simply telling you 'no.'"

"Saving time, sure. Saving lives, though? That is the more pressing matter, surely."

"With respect, Senator, if you think it is that simple of a dichotomy, then you are even more ignorant than I feared."

"Hah. Not simple, no. Not at all. But important, nonetheless. I understand your trepidation completely, sir. You do not wish to become an appendage of some bloated empire again, to have your reputation strangled and tarnished by some bureaucratic contract."

"Well, in the past, it was more of an autocratic contract that gave us trouble, but yes, that is one of the major issues."

"Ah, indeed, indeed. But I am not here to try and 'bring you into the fold,' as it were. No, I think the Vanguard is just fine where it is. Independent of any government. Beholden to none but itself. What I am offering, sir, is simply attention. Eyes. On this war of yours."  
"3462

Jackson's brow tilted a little. "Disregarding for a moment how that might needlessly complicate all of our lives... why do you want this? What do you stand to gain from shining a light on our operations?"

"Me?" said Jacobson, pausing a moment as if he had genuinely not even considered that question, which must've surely been a facade. "Well... um... hmm. I suppose if things go smoothly, like I am hoping they will, then the credit for it all might be traced back to me, but that's really neither here nor there. Especially because one should never assume that things will go smoothly. In fact, this may very well blow up in my face and cause me no end of political trouble."

Now Jackson was truly confused. "I'm even less certain of your motives, now. Which is not something I can abide, Senator."

Jacobson held up both hands and bowed his head a little. "I understand. Fair is fair. But I am not sure how to explain my motives here without coming across as an over-eager, self-righteous fool. Or a liar. So..." He scratched his chin. "I suppose I should just stop trying and let you think what you will."

Jackson just waited.

"This war of yours," the man went on, "it's a rare one. A truly... just one. That's not something that can often be said. The world is messy, and typically, there are many reasonable arguments to be found on both sides of any given conflict. Or at least, that's the modern way of thinking that we Intarians have bought into."

Ah. Finally, Jackson was starting to get the picture.

"If we could show the people the truth of this fight, of the brave men and women involved in it, and of the justness of your cause, then I think popular sentiment about Intarian neutrality could begin to shift in favor of intervention. And then we could bring things to a swift conclusion. For the sake of all Eloa."

Jackson's gaze drifted away from the other man, but he still nodded with a degree of understanding. Truthfully, such an offer was not something he should refuse, regardless of how he might feel about the circumstances of its arrival. Whether Jacobson was being truthful about his intentions or not almost didn't matter, if it meant that full Intarian backing was on the table.

The only thing giving him pause was the fact that it was already a bit late in the game for this kind of thing. Would such support be necessary? Hell, would it even arrive in time?"

"3463

Of course, there was also the matter of having some sort of media entourage following his men around the battlefield. Unless the senator had some other strategy in mind. Jackson supposed he needed clarification on that point before anything else.

"How, exactly, would you intend to go about 'showing the truth of this fight' to your people?" he asked.

“Oh, I had various ideas in mind. Camera crews, for one. They would be key in capturing what is really going on out there. And I think enlisting the help of a number of skilled documentarians would be quite helpful, as well. Someone needs to not just see what is happening but also piece it all together into a coherent message. And thirdly, I would ask that you appoint someone to become the new face of your organization. Or perhaps more than one person. A small team of public representatives who can regularly meet with average citizens and answer questions. Do television appearances and so forth. Might you have someone like that in mind already? Individuals who handle themselves well under spotlight and scrutiny?”

Indeed, several names came readily to mind. He was not about to bring them up so quickly, though. “And what if you go through all this trouble, set all these things in motion, only for the war to suddenly end, a week from now? Or even tomorrow, hypothetically?”

Jacobson broke for a laugh. “Well, that would hardly be cause for disappointment, now would it? Such a quick resolution to the hostilities? Why, a celebration would be in order, I should think! In which case, what better way to go about it than to give very public credit where credit is due?”

Ah.

Yeah.

This fellow was definitely a politician alright.

The man paused for another mild laugh before continuing on. “Forgive me if I am presuming overmuch, but I am getting the strange impression that you, sir, do not fully realize just how curious the general public is about you and your people. But surely, I must be mistaken, yes? I can only imagine the countless offers you must have gotten over the years from the folks out of Bellvine or Windreach to make motion pictures out of various legendary Vanguardian exploits. I always thought it curious how there weren’t more of such things. Have you been turning them down? If so, then I must say, that is a shame.””  
"3464

Boy, this guy sure could talk. “We’ve had a bit of trouble with that in the past, as well. Our policy has typically been one of flat refusal.”

“Aha, I see. What kind of trouble did you have, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“The misinformation kind,” said Jackson. “Filmmakers often have an unfortunate lack of care when it comes to depictions of the truth. Providing entertainment has too often been the only thing important to them. Which is fine, when dealing with entirely fictional stories, but not when it comes to representing my men to millions or even billions of people.”

“I understand completely. You are protective of your comrades. As any good commander should be. But I can assure you that I hold nothing but the highest esteem for you and your men. There would certainly be no unfavorable portrayals on my watch.”

Jackson cocked an eyebrow. “Excessively generous depictions can cause their own sorts of problems, too,” he said. “Some men might appreciate a bit of friendly embellishment, but others will not. Which can hurt morale. Matters of jealousy and so forth. Not to mention, if your intention is to inform the general public, then hero worship and comforting lies should not be part of such an endeavor.”

The senator’s eyes were now widened, just a bit, though he was still smiling. “It seems your past experiences with the media industry have left a lasting impression on you.”

“That is one way of putting it. I am not sure it is worth all the trouble.”

“Oh, no, please, don’t say that. It is absolutely criminal that the Vanguard is not more widely beloved here in Intar. Something must be done about that.”

“Mm.”

“Have you not found this relationship between your organization and the Intarian government to be a bit... sad and pathetic?”

Strong words. Jackson elected not to respond yet.

“A bit parasitic, even?” said Jacobson. “You do all the work, keep the world safe, and get none of the credit. Or not nearly enough, at least.”

“We don’t do this for adoration.”

“Of course you don’t. And that speaks volumes of your character. But

tell me. Does it not slowly breed resentment among your ranks, when your men are so regularly putting their lives on the line, only to then see my government, for example, sitting back and doing basically nothing? Sitting on its rather plump bottom while you're putting out fires all over the world?"

"3465 -- CCXC.

Well. Jackson couldn't entirely refute the other man's point there. If he was still being considerate of troop morale, then the apparent laziness of various governments around the world had always been a rather persistent point of contention within the Vanguard.

But it was also somewhat beside the point.

And right now, the only words going through his mind were the ones that belonged to the man he respected most in this world.

"...It is not the responsibility of others to take up this cause that we have ourselves volunteered for," said Jackson. "To think otherwise is but one more path to dishonor, corruption, and self-destruction. And we certainly do not need more of those."

At that, Senator Jacobson made no response. He merely stared back steadily at Jackson for so long that Jackson began to think that he may have accidentally killed the entire conversation.

Until, at length, another smile began to grow into the senator's face, and a starry look appeared in his eyes. "I knew you were the real deal."

Jackson's expression flattened as he began to get the distinct and somewhat terrifying impression that, no matter what else he said here, this man in front of him was never, ever going to give up.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety: 'Intimation of an augured luster...'

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Hector had to take his time. After that last bout of meditation, he barely felt like himself, in some ways. And yet in others, he felt more like himself than ever before.

Was this what they called clarity? Heh. Enlightenment, even?

Ha.

Ha ha.

Wouldn't that be funny? If he'd achieved enlightenment in a cave under a waterfall?

No. He was reasonably certain that wasn't the case. How could he have achieved enlightenment when he didn't even know what that meant, really? It was more of a buzzword than anything, wasn't it? An old-timey buzzword, perhaps.

Eh, whatever.

All he knew was that he was feeling good. Not necessarily about himself or... the current state of the world, for that matter, but rather... just in general.

He felt... comfortable, somehow.

Which was a little concerning, in its own way. All this crazy meditating wasn't making him too mellowed out, was it?

Now there was a thought he'd never expected to have. Where had all that anxiety gone? It was still in there somewhere. He knew it was. Or at least, he dared not hope that it was truly gone for good."  
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"3466

Yeah. Hector was reasonably confident that it would rear its head up again, eventually.

Which wasn't... necessarily a terrible thing, either. It was part of him, too. That anxiety. He'd come to understand that much. And on some level, it probably had its uses. Keeping him... alert, at the very least.

Mmhmm. And as nice as this current feeling of contentment or "centeredness" was, he didn't think that he wanted to feel this way all the time. It seemed wrong, somehow. Unfitting.

And now he was confusing himself. How had he managed to make himself uncomfortable with how comfortable he was? This had to be some kind of new level of stupidity on his part. Maybe that was the real accomplishment of all his meditating. Improving on how much of a dumbass he could be, when he really put it his mind to it.

Well, at least he was starting to feel more like himself again.

The next few days remained rather quiet around Warrenhold. Which was a blessed change of pace.

Everyone was waiting on word from Vantalay--word which arrived via the reapers every morning, afternoon, and night. Apparently, the battle for Ridgemark was going quite well, even if it was taking a while. No new casualties. The city limits had nearly been breached when the Rainlords joined the fight, but now they had been thoroughly secured, and the combined forces of Abolish and the VMP were being continually pushed farther and farther back.

There was even talk of taking the fight beyond Ridgemark and going all the way over to Czacoa in order to try and catch the invading Vantalayan forces over there with their pants down. And maybe bring that entire warfront to a swift conclusion.

Mercifully, though, that was still just talk. After communicating to them about the attack on Warrenhold, the Rainlords seemed equally eager to get back here.

He wondered what would happen when they did. Even just from the reports that the reapers were providing, he could tell that the Rainlords' overall energy had shifted dramatically.

Which was only natural, of course, now that they'd recovered all their lost kin. They'd scored an incredible victory over there.

A historic one, really. The kind that would probably be spoken of for generations among them. Like the victory at Magarabad, when the Redwater Twins struck down the Sawtooth General, one of the Mohssian Empire's most reviled and bloodthirsty leaders. Or the victory at Denowa, when one Cassius Merlo, the Water Dragon of his time, led a group of Rainlords in the defense of a small island in the Luthic Ocean that had come under attack for its strategic importance by the forces of a young Dozer and a monster of a man called Suresh."

"3467

It was a bit strange to think that so many more of them would be returning here to Warrenhold. So many new Rainlords whom he'd never even met.

Very strange, indeed.

He couldn't help wondering what they would think of him. He was aware that he'd garnered a bit of a... weird reputation among the Rainlords, so how were all these new people going to view him?

A little nerve-wracking. He was almost dreading their return.

But only almost. That was just a loose thought. A distraction. He still had plenty of important things to be devoting his attention to here at Warrenhold.

While it was true that most of the warrior Rainlords were away, there were many non-combatants here to talk to. It sometimes didn't feel that way, since apparently the warriors were the rowdiest bunch, but he wanted to think of this as an opportunity to get to know some of them better.

Like the Blackburns. Particularly, Nere Blackburn. Her late husband, Ismael Blackburn, had been killed by the Salesman of Death at Dunehall--a death which Hector had personally witnessed in all its

cruelty.

And despite Nere being positioned as the new head of her House, the leadership role had instead fallen upon the shoulders of Horatio Blackburn.

From everything Hector had seen and heard, Nere had not been doing so well ever since, which was obviously understandable.

Her reaper, though, name of Sentsia, was a different story. It made for an odd dichotomy whenever Hector saw the two of them. Sentsia leading the way, being talkative with others--jovial, even--while Nere followed wordlessly behind, shoulders slumped, gaze drifting about. It was hard to tell if the woman was even listening to any of the conversations that she was overhearing.

He wanted to say something to her, but each time he'd had the opportunity, it just didn't feel right. Or he couldn't think of what to say.

Sentsia, of course, was easy enough to talk to, like most reapers, but Hector felt repeatedly stuck trying to break the ice with that poor woman.

And so he began to think that, perhaps, words were not what was in order. Instead, maybe a real, tangible gesture would be better.

So in his free time, and with the assistance of some of the other Blackburns, he'd been working on a gift, of sorts. It wasn't specifically for Nere, as he hoped many of the Rainlords would be able to get some use out of it, but he did want her to be the first to see it.

With a small host of Blackburns behind him, including Nere and Sentsia, he pushed open the door to the first fully restored shrine within Warrenhold."

"3468

It was a modestly-sized chamber, by Warrenhold's standards. Maybe twenty or so people could fit in here without feeling cramped, and the old rainbow tiling had been cleaned up and refurbished entirely. No more cracks or fissures. Now they had a polished sheen to them.

The rainbow color had been relegated to only one wall, however. After having thought about it for a while, Hector came to the conclusion that

maybe some of the folks interested in shrines as places of spiritual peace or meditation might not love having such a “loud” display of color surrounding them on all sides. Maybe, instead, they would want some plain walls that they could decorate as they pleased.

But for this particular shrine, he’d been focusing his research on the Rainlords and their history, not just their old religious views. It was his understanding that many of them were no longer spiritual in the slightest, so he wanted this to serve as a place of historical value to them, as well.

Hopefully.

So there was a table full of candles and bowls for burning incense. There were chairs and floor mats and tall poles for advanced meditative exercises. And there was also a large water basin in the center of the room with a long-necked, brass faucet curving around the top of it, releasing a slow, timed drop of water every three hundred seconds.

That last one, according to a few of the reapers, was an ancient fixture of their Luthic religion, meant to represent how Lhutwë, the God of All Water, created every single drop that had ever or would ever exist.

And it looked pretty cool, Hector thought. So he was glad to see a few of the Blackburns’ faces light up when they saw it there, especially some of the reapers who’d told him about it but not seen it yet.

Sentsia was all praise and laughter, which Hector was glad to see, but Nere, unfortunately, remained the same. Still with that somber, glazed-over look in her eyes as she silently took in the view.

Hector couldn’t be too disappointed. He understood.

But there was still one more thing to be revealed. He’d saved it for last because he’d thought it would make for the best surprise, and yet, now that he was about to pull the tarps away, he found himself suddenly hesitating as he wondered if this wasn’t about to go horribly wrong, somehow."

"3469

With one last look at the awaiting Blackburns, Hector put the notion out

of his mind and began pulling the tarps down from the room's far corner.

What was revealed was a gargantuan cabinet with a few small statues and plaques dotting its shelves.

"I know it's still a bit empty-looking," said Hector preemptively, "but I thought I should leave plenty of space for you and the other Houses to add in whatever you like."

The statues were made of polished stone. He'd had them commissioned from a sculptor on the other side of the city.

Every single person who'd lost their life at Dunehall was either named here on a plaque or given a statue.

And Ismael Blackburn was there in the center.

Hector hadn't known him long, but it only felt appropriate to honor him like this.

He'd thought about just materializing all the statues out of his iron, and indeed, he'd even gone ahead and done so as a form of practice, but it ended up proving rather laborious, trying to capture the perfect likenesses of actual people, especially in a miniaturized form. While he was sure that he could've gotten it right eventually, he came to the conclusion that they probably shouldn't be composed of iron, anyway.

In the admittedly quite likely event that he someday got himself into another dire life-and-death situation here at Warrenhold, he figured that he didn't want to have anything delicate here taking up space within his volume limit. He could very easily imagine a situation in which he needed to start annihilating iron indiscriminately in order to free up volume quickly, and he didn't want the extra concern of trying not to accidentally annihilate what was supposed to be a precious fixture of historical importance.

Plus, he supposed it just felt a bit more impactful, this way. Even if there was still a degree of skill involved in the process, using materialization was kinda cheating, wasn't it? There was something meaningful about having this kind of thing done properly by a professional.

Eh, but then again, maybe if he'd had more free time on his hands to get it perfect, he would've gone for it, anyway. Because there was definitely something meaningful in doing it all himself, too.

If only.

The reaction from the Blackburns was definitely something, though. The smiles on their faces. The tears in their eyes. The solemn nods--of approval, hopefully--as they approached and looked more closely.

Yeah. That alone made this more than worth the effort."

"3470

He tried not to stare at the Lady Nere, but it was hard not to pay extra attention to her reaction, since she was the one he was most concerned about.

And he could see her slowly gravitating toward the cabinet with that somber gaze of hers.

'This is magnificently thoughtful of you, Lord Goffe,' Sentsia was saying over his shoulder. 'Words can hardly express how much this will mean to not just House Blackburn but to all of our kin. In fact, perhaps we should...' She trailed off as she presumably began to notice Nere as well.

Along with everyone else.

The small crowd parted for her as she moved toward the Ismael statue, eventually reaching for it with both hands. She picked it up gingerly and brought it closer to her face.

The statue was about equal in size to her head, and the sharp suit that Ismael was dressed in had been replicated from a photo that Hector had been given. As far as he'd been able to tell, the features of the man's face had been recreated fantastically well.

And perhaps the lady thought so, too, because she soon began to cry. And slump to the ground.

The Blackburns closed in around her again, putting hands on her shoulders or trying to help her back to her feet.

But then her crying turned to sobbing, and she was abruptly not so quiet any longer. The shrine started to fill with the choked sounds of strained voice and disjointed breathing.

Then she started moving again, trying to wriggle away from her family members, who were now attempting to help her a bit more forcefully onto her feet.

She shouted something incomprehensible and threw herself away from the others, all but collapsing at Hector's feet.

He knelt down to help her up himself, but she pushed him back and scrambled away, still with the statue in her clutches.

Her cries were more like wails now as she fled the room and disappeared from sight.

Sentsia was the first to give chase, but the other Blackburns were not far behind, leaving Hector there flat on his ass, alone but for Garovel hovering next to him.

'Well, that could've gone better,' said the reaper.

'Fuck,' said Hector, picking himself up off the floor. 'Now, I... I'm not even sure what I was expecting to happen.'

'You were expecting she would be happy, I imagine, no? Or perhaps sad but in a still-mostly-happy sort of way, hmm?'

'Yeah, but, I mean... ugh, I don't know. I feel like an idiot.'

"3471

'Don't beat yourself up too much,' said Garovel privately. 'And most importantly, don't let this experience dissuade you from doing things like this in the future. It's impossible to know how someone is going to react, but that doesn't mean you should stop trying to do nice things for them.'

He supposed the reaper had a point. And it was still true that the rest of the Blackburns seemed to like it. He just hoped he hadn't made things worse, somehow.

He'd have to check in on them later.

In the meantime, there were more things to see to. He could've started showing off the shrine to the other Houses, but after that disaster, he



wasn't much in the mood for it. Maybe he'd ask Ms. Rogers to do it for him. Or just wait until the rest of the Rainlords got back from Vantalay.

He had a mountain of mail to go through. That was one thing that Ms. Rogers had indeed been helping him with, but he wanted to handle some of it himself, at least. If nothing else, it was interesting to see all the random things people were sending.

There was food. Lots and lots of food. Cakes and pies and bread and cookies. Oh, and a big, insulated box full of frozen meats from a family farm out in Lorent. Apparently, they wanted him to pay them a visit and give him a tour. That was a new one.

Then there were the letters, of course. So many letters. But it was usually the handwritten ones that caught his eye. There was something about those that just seemed that much more important. Because the others often turned out to be veiled--or even not-so-veiled--solicitations from businesses or lords. They always wanted to set up some meeting or another to talk about some "opportunity" or another.

While it did feel a bit rude to ignore all of them, he just didn't have the time or inclination to think about such things, right now.

But yeah. The handwritten ones. Those always felt a bit more special, even though they occasionally turned out to be no different by the time he got halfway through the first paragraph. All the good ones made up for that nuisance, though.

A little boy had written to him. Age of seven, according to the kid's own declaration in the very first line. Apparently, he wanted to know how Hector had gotten so brave. And he wanted advice on how he could become braver himself.

Talk about hard questions."  
"3472

He didn't want to lie to the kid or give him some generic platitudes that he didn't even necessarily believe himself, so he had to think about his answers to those questions for quite a bit longer than he probably should have, considering how much other stuff he had to do.

He found himself mulling his answers over and over while taking care of other business. And oftentimes, he realized that he wasn't even using a background thought process, either. He was just thinking about it normally while on autopilot going around Warrenhold.

In the end, this was what he decided to write back:  
Dear Mr. Caleb Hammerwell,

Thank you for the letter. Your questions have given me a lot to think about. It seems to me that bravery is a funny thing. You say that I'm brave as if it's an obvious fact, but I've never felt very brave at all. The things I've done that you might say were brave, I would instead argue that those were just things that had to be done. Because if I hadn't at least tried to do them, then something bad would have happened.

So I think that's my answer to your questions, Caleb. Don't worry about being brave. Just focus on figuring out what the right thing to do is-- and then doing it whenever you can. It might be really hard, sometimes, so don't worry too much if you mess up. A good friend of mine once told me that we shouldn't respond to failure with sadness. We should respond by becoming better, until our best is good enough to succeed.

Sorry if that wasn't the answer you were looking for. And congrats on turning seven.

Best wishes,  
Hector Goffe

If only all the letters he received were like that. He wouldn't have minded writing up responses to them all day long.

Unfortunately, while there were some letters in a similarly innocent vein--such as one from a particularly precocious little girl asking him to marry her when she grew up--there were also some that left him with a bit of heartache after he finished reading them.

One little boy wanted him to come beat up some mean kids at his school. Another wanted him to bring the family cat back to life. And still another wanted him to make his mother stop drinking."

"3473

Hector wanted to respond to each and every one, but half the time, he wasn't even sure how. And there were so many. Dozens, already, from the just the past month or so. He had Ms. Rogers helping him sort through them all, but even with her assistance, he simply didn't have as much time to spend on this as he would've liked.

He considered maybe trying to organize a small team to aid with it. Like a proper mail room? Hmm. Which tower would that go in? Ah, the Book Tower, of course.

Going forward, it seemed like Warrenhold was only going to get busier and busier. He didn't even want to imagine how difficult this might become if or when the amount of real, heartfelt letters he was receiving in a single month began to climb into the hundreds. And when compounded by however much the spam and business letters might increase...

Yeah, a proper mail room might be a good idea, he decided. Come to think of it, he was pretty sure that Amelia Carthrace had set up a makeshift one right next to her office, but she wasn't staying here at Warrenhold nearly as much, as of late. She was quite busy managing the Darksteel National Bank from its pair of office buildings in downtown Gray Rock.

Which was a whole other thing to worry about. While he might've been content to just let her handle everything involving the Bank, Hector knew that it would probably bite him on the ass one day if he didn't continue making an effort to learn the trade, at least a little. He doubted he would ever become truly great at it, but hopefully, he could manage to avoid making a total fool of himself if he ever needed to show up to a board meeting on short notice or something.

And on the subject of expansion, the Bank was obviously key. For both Warrenhold and his new land in Lorent. That was a lot of heavy lifting, financially speaking, and the Bank was going to be carrying the brunt of it.

After discussing it more with the Madame Carthrace, they decided that they would indeed be branching out into Lorent with their operations, offering full services to all Lorentian citizens in Hector's southern Jagwa territory. The intent was to eventually expand to the rest of Lorent as well, but they didn't want to rush that when they knew that they were already on quite delicate footing here to begin with."

Given all that Queen Helen had said previously when Hector first broached the subject with her, it was clear that she wouldn't be terribly pleased by this news of their expansion. She had, in essence, expressed concern that his bank might grow too powerful too quickly, and while Hector found that understandable from her perspective, he also knew that he had to do what was right by the people that were depending on him.

And if they didn't expand into Lorent soon, then it wouldn't be a matter of simply "slowing" the Bank's growth. The Bank would begin to stagnate and even lose money, thanks to Atreyan regulations.

Or at least, that was his understanding of the situation. He did worry that perhaps these veteran bankers who were advising him were pulling the wool over his eyes, trying to make the situation seem more dire than it truly was so that he would be more agreeable about the expansion, but as far as he'd been able to tell, they were all being straight with him. He'd read the regulations himself. Learned about why they were implemented. And he'd consulted with several reapers and Rainlords who were knowledgeable about finances and politics.

This needed to be done. He was convinced. Even if it made the Queen unhappy with him.

The more time went on, the more Hector began to wonder what would happen if he and the Queen ever had a true falling out with one another. He felt like his relationship with her was probably the most important one that he had, politically speaking. And after all she'd been through, all she'd done for him, he hated the idea of allowing things to break down between them.

Was there something he could do to help ensure that they remained on good terms? There must've been, right? Yeah, of course there was. He just had to think about it.

He could feel a few ancient memories from the Candle bubbling up, wanting to assert their relevance to his current line of thinking.

Hmm.

A kingdom in decline. A class of warriors raised to nobility generations ago, now being disrespected daily in the king's court. Soon, the king himself begins to chip away at their political power, little by little. Near

a decade transpires, and they are a shadow of their former glory, figureheads at best. Talk of civil war has been bandied about for years, and it finally becomes more than just talk, but it is far too late. They have not the influence nor the resources to succeed, and in the end, they are all beheaded.

But the war still cripples the kingdom. Makes it even more vulnerable than it already was. And another war soon breaks out as the neighboring king seeks to take advantage of the opportunity.

Conquest follows swiftly, and the kingdom in decline is a kingdom no longer.

Huh...

Well, that wasn't very comforting. And perhaps a little biased. Maybe one of these other memories would be better."

"3475

Hmm. A queen with an obsession. A desire to restore her religion as the most prominent one of her kingdom. She converts her husband at a young age, and he quarrels with the court priests throughout his reign. Many call her a witch, a demon, a manipulative hag, and when her husband dies of pneumonia, they blame her.

But she has her faith. Her own priests. And a foreign papacy supporting her. Together, they call forth a host of holy warriors. The crown would normally pass to the eldest son, but he was born by the previous queen, the excommunicated one, and so he has no love for her, nor her for him. If she allowed him to be crowned, he would have her beheaded at the earliest opportunity.

And so there is war. Her sacred army proves victorious.

And there is no leniency in her heart. As would have been done to her, so she does to her enemies.

...Man, what the fuck? That was even worse than the last one. And how many of these memories ended with beheadings?

"Ah... Lord Goffe?" arrived a feminine voice.

He looked up from his ribeye steak and creamed spinach in order to

see a familiar young woman standing on the other side of the large table in the Tower of Night's refectory.

Selena Cortes was her name. Zeff's niece. He did not, however, see her reaper, Ojarea, with her.

Hector was aware that those two had been working through some relationship troubles, which was a rather worrisome problem to have between a reaper and servant. It made him all the more grateful for Garovel, and yet he also felt in some tangential way responsible for them, too. Being the Lord of Warrenhold, where they were currently living, he felt like he needed to keep an eye on them.

He'd mentioned their troubles to Zeff a while back, who had apparently taken the direct approach toward trying to help the two of them repair things. Zeff and his sister, Joana, had confronted Ojarea and eventually arranged for strict regimenting of the time the two were allowed to see each other. And from what Hector understood, the other heads and reapers of both Houses Elroy and Cortes had been speaking with Ojarea regularly as a form of therapeutic engagement.

Which was an interesting concept, Hector had thought. Reapers, being immortal and so knowledgeable of the world, did not seem like the easiest subjects for therapy, but he supposed if he anyone could pull it off, it would be another reaper."

"3476

All of that had to have been made even more difficult, however, due to the current circumstances. With Zeff and so many other prominent Rainlords abroad, Hector couldn't deny being a bit worried about Selena and Ojarea's progress.

So to see her coming up to him like this certainly made him curious. "H-hello, Miss Cortes," he said, setting his fork and knife down.

"Sorry to bother you while you're eating," she said, looking briefly like she was about to sit down across from him and then thinking better of it.

"...Is something the matter?" he asked. Wait, should he have invited her to sit? Probably. Dammit.

"Oh, no, I was just--er--" She looked around. A few of the other Rainlords were watching them now. "I'm sorry. Is this inappropriate? It is, isn't it? I'm sorry. I'll go now." And she was already turning to leave.

"Hold on a second," said Hector, more confused now than concerned. "Whatever it is, just sit down and tell me."

She stared at him for a moment, eyes big and gray. Then she glanced around again and finally sat down without saying anything.

Hector waited for her.

But she still remained quiet.

Umm.

What the hell was going on here?

Girls had always been rather impossible for him to understand, but he had to admit that Selena here was consistently proving to be the most confounding one he'd ever met. He still remembered her jubilant, irreverent attitude when he'd found her having mounted a giant gun on that underground train. Compared to how he'd found her shortly thereafter, panicking and crying while Ojarea yelled at her, Hector didn't know how to consolidate those two completely different versions of her in his mind.

Sure, maybe she'd just been full of bravado and hadn't realized how much danger she was putting herself in. In fact, that was almost certainly the case. But he also had to wonder if that part of her was still in there, somewhere. Thus far, he'd yet to see it again, but... did people really change so dramatically so quickly?

She'd snuck away from her family during a deadly train ride in a foreign land filled with bandits and monsters. She couldn't have been entirely ignorant of the danger, so that had definitely required some guts on her part.

Not that he actually wanted to see such recklessness from her again, of course. It just made him curious about her. About what kind of person she really was.

After all, he'd come to realize that he had some... different sides to himself, lurking within his mind. It only made sense that other people might have something similar going on, no?"

"3477

It seemed like Hector would have to be the one to revive the conversation, so he tried his best to think of something. Maybe he should've called Garovel over or just consulted him, but...

Hmm.

For some reason, he didn't want to. For some reason, that seemed like it would be somehow inappropriate. Or disrespectful to Selena, perhaps.

What a weird feeling.

"...Is it something that you're worried about?" tried Hector. "Or maybe something that you think I could help you with? Or... uh...?"

It took her few more moments, but she found her response. "I wanted your opinion."

Well, that was a start. "Okay. About what?"

"About... ah..." She was hesitating so much that Hector became worried that she wasn't going to finish her sentence again.

Man, was this what it had been like talking to him, not so long ago?

Wow.

She did manage to get the rest out, though. "About... your meal. The steak that you're eating. What do you think of it?"

The steak? That had not been what he was expecting. Though, he supposed he didn't even know what he'd been expecting. "Uh... why are you asking about that?" Then it clicked, and he blinked. "Did you cook this?"

Her eyes went a little wide, and then she nodded, meekly at first and then more vigorously. "Is it any good?"

Oh shit. He wasn't exactly a food connoisseur. In fact, he'd only recently acquired a taste for steak, so he didn't really have much to compare it against.



That didn't seem like a good answer to give, though. In fact, it seemed like it might've been among the worst ones.

"Er, um. Yeah. It's quite good, actually. I thought Lluís had cooked it, like the last few times."

A smile arrived on her face briefly before disappearing into a look of abrupt skepticism. "Are you telling the truth? Or are you just saying that to spare my feelings?"

"No, I--"

"I won't improve if you don't give me honest criticism, Lord. Then every steak I make for you in the future will taste like shit, and you'll have no one to blame but yourself, you know."

It was his turn to go a bit wide-eyed, and he couldn't help laughing. She certainly seemed to have a way of catching him off guard. "I am being honest," he said, still snickering.

Her eyes lit up again, but then she squinted at him. "Really? I don't know if I believe you. You seem like the 'too nice' type.'"

"3478

Hector laughed again. "I promise I'm telling the truth," he said. "But I will say that I'm not exactly a food critic, either. If you're looking to improve on your technique, then you should probably be consulting someone else."

"Oh, I think Lluís and Margot have that aspect of things covered for me," said Selena. "It's actually kinda crazy. They're so sweet and gentle and kind the rest of the time. An idyllic old married couple, you know? But then you get them to start teaching you about food, and they turn into the some of the strictest disciplinarians you'll ever meet."

"Wow, really? They always seem so laidback."

She paused again, blinking as she perhaps rethought what she had been saying. "N-not that I'm trying to get them in trouble or anything. I love them both and am terribly grateful to them. I'm just complaining for, uh--for fun, I guess."

Hector cocked an eyebrow, unable to conceal his smile. "For fun?"

“Yeah, you know? Talkin’ shit? So it’s no big deal. I just suddenly realized you might take me too seriously and go chew them out or something. And that’s the last thing I want. They really are too sweet for this world, when it comes down to it. They wouldn’t deserve that.”

“Okay, so first you were worried I’m too nice, and now you’re worried I’m too much of a hard ass?”

“Yeah, well, I’m still getting to know you, okay?”

“I feel like you might be too much of a worrywart,” said Hector.

“That’s quite rude. And not untrue. That’s actually something I’ve been trying to be better about, but it’s hard.”

Hector could relate. “Yeah, I’m... er, kinda the same way, honestly. It’s tough to not overthink things, sometimes.”

“Oh yeah?” said Selena. “But you always seem as cool as a cucumber. Are you telling me that deep down, you’re actually not cool or cucumber-like at all?”

“Heh, I’m afraid so...”

“Hmm. What would be the appropriate analogy for you, then? Warm as a trout?”

“What the--? Why a trout?”

“I dunno. I’m brainstorming.”

“Isn’t it supposed to, uh, start with the same letter? Like ‘cool as a cucumber’ does?”

“Oh, right, right. Maybe, then, um, warm as a wolverine?”

“Are wolverines warm?”

“Probably. They live outdoors with all that fur.”

“I’m pretty sure they can still get cold, though.”

“Warm as a waterfall.”

“Those aren’t really warm, either.”

“Warm as a warm waterfall.”

“You just used the word warm twice.”

“Warm as a warm spring.”

“You did it again!”

“Warm as a war with wizards.”

“I don’t even know what to say about that one.”

“No, hey, that one makes sense! Wizards cast fireballs, right? So it really would be warm! And it’s fun to say!”

“I’ve forgotten why we even started talking about this in the first place.””

"3479

Selena giggled but didn’t spout off another iteration, though perhaps not for a lack of trying. Judging from her expression, she was still thinking.

Hector had a feeling that this would keep going for quite a while if he didn’t change the subject first. “Have you had something to eat yet, yourself?” he asked.

That seemed to catch her by surprise. “Er, um, no...”

“Then why don’t you go grab something from the kitchen and join me?” said Hector. “Or you could have some of my steak, if you want.”

“What? No, I couldn’t possibly--I mean, I made that for you. It’d be weird if I--um--I don’t know if--that’s just--I mean, honestly, how could you even--?”

Hmm. Had that been a weird suggestion on his part? Maybe it was. She certainly seemed flustered by it for some reason.

He didn’t really get it. “Do you want some of my spinach, then?”

She took an abrupt break from her fumbling. “...I hate spinach.”

Hector couldn’t help snickering again. “It’s not for everyone, I guess.

It's pretty healthy, though, I think."

"If it wants me to eat it, then maybe it shouldn't taste like a bag full of lawn mower shavings."

"I'm not sure it wants anything. It's spinach."

"I'm more of a carnivore," she said.

"Oh, so you do want the steak." He started cutting her off a portion.

"No, I--agh, if I want one, I'll make one later! You just sit there and eat! I swear if you keep trying to give that to me, I'll start to think you were lying before about it being good! That you're just trying to find an excuse so you don't have to finish it!"

Man, she sure was getting animated again. It was really strange how she could waffle back and forth between being so reserved and being so full of energy.

He was mainly just amused, though, and he did indeed go back to eating quietly as he waited for her to settle down.

Once she did, another bit of silence descended upon the table, though it felt decidedly less awkward than before. Instead, it felt more like they were both waiting for the other to make some sort of move so that they could try to counter it.

Or at least, that was Hector's feeling, anyway. He smiled as he chewed.

"...Warm as a woolly mammoth," said Selena.

Oh, goddammit."

"3480 -- CCXCI.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-One: 'Thy primordial glimmer...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Man, the Library sure felt quiet, lately.

Well. Quieter, he supposed. It wasn't like it had ever been particularly

noisy to begin with it. At least, not in the conventional sense.

But there was definitely something different about it now, Ibai Blackburn thought. And it probably had to do with Gohvis, the Keeper of the Library, not being here for the first time that Ibai had seen.

He'd been trying to figure out the exact nature of the difference ever since Gohvis left, but it was difficult. What was a giant, sentient Library supposed to feel like, anyway?

Maybe it was apprehensive without its master around to protect it? Or maybe it was actually feeling uncertainty with the bit of freedom that it now had? Gohvis certainly had an oppressive presence when he was around, though most of his mutant followers didn't seem to feel that way.

Gohvis had taken several of them with him, Ibai noticed, so that doubtless contributed to the quietude, as well. The refectory was emptier, as were the recreational rooms.

But it was really all the book rooms that made Ibai so curious.

So his current objective with his writing was to hopefully, somehow, gain some sort of clue about the curious puzzle that was this ancient Library of Erudition.

He'd been trying for a while now, writing original stories so that he might gift them to the Library and thereby gain its affection, and his first work had been a rip-roaring success.

Probably.

Okay, yeah, it was a little hard to tell if the Library had actually been pleased or not, but it definitely felt less hostile towards him, he thought. Why, just the other day, when he took a book off the shelf and started walking away with it, the Library waited nearly ten whole seconds before trying to kill him with a serpentine stream of ardor-infused, razor-sharp papers.

A few months ago, it would've only been five seconds. Progress!

So with this current story that he was writing, he was thinking that perhaps the narrative should in some way be related to his objective with the Library. Metaphorically, that was.

He'd decided to make it about two guys who were struggling to get to

know and trust each other during a period of civil unrest under a despotic regime, where trusting one another carried even more risk than usual.

And he was just. About. Done. Putting the finishing touches on it.

Yeah.

In the end, true friendship won the day. The two men became lifelong buddies and took down the evil dictator oppressing the land.

Perfect."

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"3481

Ibai exhaled a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. He stretched his arms and rolled his neck. Whew.

He'd lost track of time again, hadn't he? Well, at least he wasn't feeling

so utterly famished that he could barely walk. He'd gotten an earful from Chergoa and Emiliana after that one.

But the book was done. His next gift for the Library. Impulsively, he wanted to hand it over right away, but then he thought that maybe he should wait until his proofreader returned so that he could put the extra-finishing touches on it.

Hmm. Tough call. Making him antsy.

Either way, it was time for a break, he supposed. And thinking about Chergoa and Emiliana just now had made him want to go check on the two of them.

Emiliana in particular.

She'd been in a peculiar state, recently. Just before leaving, Gohvis had taught her some type of new meditative technique, and now, the entire time he'd been away, she hadn't budged from that same spot in the center of the Library's main room, right next to Arkos' Great Globe of Eleg.

Sure enough, when he arrived, she was still there, just the same as he'd last seen her. Yesterday? Two days ago? He wasn't sure.

He'd frequently seen Chergoa hanging around her as well, and indeed, she was here this time, too.

'Hey,' said the reaper upon seeing him.

"Hiya." With his new book under his arm, he approached the young woman both curiously and cautiously. It was weird. He didn't want to disturb her training, but at the same time, it had been so long that it was hard not to worry about her condition. She was looking decidedly quite pale and slim. "Any change?" he asked.

'None that I've been able to see,' said Chergoa. 'Apart from the obvious.'

The obvious being her weight and complexion, Ibai knew. "Wow. It's been over a week now, hasn't it?"

'Going on two, actually.'

Really? Huh. "And you still can't rouse her out of it?"

'Sure can't,' said Chergoa with a sigh.



"Hmm. Do you think...? Um." He was hesitant to utter his next question, despite having thought it several times already, but it seemed to him that they were reaching a point where they shouldn't ignore the possibility. "Do you think, perhaps, that this isn't actually a form of training, like Gohvis said?"

'The thought has crossed my mind, yes.'  
"3482

Of course it had. She was the thoughtful, worrisome type, wasn't she? Yep. "What should we do?"

'I don't know,' said Chergoa. 'Doesn't seem like there's much that we can, except wait for the grumpy dragon to show up again and reverse whatever he's done.'

Hmm. Ibai wondered if that was really true. Sure, it seemed like it was, but... hmm.

With all this knowledge around here, all this incredible power being hoarded by this sentient Library, there was almost certainly something that could be done.

It was just a matter of finding out how.

But of course, that would mean reading a lot of books. Like, a prohibitively silly amount of books. Which would probably take so long that, yeah, it would just be faster to wait for Gohvis to return, instead.

Plus, if there was, hypothetically, only one book within the entire Library that held the solution to Emiliana's current predicament, then that meant it was quite possible he could spend the rest of his life reading books and still never find it. That was how many there were to go through, between all the different rooms.

Though, hopefully, there would be more than just one book that had the answer in it. Surely, there would be at least a handful of them, right?

Maybe.

Interesting to think about, nonetheless. Especially because he knew

that there were still hidden areas within the Library that he had not yet been able to explore, areas that were probably being hidden--as in, purposely--by the Library itself.

He'd discussed this very subject with Emiliana a few times. She told him about how Gohvis had taken her through a hidden passageway in order to meet a funny squid-lady called the Weaver.

That story had actually piqued his curiosity so much that he decided to go on a quest to find and talk to her himself. He'd already been having plenty of fun exploring the Library without any particular goal in mind at all, so the notion that there were extra-hidden secrets to be uncovered had only served to increase his motivation and enjoyment that much more.

And he hadn't told anyone about this yet, but he'd actually succeeded in finding her.

Quite easily, as it so happened. She had apparently been able to figure out that he was looking for her and had therefore started talking to him telepathically in order to guide him directly to her.

'What is it that you want from me?' was the first thing she'd asked upon seeing him.

"Iunno!" he'd told her with a big shrug and a bigger smile."  
"3483

'You are a curious creature, aren't you?' she'd said.

"Is that a compliment? Because it sounds like a compliment! If so, then thank you!"

'It is, yes. But you know what they say about curiosity, don't you?'

"That it's the foundation for all human advancement?"

At that, the Weaver giggled. 'Why are you aberrations all so amusing? Is it somehow baked into your very nature?'

"Ooh, so you've met other aberrations, huh?"

'Indeed. Though, typically, I look upon them from afar. Meetings are not my strong suit, after all.'

“Well, I’m glad you’re making an exception for me, then. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Weaver.”

‘The pleasure is mine. I must say, however, that you are far more polite and personable than most aberrations. In fact, now that I am thinking more deeply about it, I find it quite strange how you are not entirely bored out of your skull while stuck within the confines of the Library.’

“Why would I be bored? There’s so much to do here! So much to learn!”

‘Is that so? I was under the impression that aberrations did not find reading to be very fun. And fun is the only thing that you care about, is it not?’

Ibai scratched his chin. “Well, I wouldn’t say the only thing, but... yeah, maybe, sorta. Fun is what makes life worth living, isn’t it?”

‘Now there is a question for the ages. I do not know if I can agree, however. I think there must surely be more meaning in life than indulging in pleasurable activity.’

“Oh, of course, of course! But the ‘meaning’ of life is a slightly different matter, I’d say.”

‘Would you? I would not. On the subject of what makes life “worth living,” I would say that “meaning” is what matters most of all. If your life consists of nothing but meaningless amusements, then would that not begin to ring hollow after a while? Would you not be deprived of a greater, deeper sense of fulfillment?’

Ibai crossed his arms and smiled, having to chew on that a little. He decided to take a seat on the cold floor, as well. It was a bit wet and sticky, but he didn’t mind. “Those are all fair points,” he said. “But I’d also argue that without fun, life would surely become a slog. A rote, tiresome experience devoid of any spark or magic. Moreover, I think that it’s wrong to reduce fun down to this idea of ‘pleasurable activity.’ Because fun is also dependent on one’s mindset, no? What I find fun might be quite different from what you find fun, eh?”

"3484

'I fail to see a difference,' said the Weaver. 'Whether you find something fun or I find it fun is irrelevant, because the question already concerns only what is relative to us, individually. What the "pleasurable activity" actually entails is immaterial, so long as it is established as being both fun and meaningless. One's mindset would not change that.'

"No, but that's what I'm getting at," said Ibai. "The 'meaninglessness' of an activity is not something that can be established. In fact, I think I can make a rather strong argument that fun, in itself, might very well create meaning. All on its own."

'Go on, then. Make your strong argument.'

He giggled. "Okay, well, uh! Here goes! Hmm!" He took a few moments to gather his thoughts and figure out where to begin. "So if the hypothesis here is that 'fun generates meaning,' then we should first establish what constitutes fun and what constitutes meaning. In which case, I put forth the definition that 'fun,' ultimately, is a sense of positivity that occurs in the brain as a direct result of observing or participating in an activity."

'Stop there. I see your game. That definition is too broad. It can apply to plenty of situations which cannot reasonably be considered fun.'

"Mm, you think so?"

'Yes. A "sense of positivity" is far too vague. By that definition, you could declare any fleeting sense of "hope" that one ever feels in the midst of a terrible circumstance to also be "fun," as well.'

"Yeah-huh? And what's wrong with that?"

'You cannot seriously claim that you are suddenly "having fun" when surrounded on all sides by misery, just because a brief period of "positivity" comes over you.'

"Sure I can! Just because it may only exist in a trace amount doesn't mean it's not there!" He bobbed his head. "But I will acknowledge that, sure, it might be inappropriate to describe the overall situation as a fun one. For that to occur, I think you'd have to pass beyond some sort of critical threshold for fun. Where the positivity overwhelms the negativity long enough to cement itself in the mind."

'But positivity could apply to any number of other feelings.'

“And I’m saying that fun is a component of all of those feelings, too. Because positivity is fun!”

‘Mmhmm. But what of negativity, then? Is that not sometimes fun, in its own way?’”

"3485

“Ah, hmm! That IS an interesting question, isn’t it?! Perhaps in instances like that, the negativity has a hidden element of positivity inside it! Which is the real source of the fun!”

‘How convenient for your argument.’

“Admittedly, I feel a little out of my depth on that one. While I’ve read about those types of feelings, I don’t know if I’ve ever actually experienced that sort of thing, myself. But it does fascinate me! I mean, when you think about it, you’re turning something bad into something good! Isn’t that cool?!”

‘I don’t know if that’s the best way of looking at it.’

“Mm? Why not?”

‘Because a “feeling” of positivity stemming from a negative source is not necessarily a good thing. In fact, it might be quite a terrible thing. For example, the feeling that a bully gets when victimizing someone. The sense of power and control, I mean. That may feel good for the bully, temporarily, but is it a good thing overall? I think not.’

Ibai nodded along. “Fair enough, fair enough. But we’ve also shifted points a bit here, I think. What you’re talking about is someone feeling good from doing a bad thing. What I was talking about was someone feeling good from also feeling bad. Like, say, when you feel really sad about something but then start to feel weirdly kinda good about it, too. Maybe in a self-pitying sense. Which, okay, sure, isn’t necessarily the best thing, either, but... hmm...”

‘I see. I can agree that wallowing in one’s own misery can have a strangely comforting sensation to it. That may even be the driving force behind why it can be difficult to pull oneself out of such states. Because on some level, it feels good to remain there.’

“Yeah!”

‘In which case, your thesis about positivity being good is proven wrong.’

“Oh.” A beat passed. “Whoa, hey, wait a minute. I didn’t say positivity is always good. I said it’s fun!”

‘Oh? Then are you declaring that fun is not always good?’

He was tempted to say yes immediately, but he took a moment to mull it over a bit more, first. Then he nodded again. “Yeah, I think so. Lots of fun things can end up being quite bad in various ways, right?”

For a time, the Weaver said nothing. She merely stared at him from her shadowy corner of the room.

Or at least, that was what it felt like she was doing. It was a little hard to tell if she even had eyeballs with which to stare."

"3486

After that, their conversation had drifted to other subjects as the Weaver began asking various questions about Ibai himself, inquiring into his personal history. She even demonstrated an interest in House Blackburn as a whole.

He hadn’t provided her all of the answers that she wanted, however. As much as he enjoyed getting to meet her for the first time, he decided to play things more mischievously. When it came down to it, he didn’t know if he should trust her with information about his family.

Plus, it was more fun this way. He could tease her with his answers and maybe even coax a few out of her, in exchange. She was quite the curious creature, after all. He wanted to know more about her personal history, too.

She hadn’t been forthcoming at all, though, and so that first encounter had ended with the two of them having not made much progress with one another.

But that was okay. It just gave him more reason to go and talk to her again. If they were going to build trust, then it would take time.

And heck, even if she never told him anything else about herself, she

was still a wellspring of information about all manner of other subjects.

Such as the Library.

Which was why he decided to go and visit her again. He'd already asked her about Emiliana's meditative trance once before, and the Weaver had told him that she didn't know anything about it, but this time, Ibai intended to take a different approach.

Luckily, he'd already memorized the path back to her.

'Hello again,' she said.

"Hi," he said with his usual cheer, but he also decided to not waste time and just jump straight into his question. "Do you know of any other hidden areas within the Library? And I mean areas where, like, the extra special books are stored."

'Ah. Well, the answer to that is more complicated than you might expect.'

"How so?"

'Do I know of such areas? Yes, I do. Do I know how you can reach them? Maybe.'

"Aw, c'mon, don't tease me about this, too! This is more important than just simple curiosity on my part!"

'Alas, I am not teasing you. Rather, I genuinely am not sure if I can help you or not.'

"Oh."

'You're aware that the Library has a will of its own, yes?'

"Yeah-huh?"

'Then perhaps it will come as no surprise to you that if the Library does not wish for you to find something, then you will not find it.'

"3487

"HMMMMM." Ibai had to mull that notion over. "Well, now I'm torn,

because that sounds like a fun puzzle to solve. Going against the Library? Unlocking its secrets despite its best efforts hide them? What a great game!" He bobbed his head to one side. "But on the other hand, might it actually be more fun to try and earn the Library's trust? I mean, I've been working that angle for a while already, so it would probably be faster to simply continue on like so, eh?"

'Not merely faster, but also possible. As I said, if it doesn't want you to find something, then you have no hope of finding it. The Library will forever conceal it from you.'

"Oh, quit that! Don't try and tempt me now! It won't work!"

'I am not trying to tempt you. I am merely warning that--'

"It won't work, I said!" And he broke for a short laugh. "If this were just matter of my own academic interest and desire to have a boatload of fun, then sure, you'd have tricked me down that first path like the super smart squid lady that you are--and I'd have been pleased as punch about it, too! But unfortunately, there's more at stake here than just that. Can't justify taking that kind of risk."

'Again, I was not trying to trick you--'

"My heart shan't waver! Don't worry about it! Though I may long for a puzzle to solve, I must stay the clearer course!"

'Alright, whatever.'

"Might you have any tips about how to get on the Library's good side?"

'None whatsoever.'

"Aww, shucks, really?"

'The Library is a capricious, ravenous, amoral monstrosity. I do not think it has the capacity to trust or love you or anyone else, even in the most minor of ways.'

Ibai pressed his lips together flatly. "Pretty harsh, bro."

'Do not call me that.'

"Sis?"

'Nor that.'



“Sibling? Oh, or?! Squidbling?!”

‘Ugh, what the--?’

“Look, you can’t be sayin’ stuff like that about the Library and still expect it to fall in love with you. I’m sure it can hear you. And words hurt, you know.”

‘What nonsense are you talking now?’

“In fact, you should probably apologize.”

‘For what? I merely spoke the truth.’

“Mmmmm, I dunno...”

‘Of course you do not know. You know nothing of this place, while I have been here for decades.’

“Okay, but even if what you said was true--or partially true, maybe--I’m sure there was still a nicer way you could have phrased it, right?”

‘You are beginning to annoy me.’”

"3488

“Am I?” said Ibai. “I apologize. Much like you should!”

‘You are getting sidetracked. Weren’t you saying that you had something important to do?’

“I did say that, yes! You’re a good listener!”

‘I presume it has to do with the Elroy girl’s current circumstances.’

“You’re good at presuming, too!”

‘You think the Library can help her?’

“That’s the hope. Dunno how plausible it is, though.”

‘Not at all, I’d wager.’

“Hmm? You just said it was possible, though, didn’t you?”

‘No. Winning its favor may be possible. Unlikely, perhaps, but possible. But acquiring its help for the girl? That is a different matter, unfortunately. ‘Tis is a fool’s errand, I’m afraid.’

“Dang. Why you gotta be such a downer about it, though?”

‘You told me of her current state before, remember? If the Master was truly the one to put her into that trance, then the Library will not help. He is its Keeper, and it will not go against him.’

“Yeah, but what if I ask it really nicely?”

‘Your jests belie your desperation. And while I sympathize with your plight, I think you would be better off not wasting your time on it. The Master has obviously taken an interest in her and will therefore not abandon her. Sooner or later, he will return and revive her, and given that she is undead, it does not matter how delayed his return might be. She will be fine, regardless.’

“All fair points,” said Ibai. “But I also can’t help thinking that maybe you’re overestimating how much the Library cares about Gohvis’ opinion. Didn’t you just get done saying how capricious it is? Even if he is its Keeper, does that really matter?”

‘I have never once seen it move against him.’

“Well, there’s a first time for everything. Plus, it wouldn’t even be going against him by aiding me. That’s a false dichotomy! It’s not like we’re sworn enemies or anything! I think Gohvis is a swell guy! Reads my books, you know! Very thoughtful, him!”

‘Uh-huh... Nothing I say will convince you to give up, will it?’

“Proly not. I like to think I’m open to having my mind changed, but sometimes, you’ve just gotta stand firm, don’t you think?”

‘Clearly, what I think doesn’t matter.’

“Aw, don’t be like that! Hey, what say I put in a good word for you once I’ve won the Library over, eh? Maybe help repair some of the bad blood between the two of you? Because there’s bad blood, right? I’m definitely sensing some bad blood.””

"3489

‘I have no desire to curry favor with a building,’ said the Weaver.

“Why not? What do you have against buildings?”

‘Enough silliness. If you are so determined to befriend the Library, then you will find no help from me.’

“Really? Not even a little bit?”

‘I do not know anything that would be of use to you.’

“Are you sure? What if you just don’t know that you know? They call those kinds of things unknown unknowns. Y’know?”

‘If that is so, then I would still have no way of detecting and then imparting said knowledge to you.’

“Unless I ask you the right questions! Triggering your deeply rooted, ancient wisdom!”

‘I’m not THAT old, I’ll have you know.’

“And yet you’re still so full of ancient wisdom! It’s all the more impressive when you look at it like that!”

‘Flattery is pointless and beneath you.’

“It’s not flattery if I’m just speaking the truth, is it?”

‘Yes, it still is. The intent is what matters.’

“Huh. Well, my intentions are entirely pure, so I’m pretty sure that I’m covered there, too.” And before she could give another sidetracking retort, he decided to push the conversation forward. “Anyway! Question time! It’ll be a fun game! You like games, don’t you? I sure do!”

‘Is that the first question? Because yes, I do happen to enjoy a good game, now and again.’

“Perfect! What a great start!”

‘Go on, then. See if you can uncover something within my mind that even I have forgotten about.’

“Okay! Hmm! Let’s see here... Now what would be a good subject to

begin with...?"

'You have no idea? After all that bluster, I thought you had some sort of plan, but you really are just winging it, aren't you?'

"Oh, I know! The first time you arrived at the Library! How'd you come to be here, exactly?"

'Is this game just an excuse to ask me personal questions?'

"No! Of course not! Maybe a little!"

That earned a silent titter from her. 'I was brought here by the Master, of course. He wanted to provide a place for me to rest and recover after... a particularly trying ordeal.'

"Oh? Mysterious. What was the nature of this ordeal, hmm?"

'Let's keep these questions relevant to the Library itself, shall we?'

"Aww. But okay. In that case, how long ago was it that you arrived here?"

'Decades, as I already said.'

"Yeah, but how many decades, exactly?"

'Many.'

"So like seven?"

'I'm not that old!'

"Alright, but then stop saying things that make me think you are!"

'Look, the truth is, I do not quite recall how long it has been. Time... is a rather loose concept for me. I do not feel its passing as I once did.'

"...Sounds like something a really old person would say."

'Oh, shut up!'"

"3490

"Okay, okay, sorry. I'll stop calling you old. I can see how sensitive you

are about the subject, which tells me that you might, for some reason, be lying to me about it, but I suppose that's neither here nor there. Let me ask something--"

'I'm not lying! I'm still young, damn you!'

Dang. He'd just been teasing her, but with all her protestations, now he was genuinely starting to believe that she was hundreds or even thousands of years old, somehow.

His big, toothy smile probably wouldn't have helped her mood very much, but thankfully, the room was too dark for her to see it.

'And wipe that shit-eating grin off your stupid face.'

Oh. Well, nevermind.

"Anywho! Next question! You're doing great so far, by the way! Very cooperative!"

She just returned a psychic grumble.

"Do you know of any other secret passageways, like the one that leads to this room here?"

'Sure. There's one that leads to an underground garden on the lower levels. And one to a bathing chamber, where certain historical figures were known to get up to all sorts of naughty hijinks.'

"Ooooh."

'If you visit that second one, however, then I would take great caution, were I you. The waters there have been neglected and stagnant for eons. It would not surprise me if they are rancid or even toxic.'

"Ewwwww. But neat! Any other cool spots to know about? Like, say, a secret inner sanctum full of secret, inner-sanctum-y reading materials?"

'Oh, of course.'

"Really?!"

'No! I already told that I don't know how to reach such areas! I would have directed you to them straight away if I did.'

"Ah."

‘You think I would’ve forgotten about something so important?’

“Well. I mean. I didn’t want to bring up your age again, but...”

‘I will turn your insufferable little mind into a Jesbolese knot if you keep this up.’

“Mmmmm. So what made you come to believe that the Library hides stuff from us, then? Was there a particular place that you’ve tried to find but just couldn’t?”

‘If you’re asking whether or not I’ve ever personally searched for this “inner sanctum” as you called it, then yes, I have. And to no avail, obviously.’

“And yet you’re still convinced that it exists?”

‘The Master has mentioned it. I believe he knows how to reach it. And others, most likely.’

“Makes sense, I guess. Where did you search, exactly?”

‘Everywhere. Every floor. Behind every wall. Beyond every brick. Between every nook and cranny.’

“Sounds a little exaggerated...”

"3491

‘You test my patience yet again. I assure you that I was entirely thorough. There must be some strange mechanism by which the Library can conceal its pathways. To my mind, the most likely reason is that it is able to shift walls and hallways or even entire rooms as it pleases.’

“Yeah, that sounds like something that this cheeky building might do.”

‘But that is only my guess. I fear there may be yet more to it. Some other component that I am unable to even imagine.’

Ibai stuck on that notion for a moment, rubbing his chin as he thought about it. “Some other component, huh? Interesting...”

‘Might you have some idea?’

“Oh, it’s too soon to say anything about that. Wild speculation can come later!”

‘That’s not really what I was getting at.’

“Do you know who built the Library of Erudia?”

‘Ah. Now that is a complicated subject. This place is as ancient as they come. ‘Tis a remnant of the many lost civilizations that once called Exoltha home.’

“Many? Not just one?”

‘Oh yes. It was a long-continued project, spanning generations and bringing together cultural figureheads from across this continent. Kings and queens, prophets and apostles, akhunds and mobads. Many were brought together in the shared pursuit of the preservation of knowledge.’

“Mm! That was a really big deal back in those days, wasn’t it? Because they’d had so much trouble with heretical book burnings and whatnot, right?”

‘Oh, indeed. You’re familiar with the history?’

“A tad.”

‘Yes, wars were fought over these matters. It was certainly no coincidence that brought all of these learned men together. Many would have needed little or no convincing about the importance of the undertaking, having personally witnessed barbaric hordes descending upon their beloved institutions of learning.’

Ibai just nodded along silently.

‘As for who, precisely, began the long venture of trying to build the Library: I believe that information has been lost to time. Too many others came to be involved in its creation over such a long period of time. And there are quite a number of fantastic tales surrounding the various stages of its construction, too. It may be an impervious fortress now, but that is only because many brave people sacrificed everything in order to protect it while it was still vulnerable.’

“I read a bit about that, not long ago,” said Ibai. “There were something

like forty sieges on this place before it was finished.””  
"3492

‘You read about it?’ said the Weaver. ‘When?’

He paused for a shrug. “A couple weeks ago, maybe? Can’t remember which book. There’ve been lots.”

‘Hmm. Unfortunate. If you could find that book again, I would be interested in reading it myself.’

“Oh, okay! Sure, I’ll definitely find it for you! Wow! I kinda figured that you’d already read all the books here ‘r something.”

‘That would be an impossible feat, surely.’

“Guess so, huh? Especially with some of ‘em being hidden ‘n all.”

‘Indeed.’

“But wait a tick. Where did you learn about the history of the Library, then? Not from one of the books here?”

‘No, I...’

Ibai waited for her to finish, but it seemed like she wasn’t going to.

“You keep trying to convince me you’re not super old, but if you didn’t read about it in a book, then are you sure you don’t just remember the history?”

‘It is a personal matter.’

“Yeah, that makes sense. Remembering stuff is very personal.”

‘No, I mean--ugh. You know what, you silly aberration? Fine. You’ve worn me down. If you must know the truth, I did read about it in a book, just not one from the Library of Erudition.’

“Ooooh. So you’re like a huge nerd, then! Always visiting libraries and stuff!” And he laughed.

For some reason, she made no response.

“Oh, but I don’t mean that in like a bad way or anything! I think I’m



pretty nerdy myself. So we're like kindred spirits, is what I'm saying!"

'Uh... huh.'

"Anyway, you were saying? About the Library being built and protected by loads of cool and heroic people?"

'I'd finished my point, more or less. Unless there was something specific you wished to ask about.'

"Hmm-hmm. Um. Lemme see." Dang, this was a tough one.

He tried to focus. Which was not something that he attempted to do very often. Usually, he preferred to just let his mind go wherever it wanted. What was the point in trying to force his thoughts in a particular direction? Where was the fun? Where was the freedom?

But this was important. If he could just figure out a way to find the Library's secret stash of super cool books, then maybe he could figure out a way to help Emiliana.

So he decided not to just try. He decided to really try.

What questions could he ask the Weaver that might reveal some type of hidden clue?

"HMMMMMMMMMMMM..."

"3493

'...Are you alright?' said the Weaver. 'You look like you're in pain.'

He barely even heard her and certainly couldn't afford to formulate a response. He was busy. Thinking.

Because there was definitely something there. Something deep in his head.

Where? Exactly? Was it?

Something he'd read, maybe? Yeah...

In ancient times, places like this were even more difficult to build than they were today. Frequently, but not always, they were the work of

brilliant servants--or brilliant architects who employed servants. Exceptions existed all around the world, grand buildings that had been the product of pure, normal human labor--such as the Great Cocoran Cathedral of Trenoy.

Yes. That was the ticket. Servants were not always part of the construction, but something else was. Every single time. The common denominator between the constructions of all these super-ancient structures.

They'd been built for the gods.

That was, perhaps, the greatest difference between the ancient world and modern day, Ibai thought. People back then revered the gods with an almost unfathomable passion, compared to today.

So this place must have been no different.

"...Which god was the Library of Erudia built in dedication to?" was what came out of his mouth.

'Oh, that's a tough question, but as it so happens, I do know the answer to it.'

"Cool!"

'As with most things regarding the Library, it is a complicated matter. But first, are you already aware of the Dáinnbolg's relevance to your question?'

He blinked. The Eternal Storm? The thing blanketing all of Exoltha and causing it to be the so-called 'dead continent?' His curiosity had just doubled at the mere mention of it. "No. What does that have to do with this?"

'Supposedly, the Dáinnbolg is the long-lingering work of Hada, the God of Storms and Wrath. Otherwise known as He Who Hates All Humanity.'

"Oh! Wow, really? That would make a lot of sense!"

'Supposedly, I said. There's no way to know for sure. In fact, perhaps Hada was merely blamed for it because of how sensible the idea SEEMED.'

"Ah. Hmm. That'd be a real bummer for him, eh?"

‘Regardless, the story goes that Hada was once the caretaker of Exoltha--and also the progenitor of its inhabitants.’

“Wait, really? He created people? Despite famously wanting all of us dead?”

‘Yes, it is a contradiction. Perhaps this story is false. Or perhaps this occurred before his hatred grew to be so strong. Or perhaps it is WHY it grew so strong. If only we could find him and ask him for clarification personally. Preferably without being instantly obliterated.’

"3494

“Huh,” said Ibai. “Makes me wonder what people made by such an angry guy would’ve been like.”

‘That’s a key part of the tale,’ she said. ‘As the story goes, they took after him. TOO much so, in fact. Rather than worshiping him, they hated and cursed him at every opportunity. Never built a single temple in his honor, apparently.’

Ibai bit his lip, holding in a laugh. “Yikes.”

‘They had a long and storied history of rebelling against their creator--trying to slay him, even. Until eventually, Hada grew fed up with them and began brewing the Dáinnbolg as a form of final punishment.’

“Ah. Hmm.”

‘But his people, just like him, were far too stubborn to roll over and die. So they set to work building as many new things as they could, trying to counter Hada’s unending wrath with invincible structures.’

“Oh! So the Library was one of those, then?”

‘Yes. But even among those exceptional structures, the Library was still quite special, because not only was it built as a form of rebellion against Hada, but it was also built in dedication to three other gods.’

“Say what?”

‘I already told you that many people came together to build this place, right?’

“Yeah-huh?”

‘Well, some of them were worshipers of other gods. And the “anti-worshipers” of Hada apparently didn’t mind.’

“Ooh.” He sucked some air in through his teeth. “Ouch. That’s gotta sting, if you’re Hada, right? Not only are your own people turning against you. They’re also going to your relatives? And your relatives aren’t saying no, either? Dang, dude.”

‘Quite. So you can see how this tale might have done little to soothe Hada’s hatred of us.’

“I’d be surprised if it didn’t make him hate us even more. I kinda feel bad for the guy, honestly.”

‘Well, I wouldn’t expend too much empathy on him, if I were you. I don’t think I’ve ever read or heard a single nice thing about Hada. In fact, if he is or ever was real, then I would argue that he was the single most colossal bastard to have ever existed.’

“Really? That’s pretty harsh.”

‘Know what the first cause was for his hatred of humanity? The thing that got the ball rolling?’

“No, what?”

‘He wanted to eat us. And when we fought back, he didn’t like it. And from there, the hatred just built and built.’

“Huh...”

‘Still empathizing with him?’

“Well, I mean, that’s just one example of a bad thing. And first impressions can be really awkward and unfortunate, y’know? Maybe later on, he could’ve--”

‘He had a preference for devouring children.’

Ibai’s face scrunched up."

"3495

‘And that’s just the tip of the iceberg, frankly. There are many, many terrible stories of Hada being absolutely horrible. I’m surprised you aren’t more familiar with them.’

Truthfully, he was. He just hadn’t wanted to jump to conclusions. Just because Hada might’ve been a big ol’ jerk a hundred times in a row didn’t mean he couldn’t still be a nice guy on that hundred and first time, right?

Ibai made the rare decision of keep that thought to himself. He had a rather strong feeling that the Weaver either wouldn’t understand or would try to argue with him. Or maybe both.

And they’d already gotten sidetracked quite a bit.

‘Welp. Alright, then. So who were these three other gods that the Library was dedicated to?’

‘Makirë, Ettol, and Xixa.’

He had to pause and think about those, trying to recall anything he might have ever read about them. “Xixa... is the Goddess of Secrets, yes?”

‘That’s right. If one were to believe in her, then it’d be reasonable to think that she would make great use of a place like this.’

‘Yeah. All the more reason to think that there are plenty of juicy secrets here, waiting to be uncovered.’

‘True enough. But Xixa was also known as the Goddess of Darkness and the Goddess of Beauty. So if you’re trying to read something into her supposed involvement, then perhaps you should take those monikers into account, too.’

“Hmm. ‘Kay. What about the other two, though? I’m not as familiar with them. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever heard of them, even.”

‘No? Perhaps that is not surprising. They are both rather odd and mysterious figures. Makirë was known as the Goddess of Wonder, Youth, and the Stars. Ettol was known as the God of Impulse, Deceit, and Rebirth. The stories about them are always quite strange.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, Makirë, for instance, is frequently depicted as an elderly woman

with a very childish demeanor. She is regularly abrasive and even cruel--much how children can be. But her tales often involve helping people come to terms with some horrific truth--and then providing some manner of comfort or aid. I remember one story in which she appears before a man who is terminally ill. She makes him relive many important moments in his life, showing him his own ugliness and mistreatment of others, chastising him ruthlessly and tormenting him psychologically with impossible hypothetical quandaries. And yet in the end, she accepts his apologies, restores him to youthful vigor, and then takes him with her to visit a new world among the stars."

"3496

"Huh," mused Ibai, a smile reforming on his lips again. "Sounds like an interesting person to talk to!"

The Weaver tittered another time. 'You think so, do you? I do not know if I would agree, but I can at least say with confidence that I would enjoy listening to YOU speak to her.'

"Meeting new people is always fun," he said.

'I shan't try to rain on your parade. As for Ettol, I assume you are also curious about him?'

"Of course! What's his deal? God of Deceit, right? That doesn't sound very flattering."

'Yes. Most of the primordial gods are portrayed, at times, as both benevolent and malicious, depending on which story you are hearing or reading. But Ettol has, without a doubt, the wildest swings in portrayal out of any of them. In some tales, he tricks his victims into the cruelest of circumstances imaginable. I remember a story in which he appears in the dreams of a young, newlywed man, promising him riches, glory, and power if he would only leave his pregnant wife behind to pursue them.

'The young man does so, and over the course of his journey, the lad is cursed by a witch and turned into a cotton-eating weevil. The "riches" he earns are a field of cotton, so that he will never again go hungry. The "glory" he earns is that he becomes king of his fellow weevils. And the "power" he earns is immortality, which Ettol grants to him directly after appearing before him again and explaining the previous two

“rewards.”

Ibai's smile diminished as he continued to listen with widening eyes.

‘In another story, however, Ettol appears in the dreams of a young woman who has a vile and cruel mother. He lays out a plan for her to take up a knife while the woman is out gathering wood for a fire, then plunge it into her heart after she falls asleep. But when the girl refuses, Ettol changes her mother's heart, filling it with love and kindness for her daughter so that the two may live happily thereafter.’

“I see...”

‘But those are just the stories where he plays the part of a trickster god. He frequently appears in the stories of other gods, albeit stealthily so. You may read one story about Lhutwë, for example, wherein a sea serpent is featured prominently and Ettol is never mentioned. But then you may find out in an entirely different story that Ettol was that sea serpent all along and that he was either helping Lhutwë or throwing a wrench into the Water God's scheme by aiding the involved humans. That is the type of god he is.”

"3497 -- CCXCII.

“Interesting,” said Ibai. “He doesn't sound too terrible, in that case. Apart from being a little judgmental. And manipulative.”

‘And unpredictable,’ said the Weaver. ‘Out of the all the primordial gods I've read about, he may be the one that I would fear the most.’

“Really? That doesn't seem right. Hada seems way scarier. At least Ettol would have a chance of being on your side.”

‘No, but that's the thing. Ettol would at first appear to be your friend. Maybe even someone you already know quite well. In fact, you may never even know he was there to begin with until he had already passed judgment on you. With Hada, at least you could see him coming and try to prepare yourself.’

Ibai bobbed his head. “I gotta say... I find it a little curious how he's also the God of Rebirth, along with Impulse and Deceit. Do you know how he got those names?”

‘I do not. But it appears to be a pattern with each of the Primordials.

They all have three monikers.'

"A trinity of power," observed Ibai.

She paused at that. 'I... yes. I hadn't thought of it that way, but yes, perhaps that is exactly right. Hmm.'

"I wonder what it really means to be a 'god.'"

'A good question, if ever there was one.'

"Mmhmm. Think I wanna go do some reading, now."

'Ah, okay. So was any of that helpful? If you're able to somehow figure out the Library's deepest, darkest secrets from just that bit of information, then I'd sure love to hear about how and why.'

"Oh, it was super helpful! Thank you!"

'Uh-huh. What do you plan to do now? After your next reading session, I mean.'

Another big grin split his face. "Simple! I'm gonna write a new book!"

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Two: 'The Dragons in the Rain...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

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The allied Rainlord forces had managed to flank the enemy fairly well, though the geography of the area still left a rather clear route for them to retreat, whenever they decided to do so.

Perhaps the Rainlords could have done more to prevent that, to circle around and cut them off completely, but time had been a factor.

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"3498

Since time immemorial, the Rainlords had not been in the habit of massacring non-servant armies without leaving them the chance to retreat. They considered it dishonorable both as warriors and as servants. In fact, Rainlords who disregarded that unwritten rule were historically punished quite severely--even disowned as Rainlords, in certain extreme cases.

Their Arman ancestors had not been the same way, however.

That was one of the reasons why Rainlords had decided to distinguish themselves as such in the first place: to break away from the utter ruthlessness that the Armans had been known for while still trying to pay them homage for all that they accomplished.

Zeff sometimes wondered if that was a fruitless effort, though. Or a self-deceptive one, perhaps.

This barbarism that he felt in his heart. This anger. This desire to go forth and destroy his enemies. Maybe it was just in his blood. Maybe it

always had been.

Maybe Parson Miles had been right about that much, at least.

Foolish thoughts.

He shook his head and took a deep breath before looking out across the vast horizon again.

He was torn in equal parts as he considered heading back out there to do battle. On one hand, it wasn't his turn. He was supposed to be taking rest. But on the other, he wasn't tired, and this bloodlust wasn't calming down.

But on the other other hand, that probably wasn't a good sign, was it?

He shouldn't indulge this feeling, now.

Discipline. Self-control. He needed these more than ever. He knew he did.

Because his son had not been here. Francisco had not been among his captured kin.

He'd come so far, done so much, and tried so hard to temper his expectations for fear of disappointment--and none of it had mattered.

The disappointment had been crushing, just the same.

Gema. Francisco. Emiliana.

Three of his five children. All missing. And in fact, Francisco was now the one whose whereabouts he knew the least about. Where in the world were you, boy? What had you gotten thrown into?

He wanted to have confidence in him. The boy was certainly tough for his age, but in some ways, that was worrisome, too. Cisco had always struggled to make friends. Or... perhaps it was that Cisco had never cared to make friends.

Zeff wasn't sure which. But either way, out there in the world, all on his own, Zeff might've felt more relief if Cisco were the friendlier sort. It was almost always better to make allies out of people who might otherwise be his enemies.

Zeff felt like he himself had taken far too long to learn that particular lesson. Hell, he still questioned whether he actually had or not.

Why did that boy have to take after him so much?

Damn it all."

"3499

A string of explosions sputtered across the battlefield in the distance. Diego's handiwork, perhaps?

Maybe not. Zeff was probably being too hopeful. Such an impressive attack might've been too much for the young "Red Hunter" to pull off, still. He'd heard that Diego had achieved emergence at Logden, but he'd yet to see him in action since then.

"I see that you are still a fan of venturing off on your own to brood," came a voice from behind him.

He just kept leaning on the metal wall that one of the other servants had materialized around their encampment. He didn't need to turn around to know that it was Octavia Redwater approaching. He wanted to respond, but a fitting retort wasn't coming to mind. Except, perhaps, one that would be needlessly rude.

And that was the last thing he wanted to be to someone whom he owed so much.

"You're not so different, after all, I think." Her tone had an old and familiar softness to it. Enough so that it briefly transported him back to his teenage years.

And despite his mood, he couldn't help smiling just a bit. "God, it's good to have you back, Octavia."

"Hoho! Thank you. You're more affectionate than I remember, though." She leaned over next to him and bumped into him purposely.

"Heh. Maybe I've finally learned to cherish what I have while I still have it."

"Doubt it."

He snorted. "Have the others been saying that I've changed?"

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m not one for gossip.”

“You are one for lying, though, apparently.”

“How hurtful.” She allowed a beat to pass. “Okay, fine, maybe I’ve been listening to a few rumors. But I had to! So much to catch up on, you know!”

“I do know, indeed. You’ve been sorely missed.”

“Aww.” She bumped him again. “From the sound of things, you’re really coming into your own as the Water Dragon of Sair.”

Now that, he did not believe at all, and he couldn’t stop himself from scoffing.

“What’s that sound for?”

“I’ve done nothing but fail ever since...” He shook his head and blinked slowly, trying to recall. “Lakefire, I’m not even sure how long it’s been, anymore.”

“Ah. The brooding, then. I see.”

He could already tell what she was getting at. And she wasn’t wrong, he knew. “I’m sorry. I should be happier with our great victory.””

"3500

“Don’t apologize, boy. You should feel whatever way you want, right now. It’s a difficult position you’re in. Whatever you have to do to cope, you go ahead and do it. All I ask is that you pick something that’s not self-destructive. And brooding, well... brooding is questionable on that front, I’m afraid, but you certainly could’ve picked a worse mechanism.”

Zeff made no response.

“Dwell on things too much? Drive yourself crazy. But at the same time, it’s healthier than going off and venting your frustrations via bloodlust. Or actual lust. Or, god forbid, by abusing the people you’re supposed to love. Next to all that stuff, brooding doesn’t seem so bad to me.”

“...Seen that all before, haven’t you?”

"I have. Along with even worse examples, if you can believe it. The kind of examples that are still too painful to even utter."

He had a vague idea of what she might've been referring to, but it would've been wrong to push, he felt.

She wasn't done talking, though. Her wrinkled hand found his face, and she made him turn to look her in the eye with that steady, steely gaze of hers that she rarely ever resorted to. "So if you need to brood, then brood. Just don't forget that we're all still here for you, too, my dear. And that the world isn't a completely dark place, much as it might sometimes feel like it."

His eyes eased shut, and he took her hand in his own. "Thank you."

And for a while, she just stood there with him in silence as they looked over the battlefield together.

"...Think I see rain on the horizon," she said.

He spotted the clouds she was talking about. Barely visible now, but quite dark. She was probably right.

"Y'know," she went on, "supposedly, our ancestors could tell the difference between a good storm and bad storm from two days away. Or more, even."

A good storm or a bad storm. An interesting distinction, but one that he and all other Rainlords were familiar with. A bad storm was the kind that brought nothing but destruction. The kind that did nothing but ruin or take lives.

A good storm, though? A good storm was the kind that cleaned the roads and swept all the stagnant water away. The kind that children could dance and play in without fear of being carried off by terrible winds or surging rivers.

"I wonder if I'm there yet," she said. "Got a feeling in my bones. Like this one will be a good storm."

"3501

Zeff smiled another time. "I hope you're right." Coming from anyone else, he wouldn't have believed it, but from her? Maybe she really did

have that kind of power.

The sun waned in the sky. The day's hostilities would soon come to an end, unless some eager warriors out there were feeling bold or desperate enough to launch a night raid.

Which was possible.

By his estimation, the VMP's spirit was already broken, so the subset of Abolish forces were almost certainly at the end of their rope. Desperation might very well be on the menu tonight.

If they did launch an attack, though, it would be their last. Zeff would make sure of that.

"...So tell me more of this Lord Darksteel of Warrenhold that has been providing so much aid to us," said Octavia. "You have gotten to know him quite well, from what I hear."

"I suppose I have."

"So spill. There are quite a number of rumors circulating about him. What is your opinion of him?"

"My opinion..." Hmm. Why did that seem like such a hard thing to provide? "Umm..."

Octavia just waited for him.

Whenever it came to Hector, Zeff had this impulse to be... stricter than perhaps he should have. He knew this. For the boy's own good, that felt right and necessary.

Now was not the time for that, though. Octavia had only met him briefly back at Rheinhal, and her asking like this was probably more than mere curiosity. It was trust in Zeff's judgment.

If he said something overly harsh, she would take it to heart.

"...He has been a truer ally and friend to us than I could have possibly ever hoped for," said Zeff.

"Oh my."

"But if you tell him I said that, I'll deny it."

She laughed outright. "I see!"

Zeff just let her keep laughing.

“That is a relief, then,” she said. “I was a bit worried when I heard about just how much we’ve apparently gotten entangled with him, but if you think so highly of him, then there must be something to it. I know you don’t extend your trust very easily.”

Zeff had to wonder if she’d wanted to add an “anymore” to the end of that last statement. It was kind of her not to, but he was fully aware that his trust in the Vanguard was a very large part of the reason why any of them were in this situation in the first place.

But maybe he was just reading too much into her words."  
"3502

“Tis quite a rare thing, though,” Octavia went on. “Finding such a stalwart supporter at a time like this. In the face of both the Vanguard and Abolish. I have made many foreign friends over the years, but I do not know if any of them would have stuck their neck out for us as much as this fellow has. Going by all I’ve heard about him so far, I can’t help thinking that he must be either an incredibly confident warrior or one of the biggest fools I’ve ever heard of.”

“He’s neither of those things,” said Zeff, lowering his voice somewhat. No one was around to overhear, but it still felt appropriate. “He’s something far more dangerous. To both his enemies and to himself.” He leveled a stare at the old woman. “He’s an astero. And easily the most powerful one I’ve ever seen. While also still being the youngest, too, I think.”

She pulled away from him a little, and her head reared back. “An astero...” She needed a few moments to chew on that thought, apparently. “How young?”

“I don’t know for sure. He and his reaper are understandably reluctant to say, but... that just makes me think that the number might be even lower than I first suspected. Which is terrifying, honestly.”

“What is your guess, then?”

He couldn’t help hesitating. “...I think he may be as young... or even younger than my own children.” And he watched her face. He could



practically see the gears turning in her head.

“So not even twenty, then?”

“No. Well, yes. But I meant... younger than them as servants.”

She blinked at him. “Tell me you’re joking.”

He just shook his head.

“So you’re saying he’s... what, less than eight? Seven?”

“Honestly, I think he may even be less than five.”

“That’s not... that...” The thought went unfinished as her hand found her own forehead. “I heard he bested Banda Toro in single combat and captured his reaper. Banda Toro. Do you know who that is? That is someone I might struggle with!”

Zeff did indeed know. Those Blackburn Triplets hadn’t been able to shut up about it. Not that the reapers were much better.

And frankly, Zeff didn’t know if he believed it or not. Even if it was all completely true, knowing Hector as he did, there was probably still more to the story, somehow.

Octavia was still going, though. “--and that is just one of the absurd things that I have heard! Yet you are trying to tell me that he--?! That he’s--?!”

Zeff just waited for her. This was a strange sight, indeed. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen this woman fumble over her words before.

Heh.”

"3503

She took a few more moments to regain her composure. “...What is with that look on your face, huh? Am I amusing you, hmm?”

“I won’t deny it. In fact, I might just have to thank Hector for letting me see a new side of the ever-calm Lady of the Red Lake.”

“Zeff... are you telling me the truth? This is not some twisted joke to get

a rise out of me? Because if it is, then I will be relieved but still quite unhappy. I've never known you to lie for fun."

"It's no lie," said Zeff. "I've been training him extensively. In retrospect, his prowess was already impressive from the start, but there were still obvious gaps in his knowledge. Now, though...?"

"Now, what? He's changed that much in so short a time?"

"Yes and no. He's reached a point where it is difficult for me to gauge his true strength. Primarily because he has an annoying habit of holding back during training."

"That's not proof, then," said Octavia. "He could've been playing ignorant in the beginning. And the reason he holds back now is because he is still trying to conceal his true strength from you. Which would be wise of him."

Zeff chortled. "If he was pretending from the start, then he is an incredible actor. He even managed to fake having pathetically weak soul power."

"Ah..."

"Yes."

"I've... heard that's possible, too," said Octavia, though she sounded like even she didn't believe it.

"Well, regardless, you can come to your own conclusions when you meet him yourself."

She paused to exhale. "An astero to such an extreme degree..."

Her tone was making him curious. "I said he's the most powerful one I've ever seen, but what about you? How many asteros have you encountered in your life, Octavia?"

She took her time answering that one. "A fair few, I suppose. I'd guess maybe... two or three per decade. But what you're describing is... it's almost unheard of."

He stuck on that. "Almost?"

She shook her head. "I'm sure the reapers would know more. You must have discussed this matter with Axiolis by now, surely, no?"

"Of course."

"And what did he have to say?"

"Now that I'm thinking about it... surprisingly little. But it has also been a while since we talked about it, so perhaps I should bring it up again."

"Ugh."

"We have been quite busy, you know."

"You bring him over here, right now, young man. I want to talk to him."

Zeff snickered. "Okay." That was one order he was happy to follow. Listening to Octavia Redwater chew out one of the oldest reapers on the planet sounded like quite a good time to him."

"3504

It didn't take long for Axiolis to show up, nor did it take long for Octavia to start laying into him.

"Axiolis, you old secret-keeper! What's the matter with you?! How have you not been talking Zeff's ear off about this whole astero situation with our new friend?! I know you must have some rather strong opinions about it, and yet Zeff tells me you've said 'surprisingly little' about the matter! Explain yourself!"

'I'm glad to see you so spirited, Octavia.'

"Oh, thank you, darling. You know me. Can't keep me down for long."

'Heh.'

"Now answer my damn questions."

But apparently, the reaper was not going to be rushed. He took his time as he circled around the two of them, perhaps mulling over his next words. '...Could you ask something more specific? What exactly is it that you want me to tell you?'

"Hmph. Well, to begin with, how about the precedent for this whole thing? You must have seen countless asteros over the course of your life. Have you ever encountered a more extreme case than this one?"

‘...Not more extreme, no. But comparable, at least.’

Zeff perked up at that. “You never mentioned that.”

‘Mm. While I can understand your fascination with the subject, I am also... not so interested in discussing them anymore, myself.’

Octavia seemed to lose most of her fire. “Why?”

The reaper paused for a silent sigh. ‘Because never have I known their stories to progress happily. And their endings...’ Axiolis just shook his piscine head.

Zeff and Octavia were both quiet.

‘It is in their very nature, of course,’ said Ax. ‘Their shocking growth is due to their turbulent and terrible lives. But the world is vast, and eventually... well, eventually, what luck they have--if any--finally runs out.’

“You’re afraid, then,” said Octavia.

‘Absolutely, I am.’

Hmm. Zeff had to pick him up on that. “The rain fears not the torch, Ax.”

‘True. But it is not for myself or any of us that I am afraid, Zeff. Hector and Garovel are not of the rain.’

That was a fair point, Zeff supposed.

Octavia spoke next. “What else can you tell us about asteros? Is there some other... common denominator between them all? Besides their troubled lives, I mean?”

‘Oh, indeed. In fact, I would say that their troubled lives are--especially in the most extreme cases like this one--not merely a product of misfortune. In medical terms, one might call their lives... symptoms of the problem, not the cause.’”

"3505

“What’s the cause, then?” said Zeff.

‘Well, first of all, let me make one thing clear. Hector Goffe is not the astero here. The astero is Hector Goffe and Garovel together. That is one point that I think our people sometimes overlook or don’t realize. The reason asteros are so rare in the first place is because it’s not just one, singular madman coming into the world. God knows we have more than enough of those. No, it requires TWO madmen who find a kind of... perfect and terrible harmony with one another.’

“That’s an interesting way of putting it,” said Octavia. “So you are saying we should be just as mindful of this Garovel as well, then?”

‘Yes. That is, in my opinion, the true cause behind all asteros. The relationship between reaper and servant. They both have to be of precisely the right--or wrong--mindset. It doesn’t work if either one of them is normal. The reaper has too much power in the relationship, especially early on, for the servant to be the only deciding factor.’

Octavia smacked her lips. “Honestly, though, what is truly considered ‘normal,’ anyway? Isn’t that too muddy of a concept to work from?”

‘In this context? Normal means having a properly functioning sense of self-preservation.’

“Ah. Well, that makes things a little clearer, then...”

‘I can virtually guarantee you that Garovel places little to no value upon his own life. Otherwise, he never would have allowed his servant to get involved in so much danger at such a young age. And he certainly would not have allowed HIMSELF to get involved, either. Others might call him courageous--and be correct, depending on the circumstances--but to my mind, that is probably just the tip of the iceberg. And... seeing the growth that Hector has exhibited in the short time we’ve know him... mrrgh. They hide it well, but nonetheless, I am still made quite fearful of the true DEPTH of recklessness that must have brought the two of them this far.’

A brief silence arrived.

“I can certainly respect your point of view and even share in it,” said Octavia, “but at the same time... isn’t that a bit hypocritical, coming from a bunch of Rainlords?”

‘I don’t think so,’ said Axiolis. ‘If anything, I’d argue that makes us MORE qualified to say that, not less.’

She gave a faint laugh. "Right, because if WE think someone is crazy, then they must be truly mad. Is that it?"

'More or less. But also, I think it helps explain why our kin have become so enraptured with them so quickly. In many ways, they exemplify the pride and spirit of our people. It is a most... ancient feeling in us, I think. Instinctual. Essential. Tribal, even.'

"3506

Zeff had to admit, Ax was making a lot of sense. Enough, perhaps, that he was even starting to view Hector and Garovel in a new light. And perhaps the Rainlords as a whole, as well. Just a bit.

Hmm.

'Have you not felt it yourself, Zeff? In their presence? A kind of... gravitational pull, of sorts? I know I have.'

Zeff made no response. He had some idea of what the reaper was talking about, but he wasn't sure.

Octavia spoke up in his stead. "What do you mean by that? Gravitational pull?"

'I'm not entirely certain, myself. Despite everything I've said, and despite my trepidation about asteros in general, I am also of the belief that there is yet more to them.'

"To Hector and Garovel or to all asteros?"

'All of them. I gave you my opinion of what seems the most rational explanation for their existence. But I harbor other views, as well. Views which I'm sure you will be much less receptive to, being the godless heathens that you are.'

"Okay, Ax," said Octavia, taking a defensive and doubtful tone. "I had almost forgotten about this side of you. But I suppose if you're willing to share your crackpot religious views on the matter, then I am willing to listen."

'How kind of you.'

Zeff knew that the two of them were mostly exaggerating. Ax didn't really think they were heathens, nor did Octavia think that Ax was a crackpot. This was just their way of poking fun at one another and lightening the mood.

...Probably.

"Are you about to tell us that you think Lhutwë is somehow responsible for the existence of asteros?" asked Zeff.

'No, I don't think so,' said Ax. 'But many who have studied asteros over the eons have come to think that, perhaps, their suffering is... in some way the will of the gods. Various gods. In various Ardoran cultures, for instance, they have their own term for asteros. They call them "kridanaki," which means "playthings of the gods."' "

"And that's what you believe, too?" said Octavia.

'...A bit, yes. I'll admit that I am uncertain, at least. But I simply find it too difficult to believe that all of the misfortune that I have seen so many asteros endure over the ages can be chalked up entirely to... their own doing. The idea that some invisible force may be involved seems... possible to me. Likely, even.' "

"3507

A year ago, Axiolis would've been right about Zeff not being very receptive to that idea. But now?

Now he was much more tempted to agree with the reaper's perspective.

He decided to keep that thought to himself, though. It hardly mattered, either way.

The conversation continued on, with Octavia soon bringing over her own reaper, Wen, in order to get his opinion on things, as well.

Not much was learned, however. Wen was non-committal, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Axiolis; and he didn't offer any information about asteros that hadn't already been discussed.

Until, that was, Zeff asked a particular question.

“Ax said that he knew of other asteros whose growth was at least comparable to Hector and Garovel’s. So tell me something. Were any of those people Rainlords?”

Ax and Wen were both quiet for a time, and they exchanged looks.

‘...There have been a few,’ said Wen. ‘But the one that comes immediately to mind... Axiolis? I have a feeling you are thinking the same?’

‘The first Water Dragon,’ said Ax. ‘Rhein Ricardo.’

Zeff took pause. That was a name he was intimately familiar with, of course. Among the long history of his kin, Rhein was arguably the single most important figure. The Redwater Twins were more famous internationally, especially in the modern day, but among the Rainlords themselves, it was hard to say if that was the case.

Certainly, though, no one else was more revered. Various reapers, such as Wen here, had known the Twins personally and therefore also had some... less than flattering things to say about them. The Twins, while beloved as heroes in their own right, were nonetheless still regarded as very flawed human men.

But Rhein Ricardo...

The stories about him were truly legendary.

Some said that was only because the tales were so old. There were just too few reapers left who had existed during Rhein’s time, they said. It was easier, therefore, for the man to maintain an almost deified status as the father of all true Rainlords of Sair.

They said that.

But Wen and Ax here had both been around during his time, Zeff knew.

Which was why Zeff couldn’t stop himself from feeling a certain type of urgency all of a sudden. “Careful,” he said, intensity in his tone. “That’s a heavy thing you’re implying, right now.”

‘We’re not implying anything,’ said Ax. ‘You asked a question, and we’re answering it. That’s all.’

Zeff stared at Ax intently.



The reaper, for his part, merely stared right back."  
"3508

"Well, then," said Octavia with a distant look in her eyes. "That certainly... puts things into perspective, at least. I'm looking forward to meeting this young man and his reaper again."

The conversation didn't last much longer after that. With night coming on, Octavia went to go rest. Wen did not go with her, but he did venture off to go talk to someone else. Even Axiolis ended up leaving Zeff alone with thoughts again.

Long after they were gone, Zeff's mind still lingered on that last subject. He didn't know how to feel about it. While he didn't think that Ax was one to make such comparisons thoughtlessly, it still felt... like a strange decision on the reaper's part.

He was tempted to call Ax back over and try to hash things out, but he had no idea what he would say. This unease in the pit of his stomach had no words to accompany it.

Was he afraid of something here? Did he think that Axiolis had some sort of... intentions at play, now? Hying Hector up like that in front of Octavia? As if the boy even needed it, at this point.

Bah. But still. Rhein Ricardo was... an entirely different level of importance.

Some tales regarded him as an incarnation of Lhutwë himself. Others said, instead, that he had encountered Lhutwë and received the God of All Water's everlasting protection--for him and all his future kin.

They said that Rhein Ricardo was the very reason why the divine materialization ability of water even existed in the first place. And why it continued to propagate into the future through the bloodlines of the Rainlords.

And of course, there were the tales of how Rhein distinguished himself among the ancient Arman people during their countless clashes with the Lyzakks, eventually establishing an entirely new warrior class known as Rainlords, who went on, long after his death, to seize power over the local government when the old regimes proved too

incompetent and corrupt.

The Mohssian Empire had not been terribly pleased about that, but it was still quite young at the time, and the heroic legacy of Rhein, still fresh in everyone's mind. So the Rainlords were able to negotiate a privileged status for themselves within the empire as a vassal group with unparalleled autonomy, so long as they recognized the emperor as their rightful ruler and fought in his name when he called for their banners."

"3509

That status quo lasted for nearly two thousand years, all the way up until the empire began slowly eroding that autonomy away from the Rainlords, as it had been doing with many other groups during that time period. And when the Mohssian emperor sent his new "Rain King" to rule over them, the bastard didn't last long before the Redwater Twins declared full independence by killing him in his own throne room.

Zeff, therefore, was supremely uncomfortable with comparisons being made--even tenuous ones--between Hector Goffe and Rhein Ricardo.

But... goddammit, he did have to admit that the legendary tales did have some... resemblance to what he knew Hector had been through.

What Zeff had himself been through, alongside the boy.

Ugh.

What a terrifying thought.

He rubbed his forehead and took a deep breath.

What was to become of his kin, now? Where were they going?

He'd heard plenty of loose talk, but the heads of all the Houses had yet to properly sit down and discuss it at length. Nor would they, Zeff figured, until they all returned to Warrenhold and fully reunited with everyone. Only then would each House have all of its most influential members present for such conversations.

But the temptation was certainly here, already. To Zeff's mind, there was really only one route forward. The recapture of their ancestral

homeland.

That probably would not require much discussion, other than deciding how soon they should attempt it.

But afterwards? What then?

Zeff couldn't ignore this disturbing feeling in his stomach that things had already changed for his people in ways that could not be undone. That even after retaking Sair, the Rainlords would never again be the same.

Agh.

He was letting his mind wander too much. Letting the pre-battle anticipation get to him. An all too familiar feeling. He needed to--

"Water Dragon," came a dark voice.

One he recognized.

He turned to his left and saw a monolithic figure there next to him, barely recognizable as human in the encroaching darkness of the evening.

He should have been surprised. Shocked, even. And yet somehow, Zeff Elroy was not. For a few moments, he merely maintained a flat expression on his face as he sized up the mountainous man, feeling abruptly as though this was a meeting that he had been expecting all along.

"...Scourge," said Zeff. "I see you are indeed not dead, just as Graves said."

"Mm.""

"3510

"So you can just appear in front of whoever you want, wherever you want, is that it?" said Zeff.

The Monster made no response.

Unsurprising, Zeff supposed. Gohvis had no reason to explain how his

powers worked. In fact, he had every reason not to. At his level, maintaining such secrets was no doubt quite important, whenever possible. And considering how little the world seemed to know of this man despite his age, Zeff had to think that Gohvis took his secret-keeping efforts quite seriously.

Meaning he should probably watch his words here.

Yes. Logically, he knew that.

But his logic was not entirely in control, right now.

“Graves told me something of your abilities,” he went on. “You are not truly here with me, are you?”

Still no answer.

Zeff did have a point that he was getting to, though. “Whatever trick that is... might you teach it to my daughter? So that she and I can speak directly like this?”

“A bold ask,” said Gohvis.

“That is what you are doing, isn’t it? Teaching her? Or am I mistaken?”

Gohvis paused briefly. “Where did you come by this impression? I do not recall telling you my intentions for her.”

It was Zeff’s turn not to say anything. He wasn’t about to tell the man that Hector had some kind of psychic link with Emiliana via the Shards of the Dry God.

“You are surprisingly calm, as well,” said Gohvis. “I thought you would give me a harder time here.”

“I probably should. And I probably will, if you don’t give me some assurances, at the very least.”

“Assurances, is it? That is doable. But I did not come here to speak with you of Emiliana, so perhaps we can find an accord between the two of us.”

Zeff cocked an eyebrow. “An accord? Regarding what?”

“Graves.”

Zeff’s jaw tightened. “What about Graves?”

“You can’t trust him, you know. He is using you and all your kin like pieces on a game board.”

“Yes, I remember you saying that before. But you are not exactly a paragon of trustworthiness yourself, Monster of the East.”

“Mm. Even so, I advise you not to get too deeply involved with him.”

Zeff hadn’t been planning on it, but the mere fact that Gohvis was apparently going so far out of his way just to tell him this... was making Zeff quite curious. “Why not?”

"3511

“Graves has a long history of backstabbing and betrayal,” said Gohvis. “Shall I list specific historical instances of it? We will be here for quite some time, and you will have no way of verifying my information, as he always goes to great lengths in order to cover his tracks. Even your reapers have probably only heard whispers about him, at most.”

“How narratively convenient for you,” said Zeff.

“Think so, do you? Tell me. What do you think would have happened if you had been rendered unconscious by Graves like the rest of your kin? Hmm? Think he would have come clean about everything, explained the whole situation to you?” Gohvis waited for him to say something, but Zeff merely remained quiet, so he continued on. “No, he would have swept it all under the rug. At best, he would have kept you completely in the dark about his presence. At worst, he would have not only recaptured all the prisoners you just freed but also captured the rest of you, as well.”

“Hypothetical situations are not going to convince me of anything,” said Zeff. “Why do you even care what happens here?”

“Why shouldn’t I? You are a noble people. I should not like to see your time cut short by yet another betrayal.”

“Ridiculous. You care nothing for us.”

“But I do. I’ve my own history with your kin, though I doubt you’ve heard much of it. If any.”

“Your doubt would be correct, then. I’ve heard nothing about any relation you have to us.” Well, that wasn’t entirely true, he knew. Parson Miles had mentioned something, but Zeff refused to trust those words.

Gohvis fell quiet for a time. “I have ties not just to your kin as a whole, but to House Elroy, in particular. To Agam Elroy, specifically.”

Zeff’s eyes widened.

Agam.

There that feeling was again. The feeling that there was something he was missing. Something right in front of his face, perhaps, that he simply couldn’t see.

“How did you know Agam?”

“He... raised me, you might say.”

What in the world? “Agam Elroy raised you? How could that possibly be true?”

“To be clear,” said Gohvis. “I am not a Rainlord. But when I was born, I was alone. I had nothing and no one. No parents. No kin of my own at all. And Agam, being the odd yet noble-hearted man that he was, decided to care for me.”

"3512

“Absurd,” said Zeff. “You claim you were essentially a son to him, and yet none else knew of your existence? If you were so close with Agam, then he would have made that clear.”

“And yet he did not. What does that tell you of his character?”

“Nothing. But it tells me that you have the character of a liar.”

“Mm. You are much like Gerard.”

Zeff stuck on that. The name of his father.

Gohvis just observed him for a few silent moments before continuing. “I appeared like this before him, as well.” A beat passed. “Well, not

quite like this, I suppose. My projections were less refined. But it was similar enough. And he did not believe me, either. Nor did your grandfather, for that matter. The fiery, little Emilio. Now he was a belligerent one. I'm glad that you do not appear to have inherited his temper, at least."

Zeff was at a loss. Could any of that be true? He remembered searching Axiolis' memories of his father and grandfather both, but he didn't recall any mention of his father meeting the Monster of the East.

His grandfather, though...

There had been something, hadn't there? An encounter in Ardora that the man had only spoken of twice that Ax remembered, late into the man's life.

Emilio Elroy said that he'd fought the Black Scourge in a tomb beneath a mountain. He said that the Black Scourge had even tried to strike a bargain with him after spouting off a bunch of nonsense.

"...My father never mentioned meeting you," said Zeff.

"No? Ah. That is believable, now that I think of it. I believe our meeting was not long before his passing." Gohvis' tone shifted into one noticeably more somber. "Before everyone's passing, I should say."

Zeff made no response.

"Gerard and Emilio both had strong biases against me, thanks to the Vanguard," said Gohvis. "Now... I suppose I am hoping that, with all you have been through, you will not be seduced by that same allure."

"...If any of that is even remotely true, then why are you only appearing before me now? Why wait so many years? Why not show yourself to me when I was merely a child and far more impressionable?"

A low rumble arrived from the dragon man's chest. A laugh?  
"Impressionable, you say? I observed you a bit during that time. You were not impressionable at all, in my estimation. You were more like... a little ball of righteous indignation. I do not think you would have been very receptive to me in the least."

"3513

“Hmph. So to make me more ‘receptive,’ you decided to kidnap my daughter in the midst of a terrible battle?” said Zeff bitterly. “A battle wherein you offered no aid to us, as well? Interesting strategy.”

“No aid? I seem to recall you having quite a bit of trouble with that little Marauder man until I removed him for you.”

“And Ivan? You had a nice and long conversation with him before disappearing. Do you know how many of my kin you could have saved that day with power like yours?”

Gohvis let that question linger, unanswered.

Zeff didn’t need a response, though. “Your words are insincere. Your intentions, muddy. You speak of Graves as if he is only out to manipulate me and my people--and perhaps that is true--but you do not strike me as any better. In fact, you are probably worse.”

“Mm. Probably? So you are not yet certain, then.”



Zeff scoffed.

"I will consider that progress," said Gohvis.

"You are surprisingly flippant. I'd heard the Monster was never anything other than dour and humorless."

He returned a slight nod. "It is true that, in the presence of fools and manipulators, my mood tends to worsen. But I do not think you are either of those things, Zeff Elroy."

"If only I could say the same about you."

Another rumble. Another laugh. "You do have some stones on you, don't you? Not many would dare to say such things to me, anymore. It is almost refreshing."

Never in his life would Zeff have imagined hearing the Monster of the East laughing so amicably in his presence. Or laughing at all, for that matter. He was at a loss for words now, quite frankly.

After a short time, Gohvis continued on. "I will not try to argue your points about me. In particular, if I am being perfectly honest with myself, I think there is some merit to the notion that I am too... insulated. That I am sometimes too concerned with my own goals and therefore blinded to other matters that might benefit from a modicum of my attention."

Again, those were not things he had been expecting to hear from this man, right now. Where in the world was this conversation going, he wondered?

"It may be a product of age," said Gohvis. "Perhaps you will notice the same thing, should you achieve similar years. Eventually, the world seems to... blend together, one might say. Many--or even all--problems that I encounter have begun to feel... recursive in nature. Chronic. To the point, perhaps, that addressing them is without purpose, because they will just keep reappearing, anyway.""

"3514

Zeff was far from understanding or convinced. "That all sounds like an excuse to me. And a weak one, at best."

"Again, I will not argue the point. Instead, I will simply make you an offer."

Zeff's brow furrowed, as if to brace himself for what he might be about to hear.

"Leave Graves and Vantalay behind," said Gohvis. "Bring all your kin and come with me. I will take all the Rainlords of Sair into my protection."

Lakefire.

Zeff made no response.

Gohvis kept pushing. "You wish to see your daughter, yes? With this, you can. I cannot yet allow her to leave, but I can bring you to her."

Still, Zeff said nothing. Goddammit. He turned away from the Monster to look over the evening battlefield in the distance again, taking a deep breath and then exhaling slowly.

"I understand if this is not something you can decide upon quickly, but I would urge you not to delay. The longer you remain with Graves, the more tenuous this deal becomes--for you and for me."

That, at least, brought immediate questions to Zeff's mind. "What do you mean? Why should Graves be a factor?"

"Because if he learns of my offer, he will seek to use it. To manipulate you against me. Or to some other end, perhaps."

"The two of you seemed to get along strangely well."

"Yes, in spite of myself, I do not hate him. But that is also part of his game, at times. He often presents himself as very agreeable. He thinks of the bigger picture, I suspect. Hoping to gain trust for some vital future use, perhaps. But when the time comes--and make no mistake, it will come--he will discard you like so much trash and think no less of himself for it."

"Hmph. So you know what goes on in his mind now, do you?"

"He and I have known each other for a very long time."

Zeff had no retort for that. He was still struggling with the offer Gohvis had just made. He needed time to think, but from the sound of it, the Monster did not want to give it to him. Or at least, the Monster wanted

to put time-sensitive pressure on him.

Agh.

“...I cannot make such a decision for everyone,” said Zeff. “That is not my role.”

“But it should be, Water Dragon.”

At that, Zeff had to turn and look at him again. “That is not our way.”

“Not anymore, no.” And for a few moments, Gohvis merely met his gaze with those infernal red eyes. “But I understand. Consult your reapers and your kin. And try to keep Graves from overhearing, if you can.””

"3515 -- CCXCIII.

Zeff had to admit: the Monster was being oddly accommodating here. Considering how much leverage Gohvis had over him, holding his daughter captive, there was obviously quite a different approach that the man could have decided to take.

But then, maybe Gohvis was just trying to use the carrot before resorting to the stick.

Zeff didn't really want to find out, though it certainly would've clarified a few things about the mysterious character of this man in front of him. Was it worth pushing for, he wondered? To gain vital information?

No. Not yet, at least. Not before consulting Ax and the others.

And so, he found himself holding his tongue yet again. Probably the wiser course of action in the presence of these juggernauts.

Yet, somehow, he still couldn't help feeling disappointed in himself.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Three: 'Considerations of yore...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

“...This is too generous, lord.”

“No, it isn’t. I broke your arm, officer. Truthfully, this isn’t even close to enough. If there’s something else you want from me, just say it, and I’ll try to make it happen.” Hector bobbed his head a little. “As long as it’s not too crazy.”

The uniformed police officer on the other side of the table just looked at the check in front of him. The man hadn’t said very much since arriving here at Warrenhold.

It had taken Hector quite a while to track this guy down, in part because he’d been so damn busy and kept forgetting about it. But once he’d finally remembered to tell Ms. Rogers about it, the task hadn’t taken very long at all.

This man here was Officer Fred Michaels of the Klein City Police Department. And he was the poor guy whom Hector had injured during that time period when virtually every member of law enforcement in Atreya had been hunting him down.

It had been a sloppy, frustrating mistake, and Hector had been wanting to make amends for it ever since.

Fred, however, wasn’t giving him much to go on, here. The man merely remained stone-faced throughout this whole meeting.

Hector could only imagine what might’ve been going through the guy’s head. When Ms. Rogers told him that she’d put in a request for Fred to come to Warrenhold, Hector had actually gotten a little upset with her. He’d intended to go to Klein himself, not make the officer come all the way here, but by the time he learned of the situation, it was too late. Fred was already on his way."

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"3516

And now, here he was. Probably confused as hell.

Hector tried to think of something else to say, but nothing was coming to mind. Damn, this was getting awkward fast.

At length, Officer Michaels finally said something else. "Why are you bothering with this? Not that I'm not grateful, but... insurance already took care of my medical expenses, which weren't even comparable to what you're offering me here. You worried I'll sue you or something? Because frankly, I don't think I'd have much of a case. And even if I had, I'm not sure I would've been able to get this much out of you..."

There were a lot of ways that Hector could answer that. He took a few moments to think through them all before settling on the simplest one. "I just think it's the right thing to do."

Fred held his gaze steadily, saying nothing.

"I'm sorry for making you come all the way out here, by the way. I intended to visit you in Klein, but uh, some wires got crossed, I guess. And then you showed up before I could fix them."

"It's fine. Wanted some time away from the wife and kids, anyway."

Was that a joke? Probably. Hector decided to smile. "How are things over in Klein, by the way?"

"Uh... pretty normal, I'd say. Why do you ask?"

"No real reason. Guess I'm just curious about how people are doing across the country. What with the war and everything."

"Oh." Fred allowed a beat to pass. "Well, if you want a beat cop's opinion, then I'd say that people are scared, but not all that much more than usual. Foreign conflicts have always been terrifying to hear about. This one's just a bit closer than we'd like."

Understandable, Hector supposed. It wasn't so long ago that he'd felt similarly. Hearing about wars abroad felt unsettling but thankfully also quite distant. So when that distance began to shrink...

"Way I hear it," said Fred, "you've gotten involved with Lorent, which is even closer to the war than we are. You plannin' on sticking your neck out even further than that?"

What a question. Hector felt like he should be firm here. "Not at all. The exact opposite, actually. I feel like if I do something crazy, it might put Atreya at risk, which is the last thing I want."

"Ah. Big hero with big concerns, eh?"

Hector didn't know what to say to that."

"3517

"Hafta say," Fred went on, "it was a very strange feeling, seeing the kid that messed me up continue to make such crazy headlines, week in and week out. Didn't know what to make of it all. First, you were the biggest villain in the country, then the biggest hero, and now you're apparently the most powerful lord in Atreya, to boot, goin' around, givin' the other lords what for, showin' 'em who's boss with that new bank of yours."

Hector still didn't know what to say, but he felt like he couldn't let that last part go. "I don't think that's quite how it went down, sir..."

The man chuckled. "If you say so, lord. But from my perspective, you are an enigma and a half. Because despite all that, despite how much else you clearly have going on in your life, you decide to make time for me, of all people. A man who, apparently, was hunting you down unjustly, acting as nothing more than a stooge for some... foreign coup attempt, was it? I'm still not too sure I understand what went down in the capital last year."

Geez. For how quiet this guy was earlier, he sure was speaking his mind now, Hector thought.

"My point, lord, is that you have no reason to be doing this for me. And it's weirding me out. So thank you for your thoughtful generosity, but I don't think I can accept this money."

Hector blinked. "...Are you sure?"

Fred eyed the check one more time. "No. I'm not sure. But I try to listen to my gut whenever I'm on the verge of making potentially life-changing decisions, and right now, it's telling me that I shouldn't take this. Assuming you'll actually take no for an answer, lord."

Wow.

Um.

Damn.

"...If you're worried about there being some sort of string attached to this money," said Hector, "then I can assure you that there isn't. Genuinely, you can just take it and go, and I will never contact you again. I promise."

That seemed to give Fred pause again, though not for long. He shook his head. "Thank you, but my answer is still no, lord."

He blinked again. "...And you called me an enigma."

The man chortled. "Fair is fair, I suppose."

Hector had to ask one more time. "You're really, one hundred percent sure that you don't want to accept this?"

Fred sighed and scratched his brow. "Yeah..." He said it almost sadly, as if he was somehow exasperated with his own decision.

"3518

Well, Hector was at a bit of a loss now. He truly had not considered what to do if this guy had simply refused to take the money.

Huh.

"Sure is tempting, though," said Fred. "Wish I could accept, but I just can't. Frankly, lord, I don't think you owe me anything. Wouldn't feel right, taking this money."

"Hmm," hummed Hector, thinking. "Not even for the sake of the wife



and kids that you just mentioned?”

“Eh, fuck ‘em. It’s my decision, not theirs.”

Hector couldn’t hold back a snort. “Are you being serious, right now, sir?”

“Mostly. In all the ways that matter, at least.”

“I’m not sure what to make of that. Are you a man of incredible integrity or just a terrible father?”

“What, I can’t be both?”

That pulled a laugh out of Hector, and he shook his head, not knowing how to respond.

“Look, I love my family, but we’re doing just fine, financially. This isn’t needed and would probably spoil the shit out of them, anyway. It’s hard enough to prevent my kids from turning into insufferable little brats, as is.”

“That is... definitely one way of looking at it, I suppose.”

“Okay, lord, y’know what? How would I explain where this money came from, hmm? Oh, the new Lord of Warrenhold decided to just up and gift it to me? No. I’m a cop. People will think I’m on the take and just lying about it. Badly.”

Well, that argument held a little more water, Hector felt. “Alright, uh... what if, instead of giving the money to you, I give it to someone else of your choosing? Or multiple someones, if you prefer.”

Fred’s head reared back as he took that into consideration.

“Maybe an organization?” pushed Hector. “A charity?”

“This got a lot more complicated, all of a sudden.”

“You don’t have to decide, right now. I’ll keep the money in reserve for whenever you make up your mind. Sound good?”

Fred stared at him for a moment, then exhaled a curt laugh. “You’re really something, y’know that?”

“You’re one to talk,” said Hector.

"I was trying to pay you a compliment."

"So was I."

Fred's gaze went to the table briefly, then he smiled and stood up, offering Hector a handshake. "Thank you for this. I'll take some time to think about it and get back to you."

Hector stood and took the handshake. "Alright, then."

"3519

They exited the aboveground building together, and Ms. Rogers appeared with a couple of Rainlords behind her. She didn't say anything, but Hector could infer that she meant to take the man off Hector's hands for him.

Hector decided against that, however. He walked with Fred back to the man's four-door sedan and watched the man drive away, though not before making sure that the guy had a means of getting in touch with him again. Rather than keeping Ms. Rogers as their go-between, Hector gave Fred his personal number.

He returned underground with Ms. Rogers and the Rainlords.

She was noticeably quiet, Hector felt. Usually, she wouldn't hesitate to use these walking periods to remind him of one thing or another, so the fact that she wasn't doing that now made him wonder what was going through her mind.

Truthfully, he was still a bit displeased with her, but he also didn't want to let one mistake override all the great work that she had done for him, either. That wouldn't be fair to her.

And things seemed to have worked out with Fred, anyway, so there was really no point in staying upset.

But before he let her off the hook, there was one thing he needed to double-check.

He asked the Rainlords to give them some privacy. One of them, Matteo Delaguna, was slower to acquiesce than the other, but not by much.

“Ms. Rogers,” he said once they were alone in a side room near the top of the Entry Tower. “Do you understand why I got upset with you about Fred?”

She was a bit slow to answer. “Because you felt that I had disrespected him. And by extension, since I was representing you, I made it appear as if you had disrespected him.”

“Okay, but do you understand why I thought it was disrespectful?”

“...Because you wanted to express your contrition to the man. If you had gone to him, it would have made for a clearer indication of your sincerity, as you would effectively be saying that his time and convenience were more important than your own.”

Huh. Well, that was pretty much spot on. As he should’ve expected, considering how sharp he knew Ms. Rogers to be.

But that also confused him a little. “That’s exactly right,” he said. “So... why did you have him come here?”

She paused again. “It was a mistake, lord. I can only apologize.””  
"3520

Why was he getting the impression that she wasn’t being entirely honest with him here?

He supposed he was putting too much thought into it at this point. Better to let it go. “It’s okay, Ms. Rogers. I might’ve, uh... er... I think I might’ve been at fault, too.”

Her gaze twitched. “In what way?”

“By not being clearer from the start, I... put you in a bit of an awkward position, didn’t I?”

“No, lord, you did nothing wrong.”

“That’s kind of you to say, Ms. Rogers, but you don’t need to sugarcoat things for me. I’d rather you spoke your mind. I’m still new to this lording business, after all.”

At that, the Stewardess of Warrenhold was quiet.

Hector, finding that curious, decided to just wait for her. Perhaps she was thinking about what to say.

And indeed, that appeared to be so. "...In that case, lord, please forgive me if what I am about to say comes off as rude. I do not mean it that way."

Aha. He braced himself.

"It seems to me," she went on, "that, occasionally, you do not quite realize just how much more valuable your time is, compared to that of other people. I suspect this is because you are... humble in the extreme, to say the least. Which is an admirable thing, by and large, but there are also certain realities of your station that should not be ignored, both in terms of your own scheduling and in terms how others are to perceive you."

That was a lot to take in. Hector chose not to say anything right away, instead just mulling her words over. On impulse, he wanted to disagree, but this was someone whose opinion he held in high regard, so he didn't want to discard her thoughts here too quickly.

She returned the favor of giving him time to think. But after a while, she decided to say a bit more. "But to be clear, lord, I do indeed think that you did nothing wrong in this particular instance, especially now that I have have given it more thought. This was clearly a more important matter to you than I at first realized. I will be more careful in the future."

Hmm. Hector was starting to feel like an asshole. But he didn't quite know how, why, or what he might say or do to counteract that feeling, so he merely remained silent. Backpedaling didn't seem like the right call here, either.

Man.

He'd thought he was getting a little better at being a lord, but maybe he wasn't. Maybe he barely knew anything."

"3521

Not long afterward, the two of them went their separate ways, with Ms. Rogers returning to her office in the Tower of Night and Hector going to grab a bite to eat in the refectory. He spotted Garovel along the way,

chatting with a few of the other reapers, as usual, but decided not to bother him.

Garovel soon found him on his own, though, and brought up a subject that the both of them had been meaning to find the time and opportunity to address for a while now.

The subject of Rathmore's Gate.

The Gate was a peculiar location, deep within the Carthrace Nature Reserve, where a large, seemingly natural rock formation resided. The first time he'd visited the place had been during a battle for Atreya's fate against a group of Abolish terrorists. The second time had been upon their return from the Undercrust, via some kind of still-not-understood teleportation mechanism and the newly ascended "god" Royo Raju. Or had that been Malast's doing? Hector couldn't quite recall.

Regardless, they had been wanting to return there and investigate the location again, but it was starting to seem like they would never find the time. Hell, even now, when things were starting to feel relatively calm again, Hector still found himself a bit reluctant to go.

But he supposed if he'd been able to justify a trip to Klein, then he could probably justify this, instead.

It helped that Atreya was such a small country. And that he could fly pretty damn fast now with his armor. He wouldn't need to be away from Warrenhold for all that long, and he could of course keep in constant contact with the castle's guards and scouts, not the least of which was one Pauline Gaolanet in her roost at the top of the tallest aboveground tower that Hector had materialized.

Plus, he didn't know if he was ever going to be completely free from concerns over an attack. Even if the war came to an end tomorrow, that didn't necessarily mean Atreya and Lorent were much safer. In fact, maybe that would make the Abolish remnants go looking for some softer targets that weren't being defended by the Vanguard.

Which was assuming that Abolish ended up on the losing side. The other possibility... Hector didn't even want to think about that.

So he decided, as ever, to think of this as another opportunity for training."

"3522

With Garovel on board, Hector was a bit reluctant to go too crazy with the flight practice. That last fight with Banda had been the absolute pinnacle of what he could currently achieve when it came to flying--and he was still feeling the after effects, even now. Aches and pains lingered from breaking every single bone in his body a dozen times over.

He wasn't sure the damage had ever been that extensive before. Thinking back, it was tough to compare. The fight with Harper Norez had been pretty damn bad, though. And the time he'd been blown to smithereens. And maybe the time he'd gotten dissected...

But no, this time still felt worse, somehow. Sure, he might've built his pain tolerance quite a bit since back then, but the intensity of the pain wasn't the issue. It was the stubbornness of it. He again found himself in a state of existence where it felt like he might never be pain-free again. Like all these dull aches were just a fact of life now.

Was this how old people felt all the time?

Goddamn did he sympathize.

Still, he tried to push himself a bit during the flight to the Carthrace Nature Reserve. It was good chance to test his actual comfort level, now that he had definitive experience with being incredibly uncomfortable.

He kept checking in on Garovel, who'd tucked himself into the armor, but the reaper just kept telling him that he was fine.

'Are you sure?' said Hector. 'I don't want to bank too hard to the right and accidentally knock you out cold. Or worse.'

'Relax already, you worry wart. As long as I'm attached to your body, I'm unaffected by physics.'

'...Is that really how it works? Kinda sounds like bullshit.'

'You think I'd bullshit you about something like that?'

'A little, yeah.'

'Wow, buddy. What the hell?'

‘Or you could just be honestly mistaken. I mean, you’re not exactly the most safety-conscious person I’ve ever met, Garovel.’

‘Okay, you’re the LAST person who can lecture me about that, Mr. Dimension-Hopping-Dinosaur-Wrestler. At least I’ve never needed to be puked out of a monster’s stomach before.’

‘...Wait, how’d you learn about the puking? I don’t think I mentioned that part.’

‘Roman told me.’

‘He saw that?’

‘He sure did. And judging from the way he described it to me, I think he might be scarred for life now, by the way.’

‘Aw, shit...’

"3523

‘You should do something nice for him,’ said Garovel. ‘Get him a present for being such a bro all the time.’

‘What kind of present can I get for one of the richest dudes in the country?’

‘Beats me. Put some thought into it. That’s the part they say counts, right?’

‘Real helpful, Garovel.’

In the end, he decided to trust the reaper’s judgment about being able to handle more intense flying maneuvers.

So he stepped it up, pushing for speed. He told Garovel not to render him numb, because he thought that pain might actually be the best way to gauge how much his own body was able to handle.

That nearly turned out to be a mistake. Rather than pain, he found instead that he was struggling not to pass out.

He was stubborn, though. In addition to no numbing, he also went

without the undead vigor and regeneration, knowing that they would just leave him exhausted afterwards.

He didn't quite recall how much of that fight he'd done without those enhancements, but he did know that he'd endured the last part of it that way. Specifically, he remembered how much of a relief it was when Garovel invoked the regeneration once it was all over.

So he knew that he could do this. These movements were nowhere near as intense.

But why did it feel so much harder, then? Because the stakes were so much lower? Because he was less focused?

Agh.

Mind over matter, huh?

He hadn't expected the difference to be this dramatic, though. It made him wonder if he was remembering things wrong. He supposed training simply didn't compare to the real thing.

The flying practice wasn't meant to be fun, but as they sailed over the capital city of Sescoria, catching glimpses of famous buildings and landmarks, Hector couldn't help wanting to take in the view a little more.

He made sure to gain plenty of altitude, though. No sense in spooking people on the ground by flying too low.

When he saw Bosliat Palace, he knew they were making good time and decided to slow down a bit to admire it. The place looked completely different from above. Being able to see the entire breadth of the compound made him wonder how Warrenhold might look from this perspective, if it weren't underground.

Briefly, he considered popping in to say hi to the Queen, but she was probably busy. And besides, he felt like she might surprise him with some kind of new task or request.

So he pressed on, pushing for even more speed this time. It was about staying focused, Hector felt. Concentrating. Maintaining the flying armor wasn't enough. He had to press harder. Remind himself what he'd been able to do before. The urgency.

Sescoria quickly fell away into the horizon behind him, and soon



enough, the vast forest of the Reserve came into view."

"3524

It wasn't quite as impressive as he remembered. From this high up, he could see most of the forest's edges in the distance.

But perhaps he was being unfair. After having spent considerable time in the great Imara Forest of Lorent, this place felt downright quaint. Hence why House Carthrace wanted to preserve it, he supposed, rather than letting it dwindle away into nothing. Lorent clearly didn't have such problems.

The Gate itself was quite easy to find, too. Not only was the Reserve smaller than he expected, but the battle that had taken place here had left a giant hole behind.

Which made him feel a little bit bad. He'd talked with a few different Carthraces now, not the least of which being Amelia, but the subject of their nature reserve and his involvement in its partial destruction had never come up.

He landed with a thick thud, not quite as graceful as he'd intended, feeling bolts of pain shoot up both legs as he barely managed to stay on his feet. Thankfully, he regained his composure quickly enough, which told him that he'd probably avoided injuring himself, at least.

The sundered battleground did seem to be recovering, he noticed. That was good. It looked like all the felled trees had been cleared away, too, leaving room for new sprouts to pop up all over the place. Or had those been planted by hand? Yeah, some of them must have been, if not all. A few were nearly as tall as he was already, and while he was no botanist, he was fairly sure that trees didn't grow that quickly.

Some pristine red flowers were blooming amid the tall grass, as well, making for quite a painterly view as he laid eyes on and finally approached Rathmore's Gate.

So this had the power of teleportation. In part, at least. Hector highly doubted that he and Garovel would be able to get it to work here and now. He wasn't even sure what they would do with it if they could.

But it did make him wonder if it might be capable of anything else. "So Rathmore named all these things after himself," said Hector, recalling what Garovel told him before, "but they actually existed long before he did, right?"

'Yep. Kind of a wily prick, that Rathmore.'

"And you knew him personally, you said."

'That's right.'

"Doesn't seem like you have many fond memories of the guy..."

'Actually, I do. It's just that I have some particularly horrible ones, as well. Horrible enough to ruin everything else.'

"Ah..."

"3525

'I mean, the guy was brilliant. I'm not contesting that. Even if he didn't actually create these things, he's still the only person in history who's ever been able to affect them in any way. And my interest in his Materials definitely stems from that fact, at least in part. I just feel it in my non-existent bones that these things must harbor some kind of incredible power or secret.'

"Well, this one was secretly a teleporter, so I guess your bones were right."

'Indeed.'

Hector circled around the base of the Gate, inspecting it. The formation was simple enough at a glance. Two big rocks, one almost twice the size of the other, similar in overall scale to a small office building. There hadn't been much opportunity to examine the Gate before, so Hector wanted to take his time now.

He recalled Garovel mentioning that Rathmore had marked all of his works with a certain type of etching. Hector had seen it firsthand back in Himmekel, during the treasure hunt that ultimately led them to Malast. The etching had been quite hard to spot, though, nearly invisible to the naked eye.

He looked for it now on the Gate, getting up close to the rock and squinting. He was a little afraid of touching it with his bare hands, even though it was almost certainly fine to do so. There was just a slight fear in the back of his mind that it might suddenly teleport him back down to the Undercrust--or to some totally random place, maybe.

He was fairly sure it didn't work like that, but still. A bit of caution wouldn't hurt, he figured.

If there were any etchings on these rocks, then he wasn't seeing them yet. It was quite hard to tell, though. He tried looking even closer.

'Hector,' came Garovel's voice. 'Over here.'

Hector ventured to where the reaper was pointing and found something entirely unexpected.

There was a flat object jutting out of the larger rock formation, about two-thirds of the way up to its peak. It had a golden sheen to it.

"What is that?"

Garovel was already up there, investigating. 'Um... hmm. Wait a second. This is... a mirror.'

Hector raised an iron platform for himself to join the reaper. Indeed, it was a moderately large mirror with a golden, jewel-encrusted panel. "What the heck? Why would Rathmore stick a random mirror into his Gate?"

'He didn't,' said Garovel. 'This wasn't here before.'"  
"3526

"How could that be?" said Hector. "And how do you know?"

'How do I know? Because I was paying close attention, that's how. Rathmore's Materials are always of interest to me.' The reaper hovered around the mirror, inspecting the different sides of it. 'As for how it could be possible, well... the only explanation that I can think of is that the properties of the mirror interacted with the properties of the Gate, creating an unexpected result.'

Hmm. "But where did the mirror come from?"

'You don't recognize it? This is the same mirror that I had you grab during the middle of that worm fight, remember?'

Oh shit. Hector looked at it anew. The reaper was right.

'You thought you'd dropped it at some point during all the confusion, didn't you? You were quite bummed about it.'

"Yeah... I thought I'd lost another artifact of power, like with the Moon's Wrath. Or if not an artifact, then something that we probably could've sold for a lot of money, at least."

'Right. We never did figure out what kind of power it harbored, if any. But I think we can safely say now that there was indeed something more to it. Otherwise, it never would've gotten stuck on the Gate like this.'

"Huh..."

'In fact, this is... entirely unprecedented. In all the time I've been studying Rathmore's Materials, never have I seen anything or anyone modify one of them in any way, apart from Rathmore himself.'

Dang. "When you put it like that, this, uh... this seems like kind of a big deal."

'It is.' Garovel eyed Hector for a moment. 'Wow, buddy. All this time, I had no idea you were the most powerful integrator since Rathmore. Talk about impressive.'

"I--?" Hector's expression flattened. "Okay. First of all, I definitely didn't do this. And second--"

'You don't know that. Maybe it was your aura playing havoc with things.'

"No. I don't accept that. That's bullshit, Garovel."

The reaper laughed. 'You seem surprisingly confident about that.'

"I'm confident that you're trying to fuck with me."

'Heh, maybe. But we genuinely don't know what caused this. I'm just having fun speculating, right now.'

"Uh-huh. Anyway, how do get it out of there?"

‘Good question. I suspect that we simply can’t. It looks like it’s fused with the stone. But go ahead and try pulling on it, if you want. Maybe looks are deceiving. Maybe it’ll slide free, easy as can be.’”  
"3527

Hector hesitated. “But what if... what if it gives me, like, a crazy vision or something when I touch it?”

‘Why would it do that?’

“I don’t know. Why did it fuse with the rock?”

‘Fair point.’ Garovel allowed a beat to pass. ‘Eh, but I’m sure it’ll be fine! Go on! Touch it! See if it does anything!’

“Garovel...”

‘What? Don’t chicken out on me now. Where are those massive iron balls of yours, all of a sudden?’

Hector sighed and chuckled at the same time. “You’re such an idiot, sometimes...”

‘Like reaper, like servant, my friend.’

“Fuuuck you...” Hector did lift his hand, though, readying himself to grab the edge of the mirror. It was probably safe enough, he figured.

He touched the golden paneling.

Nothing happened.

He gave it a second, just in case, but still nothing. So he grasped the edge of the mirror more firmly and gave it a tug.

It didn’t budge. Not even a little.

‘Put some elbow grease into it.’

“What if I break it?”

‘Eh, I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

“The more you say that, the less convinced I become.”

‘Alright, I’m mostly kidding this time. Don’t break it yet.’

“‘Yet?’”

‘Let’s just have a little look-see here...’ The reaper hovered nearer to it, looking at it from directly above now, straight into the reflection. ‘Hmm. Y’know what would’ve been a cool power for this thing to have? If it let me see myself in it.’

“Cool and useless.”

‘C’mon. Being cool is its own use.’

Hector decided to raise his iron platform a bit higher in order to join the reaper in looking into it. As one might’ve expected, he could indeed see himself in it.

Huh. So that was what his helmet and pauldrons looked like from the outside. Despite how much effort he’d put into making it, he hadn’t actually bothered to check what this new dark armor looked like in a mirror yet.

Pauline had mentioned that it looked scary, and... now he could see why she thought that. He hadn’t bothered to add any ornamentation to the helmet, because the material had simply been too difficult to work with, but it had still ended up with a T-shaped eye slit, thanks to the faceguard, and a smooth overall profile that fully concealed his neck, thanks to the way it interlocked seamlessly with the gorget.

And because of how dark it was, it made him look less like a person and more like a shadow."

"3528

‘Ooh, wait a minute,’ said Garovel. ‘What if this thing is a teleporter now like the Gate? Try sticking your hand through it. Watch it pass through the mirror like an open window.’

“You really think that’ll happen?”

‘Well, of course. It was my idea, and I’m never wrong, so yes, I’m sure it will.’

Hector bobbed his head and decided not to retort. "Alright, then. Here goes."

He pressed his gauntleted hand flatly against the reflection. And waited.

Nothing happened, still.

'You're obviously doing it wrong,' said Garovel.

"Oh, am I? How so?"

'Uh. Well. Your armor. You gotta use your bare hand, of course.'

"Okay, then." He dematerialized one gauntlet and repeated the same action.

It made no difference.

'Alright, it's useless. You can break it now.'

"I'm not gonna break it!"

'Oh, c'mon. It deserves it. Just look how smug it is. With its. Reflectiveness.'

"Even if it is useless, what would be the point in breaking it?"

'To make me feel better?'

"Garovel."

'I'm kidding again. Relax.'

"Are you, though? You sure this isn't one of those sarcastic confession-type things?"

'Maybe a little. Maybe I think that mirror is being a real prick, right now.'

"Okay, Garovel."

'I don't appreciate your tone, Hector.'

He decided to move on before the reaper dragged him down another conversational rabbit hole. "I wonder if whatever power the mirror had... got sucked out by the Gate 'r something."

‘That sounds possible. Hmm. Maybe even plausible.’

‘But why would it only affect the mirror and not anything else? The Shifting Spear of Logante had power in it, too, right? And it came through the Gate just fine. Not to mention the Scarf.’

‘Perhaps the nature of the mirror’s power was similar to that of the Gate. So they interacted with one another.’

‘So... maybe it’s actually the opposite of what you were saying. Maybe it was a teleporter, but now it’s not?’

‘Maybe. And if so, then... man, that bites. Bad luck on our part.’

‘I mean, at least we didn’t end up fused into the rock.’

‘I guess that’s true. Way to look on the bright side, Hector.’

“Hmm...”

‘Now what’re you thinking?’

‘I’m trying to remember the last time that I actually saw this thing,’ said Hector. “Because I feel like... I didn’t even have it with me when we went through the portal. Not that I knew we were going through a portal, at the time.”

"3529

‘What, so you’re saying you really DID lose track of it beforehand?’

“Um... maybe? Do you remember when I last had it?”

‘It was on the ground. Not technically in your possession, I suppose. You were carrying it in orbit around you until Malast, uh... gave you his “blessing.” Then you dropped it, along with everything else. When you came to, Malast gave you everything back... except the mirror. Hmm.’

‘Oh. Huh. You think he left it out on purpose?’

‘Tough to say. He might not have even known it was a special artifact. You had it encased in your iron the whole time, so perhaps he merely mistook it for debris or something.’



“Yeah, but he was a ‘god.’ And he, like, knew stuff.”

‘You have a real way with words, sometimes, Hector.’

“What I mean is, he would’ve known that it was special, wouldn’t he? Because he could just tell. With his weird god-powers or whatever.”

‘I’m inclined to agree with you. But remember, he was also a big idiot.’

“That’s, uh... hmm.”

‘And a bigger douche.’

“Wow, Garovel. Tell me how you really feel.”

‘I’m just saying we can’t assume much about what his intentions might’ve been. If we’re feeling less insulting in our choice of labels, then we would probably call a guy like that a “wildcard.”’

“Okay, well, even if he didn’t hold the mirror back intentionally, we’re still at least certain that I didn’t have it on me when we returned to Atreya, right? Which was the important point.”

‘I suppose so, yes. Which would mean... we REALLY have no idea how it ended up in the Gate.’

“Oh, maybe Malast sent it afterwards. Like, maybe he saw it on the floor and realized he’d forgotten something, sent it through on its own, and then it got stuck here.”

The reaper was quiet.

“What?” said Hector.

‘We didn’t have much time to get to know Malast, and yet... somehow, the scene you just described sounds incredibly likely to me. I can just imagine him fucking up like that.’

“Geez. Y’know, you’re ragging on him so much that it’s starting make me feel bad for him.”

‘Really? You’re the one who shit-talked him to his face, though.’

“I--well, that wasn’t--I mean... er...”

‘Yeah. There’s the Hector I know.’

Hector wasn't sure what to say now. And rather than continuing to struggle with that, he returned his attention to the mirror.

'You sure you don't want to break it?' said Garovel."  
"3530

"Yes, I'm sure," said Hector. "Shut up with that, already."

'But what if breaking it unlocks its hidden power?'

"Why in the world would that do it?"

'Why wouldn't it? It'd be like breaking open a locked door.'

"Yeah, okay. Or it'd be like smashing a priceless vase."

'Y'know what? I bet you're not even strong enough to break it. I bet it's probably too powerful for you.'

Hector snorted. "You must be getting desperate, if you think that's gonna convince me."

'Ugh, damn you and your lack of pride. You're a lord now, you know. Your ego is supposed to be inflating every day.'

Hector ignored him, knowing they were going to get sidetracked again if he didn't.

In a background thought process, he'd been trying to sift through the memories of the Candle for anything about Rathmore's Gate or Rathmore's Materials--or even Rathmore himself. In truth, he'd been searching for a while, on and off for the past few days.

With all the things that the Candle had left him, it felt like there had to be something in there. Somewhere. Right? If these Materials were as old as Garovel said, then surely the Candle would've learned something about them as some point.

If only it was that simple.

Perhaps Hector was taking too long with his thoughts, because Garovel seemed to realize what he was up to.

‘Find something relevant in that head of yours?’ the reaper asked.

‘I’m trying, but... I don’t think so.’

‘Hmm. Nothing at all about Rathmore? He was pretty damn famous, so it would make sense if the Candle knew about him.’

“Unfortunately,” said Hector, “that’s not really how it works. The memories are... just, like, scenes in my head. And emotions, too. Those are able to come through. But names? And words? I can’t really use those like keywords for a search.”

‘No? That sucks.’

“Tell me about it,” said Hector. “I can sometimes remember... conversations. Sort of. But that’s about it. And they’re usually kinda... weird and muddy. Probably because they were taking place in a language that I don’t actually know.”

‘So you just need to search for someone mentioning Rathmore’s name.’

“You make it sound so simple...”

‘Maybe it is. Maybe you’re getting into your own head and overcomplicating things. Not that you would ever do such a thing, I’m sure.’”

"3531

Hector almost resented that. But the reaper probably had a point. “I think... the way it works is... I need to see something in order to search for it in my memories. Specifically, I mean. I’ve tried to search based on just ideas before, but the results I got back were always kinda... shitty and vague. Almost like the Candle itself was trying to figure out what I want. And not quite succeeding.”

‘So you’re saying the Candle is stupid.’

“I did not say that. Not at all.”

‘That’s what I heard.’

“I’m saying that words like ‘Rathmore’s Materials’ or whatever are not

helpful. Maybe if I knew what they looked like, then I could find something relevant, but..."

'Well, the Gate's right here. Put those photoreceptors to use and get a good look. That's basically why we came all this way, isn't it?'

"I have been looking," said Hector, extending out his iron platform so that he could eye the Gate up and down again. "I'm just trying to..."

'No rush,' said Garovel. 'Take your time and think. You've got a lot in there, right? Soak in the view and think back. Hell, meditate if you have to.'

Hmm. Hector did as the reaper said, circling around the Gate to get a series of good looks in from all different angles, including from above and below. Maybe he couldn't search for someone mentioning the Gate, but perhaps it would show up in the background of a memory. If he could just learn to recognize its shape...

'Okay, but don't actually take that long. I'm getting bored over here.'

"You were being so helpful for a minute there..."

He concentrated. And yet also didn't. He wanted to find just the right headspace to occupy for this. He wanted to be loose and free. Moving through memories quickly and easily. Not lingering. Not getting bogged down in details. But he also wanted to have enough awareness so that he could actually detect the Gate if it appeared.

It was a balancing act, of sorts. A long and strange trek, speeding by countless memories like a passenger looking out the window of a train.

There was a temptation to simply... keep going. Because, also like a train, there was a certain rhythm to this. A certain... comfort. Passively observing the world. Observing history. Hmm.

Stop.

There.

He had to rewind a bit. Had to journey backwards. Not sure that he'd seen what he thought. Had to take his time, too. Look over each scene a bit more thoroughly.

But he found it.

Rathmore's Gate."

But the scene surrounding it was quite strange indeed. Instead of a simple forest, there was a tremendous formation of... something. Rock? Metal?

Both.

Almost like a massive, tangled web. It rose high into the air above, with dozens of metal spikes pointing downward at the Gate, looking almost like scorpion tails preparing to strike. But they were not moving. Nor did it seem like they ever would, Hector thought.

What was this? This giant structure didn't exist in the modern day. What had happened to it?

He observed the scene for a while, unsure if anything was even going to happen at all. No one was around. The structure seemed perfectly still.

Then, at length, a person stepped into view. Hector couldn't make out any details about them, as their face and body were a blur. They hovered around the base of the structure, perhaps examining things, until they eventually approached an apparent lever on the far western edge of the structure and pulled it with both hands.

The scene exploded with bright light, and it remained that way for so long that Hector began to think the memory had ended. When the light finally faded, however, Hector looked for some kind of change to the scene.

But he couldn't see a difference.

"Does this qualify as success?" came a voice from his right, and Hector turned to see a second blurry person approaching.

"No," said the first person, still by the lever, "but perhaps it will have to."

"Truly? You are finally putting an end to this nonsense?"

"For this monument, yes. But only because there are still so many others left."

“Bah. You gave me hope for a moment there. I ask again: what is the point in all this if no real results are achievable? Even if your theories are true, why bother with--”

“Cease your incessant whinging, woman. If you still do not understand, then I expect you never will.”

There was silence, until the second spoke again. “I did not expect to find you in such foul temper. You are normally so calm, even in failure.”

“Hmph. Perhaps that is why your insufferable attitude has gotten so out of hand. Because I have been too calm. Because I have allowed you to forget who I am.”

“You are my consort, and I am your Queen. You would do well to--”

“No, you ignorant wench. I am the Seer of the Distant Dawn. I am He Who Has Touched the Heavens. I am Rathmore of Andeyal.”  
"3533 -- CCXCIV.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Four: ‘O, Wonder! O, Threshold...!’

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The memory froze when Hector heard that. Had he frozen it himself? Yeah. He felt so. He wasn’t entirely sure how he’d done that, but it seemed true.

If this blurry figure in front of him was really Rathmore, then he wanted to take a minute and reexamine the scene.

Recontextualize it, actually.

This giant metal-and-rock formation all around the Gate...

Could it have been a Fusion Forge?

Hector knew that they could look like just about anything, so perhaps there was no telling for sure. But if it was, then that might explain, in part, why it no longer existed in the modern day. Forges were too

highly sought after to be left alone. Someone would've either taken it or destroyed it.

Furthermore, it might also explain how Rathmore had been able to affect the supposedly un-affectable stone. If anything in the world could modify the unmodifiable, it would probably be a Fusion Forge, wouldn't it?

Hmm.

The more he looked at the enormous formation, the more he wondered about how it might have functioned. All those spiked points focusing on the Gate. Were they for channeling ardor, perhaps? Or extracting it, maybe? Dammit. Maybe if the scene hadn't gone white earlier, he would've gotten a clearer picture of things.

He found himself hovering higher, floating above the stony contraption in order to get a better idea of just how huge it really was. It extended out farther than he'd realized, seemingly embedded deep into the ground, making it difficult to tell where the natural rock ended and Forge-rock began.

Perhaps that was the point. The Candle had a similar design philosophy, didn't it? Built right into a tree. Made inseparable from it. In which case, it might've been better to think of the "natural" rock as still part of the forge. Like a root system.

And that lever. That was distinct. Hector looked for any other mechanical parts, but he couldn't find any. How could that be the only thing? Was there a vast network of cogwheels underground? Probably not. That sort of technology seemed a bit advanced for how long ago this must have taken place.

But then again...

Ancient integrators were no joke. Stasya Orlov, the creator of Warrenhold, had apparently invented locked door mechanisms long before the technology became commonplace. So maybe Rathmore had done something similar here."

"3533 -- CCXCIV.

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"3534

At length, Hector decided that he wanted the memory to resume, but since he still wasn't sure how he'd managed to pause it in the first place, he didn't know how to make it continue. He floundered for a bit, searching up and down and all around him, as if he might perhaps find a hidden button somewhere that he could press.

Thankfully, though, it soon started back up on its own. Or had that been his doing, too? Yeah, it probably was, huh? He didn't see how anyone else could've been responsible for something that was occurring his very own mind. Other than maybe Rasalased. But he didn't sense the Dry God anywhere, right now.

The apparent queen was now quiet, perhaps thinking twice about saying something to further antagonize Rathmore. And Hector couldn't help feeling rather anxious for her. Rathmore didn't exactly seem like the nicest guy so far. He wasn't about to kill this woman, was he?

For a time, the blurry Rathmore seemed to just be staring at her, but eventually, he took a deep breath, rubbed his face with one hand, then exhaled a heavy sigh. "...Apologies, dearheart. I seem to have... overreacted."

"Tis unlike you to speak to me so."

"Yes, I... let emotion get the rule of me. I suppose I was more frustrated with my results than I realized. Please forgive me, Anicca."

"Hmm. I shall have to think on it."

“Anicca, please...”

“Tell me again why this monument confounds you so. I recall you mentioning before that you believe it to be some manner of gateway, yes?”

“Ah...” Rathmore turned away from her to look at the Gate again. “Belief has no bearing on it. It is a gateway. And so much more than that, as well. In truth, calling it a mere gateway may be doing it a disservice.”

“You know this how?”

“I can see it. The full breadth of its divine form and heavenly function. No doubt, when you think of a gateway, you think of a simple threshold which marks the passage of one area into another, but this monument... it can bend those areas as it pleases. It can make them overlap. Or distort. Twist them up and down. Turn them bright and beautiful. Or dark and ugly. Or perhaps something else entirely. Perhaps a ‘bridge’ might be a more apt term for it, in some sense. Ah, no, but even that will not do, naturally... what then... hrm...?”  
"3535

Rathmore continued on, mumbling low enough that Hector couldn’t hear what he was saying.

After a short time, Anicca stepped closer to the Gate. “You are getting lost in your own musings again,” she said firmly. “Rein that wandering mind of yours in, please.”

Rathmore stopped and looked at her. Hector wished he could see the expression on the man’s blurry face. Given how wildly Rathmore’s mood had shifted, Hector wondered if he would get upset with her again or become even more timid.

Anicca left him an opening to respond, but when he didn’t, she spoke up again. “How will any of this help me to reclaim my birthright?” she said. “I’ve granted you the resources you asked for. I’ve bestowed titles and land to you. I’ve given you influence of your own within my court. And yet the years continue to draw on with no destination in sight. No path to my crown.”

"You have a crown."

"Not the crown of my mother. Not the one that was stolen from me."

Rathmore scoffed. "Even now, you cling to this idea of vengeance? After all we have built together?"

"What have we built? A palatable place to hide and die in? A little corner of the world to call mine, only because none else know to claim it? You speak of nothing. Empty lands and hollow words."

"And you speak of greed and ingratitude. What you have is more than most in the world, and yet it is not enough for you. Nor will it be, 'till you have brought ruin to it all and perhaps finally realized your own foolishness."

"Again, you speak out of turn."

"Because again, you push me when you should not. You do not make it easy to love you, dearheart."

Anicca said nothing.

"You say I speak of empty lands and hollow words? That is your old crown. Nykeir has made it so. There is nothing to reclaim. It has been too long. Your people will not rejoice upon your return. They did not fight for you. They did not weep at news of your death. They do not care. And why should they? You were little more than a babe, hardly out of your swaddling clothes."

She turned and walked over to Rathmore, right up to his face, and slapped him.

Rathmore just took it.

"Yours are craven words," she said, sounding not just bitter but almost tearful, too. "Repeating such lies. Why? Cruelty ill suits you."

"If you think that was cruelty, dearheart, then you truly have learned nothing of the world, even after all this time."

"3536

"You would ask me to forget what Nykeir has done to my family? That

man deserves a slow, sunless death without mercy or hope.”

“Aye, that he does. But you do not deserve to waste your life in the miserable pursuit of him.”

At that, she turned away and made no response.

“At this point, ‘tis a matter of mere pragmatism. You must realize this, my dear. On some level, you must. You have acquired much of the influence that you might have once inherited, but Nykeir’s kingdom is no longer the fledgling power that it was when he conquered your home. He is among the most powerful men on the continent. Perhaps the world, even. There is no victory for you against him. And even if there was, there is no kingdom to reclaim. Better to focus on defending what you now have, rather than risking it all to take back what once was.”

After that, the memory fragmented--but it didn’t quite break down entirely. Hector could see that the conversation between the two was continuing. He just couldn’t make out what they were saying. It felt like there was more here. He thought he could sense it, somehow. But then everything seemed to speed up and fade away, disappearing into a fog.

Damn. He supposed that was still pretty informative, but he’d really felt like--

Wait a minute. No. There was something more here. Another memory. Linked to that one. How? By time? By the people?

He found it.

The scene that appeared before him one of utter devastation. Pillars of flame shot up into the air, roaring with such intensity that he could almost feel them. Red and orange filled his view, blanketing the Gate in its entirety.

So it was as he’d thought, then. He was convinced. That giant thing had indeed been a Fusion Forge, and this memory here was its destruction.

How had it happened, though? Why was the memory starting off like this? Shouldn’t it have begun earlier? With a bit of context or something? He tried rewinding, but it didn’t work. Whether that was because the memory itself was incomplete or because he simply wasn’t doing it right, Hector couldn’t quite tell.

Until he tried fast forwarding, instead. That worked like a charm. The flames raged higher and higher, seeming to reach all the way into the sky, before eventually beginning to dissipate. Hector had no concept of how long it might've taken. These couldn't have been normal flames, surely, if they'd been able to destroy a forge."

"3537

When the fire finally died all the way back down, it was as expected. Aside from the Gate itself, only mounds of ash remained, which were already beginning to blow away in the wind.

Disappointed, Hector thought this might already be the end of the memory. No new information to be gleaned.

Then two figures stepped into view, one of whom was stumbling forward, as if having been pushed.

They were both blurry, just as before, but he did not have long to wait in order to begin learning their identities.

"Rathmore, Rathmore, Rathmore," said the more composed one, sounding almost pitying. "See what has become of all your tireless work."

Rathmore had fallen to his hands and knees and was struggling to stand.

"The worst is to know that this could have been avoided," said the composed man, stepping closer. "If you had but listened. Accepted my terms. But no. You were in love, I suppose. And for that, I am possessed of a morsel of sympathy." He broke for a laugh. "Never have I known a fortress more impenetrable to the sieges of reason."

Finally on his feet again, Rathmore still wasn't answering. Instead, he'd begun sifting through the smoldering heap of dust, leaving fleeting clouds in his wake.

"Looking for something? I left nothing to find. Apart from that lone monolith. Quite the irritants, these Materials of yours. Or was it Tools? Which name was it again?"

Rathmore ignored him and just kept digging.

"You are wasting your time, my friend. I promise you that I was quite thorough. Ah, but perhaps you wonder how I am so certain. It is because I have already visited several of these other sites. This may be the first time you are present for it, but it is not my first time doing this. Hah. For a man heralded as a genius, these constructs of yours were all surprisingly similar in how primitive they were. Hardly even worth calling forges, in my view. I made sure to burn the heart and roots out of each and every one."

Rathmore's hands stopped moving, and he slumped down onto his knees again. "Why bring me here?"

"Aha. Glad am I that you have asked. Two reasons, truth be told. But they are... conflicting, now that I am thinking on it. Hmm." The man scratched his head. "Alas, perhaps you have made me somewhat unreasonable, myself."

"3538

"Have I?" said Rathmore, sounding mildly curious, though more haggard than anything. "So after all is said and done, you do value my opinion."

"Hah. Of course. I should think that obvious by now."

"The only obvious thing is that you take great joy in belittling me and my work."

"Oh? Perhaps so. But what should that matter, if you are the genius that everyone says you are? A truly great man would not be bothered by any of my playful jabs, surely."

Rathmore stepped toward the Gate. "When the most powerful man in the world makes it his life's mission to ruin my own, what is there to be done? Tell me, O, Nykeir the Great. In what ways have I erred in my dealings with you? What other paths might I have taken and when? Please, be quite specific."

"You are sounding rather bitter, my friend."

"And you are sounding rather predictable."

"Am I? What shall I say next, then?"

"Something either self-congratulatory or derisive of me, I'm sure."

Nykeir chortled. "I shall have to mix things up, then. I do so hate being predictable."

Rathmore placed his hand against the Gate, saying nothing.

"Here, allow me to administer a well-earned compliment. Of the two reasons I brought you to this place, one of them was to have you tell me what you know of these monoliths."

"In what capacity does that qualify as a compliment?"

"You do not see? Because I am wondering if you may know something that I do not! The most flattering of notions, no?"

"You sicken me, madman."

Nykeir scoffed. "Biting words--and wholly undeserved. Please, my friend. You must have learned something of these things during your time with them. Else you would not have been able to alter them as you have."

Rathmore turned to look at him again. "Yes," he said, suddenly confident. "I did learn of them. Many things, in truth. And that is knowledge you shall never possess."

"Oh, do not be so quick to say so. If you tell me, I shall let you live."

"You will let me live, regardless."

"Hmm-hmm, you believe so?"

"Yes. Because of the other reason you brought me here. I have realized what it is."

"Heh. Speak it, then."

"You want to watch me suffer. You brought me so that I would see my work undone. My time and energy, wasted. And at your hands, naturally."

Nykeir was silent for a few moments. Then somehow, Hector felt like he could see a smile appear on that blurry face of his. "I shan't deny it."

"3539

Rathmore breathed deeply and took a step closer. "Lucky am I that you have become such an arrogant, careless fool. Never could I have accomplished this when you were younger."

Nykeir straightened. "Accomplished what?"

"Curious, are you?" said Rathmore, raising one hand slowly, palm upwards. "Or merely frightened?"

The other man gave an audible sniff. "Go on, Seer. Stupefy me, then. Show me what your Heavenly Sight has seen."

"I can grant you but a glimpse. 'Twill be up to you to see anything beyond."

"Hmph."

Rathmore's hand tensed suddenly. "Now, Behold!"

Light gathered into his hand, then burst forth, shooting toward Nykeir and enveloping him.

It clashed against a wall of yellow flame, with Nykeir remaining comfortably in the center, apparently unbothered about being entirely consumed by fire.

"Tell me this is not all," said Nykeir, his voice distorting from behind the inferno, sounding lower and almost monstrous, as if the flames themselves might be speaking for him.

But indeed, that was not all. Because the light still enveloped the flames, and then bounded backward to the Gate, first touching the smaller rock, then connecting to the larger one. The beam stayed there, bright and strong, linking Rathmore to Nykeir, and Nykeir to the stones.

"Yigorosk!" said Rathmore.

And Hector blinked, in complete disbelief of what he was seeing.

A gargantuan tentacle shot out of the Gate, appearing from the shimmering line of light between two rocks and arcing over Rathmore's



head to slam down on top of Nykeir.

The ground exploded from the impact, filling the area with a cloud of dirt and debris, and Hector had to wait for it to clear. When it did, he saw Nykeir still there, standing within the fire and light, a massive hole burned into the tentacle where it fell upon him.

From his body language, he seemed a bit confused but not terribly concerned. Then he started laughing. "What in the world is this?!" he said happily.

Rather than answering, the light from Rathmore's hand shone even more intensely, and the burned tentacle shivered and melted into a bluish ooze, which splashed over Nykeir, coating him entirely. The yellow flame and even the light surrounding it were both smothered.

And the tentacle reformed, yanking itself back through the Gate, whereupon it winked out of existence, taking all remaining traces of the light beam with it."

"3540

The scene went dead quiet after that, to the point that Hector wondered if that was the end. Everything in sight was silent and still, including Rathmore, who merely stood there, staring at the Gate through which Nykeir had just vanished.

Wait a minute. Had this guy just yelled "Yigorosk?" Hector hadn't forgotten that name. He still, unfortunately, remembered researching it. A yigorosk was supposed to be mythical creature, infamous for its ooze and tentacles, among other things.

But then... this memory would mean...

Ugh. Hector did not appreciate this kind of confirmation.

At length, Rathmore moved again. He tossed something up into the air and caught it again, then let out a small laugh.

Hector froze the memory there, wanting to get a better look at the object in his hand. Had he had it on him the whole time? Or had he pulled it out of the rubble earlier? Nykeir had seemed quite confident nothing could have survived the forge's destruction, so what could possibly have--

Ah. Hector recognized the object instantly. A small black pyramid with protrusions on some of its sides.

A Kag. A type of ancient key. He'd seen one just like it back in Himmekel.

Come to think of it, that Kag had been what brought them to the treasure they'd been seeking--and to Malast.

Huh.

Wow. Suddenly, this seemed like the most obvious thing in the world. Like he should have been looking for a Kag all along.

But hold on here. It wasn't that simple, was it? The Kag in Himmekel had actually been used like a proper key. Diego Redwater had slotted it into a monument--one not unlike the Gate here. But Rathmore, from what Hector had just seen, had not slotted this Kag into anything. Instead, the guy seemed to have just magically activated it in his hand.

That was quite a difference. Hmm.

He rewound the memory in order to check more closely on what Rathmore had been up to when he'd been digging. The man's blurry hands didn't make it easy, but eventually, Hector spotted it. A moment where Rathmore did indeed appear to pull something out of the debris.

Yes.

While the forge and everything else in the area had been annihilated, the Gate was not actually the lone survivor. The Kag had endured, too.

Damn. Did that mean these things were made out of the same stuff as the rest of Rathmore's Materials? Hell, they kinda looked like nightrock, now that Hector was thinking about it, which made him wonder if that was a coincidence."

"3541

In fact, given the relatively close proximity to Warrenhold, Hector began to further wonder if his castle might have some tangential relation to these monuments. Voreese might know more, given that she was Stasya Orlov's reaper, but from the way that Voreese had

talked about her before, Hector had a feeling that the reaper wouldn't be able to provide many new details. It seemed like, even now, Stasya was still something of a mystery to Voreese.

And as he recalled, Stasya was herself a descendant of the Nykeirian people.

Which was a crazy thing to think about. This fucking prick that had been making Rathmore's life hell had been such an important historical figure? It felt hard to acknowledge that as even possible, let alone true.

According to Voreese, though, Stasya had not actually been born until after the collapse of the Nykeirian Empire. She'd been "a product of the Mohssian culture," as the reaper had put it.

Whew. He was feeling a little woozy, all of a sudden. Perhaps he needed a break from this weird-ass memory-diving. And so much the better, since it seemed like he'd reached the end of this memory, anyway.

He opened his eyes again, felt breath in his lungs again, felt his whole body again.

And felt even more woozy, actually, enough to make him stumble backward and fall on his ass.

'Hector!' came Garovel's voice.

Hector had to shake his head a few times before the ground beneath him finally stopped spinning. "Hey, Garovel..."

The reaper gave a silent sigh. 'Geez. You were gone for quite a while there, buddy. Startin' to make me worry you'd slipped into another soul coma. I was getting ready to just sit here like an asshole for two weeks, watching you.'

"Ah. Uh. Yeah, sorry about that..." He took his time climbing back to his feet, still feeling a bit drained, like he'd just gotten done with a full body workout. "How long was I out?"

'A few hours, I think.'

He straightened. "Hours?!"

'Yeah. Didn't feel like that for you, I take it?'

"No!"

‘Hmm. Did it feel shorter or longer?’

“I mean, uh--” He had to think about that for a second. “Shit. I only looked at, like, two memories...”

‘So shorter, then.’

“Ugh. I guess I should be more careful about doing that again in the future. I didn’t intend to spend so much time on this.”

‘Well, did you at least learn something new?’

Hector looked at the reaper. “I saw Rathmore.””  
"3542

‘You did, huh?’ said Garovel. ‘Well, uh, that’s neat ‘n all, but still not technically anything new. I’ve already seen Rathmore.’

Hector cocked an eyebrow. “I mean, yeah, but that wasn’t really what I was--”

‘I’m just sayin’. I asked for a new thing, and you gave me an old thing. A been-there-done-that thing. Kinda disappointed in your weird new memory powers, honestly.’

“Garovel, there was more to it than just that.”

‘That’s good. Because I don’t see how just seeing Rathmore’s face would prove helpful at all.’

“...I actually didn’t see his face.”

‘Say what?’

“The memory was, er... I mean, for some reason, people in the memories were all blurry. Faces included.”

‘Wow, so after all that, you still don’t even know what he looks like?’

“Ah--yeah...”

‘Hah! Your new memory power sucks!’

“What the--?”

‘Garovel’s still on top, baby!’

Hector’s face went flat.

‘Go on, ask me something! See how well I can remember stuff!’

In spite of himself, Hector couldn’t help snickering. “You done?”

‘Not really. Feel like I could gloat for another ten minutes, if I needed to.’

“Can we skip that part? I did actually learn some useful things, I think.”

‘Oh, alright. Out with it, then. Astonish me.’

“Agh--don’t build it up like that. I don’t know if it’s that good!”

‘Okay, okay. My expectations are lowering with each passing second. As usual.’

“As usu--?! Fuck is that supposed to mean?!”

Eventually, they managed to actually discuss the subject in question.

‘Hmm,’ mused Garovel for a long moment. ‘So you saw Anicca and even Nykeir here, too. Interesting.’

“And the giant tentacle monster. Don’t forget that. Turns out that thing really existed, after all.”

‘Yeah, I know. I told you that when I first brought it up. What, you didn’t believe me?’

“I mean... not really, no.”

‘Wow. I’m hurt, Hector. Blindly believing everything I say is part of your sacred duty as a servant, you know.’

“Uh-huh...”

‘Gotta say, though. I wasn’t expecting to learn the truth about Nykeir’s sudden disappearance this way. So in the end, he got devoured by a Yigorosk... And a pretty gnarly one, from the sound of it.’

“Gnarly? Were they not all that powerful?”

‘Of course not. Nykeir was probably the strongest servant alive at that time. A normal Yigorosk shouldn’t have been able to touch him. Frankly, while I do find that son of bitch’s death hilarious and well-deserved, I also find this information rather terrifying. A Yigorosk that strong is, uh... not a pleasant thought, given everything else I know about them.’”

"3543

“Huh,” said Hector, feeling abruptly like he might need to elaborate. “But, uh... Nykeir seemed kinda amused by the giant tentacle. Like more amused than worried. He just... sort of stood there and took it. Then it gooped him up and yinked him away.”

““Gooped him up and yinked him away.” Once again, your word choice continues to impress.’

“Look, I don’t how else to describe it. It was really fucking weird-looking, man.”

‘No, no, I wasn’t saying I didn’t understand. If anything, I’d say you’ve painted quite the picture for me. I’m imagining it very clearly.’

“Oh. Well, good. But anyway, my point was that maybe the Yigorosk wasn’t actually that powerful. Y’know? Considering how unbothered he seemed when it happened? Maybe he survived. In... another dimension or something.”

‘Given everything else we’ve seen lately, I suppose that’s possible. But it’s also been well over two millennia since his disappearance. If he really did live through that, then he probably got killed some other way, else he would’ve almost certainly returned by now.’

“You sound confident about that. Did you... know him personally?”

Garovel allowed that question to breathe. ‘As a matter of fact, yes, I did.’

“Why’d you never mention that you knew an ancient emperor?”

‘Why should I have? He’s far from the only one I’ve ever encountered.’

“Really? How many past emperors have you met?”

‘Oh, I don’t know. A lot. You have to understand: things weren’t always like the stalemate that we have with our current four emperors. There’ve been many times throughout history when the term “emperor” barely even applied, because they were popping up like weeds and dropping like flies. And many, despite how fleeting their time was, still managed to leave quite an impact on the world. In fact, I suspect that was all some of them cared about. Going out with a bang.’

Hector thought a moment. “You’ve really known lots of emperors-class servants?”

‘Okay, first off, you’re making it sound a bit more grandiose than it really was. And secondly, it’s not like I was intimately familiar with them all during the height of their power. Most of them, I met when they were younger. Once they got all high-and-mighty, they were usually out of my reach.’

“Usually? But not always.”

‘...No, not always.’

“So you have known some at their strongest.”

‘Yes. And Nykeir, I’d say... hmm. I knew him when he was quite powerful but not at his strongest, probably.’

“And he didn’t leave a favorable impression, from the sound of it.”

‘He did not.’”

"3544

“That tracks with what I saw of him,” said Hector. “The way he talked to Rathmore was like...” And he paused, suddenly realizing what words were about to come out of his mouth and thinking twice about it.

‘Hmm? Like what?’

Hector remained quiet for a few moments longer as he thought back.

As he relived something that he didn’t want to.

“...The way Nykeir was acting reminded me of Geoffrey Rofal,” he finally said.

Garovel said nothing, perhaps expecting Hector to elaborate.

Hector decided to do so, realizing something else as well. "I guess... you weren't actually there for that part, were you?"

'What part?'

"At the end. My final encounter with him. He was different than before."

'You told me about it. I remember.'

Hmm? Oh, Garovel was talking about his father. How Geoffrey had stolen the man's body. Taunted him while wearing his father's face. Hector had of course told Garovel about that.

But that wasn't what he was talking about here. "No, it wasn't just... that. There was something else different."

'What do you mean?'

"Geoffrey's behavior. It was like... he wasn't just crazy, anymore. He was obsessed. With me. And the way Nykeir was talking to Rathmore... felt very similar."

'Ah. I see.' The reaper paused, hovering nearer the Gate. 'I know exactly what you're talking about. I may not have been present for either of the situations you're describing, but I've seen it many times before. That type of... truly malevolent, psychopathic obsession. And as a matter of fact, that's what happened to Rathmore in the end, too.'

Hector blinked. "He...? He turned out like Nykeir?"

'Well, without having actually witnessed what you did, I can't say for sure that they were the same, but from the sound of it, ah... yes.'

"But Rathmore seemed pretty reasonable in the memories. I mean... mostly."

'Oh yeah. For a while there, he was a great man. Noble of mind and heart. Level-headed and intelligent. Someone to look up to.'

"So what changed?"

'Lots of things. It was a slow process over many years, as it often is. But... it was terrible to watch unfold. And terrible to remember, still.' The reaper shook his skull solemnly. 'Not being as experienced in



these things back then, I was in denial about it for much longer than I should have been. And his reaper--she was even worse than I was. Absolutely refused to see the truth of things, long after it should have been obvious.'

"...What finally convinced you that he was too far gone?"  
"3545

'He joined Abolish,' said Garovel.

Hector's brow rose.

'Went on to do many horrific things after that, though the world seems to have forgotten much of it, just because he did some great things when he was younger. Really bothers me, that.'

Hector was almost afraid to ask, but he had to. "What, exactly... did he do that was so bad?"

Garovel looked up at the sky. 'He poisoned three countries. Contaminated their water. Created an awful disease and the worst acid rain I've ever witnessed. Killed millions in the span of a year or two.'

"Holy fuck..."

'Yeah.' The reaper paused. 'But I suppose, in fairness, I should mention that there is some contention over whether or not he was the one responsible for it. Part of the reason his crimes have been largely forgotten, I suspect, is because there was a lack of proof of culpability.'

"But you believe he did it?"

'I'd love to be proven wrong, but yes. I think I do.'

"How come?"

'Because I talked to him, near the end. And while he didn't explicitly confirm it, he was just... so pleased about the situation. And so insane. He talked about people who'd been dead for half a century as if they were right there next to him. Anicca, in particular. Her death... broke him, I think.'

Hector didn't know what to say. The pain in the reaper's voice was not

something he'd heard many times before.

Garovel wasn't saying anything, either, and a heavy silence drew out.

After a while, Hector exhaled slowly and decided to change the subject, if only slightly. "...It's still crazy to me that Abolish has been around for that long," he said. "I mean, you're talking about, like, two thousand years ago, right?"

'Thereabouts.'

"And they've really been at war with the Vanguard the entire time?"

'More or less. There have been periods of peace between the two, here and there. And there have also been periods when one side seemed to achieve true victory over the other, only for the loser to reemerge years later and continue the fight.'

"Man..."

'The problem, I think, is that the two sides are more ideologically driven than anything. And ideas are very hard to kill. If not impossible. Even if you manage to wipe out everyone who thinks a certain way, someone brand new could be born who eventually arrives at those same ideas all on their own.'

"Hmm. But both sides kept the name the whole time? Like, every iteration of the Vanguard has always referred to itself as such? And Abolish, too? That seems a little weird."

"3546

'Technically, there's been some variation there, thanks to all the different languages that have arisen over the years, but by and large, yes, the two big names have remained the same. And that's because of us reapers, I think. We're not ones to let well-known names go to waste, especially when we see an opportunity to gain power and followers from them.'

"Still. You'd think some would try to branch off and establish their own groups, without all the baggage that comes with the old names, right?"

'Oh, of course. That's happened many times, too. And sometimes, those groups grow to be even larger than the Vanguard or Abolish for

a while. We're just in a period of history right now where that is not currently the case. At the moment, the old names are the strongest again.'

"I see..."

'In any case, we've been here for a while now. We should probably head back to Warrenhold before the world explodes again.'

"You didn't hear my phone going off while I was out, did you?"

'No. Everything should still be fine.'

Hector took a small breath. "That's good, at least. Are you sure there isn't anything else you want to do while we're here? What about the that mirror?"

'Well, if you've changed your mind about breaking it, then I say we should take a chunk of it back with us. Otherwise, I don't see what else there is to accomplish here, right now. Unless, perhaps, you discovered some way to activate the Gate's teleportation capabilities while you were out and have neglected to mention it thus far.'

At that, Hector opened his mouth and hesitated. "Uh... a-actually..."

'No. Hector, there's no shot you learned something that important and forgot to tell me.'

"Hey, man, I was confused. And it's not like I figured everything out. I just saw Rathmore using a Kag to activate the Gate. That's all."

'Ooh. A Kag, eh? Interesting. Those are quite difficult to come by, in this day and age. And if there's only one Kag in the entire world that fits the Gate, then finding it sounds... rather impossible.'

"Hmm. Yeah."

'But perhaps we could ask Abbas to make a new one for us.'

"Oh! You really think he could do that?"

'Dunno. Worth asking, though. My understanding of Kags is admittedly a bit limited, but to my knowledge, they have quite a bit of variance to them, just like modern keys do.'

"Maybe even more so," said Hector, thinking back on what he'd seen Rathmore do with it."

‘Oh?’ said Garovel. ‘Saw something else?’

Before Hector could respond, however, his phone went off. He dematerialized some of his leg armor in order to fish it out of his pants and saw that it was Ms. Rogers calling. He answered it.

<“Lord, there is pressing news from Vantalay. The Rainlords would like to talk to you. Would you mind returning to--?”>

A rustling noise arrived, and then someone else was speaking.

<“We’ve received a very strange offer, Lord Goffe.”> That was Joana Cortes from the sound of it. <“And we would like your opinion.”>

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Five: ‘An archdemon’s pursuit...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Nibas clutched his head again, squinting hard as the unwelcome thoughts returned, setting his vision aflame and burning the inside of his skull. Confusion was trying to grip him again. He could feel it. Powerful and tempting. Ancient and inviting.

But he had anger on his side. He would not bend. He still remembered. He still had his walls. Still had himself.

“Morgunov,” came that familiar double-voice on his left. “Don’t forget. Use me as your anchor. The sound of my voice. Hold onto it. Don’t forget.”

Nibas was getting annoyed with him, too. “Stop reminding me. I remember just fine.”

“No, you don’t. You have to trust me, right now.”

“Why should I? You’re not even real! You’re just an illusion, like all the others!”

"Yes, but I'm not your illusion. I'm my own. And I've come to help you. Remember? You were in a bad spot until I bailed you out."

"I was having fun!"

"You were being killed."

"Which was fun!"

The voice sighed.

Nibas was still having trouble placing it. So familiar. Agh. "What's your name?"

"Gohvis. Remember."

"Ah! Gohvis! You came to help me?! No wonder I think you're an illusion! The real Gohvis would never do that!"

"You of all people should know that there is no such thing as 'never.'"

"Oho! True enough, I suppose!"

"Circumstances are too complicated, at the moment. Just keep listening to my voice. Trust that I am your ally here. You can still make it through this."

Nibas shook his head. Yes. Strangely enough, he knew the voice spoke true. They'd had this conversation before, hadn't they?

How troubling.

Where was he again? A large cave, quite clearly. He strained to recall further details.

Ah, yes. Not just any cave. It was one of his caves. A labyrinthine network that he'd carved out decades ago. No. Centuries? Yes, centuries.

Ehehe. Finally getting to use it, eh? Nice, nice.

Now where had he been going?"

"3547 -- CCXCV.

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"3548

Aha. He remembered.

Oh boy, did he remember!

There was an ancient workshop at the heart of this cave system. A workshop that had once belonged to one of the greatest integrators to ever live.

Karugetti the Wise.

In fact, as far as historically revered geniuses were concerned, it was just him and Skapa at the top.

Nibas dreamt of being in that same category, one day. Standing tall, shoulder to shoulder with those giants.

And to think that he'd stumbled upon one of their workshops. Granted, it hadn't exactly been in the best condition, but still. There'd been a massive crater in it where he suspected that a Fusion Forge once resided. He wanted to put a new one there, both to honor Karugetti and to see if, perhaps, he might be able to discover something interesting about that particular location. A man of Karugetti's stature probably hadn't chosen the site of his Fusion Forge randomly. Maybe there was something special about it.

Hmm.

So why hadn't he ever gotten around to doing that, then? Nibas paused to think. The weird dragon man was saying something again, but Nibas wasn't listening.

There'd definitely been a reason. He wouldn't have abandoned such an incredible place without cause, surely.

On second thought, maybe he would have. He was kind of an airheaded guy sometimes, wasn't he? Easily distracted with new and exciting projects. Too true, sadly. Too true.

No, but there had to have been a reason--

The shaking ground brought him back to reality, and he sensed the attack coming from above.

Tch! Interrupting his important thinking time!

The wolf's mouth barreled through the cave ceiling, coated in black and as massive as a whale's. Ready to devour him whole.

Morgunov jumped up and clobbered the beast with a right hook.

The wolf's teeth nicked his shoulder before it was sent flying into the



far wall.

Morgunov landed with a heavy thud on both feet, cracking the ground below him as he flexed his gloved right hand, feeling the power and pain surging through it. That glove was the third generation of the Demon's Grip, and it had the ability to not just increase the muscle strength of his arm, but also the weight of his entire body, starting from the hand.

At its full strength, which was what he'd just used, that punch should've had enough force behind it to obliterate the wolf's entire body like a popped balloon, but he could already sense the damn dog getting back up again.

Morgunov scowled."  
"3549

He wanted greatly to stay and show the beast what for, but he knew better. The battle that had taken place back at his workshop had illustrated that point for him.

It had not gone in his favor, to say the least. In fact, it had only gotten worse and worse as things drew out.

First, there was Rasalased's supposed sister hassling him via the new tattoos. Then there was the blasted dog, hunting him down incessantly. Then there was Germal, to boot--that mind flaying bastard.

And to top it off?

Damian Lofar had showed up, too. That one, Morgunov had actually been quite pleased about.

At first.

He'd been hoping that Damian might've somehow been alive all these years, but clearly, the lad had not been harboring similar feelings for his beloved mentor. The first thing the old boy had done was free Parson Miles. Along with the other captive Vanguardians.

And that was really when things began to go south. Iceheart and all those angry little generals joining the fight, even in their debilitated states, was not something that Morgunov had a good time dealing

with.

Or had he?

No, that was wrong. He'd been having fun, hadn't he? A thrilling encounter with his life truly at risk for the first time in countless years.

Nibas had loved it.

Rgh. Morgunov shook his head as he ran. Tricks and confusion. Right now, he needed to focus. Maintain the link to the Roberts. Their numbers had been severely culled by now, but they were still one of the best remaining cards up his sleeve. How many could he sense? Twenty-three? Twenty-four.

Rough. Hopefully, more survived elsewhere, out of range.

He knew he'd have to be sneaky with them. The Vanguardians had grown wise enough to avoid them rather than fight, which was annoying, but it was the dog that was the biggest threat to his poor Roberts. That son of a bitch could just shrug off their attacks and bite through their tempered metal hulls as if they were made of meat.

In that respect, it was actually a good thing that the wolf was so obsessed with hunting him down. It meant that Morgunov didn't have to go out of his way in order to keep the animal's attention. He could more easily focus on having the Roberts harass the softer targets with guerrilla tactics."

"3550

Careful. Had to be careful. A single Mk. V could certainly help out in a big way, right now, but that would be risky, and there were too few Roberts left to be gambling with them.

For the moment, at least.

Needed to wait for his opening. The information the Roberts were relaying back to him was arguably even more valuable than their combat assistance. There were too many threatening opponents to worry about now. Being able to track all of their movements like this was exactly what he needed.

For now, he could just keep sprinting through the labyrinth. Might be a

problem, though, if he forgot that path to Karugetti's workshop.

Yeah. Better play it safe, then. Partition that information off. Give it some extra mental security from the mind flayer.

He felt another bolt arrive. A surge of electric pain through the skull.

A distraction. Nothing more. Easy enough to ignore. Pain wasn't a problem. The tricks were. The subtle attacks. Those were what he had to pay attention to. The pain was meant to help those sleights of hand elude his notice.

Yes. There you were, Germal. Silent as a shadow, rifling through memories that didn't belong to you.

OUT!

The cavern trembled with the force of Morgunov's psychic purge. Rock and dust drizzled from the ceiling, threatening a cave-in, but he just kept going. It was the first time he'd caught even a glimpse of the Liar in there. He couldn't let the opportunity go to waste.

The trembling grew into a full earthquake, and then the cave-in was no longer just a threat. Truck-sized boulders crashed down all around him--even on top of him.

And still, he ignored them. It didn't matter if he ended up buried. He could dig his way out later.

Germal was all that mattered now. Morgunov had grip of a thread. A psychic line leading back to the slippery bugger. Just a few seconds more.

Ah, but now was precisely when the protector would--

Yes. The wolf's jaws came through the boulders with drilling force, and Morgunov had to stop and catch them with both hands, invoking the Grip's strength again. Thankfully, he had a glove for each hand.

Yet even still, it was barely enough power to keep that black maw from closing down on him. Morgunov was struggling. And he knew that he didn't have time for a stalemate here. A stalemate was as good as a loss when so many others were gunning for him."

"3551

Gohvis grabbed the dog by the scruff and pulled him off of Morgunov. Koh thrashed wildly in the Monster's grasp, jaws snapping at the dragon man's face until Gohvis flung the animal into the dark, distant reaches of the cave.

Morgunov was not grateful, however. "I don't need your help."

"Yes, you do."

There was a game afoot. Morgunov knew it. Gohvis didn't care about him. The Monster of the East had no reason to be here, right now. And Morgunov very much wanted to call him out on it. Tell him to stop pretending. To reveal what his true intentions were.

But there was no time for throwing accusations around. And while it was true that he didn't need Gohvis' help, what he really didn't need was Gohvis deciding to join sides with the attackers.

Unfortunately, Morgunov had a feeling that was going to happen sooner or later, regardless.

He kept running. The workshop. Had to get to the workshop. There was something there that would help. He knew that much. He just couldn't quite recall what it was. He must've remembered earlier, when deciding to head there. He just had to trust in his earlier self's judgment.

That was fine.

The Vanguardians were closing on his position again. The Roberts told him so.

Time to intercept, then. A couple of Mk. IIIs would be sufficient, he decided. Didn't want to use too many for this. That would reduce their collective observational prowess, which he very much needed.

The Mk. III Robert was ideal for this task for a couple of different reasons. The first was that it had the best ratio of durability and mobility. Not so weak that it could be easily knocked out by one of those Vannie generals, but also not so slow that it could be easily dodged, either. And the second reason was that it carried a particular invention in its arsenal that the Mk. Is and IIs didn't have access to.

An invention he'd dubbed the Bull Fighter.

Well, okay, Jercash had dubbed it that, but Morgunov had liked the name enough to keep using it.

The Bull Fighter, in short, was a distraction-based tool, utilizing both audio and visual projection technology in order to befuddle opponents and then immobilize them from behind with soul-strengthened net launchers.

For more threatening targets, however, the nets would not serve well as long-term containment. Which, unfortunately, meant that the Mk. IIIs had to use that window of vulnerability to go in for the kill, instead."

"3552

It was a waste of perfectly good subjects for future experimentation, but they were the ones trying to push him into a corner here. This was what happened when you refused the Mad Demon's mercy.

When the Vannies noticed the Roberts, their ranks distorted instantly. Ehehe. Perhaps his little metal boys had left them with a bit of trauma? Funny, considering how old and powerful these uppity generals were supposed to be.

One, two, three captured piggies. Easy as pie. The projections really did work wonders, didn't they? Ah, Iceheart set about trying to free his companions immediately. Surprisingly warm of him, considering his reputation. Must've thought they were important.

Wasn't going well for the icy boy, though. Lad wasn't at his best, at the moment. Morgunov had made sure to infest him with plenty of little saboteurs, just as he'd done for Jackson. Didn't want Iceheart feeling left out, if he managed to survive all this.

Impressively, though, Iceheart was still managing to avoid capture himself. Hmm. Not being deceived by the Mk. IIIs' projections, huh? Interesting. Why might that be? Had that fellow developed aura sight while Morgunov wasn't looking? Finally seeing a bit more of the world, perhaps? Not letting that closed-mindedness of his continue to win out?

Eh. Doubtful.

Oop. Dog was back. Barreling toward him with that huge body like a

torpedo. Ah, but Gohvis was intercepting again, allowing Morgunov to retain some of his breathing room.

Morgunov still wasn't buying it, though. Rather than moving to assist Gohvis, he kept running and devoted some thoughts to why the Monster might be pretending to go against his own mutant cronies, right now.

The main reason why Morgunov had not been able to deal with the enigmatic problem of Germal years ago was because the Liar had the protection of not only Koh but also Gohvis. So had the Liar lost Gohvis' favor?

Maybe, but Morgunov could see Gohvis pulling his punches here, too. If Germal had truly angered the Monster, then this scenario would be playing out quite differently, right now. That wouldn't just be a psychic projection over there. That would be the real Monster.

So what was the goal here, then?

Well.

To trick the Mad Demon, obviously.

But it wouldn't work.

Morgunov could sense. Morgunov could see.

The mayhem of the fight was increasing to a feverous pitch. Those familiar packets of floating light were beginning to appear. Whispers of freed energy."

"3553

How curious they were. He'd seen them many times before. In his clashes with the other emperors, most commonly.

He knew the theories, of course. The lights were vestiges of soul power that were escaping during the extreme exertion of an emperor's strength. Similar to beads of sweat escaping the body, perhaps. Or sparks flying away from a tempering metal. They certainly looked similar enough.

He never bought into that explanation, though, because this was a

phenomenon that only ever seemed to occur when two or more very powerful servants clashed. If it were merely about the exertion of great power, then a single servant should have theoretically been capable of producing these mysterious lights, and yet Morgunov had never been able to do so.

No, he'd come to believe that they were not vestiges at all. Not little sparks of power being chipped away. Instead, he'd started to think they might be just the opposite.

They were entirely new energies. Being created from the clash of two great souls.

From the collision.

That theory had sparked all sorts of new queries in Morgunov's mind for many years, but unfortunately, these lights were all but impossible to study. The problem, of course, was that they vanished upon the cessation of hostilities between the two great souls, so the only opportunity to learn more about them directly was in the midst of the battle. At the peak of the battle, even. When the most danger was posed.

But perhaps here and now, he might finally have a window? While Gohvis was buying him time.

Oh dear. The temptation was so very strong.

He needed to not give in. He needed to remember the danger. He needed to keep going. Stay on task. The workshop. That was what mattered now.

Even if he might never get a better opportunity than this one...

No! Foolish thoughts!

And not even true, besides. Because he remembered now. There was actually another instance in which this same phenomenon could occur.

Feldeaths. They could produce this effect, too. It was rarer for them, but Morgunov had most definitely observed it a couple of times during his tumultuous research of those stubborn buggers.

Not all feldeaths seemed capable of pulling it off, though. That was the trouble with them. Their unpredictability. With two clashing emperors, it was much more consistent.

But perhaps there was some other, still-mysterious environmental condition that needed to be met with feldeaths."

"3554

Ah, wait a tick.

Feldeaths! Of course. He was recalling now. How could he have forgotten?

That was why he'd decided to head for Karugetti's workshop.

Because there was a feldeath there. Guarding it. And that was also why he'd never gotten around to putting a new fusion forge in there. Because that particular feldeath was a real son of a bitch, even when compared against others of its kind.

His long study of feldeaths might not have been nearly as fruitful as he would've preferred, but one thing he'd been able to learn quite clearly was that not all feldeaths were created equal. Far from it, in fact. He'd even begun work on a rigorous classification system for them.

It was far from exhaustive, though. The bastards never made it easy to measure their strength. And the true depths of their power might've simply been impossible to discover without first giving oneself over to certain death.

Mad as he supposedly was, even Morgunov was only willing to go so far for his work.

The naming scheme had taken him a while to nail down. On the one hand, he didn't want it to be all generic and boring, like with hurricanes, for example. But on the other hand, a good classification system needed to be largely intuitive to understand. So naming one of them Category Pickle Sandwich or Tier Snot Bubble was out of the question, unfortunately.

In the end, he'd decided that animals would be the best of both worlds. They could be both non-generic and also intuitive, as long as he picked the right animals for each tier.

Thus far, he'd created five categories, though he hoped to one day codify a sixth or even seventh. That would just depend on whether or



not he could ever find any more distinguishing characteristics that corresponded with their varying degrees of power.

From least to most dangerous, they were Mouse, Rabbit, Swan, Hippo, and Moth.

That last one, admittedly, had been a bit of a rule break. He had to do it. Even if moths were supposed to be harmless, there was just something about them that he didn't trust. And besides, that tier was still a work-in-progress. He'd only ever encountered a single Category Moth, anyway, and he'd pretty much just run away from it the whole time. So it hardly mattered, right now. He could always rename it later, if he thought of something better."

"3555

As for the feldeath that had claimed Karugetti's workshop, Morgunov classified that one as a Category Hippo. Extremely dangerous. Certainly among the deadliest he'd ever spent time actually trying to fight.

This particular feldath was also one that had garnered a bit of fame for itself and earned a moniker. Kallmakk, they called it here in Ardora.

And it may have been the cause of Karugetti's death.

Morgunov still did not know that for sure, and he probably never would, but it was a very reasonable explanation for the famed inventor's sudden disappearance from the world stage during the height of his power and influence. Considering no human person ever tried to take credit for the man's death, that really only left two possibilities: either Karugetti gave it all up and went into hiding on his own, or he died with no witnesses and no means of ever confirming it.

Being such an admirer of the man's work from even a very young age, Morgunov had held onto hope for many, many years that Karugetti might still be alive. Heck, a part of him still wanted to think that way now.

But the workshop was pretty damning evidence. And from all accounts he'd ever read about Karugetti's personality, the man had actually been quite the social butterfly. It was therefore doubly unlikely that he would've faked his death to go live in quiet isolation somewhere.

Which was why Morgunov had decided to fight Kallmakk on more than one occasion. Vengeance for his fallen hero. Or, perhaps, a means of discovering some evidence that Karugetti was indeed alive. If such evidence existed, it would've made sense for Kallmakk to be in possession of or otherwise guarding it.

But to no avail.

On both counts, Morgunov had failed miserably. Kallmakk was simply too damn powerful. And even after trying to avoid the fight in order to sneak into the workshop and look for clues, he'd still turned up nothing.

Which was not to say that he'd entirely given up on the endeavor.

One day, he aimed to return and give Kallmakk a right thrashing.

And as a matter of fact, today seemed like as good a day as any. He certainly wouldn't mind if his pursuers managed to bring the stubborn jerk down.

So really, this was a win-win situation for him, regardless of who won.

Unless he himself got killed here, of course. Boy, that'd be a real downer."

"3556

It was a good thing he'd managed to remember in time. Would've been quite the gnarly surprise to run into Kallmakk without realizing.

Which reminded him of something further.

He'd forgotten on purpose. In order to deceive Germal. Morgunov was ninety percent certain that the mind flayer was capable of reading his thoughts, so he'd decided to put certain memories into a temporary mental storage state.

Eheheh.

Were you still reading these thoughts, Germal? It was too late to run away, now. Kallmakk was close.

The network of caves expanded out ahead of him into one enormous

cavern. Distant holes in the ceiling allowed visible bars of sunlight to cut through the otherwise thick darkness.

The light couldn't disperse very much in here, which was the feldeath's doing, Morgunov knew.

One other thing that he had learned about them during his years of study was that feldeaths very frequently acquired an elemental affinity--but not in correspondence with the modern understanding of elements. Rather, it was the five classical elements that the feldeaths gravitated to. Earth, water, wind, fire, and--in Kallmakk's case--darkness.

Why this was, Morgunov still did not know. Truly baffling, he found it. But then, that was often the way with feldeaths, wasn't it? They were paradoxical beings that should not have been able to exist in the first place.

Regardless, it made fighting Kallmakk that much more of a challenge. Because this darkness wasn't just physical. It muddled soul senses and even aura sight, too, concealing the feldeath's presence beneath a kind of regional blanket.

Which meant that light was now a precious resource. Vital for survival here. These bars of it from the sun were nowhere near enough.

So he set about creating more. With integration, it was a simple enough matter. He stopped running abruptly and slapped the flat ground with one hand, sending dozens of glowing lines through the rock all around him, lighting up the entire cavern within seconds.

And there the surly bugger was, bundled up in a high corner above the workshop's entrance.

Kallmakk the Nightspinner.

The sight of it there made even his pursuers stop and pause.

Eheh. Getting cold feet? Bit late for that.

Kallmakk unfurled itself slowly, not unlike a massive serpent, but its actual form, to Morgunov's eyes, soon became that of a hulking, ethereal machine with a distorted clock face at its center. Blood oozed from its numbers and twitching hands, and black smoke seeped from cracks all over its body."

"3557

Now, of course, there was a very big problem with his plan here--something that he needed to address before doing anything else.

The thing about feldeaths was that they were very territorial creatures by nature, but normally, they would only kind of try to kill you. To shoo you out their domain, mainly. As long as you ran away properly, they'd leave you alone.

But when you decided to not flee and even attack them back--as Morgunov had done to Kallmakk here several times previously--that was when their cockles got all riled up.

That was the point at which merely running away ceased to be an option. That was the point at which no other being on this planet could compete with the feldeath's single-minded determination to kill you.

It no longer mattered how far you managed to get away from it. They would chase you, quite literally, forever. They would lock on to your soul signature and follow you endlessly, until either you or they were dead, because their ability to sense souls was unparalleled. Morgunov suspected that they could sense every single soul on the planet at all times. Which meant that there was no hiding from them, either.

Thankfully, however, he had learned of one trick to get them off his case. He kept thinking that it might one day stop working, but he'd used it on Kallmakk in order to end every fight, and it hadn't failed him yet.

He had to fake his death.

But not just his. He had to fake Bool's as well. Which was significantly harder.

The key was to give the feldeath that all-important final blow. That satisfying strike. Once the feldeath got that, it would calm down and forget all about you.

They were beings of pure instinct, after all. Or at least, they seemed to be. He'd tried to discern if there was anything more sophisticated going on inside those strange, ethereal minds of theirs, but never had he been able to detect anything else.

But again, this was still a very big problem, because now that Morgunov had reentered its territory, Kallmakk was going to remember him. The feldeath would therefore be attacking him first--and perhaps exclusively--unless he did something about that.

So what was the solution, then? To trick the others into attacking it, as well? That would certainly do it, but he doubted they could be deceived so easily. Even if his knowledge of feldeaths dramatically dwarfed all of theirs combined, they would still know that they should avoid attacking it all costs."

"3558

No. The solution was to trick the feldeath. A much simpler task, especially when it was already obsessed with killing him.

All he had to do was slap some of his own soul power onto the others. As long as he amassed enough of it, the feldeath would treat them just like him and try to kill them, too.

Easy. Especially for the ones who were already infested with his little nano-pals. Those unlucky bastards were truly screwed here. He might've even felt slightly bad for them, if he didn't find it so thoroughly amusing.

The feldeath's first attack was not long to arrive. And it was a speedy one, too. Enough so, in fact, that had he not been anticipating it this whole time, Morgunov might well have gotten hit.

Dark beams with vaporizing force. Lasers that emitted no light of their own. Which further meant that they were completely invisible to the naked eye, unless light was already present in the area to reveal their shadowy form. And in the Nightspinner's oppressive darkness, even soul senses and aura sight could not pick up the slack quick enough.

Thankfully, these weren't nearly as fast as real laser beams. If they were, then reacting to them would've been entirely impossible without a predictive insight.

The beam that came for him sheared the rock below his feet away as if it were no more resilient than butter, leaving behind a molten groove that could have fit a highway inside it.

And that beam had not been alone. Several of his pursuers received

one just like it, and many did not fare as well as he.

Two or three of them seemed to have been deleted from existence. But he was fairly sure that they had not been dumb enough to bring their reapers along. Surely, these Vannie generals would've known better than that, right? Even if they thought they'd had the upper hand against him for a moment there, they couldn't have been that silly.

If not, though, then that would be quite funny. And well-deserved.

Ah, but the damn dog was still on his ass. Even with Kallmakk being all menacing over there, the pooch was still locked in on him, eh? Not that Morgunov had expected anything less. Gohvis couldn't be relied upon to truly hurt his mutant pals."

"3559

The real trouble with Koh was how resistant that big furry body was to all manner of attacks. One of Morgunov's favored approaches when dealing with powerful close-range threats was to use integration directly on their bodies in order to fuse limbs together--or organs, even. Or, perhaps, to convert chunks of their body into completely different compounds. Even servants with quite strong passive soul defenses could not ignore such attacks completely, not when Morgunov was able to lay his hands on them. And when combined with a few centuries' worth of wrestling practice, as well as the Demon's Grip on both hands, Morgunov usually loved to deal with big brutes who just wanted attack him head on.

But Koh was an annoying outlier. Not only was he durable in the extreme, even by old servant standards, he also seemed to be packing some kind of extra resilience to Morgunov's integration-based assaults. They did nothing to the mutt.

Was there some unknown protective factor causing that? Or was it just very impressive passive soul defenses? They would have to be truly exceptional indeed, if that was all it was. Superior even to his own, Morgunov knew. On par with Sermung's, perhaps. Which seemed unlikely.

Regardless, the dog couldn't be ignored. Morgunov had to let things get messy. Koh barreled into him, and the Mad Demon took it while sliding backwards, not letting himself be toppled over. He caught the

animal by the neck, even as huge teeth dug into his shoulder, instantly threatening to sever his left arm.

A throat punch softened the dog's grip, but it still didn't let go until he hit it with a second one. And even then, the beast went straight back to mauling him.

Controlling those deadly jaws was priority number one. Allowing himself to get bitten gave too much advantage to Koh.

They hit the ground this time as they wrestled. This wasn't good, either. Koh's size gave him another advantage here. Needed to get back on his feet as soon as--

Morgunov saw the Nightspinner on the ceiling, already descending on them. There was no time to dodge.

This wasn't going to feel good.

Kallmakk body slammed them both, and an earthquake split the entire cavern in two.

Black smoke blinded him, filling his vision and even his mind. And there was pressure. From everywhere at once. Not unlike being at the bottom of an ocean, which he'd experienced a few times."

"3560

Fear and paranoia gripped his mind, threatening him with terrible familiarity. Dredging up ancient history. Assaulting him with that most deadly of weapons. Himself.

It was almost enough to make him lose track of his body. Of the pain surging through it.

These feldeaths had a way with that, he'd learned. They frequently found a way to override numbness, either by circumventing it and inflicting psychic pain instead or, even more terrifyingly, simply undoing it. As in, getting into the brain and deactivating the numbness that a reaper had previously activated. Almost like they could take over the reaper's role.

Thankfully, this was not the first time Morgunov had experience such an attack from Kallmakk. He knew what to expect. Knew to brace not

just his body but also his mind.

It didn't make it hurt any less, but it allowed him to regain control of his faculties more quickly. Like bouncing back from a punch instead of getting floored by it.

He activated both Demon's Grips simultaneously to increase his weight. Double, triple, quintuple. Ten times, fifty times, a hundred times. Needed the extra inertia here, as his strength rose in correspondence with it.

Not enough. He was still stuck fast. Kallmakk's hold was ridiculous. Agh, had it gotten even stronger since the last time?

Five hundred times.

A thousand.

His arms twitched, then burst free, grabbing onto a chunk of physical darkness as if it were solid rock and ripping through it.

This did not help the pain one bit. His mind whited out for a second as he resorted to an ancient trick, trying to cope with the sheer, maddening degree of it, which left his body to stumble aimlessly through the blackness. He was moving, but it took him a while to even realize it.

Then he was in the air, still unsure why. Taken another hit? Probably.

He crashed into the ceiling and broke straight through, flying out of the cave and up into daylight. Quite the welcome sight, actually. Kallmakk would be much less threatening up here. Unless--

The sky darkened as the sun turned black.

Uh-oh.

Another dark beam came for him, and toppling through the air, he wasn't able to dodge this time. It hit him like a train, sending him even higher into the air.

Now stuff was missing. Clothes in tatters. Left arm? Side of his face? Both missing. Not good. That meant he'd lost a glove, too.

No time to fuss over it. Another beam was coming for him. Bastard was trying to juggle him until he was completely vaporized."

"3561



Truth be told, Morgunov had options, still. It might not have seemed like it, and he might not have even wanted to acknowledge it himself, but it was true. Pan-rozum, which he and Bool were currently in, always allowed for plenty of flexibility.

He just hated resorting to it. For a couple different reasons, really. The first being that it gave more power over to Bool. Whenever they merged these days, Morgunov's consciousness dominated Bool's to the point that he no longer felt any different when compared to his normal self. So he was able to enjoy some nice, passive bonuses without having to deal with yet another meddlesome voice in his head.

But the more proactive benefits of pan-rozum--such as tapping into materialization, for instance--required the reaper to put in some real work. Which meant Morgunov had to give up some control.

Quite unpleasant.

Another reason he hated it was because it just felt somewhat... cheap. Lame. Unrelated to his genius or hard work.

When it came to fighting, he always wanted to win because of his inventions, his mastery over integration, or with sheer martial prowess.

But ultimately, that was his hubris talking. Something that had, perhaps, grown a bit out of control over the last century or two.

Here and now, he was again being reminded of his own limitations. Of how, when the chips were down, he would do whatever it took. Ego be damned.

For the briefest instant, Rachman's face flashed through his mind. That smiling, self-satisfied face from right before Morgunov struck the final blow.

It was never going to stop haunting him, was it?

Morgunov split his body apart in order to avoid the next beam at the last possible second.

A most difficult technique. It required the simultaneous use of integration, transfiguration, and materialization.

For transfigurers in pan-rozum, they could turn their body into their element and manipulate it freely by merely adding materialization. Becoming beings of gas or liquid. But for integration users, the same trick required an extra step in the beginning. Fusing the body with the surrounding gaseous elements. Then he could access transfiguration as an extension of his integration ability, which was always going to be his most comfortable, instinctual power.

From there, he could turn his body into air and split it apart, then bring it back together with materialization and finally fuse it all again with integration in order to make himself whole."

"3562

It was difficult, yes. But it was a technique that he had mastered many, many years ago, back when Bool was still calling most of the shots and forcing him to learn this and that. He'd mapped it to an instinctual place in his mind, making it summonable on a moment's notice, whenever needed.

But these days, it really, really annoyed him whenever he had to use it.

A reminder of his failings. A loss of control. Of self-determination and agency.

There were few things in this world that he hated more.

Kallmakk really knew how to get under his skin.

Thankfully, though, his plan was working. Despite how intensely the feldeath was coming after him, the other combatants were still receiving plenty of attention, too. In the mayhem, he could sense those dark beams wreaking havoc among the Vanguardian ranks.

Where had the big pooch gotten to, though? Morgunov had no doubt Koh would be all over him again at any moment.

Aha. Morgunov sensed him. Still a ways away, on the ground. He finally had a few fresh moments of breathing room. He had to avoid another beam, but that was easy enough in this gaseous form.

Time to prepare the Roberts, then. They needed to assemble and transform. He gave the telepathic command via the chips in his brain.

Nothing less than three Mk. Vs would do, he decided. That wouldn't leave very many Mk. IIs behind to harass the Vannies, but it was a necessary risk. And Kallmakk was keeping them plenty busy, now. He wouldn't get a better opening than this.

In the meantime, he resorted to Invisibility, using one of his aberration bone items. Not a ring, like most of his boys had to use. No, his was a tooth. Or rather, a cap, installed over one of his molars.

A much better hiding place.

He knew it wouldn't work on Koh, though. He'd already tried it, and the mutt had no trouble keeping track of him, probably via both smell and aura.

Kallmakk, though, was a different story. Morgunov was reasonably certain that feldeaths sensed the world around them primarily via ardor and soul power. If they could sense aura, it was definitely much weaker.

And with so much of his soul power already in play elsewhere, this Invisibility was actually perfect for keeping the feldeath off his back. He would've used it even earlier, but he'd wanted to make sure Kallmakk became enraged, first. Plus, Koh would have torn through the Invisibility's coating, anyway, rendering it useless."

"3563

There was another problem to consider, however.

The black sun. The darkening atmosphere.

That was no mere cosmetic side effect of Kallmakk's presence. It was a sign that the feldeath was doing two things: boosting the potency of all its attacks, and also preparing one of its most powerful abilities. After having been obliterated by said ability twice in the past, Morgunov had taken to calling it "Domain Wipe."

It was either that or "Darkness Nuke." He wasn't sure which was more apt, but he liked the sound of the first one better.

Regardless, it was a thing that could not be ignored. If it was allowed to go off, it would probably kill everyone here simultaneously, and

since he was the only one present who knew precisely how deadly it was, he couldn't count on the others to stop it. If he did, and they failed, he and Bool would end up just as dead as the rest of them.

Truthfully, though, he was still a bit tempted to let it go. How funny would it have been if, after so much fighting with each other, Kallmakk just killed them all with one attack? In terms of ways to go out, that was quite a chucklesome one.

If he didn't still have so much that he wanted to do, he might've allowed it.

With Invisibility, he circled around to the feldeath's backside. It probably made no difference, since he was fairly sure that Kallmakk had omnidirectional senses, but it wouldn't hurt, either.

With his one remaining glove, he gathered his strength into his hand and barreled into the giant abomination with a flying punch, not holding back in the slightest, because he knew the sucker could take it.

Kallmakk burst apart in an inky spray of black. The sun flickered and brightened, as did the rest of the sky, though it was noticeably slower to do so, as if a veil were being slowly peeled away.

That was better. The sun was still unnaturally dark, but that was fine. As long as it wasn't black.

Now for the Roberts. They should've been--

He spun around in midair just in time to catch Koh with another hooking punch. The dog went flying again and left a satisfying crater in the ground when he landed.

Hmph. Sneaky little jerk. Almost caught him offguard again. If he hadn't been anticipating--

From behind, he felt two hands grab his head."  
"3564 -- CCXCVI.

~~"Hello, Demonnnnn."~~

The words were unlike anything he had ever heard or felt. Low and distorted, they stretched through his mind, dragging it along with with

them, interfering with every new thought that struggled to arise.

A root cause attack.

Even just realizing the danger was difficult. He'd never experienced this before, but he'd read of it, long ago.

One of the most powerful psychic techniques ever invented--and by the most powerful psychics to have ever existed, no less. The ancient Kingsparrows.

It paralyzed their prey by preventing any and all thoughts from being formulated in the mind. Reserved for particularly resilient minds that the psychic could not simply snap with brute force. And once it was activated, there was no escaping it, except by the will of the psychic who used it.

Morgunov, therefore, found himself abruptly trapped in a prison of his own mind.

And yet, when he'd read the claims in that ancient text about just how strong a root cause attack was supposed to be, he'd found himself quite doubtful, especially regarding that last part.

So now, he was about to put it to the test.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Six: 'The Dance of the Mad Gods...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The first thing to do was invoke a feedback loop. It didn't require any real thought. More of a feeling than an idea. And quite simple, besides. Well-practiced.

So if he was to be trapped, then at the very least, he would not be alone here.

It only seemed fair, right?

Aha.

Yes.

Fascinating. The space of his mind had reduced immensely. No feeling of his body. No senses whatsoever. Not even aura or time.

A simple black void. But not even a vast one, like the true Void. This had walls. Impassable barriers all around him.

A tiny room.

Good thing he wasn't claustrophobic.

"But what about you?" said Morgunov without a mouth. His voice simply carried forth, originating from nowhere and everywhere at once. "You're not afraid of tight spaces, are you?"

His passenger was there, though he had no form, no body, just like Morgunov himself.

"There's no point playing coy, now," Morgunov went on. "Speak to me. It seems you've granted the both of us an abundance of time. And to be honest, I've been waiting for an opportunity like this for years. Germal."

A long silence drew out, but it didn't bother Morgunov in the slightest.

Actually, it made him giggle. Was he causing frustration for this creature that had long frustrated him? How positively delightful.

"You cannot sustain this, Demon."

"Mm, I dunno. I kinda feel like I can."

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"3565

"A stalemate does not favor you here," said Germal.

"Oh? And how would you know that? I'm sure you have no perception of time, either. For all you know, this could last a good long while for us in here before anyone out there is able to interfere. Or even forever! Eheh! Now wouldn't that be something?! Trapped together for eternity!"

"You would never abide such an arrangement."

"Nor would you, I imagine!"

The Liar made no response.

Morgunov pondered the situation a bit more on his own, trying to assess himself. His thoughts may have been greatly diminished in this space, but he still felt like he had access to the full breadth of his memories. And his personality still felt entirely intact, for what that was



worth.

Yes. It was really just his body that was missing. Interesting.

A root cause attack should have, theoretically, been suppressing every new thought, even these ones. He supposed it was because he'd pulled Germal in with him that it wasn't working properly. Either that, or that ancient text had been full of shit. What had it been called again?

Of Minds and Manipulation, by Harundel the Greater.

Ah, yes. One of those silly Harundels. Perhaps that made sense.

"Still reading my mind, Liar?"

"I am flattered that you continue to overestimate my abilities," said Germal.

"Mmhmm, mmhmm. That's right. Never stop trying to downplay yourself. Always seek to make your enemies underestimate you. Eheh. Did I teach you that? Surely not. Doesn't sound like me. So where'd you learn it from, hmm? You can tell me. Who was your mentor?"

"Oh, I've had many."

"Yeah? Who was the most impactful, then?"

"I couldn't possibly choose just one."

"Mm," hummed Morgunov. "Or perhaps you've had none at all? That's another way of thinking about it, isn't it? If you have enough teachers, then you cease taking after any of them, eh? You achieve that all-important originality, eh?"

"You flatter me again, ledo."

"Ooh, the honorific! Who's flattering whom now?!" Morgunov broke for a chortle. "Y'know, I've learned a thing or two about some of those curious words you use. Words I've never heard anyone else use."

"Is that right?"

"Sure is. What, did you think I haven't been observing you over the years? You may be a sneaky boy, but you're far from the first to hide from me. And honestly, you're not even that good at it. Gotten too comfortable behind that big pupper of yours, I'd wager."

"In that case," said Germal, "perhaps you could share what you've learned of me. At times, I feel as though even I do not know what I am doing or why."

"Oho! How I wish for that to be true!" said Morgunov. "Very relatable, that notion! But of course it would be, wouldn't it?! You've learned a thing or two about me, as well, I'm sure! Tryin' to soften me up with some familiarity, huh?!"

"Interpret things however you please, but I shall not deny that I have been studying you. The Problem of the Furies is an ever cycling one, but you, ledo, only ever make it worse. Ignoring you would have been foolish beyond measure."

Morgunov's eyes might have bulged if he could have felt them. "The Problem of the Furies, you say? Well, now... that's quite the juicy morsel you've just dropped at my feet! Hmm! I'm finally tempted to believe something you've said! Well done, Gergy!"

"Either you die this day, or I do. There is no point in lying."

"Said the Liar! Oh, and please, don't say that! If I have things my way, you won't be dying for a very, very long time!"

"All the more reason to bring your reign of terror to an end, then."

"Ooh, is that what this has all been about?! Gergy! Don't tell me! Are you one of those secret, noble heroes of the ancient world?! Fighting wickedness from the shadows?!"

"Anyone who goes against you can be considered a hero."

"Eheh. How mean. I can be heroic when I want to, you know. As a matter of fact, I have a sneaking suspicion that taking care of you, right here, right now, might just be one of the most heroic things I could ever do."

"You've really built me up quite a bit in your mind, haven't you?"

"It's nothin' you haven't earned, dear boy! Or, cedo, as you would say? Yes!"

"Indeed. Ah, but you still have not told me what you know of my words. Please, go on and enlighten me."

"I do love an attentive listener. Alright, then! Those words you use. They're psychic markers, aren't they? Meaningful to you in ways that are imperceptible to others. And I bet they make it easier to pry into the mind, don't they? Especially when you want to leave a lasting impression on someone, hmm? What better method than to take on a memorable way of speaking? You do love mucking about with memories, don't you?"

For the first time that Morgunov had heard, the Liar of Lyste returned a laugh.

"I shall never let it be said that you lack imagination, Demon.""  
"3567

"And I shall never let it be said that you lack conviction," said Morgunov. "This whole thing was your doing, wasn't it? This plot to ambush me?"

"Well, if you are to blame anyone, it might as well be me."

"Ha! So casual! As if you did not plan it meticulously!"

"You are not as unpredictable as you think, Nibas. It was not that hard."

"Mm! How irksome. You really know how to get under a guy's skin, don'tcha?"

"I do my level best."

A funny thought struck Morgunov, and he decided to run with it. "But if that's really true, then you shouldn't mind proving it, eh?"

"Proving what?"

"That it wasn't that hard for you to ambush me! Because I'm so predictable, right? So prove it!"

A beat passed. "Heh. How would you like to me to do that?"

"Well, obviously, you should let me escape and then just ambush me a second time!"

Germal chuckled.

"C'mon!" said Morgunov, also laughing. "That'd prove your point more thoroughly than anything else! You know I'm right!"

"A tempting proposition."

"Hoho! Perhaps you've got some guts, after all! Not just a bag full of underhanded hijinks!"

"Tempting, I said. But no. I think not."

"Boo! What a chicken! A spoil sport! And, dare I say, an all-around fib-teller! You must not have found me predictable in the slightest! In which case, I believe this now counts as my victory. Too bad for you, Gergy."

"Truly, I am crushed."

"Well, either way, it seems we'll have to arrive at some sort of compromise here, eventually. I'm not letting you go unless you let me go, first. And since we've been gabbin' for a good little while now and no one's come a-knockin', I'd say we're well and truly stuck here."

"Perhaps so."

"Good, I'm glad you agree! So let's talk brass tacks, then! What's it gonna take for you to let me outta here, hmm?"

"Oh, well, what are you offering?"

"How about a big, friendly hug once we're free?"

"Ah. Not a death sentence at all, I'm sure."

"Of course not! Friendly, I said! How could killing you be considered friendly?"

"I'm sure you could think of a way to spin that."

"Alright, alright. How about if I promise not to immediately rip your head off, then?"

“How generous.”

“Right? I mean, we both know you would deserve it.”

“I think I’ll have to pass on that one, as well.”

“Really breakin’ my balls here, man. Why don’t you try suggesting something, then?”

”3568

“Instead of promises which are sure to be broken, perhaps you could provide me with information. Here and now.”

“Interesting!” said Morgunov. “I’m open to that! Only problem is that all I’d be getting in exchange would be a promise from you to release me. And as you said, promises are sure to be broken.”

“If I do not deliver on said promise, then we will both remain stuck here.”

“Exactly. Which further means that you could continue pumping me for information for as long as you please. So if you want my knowledge, then you’ll have to give me some of yours in return.”

“You surprise me. I thought you would surely believe that I could not possibly tell you anything that you do not already know.”

“Why? Because of the so-called ‘emperor’s hubris?’ Puh-lease! I’m the humblest emperor to ever walk the planet!” He paused. “Plus, I’m sure you’re hiding all sorts of juicy secrets in that freaky little horn of yours.”

“It is not freaky.”

“It’s pretty freaky.”

“Hmph.”

“Oh, and since you’re the one holdin’ the key here, you’ve got a bit more negotiating power than I do. So that means I’m gonna need you to go first with the answering of questions. As a show of good faith, you understand.”

“I do not like the sound of that. If I have more negotiating power, as

you claim, then surely it is you who should be going first, not me.”

“No, but see, if I go first, then you can just refuse to answer my question and ask another one of yours, instead. And you can just keep doing that endlessly.”

“You say that as if you would be incapable of refusing, yourself.”

“Of course I could refuse! But you could end the conversation whenever you want by just releasing us! And then what, huh? I’d be left alone, answerless, with my dick in my hand. And I would find that quite upsetting.”

“Hmm. I suppose you have a point.”

“Course I do!”

“But please keep your penis in your pants.”

“It was a metaphor. The youngins say that all the time. I can’t even feel my pants, right now.”

“I do not wish to see your metaphorical penis, either.”

“My--? Huh... Why do I feel so insulted, right now?”

“If I am to go first, then so be it. What is your question for me?”

”3569

“Ah, lemme think about that! Lots of things come to mind! And you’re quite likely to not answer anything I ask later, so I gotta pick something really good! Hmm! What’s the best question to ask first?!”

“I already have mine picked out.”

“Oh, well, look at you, Mr. Prepared. Got somethin’ you’ve been wanting to ask me for a long time, eh?”

“Indeed.”

“Interesting. And you didn’t think to simply ask? Y’know, before trying to kill me?”

“The thought did cross my mind. But I discarded it.”

“How cruel. You should indulge your curiosity more. It’s a very human quality, Gergy. And who knows? I might have pleasantly surprised you.”

“I doubt it.”

“Hmph. My question for you, then, is thus. What are you, really? You’re not a servant. I know that much. So tell me the truth of your existence, Liar of Lyste.”

“I’ve never cared for that name.”

“Gentleman of Palei, then.”

Germal took a long pause before answering. “I am that which you have been seeking, Demon.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“A Primordial.”

Morgunov made no response. He just let that answer linger, thinking on it. Could that be true? This was coming from the Liar, after all. And that had been quite easily said.

Ah, but perhaps that was the trick here. Telling the truth so quickly would actually make it seem like a lie, wouldn’t it? Which would let Germal pass over it and move on to a more favorable fiction.

And if it were true, it would explain a few things. Morgunov had already come to the conclusion that the Liar had orchestrated this whole thing, which meant that the timing with Rasalased and his supposed sister had not been coincidental. It would make sense that a real Primordial would’ve had access to those two beforehand. Coordinated with them. To ambush him.

Yes.

“I don’t believe you,” Morgunov decided to say.

“How surprising. But I have answered your question. Now it is my turn.”

“I’m afraid not. We can’t move on until the question has been answered to the asker’s satisfaction. And I am far from satisfied. If what you said is true, then provide details. The term ‘Primordial’ has

existed for eons. If you really are one of them, then tell me what that means to you. How do you define yourself?"

"My, my. There are any number of ways that I could answer that. If I were to ask you the same thing, to define yourself, could you do so?"

"You bet your ass I could. And if you want, I'd be more than happy to. When it's your turn.""

"3570

"You are setting quite the precedent here," said Germal. "I will be quite demanding with my question, now."

"Ha! You really don't know me very well at all, do you?! How delightfully surprising! Unlike you, Germey, I do not obsess over keeping all my knowledge to myself. In fact, giving lectures about the secrets of the world is something I quite enjoy!"

"You certainly do love to listen to yourself talk."

"I won't deny it! If only there were more who were bold enough to listen! Now tell me. How do you define yourself?"

Germal took a minute to answer. "...Truthfully, Demon? I define myself as one who would return this world to order. The way it was, long ago."

"Order, you say? Interesting! Now do you mean 'order?' Or do you mean 'Order?'"

"I am confused. What is the distinction you are referring to?"

A lie, for certain. Perhaps the greatest of all the lies the Liar had yet told.

Which was no surprise, of course, but this time was special. This time, Morgunov found it intensely annoying. "Confused, you say? Why should you be confused? Ah! Perhaps because you do not wish to acknowledge your great nemesis, hmm? To hear it named truly?"

Germal fell quiet at that.

Morgunov decided to let the silence linger for a bit. In truth, he'd been holding a few things back this whole time. A few memories. Locked



away for safekeeping, just in case Germal started getting uppity with his mind reading again.

But those memories were now beginning to unlock themselves. As per their locking conditions, no doubt. A timed trigger? Hmm, unlikely, considering time seemed to have largely stopped in this strange space.

Ah. An emotional trigger, then. Related to his long-held ruminations on Order and Chaos.

Yes.

“You Primordials are beings of Chaos, are you not? Your great enemy, therefore, must be Order. So it makes no sense that you would seek to ‘put the world to Order.’ Unless, of course, you were using deliberately misleading language, and your idea of ‘order’ means something totally different, eh? Perhaps even the exact opposite thing! Eheh! But I’m sure a stand-up Gentleman like you would never do something like that!”

“...You remember more of Bellvine than you have let on.”

“Mm! Perhaps I do! But y’know, I feel talking to you is also helping me to remember even more things, too! So thanks for that. Maybe you’re not such a bad guy, after all.””

"3571

Germal chortled again. “Ah, but in that case, it should honestly be I who is thanking you. Without your intervention at that time, I am not sure that I could have returned to this realm.”

“Oh yeah? Well, you’re welcome, then. But you sure have a funny way of demonstrating your appreciation! Tryin’ to kill me ‘n all!”

“Kehe. Don’t act like you were not already planning to come after me again.”

“That’s hardly fair! Just because I’m planning something doesn’t mean I’ll follow through with it! Do you know how many things I have left on my to-do list?”

“A real shame, that. Anyway, have I answered to your satisfaction? I

wish to take my turn, now.”

“Hmm! Almost! Just one little thing I want clarification on!”

“Yes?”

“If you’re all beings of Chaos, then what’s your beef with me, huh? I’m a reasonable fellow. In fact, I would’ve expected us to be on the same side! I happen to love Chaos! Everyone knows us Abolishers are big fans of the Void, of which Chaos is merely one aspect!”

“Calling yourself reasonable has to be a bigger lie than anything I have ever uttered.”

“Now you’re just being hurtful. Sure, my enthusiasm can get away from me, on occasion. But I genuinely think that you and I could have arrived at some quite amicable terms, many years ago, if you’d just tried to reach out. Explained your position a bit. Heck, maybe we still could! Wouldn’t that be neat?!”

“You would have almost certainly tried to capture me.”

“Well, yeah, of course I would have! But I’m tellin’ you: we would have eventually arrived at a place of friendship!”

Germal fell briefly quiet again. “Keheheh...”

“Somethin’ funny?”

“You do bring something out of me, Demon. I’ll grant you that.”

“Oh? Happy to hear it!”

“Unfortunately, that was not a compliment.”

“Aww.”

“I am tempted to play your game here. To indulge your offer of friendship, even. And continue this exchange elsewhere. But no. You are too dangerous to leave alive.”

“Mm. Heard that before. Real shame, coming from you. Was hoping you’d surprise me. Spice things up, somehow. But I guess in the end, you’re just another of those morality-obsessed do-gooders, eh? Despite so much evidence to the contrary! Talk about a letdown!”

“A morality-obsessed do-gooder? Now that is an interesting

interpretation. Kehe. I fear you are still quite confused, my 'demonic' friend."

"Am I? How so?"

"3572

"There is no morality in this world, save that which we above decide," said Germal. "And you, cedo, are no ally of Chaos. You are, in fact, the furthest thing from it."

Morgunov paused. Hmm. There was a lot to unpack there. "What makes you say that? I've been spreading chaos all over the world my whole dang life! Go on, ask anyone!"

"Ah, but now it is you who is using misleading language. You spread 'chaos,' yes. But not 'Chaos.' In fact, for all your knowledge and experience, I suspect you hardly know what true Chaos is."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Easy with the insults there. You're not seriously trying to tell me that I've secretly, unwittingly been an agent of Order this entire time. Because frankly, that has to be the silliest darn thing I've ever done heard!"

"You truly do not understand? How short-sighted. Yes, you may not be of the Furies, but you incite them to move. You spur them on. Inspire them. And frequently, you do much more than that, don't you? You often allow them to live when you could easily end them. You even feel remorse on the rare occasions when you put one down. And of course, some, you teach directly as your students. Help them refine and grow themselves."

Morgunov had a lot to say, but he remained silent, because it seemed like this guy wasn't done yet, and he wanted to hear the rest.

"The mere act of inventing--don't you see? That, too, is making Order from Chaos. Taking the natural, beautiful Chaos of the world and twisting it into inert knots. That is the ultimate goal of all your efforts, whether you realize it or not. Whatever amount of Chaos you might bring--it is incidental and fleeting. Soon chased away by Order. You claim to be a gardener, as we are, yet you do nothing but plant and grow weeds."

Morgunov could stay quiet no longer. "Excuse me? Weeds? You think inventors, the brilliant and beautiful minds of the world, are weeds? The people who spend their lives advancing technology, pushing the boundaries of human knowledge and potential, usually at great personal risk to themselves--those are the ugly things you want to uproot?"

"Ah. Perhaps you do understand."

And for the first time in many, many years, Morgunov was struck dumb. With utter incredulity.

How could anyone believe something so obviously moronic?"

"3573

Well.

On second thought, he knew exactly how someone could believe that. He was suddenly reminded of his youth--of that special breed of proud, malicious ignorance that seemed to possess everyone around him in those days.

'Anti-knowledge,' he'd called it. Not just the desire to remain ignorant. No. It went a step further and sought to destroy the knowledge of others, too. To humiliate them for even having the gall to pursue said knowledge in the first place.

There was nothing in this universe that Morgunov hated more than that.

And his confusion, his disbelief--they melted gradually away.

Replaced in their entirety with rage. The kind he hadn't felt in countless years. The kind that threatened to overtake every cogent thought in his mind.

It was all he could do to contain himself. If the two of them were not already trapped, he would have killed Germal instantly. No games. No toying with his food. No experimenting with some untested invention. No saving his real trump cards for later. Not even any capturing for future study.

This creature in here with him--whatever it was--it needed to die.

“...You’ve fallen quiet,” said Germal.

Morgunov said nothing.

“Kehe. It seems I’ve accomplished the impossible.”

Morgunov knew he needed to steady himself. He’d allowed his emotions to rise too much.

He knew that.

And yet he didn’t entirely care. The thought occurred to him that, yes, if Germal could really read minds, then the bastard could be reading this, right now. That he--no, it--could’ve even known ahead of time exactly what to say in order to provoke this very reaction.

That it could’ve all been a lie, said for no other reason than to get under his skin.

If so, then Morgunov could admit: it had worked. And this bastard was going to regret it with every fiber of its being.

But for some reason, Morgunov felt like that wasn’t the case, either. That really was how Germal viewed the world, wasn’t it? Perhaps that was even how all the Primordials viewed it.

Which would certainly explain why the Void decided to rip them from this plane of existence.

Because they deserved it. And worse.

“Is it my turn, now?” said Germal. “Have I answered to your satisfaction?”

Still, Morgunov almost remained silent. But after a moment, he found enough poise to say, “Yes. Go ahead.”

"3574

“The Vessel of Trenoyis,” said Germal. “Where is it?”

“Trenoyis,” echoed Morguonv. “Hmm. Have you checked Trenoy? I hear they named that place after him.”

"Cute. You know this does not work if you refuse to answer, yes? You must answer to my satisfaction. You know the Vessel's whereabouts, don't you?"

"Do I? Why don't you just read my mind and see for yourself?"

"You know why."

"Oh, come now. Are you tellin' me that my measly little psychic defenses are able to thwart the efforts of a big, bad Primordial like yourself? Surely not."

"Measly, are they? You've created an entire labyrinth full of coma-inducing booby traps."

"What can I say? I don't like people rooting around in there without my permission."

"What if I promise to be gentle?"

"Oh, sure, but you have to let me run some experiments on you, first. I promise that I'll be equally gentle."

"Kehe. Indeed. We've arrived at yet another impasse, it would seem."

"Shocker, eh? And hey, let's not pretend like you psychics don't deserve a bit of backlash for all the stuff you've gotten up to over the years. Rifling through other people's memories--is there any greater invasion of privacy than that? I think not. And that's just one of the messed up things you've been doing!"

"The pot is truly screaming at the kettle, now."

"Eheh. I never said I don't have some backlash coming, too."

"Oh? Are you perhaps acknowledging that this ambush is deserved?"

"In a general sense? Yeah, maybe. But I don't recall ever wronging you specifically."

"No? You have been hunting me for decades."

"Yeah, what's wrong with that? I just wanted to have a nice chat. You're the one who made it weird."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind. Now answer my question. Where is the Vessel?"

“What’s your interest in it?”

“Can you not guess, based on everything else I’ve already told you?”

“Maybe I want to hear it from the horse’s mouth. Are you a horse god, Gerny? I bet you are, aren’t you? I feel like that’d suit you.”

“The Vessel shall help me free Trenoyis.”

“You don’t say? Are you sure you want to do that? What would the Void think?”

A brief silence arrived. “Kehehe. Not much of anything, I suspect. Your faith in that being is misplaced, I’m afraid.”

Hmm. Morgunov wanted to scratch his chin. “So despite being of Chaos, you’re going against the Void’s will? Hmm. Now that just don’t seem right.”

"3575

“You conflate the two when you should not,” said Germal. “Chaos may be an aspect of the Void, but that does not mean they have the same desires. Does your stomach always want what you do?”

“I mean, usually. I’ve never been big on dieting.”

“Even so, that is the essence of it. The Void believes that it knows best. It often tries, foolishly, to ignore its many competing instincts.”

“Interesting. So what does that make you, then? A stomach virus?”

Germal laughed outright. “From your perspective, perhaps so! But you’ll have to forgive me if I do not measure my self-worth by the judgments of a gleeful, mass murdering psychopath.”

“Mmhmm. You say that, but if you’re really a Primordial, then the odds are quite good that you’ve dabbled in a bit of mass murder and/or psychopathy yourself.”

“A fair statement. Incorrect, but fair.”

“Oh? Which Primordial do you claim to be, then?”

"Ah-ah. It is still my turn. And you have yet to answer my question. The Vessel. Where is it located?"

"Fine, fine. I have it, actually. Locked up tight in one of my warehouses."

"Which warehouse?"

"Lemme go, and I'll take you there!"

"How kind of you to offer. But I shall make do with just the location, if you please."

"Hmph. It's in Luugh. Outside a little town called Ragayo. That specific enough for you?"

"No. What is the exact address?"

Tch. "Doesn't have one. No road nearby. Won't show up on a map, either."

"Landmarks?"

"It's surrounded by trees. Squirreled away, out of sight. I like my hidden things to remain hidden, y'know?"

"Security?"

"None at all."

"You're lying. I can tell. How much security is there?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing a tough guy like you can't handle."

"Specifics, Demon. Answering to my satisfaction was your rule, remember?"

"Ugh, so dull! Can't you just appreciate a good surprise, every now and then?"

"No."

"Alright, alright. Lemme think. Umm. There were... twelve automatic turrets along the perimeter. Programmed to stun, not kill. Thirty-seven mines dotted the outer walls. Oh, and a small platoon of Roberts."

"Roberts?"



"My tin soldiers. That's what I call 'em."

"...How small is this platoon, precisely?"

"Oh, I, mm... sixty-eight."

"Sixty-eight of those monstrosities?"

Morgunov could not help feeling immensely pleased by the bastard's worried tone. "You and your boys made short work of them back at my workshop. And without me there to feed them orders, I'm sure you won't have any trouble." Assuming Germal actually brought all his buddies along to help, which seemed unlikely.

Eheh."

"3576

"How did you get your hands on the Vessel, anyway?" said Germal. "It should have been guarded by a cluster of feldeaths."

"Oh, you knew that, huh?" And a thought struck him. "Wait a minute! Don't tell me! You went and tried to grab it yourself, didn't you?! Only to find it missing after putting yourself in so much danger! Ahaha! That's what happened, isn't it?!"

Germal said no response, which prompted Morgunov to just keep laughing.

"That's excellent!" said the Mad Demon. "Wish I'd been there to see you scurrying about like a scared mouse!"

"Tell me how you snuck it out," said Germal.

"Curious, eh? Alright, fine. I lured a crew of worms over to distract the big fellas for me while I made off with the spoils. Which involved more than just the Vessel, by the way. In fact, I'd nearly forgotten about that old thing until you brought it up."

"Ah..."

"So there. Satisfied yet?"

"I suppose so."

"Good! Then we can be done with this whole thing and get back to the real world!"

"You have no further questions for me?" said Germal.

Morgunov paused. Truthfully, he wanted nothing more than to get back to ripping this guy in half as soon as possible, but he supposed he shouldn't waste this opportunity while he had it. Plus, something else was occurring to him. "If you're saying that, then you must have additional things to ask, mm?"

"Perhaps so. You are a font of knowledge, Demon. I should like to make use of you while I still can."

"Ooh. A threat and flattery. What a charming devil you are, Gemy. In that case, I'll indulge you a bit longer. Tell me. What are the Furies, exactly? How do you define them?"

"I'm surprised you do not already know that."

"Mayhaps I do. But I still want to know what your twisted and stupid perspective is."

"Kehe. The Furies, dear Demon, are the great agents of Order. They are a troublesome collective that span the breadth of history, often linked together unwittingly. They are one--and also many."

"Hmm. One and many, huh?"

"The collective supports the one. The emergent head of a given era. Only one exists at a time. It becomes the focal point to which flows all the troublesome toils of the others. And when the head is slain, another inevitably emerges. A hydra, of sorts. I am certain that you know exactly what I speak of. And that I am not lying, yes?"

"3577

"I don't think that I do," said Morgunov, though that wasn't entirely true. "You're tryin' to tell me that there's some grand, invisible force that's been creating great geniuses throughout history? And that only one can exist at a time? Why would that be true? Seems pretty inefficient to me. If the goal is to create Order, then the more brilliant minds there

are, the better. Limiting it all to just one, singular dude sounds stupid as hell."

"I never said Order was smart, now did I?"

"Oh, c'mon, that's the best you've got? You're supposed to be the greatest liar in the world, aren't you? Come up with something more convincing!"

"What could be more convincing than the simple truth?"

"Eheh, oh, please. The best liars are able use the truth as if it were a lie--and vice versa. Think I'm not aware of that? Gotta say, you're really leavin' me quite unimpressed with your abilities so far, fella. Fumblin' the bag, as the youngins like to say!"

"Well, I did tell you from the beginning that you were overestimating me."

"Aha! True enough!"

"But alright. I cannot claim to know what Order is thinking--or if it even thinks anything at all, for that matter--but I do feel that you are misconceiving something. A true Fury is able to take inspiration from their contemporaries, as well. Not just from those in the past. So your idea that more would be better is rather moot."

"Hmm."

"Additionally, would more actually be better? They do say that too many cooks spoil the broth, no? Perhaps Order believes something similar."

Dang it, that was actually a good point.

Morgunov still had more to follow up on, though. "Okay, so the Furies are, what, the greatest minds of their eras? And yet you also told me that I'm not one of 'em? How can I not qualify, huh? After all I've done! That hardly seems fair!"

"Tis not a matter of intellect alone." A beat passed. "Though I'm sure you would be found wanting there, as well."

"Eheh, ouch! So what else factors in, then, hmm?"

"Personality, of course. Temperament. Desires of the heart and soul."

"You sayin' I'm not pure of heart?"

"Not at all. Your heart is perhaps the purest black I've ever seen."

"Really? Ever? You've known some real mean buggers from across all the Ages, haven't you? And yet you honestly think I'm the worst?"

"Yes. I do."

"3578

Morgunov needed a moment to deconstruct that statement. But only a moment. "Oh. Right. Because I'm also an inventor. And we're the worst by default, according to your twisted logic. Of course."

"There is far more to it than merely that, and I think you know that."

"Oh yeah? So you're tellin' me that I'm worse than Arnel the Terror? Really? Look, I know I've done some messed up things, okay? But that guy literally cooked people alive and ate them in front of their horrified family members."

Germal paused. "...Okay, well, I never met Arnel. And I said that you're the worst I've seen. Not the worst to ever exist."

"Wow, what a cop out. And still definitely untrue! You must've met Hada, right? Oh, unless you are him, I suppose. In which case, dang. You've really got no room to be calling me names."

"Hada does deserve admonishment, true. Which I have provided, on many occasions. In fact, it might be my single greatest pastime. But Hada is also a god, which affords him special consideration. You, however, deserve no such thing."

"Oh, so that's how it works. I'm not part of your privileged little club, so off with my head, eh?"

"In essence, yes. Ah, but now, perhaps you are thinking that you might like to join?"

Morgunov stopped on that notion for a bit. After all he'd just heard, there was no more repulsive idea to him than what Germal had just suggested. "Yeah, sure, man. Do I have to learn a secret handshake?"

"No. Unfortunately, there is no set path to godhood. No advice that can be granted. 'Tis something that one must arrive at in solitude. Or become a vessel and agree to incarnation. Might you be interested in that?"

"Oh, you mean giving up my corporeal form and sense of self in order to transform into an entirely new being?"

"Indeed. If you are amenable to the idea, then I can arrange it. There are many of us who are awaiting new vessels."

"Interesting! You can do it just like that, huh? Simple and easy?"

"Quite."

"And you're sure I'd make for a suitable vessel? I'm not too messed up or unworthy or anything?"

"Of course. You would do fine."

"Well, alright then! Let's make that happen, pal!"

"Truly? I thought you would be more--"

Morgunov waited. He would've smiled if he could've.

"...You're lying," said Germal. "You have no intention of incarnating with anyone. As soon as I free us, you will try to kill me."

"Well, duh. That was always going to happen, Germy. You're the one who decided to put your balls on the table and confront me. You can't honestly expect that I'm gonna let you get outta this unscathed, can you? But I do find it funny that you almost didn't realize it in time! You must be really eager to find vessels for all your little buddies! How quaint!"

"You are a bastard.""

"3579

"Anyway, enough of this," said Morgunov. "You've answered to my satisfaction. Take your turn, and then let's get out of here."

"Already?" said Germal. "This will only be my second question."

“What, that’s not enough? How many more could you possibly have for me? Aren’t you Primordials supposed to be all-knowing?”

“If only that were so.”

“Geez. Y’know, you’re comin’ across as kinda pathetic, right now. In fact, you’re makin’ me feel like the term ‘god’ applies more to me than it does to you. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

“I can only apologize.”

“If this is some subtle strategy to make me arrogant and careless, then it won’t work! My carelessness has already given you plenty of chances! Don’t tell me you need even more! Greedy! That’s what that is!”

“I know my second question for you.”

“Out with it, then.”

“Why did you kill Dolf Rachman?”

Morgunov stopped.

Germal just waited for him, however. The son of a bitch.

“...That’s completely out of nowhere,” said Morgunov, suspicious. “Why do you care about that?”

“Kehe. I will admit it: you do not make it an easy process, but yes, I have been looking through your memories. And that is one that stuck out to me. I cannot discern your feelings from that time. It seems they are quite tender to you. A sore spot, perhaps? Surprising, for a madman like you. It has made me curious to know more.”

Psychics. This was precisely why he’d grown to hate them in his youth. These days, his feelings toward them had waned a bit. He’d grown powerful enough that they’d ceased being a real concern. And perhaps he’d begun to think that, as long they knew their place, they might not be so bad, after all. Fun to play with, even.

But now he was being reminded. Of what they were really like. When they lacked fear. When they’d been truly threatening. He understood completely why his ancient predecessors had sided with the Vanguard against the Kingsparrows. He would do the same, if such a time ever came again.

“...Ask me something else,” said Morgunov.

“Oh? Well, now you are only making me even more interested. Can it really be such a sensitive subject for you? Surely not. For a battle-hardened emperor such as yourself? How could that be?”

“This tack won’t work, either, Liar.”

“What tack? I’m simply confused. Because from everything you’ve claimed thus far--everything you even seem to believe--you love to see brilliance in action. You love human ingenuity. It’s why you’re an inventor. Why you’ve been once since you were but a boy. And yet, with Mr. Rachman--”

“You’re wasting your time. And your question.”

“Well, that’s my decision to make, now isn’t it?”

"3580

Morgunov remained quiet for a time. He needed to clear his mind. Dwelling on thoughts, wallowing in feelings--those were not only useless, but actively harmful in this particular conversation. With this disgusting creature searching for any potential vulnerability, there was nothing to be gained here and everything to lose.

So he delved further into his calm. His meditative clarity.

He’d not meditated in a very long time. He was most certainly out of practice. In fact, ever since mastering his psychic defenses, he’d begun to think that meditation was a pointless activity. No longer needed. Especially when he had so much other fun stuff that he could’ve been doing, instead.

But that was fine. It was like getting back on a horse. Old and familiar.

“It is no use trying to run from me,” said Germal. “We are trapped here, remember? There is nowhere to go.”

Morgunov ignored him. Calm and clear. Devoid of emotion.

Germal kept pushing. “You’re just not going to answer me at all, are you? Kehe. How cowardly.”

Just words. Empty words.

"Alright, I think I understand now. There can't be many reasons why something would be a sore spot for you. And I've already caught enough of a whiff to piece things together. So rather than you answering my question, how about I do you a favor and answer it for you? Generous of me, no?"

No. Ignore the mind flayer.

"The reason you killed Dolf--or rather, the reason it haunts you so--is because it was the moment when you were forced to confront your true self."

Bastard.

"The part of you that you hate. Your old, weak, scared, pathetic self. The self that you've tried, in vain, for centuries to overcome, then repress, then simply pretend it never existed. Dolf reminded you that all your lofty ideas about humanity, about the beauty of invention and innovation, about brilliance and technological progress--all those cherished thoughts are ultimately just bullshit when competing against your own fragile ego. Against the sudden realization that someone out there is actually smarter than you. Better than you."

"I'm going to kill you, mind flayer. And then I'm going to find you in whatever realm your recursive self calls home, and I'm going to kill you there, too. Or put you in a cage, perhaps. I'll have to make up my mind along the way. Regardless, there will be no more incarnations for you. Only the Void. And then I'll find a way to take that from you, too."  
"3581 -- CCXCVII.

Germal just laughed.

Which only incensed Morgunov further.

But there was no point in voicing it. He hated losing control of his emotions like that and was already regretting it.

No. He was just going to follow through with his promises. And await the day when this smug creature was finally laid low. How thoroughly satisfying that was going to be.



"You've fallen silent again," observed the Liar. "Has our game come to an abrupt end? If so, then 'tis a shame. Strange as it may sound, I would say that you have indeed answered to my satisfaction. Kehehe. And so it is now your turn, my friend."

What a piece of shit. In this moment, Morgunov was not sure he had ever hated anyone so much. Anyone--or anything, even.

A disturbance arrived, however, causing sudden havoc with Morgunov's perception of this empty headspace that they were both trapped in. What in the world was that?

"Ah!" came a new voice. "There you both are! Finally!"

Who was that? Morgunov needed a second to--

"Master?" said Germal.

And Morgunov realized. "Gohvis? How did you find us?"

The Monster of the East ignored both their queries. "What are you two idiots doing? Having a nice chat in some kind of liminal space? How cozy. Meanwhile, I'm trying to prevent a feldeath of darkness from atomizing the pair of you."

"Oh, the fight's still going?" said Morgunov. "We thought time was simply moving differently for us in here."

"It is," said Gohvis. "I can sense the time dilation. But multiple minutes have still transpired for me outside. Do you realize how long that feels, right now?"

"Ah."

"Oh."

"Have you at least managed to talk through your disagreements?" said Gohvis. "This entire fight is pointless. We are all on the same side."

"If you actually believe that," said Morgunov, "then Germal's fooled you even more thoroughly than I thought."

"Master, please stop interfering. This matter has nothing to do with you."

"I hate you both so much."

## Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Seven: 'How Fire perceives Steel...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Warrenhold sure was feeling different, lately. And not just because of the restoration efforts, Roman felt. There was something more. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Something to do with Hector.

This place. What exactly was it transforming into, he wondered? A place of safety? Refuge for all who needed it? Or an indomitable fortress? A headquarters from which an empire would be built?

Could all of those things be possible simultaneously?

Voreese seemed to think so."  
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"3582

It was unsettling, to be sure. But also, admittedly, exciting. A mixture of hope and dread. Like he was watching history take shape before his very eyes, every single day.

And increasingly, he questioned his role in things here. A year ago, he and Voreese had been laying their long-visioned plans for building up a new faction of their own. Something that, according to her, would take a century or more before it began to bear any real fruit.

But now, it seemed as though they had been sucked into something entirely different. Voreese, for her part, seemed to have all but forgotten about her previous plan--not that there was any sense of urgency with it, of course. They could always circle back around to it later, Roman supposed.

Assuming they lived that long, of course. Which was kind of the sticking point here.

Their plan, more or less, had been to lay relatively low and accumulate strength, resources, and powerful allies over time. Now, whatever this current plan was--if it could even be called a plan--it seemed to have thrown that first part out the window.

Laying low? Who cared about that?

Sure, Hector and Garovel both came across reasonable enough when they spoke about plans and how to handle whatever the emergent situation at the time was.

But their actions... those told a somewhat different story, Roman felt.

They were just going to keep throwing themselves right into the thick of things, weren't they? He thought maybe that wouldn't be the case when they decided to stay here at Warrenhold and not venture off to

Vantalay, especially since they'd had multiple motivating opportunities to, but this latest business with Banda Toro had now convinced Roman that Hector was indeed the maniac that he'd been fearing he was.

Damn it all. Roman felt like a dumbass. Why'd he have to go and become friends with a guy like that, huh? Especially right before a gigantic war broke out? Talk about bad timing.

The worst part, though, was that not many other people around Hector seemed to be seeing things the way Roman did. All these reapers and Rainlords. They were ready to do whatever Hector told them. As if he'd been their lord for years, already.

Which meant that, as his friend, Roman had a greater responsibility to not become a yes-man.

To keep his friend balanced.

Where the future of this country was concerned, Roman wasn't sure there was any more important task than that."

"3583

And to that end, Roman had begun restructuring several of his own companies and organizations in an effort to prepare for the future. Naturally, he'd been hit rather hard by this economic crisis that Atreya had been dealing with, so a restructure had needed to happen, regardless, but he was certainly taking a different approach to it than he would have a year or two ago.

He needed more flexibility. The vast majority of his money was tied up in things. He didn't like letting it just sit there, doing nothing, when he could instead invest in people who were trying to build things for their communities.

A nice idea, certainly. He'd helped a lot of people that way. Helped create work for tens of thousands of Atreyan citizens, mostly without even meeting any of them.

But now he was thinking that it sure would've been helpful if he could've freed up more of that cash without having to liquidate entire companies, especially at a time like this when those people needed their jobs more than ever. If he'd invested more into real estate, for

example, then he could've flipped a bunch of properties and funneled a lot more cash into Hector's direction during this critical period. Which probably would've helped even more people out.

But eh. It was hard to know that for sure. Things were never really so cut and dry, were they? Especially when it came to multi-million troa businesses.

Perhaps he could free up some room with some of his underground workers. Technically, they were criminals, and if he was going keep spending so much time around the new hero of Atreya, it would be risky to keep conducting business via extralegal means; but on the other hand, those businesses were actually the best sources of the "flexibility" that he was looking for. And the criminals he employed would just find work elsewhere if he let them go.

Much worse work, probably. The non-victimless kind. The temptation to which only increased during times like this.

No, it was better to keep those under management. He'd just have to be even more careful than usual.

Thankfully, Warrenhold was a good place to hide. For the time being, anyway. If Hector ever decided to open it up to the public, then Roman would definitely have to leave.

Or disguise himself as a janitor, maybe. That might be fun. Hadn't done that one in a while."

"3584

Roman hovered through the air as he made his way through one of the two still-unnamed towers of Warrenhold. The stony floors were still dusty enough that he could make out visible tracks in them from where people had walked through in recent weeks--and maybe months, judging from the more faded tracks. Those might've belonged to the initial survey team that Hector had employed to help him explore and map out the castle grounds.

At the moment, this particular tower was only being used for storage--and only a little. Even when all the Rainlords had been present, this gigantic castle had not felt terribly crowded. The six named towers had been plenty spacious enough for everyone and everything. These

other two had only been used for storing materials that were relevant to the castle's all-important hydroelectric generator, which sat below one of them.

Roman had been internally debating whether they should dub that one the Generator Tower. These things needed names, and it would be fitting. But on the other hand, perhaps it would be better to be more discreet about the location of the generator. The more obvious they made it, the more vulnerable it might be to some form of sabotage in the future.

Yeah.

That's probably what Hector would say if he broached the subject, Roman decided. The kid was pretty damn concerned about security, he'd noticed.

As he should be, Roman figured. This place had already become a focal point for the safety of the nation, it seemed. If the enemy realized how important Warrenhold was--and how powerful its current inhabitants were--then it was fairly likely that someone would send some manner of infiltrator here, eventually.

Roman intended to be quite vigilant on that front.

As did Voreese. That was one of the reasons why she'd been asking him to pay extra visits to these two empty towers: to make sure there were no secret squatters here. No unexpected visitors. The tracks in the dust were actually helpful to that end. As was he his ability to levitate and avoid leaving tracks of his own.

Plus, it made for decent practice, controlling his power over particle vibrations like this. It required slow, gentle precision on his part. Not like the haphazard flight that he'd grown more accustomed to.

The other reason she'd wanted to visit these towers, however, was because she suspected there were secrets here. Hidden areas that the survey team may have missed."

"3585

'Do you really think we're going to find anything?' said Roman.

'I don't know,' said Voreese. 'That's the point of searching, my dear

boy. To dispel uncertainty.'

'Okay, but you were the reaper of this place's creator. So shouldn't you already know about any hidden areas?'

'Sure, apart from, y'know, the thousand-year gap between when I last visited and now. Wouldn't exactly be surprising to discover that one of its many inhabitants since then made some sneaky additions.'

As Roman was about to respond, he lost the balance of his hovering technique and had to catch himself on the floor. "Tch." He took a moment to regather his concentration and begin hovering again.

'Maybe you should focus more on your technique and less on running your mouth,' said Voreese.

'Oh, well, my mouth's not actually moving, so I guess it's fine,' said Roman.

'Heh. Feel free to shut the fuck up, anyway, if the mood strikes you.'  
'It doesn't. Besides, I'm sure you'd just get bored if I did that.'

'That's actually true. I just like telling you to shut the fuck up. Don't actually do it, though. I'll get upset.'

'You're a complicated woman, Voreese.'

'Unfortunately, brilliance and simplicity rarely go hand-in-hand. That's always been my problem. Woe is me.' And she pretended to cry.

Roman decided to ignore that and change the subject. 'Wanna tell me more about Warrenhold's genius creator? Stasya Orlov, wasn't it?'

'Oh, you remembered. How uncharacteristically intelligent of you.'

'Somehow, I knew you were going to say that.'

'And yet you did nothing to preempt or prevent it. You're just getting lazy now, aren't you? Or too comfortable, maybe. Guess I'll have to find some new way to keep you on your toes.'

'You know what would really shock me? You giving me a straightforward, sincere answer for a change. Truly, I wouldn't know what to do.'

'Sounds lame.'



They arrived at a corridor that branched off into multiple rooms. He picked the nearest one, holding up his lantern as he hovered into the darkness.

The chamber proved larger than he expected, almost big enough to be a banquet hall. It was still totally empty, though, so there was no telling what its intended purpose might've been. Assuming it even had one.

'So? What was Stasya like?'

'The complete opposite of you,' said Voreese. 'I really miss her.'

Roman floated toward the far wall. If the point of this venture was to find hidden areas, then he had to inspect the walls thoroughly. Maybe there was a hole or loose stone somewhere.

'She was a troubled soul, in many ways,' the reaper went on, unprompted, which surprised Roman. 'Hated interacting with people. Seemed happiest whenever she could lose herself in her work.'

"3586

'How'd you first find her?' asked Roman as he scanned the gray stones in front of him, squinting and lifting his lantern up even higher.

'Heh. I saw her drawing on a big stone monument with a hunk of charcoal. She was just a little kid. Turned out, that stone monument was an important religious symbol in her village, marking passage into the afterlife. She caught hell for that stunt from her parents. Smacked her around like you wouldn't believe. Tough to watch, even back in those days when child abuse was hardly a concept.'

'Damn.'

'That charcoal drawing of hers, though--it had been of fractals. Not that I understood that at the time. Wasn't until centuries later, looking back, that I realized the significance. But it had been striking enough imagery to make me take notice of this strange little girl who seemed to already be the black sheep of her community. And honestly, I'm not even sure she understood her accomplishment at that time, either.'

'How do you mean?'

'Stasya was... well, she was probably more brilliant than anyone I've

ever known--and I've known A LOT of people--but at the same time, she was also kinda... stupid, quite frankly. Or at least, that's what it seemed like to me.'

'You've lost me.'

'Agh. It was like... she had an intuitive understanding of the world--an ability to perceive patterns and make connections that no one else could. But she had no ability to explain her thought processes. She could solve almost any problem you put in front of her, but she couldn't teach you how she'd done it. And that really tormented her, I think. Made her feel isolated. On a deep, existential level.'

Roman bobbed his head a little as he tried to imagine that. 'Hmm. And you called that stupidity? Seems a bit harsh.'

'In its own way. Social intelligence seems to come easily enough to you, but for some people, it's a whole different animal. And she struggled with that more than anything else in her life, I think.'

'...Did you just compliment me?'

'It's a shame you're such a dumbass by every other intellectual metric.'

'Are you sure your constant insults weren't what was REALLY tormenting her?'

'Psh. I was way nicer to her than I am to you.'

'...That's still not saying much, honestly.'

'Oh, quit your whining. You know I love you, right?'

'Do I?'

'When you're not being a dumb bitch, yeah. Of course you know that.'"  
"3587

Roman was getting fed up, but not with Voreese. This was just business as usual. No, he was getting annoyed with this search. All these damn stones looked identical. He decided to try pushing on some of them at random, since there were no discernible marks or clues anywhere.

‘Did you see something?’ said Voreese.

‘Nope,’ said Roman. ‘But I figure, if there’s a secret or something, then maybe it’s so secret that there are no visible hints. Maybe you’ve just gotta know the exact right spot to press.’

‘That’d be a pain in the ass for a normal person to remember, unless they were using it all the time.’

‘Or unless they had a reaper to remember for them.’

‘It sure would help if I could sense through these walls.’

‘That would make Warrenhold much less secure, though.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Stasya knew what she was doing.’

‘Do you ever get claustrophobic in this place?’ said Roman, still trying different stones as he hovered along the length of the chamber. ‘It must feel way different for you compared to being up on the surface, right? Where you can sense stuff in all directions?’

‘Claustrophobic? Nah. But you are right that it’s quite different. Wouldn’t surprise me if some other reapers found this place very uncomfortable. Me, though, I’ve come to find it quite cozy. Nice ‘n safe.’

‘Hmm. S’pose it helps that these walls are borderline unbreakable.’

‘It sure does.’

‘Has nobody managed to punch a hole through one yet?’

‘Not that I know of,’ said Voreese. ‘But I did see Hector testing them on his own the other day. I don’t think he was doing tests with brute force, though.’

‘What kind of tests was he doing, then?’

‘I didn’t actually ask him. Didn’t want to bother him.’

‘Didn’t want to--? Excuse me? Were you unwell? Had you just seen some flying pigs? Had Hell frozen over?’

‘Hah. Actually, I just kind of enjoyed watching him from afar. Seeing what he was getting up to all on his own. You can learn a thing or two

about someone by observing them when they think nobody is around.'

'Oh, so you were stalking him.'

'I was silently and respectfully observing him! Nothing weird or creepy about it!'

'Uh-huh.'

'I mean, are you not worried about him at all?' said Voreese. 'That battle with Banda Toro was no fuckin' joke. I wouldn't be surprised if it had gotten to him a bit. Psychologically, I mean.'"

"3588

'Dunno,' said Roman. 'He seems just fine to me.'

'Oh yeah? Well, then, it must be true, because there's no way your young, inexperienced ass could be mistaken, right?'

'Pulling the age card, huh? What a surprise.'

'Damn right. And I'm not sorry, either. You'll just have to forgive me if I decide to trust my instincts over yours.'

'Not like I was expecting different.' The notion of using brute force was sticking in his mind, and Roman decided to invoke his power just a bit. He slammed the wall with a wave of force, knocking up a thin spray of dust from the floor but otherwise not even making the stones tremble.

'Getting frustrated?'

'A bit.' He tried again, putting more oomph into it.

It made no difference. The wall budged not a whit, nor did any of the individual stones, as far as he could tell.

"Geez," he muttered under his breath.

'Feeling inadequate?'

'Shut up.'

He could've put even more power into his next attempt, but he decided to just move on to the next room. He'd be here all night if he didn't pick

up the pace. Hell, he probably still would, anyway. These towers were too damn big.

Which motivated his next question.

‘Why did Stasya make this place so friggin’ huge?’

‘She wanted it to be a hub between the surface and the Undercrust.’

‘Yeah, you mentioned that before, but still, was this size really necessary for that? I mean, the “Warrenhole” as you call it, is only so big. That’d limit how many people could come and go from above and below. There’s no way all this space would be necessary to handle the traffic. And even if it was, she could’ve just added more to the castle later, when it became relevant. But from the way you’ve described it, she didn’t do that, right? She made all this at once?’

‘It took her many years, but yeah. She never stopped work until she was done.’

‘So then why? This just seems so excessive.’

Voreese’s ethereal, avian eyes held on him for a moment. ‘You’re not wrong. In fact, I remember saying something much the same to her, myself. I didn’t exactly appreciate hanging around here, doing jack shit for years, while she toiled away in silence.’

‘How’d she respond?’

‘She told me she didn’t expect me to understand. And that if I was bored, I should leave.’

‘Harsh.’

‘Yeah, she was kind of a bitch, sometimes.’”

"3589

Roman breathed a laugh. ‘Really? The way you’ve been singing her praises, I thought you considered her some sort of angelic being, too pure and good for this world.’

‘Heh. Maybe. Life certainly wasn’t fair to her, which earned her a lot of sympathy points from me. But she was still a flawed human being, like

the rest of us.'

Roman stopped for a moment as another question occurred to him, but he thought better of asking it.

Voreese took notice of the abrupt silence, however. 'Now you're wondering why I released her, aren't you?'

He gave the reaper a look and just sort of nodded.

She sighed. 'To make a very long story short... she went mad.'

Roman said nothing.

'Thankfully, she didn't hurt anyone. It wasn't really that type of insanity. But that also made it a much more difficult decision. For a long time, I thought it would be okay to just let things continue as they were. Madness is a somewhat subjective perception, anyway, right? And if she wasn't hurting anybody, then what was the harm in just letting her be?'

'Damn... so why'd you finally decide to do it?'

'Because I just... couldn't take it, anymore. For my own sanity, I felt like I had to.'

He nodded glumly. 'I can only imagine how difficult that must've been.'

'She just wasn't even there, anymore. The young woman I'd come to know and care for--she was gone. Replaced with constant, incoherent ramblings. I kept thinking that maybe she could come back from it. Or that maybe I was at fault, somehow. Like she'd ascended to a new level of intelligence that my meager mind could no longer comprehend. But no. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that those things were just wishful thinking and that keeping her as my servant was not an act of compassion. And I guess I also worried that, as she continued to grow in strength, she really would become a danger to everyone around her.'

Roman frowned. More questions bubbled up in his mind regarding other servants she'd had over the years, but as he mulled it over, he wasn't even sure he wanted such answers.

After all, he was on that exact same path, himself. Would hearing about his predecessors in this endeavor help him to avoid a similar fate?

He wanted to say yes. Of course he wanted that.

But in the recesses of his mind, he felt differently. And strongly.

This undead life was borrowed time. He'd known that ever since Voreese made that offer to him."

"3590

Perhaps that was a strange way to look at it. He was technically immortal, after all. He was literally unable to die on his own.

And yet... the more time he spent as a servant, the more tales he heard about servants of the past, and the more he saw of other, older servants around him... the clearer it became to him that things weren't so simple as all that. Surely, it was no coincidence that, despite the long history of reapers and humanity as a whole, the oldest living servants were still only a few hundred years old.

Voreese fell quiet for a while, and Roman did the same. As he went through the motions of mindlessly checking wall after wall, stone after stone, for some sort of secret passageway, he allowed his mind to wander, again, into the larger questions about this very odd life that he'd found himself living.

About what the future might hold in store for him.

He realized that, if he was being totally honest with himself, this immortality didn't feel so at all. In his gut, when it came to the subject of death, he had this looming sense of inevitability--much more so than before he'd become undead. Like it might just be around the corner, somehow.

But it didn't bother him.

Maybe because he'd already felt death once before. Maybe this was just an in-built adaptation that all servants had. He'd have to ask some others about that, sometime. Though, he suspected that Hector might be the exact wrong person to consult. And the Rainlords, too, for that matter. Hmm.

He remembered a time when he'd felt invincible. Multiple times, in fact, both before and after meeting Voreese. Naturally, when he'd

discovered his new undead powers as a servant, that had been quite the confidence booster, until he'd learned more about how dangerous the world really was. But it was the times from before that were sticking in his mind, now.

Back when he'd been poor as dirt. Somehow, that hadn't seemed to affect his confidence at all. Not in those days. If anything, it had emboldened him. Perhaps it had been because he'd had nothing to lose. If his life was already at rock bottom, then the only way was up, right?

All that verve eventually caught up with him, of course, when his life of thievery led him into biting off more than he could chew.

At the time, anyway.

Once he'd revived, he discovered that he could suddenly chew quite a bit more. And his appetite had increased, as well.

With Voreese's help, his fortune accumulated quickly. Getting back at the rich bastard who'd killed him turned into something much more than just revenge. That score had been unlike any other. And it had allowed him to begin building himself into someone entirely new."

"3591

It had taken a while, of course. Years. And even now, he didn't feel like he'd completed that transformation. Sure, he swaggered around as if he'd figured it all out already, as if every bit of his wealth had been accumulated as a matter of course.

As if dumb luck hadn't decided most of his life for him.

But he knew the truth. Deep down, he knew. This so-called "empire" that he'd been building for himself--for Voreese and for Atreya, too--it was all still as fragile as a glass flute. It played a pretty tune, true, but one false move, and it would shatter.

Leo had seen right through it. The facade. The veneer of money. For a while now, Roman had been wanting to believe that Leo's assessment of him had been off the mark--or just an unfortunate coincidence, perhaps--but increasingly, he was coming to the realization that, no, that guy had hit the bullseye.



Which shouldn't have been so surprising, really. Leo, for all his faults and oddness, was one of the oldest servants in the world. Roman's amateurish "confidence" must have been plain as day to that guy.

Agh.

Money. When he first got his hands on it, he remembered thinking hard about his plans for it all. About how he wouldn't be like so many other rich assholes and just hoard it for no reason. About how he would find good uses for it wherever he could. Responsible uses for it.

But that certainly hadn't been easy. More responsibility meant a more complicated life. And while he hadn't lost faith in his original intentions, a part of him had a tiny bit more sympathy for those same hoarding assholes that he previously so despised. Saving his money for a rainy day certainly would've been easier. And it would've come in handy, too.

Egh. Nah. Those guys could still go fuck themselves. In fact, maybe he should--

His hand depressed against a stone, bringing Roman's attention back to the present.

He wasn't even sure how many of these rooms he'd been through now--or on what floor of the tower he was, for that matter.

But at least they'd found something. He pulled his hand back, and the stone shifted back into place.

He looked around at the empty chamber--and at Voreese, as well--but nothing appeared to have changed. He pressed the stone again, and indeed, it moved again, but nothing happened.

'Aw, shit,' said Voreese. 'It's a goddamn puzzle, isn't it? I hate puzzles.'

"3592

Roman pressed the stone a few more times, just to make sure that it hadn't triggered anything, then he looked around the room anew.

He'd been on autopilot just now as he'd let his mind wander, but with the realization that there was indeed something to be discovered here,

he was suddenly eyeing every single stone much more carefully. Surely, there had to be some sort of visible clue.

But no. He still couldn't see anything. Even upon closer inspection of the one stone that he knew to be some sort of switch, he still saw nothing peculiar about it when it was in its default position.

"Goddammit," he mumbled. "Who fucking built this shit, huh? It looks completely seamless. No gaps between the stones where the switch is. How'd they even manage to pull that off? That seems impossible."

'You're talking aloud,' said Voreese, privately.

'Oh. Sorry.'

The reaper hovered around his shoulder, eyeing the same spot he was. 'But on second thought, maybe Stasya sneaked this into the building plans. You're right that this seems suspiciously well-crafted.'

'If she did, then why didn't you already know about it?'

'Hey, it wasn't like I stuck around her every second that she was building it. She was working on this place for a long ass time.'

'Ah. And you got bored and went off on your own for a while, didn't you?'

Voreese made no response.

Which was strange enough to make Roman pause and look at her. 'Voreese?'

Rather than biting back at him with another insult, as he'd been expecting, she shook her head, and her tone turned somber again--even more so than before, in fact. 'Yes... I did leave her alone.'

Roman was confused. What was she--?

Oh.

'I'm sure that didn't have anything to do with her going mad,' said Roman, trying quite hard to not sound like a sarcastic prick. 'There's no sense in blaming yourself, if that's what's bothering you.'

But again, Voreese merely remained quiet.

Well, shit.

Now he didn't know what to say.

He decided to begin blindly pressing stones again. If this one by itself hadn't done the trick, then there had to be others around here somewhere. Maybe they needed to be pressed in some sort of sequence.

He kept at it for a while, though, and eventually became discouraged when he still hadn't found a single new switch."

"3593

'This bites,' said Voreese. 'Now that we know there's definitely a secret here, it's going to bother the shit out of me until we figure it out.'

'Which could be never,' said Roman.

'That is not helping my mental state, right now.'

'Hmm. Maybe there's only one switch, and we just have to press it in the right way. Like with rhythmic timing or something.'

'Ugh, god. You wanna just head back and start pressing it over and over again, hoping to get lucky?'

'I mean... no. But it's worth a shot, I guess, considering we have no other leads. I'm not sure going around this giant tower, hoping to get lucky with finding another incredibly well-hidden switch is any better. Especially considering there could be MANY more switches. Hell, they could even be in the other towers, for all we know.'

'Aw, fuck me. When you put it like that, it seems pretty obvious that we need to enlist some help.'

Roman gave a nod. 'Sure, but everyone around here has a lot goin' on. And I don't know if I want to drag them into some wild goose chase.'

'Not the kids. I'm sure they'll love a wild goose chase. Just gotta turn it into a game.'

He scratched his chin. 'Hmm. That might actually work. And I bet the kids could use the distraction, too. I doubt they're thrilled about being

cooped up down here all the time.'

'Hah. Spoken like someone who hasn't been paying much attention to them. Most of the little scamps seem to love this place.'

'Really? That's surprising.'

'Why? There's so much shit around here to explore, and they have plenty of friends to play with. Gina's been getting them access to all sorts of entertainment, too. Books, TV shows, movies, video games. You name it, they've probably got it.'

'Damn. Gina's been doing all that? I did think she seemed busier than usual, lately.'

'Yeah, some of the Rainlords asked her to assist them with setting up a makeshift academy for the kiddos while they're stuck here. Don't want them to fall behind on their educational development because of all the bullshit goin' on.'

'Sounds like a lot of work to be dumping on Gina. She doesn't need more on her plate.'

'Maybe so, but it wasn't like they forced her into it. She just likes to help out.'

'Believe me, I know.'

'You worried she'll burn herself out?'

Roman let his feet touch the floor, and he started walking. 'She has a nasty habit of taking care of everyone except herself. I should go check on her, actually.'

"3594

Voreese followed close behind. 'Y'know, it's cute 'n all, the way you both fuss over each other so much, but perhaps I should remind you that she HAS come out of her shell quite a bit since you two met. And she IS a grown ass woman. With quite a bit of backbone, in my opinion. You don't need to act like an overprotective babysitter. If the Rainlords were asking her to do something that she didn't want to do, I'm pretty sure she'd have the lady balls to tell them no herself.'

‘Weren’t you the one talking shit about the Rainlords, not so long ago?’

‘Who, me? Of course not. I would never talk shit about anyone.’

‘Hah.’ Roman picked up his pace. This damn unnamed tower had so many stairs.

‘Ooh, you’re really worried about her, huh? Wow. What, been too long since you last saw her? A whole three hours, maybe? My, my.’

‘It just occurred to me that I haven’t been checking in on her eating habits, lately. She’s become one of the best cooks I know, but if you leave her to her own devices, she’ll just sit in front of her computer all day and eat nothing but junk food.’

‘Okay, stop deflecting by making good points. I’m trying to tease you here, and that’s annoying.’

‘Subtle, as always, Voreese.’

‘So are you in love with her, or what?’

Roman shook his head and sighed but didn’t slow down. ‘Voreese…’

‘What?’

‘We’ve discussed this. Several times.’

‘Yeah, so why not add one more?’

‘If only you would stop at one…’

‘Heh. Maybe I would, if you ever gave me some answers that actually satisfied me. Weird, huh? Almost like you’re full of shit or something.’

Roman just ignored her.

‘You’re really not gonna pursue her, just because of some old vow? I think that’s dumb. You’re dumb. Stop being dumb.’

‘Shut up.’

‘No.’

‘It’s not just because of some old vow, and you know that.’

‘Oh, you mean because you don’t want to hurt her? Afraid of going

back to your playboy ways and breaking her heart? Well, maybe you could just, y'know, control yourself, instead?'

He sighed again. 'Which is exactly what I'm doing.'

'Yeah, but not like that!'

'Oh, okay. Thanks. You're really helping me along on my journey of self-reflection and discovery. I'm sure this thing that's been tormenting me for years will be fixed in no time, now.'

'Alright, alright. I'm sorry. I just want to see you happy, is all. Genuinely, I mean. Instead of the facade you put up all the time.'"  
"3595 -- CCXCVIII.

'Facade?' said Roman. 'I'm not pretending to be happy. I am happy. For the most part. I mean, what have I got to complain about?'

'Don't do that,' said Voreese, her tone abruptly more severe. 'Don't minimize yourself. We both know you've been through a lot, my dear.'

'I'm just saying: I'm fine. You don't need to worry so much.'

'Roman, it's one thing to keep a stiff upper lip and get on with your life. That's great. Admirable, even. It's another thing to pretend nothing ever happened in the first place. Especially if you're on a journey of "self-reflection," as you say.'

Maybe she had a point. It was rare to get this more serious, almost motherly side of her. She seemed to reserve it for when she really wanted him to listen.

Or at least, that was his impression.

He made no response, however, and just let her words sink in.

They finally made it out of the tower, but rather than heading straight for the Tower of Night to find Gina, Roman was made to stop and wonder what was going on in the central courtyard, instead. A crowd had gathered.

Voreese flew ahead of him and consulted the nearest reaper. 'Has something happened?' she asked.

‘Ill news from Vantalay,’ said the other reaper, whose name Roman could not recall. ‘Apparently, after getting into a disagreement with the other heads, Lord Elroy has disappeared.’

## Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Eight: ‘Shadow of the Dragon...’

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The battle with Kallmakk went on for days and carried all of them across the vast expanses of the Ardoran continent. Several times, he thought they might’ve left some of the Vanguardians behind entirely, but most of them eventually caught back up and continued the fight.

In the beginning, he didn’t even know the feldeath’s name, but Morgunov eventually ended up explaining quite a bit, during the fleeting moments of downtime that they managed to acquire for themselves in the midst of all the chaos.

Gohvis-Aeha wished he hadn’t been saddled with this mission. Of all the places to be deployed, this had to have been the shittiest one, right? He was virtually certain. If he had more opportunity to meditate and convene with the others, then he would’ve confirmed it. And complained to them, no doubt.

As it was, though, he could only maintain a weak node within the network--and even that ended up getting destroyed repeatedly and needing to be rebuilt each time the fight demanded too much of his concentration."

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As it was, though, he could only maintain a weak node within the network--and even that ended up getting destroyed repeatedly and needing to be rebuilt each time the fight demanded too much of his concentration."

"3596

More than once, he found himself questioning this mission in its entirety. The Prime wanted to assist everyone and reserve the value judgments for later, once Blacksong was successfully averted, but the longer that Gohvis-Aeha spent out here, so detached from the network, the more he wondered if it might not be better to turn on one of these annoying jackasses first. Or both of them, even. It seemed apparent enough that they deserved it.

Turning on Germal would be the most problematic, though. The Prime had devoted an enormous amount of time and effort to studying mutant physiology, and Germal had been one of the most useful subjects to that end.

In fact, it was not an exaggeration to say that the network itself may never have come to fruition without studying the so-called Liar of Lyste.

The split personality that existed within Germal's mind had been the basis for the network's creation. From that starting idea, the Prime learned to divide his own consciousness by aspects of personality and thereby create free-thinking, self-governing psychic projections.

It had taken many years, of course. As far as the Prime could discern, this technique was truly groundbreaking. The great difficulty of it had been striking the right balance. The personality aspects were important for the generation of new, independent thought, but at the same time, if that independence was too strong, then the more deeply held values within the Prime's psyche would be at risk of changing within the projections.

Which would cause a clash of more than mere personalities.

That was where the network came in--and why it was so important. The desire to maintain the network had been baked into each projection at the most basic level. They yearned to stay connected--and ached terribly when forced to sever the link, even briefly.

It certainly didn't make this fight any easier, either. Dealing with such a distracting feeling in the midst of keeping himself and everyone else alive at the same time--it was like trying to juggle flaming torches while starving to death.

He was not having a good time.

And of course, Morgunov and Germal refused to work together, even against the feldeath. They were constantly taking pot shots at one another, with Morgunov's being especially deadly to deal with.

The Mad Demon didn't often use his power this way. His mastery over integration, combined with pan-rozum, allowed him to create quite complex machinery out of almost anything. Not as complex as the "Roberts," as he was apparently calling them, but still."

"3597

It was a testament to how utterly infuriated Morgunov must have been, the fact that he was resorting to his power like this for attacks. Typically, the Mad Demon only liked to use his inventions in combat. As a matter of pride, the Prime had been told.

Thankfully, Gohvis-Aeha had something of a counter for that particular ability. His hyper-refined somatosensory system. The mechanoreceptors and thermoreceptors of his body may have merely been psychic imitations of the Prime's, but thanks to the passive telepathic link that he could establish with every living body in the immediate area, they might as well have been real. And more attuned to the environment than ever. Only the Prime himself would have superior senses, and only when not maintaining so many projections on the network.

The Mad Demon's power gave off slight environmental cues via heat and vibrations when activating on a given location. At an elemental level, the chemical reactions that the man was provoking may have been impossible by conventional standards, but they were reactions, nonetheless. And Gohvis-Aeha could sense them.

He could, therefore, also intercept them before they skewered Germal through the spine or skull; or captured him in an electrocuting cage; or torched him with roaring flamethrowers; or riddled him with bullet holes

from primitive firearms.

It was like trying to swat a neverending swarm of flies. If those flies had learned to harness human weaponry.

And as the days drew out, the tactics naturally became more complex, as well. Morgunov increasingly sought to create distractions--or use distractions being provided by the damn feldeath--in order to land a much more devastating blow on Germal.

Truthfully, Gohvis-Aeha did not know if he could keep this up. The only saving grace here seemed to be that the Liar was a bit more evasive and durable than even the Prime had realized. Though, of course, Koh did quite a lot of heavy lifting there, too.

The Maneater of Melmoore was performing well, but that was no surprise. If anything, it seemed to him that Koh might've actually been holding back, somewhat. It made little sense, given everything he'd come to know of the very strange circumstances surrounding this battle, but when compared to some of the Prime's sparring sessions with Koh in the past, Gohvis-Aeha could not dismiss a certain sense of confusion.

But there was hardly time to dwell on it. And there was already plenty of confusion circulating from other sources during all this madness."  
"3598

Kallmakk was truly a resilient bastard. Most attacks simply phased through or bounced off of it. After days of continuous combat, it was becoming quite clear that their only real hope of putting the thing down for good was to coordinate their attacks.

Which everyone refused to do, of course.

Save for him, at least. They would work together with him but not each other.

So that had become his task here. Finding the openings in the fight and using it to quickly discuss strategy with both sides. One time, he nearly tricked them into working together, but Morgunov saw through it at the last moment and used the opportunity to attack Germal, instead.

And in retrospect, Gohvis-Aeha supposed he should have been

expecting as much. Morgunov, more than anyone else here, probably wanted Kallmakk to survive as long as possible. The madman had led them to it, after all. Trying to acquire the Mad Demon's assistance was probably a fool's errand, at least until the Vanguardian crowd was thinned a bit.

But when he decided to devote more of the openings to discussions with the Vanguardians, they proved just as stubborn, if not even more so. While they might have been more receptive to the idea of working together in order to eliminate the feldeath, they were not at all on board with his proposal to have some of them fall back. Even when he said he would help them fake their deaths in order to fool both the feldeath and Morgunov, they refused.

They were too eager. They saw an opportunity here to finally slay an emperor of Abolish and definitively shift the balance of power across the entire world in their favor.

These men.

They didn't care if they died in the process. Even their reapers.

He couldn't fault them for their bravery, at least.

But how long could this stalemate continue? Realistically, it could actually go on for many, many more days. Potentially even weeks. Everyone here was determined and immortal. The reapers could just keep pushing their servants on and on, not caring about the future consequences.

But those consequences could not be put off forever. The Prime had only experienced this a few times over the course of his long life: these sorts of fights that truly tested a servant's ability to endure.

Only a few times, yes, but every one of them had made for quite the lasting memory."

"3599

There'd been one particular battle, from the first so-called "Continental War" some hundred years prior, when the Prime's abilities had been tested like never before. Over two months of continuous combat. And during that time, he saw countless servants being pushed to their limit

by their reapers and beyond.

Until they broke.

It had been roughly the same story as here, actually, though it had instead been Dozer that the Vanguardians were feverishly trying to corner and kill. They'd nearly managed it, too, truth be told, but in the end, Father escaped.

And their many noble sacrifices had been for naught.

Though, it did bring the war to a rather swift conclusion. Father wisely decided to lay low while he recovered from that grueling ordeal, and peace broke out in the meantime.

By comparison, these Vanguardians here were already not looking very good after only a few days of combat. But perhaps that was an unfair assessment, considering they had been Morgunov's prisoners for weeks beforehand, and there was no telling what sort of horrific treatment the madman had been putting them through.

Regardless, this couldn't go on for much longer. Unless they somehow found replacements, Morgunov would outlast them. Maybe even without the feldeath's help.

In that respect, Gohvis-Aeha could most certainly be of assistance. While his access to the network was tenuous and frequently getting interrupted, he did have a modest grasp of what was going on with some of the other warfronts.

Meaning he could try to steer this battle over to one of those.

But in service of which side?

Did he really want to assist the Vanguardians? The Prime had deployed him here in order to ensure Morgunov's survival, though not out of any sense of duty or affection. The Prime wanted something from him and didn't intend to let him die until he got it.

And yet, Gohvis-Aeha was also getting a faint impression that the others had already given Morgunov up for dead. That this was a lost cause. That the Mad Demon might as well be left to fend for himself at this point.

But his connection to the network wasn't strong enough to be sure of that. If only he could find an opening to meditate for a few minutes.

Yeah. This was definitely the shittiest job alright.

But as the days drew out, he began to think that perhaps this giant mess did have one, singular upside. Something that took a while to truly appreciate.

If he didn't have time to convene with the others or even consult the Prime, then that really only left one thing to do, didn't it?

He had to make the decision himself.

He had to be... independent.

What an absolutely wondrous realization."  
"3600

It was a strange position to be in, he knew. If he did nothing here, then he had a rather strong feeling that, eventually, Morgunov would either escape or even turn the tables on the Vanguardians here. And judging by the man's aura, by what a furious inferno it was, the latter possibility was seeming quite likely indeed.

Did Morgunov even wish to escape? Or was killing Germal his foremost priority now?

Gohvis-Aeha couldn't allow that to happen, either.

Additionally, there were the vast distances to take into consideration. This battle here, while theoretically part of the Second Continental War, was not actually taking place on the Eloan continent like all the others. So if he meant to drag this battle over to one of those, it would mean crossing one of the oceans first--while the feldeath continued to give chase, no less.

Would that even be possible?

Well, yes, of course it would. An ocean wouldn't stop Kallmakk, nor Morgunov, nor Koh, nor Germal... but Iceheart and the rest of the Vanguardians?

Some of them would probably get left behind. Which would gradually weaken them, further strengthening Morgunov's position and

diminishing Germal's. There were also aerial dogfights still taking place over the Luthic. That probably wouldn't be an issue, but there were a few pilots in the world who could make it one.

All in all, not ideal.

There were two other options, though.

Instead of bringing this fight to one of the other warfronts, he could bring it to the Prime. That would certainly mix things up. The Prime would probably be quite displeased with him, but at the moment, he was quite displeased with the Prime, too, so maybe that would only be fair.

For some reason, however, he found himself leaning away from that option. Why? There was scarcely enough opportunity to think all these things through, let alone dwell on his feelings about them. But it did bother him a bit. He wanted to return to the network, didn't he? To reestablish the strongest connection possible? Going to the Prime was the easiest way to do that. Probably the smartest, too.

And yet he was reluctant. He wanted to find some other way. Miserable as he was, he didn't want this to...

Ugh.

So what did that leave?

The last option. And perhaps worst. Or best, accounting for distance.

He could bring the battle to Father."

"3601

Father had told the Prime in no uncertain terms that he did not wish to get involved in this war, so Gohvis-Aeha had no doubt that Father would be supremely pissed off about being pulled into it.

Which could be a problem. For both himself and for the Prime.

But would Father even realize that this was his doing? He couldn't be blamed if it just seemed like a coincidence. In fact, if anyone was going to receive Father's blame here, it would almost certainly be Morgunov.

And better still, Father was perhaps the only one in the world who could talk any amount of sense into Morgunov, thereby saving Germal's life.

Admittedly, that might've been a bit overly optimistic, but in Gohvis-Aeha's opinion, no other path forward afforded even the slightest chance of such an outcome.

So that was the decision made.

The problem then became how he would actually make it happen. In actual practice, the notion that he could "steer" this battlefield somewhere was perhaps more ambitious than he'd realized.

Morgunov was the focal point. The Vanguardians were chasing him. And Kallmakk was constantly disrupting that, creating openings for the Mad Demon.

So the task here was... what, then? To force Morgunov in a certain direction?

Impossible.

The man could not be led by force. And trying to do so would likely make Morgunov think that he'd turned on him, which might prompt even more erratic behavior from the madman.

But again, this chase was a curious thing. Morgunov may have been leading it, but was he truly trying to escape?

Gohvis-Aeha could make a wager. Morgunov wanted Germal dead, yes? So carrying Germal away might prompt Morgunov to change up and give chase, instead. And Germal was much more manageable as a kidnappee than Morgunov.

So that was what he did.

He waited for another opening, which Kallmakk soon provided.

A great pillar of black energy dug a volcanic trench into the ground, leaving a chain of explosions, smoke, and molten earth in its wake as it ripped all the way into the horizon. Everyone on the field had to disperse in order to dodge it, with several not succeeding.

Gohis-Aeha knew he had to be precise with his movements here. The distraction was a bit too good, honestly. He might've been able to grab



Germal here and get away entirely without Morgunov even noticing.

Which was a thought. Hmm. Would that be the better option?

Agh. Maybe. He could mull it over later. Better to stick with the plan, for now.

He blitzed across the sundered field and scooped up the Liar of Lyste like a sack of potatoes. Then he made sure to run by Morgunov, giving him a nice view of the prize."

"3602

It worked like a charm. Soon, Morgunov was the one giving chase while Gohvis-Aeha led the way.

As a result, a new lull in the fighting arrived as the Vanguardians struggled to keep pace while also fending off Kallmakk's attacks from the rear. Rarely did those same attacks reach all the way up to Gohvis-Aeha's position.

The main worry was simply paying enough attention to what Morgunov and his robots were up to. Perhaps the madman was hesitant to turn on him fully and threaten their neutral attitudes toward one another for the remainder of this battle, but he doubted that hesitation would last forever. Morgunov was not renowned for his patience or self-control.

The land at his feet became a blur as he sped across the wilderness. He no longer even felt like he was making contact with the ground while he ran. He might as well have been sailing over water.

He considered slowing down, in case Morgunov needed it, but that didn't appear to be the case. How was he doing that? Probably yet another of his hidden inventions. Koh certainly wasn't having trouble, though Gohvis-Aeha couldn't tell if the wolf was chasing after him now or still Morgunov.

At length, Germal's telepathic voice arrived. 'Master,' he said. 'Please, release me. You need not go to such lengths in order to protect me from the Demon. I came to this fight prepared.'

'Hmph, if only it were that simple,' answered Gohvis-Aeha.

'Your interference in our battle makes little sense, Master. Why do you

seek to protect him? I have never known you to have any affection for him or his cronies. I thought your disgust with Vanderberk stemmed as much from the Demon as from the Weasel himself.'

He might have sighed if he wasn't already utilizing the full capacity of his psychically projected lungs. 'This is what you get for making a move without first informing me. If this has been your plan of many years, then you should have consulted me. We probably could have come to some sort of agreement and avoided this whole mess.'

'...Truly?'

'Truly. But now my hand is forced, and I must move to protect my own interests before they are destroyed. There is much work that would be lost, if I let you kill him. Not that I believe you would have managed to do so, mind you.'

"3603

'What work is so important that it requires the Demon be kept alive?' asked Germal. 'That man is an existential threat to our kind, Master.'

Gohvis-Aeha cocked an eyebrow at that but said nothing. There was no reason to answer Germal's question, especially after getting a glimpse of just how much the Liar had been hiding from him this whole time.

Germal kept going. 'If you do not kill him now, then you will have to do so sooner or later. It is inevitable, Master. And it will only become more difficult the longer we wait, as he continues to develop new technological menaces. You have seen what his "Roberts" are capable of firsthand, yes? Imagine how much more trouble they will become in even just twenty years, if he continues to refine them.'

The draconic projection wanted to laugh. 'What makes you think he is a threat to our kind?'

'I don't think--'

He felt the Liar twist and flail in his grip. If he didn't know better, he might've thought the man was trying to wriggle free.

There was no risk of that, though, and Germal would have known that.

No, this was something else.

The personalities were fighting again.

The Prime had seen this many times, though not in recent years. It had been particularly prevalent at the beginning of Germal's apprenticeship, to the point where the Prime had labored daily with the boy for months in order to help him get his mind under control.

When the thrashing stopped, psychic laughter arrived. 'Give up, you abominable fool! It's my win! The Mad Demon is forever against you now! Forever on OUR side!' And the laughter continued.

What in the world? That voice wasn't talking to him, Gohvis-Aeha felt. Both personalities within Germal revered the Prime and would never speak to him in such a manner.

He might've liked to hear what the other personality had to say in response, but this one seemed to be in full control, at the moment, so there was no hope of that.

'Ah! Master! Apologies! Please don't mind my gloating.' A few chortles still persisted, however.

'You seem quite pleased with yourself.'

'Oh, if only you knew, Master. How I wish I could explain everything in its entirety! But I lack the words. And the cohesion. And the time. Oh, the time. The damn time! It's never enough, Master! Never!'"

"3604

'I understand,' said Gohvis-Aeha. He didn't, really. But with the Prime having experienced this so many times before, he knew that it was better to keep this one talking, rather than trying to relate or sympathize or pose questions that diverted the train of thought. These days, this personality seemed to be the less dominant one. It only popped up when it was feeling quite strongly about something.

'Of course you do, Master! I've missed you! Thank you for everything!'

'You're very welcome, Jonah. It is good to hear from you again.'

More laughter. 'I've done it, Master! I beat him! The abomination! I

finally got one over on him! He didn't see it coming until it was too late! Kehehe!

Interesting. He still didn't quite understand, but inquiring further wasn't the right strategy. 'That's good to hear. I'm proud of you, lad.'

And there was yet more laughter, lasting even longer this time.

How strange. By Gohvis-Aeha's estimation, that laughter carried with it a sense of genuine relief, not malicious delight as he had first thought.

But perhaps that was reasonable. The Prime had never known Jonah to be malicious in any way, other than towards Germal. Or himself. That was one of the most confusing things about this personality. It seemed to hate both its counterpart and itself, and yet it also seemed to love life as a whole. It had often expressed a desire to explore and see the world.

And it was gentle as a lamb, as well, which may have contributed to why the other personality had become so dominant by comparison.

Gohvis-Aeha wished he could consult the Prime's memories more deeply and check how long it had been since he'd last spoken to Jonah. He had a feeling that it had been many years, though he wasn't at all certain.

'It's not hopeless, after all, Master! They haven't won yet!'

The temptation to ask for clarification was truly strong now, but he resisted. 'Of course they haven't. I told you that long ago, did I not?'

'You did! Yes, you did! Truthfully, I don't think I quite believed! I'm sorry, Master! I believe you now!'

'I'm glad to hear that.'

'Ah... what a great day. Mm. Master. I can feel myself fading. I'm sorry I can't be more help. Don't be fooled by his lies. He's not as confused, anymore. He doesn't follow you. He'll--'

The thrashing returned, informing him that Germal was taking control again."

"3605

Gohvis-Aeha took the opportunity to reassess the state of the chase while he waited for Germal to regain his composure.

One of Morgunov's Roberts was getting closer, he noticed. The Vanguardians were keeping up fairly well, and Kallmakk, all the way at the rear, seemed to have calmed, somewhat, if only to focus on the chase, but there was definitely something brewing back there, too. He could sense a worrying buildup of ardor. If he didn't pay attention, that could turn into a very big problem.

Bah. He was going to be very annoyed if Kallmakk ended up killing Morgunov in the middle of this chase, while he was more focused on protecting Germal. Surely, the Mad Demon would not be that sloppy.

Egh...

'Master,' came Germal's voice. 'What did Jonah say to you?'

'Doesn't matter. Answer my question. Why do you think Morgunov is a threat to mutants? He has never expressed any desire to harm us. Only study us. And even that has been rather fleeting, compared to his other interests.'

'That is merely the way his mind works, Master. You know this as well as I. His interest in a given subject ebbs and flows. Make no mistake. He WILL come back around to us. And when he does, it will not be for some relaxed academic exchange with you. He will seek to enthrall as many of our kind as possible for his experiments. To make our power his own. And merge it with his abominable machines.'

He might've argued the point, but one of those same abominable machines was now getting even closer to his position.

Too close.

He sent a quick telekinetic wave in its direction, just trying to knock it off course and slow it down.

But it dodged his attack and continued to inch closer.

Annoying.

He decided to pick up the pace, instead. Just a bit.

Germal kept on talking in the meantime. 'I've read his mind, Master. It was difficult, but I was able to discern some of his plans. One of them

is to complete work on something called an Omnivore Drive, which will allow his machines to grow more powerful by consuming the flesh of those he feeds to them.'

Well, that certainly sounded believable. Morgunov would absolutely work on a project like that.

Gohvis-Aeha did have a counterargument, though. 'Do you have any idea how many failed experiments that man has conducted since I've known him?'"

"3606

'What difference should that make?' said Germal. 'If anything, that should worry you even more, because it's a testament to just how persistent he is.'

He supposed the Liar had a point. Hmm. What would the Prime say here?

Egh, what difference did it make? The mission was clear enough. There was no utility in debate. Perhaps he should say as much. And remind Germal how much of a nuisance he was.

But no. Gohvis-Aeha decided to remain silent. Heh. Yeah. That was probably what the Prime would've done, anyway. Ignore useless conversations.

Germal kept pushing, however. 'Please, Master. You must see the danger. He will come to view us as useful materials for his Omnivore Drive--and other experiments, I am sure. Our ability to manifest new powers is unlike any of the others. And if that project succeeds, then those machines will become an existential threat to not just us but to all mankind.'

'Aha.' He could not stay quiet at that. 'So it is a matter of protecting mankind now, is it? How terribly noble of you.'

'I know you care for them, Master. Do not pretend otherwise. That may have its uses when talking to your contemporaries, especially within Abolish, but there is no need for that with me. That should be obvious by now, no?'

Hmph. Obvious. When it came to Germal, nothing was ever obvious.

But the man was no doubt referring to the founding of the Freeman Fellowship. Germal had done that at great personal cost to his reputation among his peers--to the point, even, that he had begun attempting to hide his own involvement in order to prevent his credibility from continuing to deteriorate.

But there was a game there. Gohvis-Aeha had no doubt of that. It was clear enough that Germal had been planning Morgunov's assassination for a very long time now. And while the Fellowship may not have played an obvious role in this attempt here, there were any number of ways that Germal might have been using it behind the scenes--or for some other obnoxious purpose, perhaps.

After all, if Morgunov was deemed an existential threat to humanity, then surely Father should also be considered one, no?

Logically, that followed.

But then again, Father and the Fellowship had a curious relationship. On more than one occasion, the Prime had seen him showing... what seemed to be affection toward them. And Germal, too."

"3607

Which was part of the reason why he was hoping now that Father might be able to broker a peace with Morgunov for the Liar's life.

But it was always impossible to tell what Father was truly thinking. Perhaps he merely thought them useful and wanted them to think that he had a soft spot for them. In fact, that was most likely the case.

Here and now, however, during this tentative downtime in the battle, Gohvis-Aeha was thinking that there was little point in trying to argue with Germal about any of this. Boy, did he want to, though.

No, he should focus on gathering as much information for the Prime as he could for when they eventually reconvened. The Prime could be the one to pass judgment on Germal. Or Father, perhaps.

Ah.

Iceheart seemed to be getting antsy. No doubt, being closest to the raging feldeath in this chase made for a rather uncomfortable position.

Gohvis-Aeha almost felt sympathy for the man, especially because the marshal still had subordinates that he was trying to keep safe.

With his predictive atmospheric senses, Gohvis-Aeha could all but see the unfolding mayhem back there. A whirlwind of ice, tossing Vanguardians haphazardly out of Kallmakk's path--including Iceheart himself, who still got clipped by a dark beam and lost a leg, only to replace it with an icy one a moment later.

Hmph.

Foolish Vanguardians. Throwing their lives away. Too young for this fight, most of them. He couldn't even recall any of their names. Maybe he could've, if he accessed the network, but that was still too dangerous to attempt. He needed every ounce of situational awareness, right now.

One of them caught a pitch black tendril across the torso and went flying. Unfortunate timing. Iceheart was too busy avoiding another three beams at once. That one who got sent flying was doomed. He could sense another tendril materializing from Kallmakk's back. It was almost certainly going to morph into a mouth and devour that poor bastard before he even touched the ground again.

Gohvis-Aeha's right eye shimmered, then winked.

The black tendril that he knew would appear did so, but it exploded apart in midair before it could reach the hapless Vanguardian. Instead of getting eaten, the battered man hit the ground rolling and quickly fell behind in the chase, disappearing from Gohvis-Aeha's sight.

Perhaps he was the foolish one. Why had he done that? The Prime wouldn't have bothered. The Vanguardians were idiots for thinking they could rely on him at all. They deserved to reap the consequences of their idiocy, didn't they?

Ugh."  
"3608

These were not things that he had the luxury of dwelling on, right now. He had to put them out of his mind. To stay focused on the task at hand.



Germal wasn't making it any easier, though. 'I sensed that, Master. You saved that man just now, didn't you? Even as you protest, you continue to prove my point. You care for this world and its inhabitants deeply.'

What an irritating conversation. He wished one of those Roberts would get close enough to provide a meaningful distraction again.

Germal just kept going. 'I've always been able to sense your compassion, Master. You try to keep it buried. I know not why. But it has been there for as long as I have known you. In fact, I believe it is the very reason why you granted me the honor of getting to know you in the first place. And yet... here and now... I sense it more strongly in you than ever before. You are not trying nearly as hard to hide it, anymore. How curious...'

Gohvis-Aeha said nothing. While it was true that the Prime had created this powerful psychic cloning technique by studying Germal's multiple personality disorder, it had also never really been clear how much Germal himself had been able to discern about what the Prime had been doing. And naturally, the Prime had never bothered to explain this technique to anyone.

'Master, have you managed to evolve your projections still further?'

Well, he definitely wasn't going to answer that. The Prime would be furious.

Germal kept nattering as the chase drew out, and Gohvis-Aeha continued to ignore him. Even as the landscape began to change and the Giants of Jaskadan, as the trees were commonly known, came into view, Germal still did not let up. Only the subject matter shifted, as the Liar started questioning where they were going and why.

Thankfully, it didn't take much longer after that in order to finally reach Father's encampment. The massive swaths of deforested land made it rather obvious that they were quite close.

Now it was just a matter of getting to Father and warning him before Kallmakk began running amok through his mobile fortresses. The man was not going to be pleased about that, but there was no helping it.

Ah. There. He sensed Father's location and went straight for it like a lightning bolt, zigzagging through various troops on standby and probably knocking a few of them up into the air by accident as he passed, thanks to the wind tunnel being left in his wake.

Oh well. They were servants. They'd be fine."

"3609

Thankfully, Father was not in his quarters in the heart of the Obsidian Shell. It would have been momentarily tedious to breach the fortress' walls and reach him there with Germal in tow, and time was quite precious, right now.

Instead, he found Father at the center of a large gathering. Soldiers sat in large groups, feasting at long, hulking tables filled with tall, blazing braziers and ample food and drink. The raucous laughter in the air began to die out as many familiar faces noticed his presence.

If he hadn't known Father as well as he did, Gohvis-Aeha might have thought they were celebrating some great victory, but this was actually quite a regular sight. Father loved his banquets. He was always finding excuses to treat himself and his men to lavish, hearty meals whenever possible. Claimed it was good for both morale and recruitment--which was probably true.

The Prime found it to be a rather obnoxious and wasteful habit, but Father always countered by arguing what was the point in conquering the world if one didn't indulge in the excesses that said world could provide?

When Gohvis-Aeha finally laid eyes on Father, the man was already looking back at him and standing up from a chair that was so ornate and golden that it might as well have been a throne.

Then the ambient laughter truly died out as all eyes turned to Father, who sighed.

"What mess have you brought me?" said the old emperor.

First things first. He had to shift blame. "Morgunov picked a fight with a feldeath."

Fortunately, Father had no time to get mad at him, which he must have realized, because he immediately shouted to his men. "Battle stations! Defend the camp!"

And everyone began scrambling. Father's surrounding officers

scattered to go organize and lead their individual sects.

Gohvis-Aeha moved out of the way as he sensed Morgunov try to blitz him from behind. He circled around behind Father, hoping that the Mad Demon would at least be distracted for a few more moments by a desire to exchange words with his fellow emperor.

A hope which proved true.

“Dozy! It’s been too long! How are you, ya old fossil?!”

“Worse for seeing your face.”

“Aww! Don’t be like that! Your boy here and I brought you a present! Ever heard of Kallmakk the Nightspinner?!”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Wait, really? That kinda ruins the surprise, man. Couldn’t you have at least pretended to--”

A dark beam ripped through the encampment, leaving behind a string of black-and-purple explosions that sent soldiers and debris into the air.”

"3610 -- CCXCIX.

The two emperors remained still as they observed the mayhem for a few more moments.

“You are going to owe me after this,” said Father.

“Sure, sure,” said Morgunov. “What do you want? Help with that big rocket ship of yours?”

“Touch that, and I’ll kill you. Bool, included.”

“Oh, c’mon!” said Morgunov, laughing. “I could make all sorts of improvements to it! And I won’t prank you this time! I swear!”

“I have a different project in mind for you.”

“Oh?! Color me intrigued! Of course, that won’t mean jack if Kallmakk beats your old ass like a paddle ball!”

"Hmph. From the sound of it, that is what he has been doing to you."

"Ehehe! Maybe just a bit! But I'm still here, aren't I? And frankly, I'm looking forward to seeing you get clobbered a few times!"

"The feeling is mutual. Now, let's go."

## Chapter Two-Hundred Ninety-Nine: 'The Hunter's sight...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Diego Redwater didn't think he'd ever felt this bad for enemy combatants before. This battle had been a foregone conclusion for quite a while now. Over the past few weeks, every single one of the Vantalayan Military Police's assaults had been rebuffed, and now, things were going ever worse for them. Each new assault was not only failing but also turning into a counterattack by the Ridgemark Private Military Police, usually extending quite deep into the enemy line and ripping them to shreds.

It was a wonder they hadn't given up already. A wonder, but also sadly understandable.

The problem seemed to be that the VMP kept getting reinforcements from the larger VAF, the Vantalayan Armed Forces, as well as from Abolish. And those reinforcements were always substantial to prolong the fighting but never enough to actually make a difference. Every new platoon of soldiers seemed to make the VMP think that, surely this time, they could turn the tide. That they still had hope of taking over Ridgemark.

That full retreat wasn't inevitable.

But all Rainlords knew it. With as much power as they had on their side now, victory for the enemy was practically impossible.

To outsiders, perhaps that would've sounded cocky. Certainly, the Rainlords had suffered their share of defeats not so long ago, but those had occurred while they were divided--and with almost no allies, to boot.

Here and now, the VMP was facing the almost fully united Rainlord forces, as well as the quite shockingly powerful RPMP. Not to mention, Leo the Bull Leech.

And with Vanderberk now out of the picture, morale on this side of the battlefield was at an all-time high. More than once, Diego had heard loose talk that even if one of the emperors suddenly showed up to support the enemy, victory was still all but assured.

Maybe that was an exaggeration, but... truthfully, Diego felt it might actually be true, too."

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"3611

By now, he'd personally witnessed the strength of all three of the RPMP's most esteemed warriors. And they were nothing to sneeze at. He could see why both the Vanguard and Abolish had chosen to

respect the RPMP's authority during their stay in Ridgemark.

Linus Maximillian, Kristof Raynor, and Daro Bright. The Linebreaker, the Jailer, and the Black Artisan, respectively.

Thus far, Diego had fought alongside Linus the most. He'd ended up practically glued to the man during the assault on Logden Prison, so he'd been able to witness Linus manhandling the likes of Raga Marda, Mikas Cross, and a powerful prison guard named Longvin--and all simultaneously, at some points.

Raynor, of course, had distinguished himself on multiple occasions, as well. When they were transporting those poor Miroan villagers over to Ridgemark, Raynor showed up and aided the Rainlords against Raga Marda and Jan Cross. And out here, on this battlefield, Raynor had been holding off the VMP since the very beginning of the siege--almost single-handedly, no less.

Because the third, Daro Bright, was exactly what his moniker, the Black Artisan, implied: an integrator who primarily took on the role of support.

But what incredible support it was.

Diego had gotten more than a few glimpses of the man's work by now--and even the opportunity to wield some of his custom-made weaponry and tools. Perhaps the most impressive was something that the RPMP troops were calling a ramata, or roughly "spell thrower" in Valgan.

In short, it was a device capable of mimicking servant powers.

True, they were quite limited in their capabilities, such as with materialization, where it could only create small, predetermined objects which did not last terribly long before disintegrating--but still.

It was hard not to be in utter amazement.

The ramata was also quite small and portable, not much larger than a standard sidearm but still smaller than a rifle. From what Diego had seen, it also required quite a bit of maintenance--and some sort of crystal as its fuel source. He had a feeling that was the real trick of it. Whatever those crystals were composed of, it couldn't be any normal thing, he felt.

He'd asked some of the reapers and other servants about it, but thus

far, he hadn't been able to learn anything.

Other than the fact, perhaps, that some of the reapers were genuinely unsettled by its existence."

"3612

He didn't necessarily blame them, either. Over the years, he'd heard it mentioned a few times: the idea that reapers might one day be rendered obsolete by the advancement of technology. Clearly, that day was still quite far away, assuming it ever arrived at all, but the ramata did look like a rather significant step in that direction.

It was certainly an interesting notion, though. He remembered discussing it with Yangéra before, but unlike most other reapers, she actually seemed somewhat receptive to the possibility.

'Honestly, it might even be for the best,' she'd told him. 'Us reapers can be real troublemakers, even when we mean well. And especially when we don't. But if we were ever cast aside by the most powerful figures on the planet, then maybe we would have less ability to meddle in the affairs of the living world. If nothing else, it would definitely give fewer reapers an excuse to neglect the job of reaping souls.'

He didn't know if he believed all that, but maybe she had a point.

Either way, even if the ramata became advanced enough to perfectly replicate all servant abilities with little-to-no resource cost, Diego still doubted that any technology would ever be able to replace the reaper's ability to regrow servants from scratch. That seemed flatly impossible, no matter how many years passed.

The presence of the ramata also added one more wrinkle to this battle, however. Under no circumstances could they allow one of them to fall into the enemy's hands. The Artisan himself had made that abundantly clear. He did not want just any old soldier to be carrying one. He'd only distributed them to those of sufficient rank, and he'd even gone out of his way to discuss the matter with the Rainlords, petitioning them for their aid in ensuring that no ramatas survived the battle outside of the RPMP's custody.

For their help, he'd offered the Rainlords various means of payment: two ramatas to keep as their own, cold hard cash, and the chance to



request a custom creation from him at some point in the future, once the war was over.

It was a hell of a deal, all things considered. When he'd heard the terms, Diego could hardly believe the man was being so generous, but then he'd heard that the Lord Santos Zabat had served as their primary negotiator, and then Diego was no longer surprised."

"3613

It was a hell of a thing, having everyone back like this. The Redwaters, in particular.

For months and months, he'd been the sole member of House Redwater among a sea of Rainlords. And for a while there, it had felt like that might continue to be the case for many months more. Years, even.

He'd never been terribly worried that they would be retrieved. For some reason, that had always felt like an inevitability to him. Perhaps that stemmed from his faith in the other Houses to see it done. He'd known quite early on that they would not rest until everyone was recovered.

But he had been worried about being the lone representative of the Redwaters. The only one able to speak and act for them.

Truth be told, he'd always felt like something of a black sheep within the family. Growing up, it seemed to him that he'd always been singled out for one reason or another. In the very beginning, it had probably been quite superficial: the other kids poking fun at him for his red hair, for instance. Very few Rainlords had that hair color, and he remembered it being a frequent topic of conversation.

But over time, it had grown beyond that. Because he adapted. Leaned into all of the attention. Embraced it, turned it around on people, made fun of them, and learned the difference between a gentle ribbing and genuine humiliation.

That had been very valuable when it came to making friends--and also when it came to getting out of trouble. Rainlord families may have been stricter than most, but it still never hurt, being able to schmooze conversations a bit with the grown ups. He couldn't recall how many

times he'd been able to soften what would've otherwise been a brutal punishment for him and the other kids.

Now, he realized that he'd taken so much strength and vigor from the presence of his family. Just being around them had energized him. Made him feel whole.

So he had not been prepared when they all disappeared. When the weight and long history of House Redwater fell upon his shoulders, alone.

He tried to never let it show, of course. The insecurity. At least, not really. Joking about it was easy enough. And helpful for the deception, perhaps. And thankfully, there'd been plenty of opportunities to focus on whatever craziness was unfolding around them instead of his own fears and concerns.

But now that they were back, he felt a deeper, longer-lasting sense of relief than he thought humanly possible.

Out of all the Rainlords who'd been searching these many months for their lost kin, Diego Redwater didn't think any of them could've possibly been more contented right now than him. Even in the midst of battle, he could still feel it there."

"3614

That was not to say that everything was going perfectly, however. Far from it. New worries were arising every day, it seemed.

Such as the whereabouts of the Lord Zeff Elroy.

His disappearance had disturbed everyone, especially Grandma. And it had not escaped anyone's notice that this disappearance had come only after Zeff told them all about a sudden offer from the Monster of the East.

An offer to leave this battlefield behind and enter into Gohvis' protection, where Zeff would be able to meet up with his lost daughter, Emiliana.

That had certainly been a surprise. And discussing their response to that offer had been their first real act as a reunited council of Rainlord heads.

Unlike the Golden Council of the Sandlords, the Rainlords had no formal title for their gathering, because the government of the Wetlands was not entirely run by the Rainlords. It mostly was, maybe about seventy percent, but there had still been plenty of non-Rainlord leaders and officials going around.

If more of the members had been present for the meeting, the official government name for it would've been the Congress of Western Sair-- or the Wetlands Congress, as some called it.

Which led Diego down a whole other rabbit hole of worry, of course, about the current state of Sair. Of their subjects, who'd been forced to endure hell at the hands of Abolish.

He tried not to dwell on that too much, right now. The time for that would come.

Naturally, the decision regarding Gohvis' offer had been one of rejection. A few of the reapers had expressed an interest in accepting, as did Zeff, but even they seemed hesitant about it. In the end, the vote to decline was not merely a majority but fully unanimous.

Which was a little surprising, actually. A couple of the reapers, most notably Mevox, were infamous for being contrarians and voting against whatever the majority sentiment was.

Perhaps even Mevox was not in the mood to be playing around when matters were this severe.

So Zeff's disappearance was doubly confusing. One would've thought that if he wanted to see his daughter that badly, then he would have cast his vote in favor of acceptance.

'I don't know,' said Yangera when they'd discussed it privately. 'It actually makes a strange sort of sense to me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Zeff was in an impossible position. Torn between his two great responsibilities. That of a leader and that of a father. Perhaps voting the way he did was him trying to do right by us, and him disappearing was him trying to do right by his daughter.'"

"3615

‘But why not tell anyone, then?’ said Diego. ‘Did he think we wouldn’t understand? It’s his daughter.’

‘Maybe. Or maybe he was worried that some of us would try to go with him.’

‘Hmm. And the Monster of the East just accepted that? The offer was for all of us to leave, not Zeff by himself.’

‘You’re right. That does seem strange. There could be more to it.’

Indeed, that seemed likely. The timing couldn’t have been more peculiar. While it might’ve made sense on the surface that the Lord Elroy would’ve done anything in order to reunite with his lost daughter, Diego hadn’t forgotten the other news that Zeff had shared with them before.

About Field Marshal Graves putting Zeff in contact with his other lost daughter, Gema.

That one had not been an offer in exchange for anything. Graves had merely promised to make it happen, free of charge, whenever Gema became available.

And from the uncharacteristically happy way that Zeff had been when talking about it, Diego felt that there was precisely a snowball’s chance in lakefire that the man would have completely disregarded that in favor of going after Emiliana.

Granted, that would’ve been another impossible call. Choosing between children. But that was also why Zeff would have told someone about it, Diego thought.

If he knew he might miss his opportunity to meet Gema, surely Zeff would have informed someone of his intentions so that that person could go in his stead, no?

Agh. Or maybe not. Maybe Zeff expected to return soon and still make his meeting with Gema?

Or... maybe this disappearance was the meeting with Gema?

The more he thought about the matter, the more questions Diego had. And there was at least one person here who could provide some answers.

Talking to him alone didn't seem like the greatest idea, though. Diego didn't have any experience with meeting people that powerful. Amicable though the guy appeared, Graves did not strike Diego as the kind of person that one should speak to casually or unprepared.

And the man did not have much in the way of free time, apparently. As one might've expected, Graves was rather important to this entire warfront, now. Some would even call him the linchpin on which all their fates rested, though Diego and his fellow Rainlords, as well as the RPMP, would probably have something to say about that."

"3616

Regardless, jeopardizing their already tenuous relationship with the man was the last thing the Rainlords wanted to do.

And to that end, Darktide appeared to be in a peculiar state, at the moment. It was clear enough that Melchor wanted to talk to Graves at length about many different things, but he also seemed to have a similar understanding about the fragility of the current circumstances. Diego could sense the many questions that Melchor was holding himself back from asking.

Before disappearing, Zeff had made clear that, despite how much they were risking by siding with Graves here, he still did not wholly trust the man and did not think that the rest of them should, either.

Which was more than a fair point, Diego felt. The Vanguard had already betrayed them once before. No matter what happened, the Rainlords were, at the very least, united in their determination to not let things here in Ridgemark with Graves the Pale Hawk devolve into a repeat of what happened at Rheinhal with Sanko the Gargoyle.

Which was not to say that they feared Graves, necessarily. While Zeff's recounting of events had certainly been cause for worry, there was also the fact that Sanko had fought against half of the Rainlords' collective might whereas Graves here would have to deal with nearly all of it. Plus a few additional guests.

Such as Leo the Bull Leech.

That man was a strange one, to be sure. Thus far, his presence on the

battlefield--and indeed, all of Vantalay since arriving here--had been surprisingly restrained. Diego had not been the only one concerned about bringing that guy along. After the mess they got into with him in the Undercrust, most of the Rainlords were not exactly thrilled to have him around.

But at this point, with how little Leo had actually contributed to most of the fighting, Diego wasn't sure what to think, anymore. On the one hand, it was definitely a good thing that Leo, a famous ex-subordinate of the servant empress Sai-hee, was not making a big splash here and potentially drawing her gaze toward them. But on the other hand, why had this fellow even bothered to come along in the first place if he wasn't planning on assisting? Would it not have been better for him to stay behind at Warrenhold?

Not to mention, Leo was an impossible person to read. Whatever was going on in that mind of his, Diego was just about done trying to figure it out.

Just about.

But not quite.

Because when Leo decided, for the first time, to accompany the Rainlords to a meeting with Graves, Diego's anxiety shot up."

"3617

"Mr. Leonardo," said Graves upon seeing the man file into the room behind the Rainlords. The recognition in his voice was unmistakable, and the look in his eyes spoke of a certain fondness. "How unexpected. I was beginning to think you were never going to show yourself before me."

All eyes turned to the Bull Leech, who took up a position at the other end of the circular table, not bothering to actually sit down in the chair that was there in front of him. The look on his face was as relaxed as ever.

The Rainlords all chose their seats, with Diego ending up next to his grandmother and Melchor Blackburn.

This chamber was another new one. It was a conference room in the

Lucky Llama Hotel & Casino. By now, they'd conducted a few different meetings with Graves, and each time, it had been in a different location. The first one had been in a barn, right at the edge of the battlefield, while this place was in the heart of Ridgemark. Diego recalled one the Triplets mentioning that this building was owned by the Black Artisan's benefactor, much like the Ruby 88 was owned by the Linebreaker's.

"Figured it woulda been rude if I didn't drop by at least once," said Leo. "Y'know, at first, I thought I might be able to sneak under your radar, but then I realized there was prolly no hope of that, eh? Got your eyes and ears everywhere, don'tcha?"

"Heh. How long has it been?" said Graves. "Forty years? You're looking well. Better than I'd heard, actually."

"Oh? Been listenin' to rumors about me?"

"What, you don't listen to any about me? I'd be hurt if you didn't."

"Far as I remember, there've never been that many goin' 'round about you, fella. Which is prolly how you like it, eh?"

"Not at all. Whenever I find out that people have been talking about me, it makes me feel important."

Leo chortled. "That so? Then maybe I'll make up a few spicy rumors about you and spread 'em 'round. How's that sound?"

"As long as they're flattering."

"Ah. Spicy yet flattering. Tall order, that. Lemme think. Oh, maybe I could tell people about how you manhandled the Weasel and then kicked the Scourge's teeth in."

Graves paused. "I'm afraid you'd be a bit late to the party there. My own men have already been spreading that around like crazy, much as I wish they wouldn't."

"3618

"Can't blame 'em for bein' excited," said Leo. "Not every day that such a big shakeup in the established order 'o things happens, y'know? How many times have you clashed with some big name baddie and

caused untold destruction, only for you both to walk away in the end, unscathed?"

Graves returned a nod. "Such is the nature of near-immortals being at war."

"You said it. Really makes a guy think, after a while."

"About what, precisely?"

"About the point of it all."

That left a silence in its wake as the two men merely looked at one another.

Then Graves eyed everyone else, who'd just been listening quietly as they conversed.

What was he thinking right now, Diego wondered? He had a feeling that these two could've gone on for hours, just chatting away--and hell, maybe the Rainlords wouldn't have even minded listening, either. It was really something, being able to hear what two old servants had to say to each other.

If only the battle for Ridgemark hadn't still been going on.

"In any case, thank you all for coming," said Graves, finally taking his seat. "As the hostilities here continue to wind down, I wanted to make one final attempt to convince you all to come with me to Czacoa. I know you said that you wished to leave as soon as Ridgemark is deemed fully secure again, but it seems to me that we could still be very useful to one another."

This again, huh? Diego was mildly surprised. He thought the Hawk had already given up on that.

The Lady Rayen Merlo spoke up first. "Did the Lord Elroy not make our position quite clear the last time you asked?"

Graves made no response.

Perhaps because Zeff indeed had made it quite clear. Diego remembered the conversation well. Rarely had he ever heard Zeff sound so authoritative and unmovable.

Which was saying a lot.



Rayen kept going. "Or perhaps you were thinking that the rest of our minds might be more malleable with him not present?" Despite the bite in her words, she had a gentle, almost musical voice. Two of her sons sat on either side of her, Gil and Andre, and they were even taller than she was, making that side of the table look not unlike a fortress wall.

Graves chuckled. "I have never been under the impression that the Rainlords of Sair are--or might ever become--'malleable.' And I pity anyone who treats you as such."

"3619

Leo was also sharing in the marshal's laughter. "They are a stubborn bunch, aren't they? I've started to like that 'bout 'em, though. They say what they mean. Don't try to trick ya with pretty words."

"Yes, I can certainly see the appeal," said Graves. And he paused to give Leo another look. "I must admit, however, that I am quite curious as to how you ended up in their company, Mr. Leonardo. They do not strike me as the type to accept others into their ranks easily, even those with famous names such as yourself; nor have you ever struck me as the type to throw in with a group with such strict ideas about lifestyle and structure. I always thought you were more of a free spirit."

Leo bobbed his head to the side. "Yeah, well, it's good to try out different things, now and again, ya feel me? Much as we might like to think otherwise, this world of ours just keeps on changin'. If we don't change with it, then what's gonna happen, ya think? A clash. Between us and it. And that's not good for anybody, now is it?"

Graves fell briefly quiet again. "An interesting perspective."

"Yeah, I been doin' lotta thinkin'. Maybe a bit too much, honestly. But that's prolly 'cuz it's long overdue." He broke for another chuckle. "But what about you, Mr. Hawk? How you feelin' 'bout your place in the world, hmm?"

"...Why do I get the impression that you're trying to sell me something?"

"Mm? Dunno, man. I'm just genuinely curious 'bout your state of mind, daddy-o. When's the last time someone asked you 'bout these sorts of things?"

"With respect, this hardly seems like the appropriate--"

"Nah, bro, this is important. Listen. It's super easy for us ol' fossils to end up all alone with no one to have real conversations with, y'know? I'm worried about it. And as a matter of fact, now that I'm really lookin' atcha and listenin' to ya, I'm actually startin' to get some real concernin' vibes from ya, pal. Like you're tryin' to avoid havin' a very important and necessary conversation about your own well-bein'. 'Cuz there's always somethin' else to distract yourself with, right? I know it, and I know you know it, brother."

Where in the hell was this going, Diego wondered?

And judging from the look on his face, the exact same question seemed to be occurring to Field Marshal Graves."

"3620

"Quit lookin' at me like a deer in the headlights," Leo went on. "It's a simple enough question. I'm sure you've given it plenty of thought over the years, at some point or another. So just tell me, man. How do you feel about your current place in the world?"

All eyes fell upon Graves again, who apparently needed a few more moments to find his answer. "...I am feeling just fine about it. But thank you for your concern."

"Oh. Yeah? That's great, dude. Happy to hear that. So you've got yourself a nice little support system in the Vanguard, then?"

"Support system? Yes, I suppose I do."

"Good, good. Glad to hear it. I'm tellin' ya, man. Social isolation: it's a silent killer. Even if it doesn't threaten your life directly, it'll mess with your head until you start thinkin' crazy stuff, daddy-o. Real family unfriendly stuff, know what I'm sayin'?"

"...From the passion in your words, I'm guessing that you have been struggling with such difficult thoughts yourself. Perhaps until quite recently?"

"Yeah. Well. No. But also yeah. It's been a complicated last few years for me, man. Simple, yet complicated. Much like myself, you might say!

Heh!"

"Right..."

"Long story short: my mind got messed with by a powerful psychic."

"Ah. I see..."

"Made me feel not quite myself for a good long while. And yet, in some ways, looking back on it all now, maybe it actually made me behave more like myself than ever before. Like it brought out the worst version of myself imaginable. That make sense?"

"I do believe I understand, yes."

"Course ya do. Knew ya would. Knowledgeable guy like you. Knowledgeable psychic guy like you."

Oh boy. Diego couldn't help tensing up, and he could practically feel the rest of his kin at the table tensing up right alongside him.

Melchor Blackburn was the one to speak up. "Leo..."

"No, man, relax. I'm not tryin' to pick a fight 'r anythin'. But I figure, maybe this fella here might know a thing 'r two about the other fella what messed with my noggin. 'sbeen on my to-do list, findin' out more about who did that to me."

"I see," reiterated Graves. "Yes, psychics can be quite the troublemakers. I assume this person has made it difficult for you to even remember much about them?"

"Sure has. But I did manage to learn the name Ettol. That mean anything to you?"

"3621

Graves cocked an eyebrow. "...Ettol, you say? That is the name of an Ancient Melmoorian trickster god."

"Yeah, dude, my reaper may've mentioned a thing 'r two about that," said Leo. "But I'm more interested in the modern day. So have you ever heard of a psychic who goes by that name?"

"I'm afraid not," said Graves. "But even if I had, what would you do with such information? Please tell me you do not intend to go after this person without some sort of plan."

"Plans come later, daddy-o. Once the gatherin' of intel is complete. Or further along, at least."

"Mr. Leonardo. I may not be fully apprised of your circumstances, but I do know something of the dangers you've described. Please trust me when I say that if it happened once, it can absolutely happen a second time. This does not sound like someone you should pursue haphazardly. I implore you to be exceedingly cautious."

"Ooh. If you're the one saying that, then maybe this fellow is even scarier than I thought. 'Preciate the warning, pal."

The marshal's gaze lingered on Leo for a few moments more before returning to the rest of the table.

Diego felt the whole room relax a little. Phew.

"Well," said Graves, "with that out of the way, I'd like to return to what we were discussing before. Czacoa."

"Still?" said Rayen Merlo. "I should think we have made ourselves quite clear by now."

"You have," said Graves. "But permit me this one last courtesy. Then I shall not trouble you with it again. Fair?"

The Lady Merlo glanced across the table and saw a few nods of affirmation before relenting and giving one of her own.

"Thank you," said Graves. He stood and produced a pair of tablets from his overcoat, fiddling with them briefly before sliding them over to the people on his right and left, who happened to be Rider, one of Santos Zabat's sons, and Delia, one of Evangelina Stroud's daughters. "This footage was taken from Denbohlt just yesterday. I'm sure I don't need to worry about your sensitivities, but even so, allow me to warn you: it is quite graphic."

The tablets passed along the edges of the table, and soon enough, one of them reached Diego's hands.

The scene unfolding on the screen was of a type that he'd witnessed before.

Razed buildings. Smote ground and smoldering piles of rubble. Smoke and ash filling the sky. Bodies littering the ground.

Diego passed it on to his grandmother.

"I well know the noble spirit of the Rainlords," said Graves. "I know you all have within you that most valiant of instincts to intervene and protect the innocent. But I'm sure that mere video footage will not be enough to sway you. So allow me to create an even more vivid depiction of what is happening over there, right now.""

"3622

The entire chamber went briefly dark, and when light returned, it looked and felt as though they had been transported to a completely different location.

It was a scene quite similar to the one that had just been on the screen--so similar, in fact, that Diego at first thought that it was simply the same one recreated--but as he looked further, he noticed different buildings and street markers, and the reddish sun was in a different position in the sky.

Ash and smoke choked the air, and it felt like Diego could actually smell them. The scent of blood and death hung thick here. An all too familiar scent.

Diego couldn't help standing to his feet.

They had all been told about the illusive capabilities of Graves by Zeff, and indeed, Diego had even caught a few glimpses of it firsthand on the battlefield since then, too.

But this was still quite a new and different experience for him. An illusion this realistic? It boggled the mind.

"This is not an illusion," arrived Graves' disembodied voice from all around them, as if in response to the thought that had just been in Diego's head. "This is a projection. A live feed, if you will. From one of the many townships on the outskirts of Denbohlt. This is what will soon become of the capital city, if action is not taken in its defense."

That information made Diego look over the scene anew. A live feed, was it?

So that flaming pile of the rubble there was burning as they spoke? Those rotting corpses along the sundered roadside were still there, right now?

And even that lone child wandering the street in the distance, face smeared black with soot and grime...? Even that was...?

Unconsciously, Diego raised a hand forward and took a step toward the child.

“...Ah.”

A hummingbird appeared before the child, drawing his or her attention. And Diego watched as the child began to follow it.

“Not to worry,” said Graves. “I will guide her to a safe place.”

Diego didn't know what to say.

The Lady Merlo certainly did, though. “Perhaps you could show us a live feed of Kuros. Or Zebul, perhaps. Or just about any of the major cities in eastern Sair, for that matter.”

“Alas, I cannot,” said Graves. “That is much too far. And the reason I am able to share this scene with you is because I am also in Denbohlt, actively monitoring things there, just as I am here.”

"3623

“This will not sway us,” said the Lady Evangelina Stroud. “Terrible though this may be, we have a responsibility to our own citizenry--one that is just as urgent, if not even moreso. Many among us feel that we have already tarried too long here in Vantalay as it is.”

“Moreover,” followed up Horatio Blackburn, “what need would you truly have for us? It seems to us that the famed Field Marshal Graves has proven himself more than capable of handling whatever remnants of Abolish may remain in this region by himself. If anything, I believe we are collectively of a mind to leave even sooner than we were originally anticipating.”

“Ah, that is news to me,” said Graves. “Well, well. I seem to have become a victim of my own success.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Rayen Merlo, apparently not in the mood for japes. “Stop wasting our time.”

“My apologies. Allow me to address your concerns in rapid succession. Please observe.”

And the scene before them shifted. It zoomed up and out, giving everyone a view of the battlefield from far above.

“See the battle lines?” said Graves, and the vision darkened, save for a few select areas which remained highlighted.

Indeed, Diego could see columns of soldiers forming up in the distance, flanked by tented encampments and standing behind large walls for cover.

There were large clusters of forces. One to the east and one to the west, judging by the position of the sun. And considering the geography, the one in the west must have belonged to the Vantalayan Armed Forces while the east belonged to the Czacoan Defense Force.

And their names, Diego realized, were unfortunately quite apt, what with the VAF being pluralized and the CDF being singular.

The CDF was clearly outnumbered here. Maybe by a hundred to one. Hell, maybe even more.

It made sense, of course. Vantalay's population dwarfed that of Czacoa. And the VAF was comprised of multiple military organizations while the CDF was really just one group.

“This is but one of the Vantalayan battlefields,” said Graves. “Here is another.”

The scene shifted again, this time blacking out first before revealing a different landscape with an apparently similar story unfolding thereupon. The battle lines were highlighted again, though this time there was a large stretch of open water in the middle and scores of warships included in the mix. “This one is farther north, and it is largely between the Vantalayan and Yena Marian navies, though I have also noticed a few groups scattered along the coastlines. Perhaps scavengers. Hard to tell for sure. But we must speed this along, allow

me to show you another.”

And again, the scene changed. This time, it was almost all sea, with land only on the horizon. Dozens of warships dotted the shimmering waters, and active missile, torpedo, and cannon fire was visible. “This one is Naos--”

“We get the idea,” said Rayen. “And still, it makes no difference.””  
"3624

“With respect to the Lady,” said Graves, “I do not think you do get it. These battlefields that I have shown you. Just involving Vantalay alone, how many do you think there are?”

She did not grace him with an answer.

He didn’t wait long. “Thirteen. One involving Czacoa, two with Naos, two with Yena Maria, this one here in Ridgemark, an additional one near Vantalay’s own capital, four more with Lyste along the western border, and then two others out in the Luthic Ocean regarding trade routes and pirates. So to your question of why I want your help: this is why. Out of the five active war fronts on the continent, this Vantalayan one is by far the messiest. And while it is very fortunate that I can be in more than one place at a time, thirteen is still a bit beyond me.”

That argument seemed to have struck a chord, because the Rainlords fell briefly quiet.

It was the Lord Santos Zabat who picked up the slack. “But the fact remains that there is not a single soldier on any of these battlefields who can stand against you.”

“Would that were so,” said Graves. “I have already died six times since my arrival in this country. Whenever I show myself, I become a point of great focus for the Vantalayans. Even I have trouble dealing with constant barrages of soul-infused missiles and machine gun fire. Which is to say nothing of the VAF’s elite unit of assassins that is constantly stalking me and waiting for even the slightest perceived opening to try and kill me permanently. Not to mention, there are actually a couple of warriors within the VAF that can threaten me on the battlefield if I am not careful.”



Huh.

Damn.

Diego didn't know the guy had it that bad. He'd always figured that the marshals had it kinda easy, considering how powerful they all were. But yeah, he supposed being the guy with the biggest target on his back might not be so fun in a warzone.

And when the Rainlords grew quiet again, Graves' tone shifted to one of confusion. "Are you really that surprised? Who do you think I am? Sermung?"

Mevox chose that moment to chime in. 'Wow. I never knew marshals could be such whining pussies.'

"Okay, who let that reaper talk again? I thought we agreed last time that he would stay silent."

"Sorry," said the Lord Salvador Delaguna."  
"3625

Grandma decided to interject with a question that gave Diego pause. "Precisely how bad are you saying that things are for you here, Graves? Mevox is out of line, but he touches upon a relevant point. You are sounding like you think you will lose this warfront without our help."

The aerial view of the watery battlefield finally shifted back to the normal chamber again. "Well, only fools assume victory before it is achieved," said Graves. "Which is especially relevant in a war with so many involved parties who might show up unexpectedly at any time. But no, truthfully, I do not think I would lose the warfront without you. Rather, I think it would be woefully prolonged and cost many thousands more lives. Much of whom would be civilians."

"Of course we would like to help you," said Lord Salvador. "But as we have already said, several times now, we have our own obligations. Our own people to consider."

"Yes, and I have already offered to return this favor," said Graves. "Do this for me, and when you are prepared to retake your homeland, I promise that I will be there to help you do so."

"The delay is still an issue," said Lady Rayen. "And the Vanguard is the reason we lost our land in the first place."

"Then I should be honored as the one to begin making amends on the Vanguard's behalf," said the marshal.

"Would it be making amends or returning a favor?" said Lord Santos. "It cannot rightly be both."

Graves returned a nod. "A fair point. Perhaps there is some additional thing you might wish from me, then? I believe I have already made my desperation embarrassingly clear, so if you have terms, then you can at least be certain that I will listen to them carefully."

"Oh, I indeed have some extra terms in mind," said Lord Santos. "I do not know if you will like them, however."

"Well, if they are within my power, I will probably like them just fine."

"You tell me if these qualify, then. First, the immediate unfreezing of all Rainlords assets."

"Mm. I can do that, but it wouldn't be immediate. The Vanguard used proxies for that little trick, so it will take a bit of time and finesse to see it undone."

"Second, a formal contract, signed by Sermung--and Sanko, for good measure--agreeing that members of the Vanguard will never again enter any region of Sair without the expressed, written approval of the local ruling House."

"That... will be more challenging. You did hear the part about these things needing to be within my power, right?"

"Third, the complete and utter disavowal of Captain General Parson Miles. Or alternatively, the deliverance of him and his reaper into our custody."

"Ah..."

"3626

The table fell quiet again as they waited for Graves' response to that

one.

Diego was quite uncomfortable. Frankly, he felt those demands were rather unreasonable to be asking of Graves, and by the look on the Lord of House Zabat's face, Diego was getting the feeling that the man had still more demands left in mind.

"...Parson Miles is not under my command," said Graves. "I can petition Lamont or Sermung for his removal, but the decision will ultimately fall to one of them. Which I'm sure you already knew, Lord Santos. So why are you asking me for things that you know I cannot provide?"

"Fourth, reparations for the nigh incalculable damage that the Vanguard has helped bring upon Sair and its citizenry."

Graves closed his eyes and sighed. "I see."

Diego did, too. Or at least, he thought he did. Santos had built up the severity of their case and was now going to steer the conversation in the direction of money. Whatever other demands Graves failed to provide could potentially be made up for by adding even more zeroes to the money offered.

Or in other words, it was a way for Santos to drive up their price.

A shrewd strategy. And one that Diego expected would not sit entirely well with everyone. Personally, he was all for it. He'd always felt that they should be trying to turn a profit whenever they could, but he knew only too well how strongly some of his kin felt about mercenary work. "Unbefitting of Rainlords," were the words that often got thrown around.

Would they see this differently? Maybe. If Lord Santos could convince them, too, perhaps.

Hmm. Knowing him, maybe he could pull it off.

From there, the meeting continued for a while longer, and it played out about how Diego expected it to. Lord Santos kept hashing out terms with Graves, but ultimately, before anything could be formally agreed upon, there was yet more work to be done--work that no longer involved the marshal, who eventually excused himself.

Several of the Rainlords dispersed as well, but the heads all remained in order to continue negotiations among themselves. Diego had the

opportunity to leave--and maybe go enjoy the casino floor, since it was technically his day off--but he didn't take it. He wanted to hear everything Santos was going to say and be here to back the man up, if he needed it."

"3627

"I cannot believe we are even debating this," said Lady Rayen. "After all we have been through because of the Vanguard's machinations? They cannot be trusted."

"This is not just about them," said Grandma, which surprised Diego a bit. "There are multiple reasons why we might decide to stay and help. Not the least of which being that Graves was right about us. About what we all feel. The pull. You know of what speak. And I know you feel it, too, my dear."

"Do not talk to me like one of your children, Octavia."

"Have no fear of that. My children would never be so ill-behaved."

Uh-oh. Diego noticed Rayen glance in his direction.

"Easy now," said Lady Evangelina from across the table. "We have just been reunited. Let's not ruin it by picking needless fights."

"My apologies," said Octavia with a slight nod in Rayen's direction.

And after a moment, Rayen returned one of her own. "Mine as well."

"Whatever else might be said, this is an opportunity for us," said Evangelina. "Now we must determine whether it is worth taking or not. The first matter of concern to my mind is, assuming we were to refuse and return to Sair forthwith, do we even think that we would be able to retake the country with our current level of strength?"

A brief silence fell over the table.

"It may not be pretty," said Rayen, "but yes, I believe we could. We do not need Graves' help."

Lord Santos spoke up next. "If the Mad Demon is still there, then our odds of success are virtually nil, especially with the Sandlords scattered, too."

"All reports have suggested that Morgunov has departed that war front entirely," said Octavia.

"Reports are only so trustworthy," said Lord Salvador. "They also told us that Graves was no longer in Vantalay, and we see how that turned out."

"Agreed," said Santos. "We should not return without the expectation that we will have to fight anything less than the Mad Demon himself. Better to be overprepared than under."

"Not when time is of the essence," said Rayen. "Our people continue to suffer while we sit here, talking."

Santos wasn't done, though. "Even if we do manage to retake Sair on our own, we must have enough strength left to hold it. Even now, we're still recovering."

"And so your solution is to wade into another battlefield?" said Rayen. "Where our strength may be further depleted?"

"3628

"If the rewards can be deemed worth it, then yes," said Santos. "The money we could procure from this venture would be what allows us to rebuild our nation and protect it. And moreover, from the sound of things, the Drylands will have an even greater need of such funding. We may need to take stewardship over them while the Sandlords remain broken."

"Just as they did for our people," added Evangelina.

"And so our finances will be stressed even further," said Santos.

"Hold on now," said Salvador. "Abbas Saqqaf yet lives. Whatever else is uncertain, that much is not."

"Of course," said Santos. "And I am sure all of Hahl Saqqaf will wish to fight alongside us, but they alone cannot hold the entirety of the Drylands. Until more Sandlords return or make contact with us, we should plan to aid the entire nation, not just the Wetlands."

Horatio Blackburn decided to jump in now. "I do not know if that is

wise. Would it not be better to focus our efforts on the Wetlands first, establish a foothold there, and then worry about expanding into the Drylands if and when it is deemed necessary? I feel we may be biting off more than we can chew, otherwise.”

“You’re right, of course,” said Rayen. “Our subjects must come first. Taking a long view of things is all well and good, Santos, but the grander we make our plans, the longer they will take to enact. The fact of the matter is that we may never feel fully prepared to return. It is always going to seem a great risk. But we have a duty to take it--and sooner rather than later.”

Santos made no response.

Damn. Diego wanted to help, but he wasn’t sure what to say here. He wasn’t even sure if it was his place to say anything. Truthfully, these big meetings with all the heads still made him feel knots in his stomach.

Fortunately, Grandma picked up the slack. “We also have a duty to our own Houses. Our families. And to each other. I am leaning toward Santos’ perspective of preparedness here. This is a critical time for our people. A cautious approach would be best, in my opinion.”

“Relying on the Vanguard again is not the cautious approach,” said Rayen. “If Zeff were here, I am certain he would be agreeing with me. And loudly so.”

Well, she was probably right about that, Diego thought.”  
"3629

“I do share your trepidation when it comes to the Vanguard,” said Santos. “I do not think we should blindly trust in Graves.”

“Finally, you are talking some sense,” said Rayen.

An idea struck Diego, and he wondered if Lord Santos was already thinking the same thing. When the man remained quiet, however, along with the rest of the table, Diego felt that it might be his turn to say something.

“Perhaps we could test Graves,” said Diego, drawing everyone’s attention. He tried not to sound too stiff. “If his trustworthiness is the

main question, then we should see about finding an answer to it.”

Lady Rayen snickered. “You play with fire, boy. What manner of test would you have us conduct on a Vanguardian field marshal, of all people?”

“Well,” said Diego, “the specific concern seems to be that he is attempting to manipulate us, yes? Moreover, he is notoriously secretive, even for a marshal, and yet we in this room now know more about him and the nature of his power than... just about anyone else in the world, I’d wager. So I’d argue that, if nothing else, he at least has a rather strong motive to not let us leave Vantalay. To keep us close so that we can’t go around spreading information about him.”

Salvador jumped in again. “Wait. You’re saying this is all, what? Just some scheme to keep us here? That he doesn’t actually need our help?”

“The thought has crossed my mind as well,” said Lord Santos. “We do indeed know far more about Graves than most, but in the end, what we’ve learned is still precious little. To my mind, he could have been playing up his disadvantaged position for two reasons. First, because he wants us to underestimate him. Personally, I find this quite believable, though not for entirely logical reasons. He simply strikes me as the type of man to do something like that.”

“A constant schemer,” said Rayen, the agreement strong in her tone.

“Indeed,” said Santos. “And the second reason why he might’ve been playing it up is because of what Diego just mentioned: he wants us to stay of our own volition, rather than having to fight and recapture us.”

Whoa. Diego hadn’t exactly said all that, but he had been intending to go in that direction. And yet Lord Santos just blurted it out like it was no big deal.”

"3630

The Lord Zabat wasn’t done. “If this is true, then even if we do choose to stay, he will undoubtedly find some other reason to keep us close after things here in Vantalay are settled. In fact, perhaps his promise to help us retake Sair could be considered part of that. It would give him an excuse to remain in our company.”

“Or,” said Diego, deciding to jump in again, “if the first reason is not true and he really does want our help, then he could still just be biding his time with us until Vantalay is secure. Once we’re no longer useful to him.”

“Also true,” said Santos. “In all likelihood, he is working multiple angles here.” And he paused to look directly at Diego. “Knowing all this, if we are to test him, then it must be on the matter of his trustworthiness, yes? And on something relevant to our current circumstances. Something which provides him with every motive to deceive or betray us. And if he still does not, then perhaps we can trust him.”

Geez. It felt like Lord Santos was already way ahead of him. “I was thinking,” said Diego, “that maybe we could just... leave. And see how he reacts. See if he actually lets us go. If he does, then maybe we could circle back and help him out. If not, then... well...”

“If not, then we are fighting him,” said Santos. “Interesting. If he tries to stop us from leaving, then he will give us no choice, but at least we will know his true character. And in such a case, we would have had to fight him eventually, anyway, whenever he finished whatever game he was playing with us. But it is still a great risk. And we would not be able to enact such a plan until our business with the RPMP is settled.”

“That won’t be much longer,” said Diego. “And I don’t have a better idea for a meaningful test, so unless someone else does, then...” He looked over the table.

As did Santos, until he landed on the head of House Merlo. “What say you, Lady Rayen?”

She leveled a stare at Diego. “I still think it would be best to leave and not come back, but... I do not hate this idea, I suppose.”

“And Lord Dimas?” said Santos. “You’ve said nothing at all so far. What are your thoughts?”

"3631

Dimas took a moment before answering. “It seems a solid idea to me. And perhaps our only option, for that matter. But I also do not wish for us to split our forces again, and if the intention becomes to stay and



assist Graves, what then shall we do about that? Will we all stay in Vantalay? Or will some return to Warrenhold?"

"Good question," said Horatio. "I am also hesitant for us to divide ourselves again so soon after reuniting, but we have many non-combatants to consider, too. And Warrenhold is no short distance from here. It would be quite the separation."

"That is a decision that must come down to each House," said Santos. "If and when that time comes, every fighting man and woman among us should decide for themselves if they wish to stay or go, with the final say resting on the head of each House. At least, that is my view of it."

"I can agree with that," said the Lord Delaguna.

"I, as well," said the Lady Octavia Redwater.

"And me," said the Lord Dimas Sebolt.

"Here, too," said the Lord Horatio Blackburn.

"Wow," chortled Santos. "It sounds like we are already putting it to a vote. But before anything is finalized, surely we must hear from the other head at this table who has remained silent this whole time. Lord Valero?"

And all eyes turned to the very young, fresh-faced head of House Garza.

Of the ten Rainlord Houses of Sair, only eight heads were present, since both Zeff Elroy and Joana Cortes were missing, but there was little doubt in Diego's mind that House Garza was in the most awkward position of all of them, at the moment.

Which was saying a lot, considering how awkward he knew the Blackburns' position to still be, after their betrayal back in Sair contributed to the detainment of so many other Rainlords.

The problem for the Garzas was that their previous head, Lady Socorro, had been slain by Parson Miles back in Sair while the rest of them had already been captured by Sanko. Only a couple of their non-combatants had managed to escape, and neither of them was here, right now. Luciana and Elise Garza had remained behind at Warrenhold.

Perhaps they should have come along in order to help their family

members come to terms with all that had happened, but it was too late for such thinking now."

"3632 -- CCC.

House Garza had been struggling to restructure themselves, which had been further compounded by the battle at Logden Prison, where apparently the two most obvious successors to Socorro had both lost their lives, putting the family into an even more confused state once the dust had finally settled.

Blessedly, there had not been many casualties from that mess of a fight--and none at all from this current defense of Ridgemark--but that was small comfort for the Garzas right now, Diego knew.

Their new head, Valero Garza, was even younger than himself.

He'd met him many times over the years, and yet Diego still felt like he'd never really gotten to know him. At most, he'd gotten the impression that Valero was a very humble, unassuming guy; and looking at him now with those wide eyes, that assessment seemed to be spot on. Of all the assumptions Valero might've made about the trajectory of his own life, becoming the new head of his entire House had probably not been among them. Especially at such a young age.

Not to mention with the war going on.

Diego felt for the poor fellow. What a time to be thrust into a leadership role.

To the man's credit, though, he did manage to speak up and answer Lord Santos. "...I-I think th-that's a sound plan, as well."

And that was all, apparently.

Well.

It got the job done, Diego supposed. But he was pretty sure Lord Santos had been hoping for a bit more than that.

The Lady Evangelina Stroud filled the ensuing silence. "As for me, I like Diego's idea well enough, but I still do not like the idea of staying in Vantelay to assist Graves. If he lets us leave without a fight, then I think we should just leave."

"Then Evangelina and I are of the same mind," said Rayen.

"It sounds like we are ready for a vote, then," said Santos. "Assuming Graves passes our test, all in favor staying to assist him?" And he held up his right hand.

As did Grandma, Horatio, Dimas, and Valero.

Salvador, Evangelina, and Rayen did not.

"Five to three in favor," said Lord Santos. "It would seem our course is set."

Chapter Three Hundred: 'O, enduring sands...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

What a strange place this was. What a strange feeling. A place and a feeling. Merged into one. Inseparable. Indistinguishable.

He couldn't think. Didn't even want to, really. It was so comfortable here. Warm and peaceful. And yet plenty busy, too. Plenty to watch and be entertained by."

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"3633

The world. It was all around him. Streaming by him in a blur. Just waiting for him to look at it. All but asking him for his attention.

He couldn't process any of it. But he could observe. Like an enormous television. And him, an unthinking couch potato. Passively watching.

Was he learning anything? Retaining anything?

Hard to say. Impossible, actually. Perhaps if he ever managed to leave this place, he would know. But here and now, no.

Asad Najir merely existed. Scarcely even aware of himself. A pebble floating in an ocean.

"That is okay," came a voice. "Take your time, Young Lion. It is not as it seems, after all. There is much to do, and we cannot rush."

He made no response. Could not make one.

But he could listen.

"We at last meet," the voice went on. "This was not quite what I had in mind, but I suppose we must go through the doors that open to us. It is a relief merely to know that you have survived."

Survived? Survived what?

Mm. Eh. Didn't matter.

Ugh, he was so tired. Like he'd never felt before. And this place was so comfortable. A warm blanket.

"Good. Good. Yes. You need your rest. Worry not. And let me be your guide."

Mm. Guide? He didn't understand. Didn't care, either.

"No, Lion. You must care. You cannot leave until you do. You must not

become an incarnation of me. That is not the way. I have become convinced. You must retain yourself."

What?

Oh, whatever.

"Rrgh. You are not going to make this easy, are you? Very well. Come along, then."

For a moment, the world swooshed more quickly past him, and then it slowed. To a crawl, actually. Enough for him to get a very clear picture of the scene in front of him.

Who was that? A familiar face. Very familiar indeed.

"The Sunsmith," said the voice. "You recognize him, of course. He toils daily, seeking the power to revitalize our people. And the wisdom to, as well."

Asad saw.

Abbas Saqqaf was there, sweating profusely and panting with one hand on a giant glass orb. He looked like he might collapse.

And that orb. Such a gentle light emanated from it. Asad had never seen the like before.

"He is more adrift than he allows others to see," said the voice. "His mind falters as much as his body does, and yet he pushes onward. Searching.""

"3634

Searching, was it? Again, Asad didn't understand. What purpose was there in searching? Everything was fine. Or soon would be. Or didn't matter.

"Those are not your thoughts, Young Lion. Disregard them. Rest now, but do not forget yourself. Remember your own life, at least."

Mm. His own life.

Hah.

He hadn't forgotten that. Not one bit.

That was precisely why this place was great.

By comparison.

He remembered the stress. The worry. The constant fear and disappointment. In himself. In his accomplishments. In his wife. And yes, in his children, too.

Perhaps that was wrong to think. As a father, he should have been more understanding. More accepting. Of their faults. And their failures.

He'd tried to be. Had he ever succeeded?

He couldn't recall. He could only remember the anxiety it caused him.

It was never enough. Nothing ever was.

"Stop," said voice. "That is not resting. That is killing yourself. Do not do that. Especially not here. This is not a place to chastise oneself. And moreover, you have done nothing to deserve it. You have always been too hard on yourself."

Had he? How would this voice know?

"Because I am Rasalased. And I have been observing you since the day you were born."

Oh.

Huh.

Kinda creepy.

"I can only agree. This is not the afterlife that I had envisioned for myself. But here I am. And being able to stay connected to all our kin throughout the ages has been wonderful, in its own regard."

Ah. So it wasn't just Asad that he'd been spying on.

"Indeed. That is how I know that the Sunsmith will have need of your help."

His help? Still, Asad didn't understand. What help could he be?

“Ah. That is indeed the question, isn’t it? But that is alright. For now. I fear it may yet be quite some time before you offer it to him. He will have to manage on his own for a while longer. Unless, perhaps, you are able to surprise me and get your act together more quickly.”

Huh?

Huh...

Mm...

So tired...

“Yes, I thought as much. Let us move on.”

The world sped by again.

Asad just watched.

It was beautiful.

So bright and colorful. So much life and wonder. A moving painting. A living stream, filled with more than mere images. He could feel them as they passed. Touch them, almost. The temptation to reach out came over him, but he resisted.

Just observing was good enough."

"3635

Ah...

Who was that? Another familiar face.

“Your brother by blood,” said the voice.

Haqq. Right.

It was good to see him. After everything.

Everything? What was everything?

Eh... Too much work to recall.

Haqq was at a table, laboring over something as usual. Research



notes, it looked like. The expression on his face spoke of frustration.

That, too, was quite normal, Asad knew. When it came to research, Haqq had always tried to keep up an appearance of ease and confidence, but Asad knew how hard his brother worked. How much effort he was constantly putting in.

And how miserable it made him, more often than not.

It was something that Asad had never really understood. Why pretend? Why not let more people know how difficult his work was? Personally, Asad had always appreciated his brother's determination to keep pushing, even if he hadn't always appreciated the inventions that resulted.

"You have never realized?" asked the voice.

Hmm? Realized what?

"Your brother believes that his reputation is everything. And where his work is concerned, he may be right. One is not regarded as a genius through hard work alone. One must achieve great results--and so much the better if it can be made to look easy in front of others."

Reputation? Did Haqq really care about that so much? Asad had never gotten that impression. Haqq always seemed so detached from the world. So immersed in his projects.

"Ah. A pitiable blind spot, Young Lion."

What?

"Your brother has lived beside the divine power of our clan for most of his life. Beside the new Lion of the Desert. Have you given not a thought to how that has impacted him?"

He was suddenly reminded of their youth, long before either of them became servants. Haqq had followed him everywhere, pestered him constantly, wanting to be involved in everything he did.

Quintessential behavior of a little brother.

Asad wanted to smile, but he wasn't sure if he even possessed a mouth, right now.

"You have forgotten," said the voice. "Perhaps that is not surprising."

Forgotten? Forgotten what?

The world sped by again, but this time, when it slowed back down, Asad saw his younger self standing there. And Haqq, too.

They were on a balcony. A familiar one. Flanked by mounds of sand that twinkled in the morning sun.

Dunehall, he recalled. Yes. This was outside his childhood bedroom. One of his favored spots, growing up. The view of downtown Moaban from here was incredible, and the mountain of sand that covered most of the castle made this little balcony feel like a hiding spot, of sorts, what with the way it peeked out from a little hole in said mountain."

"3636

His younger self didn't seem to be enjoying the view very much, however. He was hunched over and leaning on the railing, face buried between his hands.

He could see his tattoos--and Haqq's, as well--so even though he couldn't see his face, he could at least surmise that this must have taken place in his teenage years.

Ugh, too much thinking. Better to just watch.

"I don't believe it," said Haqq. He wasn't facing Asad, but he was most certainly talking to him, as they were the only ones present.

His younger self made no response.

"It just makes no sense," said Haqq. "My mind can't accept it. Just like that? She's gone? No explanation? Tiriala just releases her? I don't buy it."

Still, there was no reply.

"And because I can't buy it, I can't bring myself to mourn her, either. She can't be gone. Not like this. She was... she is... it doesn't..." The boy sighed.

Finally, the younger Asad decided to say something. "...This is how it always is."

"What?" said Haqq.

"Historically. For our people. We're lucky when we get an explanation. Frequently, we just disappear. Killed in action where no one ever finds us. Or killed in such a way that we're reduced to dust. 'Returned to the Great Sand,' they used to call it. Qorvass told me about it."

Haqq scoffed. "That's his way of comforting you? Bastard."

"No. It was a while ago. He's been... perfectly nice to me."

"Hmph."

"...Do you think we'll die like this?"

"She's not dead."

"Then do you think we'll disappear like this, someday? Gone without a word or warning to everyone around us?"

"No. Our clan is too close-knit. This is extremely abnormal. Don't let Qorvass try to convince you that it is."

"That wasn't what he was--I already said--agh. It doesn't matter."

And the two young men both fell silent for a time.

Asad felt like he was starting to remember this conversation. But only vaguely. Why was the voice showing it to him?

"This won't happen to us," said Haqq. "I can promise you that."

"That's a promise you can't possibly keep. You don't know the future, little brother."

"Oh, but I do," said the young Haqq with a chuckle. "It's as clear to me as this conversation we're having, right now."

"Hah. Is that right?"

"It is. In the future, you become a great warrior. The likes of which our clan hasn't seen in generations."

"You're just repeating the old stories about the Lion of the Desert."

"No. I know it's true. Because I'm going to help you every step of the way. Just like Mother wanted. Like she wants.""

His younger self did not reply.

Maybe he hadn't really been listening. He recalled having quite a bit on his mind at this time.

From there, the scene faded to gray, then black.

"This moment mattered little to you," said the voice. "But not to your brother. He took it to heart and has held it there ever since."

Asad didn't know what to think. Or if he should think anything at all. Was it not still better to simply watch? Less tiring, for certain.

"Rest is important, yes, but you need not suppress all emotion and thought while you do so. Ignoring everything will do you no favors."

Mm. Perhaps the voice had a point.

Or perhaps it didn't. Eh. He could figure it out later.

"You are beginning to annoy me, Young Lion."

Asad missed breathing. Where had his breath gone? Was even alive, anymore? He wished he could feel his body, at least. He recalled that the ability to breathe had been so soothing, at times. It would've been lovely, right about now.

"Rgh. Let us move on."

More speeding. Shifting and spinning. Beautiful lights and colors. Mm.

When the scene settled, he saw yet another familiar face. Two faces, actually. Who? It was hard to think.

Two women. They were running. And fighting. Not each other but a host of pursuers. And something in the sky. Something with wings. Bullets were flying everywhere, both at and from the fleeing women.

One was clearly younger.

His daughter. Jada. Yes.

And the older woman. White smoke billowed from her arms. A familiar sight.

His sister. Imas.

The pursuers closed in but Imas rebuffed them with a wall of smoke, which passed over two men like a tidal wave and left half-melted corpses behind.

Corpses which did not stop moving. They were clearly slowed, but their pursuit did not stop.

Where were they? Why were they fighting? And who?

“Remember, Young Lion,” said the voice. “The disastrous fight at Uego. You witnessed it in part. This is but one consequence.”

This was current? Jada and Imas were fighting, right now?

“Alas, there may be no such thing as ‘current’ in this place. But yes. They are still fleeing for their lives, even now. For their lives--and for the lives around them.”

Asad saw. They were not alone. There were other warriors. Other familiar faces. Sandlords. Hahl Duxan?

So hard to remember.

But there were non-warriors, too. Children, even. Also fleeing.”  
"3638

He felt something stir within him. An unwanted notion. A sense of urgency that betrayed this otherwise overwhelming desire to rest.

“They need help,” he said. Which surprised him, because that wasn’t the voice talking again. Not Rasalased. That was him. His own voice. Singular and distinct.

“Yes,” came the voice again. “But I have been monitoring them. And they have been managing. Perhaps this scene looks worse than it is.”

Ah. Asad saw what he meant. The pursuers were giving chase, but they were also themselves being chased by more members of Hahl

Duxan. Walls of materialized metal appeared, barring their path, shielding innocents, and skewering the pursuers. It was the work of that one fellow in the back, Asad was fairly sure. Such a familiar face. The Lord Duxan's eldest son. What was his name again?

Malik Duxan. Yes. A formidable young man, Asad had always thought. It was a relief to see him there--and alive, for that matter.

And then there was Jada. She was defending herself but still not drawing too much attention--in part, perhaps, because Imas was drawing so much attention in her stead.

It was a worrisome sight, to be sure. But they were handling themselves well. As he might've expected. They were Sandlords, after all.

The sense of urgency abated, and he felt his weariness wash over him again, somehow even stronger than before.

"Ah," said the voice. "Dammit."

Mm?

"Well," the voice went, "I suppose this is fine, for now. You do need your rest. But there are many more scenes like this playing out--and far worse ones. The ruination of our ancestral homeland is a matter that cannot be ignored, forgotten, or forgiven. I would have you recover quickly, Young Lion, and not only rescue our scattered kin but take vengeance for them, as well."

So many words. Agh. Too much to think about.

The voice sighed.

Asad did not understand why.

"If your condition degrades much further, I fear I may need to do something quite drastic."

Degrade? Condition? Was he not resting? How could anything degrade while resting?

"A complicated matter, that. You must stay with me in order to recover, but the longer you stay, the more my soul will merge with yours. Which is not my desire. You must become a conduit for my power, not a vessel for my soul. No matter what anyone says, I am not a god. My

flaws are too great and too numerous. I would not have you inherit them.””

"3639

His flaws? Asad still didn't understand. This was all too much. Far, far too much. He wanted to sleep. Or was he already sleeping? Was that not what was meant by resting?

Agh. He'd never felt so tired.

“Oh no. I fear I am failing to restore your strength and instead merely sapping it away. Damn my weakness. Even now, my failures continue to grow.”

Huh?

“This cannot happen. I will not allow it. Come along, Young Lion. You are not ready for where I am about to take you, but I do not see a better option. Clearly, you cannot stay with me, nor can I return you in your current state.”

Ugh, so many new questions were bubbling rebelliously into his exhausted mind. They were going somewhere new? Why? In fact, where were they now? What was wrong with this place?

“We will go to a place that I have found along the path of my great search. I do not know if things will be better or worse for you there, but I promise that I will do my utmost to protect you.”

Protect? From...? Hmm...

The voice sighed. “Alas, our ever-beleaguered kin. I fear you must abide these trials for some time yet.”

--++--++--

The blazing heat of the Undercrust was unfamiliar to him. He'd heard the stories from his cousins about this place, but actually being here for the first time was something else.

If only it had been under better circumstances.

He'd always intended to visit this place eventually, but never had he thought that the first time would be as a result of fleeing for his life.

From the mayhem at the Golden Fort.

Even now, all these weeks later, he still couldn't quite wrap his head around it. Tensions had been building between Sair and Calthos for a while, but it had been so slow. Nothing ever really happened. At least, that was what it had felt like. It was just something that all the adults had been talking about ad nauseum, an ever-present fear that he and the other young Sandlords had grown accustomed to.

Grown to ignore, perhaps.

And then everything went to hell.

The seat of his people's power, the Golden Fortress of Kuros, came under attack by the forces of Calthos and Abolish. By the fabled Mad Demon himself.

In his entire life, Taj Dagher had never been so terrified as he had on that day."

"3640

It had been a complete madhouse. Explosions and earthquakes. Battles breaking out in the middle of crowds. Blood and screaming and running and fighting.

Worse still, he knew now in retrospect that he himself had been among the luckier ones, too. Not only did he manage to escape, but the timing of things could have been far worse for him. He'd only been visiting the Golden Fort for a few days, serving as an apprentice to his much older cousin, who happened to be Lord Hamza's second son. If he hadn't been at the Golden Fort, he would have been back in Zebul, most likely in his little hut along the outskirts of Qalatin Castle.

And Zebul was much closer to the border with Calthos than Kuros was. If things had been that bad at the Golden Fort of all places, then he couldn't even imagine what Qalatin looked like now. He just hoped it was still standing. And that he would see it again, one day.

He'd been trying not to dwell on it too much, though. His reaper, Orolix,



had been trying to keep him focused. News would come in time. Whenever they managed to get back up to the surface, most likely. It was more important to stay alert.

Logically, Taj knew the reaper was right. And he tried to listen.

But it was so difficult. He knew only too well that he wasn't the correct person for this job. This wasn't supposed to be his role.

Thus far, Taj had only ever been meant to observe and learn from his more experienced kin. And to do as he was told. Silently.

And most certainly, he had not been meant to end up in the custodianship of Ivan, the Salesman of Death.

But that is exactly what happened. Instead of returning home to Zebul, he'd been tasked with protecting a frozen head and thrown into a giant hole.

Far from ideal, to say the least.

Even now, he still didn't know what had become of his Hahl. Of his cousins or even Lord Hamza himself. The group of people he'd managed to escape with into the Undercrust had been hounded incessantly by Abolish pursuers, and now, there were only a handful of them left.

At this point, he was the most powerful warrior in their little troupe.

Which was terrifying.

His elder cousin, Jafar Dagher, had been the one leading them until only two days ago, when their pursuers had caught up to them again."  
"3641

There was an image burned into Taj's brain now. An image of Jafar and his reaper, Karexa, standing there, facing down the enemy alone so that the rest of them could continue fleeing.

He didn't think he would ever forget that man. In fact, if he somehow lived through this, he was going to make his cousin's incredible bravery known to everyone he could. Somehow.

But that was a task for his future self. For now, he was still dedicating all of his effort to surviving their current predicament.

And while he was not one given to looking on the bright side, he knew that things were not yet hopeless. They'd managed to evade their pursuers this long, after all. And that was no fluke. His cousin and the reapers had taught him much about the nature of these sorts of chases.

The core problem, as one might expect, was the enemy reapers. Once they memorize their targets' soul signatures, a chase becomes much more dangerous. It becomes virtually impossible to lose them via hiding spots in the topography, and when they focus, they can sense souls across truly vast distances.

In the face of such problems, the group had been employing various methods of countering. None had worked flawlessly thus far, but there had been downtime here and there. Opportunities to sleep and eat, even. Luxuries for servants in the thick of battle, Orolix said.

Their first method of counter had been to infuse their souls into the environment as much as possible. If the soul power and ardor in the topography were too minuscule to interfere with an enemy reaper's sense, then the solution was to add more. As much as possible. Spread it around and lead them on a wild goose chase. It helped even more when they split up and sent the enemy in different directions.

But splitting up was dangerous, too, of course. And naturally, it couldn't last forever. Infused soul power dissipated over time, and it also took considerable skill to infuse it into objects across larger and larger distances. So in the end, that trick wasn't much use when the enemy reapers were already far away. In fact, it might've just made things worse, like leaving behind a giant trail of blood for them to follow. It was better for confusing the senses of reapers who were already close by.

When they already had more distance to work with, the better method was to hunt down localized sources of ardor. Which, mercifully, the Undercrust had in much greater abundance than the surface. He could understand why the decision was made to flee down here."

"3642

In particular, magma pools were their best friends. The ardor that emanated from those things could sometimes be so strong that it entirely blinded reapers who got too close.

Of course, that also made the pools terribly dangerous for their own reapers. Multiple times, Taj had noticed Orolix visibly hesitate when they were near one. While reapers didn't exactly feel "pain" in the same way that corporeal beings did, they apparently still regarded being incinerated in a pool of magma as quite a horrible way to die.

"Nightmarishly painful, just in a different sense," was how Orolix had described it to him.

He hadn't yet gotten clarification on that. Nor was he even sure that he wanted it.

Beyond that, there was only one other method of hiding that they had been using--and even then, they'd been rather reluctant to do so. Not only was it sometimes ineffective; it was also dangerous, for them and those around them.

Because it involved crowds.

When all else failed, trying to hide their souls among a large group of other souls was an option. Unless a soul was particularly powerful, reapers would often have trouble singling it out, even if they'd already memorized its soul signature.

But of course, if they still managed to--and if they were of Abolish--then a fight would immediately break out, and civilian casualties were all but guaranteed.

Taj and his kin hated resorting to that tactic. They'd been trying to avoid it as much as they could, but it had saved their lives in the city of Karetito. And it had gotten some hapless Hun'Kui passersby killed in the city of Noromonga.

It made for a difficult decision now, because according to Orolix, they were nearing another city called Acacero.

This current network of caves they were in had thus far proved quite barren. No magma pools to try to conceal themselves near, nor any convenient ardor-infused rock formations to provide cover for a while.

And hell, even if there were, the enemy had clearly grown wise to those tricks by now. They wouldn't pass by any magma or large

accumulations of ardor without investigating those areas thoroughly. Perhaps that was why their pursuit had seemed to slow for a little while there, as they'd become extra cautious.

Regardless, it wasn't worth the risk. And being the strongest member of this group now, the others were looking to him to make that decision now.

So they kept on toward Acacero, where he suspected that things would either go well or very, very badly."

"3643

It took another full day to get there. Perhaps they could have gone faster if they were taking a more obvious path--one of the bigger tunnels, for example--but they preferred to stick to the narrower ones. The abundance of the ardor in the rock made it more difficult for the enemy to keep track of them here, and if they got lucky, the bastards might even lose track of them completely.

That was the hope, anyway. It hadn't exactly worked out so far.

Taj struggled to keep himself steady. On task. In charge.

There were only five others left, not including each of their reapers, but he could see the way they were all watching him now. Looking to him for leadership.

What a farce. He was barely old enough to withstand the heat down here unaided. He could barely protect himself, let alone anyone else. Four of the others were constantly fighting the heat, perpetually sweating and being clearly uncomfortable. A couple were even in visible pain, having to constantly materialize--or have materialized for them--a cooled metal coating.

The last one, Juda Mateen, was only better off because he'd apparently managed to snag a climate suit for himself before escaping.

At first, there'd been some noticeable resentment toward him from the others. Taj had thought that it was simple jealousy--and perhaps it was, in part--but after listening to an earlier argument, he realized that there was a bit more to it.

Juda wearing that suit meant that a non-servant wasn't wearing it.

In other words, he'd taken the place of a non-combatant who could have potentially escaped down here with them.

But in recent days, that resentment seemed to have died off. And Taj could understand why. If it wasn't clear before, it certainly was now.

Any non-servant that might have taken Juda's suit would almost certainly be dead by now. And they couldn't have afforded to slow down for them, either. If they'd tried, they would've all been killed a long time ago.

Or at least, that was how Taj saw things. Maybe he was overthinking it. Maybe the others were just too tired to fight among themselves now. He certainly wouldn't blame them if that was the case. Even on the rare occasions when they were able to sleep, he never felt rested after waking up."

"3644

Before they even reached Acacero, however, the reapers began giving them warnings about something being strange with the city.

'What in the world am I sensing?' said Orolix publicly.

'I sense it, too,' said Juda's reaper, name of Arigaja. 'What is that? A forest? Impossible. We didn't go in the wrong direction, did we?'

'Even if we had, there still shouldn't be a forest down here. At least, not that kind of forest.'

The uncertainty made little difference, though. Everyone already knew that they couldn't turn back. Whatever was awaiting them in Acacero, they would have to deal with it.

When the city finally came into view, the reapers' questions only seemed to increase.

The cave let out onto a ledge with a narrow, winding path that led down onto a major road below. But the view that the ledge provided was truly something else. Taj's hazel eyes widened as he absorbed the scene before them.

It did indeed appear to be a forest in the middle of the city, trees as tall

as any of the buildings. But they glowed green and white, illuminating the greater cavern in which the city sat, revealing many other tunnels high up on the walls and even in the ceiling.

There were great rocky pillars, too, but they were less apparent than in the previous cities they'd passed through. These ones were adorned with more glowing foliage, and not all of them reached all the way up to the ceiling, either. Some of them merely plateaued higher up and had buildings of their own on top of them.

In fact, one plateau in particular was more noticeable than the rest. Right there in the center of the city, it didn't rise as high as the others, but an enormous structure sat upon it. What was that? A stadium? No.

He had to squint at this distance, but he could see turreted towers. Long banners hanging from battlements.

That was a fortress. A palace, even.

The trees all around its exterior made it luminous and verdant, the vibrant centerpiece of the entire city.

'...This city is not how I remember it,' said Arigaja.

'I've never seen this type of flora in the Undercrust,' said one of the other reapers, name of Elbadon.

Taj was as confused as anyone, but his mind was still consumed with a sense of urgency. "We can't stand around here gawking," he said, starting down the pathway. "Let's go see things up close."

"3645

As they descended the steps and neared the edge of the city, Taj began to feel a change in the air. And smell it, too.

This familiar freshness. It wasn't quite the same as being back up on the surface, but it was definitely much more comparable to it. Thus far, the Undercrust's air had been, at best, stagnant and stale. At worst, it had been filled with deadly fumes that threatened to burn his eyes out of his skull and his lungs out of his chest.

And for a few of the others in their group, those fumes had succeeded in doing both. More than once, even.

But this place. This feeling. It was hard to call it comforting when the temperature was still so damn high, but after everything they'd been through lately, he couldn't think of a more appropriate word.

If nothing else, it was certainly a welcome surprise. Almost like the city itself was inviting them in.

The first proper street that they found seemed to be empty. No Hun'Kui in sight yet.

That was both good and bad, Taj felt. Good because it meant no one was barring them entry and bad because it meant there were no crowds to hide in. They had to keep pushing. Acacero wouldn't make for very good cover if they couldn't find anyone.

Whatever had caused the city look like this, Taj prayed to the Eternal Oasis that it hadn't made all the inhabitants evacuate.

'Can you sense anyone in these buildings?' asked Taj privately.

'They are infused with ardor, so no,' said Orolix. 'And these trees are not helping, either. Everything is so clouded.'

Not what he wanted to hear.

The number of trees only seemed to be increasing as they continued onward. Denser and denser forest. Soon, he could see the root systems taking over the ground. Where before it had been only rock and pavement, now roots covered the ground.

And yet it was not entirely gnarled and uneven. The edges of the road were indeed so, but the middle remained perfectly smooth and flat. Maybe even more than before. Little saplings were sprouting along the edges, too, providing an extra line of illumination for the road.

In spite of himself, Taj slowed his pace a bit in order to inspect the wall of glowing trees more closely. And he saw something peculiar. Or thought he did, at least.

The lights made it hard to tell, but he could've sworn the bark had a slight sheen to it. The metallic kind. But there was clearly wood in there, too. He could see that much. And even feel it, upon reaching out and touching it."

"3646

‘You shouldn’t go touching strange materials,’ said Orolix, still wrapped in the echo of privacy. ‘These trees could be dangerous.’

He supposed that was true, but it was a bit late to be fussing over it. He gripped the tree a little harder. Yeah. Definitely felt like there was metal in there. ‘This town could be an even better hiding spot than we hoped for,’ he said, not taking his eyes away from the greenery. ‘All the buildings and trees will conceal us from the enemy.’

‘True,’ said Orolix. ‘But that may also make things much worse for the people here. If our pursuers have proved one thing to us, it is that they are not going to give up. If they truly lose track of us, I have no doubt that they will begin to tear this place apart until they find us again.’

Damn. Couldn’t really argue with that logic. And this group wasn’t exactly in a position to protect the hapless citizenry, either.

As they continued onward, deeper into the city, Taj wrestled with his uncertainty.

Agh. What should they be doing here? Hiding might work for a little while, but it clearly wasn’t a long-term solution. He tried to think. He’d had discussed their objective with Orolix repeatedly on the way here--just as the reapers had discussed it with each other--and it was clear enough that they needed to get topside again, but how were they to accomplish that, precisely?

The reapers knew of various great holes that led back up to the surface, but actually reaching them was another matter. Not to mention, the closest ones were also the most dangerous. There was apparently one that led up to the Swallow’s Nest in Egas, but did they really want to return to Sair, right now? Certainly not. That would be a death sentence, unless they somehow got confirmation that Egas had not been overrun by Abolish.

Furthermore, according to the reapers, the chances of finding a great hole that was not already under someone’s control were virtually nil. And since all of the holes that the Sandlords controlled could not be trusted, it was not going to be a simple matter to secure safe passage through one.

But he supposed that was a starting point, at least. If they were going to have to parley with or beg someone powerful in order to get back up



to the surface, then the first task was to find such a person, no?"  
"3647

And to that end, that big fortress in the middle of the city might've been their best bet.

After a while longer of letting his thoughts stew in his own mind, he decided to make clear his intentions to the others.

None argued with his reasoning, not even the reapers.

Now they just needed to find a way up there. A materialized platform would certainly do the trick, but that would also make quite the spectacle. Taj didn't want to resort to that just yet. There had to be a method by which normal citizens could reach that palace.

Or maybe not.

Even as they began to near the base of the grand plateau on which their new objective sat, they still did not encounter a single soul. The overgrown streets had ample space for enormous crowds, yet they remained entirely empty.

It made him uneasy. Perhaps they really had evacuated. And if so, why? What in the world had happened here?

Finally, something caught his eye at the base of the massive plateau. A tunnel. It was narrower than the street but still large enough for vehicles to enter. Perhaps it would lead them to a lift or staircase, though he already wasn't looking forward to making such a trek on foot. That had to be, what? Two hundred meters? He'd seen skyscrapers that weren't as tall as this plateau.

Oh, man.

Nothing for it, though. They had to go.

Before they could reach the tunnel, however, Orolix's urgent voice rang out publicly. 'Behind us!'

Taj turned just in time to see a steaming, car-sized boulder clobber one of his companions. He didn't have time to panic, either, because he could already see another one coming for him.

Rather than trying to dodge, he instantly dropped to the ground and slapped it with his right hand, materializing a metal slope for the boulder to launch off of.

Which it did. It sailed straight into the rock wall of the plateau behind them and bounced off, leaving only a scuff mark behind.

Taj had grown quite familiar with such boulders over the course of this long chase. It was composed of the element gallium, which had a low enough melting point that the boulder couldn't hold its shape for long here in the Undercrust.

Which might've seemed like a good thing, but it made these fights extra messy the longer they drew out, with liquid gallium splashing all over the place."

"3648

And that was no trivial matter, because in every previous encounter, this enemy--whose name he still did not know--had used the splashing to conceal further attacks. The freshly melted gallium would be cool to the touch and largely harmless, but when they tossed some boiling hot gallium into the mix, too, it became much more difficult to simply ignore the splashing.

Not to mention, against Taj's aluminum materialization--and many other metals for that matter--gallium had a corrosive effect. Normally, such corrosion required considerable time to take effect--days or weeks--but whoever was wielding it now was able to enhance its reactive properties, causing embrittlement to occur within seconds.

Taj knew they had to flee. These attacks were just from one of their pursuers, who'd apparently grown confident enough to not even bother waiting for their comrades to catch up. He could see the figure in the distance, surging toward them on a moving platform from far down the street.

Taj raised a large aluminum wall. It wouldn't stop them, of course, but it would block their sight, at least. While there was only one enemy to worry about, their odds of escape were still good. He grabbed one of the others by the hand, shouted for everyone to follow, and began sprinting for the open tunnel.

Going in there was a risk. If it was a dead end, then they would be forced to fight their way back out again. So to help mitigate that danger, he raised more walls behind them as he ran, making sure to provide plenty of space between each one so as not to accidentally trap any of his kin.

He aimed to create a maze, to further obstruct the enemy's vision. If it worked, then their pursuer might not even realize that they'd gone into the tunnel for quite some time, which was all they really needed, right now: time.

Great crashing sounds arrived from behind him, which was probably from his materialized walls getting destroyed. He thought he could hear even more than that, though, like that of buildings collapsing. He couldn't afford to turn around and look, though. The walls were obscuring his vision, and even if something really important was going on back there, Orolix would warn him.

Before they could reach the tunnel, however, an alarm blared. Its ear-splitting pitch was enough to make Taj flinch and stagger, and he was not the only one. He could see his kin doing the same--and even the reapers, too, writhing in the air."

"3649

And before anyone could recover, an earthquake arrived.

From there, Taj lost track of what was happening. His feet no longer touched the ground. Rocks flew up around him. Something passed by his vision. A hulking thing, the size of a bus. And there was a loud voice in the air, but it was distorted as through a bullhorn, and he couldn't make out what it was saying in the slightest. Whether that was because of said distortion or because the voice was simply speaking an entirely foreign language, he also could not tell.

But he did get plenty of time to think about it, because he abruptly found himself stuck fast, suspended in midair and unable to move any of his limbs.

He didn't understand. Was this Abolish's doing? It took a few more moments of futile struggling before he realized that he wasn't merely stuck: there was something wrapped around him. Something huge and

serpentine.

Something breathing.

It made a low noise, too. An almost clicking sound. Repeating, too.

Where had the alarm gone? He didn't hear it, anymore. A new voice arrived, however. This one was much crisper, though he still could not understand what it was saying.

It was coming from above, which made him look up to see a Hun'Kui man there, sitting atop whatever this... hulking thing was. The man was shouting at him, and Taj had no idea how to respond, so he merely said nothing.

Then the aluminum maze that Taj had been building came crashing down as another gallium boulder flew through multiple walls.

Another hulking serpent appeared in Taj's vision and blocked the flying boulder before it got any closer.

Taj still didn't understand. It had blocked it with its body--and been no worse for wear, seemingly.

Then, finally, as he saw the boulder be quickly absorbed into the monster's body, he realized that these were not serpents at all.

These were worms.

He'd never seen one before, but he'd certainly heard the stories. There were countless different types of them. The more infamous and terrifying ones were supposedly like gargantuan mountains of sludge, but these ones here, while still quite large, seemed much more normal. He could feel its coarse flesh against his own. It did feel rather sticky and gross, but it certainly wasn't sludge.

The worm holding him began to move, and so he went along for the ride."

"3650

He got a surprisingly good view of the action from this strange position. He couldn't comprehend how this giant thing was able to move so fast with part of its body still coiled around him. It felt like speeding down

the road on a motorcycle, and when yet another gallium boulder came flying toward them, the worm's long tail surged forward and spiked it right back at the attacker like a volleyball.

They'd gotten close enough now for Taj to make out the look of surprise on the Abolish servant's face just before his own boulder clobbered him. The rock dug into the road and stuck there, hissing with steam.

If the Abolisher was still alive under there, then he would probably need a while to recover and dig himself free, but apparently, he wasn't going to get that much time.

A third worm appeared from over the line buildings along the right side of the street and went straight for the embedded boulder, coiling around it and smothering it. He could see another Hun'Kui riding atop it.

And Taj squinted, because he again found himself questioning what his eyes were telling him. A dark ooze emerged from the worm's body, coating the rock and seeping down into in the road.

Was that the fabled sludge? It must've been. So even though these worms were smaller, they could still generate sludge like the bigger ones.

He was both fascinated and repulsed.

A string of explosions arrived from down the road, along with a flurry of flaming acid and flying material. They pelted the oozing worm that was presumably trying to retrieve and capture the buried servant.

Taj saw the new attackers. They were still rather far away, but they must have been the rest of the Abolishers, having finally caught up.

The attacks seemed largely ineffectual against the preoccupied worm, but they still did not last very long, as Taj saw worms with riders appear over the building and convene on the enemy. Within moments, the servants were being jackhammered into the ground and smothered.

It didn't take much longer before they were restrained, much like himself.

And Taj was finally beginning to get the picture. These worm riders were some kind of peacekeeping force here. And clearly quite

powerful.

The rider for his worm was talking to him again, this time with less intensity."

"3651

Taj reached out to his reaper. 'Orolix? Where are you?'

'I made it to the tunnel. I'm hiding. What's your status?'

'I've been captured by the locals. They're talking to me, but I can't understand their language.'

'I see.'

And Taj waited, but the reaper said nothing more. 'I sure could use a translator over here, Orolix...'

'Hmm.'

'Orolix...'

'Taj.'

'You're not abandoning me, right?'

'Of course not.'

And Taj waited again for elaboration which never arrived. 'You're abandoning me.'

'I'm not. I'm tactically retreating in order to get help and rescue you later. So just hang in there until I return.'

Taj took a deep breath and sighed. The worm rider was still talking to him, and he was still not understanding a single word. He could see the other worm riders moving closer now, having apparently mopped up the Abolishers already.

Yep. He'd never learned the names of the Abolishers, but he could certainly recognize their faces, and now they were all stuck fast in moving prisons of worm flesh, just like him. They didn't look too happy about it, either, with a couple of them shouting and yelling at their

respective riders.

'The locals have captured the Abolish servants, too,' said Taj. 'Orolix, if they can speak Hunese, they can lie to these guys and convince them that we're in the wrong.'

'Doubtful. I'm sure the Hun'Kui could tell who the aggressors were in that fight. You didn't even attack anyone.'

The reaper was grasping at excuses now, Taj felt. 'I don't think these Hun'Kui will hurt you, Orolix.'

'Better to not take the risk.'

The worst part was, he knew the reaper had a point. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but this was the safest course of action for them.

But not necessarily for everyone else. 'If they take Ivan's head from me and free him, it won't be good for anyone. I at least need someone who can tell them not to do that.'

'Mrgh...'

The group started moving in unison. Taj strained to see if any of the other reapers had been captured, but he couldn't tell for sure. There were even more worms present than he'd first thought, and their hulking bodies were blocking much of his view. They seemed to be heading toward the big plateau, though, so maybe this wasn't the worst thing in the world.

'Okay, I'll teach you a simple Hunese phrase you can say,' said Orolix.

Of course. Taj just sighed again."

"3652 -- CCCI.

Chapter Three Hundred One: 'Gentle listener, prepare thy Path...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Hector was anxious. At this point, it was starting to seem like the reports from Vantalay were being purposely designed to test his

patience. The Rainlords kept saying that they would be returning soon. Soon. Always soon.

Apparently, they'd encountered another Vanguardian field marshal, this one named Graves, but things had worked out with the guy. It was nothing to worry about. Everything was under control.

Supposedly.

The more they told him that, the less inclined he was to believe it.

Not to mention, they'd consulted him for his opinion about an offer from the freaking Monster of the East--who'd apparently popped over there, too. But no, it was fine. Nothing to worry about. They hadn't accepted that offer.

But now there was a new offer, this one from Graves. And they'd decided to stay a bit longer.

And Zeff was still missing, of course.

Ugh.

But what was he to do about any of it? He couldn't justify leaving Warrenhold, right now. Not with Bloodeye still being a factor. While it seemed unlikely that another attack would arrive, they couldn't simply assume that it wouldn't. Especially if Bloodeye somehow caught wind that Hector had left the country. That might just provoke an attack all on its own.

Or at least, that was Garovel's reasoning. And Hector found it difficult to disagree with him.

He hated feeling so powerless. So uncertain. He much preferred when Warrenhold felt like a place of comfort for him, not when it was starting to make him worried and stir crazy.

He could make some trips out to Lorent, though, especially to talk to Abbas about his progress with the Candle. The Sunsmith had been working on it whenever Hector visited--and sometimes looking exhausted to the point of collapse.

More than once, Hector had all but forced the man to take a break and have a meal with him.

"Thank you for doing this again," said Raheem Saqqaf, one of Abbas'



many sons. "And I apologize for him. I know this must be a hassle for you."

"Don't worry about it," said Hector. They were standing outside together on a grassy hill, a short distance away from the great tree that housed Cocora's Candle. "How's he been doing?"

Raheem looked toward the tree with a heavy breath. "He's still hardly letting anyone into the workshop with him. For our own safety, he says. But he looks more haggard by the day. I am not sure he is even sleeping."

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"3653

"I'll have another talk with him," said Hector, making for the tree. He was wearing his darker armor with the standard gray iron coating that allowed him to still fly in it, but as he neared the entrance, he let the coating melt away with dematerialization. One of the other reasons for his semi-frequent visits to this place was to get Abbas to examine this

strange new material. Thus far, results had been largely inconclusive with Abbas telling him to come back in a few days.

Haqq Najir, of course, had not stopped pressuring him to buy new, incredibly expensive scientific equipment in order to supposedly make that examination process easier. At first, Hector had thought the man was simply spouting lies in order to get some cool new toys to play with--and in fact, he still thought that--but given how much trouble even the Lord Abbas Saqqaf was apparently having with determining what this stuff was made of... well, maybe Haqq wasn't completely full of shit.

He still wasn't planning on blowing that much money on it, though.

He pushed on the door to open it, but it hardly budged.

Huh.

Strange.

Abbas had installed a modern doorknob and locking mechanism shortly after their discovery of the place, but this was the first time Hector had noticed Abbas actually bothering to use it, probably because he was always here, anyway.

He tried turning the knob, only to realize it actually wasn't locked. It turned just fine, and yet the door still barely moved.

Raheem was approaching from behind. "Apologies. I forgot to mention that he seems to have barricaded himself in this time. We didn't want to break into your property without your permission, lord."

What the hell? Why would Abbas barricade the door?

This didn't seem right. There must've been something else going on here.

Hector concentrated on what the Scarf could tell about what was going on behind this door.

Whoa.

"...He didn't barricade the door," said Hector. "At least, not with furniture."

"Lord? What do you mean?"

“The room is overgrown with plants,” said Hector. “They’re everywhere.” He was trying to sense Abbas’ shape, but the chamber was such a tangled mess of branches and vines and leaves that he was having trouble.

Then he realized the other reason why it was so difficult.

Abbas was on the floor, not moving.

“Shit!” Hector took a quick step backward, gently pushing Raheem out of the way as he revved up a bladed disc into orbit around himself. He added heat to it, wanting it almost molten, and then he loosed it on the door.”

"3654

The red-hot blade cut through the solid wood and branches behind it, flying upward in one clean stroke and leaving a smoldering crevice in its wake. It went higher than he’d intended and gouged its way up through the rest of the trunk and canopy as well, but he was of no mind to worry about that, right now.

But apparently, Raheem was. “Lord, you set the sacred tree on fire!”

Aw, fuck. “Er, take care of that for me, please!” Hector pushed through the breach in the door with his armor and created a man-sized hole for himself. More branches barred his path, but they were similarly weakened and able to be walked through with brute force.

The branches were less dense near the great orb, instead replaced by an overabundance of snaking vines.

Vines which were moving, he noticed. They lashed against his armor, leaving behind a sticky residue that slowed him down--and stunk, too. It smelled so foul that he thought he might vomit. He choked as he tried to hold his breath and not gag, but then his eyes started to burn, too.

Thankfully, Garovel was still cozied up inside his armor from the flight over here.

‘Can you numb my sense of smell for me?’ thought Hector.

‘Uh. That’s an unusual one, but yeah, I think so. Lemme try.’

‘Pain, too, please,’ he said through his searing tears.

Then it was gone, and he could breathe again. He could also feel his throat and eyes tingling with a very familiar sensation that he felt whenever dealing with acid, but at least it didn’t hurt. It sure would later, though.

The vines were still being a problem, however. And now that he could breathe and think more clearly, he had an idea.

“Candle!” he shouted angrily. “It’s me! I know you can understand me! I’m not here to hurt you! Let me reach Abbas! I need to check on him!”

And it took a moment, but to his surprise, the writhing vines began to slacken and then settle down entirely.

He was still covered in goo, though, and had to trudge the rest of the way toward the Lord Saqqaf as if he were suddenly a hundred pounds heavier thanks to how sticky it was. He realized that he probably could have dematerialized his armor safely and then immediately rematerialized it, but he wanted to play it safe, just in case the Candle decided to go berserk again.

He also figured that he would owe it an apology after this, but that could wait."

"3655

When he finally reached Abbas, he confirmed that the man was indeed unconscious. Moreover, he saw that his reaper, Worwal, was right there alongside him, reduced to a formless puddle on the floor.

He knew it was not typically a good idea to move people with unknown injuries, but this was a servant and reaper, and he was worried that this environment could have been draining their soul power or something.

‘Sucking their souls out of their still-living bodies’ was how Abbas had once described it to him.

So he grabbed them both. With some vigor from Garovel, he hoisted the Lord Saqqaf over his shoulder and brought him and Worwal outside, where he laid them both down on the open grass.

He looked over and saw Raheem taking care of the fire as requested, having bounded up the tree like a leopard in order to smother the flames with the thick robe that he had been wearing.

Huh. Did the man not have a better way of dealing with fire? Ah, wait, no, that made sense. He recalled that Raheem's power was also materialization, but it was potassium. If he'd tried to use that, it might've set the whole tree ablaze.

The man seemed to be managing just fine, though. Only a bit of smoke remained, and Raheem was already patting his blackened robe down. More Saqqafs were running up to the tree as well.

They'd set up an encampment for themselves not terribly far away, concealed by the edge of the Imara Forest. Abbas had wanted to stay close to the Candle but also remain hidden from any unexpected visitors.

The various Saqqafs divided themselves between the tree and Hector. He recognized one of Abbas' granddaughters, Ghaliya, approaching first. She was a mature woman with only a few lines among her smooth features and a bit of gray in her otherwise brown hair. All in all, she looked older than Abbas, which must have been a strange feeling.

She asked after her grandfather's well-being, of course, to which Hector had no real answers. She bade him carry them both over to the encampment, and Hector did so.

He did not stay long, however. Abbas seemed to be out cold, and judging by Worwal's visibly concerning condition, the two of them would not be waking for a while.

For now, he wanted to check on the Candle's condition. When he returned to it, he found the Saqqafs gathered outside, discussing their options."

"3656

Raheem seemed relieved upon seeing Hector approaching. "Lord Goffe. How would you like us to proceed? I do not think my father would want us venturing in there without him, even if only to investigate what happened."

"He told us endlessly how dangerous it was," said Munir at Raheem's side. Munir was much younger, though it hardly showed by appearance alone. "We should wait for him to wake up before doing anything rash."

"We cannot just sit here," said Jibril, the balding man on their right. He was even younger than the others--a great-great grandson of Abbas, as Hector recalled--and yet he looked older than everyone here. "Didn't you see the state Worwal was in? They will be out for days, at least."

Hector could understand their reticence, especially after seeing what had happened to Abbas, but he was already in agreement with Jibril here. "It's alright," said Hector. "I'll go in first. I already have a... rapport with the Candle. Wait for my word before following."

Raheem returned a nod. "As you say, lord."

Munir seemed less certain, however. "And what if you also fall unconscious, Lord Goffe?"

"He won't," said Jibril. "He already went in there once to retrieve him."

"Briefly, yes," said Munir, "but we have no idea what prolonged exposure may do. If you are to go, lord, then you should not be alone."

"Hmm," hummed Hector. The man might've had a point. But Hector really didn't want to put any of them at risk when the situation was still so uncertain. "Alright, here's what I'll do: I'll go in alone, but I'll keep a materialized orb hovering outside the door. As long it remains hovering, you'll know I'm still conscious. Sound good?"

And Munir took a moment, but he nodded, as did the others.

Jibril reached into a pouch inside his robe and pulled out a radio, handing it to Hector. "This probably won't be necessary, but take it just in case."

Hector did so. And without further ado, he walked over to the open hole where the door used to be and reentered the tree on his own. Privately, he asked Garovel if he wanted to wait outside with the others, but the reaper refused, of course.

'I actually feel safest inside this spiffy new armor of yours,' the reaper told him.

Hector didn't argue. Without knowing more about what they were dealing with here, it was anyone's guess what the safest course of action really was."

"3657

Inside the tree again, he took his time. It wasn't making him feel any different compared to outside, and now that he'd refreshed his armor to get rid of the goo, it was much easier to move around in here, too.

The overgrown branches were still a problem, though--even moreso now, because he was reluctant to cut a swath through them, in case they were in some way important to the Candle itself. Which reminded him.

"Uh. Hey there, Candle, um... sorry about before. I didn't mean to hurt you. I was just trying to reach Abbas quickly."

As ever, the Candle remained silent.

He hadn't actually expected it to respond with noise, but some wiggling vines or branches wouldn't have been out of the question. No such answer arrived, however.

Hmm. Was that a good or bad thing, he wondered? Because it seemed kind of bad.

Having spent so long inside that strange space with it, learning from it and about it, he felt a certain connection to it now. Granted, he hadn't actually communicated with it since returning to the real world.

In fact, now that he was thinking about it, that moment when it settled down had been the first time. He'd been talking to it like crazy during that so-called "soul coma," but ever since waking up, he hadn't talked to it at all. He hadn't even really tried, either. He'd just taught Abbas everything he'd learned about its operation.

Maybe that was a problem.

"Candle," Hector tried again as he pushed through the opening in the branches toward where Abbas had been, "I'm also sorry that I haven't been talking to you more during my visits. I hope you haven't been unhappy here."



Did Fusions Forges actually feel happiness or lack thereof? He had no fucking clue. It didn't seem outside the realm of possibility, though.

There was still no response.

He neared the big glass globe at the center of the room. Vines were draped all over it, almost like curtains, to the point where he couldn't quite see inside. He thought he spotted something, though, in between the gaps, but he had to get even closer first, which was difficult with the gnarled branches everywhere.

"...Did you and Abbas make something new?" asked Hector.

And at that, a shiver ran down the vines along the globe, as if a slight breeze had arrived from nowhere.

Huh. "...Can you show me?"

"3658

The branches directly in front of him shivered, then stretched themselves to create an opening for him--some to the point of even snapping apart and falling to the floor.

"Ah, geez," said Hector as he moved through the hole, "don't hurt yourself on my account."

The branches formed a narrow tunnel for him, arching around the great orb until leading him over to it.

He remembered seeing Agrian, one of the forge's two creators, standing here and working with it. This was the spot where the orb could open itself up and reveal its contents.

During all the time he'd observed Agrian using the Candle, he'd never seen this kind of overgrown state from the forge. He had to wonder what prompted it.

Well, clearly, even if Abbas succeeded in creating a powerful new artifact, some part of this must not have been intentional. Abbas wouldn't have been trying to exhaust himself and end up unconscious. So perhaps all these vines and branches were merely the result of things going a bit haywire at the end.

It might also make sense as to why he'd never seen Agrian end up in a state like this. Agrian's main problem, by Hector's estimation, was that the Candle itself ended up turning on him. Over time, it simply refused to work for him, anymore. Its power never went out of control for Agrian, probably because the Candle never allowed the man much access to its power in the first place.

Hmm.

Thinking about it like that was a little exciting, Hector felt. And worrying, too. Because if that was correct, then it would mean that the Lord Abbas Saqqaf had already accessed more power from the Candle than Agrian ever did. In fact, given the state of things, Abbas may have accessed more power than even he himself realized existed within the forge.

He remembered Abbas telling him about the Candle's "disposition." About its gentle nature. Calm and warm with an affinity for flame, not unlike a crackling fireplace.

As a perfectly straight crevice appeared in the great orb and the drooping green vines all trembled around the opening glass, Hector had to wonder what Abbas might say about the Candle's disposition now. If his opinion might have changed at all. Or if the Candle itself had changed, perhaps. That didn't seem impossible, either, at this point.

He stepped through the opening and pushed away the vines in order to finally get a clear view of the object waiting therein.

It was entangled on a pedestal of branches, and he still couldn't quite tell what he was looking at. Some sort of lamp? And was that a flame encased inside it? A lantern, then?"

"3659

Huh.

It was still concealed a bit by the branches, but it seemed quite small--and not terribly intimidating, either, when considering the state of Lord Abbas and the giant mess around here. Perhaps he'd allowed his expectations to build up a bit too much. Abbas was still relatively new to using the Candle, after all.

But this lantern. He remembered seeing Agrian make a lantern, too, actually. That one had looked quite different. Bigger, darkly metallic, and more rectangular, almost like an entire suitcase. This one was more like a snow globe in size--and a small one, too--barely big enough to fit in the palm of one's hand.

In fact... it looked rather like a tiny version of the great glass orb that had created it.

Which gave Hector pause. Hmm.

During his last few visits with Abbas, they'd discussed the man's work a bit. Naturally, with the Sunsmith looking so disheveled each time Hector showed up, the subject of why the guy was pushing so hard had come up.

And repeatedly, the answer had been that Abbas wanted to retake Sair as soon as possible. Which was fair enough, Hector thought. So Hector had stopped asking about it, more or less.

But there'd been one time when the answer had been a bit more elaborate than that. And now that Hector was looking at this object in front of them, he was beginning to think about that answer more.

"...It is my hope," Abbas had told him, "to establish an entirely new class of armored warriors. Warriors who will not require reapers in order to stand up and protect our land and our people. That has always been my end goal, ever since I began drafting up plans for my prototype suit."

Hector had blinked at that revelation. "You mean... you want to mass-produce your armor?"

"Ah. Well, that would be quite a few steps into the future. I do not know about that. Perhaps. At the moment, my foremost concern is rendering it usable by non-servants. My armor, if you have not already been able to tell, drills directly into my brain in order to establish a neural link. Obviously, this is only possible because I am a servant. Before any other strides can be made, I must find a way to change this."

And now, as he stepped closer to the wooden pedestal, sizing it up, Hector wondered how in the world a lantern might've been meant to address that problem. Or if it even was meant to. Maybe Abbas had pivoted and made something completely different.

That seemed unlikely, though. Knowing Abbas as he now did, that man did not strike Hector as the type to get distracted or change his mind very easily."

"3660

The gnarled pedestal cracked and then began to shrink, slowly retracting itself into the ground as it revealed the item more fully.

And gradually, Hector saw that there wasn't just a little glass globe. It also had a cord wrapped around it in an X-pattern, connecting the orb to a round metal band.

Which confused Hector further.

A tiny orb with a flame flickering inside. And a little circular hoop. What in the world was this thing supposed to do?

He probably shouldn't touch it. In fact, he knew he shouldn't.

But then again...

Abbas was unconscious and would likely remain so for at least a few days. And Hector wasn't about to let anyone else do something this stupid, so that would mean they would all have to remain in the dark about whatever this thing was until Abbas finally woke up and explained it to them.

Or he could just touch it and find out, right now. Maybe.

This was Abbas and the Candle's creation, after all. They wouldn't make something that could rip his soul out through his asshole or anything, right?

Hmm...

'Whatcha thinkin' there, buddy?' came Garovel's echoing question.

And Hector hesitated. Because he had a rather strong feeling that if he explained what was going through his head right now, then Garovel was actually not going to be the voice of reason here and tell him not to do it.

The reaper was gonna tell him to touch the hell out of that shit, wasn't

he?

'...I'm just wondering what to do now,' said Hector. 'I, uh... I probably shouldn't touch this thing until we know more about it, right?'

'Probably,' said Garovel.

And Hector just remained there, awkwardly standing in silence.

Apparently, Garovel couldn't bear it for very long. 'Or...' The thought went unfinished, though.

Not that Hector needed it to be. 'I shouldn't...'

'Of course not. Definitely. You're right. Let's just. Let it sit there. For the next week or so... taunting us with its mysteries...'

Hector exhaled a curt breath. 'Hold on. You're inside my armor. Can you even see this thing?'

'Oh, I found some nice little cracks to peer through. The slits you made in the faceguard in front of your mouth are actually quite helpful, because everywhere else is so closely fitted together that, if I didn't know better, I might've thought you somehow made this suit airtight.'

'Ah...'

'Anyway, touch it.'

'Garovel...'

'Go on. I'm sure it'll be fine.'"

"3661

'I swear you used to be the responsible one in this relationship,' said Hector. 'What ever happened to that, huh?'

'Well, yeah, in the beginning, I had to be. You didn't know shit about shit. I had to take care of you. Or try my best to, at least. But now that you're all sauced up and weirdly powerful, it actually frees me up to be my truest self, unburdened by things like worry for our combined well-being. Great, right?'

'I know you're being funny right now, but you're also just... telling the truth, aren't you?'

'They say jokes are funniest when they have a vein of truth to them.'

'Rrgh...'

'C'mon! Touch that shit. I know you want to.'

Hector shook his head. But he also reached his hand out. 'Why am I so stupid...?'

'Many a time throughout history, genius has been indistinguishable from stupidity.'

'Oh, really? Well, this is definitely not one of those times.' And his gauntlet made contact with the small globe.

Nothing happened.

'C'mon, we went over this with the mirror at the Gate. You gotta touch it with your bare hands.'

Inside his helmet, Hector's brow flattened, as did his mouth. 'As I recall, you told me to do that, and then it made no difference whatsoever.'

'Your recollection must be flawed, then.'

'Nope.'

'Hector, please. Leave the remembering of things to a professional. And do as I command of you, my loyal servant.'

'Oh, shut up.' He did dematerialize his right gauntlet, however. He braced himself, then pressed his bare hand against the orb.

A few long beats passed.

'...Anything?' asked Garovel.

'Uh. Well, it's warm.'

'How thrilling.'

'There is something weird here, though.'

‘Oh?’

‘Er, uh, not like with my senses or anything. It’s just that... I mean, the flame inside the orb is completely encased. There’s no hole for oxygen to get in, so how is it burning?’

‘Ah.’

‘Can ardor do that? Maintain a flame without oxygen?’

‘Dunno. Maybe the cord is letting oxygen in.’

Hector picked the orb up to inspect it more closely. As far as he could tell, the cord didn’t seem like a hollow tube. To the touch, it felt more like rope or string. And the metal band that it was connected to looked about as simple as could be. Featureless steel.

‘Hmm.’ Hector held up the band next, eyeing it closely. ‘Maybe I’m supposed to wear this? Like a bracelet or something?’”

"3662

‘That’s as good an idea as any,’ said Garovel. ‘Give it a try.’

Hector slipped his bare hand through the band. It was quite loose around his wrist, however, which made him think that this wasn’t quite right.

But then the band shrunk.

It fit snugly around his wrist. So snugly, in fact, that he couldn’t slide it back off.

“Uh-oh.”

‘Wow, did you fuck it up, already?’

‘I might’ve...’

‘Well, before we resort to chopping your arm off, why don’t you just take a moment to reassess? How are you feeling, right now?’

Hector shrugged. ‘Fine, I guess. No different.’

‘Hmm. And your senses? Your concentration? You could try focusing.

Or meditating.'

'I could,' said Hector with a bob of his head. 'I've got a different idea, though.' He took a breath and held his wrist up. "Hey, Candle, can you show me how to use this thing?"

And they waited, but no response arrived.

'Damn,' thought Hector. 'Guess that would've been too easy.'

'It was worth a try. You keep reminding me that the Candle has a mind of its own, and yet somehow, I keep forgetting. It just doesn't seem possible, but I guess that's the whole thing about Fusion Forges. Doing the impossible. Maybe you should try asking it something else. Something a little easier.'

Easier, huh? "...Can you show me how to activate it, at least?"

Still no response arrived, however.

'That wasn't much better, Hector. In fact, that was almost the same question.'

'Look, man, I don't know what I'm doing here.'

'I can tell. Why don't you just ask it to wake Abbas up for us while you're at it?'

A beat passed as Hector chewed on that. "Hey, Candle, could you wake Abbas up for us? And, er, heal Worwal, too?"

A response did not arrive for that, either.

'Hector, I was joking. There was no way that was going to work.'

'Yeah, but I mean... what if it did, though? You were just talking about how forges can do the impossible.'

'I feel like your expectations for the Candle are increasing with each new sentence out of your mouth.'

'It's called keeping an open mind, Garovel. Not that you'd know much about that.'

'Hoho,' laughed the reaper. 'Alright, Mr. Free Thinker. How about, instead of trying to get the Candle to do everything, you actually put that open mind of yours to work? Try focusing, like I said.'



'Fine...'

"3663

Hector concentrated, though he wasn't entirely sure on what. The orb? The flame? The metal band? He felt like he had to pick one.

He chose the flame. It seemed to be the centerpiece of the contraption, after all.

And as such, he did not close his eyes. Instead, he fixated them upon the fire.

It was certainly no normal flame. That much had already been obvious, but as he stared at it further, he began to sense something even stranger about it.

Yes. It had an aura.

Subtle. Quiet. But there, nonetheless.

How did that make sense, though?

As far as he knew, only living things possessed an aura.

Unless...

'Garovel, I think this thing might be alive.'

'Excuse me?'

'I think this little flame in here is alive. A living flame.'

'Huh.'

Hector waited. 'That's all you got for me? No ancient insights into the nature of life or whatever?'

'Well, I do sense ardor in it, but that doesn't confirm life. Rocks in the Undercrust, for example, are often chock full of ardor. Are you sure you're not mistaken?'

'Of course I'm not sure. I've never seen anything like this before. But it has an aura. And... I don't know... I just feel like it's... waiting.'

‘Waiting? For what?’

‘Good question. For me? The wearer? To do something? I’m not sure what else would make sense.’

‘Hmm. Okay. Let’s think about this, then. It’s not guaranteed, of course, but I’d say it’s a fair assumption that Abbas invented this object in order to assist with his goal of making powered armor usable by non-servants. That’s what he kept talking about when you asked him, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So... maybe this is some sort of... neural interface. Meant to safely connect a person’s brain to Abbas’ armor.’

Hector bobbed his head a little. ‘That sounds like a pretty good guess to me.’

‘Thank you. But if I’m right, then that might also mean that this thing actually does nothing on its own. And that we’re wasting our time, right now.’

‘Aww... In that case, I hope you’re wrong.’

‘Wow, Hector.’

‘Maybe we just need to connect it to something.’

‘Well, it’s probably meant to connect to Abbas’ armor and not anything else.’

‘You don’t know that. Maybe it could connect to all sorts of things.’

‘Oh yeah? Like what?’

‘Uh...’ Hector looked around the room from within the great glass orb. ‘I mean, there IS a big ass Fusion Forge just sitting here...’

Garovel was quiet a moment. ‘Y’know something, buddy? In terms of the most stupidly dangerous ideas we’ve ever contemplated, that might be the new number one. Genuinely, I am impressed, right now.’

"3664

‘Oh, come on,’ said Hector. ‘You’re exaggerating. I mean, yeah, okay, it’d be dangerous, but not THAT dangerous. Not number one.’

‘And you’re even downplaying it, too! It’s like you’re trying to outdo me!’

‘The Candle’s not that dangerous, Garovel. It’s calm and gentle.’

‘It just got done putting Abbas into a coma, Hector.’

‘I--er, I mean, we don’t know that was the Candle’s doing. He might’ve, y’know, just exhausted himself from overwork.’

‘Worwal was a puddle on the floor.’

‘So they both exhausted themselves. As a team. Which is what we are, right? A team.’

‘You’re really grasping at straws here, pal.’

Hector wanted to argue, but he couldn’t. Instead, he shrugged and shook his head. ‘I know.’

‘You really wanna connect to the Forge that badly?’

‘...Kinda, yeah. Who knows what we could learn from it?’

‘Didn’t it already teach you everything?’

‘No, I mean... well, maybe it did. I don’t actually know.’

‘Ah. More uncertainty. Great.’

‘Look, Garovel, it’s just... my time spent inside the Candle was... well, it was pretty useful and cool, okay? And it’d be amazing if we could establish a way to reconnect with it whenever we wanted. The sheer volume of information that the Candle has access to is... astounding. And I still don’t even know how it’s sourcing that information. If this works, we might be able to answer some important questions. And not just about the Candle itself but maybe even about Fusion Forges in general.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Don’t you want to know more? There’s a chance that you’d be able to come along with me this time.’

‘Now you’re just saying whatever you think I want to hear.’

Hector had to relinquish a nod at that. ‘I’m just trying to make my case. C’mon. I know you’re just as intrigued by the possibilities here as I am.’

‘Ugh. I really hate how right you are. None of these arguments should be convincing me, and yet here I am, ready to go along with whatever dumb shit you wanna try next.’ The reaper broke for a pause. ‘This better not be your weird aura bullshit influencing me, fucking with my sense of reasoning. I’m gonna be pissed if I find out that’s the case later.’

‘You say that as if you’re normally some paragon of rational thinking.’

‘I am. And fuck you for suggesting otherwise.’

Hector decided to step out of the big glass orb. He still didn’t really know how he was going to try and ‘connect’ this thing to the Candle, but somehow, he felt like doing so while inside the main workspace would’ve been even more stupid and dangerous. Like trying to start a car while sitting inside the engine."

"3665

He wanted to circle around the outside of the globe in order to perhaps find a better place to attempt this, but there were still branches all over the place, barring his path. Hacking through them didn’t seem worth the effort, and he supposed it wouldn’t make much difference, anyway. What did he expect to find? A hidden connection port somewhere in the globe’s base? Not likely.

This spot would have to do, he decided. And with one hand clutching the encased flame, he placed his other hand on the big orb.

He’d witnessed both Abbas and Agrian working with the Candle. This was how it was done. It was an entirely mental process.

Whether or not this would work for a non-integration user... well, he was about to find out. Technically, he’d done this before, with Abbas’ help while the Candle was still dormant. He hadn’t tried it since then, though.

He pressed his soul into the glass.

Instantly, he felt it. The full breadth of its physical volume. Like an extension of his own body, almost. And there was so much more, too, just waiting for him to push further.

But he was familiar with this feeling now, so he knew to hold himself back. To not walk off the metaphysical cliff in front of him.

But wow.

The Candle's power was clear to him. A radiant ball of concentrated energy, filling his mind's eye like a sun. Or a volcanic pit, perhaps.

It seemed quite tepid, somehow. Despite all that energy sitting there, it was still... quite calm. Maybe even... tired?

Ah. From creating a new object, of course. Right. It wanted to rest. The more he observed, the more obvious that feeling became.

Interesting. Thinking back to his observations of Agrian's work, he didn't recall the Candle ever appearing tired or drained. Which, he supposed, further supported his theory that Agrian had never really managed to summon the fullness of the forge's power.

Either that, or Agrian had just been better at maintaining control. Rendering the Candle 'tired' wasn't exactly a desirable outcome, nor was putting oneself into a coma, as Abbas had apparently done.

Hmm. But what of this weird new object? He could feel it there in his hand, radiating with that very same energy. And the metal band, too. It glowed just as brilliantly in his mind, making him feel... rather strange, honestly.

And quite powerful. Like the energy was also an extension of his body.

Like he could bend it to his will, maybe.

Whoa..."  
"3666

This was dangerous.

Supremely so, Hector felt.

No. Actually, he didn't feel that. In fact, that was the whole problem. He felt the power there in his hand. Felt the desire to hold it closer, to use it, to wield it wildly and experimentally. To begin limit-testing right away.

But he knew this feeling. He'd felt it once before. During his meditations.

When he'd gone so deep into his own mind that he felt like he'd touched the so-called Void.

This was like that. Almost exactly like it, actually.

Which was more than enough to give him pause.

Wow.

If he hadn't had that experience already, then he might not have realized the danger here. His emotions, his feelings--they were telling him to push on. To grasp this power and do as he pleased.

It was only his rational mind that was keeping him in check.

His focus lingered on the ball of molten energy in the palm of his hand. Such a curious thing. Like it wanted him to use it. Like it was daring him to, even.

It made Hector wonder something. Had Abbas made contact with this, too? And had he, perhaps, been seduced by its energizing allure?

This had happened many times before. Countless times, in fact, across history. Brilliant minds creating or discovering something incredible, only for it to destroy them.

The memories from the Candle told him so.

Dammit. Perhaps he should've warned Abbas. Agh, but how could he have? It hadn't seemed like his place to warn such an old and experienced servant about anything. Had Abbas truly never encountered this sort of thing before?

Impossible to tell now.

Worse still, Hector was realizing that Abbas' current condition might actually be much worse than a mere week-long coma. If the man had not only touched this but actually embraced it fully and tried to wield it

immediately like it was tempting Hector to do, then...

There was a chance that Abbas and Worwal would never wake up at all.

That realization made Hector bristle with irritation. His focus shifted again, bringing everything to bear upon the power in his hand.

Damn light. This was not going to happen. Hector was not going to allow it.

'We are not going to let Abbas stay that way,' thought Hector. 'You understand me, you little ball of fury?'

He felt it shudder in his grasp. It was saying something. Protesting? Telling him to seize its power for himself. To forget Abbas.

That pissed Hector off immensely. 'Out of the question,' he thought, his voice booming with reverberation. 'He created you, goddammit.'"  
"3667

'Uh. Are you talking to it?'

Hector's anger abated, and he might've blinked if he could feel his eyes. 'Garovel! You're here.'

'I am. Though I have no idea what in the world is going on.'

'Oh. Um. Well, this... Mini-Candle or whatever you wanna call it... uh, it's alive, just like we thought. And it's being an asshole, right now.'

'Excuse me?'

'It's got an attitude problem. It wants me to abandon Abbas and take its power for myself.'

'Wow. Talk about ungrateful.'

'Exactly!'

'But, um. How are you able to communicate with it, precisely?'

Hmm. That was a good question. 'I don't know. I guess I'm just... reading its aura?'

'Ah. So it's a new, unprecedented thing you can do. Cool.'

'Garovel...'

'No, I'm happy for you. That's super neat. I'm sure it'll come in handy.'

'The sarcasm in your voice is painful.'

'Is it? Ah, my bad. I frequently find myself wanting to give you a hard time for no reason.'

'Well, at least you're acknowledging it.'

The Mini-Candle pulsed in his hand another time. It was protesting again, Hector realized. It wanted him to remove Garovel from this headspace and talk only to it.

'What's it saying?' asked the reaper.

Rather than getting angry, however, Hector couldn't help being amused. 'It doesn't like you, Garovel. It wants me to abandon you, too.'

'Wait, what? The fuck did I do?'

'Dunno. Hey, Mini-Candle, what's your problem with Garovel?'

It pulsed again. Hector listened. For a while, actually. It just kept going on.

'...Well?' said Garovel.

'Uh. Okay, first off: you're a reaper. It doesn't like reapers.'

'Oh, so it's racist, too. Excellent. Wait, how does it even know what reapers are? It was just born, wasn't it?'

'Beats me. Maybe it absorbed knowledge from the Candle.'

'Okay, well, what else? I assume there was more.'

'Er. To make a long story short... it said that it can sense your desire to conquer the world.'

'What the hell?'

'Well, Garovel? What do you have to say for yourself? Have you secretly wanted to conquer the world this whole time?'



‘N-no...’

‘Oh yeah? Why’d you stutter there?’

‘Agh, bec-because! It’s such an out-of-nowhere question! I was taken aback!’

‘Hmm...’

‘Hector, please. You’re killin’ me here.’

‘I mean, it wouldn’t be the first time someone’s told me that reapers are secretive and ambitious...’

‘Buddy. I don’t want to conquer the world.’ The reaper paused. ‘At least, not in the literal sense.’

The small orb pulsed yet again.

‘It wants to know what you mean by that,’ said Hector.”  
"3668

‘I feel like this is a conversation we should be having in private,’ said Garovel.

‘I’m pretty sure this little guy isn’t gonna tell anyone.’

‘Oh, he’s a trustworthy little guy now, is he? A minute ago, you called him an asshole.’

‘Well, he was being one.’

Another pulse.

‘Yes, you were. Anyway, Garovel, continue. If not in the “literal sense,” then in what sense do you want to conquer the world?’

The reaper sighed. ‘Technically, I suppose... in the sense of wanting to uncover all the world’s lost and hidden knowledge... then yes, one might consider that a form of conquest. I suppose. If you squint.’

There arrived still another pulse.

'It says you're leaving something out.'

'Ugh. FINE. Not just the lost and hidden knowledge. The lost and hidden powers, too. One could argue that I am... a bit... perhaps... slightly... power hungry. Okay? Geez. Why do you gotta make me feel so bad about it, huh? Everyone likes power, don't they?'

'Hmm. What do you want to do with all that power?'

'I--egh--I don't know! I just--! I want to see it! Experience it. Understand it. Maybe find new ways to put it to good use, if we can. Or... I don't know. It's just a... an instinctual thing, I suppose. I've never really been forced to articulate the entirety of my feelings on the matter like this, so... genuinely, I'm not sure what I would do. Perhaps it would depend on the exact nature of said powers.'

Hector wanted to scratch his chin. 'So you're telling me you're not interested in oppressing the masses?'

'Of course not.'

'Of course you're not telling me that? Or of course you're not interested?'

'Hector. Don't even joke about that shit. I've seen far too many oppressors throughout history to want to become one myself. I don't even find the idea funny.'

'Really? Not even a little bit? God-King Garovel?'

'Shut the hell up. I'd sooner let myself get eaten by a feldeath.'

'Wow.'

The Mini-Candle pulsed again.

'It doesn't believe you,' said Hector. 'And to be honest, I'm not sure I do, either.'

'Well, it's a good thing that I don't have to prove shit to either of you, then. I know I'm speaking the truth, and that's all that matters.'

There came a sudden period of silence as apparently no one knew what to say next.

Eventually, Hector came up with something. 'Okay, but if you DID want to conquer the world literally, you probably wouldn't think of it as

oppressing anyone. It'd be, like, "for the greater good" or some shit, right?'

'I hate this conversation.'

"3669

Hector snickered. 'I'm just trying to make sure you're being entirely truthful with me. Because, Garovel, if you DO have some sort of dark ambition, I'm going to find out sooner or later. That's not something you'll be able to keep hidden from me forever. So I figure it'd be best if I found out sooner, considering the fact that we're kinda stuck together.'

'...Hector. You almost sound like you WANT me to harbor such ambitions.'

'Eh. "Want" would be a strong word. Let's just say I'm keeping an open mind.'

'I'm not sure whether to find that heartwarming or very worrying,' said Garovel.

'I think you've earned the benefit of the doubt,' said Hector. 'I'm not gonna jump to some crazy new conclusions about you, just 'cuz some judgmental little orb tells me to.'

The orb pulsed again, more violently than ever.

And then it wasn't just a pulse, anymore. A line of radiant energy lashed out like a great tentacle and snaked toward his intangible form.

Instantly, Hector's anger returned with equal violence. 'STOP THAT RIGHT NOW.'

The entire headspace shook with each word, as if caught in a momentary earthquake, and the tentacle retracted back into the orb, which was left shuddering there in his hand.

Hector needed a moment to calm his own fury. He wasn't mad that the thing had tried to attack him. In fact, for some reason, he felt as though it could not possibly harm him, no matter how hard it tried.

No, he was mad because it had tried to attack Garovel. In that briefest

window of assault, he'd sensed its intent. It had wanted to remove the reaper from this place by force, uncaring of the harm it might cause in the process.

'What's the matter with you?' said Hector. 'What, you think you know everything? That you have full understanding of someone, just because you can sense a few of their secrets? And you think that justifies doing whatever you want to them?'

And Hector left an opening for it to respond, but it had nothing to say, this time.

'This is my warning to you,' said Hector. 'I sense a bit of your hubris now. You think you're really valuable. Really special. And you are. But don't for one second think that you're too valuable and special to destroy. You understand me? You've already endangered Abbas. And now you've tried to harm my best friend. If you keep behaving like that, then I will make sure you can never harm anyone ever again.'

"3670 -- CCCII.

Still, the orb remained silent.

Hector just let his words linger, feeling that he had said all he needed to.

Garovel was next to speak. 'Damn, Hector. That even scared me a little.'

Impulsively, he wanted to apologize, but he caught himself, because he was certain that he had done the right thing. 'This Mini-Candle here needs to realize that it doesn't know everything and that we won't be dancing to its tune. If I wasn't here, it wouldn't have attacked you, but instead, it would've tried to manipulate you.'

'Oh? I suppose I'll just have to trust your judgment on that one,' said Garovel.

'Think so?' said Hector. 'I'm betting you can at least feel its pull, though, can't you? I mean, heck, you just admitted to being a power-hungry maniac, so you're probably feeling pretty tempted to seize its power, aren't you?'

'H-heh, I thought we'd moved past that already...'

‘It was like one minute ago, Garovel.’

‘Well, time is not time, right? That means it’s actually ancient history.’

‘That’s not what that means at all.’

‘Also, I never called myself a maniac. I resent you using that term.’

‘Look, the point is, this thing would manipulate you into wielding its power and then probably turn it against you.’

‘Ah... am I to assume that is what happened to Worwal, then?’

‘I think so,’ said Hector. ‘And now we’re going to have this little guy undo what he did.’

‘Uh. What makes you think he even can?’

‘Because I’m gonna be real pissed off if he can’t.’

He felt the orb shudder again.

‘Huh. Well, my little orby friend... I forgive you for attacking me, since you’ve just been born ‘n all, but it would appear you’ve already gotten yourself into some hot water. Best of luck to you.’

Chapter Three Hundred Two: ‘A prince’s position...’

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

The heel of David’s shoe tapped rapidly against the marble floor as he eyed his watch for the twentieth time since sitting down at this small table. During his time here in Intar as an Atreyan Ambassador, he’d grown quite accustomed to playing the slow game, to being exceedingly patient, but this particular wait was proving too much even for him. He’d already ordered his meal, finished it, ordered dessert, and finished that, too.

It was hard not to be annoyed.

These “meetings” that he’d been taking of late could hardly be regarded as such. They were always with individuals who were rather low on the political totem pole, but that usually also meant that they

didn't have as much trouble making time for him. In fact, that was the main reason why he'd been pursuing them in the first place.

So it was quite obnoxious whenever one of them was a no-show."  
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"3671

This particular diner was one of several that he had been using, of late. One thing he appreciated about his time in this melting pot of a country was the opportunity to sample all the different types of cuisine that it had to offer, especially here in the heart of its capital city.

But the problem with trying new things, of course, was that they weren't always to his taste. So perhaps that was another reason for his foul mood, at the moment. He had not enjoyed his lunch, nor even the experimental dessert thereafter. The other meals he'd tried here had been exquisite, but that one...

Maybe Jesbolese food was simply not for him. Or maybe this otherwise excellent restaurant did not know how to prepare it. He supposed he would have to give it at least one more try in order to be sure.

At length, he decided that continuing to wait like this was pointless. The young paralegal that he'd been hoping to talk to had probably forgotten. The kid had seemed a bit airheaded, after all. Or just overwhelmed with work. It was strangely difficult to tell one from the other, sometimes.

He'd already paid, so he gathered up his things, put his coat on slowly, and then finally left.

Out on the street, he had a car waiting for him in order to take him back to the Livingston Grand Castle where he was but one of many resident ambassadors.

Before he even made it three steps to the car, however, a familiar face arrived in his vision--a face which brightened with recognition in return.

"Prince David," said the young mustachioed man. A friendly smile crossed his lips, though it seemed rather muted when compared to how amicable David remembered this fellow to be. "A pleasure to see you again, sir."

"Likewise," said the Prince. This was not the same young man that he had been meant to have lunch with here today, but as David recalled, the two of them were coworkers. "Young Victor Branson the Paralegal. What a coincidence. Do you fancy this place, as well?"

"Ah... yes, sir, I do. I come here all the time. Their Jesbolese meatballs are to die for."

David had to consciously avoid wincing at that remark, considering he'd just dined on exactly that meal and reached the exact opposite conclusion. "Heh. I see. You know, I was supposed to have lunch with Charlie, but he never showed up. I was hoping to pick his brain on a couple of subjects."



Victor's eyes widened. "Ah..."

"3672

Prince David's brow twitched at that reaction. "But perhaps his loss can be your gain," he said. "I've just finished eating, but what say I buy you lunch, instead?"

"S-sir... that is a generous offer, but I feel I should inform you that... Charlie Rogerson is, um... well, he passed away this morning."

Somehow, David did not feel nearly as shocked by this news as he probably should have. But appearing too calm here would do him no favors, either. "What?! What do you mean? What happened?"

Victor sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I'm still not quite sure I believe it, myself. But, um... he was in his bed, and he just... didn't wake up. Which, I suppose actually means he passed away last night, not this morning... agh... I don't know. It's all been too much for me to process."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," said David. "I saw him not two days ago, and he seemed the very picture of health. Full of youthful zeal. I can hardly... imagine..."

Victor nodded. "I know, right? The paramedics said he was already gone by the time they arrived, but they couldn't be sure of the cause of death yet and didn't want to speculate. Our guess was... some freak aneurysm or something in his brain."

"...Our?"

"Ah. Me and the other roommates. We were all in total shock. Hell, I think I still am."

"Understandable. You've had one heck of a morning."

Victor didn't say anything and just kept rubbing his head with a distant look in his eyes.

Wow. Talk about a tough conversation to maintain. He did his best, though. "I didn't realize you and Charlie were roommates."

“Yeah... been that way since university...” Victor gave a solemn shake of his head. “He was just talking about moving out the other day, actually. Not anytime soon, but just as a future goal. I thought maybe he’d found a girlfriend or something...”

Oh boy. David looked around. The street was rather busy, and his car was still waiting for him. What to do here...?

Simple enough, he decided. He couldn’t just leave the poor kid here, not without at least offering something more elaborate in the form of condolences. He bumped the young man on the shoulder with one of his gloved hands. “It sounds like you might need a bit more than just lunch, right now.” He motioned to the blue-and-white sedan on the curb. “I was just headed back to my little embassy at Livingston. Would you like to tag along? See some of the sights? And I’ll still treat you to lunch, too, if you like.”

"3673

Victor eyed the vehicle. “I-I don’t know... I have a deposition in a couple days that I haven’t finished prepping for...”

Oh? Hmm. “Let me think. As I recall, your boss is... Senator Leoric, no?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m sure she will understand if you need to take some time off, right now. In fact, she might well force you to do so.”

“Ah... I very much doubt that, sir.”

The Prince tilted his brow. “Truly? I’ve heard the stories about her, but surely, she is not that much of a...” The words on the tip of his tongue were ‘slave-driving witch,’ but he changed them in favor of some new ones. “...Of a stern boss. Time off should be a matter of course after something like this, no?”

Victor gave him a look. His lips didn’t move, but his face said everything.

David didn’t force him to elaborate. “Well, in that case, you absolutely must come with me. You can make use of the embassy’s facilities to conduct your prep work, and if they prove insufficient, the greater

castle around it has plenty more to offer. Including some quite luxurious spots, I must say.”

Victor still wasn't saying anything, but his expression spoke of temptation.

The Prince started toward the car and opened the door, offering to let Victor get in first.

The kid looked like he was finally about to say something, but then he just hopped in.

David followed suit, told the driver their destination, and then they were off.

The tinted windows offered a now-very-familiar view of Andeyal, the Intarian capital city, as they sped down the road. The highways here very much lived up to their name, rising so far up into the air that entire office buildings could fit beneath--and often did. Many of the skyscrapers that filled the cityscape were nestled up right alongside the elevated roads, sometimes offering a surprisingly clear view into their mid-level offices.

The boy was still being quiet, so David had to be the one to revive the conversation. “These Intarian buildings of yours are something else,” he said as he craned his neck, staring out the window. “Every time I find myself on these roads, I’m tempted to bring a pair of binoculars and do some proper snooping. Perhaps try to discover exactly how many floors up we are.”

“...Depends on the building,” said Victor, “but this area’s about thirty. Highest I’ve seen was about fifty, I think.””

"3674

“I’ve always found it curious,” said David. “With how much land Intar has at its disposal, one would think the greater imperative would be to build outward, not upward.”

“Intarians have always had a fascination with the sky,” said Victor. “Even back in the days of the Mohssian Empire, the people here were always building monuments as tall as humanly possible.”

“Ah, yes, I believe I’ve heard a little of that. Wasn’t there a formalized

competition at one point?"

The kid nodded. "There was. Emperor Armadus III instituted it as a yearly tradition, and an entire festival grew around it. Then eventually, it became a minor holiday."

"Cloudseeker Day," said David.

"Oh, you know of it. I haven't met many foreigners who did."

"I lived here for a few years when I was younger," said the Prince with a small smile. "But that still doesn't sate my curiosity about the Intarian obsession with building upwards. Where does the interest in the sky originate? It's an interesting element of your culture."

"Oh, I see what you mean now. Yeah. I've always heard that the origins of our interest were a bit muddy. Some say one thing, others say something different."

"I've heard that as well," said David. "The most common theory seemed to involve religion. Cocora, specifically. The ancient Mohssians wanted to be closer to the Goddess of Light, so they reached for the Sun."

"That's the theory I like best," said Victor. "There's something romantic about it."

"Heh. I can only agree."

A lull in the conversation arrived, and David struggled for the next topic. Perhaps it was a bit early to be pushing for more detailed information, but he supposed there was no harm in asking the boy to talk. The lad could just say no, and that would be fine. There was no urgency here.

Not yet, at least.

"...Do you want to talk about Charlie?" said David.

Victor hesitated.

The Prince felt the need to clarify. "It is perfectly okay if you do not. I am merely offering an attentive ear, if you want one."

Still, Victor remained quiet. Perhaps even he himself wasn't sure what he wanted, right now.

Hmm. David thought for a moment. "...Well, perhaps I could talk about him, then. What little I was able to learn, at least. Would that be alright with you?"

The kid took a second, but he nodded.

"He seemed quite the energetic fellow. I only spoke with him, maybe... four times, but on each occasion, he certainly never had any trouble speaking his mind. I quite liked that about him."

"3675

Victor's gaze fell down to the floor of the car as he listened.

"He seemed particularly passionate about the current divide between the Moons and the Grands," David went on. "I remember him telling me at length that the disparities between the two parties were more illusion than reality. 'A demonstration for the masses,' was how he put it. He said that unity between the two was not just possible but inevitable without constant intervention from those currently in power." David chortled. "An interesting perspective, I thought."

Victor still wasn't looking back at him. He just chewed on his lip as he stared at the back of the driver's seat in front of him.

The Prince wondered what might be going through the lad's mind, right now. David wanted to keep talking about Charlie, but he was struggling. He only had so much to pull from. He wished he'd been able to talk to the boy more. "Ah... I remember thinking that he could have been a speechwriter, what with how strongly held some of his opinions were, and he told me that he hoped to become one, someday. Said he wasn't experienced enough yet as a rhetorician--and that one of his friends had always been far better at it. Said he'd always been a bit envious of the fellow..."

Victor's eyes widened a little, then he stopped chewing his lip and simply frowned. He shook his head and sighed.

David couldn't help wanting to connect the dots. "He... hadn't been talking about you, had he?"

The kid scratched his brow. "I don't know... maybe..."

That sounded like a 'yes' to David. "Do you have an interest in

becoming a speechwriter, too?"

"Mm... I wouldn't turn the job down, but no, I wouldn't say that was my overall goal. I'm more interested in drafting policy. Making real change happen."

David felt he had to pick him up on that. "One could argue that persuasion is the only way that real change ever comes to pass. The legal agreements that follow might be considered more of a formality than a conducted change. Or, perhaps, an argument over semantics rather than the greater issues."

The young man exhaled a curt breath. "Are you sure you only spoke with him a few times? You're starting to sound just like him."

"Heh. To my ears, that sounds like quite the compliment."

"3676

Victor made no response, though David did spot a small smile on his face.

And again, the Prince found himself struggling to keep up the conversation. He supposed he shouldn't try to force it. Perhaps just giving the young fellow some peace and quiet was better, anyway. He'd never considered himself very good at keeping his mouth shut, but perhaps on this occasion, he shouldn't be considering himself at all.

He let the silence linger. It was still a ways to Livingston, but oh well.

At length, however, Victor decided to speak up on his own. "Prince David, sir... um..."

"Yes?"

"...Have you ever... um... have you ever lost someone close to you?"

Ah. So we were going in this direction, were we? Oh, boy. Truth be told, David never much cared for talking about his own past, but he supposed if there was ever a time for it, it would be now.

The Prince took a long, slow breath before finally answering. "I have,

indeed. Most recently, my brothers.”

“Brothers?” said Victor. “As in, multiple?”

“Yes. I am one of eight children. And last year, four of my brothers were killed.”

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry. I had no idea. I can’t even imagine...”

“Yes, well... it was a complicated matter with... complicated emotions. Saying that we were close would perhaps be an overstatement. But... we had our moments.” He wondered if he should also mention that he’d essentially lost a fifth brother as well, considering the fact that Luther had been imprisoned for murdering the other four.

But he decided against it. He didn’t think the purpose of Victor’s question had been to hear about royal family drama.

In fact, with that in mind, perhaps bringing his brothers up at all had been the wrong call. Perhaps the death of his father would have been a more apt comparison?

Eh...

Well. He did have a different memory to pull from. It would probably be more fitting here, as well. But did he really want to talk about that? Especially with this young man he barely knew?

Not really.

“...Do you believe in an afterlife, sir?”

Agh. Wow. This hardly felt like the time to say that he didn’t. Somehow, that just seemed too disrespectful. So instead, he chose to soften his response. “I’m not sure what I believe.””  
"3677

Victor gave him a skeptical look, however. “Is that the truth, sir? A man your age is still uncertain of his beliefs?”

David’s head reared back, and he couldn’t help snickering. “Excuse me, but please leave my age out of this. I do not believe I’ve said anything so offensive as to justify such a scathing attack on my

person.”



"Ah... my apologies, sir."

"Heh. I forgive you. You are young and stupid, after all."

That earned a snort from the lad. "Sir, please. Hypocrisy misbecomes you."

"You think so? Then why do I feel so much better?"

Soon enough, they arrived at their destination. Livingston Grand Castle was an ancient structure and incomparably gigantic, having been repeatedly expanded upon since the middle years of the Mohssian Empire. King William surely could have told him every detail of its long history, but David was only aware of its more infamous tales.

It had a strange reputation, this place. Having been built during the empire's so-called Golden Era, it was meant to be a demonstration of the emperor's unmatched power and wealth. But the construction had been plagued by endless turmoil, and that very same emperor died long before it was completed. The story went that the emperor had been on a tour of the construction site just as the second floor was being built, and then a stone--supposedly no bigger than a baseball--fell from a worker's grasp, bounced off a wall, and landed squarely atop the emperor's bald head, killing him instantly.

Apparently, the emperor's retainers didn't even realize what had happened for quite some time, because the blow did not appear that deadly. The man even remained on his feet. And since touching him without his expressed permission was a taboo punishable with execution, none dared to confirm his death for hours, until they were finally able to fetch his favorite wife to do the job.

Ever since the castle's inauspicious beginnings, rumors abounded that this place was cursed--and by extension, so too was the empire. As such, multiple emperors had chosen not to live here, but each time one did so, some great misfortune seemed to befall him within a decade of his rule, typically resulting in his death.

And so the rumors grew. Until eventually, Livingston Grand Castle acquired a rather notorious moniker.

'The Burden of Rule' was what many had come to call it. To live in it was dangerous, but to ignore it was deadly."

"3678

For his part, though, Prince David did not mind staying here in the slightest. Thus far, several months into his ambassadorship, the castle's ominous reputation had still not touched him one bit, nor did he ever expect it to. In the first place, he did not buy into such superstitions, but even if he did, there was no reason to think they would apply to foreign visitors.

Plus, the food here was spectacular.

If anything, it was hard to pull himself away from this place. That was one of the reasons why he'd been trying to hold his meetings at various restaurants in town: to force himself to leave. To not stay cooped up in the lap of luxury.

Also, there was just... something about Livingston. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Food aside, he simply found this place very comfortable. He wasn't sure why. He slept soundly at night, felt a great peace in the extravagant gardens, and quite enjoyed the beautiful sunsets from the top floors. Thankfully, the sky-bending towers of downtown Andeyal did not entirely wall those off. In fact, he felt they might've been enhancing them with their shimmering windows.

As he stepped out of the vehicle, David noticed the young Victor gawking at the magnificent building in front of them. "First time here?" said the Prince.

"Y-yes... it's, um... much more intimidating in person..."

"Think so?" David took a moment to share in the view, in the tall, black-lined windows with sharp, pointed apexes, almost like spikes. The walls had a repeating pattern of gray-on-darker-gray stones, and the steep rooftops with long eaves created some rather heavy shadows, even during the middle of the day like this. "What's so intimidating about it?"

The young man turned to him. "Is that a joke? Just look at it."

David did so. And then shrugged. "I think it looks quite majestic."

Victor blinked. "W-well, yes, it does, b-but..."

More vehicles were arriving behind them, stopping curbside in order to

drop passengers off. David was now at a point where he could recognize some of the faces coming and going, but only some. Livingston was always abuzz with activity, and keeping track of so many different people was no easy thing.

His own car drove off to go find a parking spot, but he knew the driver would not be leaving him alone for long. That was his bodyguard, Vito, and David had come to realize that even when the fellow wasn't immediately present, he was still watching."

"3679

Even now, after all these months of being shadowed by the man, David still did not know much about Vito's abilities, but it was at least clear that the new Lord of Warrenhold had not chosen this man thoughtlessly. Vito did not speak very much, even when spoken to, but David was quite confident that he was taking this job very seriously.

It had become something of an ongoing project for David: trying to crack through that wall of stoicism. Plus, it was an opportunity to learn more about the fabled Rainlords of Sair. He'd already known a fair amount about the Sandlords of Sair, thanks to his brother Meriwether's marriage to Nasira Saqqaf, but the Rainlords had always been comparatively more mysterious. As far as he knew, Atreya had never had any formal relations with them, so in some sense, this young bodyguard here was making history.

If only he could convince Vito to see it that way. Maybe he'd be more talkative.

For the moment, however, David remained entirely focused on his other young friend as they entered Livingston together. The great antechamber was so large that it could have easily handled hundreds more entrants--and frequently did so, he knew. Despite how many people he saw around, the place still managed to feel somewhat empty.

It was a long trek to the Atreyan Embassy, but thankfully, the seemingly endless hallways had travelators to make the journey easier. Victor continued gawking the whole way, and David didn't blame him. At every intersection, there seemed to be yet another opulent thing to stare at and admire. A Pre-Imperial statue of the God of Death. A gigantic painting of Arcanus Daris, the first Mohssian

Emperor. A golden chandelier the size of a truck. Another Pre-Imperial statue of the Goddess of Relief, joined by an angel holding a sleeping baby in swaddling clothes.

That one was particularly famous, as was the scene it depicted. David had seen it many times throughout his life, in almost every medium of artistry imaginable, but he felt that the statue might have been his favorite, even if he personally harbored little-to-no love for religion in general.

It was the scene of the Goddess Xixa and the Archangel Maximillius allowing the God of Death to be born into the world in order to ease the suffering of mortals."

"3680

"How can anyone stand to live in a place like this?" said Victor.

"What do you mean?" said David. "I find it terribly charming here. So much beauty and history rolled together for all to admire, even in the small hours of the night."

"...Prince David, sir, are you secretly a vampire?"

The Prince just chortled.

"You didn't lure me here just to kill me, right?" said Victor.

"Of course not, my dear boy. I have to feed you and fatten you up, first."

Now Victor laughed. "Hold on. I thought vampires only drank blood."

"Ah, yes. Well, perhaps I'm trying something new."

Eventually, they arrived at the Embassy. It was a comparatively modest set of chambers, including an office, a small meeting room, and then David's private quarters in back.

He'd seen much more extravagant accommodations given to other countries' representatives, but he could not complain. Nor did he wish to. These were just about perfect for him. Anything more would have been a waste of space, he felt. Perhaps Vito might have preferred a bit more room so that he didn't have to sleep on the fold-out couch in the

office, but if so, the young man had been keeping those feelings to himself, even at David's prodding.

David directed Victor to the office, where the boy could use the computers as he pleased, once David logged in for him. The Prince wasn't concerned about Victor seeing any sensitive information on there, because he'd barely been using those devices. He much preferred his personal tablet and government-issued phone.

He stayed with the kid for a while longer and continued to chat, then retired to his bedroom. It was still far too early in the day for sleep, but there was plenty of news to scroll through on the internet.

He didn't get the chance, however, because just as he was going to sit down on his bed, the ground shook with such force that he practically fell on top of it, instead.

David sat up in a rush, attempting to make sense of what had just happened. An earthquake? Andayel didn't get earthquakes.

He moved to stand, but then another tremor arrived, not quite as strong as the last one but still enough to give him pause.

Not more than a few moments later, he saw Vito in the open doorway. "Lord Prince, are you alright?!"

"I'm absolutely fine, Vito, but thank you for your concern. Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"3681

"I believe it may be an attack," said Vito, calmer now.

"An attack?" David's head reared back. "What makes you say that?"

"Call it a hunch, lord. Please do not leave my side."

He certainly hadn't been planning to.

Victor scrambled over from the other room. "Did you guys feel that? I've never--"

Another quake arrived, stronger than the previous two combined. Paintings fell off the walls, and a vase in the corner crashed to the floor

while David just held onto the bed, trying not to fly off.

When everything finally settled again, the room was in shambles, and David saw a giant fissure running up through one of the walls.

Vito was already next to the bed, helping the Prince up. "We should get out of here, lord. Please follow me."

"A-alright..." David was trying to remain calm. Emergency scenario. Was he forgetting anything? If he never returned to this room, was there anything he needed from it? Tablet, phone, shoes, wallet, royal pendant. All good. Coat? Hat? Briefcase? Not sure. He grabbed those last three, just in case.

Then they were on the move. Vito led the way while David made sure Victor was still behind them.

Gigantic windows along the inner hallway provided a view of one of Livingston's several courtyards, and through them, David saw a smoldering mountain, looking like a fallen meteorite.

What in the world? He wanted to stop and stare, but apparently, his feet knew better and kept going. He thought he saw figures among the smoke. Were they appearing out of the meteorite?

Screams in the distance. Several at once. All cut short.

David's blood ran cold.

People filled the corridor now, most running in the same direction as them, until yet another quake made everyone stumble.

David could hardly process what was happening now. Too much shaking. He was on his hands and knees. Trying to get up as the trembling abated. Vito was there again, helping him.

Bless this kid.

Victor? Already up, too. Good on him.

Then a wall ahead of them exploded, and David spotted shapes moving quickly through the dust and debris--and not in unison, either. They bounced and clashed off of one another, and he heard the sound of clanging metal and gunshots ring out. Along with more screams.

"Okay, maybe we shouldn't go that way," said Vito, looking around."  
"3682

More gunshots rang out--much closer this time--and they didn't stop, either. David heard the hail of bullets whizzing through the air, and he ducked without thinking.

Then Vito was suddenly behind him, standing tall, and David instead heard the sound of bullets ricocheting off of metal. But only briefly. Because Vito returned fire and began shoving both David and Victor toward the open doorway on their right.

They reached the room and found another group of people already there, all looking terrified as they huddled behind a line of desks by the far wall.

The gunfire didn't stop, and Vito didn't stop pushing them until they were deeper into the room and behind a thick desk of their own.

When a strange man charged through the doorway after them, Vito met him head on.

Everything happened so fast that David's eyes struggled to process it. The stranger was already firing as Vito closed in and grabbed the gun, blocking the barrel with his hand as if the bullets exploding out of it were no more deadly than foam darts.

The stranger swung on him. Vito dodged and countered with a right hook that sent him back through the door he'd just entered, taking part of the frame and wall with him.

Another figure appeared to take the previous challenger's place. This one seemed to be a woman, but Vito showed no hesitation, grappling her in an instant and twisting her head off like a plucked watermelon. Her body dropped to the floor, and when another man arrived, Vito brained him with her severed head.

David merely watched with wide eyes, unable to look away.

Vito didn't leave the doorway, even as another hail of gunfire visibly pelted the walls around it. Thankfully, only a few of the bullets seemed to be breaking through, but Vito spared a glance back in their direction, probably to make sure they were staying low like he'd said.

Did he have metal skin? David could still hear the pinging of ricochets,

and there was definitely a shimmer there that the Prince hadn't noticed before.

Vito returned fire again, but he soon ran out of bullets and had to reload. He didn't seek cover, though, and when still another man sprinted over to interrupt him, Vito pistol whipped the guy, swept his feet, and then caved his skull in with the heel of his boot."

"3683

After that, the fighting slowed, as perhaps the attackers had begun to think twice about continuing to charge in at Vito, who still did not budge from the doorway.

David could still hear gunfire in the distance, along with more screaming, but it was the rumbling that was truly unsettling. Explosions? Invasive meteorite impacts? He wasn't sure which to be more worried about.

Another large quake arrived, pulling unsettled dust out of the ceiling and making the Prince wonder if it was about to cave in on their heads. Thankfully, it held strong, but he saw Vito holding onto the doorframe and struggling to stay on his feet.

Then the door and the wall around it exploded, and Vito went flying backward through a cloud of debris. In the wall's place, a great horizontal mass appeared, some kind of long and flat boulder, though it did not stay long. It seemed to disintegrate among the dirt and rubble, but David did not understand how or why. Nor did he much care. He was far more concerned about Vito, who'd left a giant hole in the wall on the other side of the room.

"Come on out, you rich little piggies!" came a booming voice. "Don't make your poor lapdogs give their lives for you! We're here for a good time, not a long time! If you can amuse us with your pathetic begging, then we'll spare your lives and be on our way!"

David's heart was in his throat as he listened. This was all too familiar. Perhaps he was jumping to conclusions with far too little information, but it seemed suddenly quite obvious who these attackers were.

More maniacs from Abolish. He'd gotten to know their ilk better than he'd ever wanted to.



It had taken only a handful of them to occupy Atreya and manipulate the entire country, and he was getting the distinct impression that there were far more of them here, now.

David's eyes were locked on the giant hole that Vito had flown through. He didn't know what to do other than hope for his young bodyguard to reappear.

And reappear he did.

A metallic hand gripped the edge of the hole with an audible crack, and Vito pulled himself through the opening, looking shinier and more silver than ever. His left arm was twisted in the wrong direction, and his neck seemed to be bent a little far to the right, but they soon corrected themselves."

"3684 -- CCCIII.

Vito met David's gaze, then motioned toward the hole he'd just climbed through. He didn't say anything, and he didn't need to, either. The Prince understood. The hole was big enough for them to escape through, and Vito intended to buy time for them to do so.

David grabbed Victor's arm and pulled him up, then began motioning for the other non-combatants to follow.

The Abolishers did not continue waiting, however. They stepped through the missing wall where the doorway had been.

And David picked up his pace, but he still could not help noticing how many of them there were. He counted at least five. And he had a terrible feeling there were even more behind them.

Chapter Three Hundred Three: 'O, tempered child of the Burning Sea...'

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Vito Sebolt had never faced such odds. But Kerikos certainly had. And

as they activated the hyper-state of pan-forma, all of the reaper's memories and experience became his own.

Unfortunately, those things still did not fill him with confidence. If anything, Kerikos' memories only served to reinforce how bad this situation actually was.

But oh well. Better to have the knowledge than not. At least now they were able to decide quickly on their best course of action here.

They knew there were plenty of other allied servants here in Livingston. They'd already sensed and even witnessed some of them fighting.

So it was just a matter of leading the fight over to some of those other warriors.

Easier said than done, perhaps. Especially when they couldn't allow any of these Abolish bastards to get near the Prince or any of the other non-combatants. Not to mention, if those other warriors weren't already rushing over to help him, then it was doubtless because they had their hands full.

Regardless, Vito and Kerikos didn't have the luxury of time to mull things over. They had to give the Abolishers something to think about.

And with Vito's lutetium transfiguration, the first tactic that entered their minds was a horizontal shower of bright red fireballs.

They would have to sacrifice considerable body mass in order to cover so many enemies at once, but that was where pan-forma's near-instant regeneration became extremely helpful.

The room roared to life with a red wave of flaming lutetium, filling the entire missing wall in seconds. The debris all over the floor caught fire instantly and began to melt or burn."

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"3685

The Abolishers scattered. Some dashed backward, trying to get out of the way, but two simply pushed straight through the inferno, aiming to get right up in Vito's face.

He welcomed them with another blast of fire, but this time, he lived inside the flames himself. He let the lutetium keep burning and create a soul-infused haze around his own body.

And he kept launching projectiles, too, but now they were nearly the size of his entire body and so would look like duplicates to confuse the enemy's senses. With the help of pan-forma, he and Kerikos could do this so quickly that it wasn't even necessary for each duplicate to serve as an attack. Some could be sent purely as distractions.

Without a doubt, the two frontal attackers ended up with more than they'd bargained for as the flaming body doubles swarmed and pummeled them into the ground.

The added control of Kerikos' mind was key here. There was no way that Vito could have kept track of all the projectile duplicates without the reaper's help, especially when he was also trying to keep track of the enemy's position, as well. The reaper's soul senses were much needed there, too, thanks to the blinding red light that filled his vision.

In the distance, Kerikos could sense some of the attackers from earlier, the same ones that Vito had made short work of. They were still regenerating, having to regrow their bodies either from scratch or from the neck down.

So Vito decided to get ahead of that problem while he could and incinerate their regenerative efforts. The reapers attached to them fled

but not without incurring some damage themselves.

That was all the opening he got, though, because the other Abolishers were reconvening on him with long-ranged assaults. Gunfire, materialized projectiles, acid and explosions came for him all at once.

He dispersed more duplicates in quick succession in order to confuse their targeting, but there was still no way to avoid the attacks completely. It was his turn to endure a pummeling as he sprinted left while his duplicates scattered in all directions.

All directions, that was, except behind. At all costs, he couldn't draw enemy fire toward the escaping civilians. Kerikos was keeping track of them, too, of course. If Vito could just buy a bit more time for them to finish climbing through that hole, then this fight might become a bit more manageable."

"3686

That was easier said than done, though. He could sense even more enemies at the periphery of Kerikos' senses. How he wished that some of those were defenders of the castle, but judging from the fact that none of them were attacking each other, he had to put that hope out of his mind.

No time for stray thoughts. The enemy was swarming, circling around the edge of his flames to try and get in close while others stayed back to pelt him with projectiles and flame-dampening blankets of materialization.

Good thing he didn't rely on only fire.

Soul-strengthened lutetium still packed quite a punch on its own. In an instant, metal spikes flew out of his body like a porcupine, covering the same area that the flames just did but extending even farther, skewering multiple attackers at once.

But one of them pushed through, taking several spikes in the arms and chest while batting the rest away with a big wooden club.

Vito was forced back as the club came crashing down in front of him, and if the crater it left in the floor was any indication, that attack would have almost certainly flattened him if he hadn't avoided it.

And Kerikos expected the man with the club to keep pressing the advantage, but to Vito and the reaper's combined surprise, the man just stood there and raised a hand, which was apparently enough to bring the other attackers to a halt, too.

"You're a tough one, aren'tcha?!" the man said with wide eyes and a toothy smile. "Tell me your name, warrior!"

Vito's jaw clenched. Truthfully, he and Kerikos were both tempted. Perhaps if they hadn't been trying to keep a low profile, they would have acquiesced to the enemy's request. It was a most ancient gesture of respect on the battlefield to ask for the opponent's name.

In the modern day, it was something of a lost practice. To hear it uttered from this strange villain now was certainly a surprise.

"Heh! If you don't give me a name, then I'll just have to invent one for you! You don't want that, do you? Better to just tell me something, even if it's a lie!"

"I trust you to give me something good," said Vito.

The stranger burst out laughing. "He speaks! And what a thing to say! I think I like you!"

"3687

Kerikos was seeing an opportunity here, and Vito decided to take it. "The feeling might very well be mutual," said Vito. "You seem too honorable for Abolish. What are you doing with them?"

"What, we can't have honor over here? Says who?"

That was at least confirmation that they were indeed members of Abolish. "The many child-murderers and genocidal maniacs among your ranks, perhaps?"

The man laughed again. "Well, everyone's entitled to their opinion, eh? Even maniacs."

Vito's gaze moved between the differing attackers as they stalked slowly around his vision, watching him with obvious anticipation on their faces. This little exchange was very much a double-edged sword, right now. On the one hand, it was buying precious extra time for the

civilians to escape, but on the other, it was also giving the enemy servants time to regenerate and regroup. He could see some of the downed and scorched ones in the back getting back up again.

Maybe it was unwise to let this draw out any further.

But no.

Prince David's safety came first. Lord Goffe had entrusted this task to him. The shame he would feel upon returning to Warrenhold alone...

There could be nothing worse. And not just for him, either. For the entirety of House Sebolt. The dishonor that would bring to his ancestors was painful to even countenance.

"You are a strange one," said Vito. "I know this may be rude, considering I have not given you mine, but would you tell me your name?"

"Rude, and yet somehow still so polite! Surely, you are the strange one here, my friend!"

"I will not argue with that."

"Hah! Alright. My name is Barnabas." And he hoisted his huge club over his shoulder with an audible thud. "Sure you still don't want to tell me yours?"

Vito almost wanted to smile. "How about this? If we ever meet again, I'll tell you then."

"Oho! Deal! Though, it's a bit unlikely that you and I will both live through this first encounter of ours."

"Not if you go easy on me," said Vito.

Barnabas guffawed again, even louder than before. "Stop making me laugh so much, damn you! I already don't want to kill you!"

"Our interests are aligned, then. I don't want you to kill me, either."

"Oh, man! At least I know you can't possibly be a member of the Vanguard, with a sense of humor like this!"

"3688

Kerikos' senses were telling Vito that Prince David and the other non-combatants had all made it through the hole and were running together. That was a relief, but he also had to be concerned about other enemies scattered throughout the castle. The reaper could sense so much chaos around Livingston, right now. It was difficult to parse through it all, but for the moment, their escape path seemed clear.

If they ran into trouble, would he be able to reach them in time? His hands were quite full here, but even if they weren't, the growing distance might become an issue.

It was time to go for that previous strategy he'd thought of. He needed to steer this fight toward potential allies.

"Why so quiet all of a sudden?" said Barnabas. "I was enjoying our conversation!"

"As was I," said Vito. "Apologies. Might you be willing to tell me what your goal here is?"

"Goal?" said Barnabas with another mild laugh. "Don't know, don't care. You'd have to ask the bigwigs about that."

Kerikos had to wonder if that was the truth. Clearly, this fellow had enough authority to make all these other Abolishers listen to him, so it seemed unlikely Barnabas here would be that uninformed about whatever this current operation was.

Playing dumb, perhaps?

"I'll tell you my name if you tell me your motive," tried Vito.

Barnabas' brow twitched. "You hard of hearing, friend? Can't tell you what I don't know."

Hmm. "Then maybe you could tell me who is leading this attack, instead."

"Now why would I tell you that?"

"Because you like me?"

"Heh. Not that much."

"Shame. What if I tell you my name in exchange?"



"You were so protective of that before, but now you want to use it as a bargaining chip? Not just tough, but wily, too, eh? Somethin' tells you're trying to take advantage of my amicable nature, right now. Probably feed me some bullshit alias, instead, hmm?"

"Same could be said about you," said Vito. "You wouldn't lie about your leader's name?"

"Of course not. I'm an honorable fellow, as you yourself have already pointed out."

"True. But if you're really so honorable, then you should trust me to be honorable in return."

"Aha. Unfortunately for you, I've made that mistake before and learned my lesson. It's a fine line between honorability and gullibility."

"Don't be like that," said Vito. "If we can't trust each other's word, then what are we even doing, right now?"

Barnabas rolled his shoulders. "Good question."

Aw, shit."

"3689

"No one interferes," said Barnabas, looking briefly around. The other Abolishers seemed disappointed, but none argued.

Vito was about to say something else, but Barnabas didn't give him time.

The man blitzed forward, wooden club cocked back for a big swing.

Vito reacted without thinking. He sacrificed both arms to a surge of molten lutetium as the rest of him dashed backward in a succession of quick hops.

Barnabas took the attack head on and didn't stop. The club crashed down just in front of Vito--and kept crashing even as he moved. Barnabas followed him with continued, thunderous swings, leaving craters and kicking up debris with each of Vito's hops.

And it soon became apparent to Vito that this was not going to stop. They were in a chase now, one spurred on by superhuman endurance. They were not going to get tired for hours, days, or even weeks, depending on how hard their reapers chose to push them.

The castle was taking more of a beating than Vito. In their wake, Barnabas' great wooden club annihilated inconvenient walls and rendered the ground virtually impassable for normal people.

There were close calls, though. Vito could feel the rush of air from each swing, enough so that it was almost a distraction unto itself. He wanted to slide through a blow for a counterattack, but he knew that to be a deadly gamble, at best. Barnabas was able to swing that thing as if it weighed no more than a knife.

So Vito decided to just keep blasting him with fire, instead. The attacks weren't doing much, but they weren't doing nothing, either. He could see Barnabas' smoldering, half-melted skin. It was obviously going to take a lot more than that in order to bring down a servant, but in a battle of attrition, Vito would eventually get there while these swings would not.

Still, this was not ideal. One slip up might just be the end. He didn't know if he'd be able to survive even a single attack from that club. It seemed a peculiar choice of weapon, and Vito had a rather strong suspicion that there was more to it than met the eye.

He had to endure. To stay focused. On both Barnabas and their environment. Leaping continually backwards like this was no easy feat. Kerikos had to make sure the way behind them was clear. That they weren't backing themselves into a corner."

"3690

But this also gave them an opportunity to steer the direction of the fight. Kerikos could sense potential allies in various directions. Vaguely familiar soul signatures. Moving with quickness and certitude. Castle guards, most likely.

They just had to make sure that those guards didn't confuse them with the attackers. Even with reapers for observational support, friendly fire was still undoubtedly a threat in the midst of all this chaos.

And the best way for Vito to distinguish himself as an immediate ally was to spare an extra attack for the castle guards' opponents.

Which would be quite difficult with Barnabas hounding him like this.

There was nothing for it. He'd have to take a risk, Vito decided. He needed to create enough of an opening for himself, first.

The same duplicate technique from before might do the trick. But yes, it would be a risk. If Barnabas wasn't fooled by the decoys when Vito tried to use them for cover, then Vito might very well have to eat that club with his face.

So the answer was to be patient, first. Try the duplicates multiple times. See how Barnabas reacted to them before committing to anything else.

And that was what he did.

The lutetium reacted as he engulfed himself in a deep reddish flame once more. He sent out the three duplicates, spreading behind him as he moved.

Barnabas changed tactics on him. Instead of continuing to pummel the ground, the man gave a big, sweeping swing of his club and caught two of the three duplicates at once--and almost the real Vito as well, if he didn't take an extra hop backward to avoid it in time.

Agh.

Barnabas didn't let up, either, and the chase continued.

Vito tried again. Five duplicates this time, spreading out even farther. It was more taxing on Kerikos, but it worked. Barnabas swung wide, catching three copies instead of the real thing.

Vito seized the opening. He circled around to Barnabas' back and grappled him under the club arm and around the neck. He twisted with all his strength, but the man's head didn't pop free like Vito intended. In fact, it hardly felt like Barnabas was under his control at all.

Barnabas' free hand found Vito's left shoulder and gripped it with such strength that the bones therein snapped instantly. And even from that awkward angle, when Barnabas yanked on the crushed shoulder, Vito felt that the man might actually succeed in pulling him off his back unless he did something."

He resorted to spikes again. Targeting the back of Barnabas' skull, in particular. It was right there, after all. Easy pickings.

And the spikes connected, too. Skewering the man's entire body, including the head. Straight through.

Barnabas did not stop moving, however. He still managed to yank Vito free and fling him away.

And he didn't let up there, either. He continued to give chase, swinging the club wildly again.

Vito was confused, but he didn't have the time to sit there and deconstruct what in the world had just happened. He returned to dodging and had to rely on Kerikos' extra thought process in order to reassess the situation.

He could see lutetium spikes all over Barnabas' body. They did not stay long. They were being pushed out by the undead regeneration.

That was a clue. Normal regeneration typically had trouble removing large foreign bodies from one's flesh.

But enhanced regeneration? Such as that of pan-forma? That would do the trick. And yet, that also made little sense here, because thus far, Barnabas had not been speaking with the telltale double-voice indicative of a hyperstate. So what was going on here?

Wait a moment.

Vito's eyes never strayed from the wooden club, but now he was seeing it in a new light. Hmm.

"What's the matter?" said Barnabas in the midst of his barrage. "You look confused."

But this time, Vito did indeed hear the two voices speaking in unison.

Kerikos felt like he understood. Barnabas' reaper had been concealed inside the soul-infused club this whole time, just waiting for the right moment to pop out and shift the tide of battle with a hyperstate.

"Neat trick," said Vito.

"I don't know what you mean," said Barnabas.

"Hmph."

This wasn't good. Pan-forma gave flat bonuses to a servant's durability, connectivity, and regeneration. Vito could still avoid these attacks, but for how much longer? The boost to connectivity could manifest in any number of surprising and unwelcome ways, depending on what Barnabas' exact ability was. Most likely, it was some form of transfiguration, since materializers tended to lead with it.

Well, Vito had a trick of his own in mind. The castle guards were close enough now that he could try to enact his plan.

Rather than attacking Barnabas in order to create a much more comfortable opening, he'd just have to use the duplicate technique in order to distract and then throw out a quick attack at the guard's opponents. It wouldn't be much, but hopefully, it would still be enough for the guards to realize that he was indeed on their side.

So that was what he did."

"3692

The duplicates went in all different directions, and soon as he saw Barnabas swing at the wrong ones, he sent out an extra duplicate--this one ablaze--toward the group of hostiles on the other side of the hall.

It soared over there like a burning missile and erupted into a blanketing inferno, catching multiple opponents on fire at once.

Good. That was--

Barnabas twisted suddenly and backhanded him across the face.

Vito staggered. And instinctively, he knew that the next, far more deadly blow would already be on the way. That meager attack could only have been meant to create an opening for a follow-up with that club.

So without thinking or even trying to regain his footing, Vito dropped to

the ground just as the club swung horizontally over his head. Then he went for Barnabas' right leg, wrapping himself around it like a snake and twisting in order to pull Barnabas down the ground along with him.

Normally, this was a move that could paralyze the opponent with pain, but that obviously wasn't going to work on a servant. It was, however, still quite useful for shifting the momentum of the fight. By now, Vito knew only too well how dangerous it was to fight this guy up close, so he decided to scramble back up to his feet while still maintaining his grip on Barnabas' leg. Then he mustered all his strength and swung the man around like a sack of concrete, sending him crashing into a wall. Wood, plaster, and insulation exploded out of the impact point, covering the area in dust and debris.

And then there was an opening in the fight. Vito considered using it to dive through the debris and pummel Barnabas up close, but he decided not to risk it and throw a blanket of flames over the scene, instead.

This way, Kerikos could also reacquire the location of Prince David's soul. It wouldn't do if they lost track of him for too long.

Ah, there he was. A good distance away. And still moving, seemingly.

Barnabas stood up through the fire, sweeping it away with a single stroke of his club.

Vito expected another front assault, but the other man took a moment to say something, instead.

"I hate hypocrites," said Barnabas. He was scowling. Not looking at all like his previously laidback self.

Vito's brow furrowed, and he tilted his head. "Excuse me?"  
"3693

"All that talk about honor," said Barnabas, "and yet what are you doing now? Trying to bring others into our fight. I told my men to hang back so that you and I could have a proper go of it. You disappoint me, stranger."

"That's not honor," countered Vito. "What you're talking about is merely pride. Honor is something done in service of others, not to satisfy one's

own ego.”

“Rationalizations of the cowardly.”

“That is incorrect. Would I like for us to have a proper duel? Sure. But when you have responsibilities beyond indulging in your own personal desires, honor becomes something much greater than a simple feeling in your gut.”

Barnabas squinted at him but made no further retort.

“I respect your desire for an honest fight,” said Vito. “If I can spare your life, I will. But it seems to me that the company you keep has given you a false concept of what true honor is.” Not that Vito was terribly surprised by that. Anyone who participated in the wanton slaughter of civilians couldn’t have understood much about honor, no matter what they said.

Vito decided to hold his tongue on those last thoughts, though. He had a feeling that they would fall on deaf ears to any Abolisher, since they’d probably heard something similar countless times before. Kerikos had often found that people had an odd compulsion to disagree with arguments they’d heard too many times, regardless of how much merit said arguments actually had.

For his part, Barnabas remained quiet, merely standing there instead of continuing the attack.

Which Vito found surprising. Perhaps he should have used this opportunity to press his own advantage, but something was stopping him. Something in that uncertain expression on the other man’s face.

Before their dialogue could resume, however, another quake arrived; but this one was unlike any of the others.

It was sharp and brief. Not terribly disorienting--or even that dangerous, really.

But something else occurred along with it.

The entire corridor behind Barnabas was gone. The connecting rooms, too. Part of the courtyard. An entire chunk of the castle.

Just gone.

In its place was a great crater. A half-sphere, gouged out of the

building and the earth. And stranger still, it looked so clearly cut. Not like the aftermath of an explosion. Rather, it looked more like the mass had simply been subtracted from the space that it had been occupying mere moments ago.

Wide-eyed, Vito had no idea what to make of it."  
"3694

After another moment, he noticed people in the crater. They were gathered together at the bottom, looking around with apparent confusion.

Kerikos recognized their soul signatures as that of the Abolishers who'd just been in the area. They'd been spared from the blast--or whatever it was that had made the crater.

More disturbingly, Kerikos could not sense any of the castle guards who those Abolishers had just been fighting. Which could only mean one thing.

This crater was undoubtedly the work of Abolish. Perhaps their leader, even. So there was nothing to prevent another crater from appearing on top of Vito and Kerikos, right now.

They had to move. Barnabas and the other Abolishers were looking similarly befuddled, so Vito decided to take the opening to flee before they came back to their senses. This fight wasn't important. Only the Prince's safety was.

Kerikos had a bead on Prince David's position. Vito bolted through the corridor, bounding over rubble and weaving between more fights going on along the way. He spared a blanket of flaming lutetium for another group of attackers as he passed, but that was it. The remaining castle guards would have to fend for themselves.

Another problem arose when he sensed some of the previous Abolishers in pursuit. The last thing he wanted to do was bring hostiles closer to the Prince, but another brief quake cut that concern short, and Vito saw another gaping hole in the castle on his left. Where entire rooms had been, now only open air remained.

The pursuers were the lesser worry now, he felt. He had to get Prince



David away from these vaporizing blasts first. The pursuers could be dealt with later.

More running. Dodging. Weaving through mayhem. A tall window offered a shortcut, and he took it, crashing through to reach the outer edge of the castle grounds. He had eyes on Prince David now, scrambling through an enormous garden among a crowd of other non-combatants. They'd nearly reached the castle's eastern exit. Would that be far enough away from the danger? Probably not, Vito felt.

Then his vision went white, and his mind blanked out. When he regained awareness, he was flat on his back in the grass.

What in the world was that? Had he gotten hit? Was he hit? Where was he hit? Where? He couldn't feel--

The left half of his body was missing. No arm. No leg. He still had both eyes, though."

"3695

Vito was floundering. His mind felt scattered. His senses. His limbs. Why weren't they reappearing? The regeneration. It was still happening. He could feel it. But it was slow. Not like pan-forma. What happened to the hyperstate?

His senses. Yes. No. Foggy. Too greatly diminished. Something was very wrong, and he quickly realized what it was.

'Kerikos?' he thought. 'Where are you?'

There. Vito saw the reaper in the grass, not far away. Smoldering with ethereal, black-and-white smoke. Wounded. Badly.

To Vito's eyes, the reaper was supposed to look like a honey badger, but right now, Kerikos was virtually without form. Little more than a blob.

Vito crawled with his one arm, trying to will the other to grow back faster.

So much blood. Still gushing out of his wounds even as they healed.

He didn't understand. How had they been separated? Where had the

attack even come from?

Might this be how he was going to die? Without even a clue as to what happened? Just caught up in some mayhem beyond his comprehension? Wrong place, wrong time? In some foreign land? Never to see his family again? His dorky little sister? His stubborn father? His brave cousins? Lord Dimas?

This wasn't right. It wasn't fair, either. He couldn't explain why. Couldn't think it through. Couldn't process any of it.

But he could feel it. In his gut, he could feel it. How wrong this was. How cruel.

He kept pushing. Kept crawling. Somehow, with each passing moment, it seemed to be getting harder, not easier. That also made no sense. He was still regenerating. He should've felt the improvement. And yet.

It was like the world itself was pushing down on him. Telling him to stop crawling. Telling him to give up.

It kept growing more difficult. His vision stretched before him. It felt like Kerikos was getting farther away, too. Not closer. That couldn't be right. Even time itself was all wrong. This felt like an eternity going by. How could Kerikos be so far away? He'd been right there a moment ago.

Agh. He knew the problem. Rationally, he knew it. He was delirious. His senses were lying to him. Aftermath of the hyperstate. That had to be it. Only explanation.

Or he was dying. Truly dying. Turning slowly feral after his link to his reaper had been severed.

No. No, no. He refused to believe it. That was just the fear talking. Trying to take over. Make him panic.

Kerikos was right there. Wounded, sure, but still alive. He could almost touch him."

"3696

Something was pushing down on him now. As if gravity had suddenly

quadrupled. He could feel it there on his back. The added pressure. Almost like the foot of a giant. Was it real? An actual giant pinning him down?

He discarded the questions as soon as they entered his mind. Distractions. Unimportant. Didn't matter if it was real or not. Didn't matter if the Mad Demon himself was sitting on his back, right now.

The only thing that mattered was reaching Kerikos.

His muscles ached. Fatigue struck.

But so what?

His body didn't want to listen to him?

So what? He was in charge, not his body.

He could hardly think straight?

So what? There was only one thing to think about, anyway.

Time stretching away from him?

So what? Time could stretch for a thousand years. Vito would crawl for a thousand and one.

The entire world was unraveling around him? Peeling away from his vision like a torn painting?

So. What.

He crawled. And kept crawling. Ignoring all the rest. Everything else.

And finally, he reached his reaper. With his lone hand, he grabbed the lump of soul power that was Kerikos and pulled him close.

And he breathed. He didn't know what to do now, but that was fine. For the moment, that was fine. He could figure that out later.

Ground shaking.

Whatever.

Kerikos was alive. But just barely. Completely unconscious. Unable to reinitiate the hyperstate. Problem? Mm. Maybe for the best. Might not have been able to maintain it for much longer, anyway.

Tired.

Absurdly so.

Not sure he'd ever felt so tired before. Couldn't think. Couldn't recall. Wanted to slip off. To sleep. To rest. Deserved it, didn't he? Such a long day. Time to let go.

...Except.

Bother. There was a bother. Still. Somehow. Somewhere.

Back of his mind. Couldn't grasp it. But it was there. Scratching at him. Yelling at him. Familiar faces with familiar voices. So familiar. And yet, he felt certain that he'd never seen them before. How could that be?

They were reaching out to him. And he heard what they were saying. Just a bit. Just enough.

"Not yet."

His palm found the hard earth. And after a moment, his other palm found it, too. Regrown. Still regenerating. Slow but steady.

His bare skin felt the grass again. And the cool air.

No. Not cool, actually. Extremely warm. An intense heat. Had he set himself on fire again? That didn't seem right."

"3697

He climbed to his knees and finally regained a proper sense of environmental awareness as his vision cleared. And yet he felt more confused than ever, because he could hardly understand what he was looking at.

The entire world was on fire. Everything around him. Ablaze.

Even himself. All up his arms and legs and chest. But these weren't the reddish flames of his lutetium.

And strangest of all, they didn't hurt, either. Because of numbness? No. The flames weren't burning him. Not cooking his flesh.

If anything, he was feeling somewhat better, actually. Invigorated. This was the intense heat that he felt before. It wasn't painful. It was like a deeply warm embrace, covering his entire body.

But he could see other things burning around him, too. Smoke and damage. Craters in the ground. Burning men running across his vision. Screaming.

What the hell was happening here?

Kerikos stirred within his grasp. 'Ogh...'

'Kerikos!' thought Vito. 'You're conscious?!'

'Mgh... I don't... what...?'

Before he could question the reaper any further, however, a blinding light in the sky stole his attention, and he had to shield his eyes. When it abated, he saw a great fireball suspended there, looking not unlike a meteor, but it was just hung there in midair, seemingly not moving.

And then it clicked for him. Could that be Jackson up there?

Vito had heard that the Radiant Sentinel, the Star of the West, had gone mysteriously missing after a terrible battle with the Mad Demon in the Uego Desert. Theories abounded about what might have become of him, but one of the more popular ones had been that he was recovering here in Intar.

If that was really him, then perhaps the situation wasn't so--

Agh, he was getting distracted, Vito realized. He needed to find Prince David again. In all this chaos, that was going to be difficult. He needed a reaper's senses.

'Kerikos, can you hear me?'

'Rgh...'

'Kerikos!'

No response, this time.

Shit.

He tucked the reaper under his arm as he looked around. The flames all over his body had diminished, but they weren't entirely vanishing,

and the same could be said for those covering the courtyard. It was a bit easier to see, at least. And he recalled the general direction in which the Prince had been fleeing.

So he started running.

Whatever else was going on around him, whatever this mad battle was and whatever big names might be involved in it, Vito Sebolt knew his task. And he was going to see it done."

"3698 -- CCCIV.

### Chapter Three Hundred Four: 'Awakening of the Sun...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

Abbas Saqqaf groaned as his eyes eased open. They resisted. They wanted to stay closed. And he wanted to let them, too. But in his gut, he knew he couldn't. He knew something was amiss.

He tried to sit up and encountered more resistance there. He pushed through that, too.

He found a dimly lit room around him. A bed beneath him. The smell of morning dew in the air.

"There you are," came a voice on his left. "Welcome back."

It was the Lord of Warrenhold sitting there, he realized between blinks. The young black man had a grip on Abbas' forearm. Instinctually, he wanted to ask why, but when he laid eyes on the glowing object in Hector's other hand, he became much more interested in that.

The Living Core. Hector was holding it. Hector was using it.

Abbas stared.

"Your family has been worried about you," said Hector, letting go of him, "but not as much as they would have been, if they knew just how close you and Worwal came to killing yourselves. Before I let anyone else in here, you and I need to have a talk."

Worwal? Ah, there he was on the right. To his eyes, reapers were regal horned lizards with ethereal black-and-white flames tracing the

outlines of their bodies.

'It seems we've upset our host,' said Worwal.

"I'm not mad," said Hector, sounding quite mad. "But this thing you've created is incredibly dangerous. I wish you would've at least told me more about it before actually trying to forge it."

Ah...

Abbas had to clear his throat before speaking. "Yes, well... with the benefit of hindsight, I would have to agree. It did not seem such a dangerous idea at the time..."

"Creating a living, thinking interface didn't seem that dangerous?" said Hector.

The doubt in the young man's voice made Abbas feel suddenly defensive, but he had to ask something else first. "What have you learned of it so far?"

"Oh, quite a bit," said Hector. "I've learned that it's capable of making moral judgments. I've learned that it can influence you emotionally. I've learned that it can manipulate soul power and ardor. But most importantly, I've learned that, personality-wise, it's kind of a dick."

Abbas almost couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Almost.

When dealing with this particular person, Abbas was somehow beginning to feel as though incredulity was to be expected."  
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"3699

Abbas sat up more fully in his bed. "...Personality-wise, you say? So you have already managed to communicate with it?"

"Yeah," said Hector.

"How in the world did you accomplish that? I have not yet created instructions for its use."

"Oh, uh. I just kinda... connected it to the Big Candle and dove right in."

"The Big Candle?"

"Right, uh. Since we've got this Mini-Candle now. Big Candle and Mini-Candle."

Wow. Abbas needed a moment. "Alright, well, before you go renaming my creations permanently, that object is called the Living Core."

"Oh. Huh. Okay. I guess that sounds better than Mini-Candle, anyway."

"If you were able to communicate with it, then I am surprised you were not able to learn its name without my help."

Hector paused for an odd look, then clicked his tongue. "Uh... well, there might be a reason for that..."

"What do you mean?" said Abbas.

"Ah... I'm not sure how to tell you this, but, er... this thing, the Living Core... it doesn't seem to like you very much."

Abbas blinked again and furrowed his brow. "Excuse me?"

"Like I mentioned, it's kind of a dick. It doesn't appreciate you. In fact,

that's why you and Worwal both nearly died."

Died? Hmm. Yes, this was the second time Hector was mentioning that, but only now was it beginning to sink in. "How... how did it nearly kill us?"

Hector took a long breath. "Well, from what I've been able to piece together, this Living Core here... ah... it led you astray. Technically, I guess it didn't try to kill you directly, meaning with its own power, but... it was the equivalent of leading you into a minefield. With a blindfold on."

"...How do you know this?"

Hector scratched his brow. "It's hard to explain. The power that this thing can tap into is the same as the Candle. Or maybe that's only when it's connected to the Candle. I'm not sure yet. But the point is, it leads to a deep, dark place. Full of... incredible power. Infinite, maybe. It might be what they call the Void."

Abbas remained quiet, though he exchanged looks with Worwal.

"I've felt it once before," Hector went on. "Recently, actually. In my meditations. So I knew a little of how to deal with it. But you..." Hector leveled a stare at Abbas. "Was that the first time you've ever encountered it?"

"3700

Abbas chewed on that question for a bit as he met Hector's gaze. He decided against answering it straight away. "The Void... that is what Abolish calls it. Their god."

"Yeah, but I don't think it's as simple as that," said Hector. He squinted. "And something tells me that you don't think so, either."

Hmm. "What do you know of the Void?" said Abbas.

"...I asked you first," said Hector. "You're not trying to avoid my question, are you?"

Hmph. He supposed there was no point in trying to hide anything, considering how invested he and his kin already were with this young man. "...No, that was not my first time encountering it. I've glimpsed it

before. A few different times, in truth.”

Hector’s head reared back a little, but the stern expression on his face didn’t change into one of surprise. “So you knew the danger. And did it, anyway.”

Abbas pulled his legs over to the side of the bed and sat on the edge, putting his back to Hector but not standing to his feet just yet. “Of course I did.”

“Then why did you--? Agh. That was so reckless!”

“Hah! Hector. This is the risk we take. This is the nature of working with a Fusion Forge. I told you before, did I not? The Candle may be “gentle,” but that does not make it harmless. In some ways, that may even make it more dangerous. It can lure one into a false sense of security.”

“I understand that,” said Hector. “But you still could have at least told me you were planning to do something risky. That way, I would’ve been more prepared to help you, if something went wrong. Like it did.”

“Hector. Every time I use the Forge, this can happen. There is no safe handling of it. I knew the danger, yes, but I had no reason to think that this instance would be any different from the others. Because, frankly, it wasn’t. This was just the first time things went wrong.” He stood up and straightened his robe. “There will probably be more.”

The young Lord of Warrenhold stood up, too. “Respectfully, Lord Abbas, that’s a stupid approach to take. And unlike you.”

Abbas chortled. “I don’t disagree. But I’m not going to stop using the Forge.”

“I’m not saying you should,” said Hector. “I’m saying you should be smarter about it. We should be smarter about it. Let me help you.””  
"3701

“Help me in what capacity?” said Abbas. “You’ve already done more than I could have imagined.”

“The Void,” said Hector. “Talk to me about it. When have you encountered it before?”

Abbas had no idea where this was going, but he supposed there was no reason not to answer. "That is a difficult matter. It's something that inventors have contended with throughout history. Even before I ever faced it myself, I had heard the tales. About how the greatest minds to ever live could reach out and touch this... realm of brilliance. Some called it the Void, yes. Others called it Enlightenment. Or the Heavens. But all agreed that it was something beyond the self. A rarely reachable place where new ideas could be discovered, where old ideas could be found again, and where struggling ideas could come together and find beautiful harmony."

Hector remained quiet, merely listening.

At the boy's apparent attentiveness, Abbas decided to continue. "As for myself, I have been fortunate enough to encounter this feeling on... six occasions that I can remember. Now, whether or not I truly came face-to-face with the so-called Void in these moments... well, that may be unknowable. I can only report how I felt. And the results that followed. Each time, I was met with a great euphoric epiphany. A breakthrough in the work that I had been toiling away at for... years, in most cases. And there is no doubt in my mind that I would have been incapable of building my armor if I had never experienced those moments."

Hector nodded. "Okay. I understand the problem."

"Problem?"

"Yes," the young lord went on. "The problem, Lord Abbas, is that you're too smart."

Abbas returned a dull blink. "Excuse me?"

"First, you need to adjust your mindset. Because you're too smart, you need to slow down and come to the realization--the epiphany, to use your word--that you're actually not smart. That you're a big dumbass."

"Hector, I am receiving some rather mixed messaging here..."

"Look. The Void will turn your own intellect against you. Your mind will become lost to infinity. So... yeah, in a weird way, you need to become stupider."

'In that regard, this conversation will surely help,' said Worwal.

At that scathing remark, Abbas might've expected the Lord of Warrenhold to take offense.

But Hector just paused for a laugh, instead.

Which ended up pulling one out of Worwal, too.

Quite the uncommon sight from his reaper, Abbas noted with mild shock."

"3702

"I know how it sounds," said Hector, still chuckling a bit. "But I'm serious. I've seen this problem many times, thanks to the Candle's memories. It knows the history of other Forges, too. Forges have always attracted brilliant inventors. And they've always come up against this same problem. You understand? I need you to listen to me on this. If you don't adjust your approach, then the Void--or whatever you wanna call it--it'll lure you in and eat you alive."

Worwal glanced at Abbas, and they didn't even need to exchange words privately in order to know what each other was thinking. Abbas returned a nod, knowing that the reaper would be able to sum up both of their thoughts just fine.

'We appreciate your concern,' said Worwal, 'but let us not forget that, Candle or not, you are still quite inexperienced in these matters, Lord Goffe. Nor are you an inventor. Abbas and I have our own process. We have been doing this for a very long time. And yes, we do understand the risks. But trying to "adjust our approach," as you put it, would not be as simple a matter as you seem to be implying. Moreover, it might just ruin everything and set our progress back by years, potentially. Which is time that our kin may not have. Particularly, our subjects back in Sair.'

Hector's brow lowered now. "You know what would really set you back? Getting yourselves killed."

'That seems a bit rich, coming from you,' countered Worwal. 'You think we aren't aware of your recent exploits? Knowing that you are not nearly as old as you pretend to be, the risks that you have taken are truly absurd. I would've thought that you and Garovel would understand our position a bit better than this.'

“Oh, I understand it perfectly well,” said Hector. “And you make a fair point. Maybe it is a bit rich coming from us. But that’s just another reason why I know what I’m talking about here.”

‘Heh. The confidence of youth. And the naivete, too.’

At that, Garovel, who’d thus far remained silent behind Hector, decided to chime in. ‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ said the reaper, sounding not sorry at all. ‘Who was it again that pulled your sorry asses out of a coma just now? Ah, that’s right. It was my boy Hector here. So how about you show a little more respect and do as he asks, hmm?’

“Garovel--” tried Hector.

"3703

The reaper wasn’t done, though. ‘He might be too nice to say it, but I’m not. It seems to me that you could both do with a dose of humility here. You should take Hector’s advice seriously before you get yourselves killed for some completely avoidable reason. And make me sad. You don’t want to make me sad, do you? I hate being sad.’

At this point, Abbas knew that many reapers would take Garovel’s words as a challenge, of sorts, and begin arguing relentlessly with him.

But Worwal was not one such reaper. A fact for which Abbas was eternally grateful.

Instead, Worwal merely looked over at Abbas and returned a nod of his reptilian head, informing him that it was his turn to say what they were both thinking.

“Amusing,” said Abbas, “but I am still a bit confused about what ‘advice’ we are meant to be taking here. I am unsure how I am supposed to ‘be stupider,’ precisely. If I am to take that more seriously, then perhaps you should propose it more seriously, hmm?”

Hector and Garovel exchanged looks of their own, probably consulting each other privately.

Then Hector spoke up again. “Okay. So. I might not be the best at explaining things... but, uh... it’s like this: when you come up against the Void again, your mental state is key. You need to be rock solid.

Unmovable. You said it yourself: you experienced a 'euphoric epiphany,' right? That's what's dangerous. When your emotions try to take over, when they fill you with a sense of power and... ambition, I guess... that's when things are most likely to go horribly wrong. That's when the Void will lure you into infinity and make it so you never wake up again. Both of you."

'Which is what almost happened, by the way,' added Garovel. 'Thankfully, you weren't yet so far gone that Hector couldn't dive in and retrieve you. With the aid of your Living Core, it must be said. I'm not trying to argue that you didn't create something incredible, because you most certainly did.'

Hmm. Interesting.

Rather than responding right away, Abbas took his time mulling that information over.

Worwal had a question for them, though. 'How long were we unconscious?'

'Tough to say for sure,' said Garovel. 'We didn't know you were in trouble for a while, because your family thought you were merely being... shall we say, 'eccentric' by barricading yourselves inside the tree.'

"Barricading?" said Abbas.

"3704

'Oh, right,' said Garovel. 'The Candle went completely out of control, and there were branches everywhere. Hector had to cut a path to you. He set the tree on fire, actually.'

"What?!"

"Agh, you didn't have to tell--"

'Eh, it's fine. Don't worry. Raheem put it out. That's just how worried Hector was about you. Almost accidentally destroyed one of the most valuable objects on the planet. What a great friend he is, right?'

"Garovel, please stop..."

‘Interesting,’ said Worwal. ‘But I doubt a bit of fire would have destroyed the Candle.’

‘You’re probably right,’ said Garovel. ‘Would’ve been funny, though. In a tragic sort of way.’

‘I think you and I may have very different senses of humor.’

‘Maybe. But anyway, to finish answering your question, you were probably out for a few hours, at least. Raheem could give you a better estimate, I suspect.’

Abbas’ eyes returned to the Living Core in Hector’s hand. The metal band was already wrapped around the boy’s wrist, Abbas noticed. “You said... you used the Core to retrieve Worwal and I?”

‘That’s right,’ said Garovel. ‘And apparently, it wasn’t too keen on cooperating, either. Hector practically had to force it.’

Hector asked the next question. “Did you give it such a bad personality on purpose? That had to have been an accident, right?”

Well, now they were coming up on a portion of the conversation that he didn’t necessarily wish to discuss. Out of embarrassment, primarily. But he supposed there wasn’t much point in trying to save face now, especially when keeping information from these two could just end up causing more problems later.

“...Truthfully,” said Abbas slowly, “the development of the Core required me to tread into... unfamiliar territory. Do you know what a pseudo-consciousness is?”

‘Is it what it sounds like?’ said Garovel. ‘A fake personality?’

“Somewhat,” said Abbas. “More specifically, the term pseudo-consciousness refers to an advanced technique in integration. It is what you might call a ‘soul construct.’ That is, a pocket of soul power that is able to react to some form of stimuli. Typically, that stimulus is a person pressing their own soul power into the associated object. That is the most primitive form of pseudo-consciousness, though it is still quite advanced by conventional integration standards.”

“Hmm,” hummed Hector. “This thing seems way more advanced than just that. It can react to a lot more than just my soul power. I mean, I can talk to it.”



"Y-yes..." Abbas rubbed his chin as his eyes slowly widened. "I must admit, that is... unexpected."

"3705

Hector looked confused. "Unexpected? What's unexpected, exactly? The fact that I can talk to it? Or the fact that it even has as personality in the first place?"

"The latter, I'm afraid," said Abbas. "My intent for the Living Core was to have to have it become the foundation of a larger interfacing mechanism for non-servants in the use of ardor. I felt that a complex pseudo-consciousness would be well-suited to that purpose. But from the way you are describing your interactions with it, perhaps I... erred in some way. Hmm."

'So you accidentally created a sentient being,' said Garovel.  
'Wonderful.'

Abbas paused on that thought. Had he truly done so?

No, no, that couldn't be right. Sure, his plans for the Living Core had been quite advanced--perhaps the most advanced individual item he'd ever developed, even--but it just didn't make sense to him that it could have manifested an entire personality without him realizing. Its ability to "think" shouldn't have even been that sophisticated. It was only meant to simplify complex processes and bridge the sensory gap for individuals who could not innately detect ardor.

This didn't make sense. How could it have--?

Abbas' expression slackened as a thought struck him, and he felt compelled to ask a new question. "Wait a moment. You said that you... 'connected' the Core to the Candle and then 'dove right in,' didn't you?"

"Er. Yeah?"

"And that is when you began to communicate with it?"

"Yeah..."

Oh. Gods. "And are you still able to communicate with it even now? At this very moment?"

Hector's eyes went from him to the Core and back again. "Y-yeah..."

Abbas rubbed his temples with one hand as he processed that. "Then in that case... I believe that this 'accident' as you put it, is not my doing. Or at least, not entirely. It is also yours."

"W-what do you...? Uh... Oh." Hector smacked his lips. "We shouldn't have done that, huh?"

Abbas sighed. "Probably not, no."

'Sorry, I'm a little lost here,' said Garovel. 'What shouldn't we have done?'

"When you connected the Core to the Candle--especially so soon after its creation--you essentially poured... an unknowable quantity of ardor and... gods know what else... directly into the Core. So it is not unreasonable to think that the Core may have... shall we say, imprinted some of that metaphysical data onto itself?" Abbas tapped his head and groaned. "Agh, the memory structure! I spent so long weaving it together! I'd just put the finishing touches on it when I passed out, which means... it would have been empty and pristine at the time you connected it to the Candle... ah..."

"3706

"H-hold on a second here," said Hector. "You're saying that its problematic personality came from the Candle?"

Abbas was hardly listening, however, as he rubbed his brow. "Ugh, I'm already dreading what I'm going to see when I look at it again. If an entire personality has taken root in it, then I can only imagine what a mess the memory structure has become. I probably won't even be able to make heads or tails of it for weeks..." Agh, or even longer, potentially. He hadn't examined very many sentient objects before, but they were always absurdly complex. In the past, he'd tried referencing neurological maps as a point of comparison, but they never seemed to help much. The difference between a fully ardor-based mind and a human brain was simply too great, apparently.

But perhaps he should treat this as yet another opportunity to learn. With the Core being so portable, it could possibly serve him well as a

point of comparison with similar objects. The Candle itself would obviously be the most convenient for that purpose, but given its intimate role in the Core's creation, it would almost certainly be of limited use here. Their structures would probably be practically identical. In which case, it might be best to compare them for their differences rather than their similarities.

No, what he needed was a sentient object--preferably more than one--that had no ties to the Candle whatsoever. That would likely prove the most illuminating. But he couldn't do that here, now could he? Such an endeavor would no doubt require--

"Lord Abbas," came Hector's voice, along with a forceful hand on his shoulder. "Can you hear me?" He sounded concerned.

Abbas saw the young man there, looking up at him. Apparently, he and Hector had both moved closer to the entrance of the tent. Ah. Abbas had always had a mildly troublesome habit of unconsciously pacing back and forth when brainstorming. "Apologies," he said. "I was merely lost in thought. Nothing to worry about."

'I told you,' said Worwal. 'He is fine. He does that all the time. It's not a side effect of anything.'

Hector pulled his hand back. "Okay, well... good. You just woke up, you know. You had me worried for a second."

"Did I ignore an important question?" said Abbas, far from the first time in his life.

'Yes,' said Garovel. 'Several, actually. He really does that all the time?'

"3707

'Only when he gets particularly excited about his work,' said Worwal. 'So yes, all the time.'

'Sounds like a real hassle,' said Garovel. 'You have my sympathies.'

'Heh, thank you. And knowing what I do of your servant, you also have mine, a'hkin.'

'Oh, wow. I haven't been called that in millennia. I'm not sure it suits

me, but I appreciate the gesture, at least.'

"Which questions did I miss?" asked Abbas.

"Uh... well, to put 'em all together, I guess I was just wondering how the personality for the Living Core could have come from the Candle when... I mean, the Core literally told me that it put you into that coma. So the personality must've been there before we connected it to the Candle, because that happened after you and Worwal were already passed out."

"Ah, yes. An understandable point of confusion. There are two possible explanations for that. Both of which harbor some rather unfortunate implications, I'm afraid. The first is, in my estimation, far more likely. And that would be that the Core's personality did indeed already exist within the Candle. So it would also remember doing that to us."

"Huh. Wouldn't that mean that the Candle itself hates you, too?"

"Not necessarily." Abbas allowed a beat to pass. "But yes, probably."

"Aw, shit. And the second explanation?"

"Temporal interference," said Abbas.

"Say what?"

"When dealing with Fusion Forges--or dense pockets of ardor in general--time itself can become something of a blurry concept. For example, the precise moment that something is created can turn into more of a... 'range' of creation, rather than a singular instant."

"What the heck? Why would that happen?"

"Oh, any number of reasons, depending on the exact nature of the object in question. But from what I have read, it can be especially likely to occur when the object being created is something particularly influential over ardor itself. It is an interesting phenomenon. I remember reading one theory that said it was a consequence of an ardor feedback loop." Abbas tilted his head as he recalled the essay more fully. "In fact, it said that such a feedback loop, if unable to rectify itself, could result in a spatial distortion akin to a... black hole. Hmm..."

Hector just stared at him.

Worwal's next words were wrapped in the echo of privacy. 'You do

realize that we're trying NOT to come off as unhinged madmen in front of our gracious host, right?"

"3708

Perhaps the reaper had a point.

But oh well. In this moment, Abbas Saqqaf could not bring himself to care about appearances. It seemed quite clear to him now that the young Hector Goffe of Atreya was going to be an important ally for the foreseeable future. Trying to present a false image to him, therefore, would not be good in the long run, even if it made things less bumpy in the here and now.

The glowing orb in Hector's grasp drew the young man's glance, along with a raised eyebrow.

Abbas wondered what that might be about, but when Hector elected not to say anything, the Lord Saqqaf decided to steer the conversation elsewhere. "In any case, I will take what you have told me into serious consideration. Worwal may pretend to know everything, but I will not."

'Hey.'

"It may well be true that we should reevaluate our approach to using the Forge," said Abbas. "And your perspective on the Void is... intriguing to me. I shall have to give that more thought. But in the meantime, I must get back to work. The Core is but the first step in a larger project. More of a proof of concept than a finished product."

"Ooh, yikes," said Hector. "It doesn't like hearing that."

Abbas returned a flat smile. "Heh. Perhaps I shouldn't even bother examining that one and instead merely leave it in your care. How would you feel about keeping it?"

"Uh. I'm not sure, but I kinda feel like I have no choice. How would you feel if I decided to destroy it?"

Abbas blinked. "Why would you do that?"

"Because it's insanely dangerous."

Abbas kept blinking. "And you just told me that it doesn't like what I

was saying. I can't imagine it was too pleased to hear those words from you."

"Oh, it already knows how I feel about it. We had a long chat before you woke back up. If it can't learn right from wrong, at least in the most basic sense, then I don't really care how much power it has to offer us. It's too dangerous to keep around."

"...You are treading into the territory of complex ethical questions, Hector. That may not be a human being in your hand there, but it is still a sentient, thinking entity that you are talking about killing."

Hector's gaze was steady. "I know. But it tried to murder you and Worwal. And possibly also Garovel."

'Yup,' said Garovel. 'Hates my guts, too, apparently.'"  
"3709

Hmm. Abbas couldn't help being a bit surprised at how certain Hector sounded of his convictions here. Young people did not often have such feelings toward such matters, he'd found. It usually took them quite some time to determine their beliefs in one direction or the other.

But for the few young people who did have such feelings, it was usually a red flag. A warning sign. That they were either thoughtless toward the real consequences of their actions, or that they simply had a callous--or even cruel--nature to them, deep down.

Neither of those descriptions seemed to fit Hector here, but it was also still too soon to be sure. They hadn't actually known this fellow for very long, had they?

There was a third explanation, though. For an attitude like this in a young person. Abbas had seen it a few times.

It could manifest when a young person had been forced to confront the matter by a particularly horrific event. When they'd been given no choice but to reach a strong decision about it.

And right now, observing this young man's gaze, Abbas was leaning toward that explanation. What exactly had this child been through? Even among Sandlord and Rainlord children--children who tended to mature quite quickly--this was rare to see.

It was one thing to bear witness to some terrible trauma. That was more than bad enough. But it was another thing to be forced into a terrible decision regarding that trauma, too.

If it hadn't felt wildly inappropriate to do so, Abbas might have inquired further.

Instead, he decided to stay on topic. Hector and Garovel were already being quite generous with how much time they were giving him to think.

"...To be quite blunt," said Abbas, "I would be upset if you destroyed the Living Core. Even disregarding how much effort I put into its creation, I simply do not see how there would be any need to destroy it. In the worst case, putting it in storage would be the more desirable outcome."

Hector made no response, but his eyes went to the floor, and he rubbed his chin.

Abbas kept going. "Especially considering the fact that you do not know how the Candle might react to its destruction. If it feels any sort of attachment to the Core, then you would be jeopardizing our relationship with it, too."

"3710

'You make a fair point,' said Garovel. 'Perhaps we should emphasize that Hector and I would much prefer to keep the Core around, as well. No matter how much of a jerk it is, we would take no pleasure in the destruction of such an incredible object. In fact, one of our primary goals for Warrenhold is to use it as a place to preserve knowledge far into the future, and I would say this little guy qualifies.'

Abbas recalled them mentioning the like before. "That is some comfort, then. But generally speaking, I do hope that you and Hector will never grow too eager to deliver death and punishment. It is a timeless problem that those in power must struggle with: that we do not become callous or cruel with the passage of time."

And Abbas half-expected Hector to return a dismissive look or some word of protest--as youth was often wont to do--but the boy surprised

him yet again with his silence, with the seriousness in his expression, and with the slight nod he gave.

A lull in the conversation arrived, but it didn't take long for Garovel to fill it.

'Well, I suppose we should let your family in here before they worry themselves into a frenzy,' said the reaper. 'But one last thing: have you made any progress on that Kag we asked you about?'

"Ah... um. No."

'Oh. Been too busy, huh? That's a shame. Or is it that you just don't think you can do it?'

'What?' said Worwal.

Uh-oh.

'It's okay if you can't,' said Garovel. 'I mean, Kags are pretty rare to begin with, and recreating a specific one doesn't exactly seem like it would be a cakewalk. I understand if it's too much for you.'

'Too much?' said Worwal, hardly able to conceal the irritation in his tone.

Abbas felt compelled to intervene privately before things got out of hand. 'Worwal, relax. It is an innocent question.'

The reaper's next words were also private. 'A mere Kag? Too much for you? Laughable. Is Garovel stupid? Or just trying to annoy me? Agh, this must be some ploy.'

'I don't think he knows you that well yet,' said Abbas. 'Calm down before you say something we both regret.'

'Mrgh.'

Garovel picked up on the abrupt silence. 'Fellas? Something wrong?'

'Listen to his smug tone,' said Worwal, still privately. 'I hate him.'

Abbas had to consciously avoid rolling his eyes. 'No, you don't. Just let me do the talking.'

"3711



‘Go on, then,’ Worwal told him.

“What exactly do you need this Kag for again?” said Abbas. “I don’t recall what you told us before.”

‘That is because they didn’t tell us anything,’ said Worwal, no longer with the echo of privacy. ‘They just asked if we could make one for some monolith back in Atreya.’

Abbas gave the reaper a look.

‘Alright, fine,’ said Garovel. ‘I’ll admit: we were being a little cagey with the details. It’s a personal project that I’ve been working on for a very long time, so I’m a bit reluctant to go into it too much.’ He spared a glance at Hector. ‘But I suppose if the two of you deem it important, we could reveal a few things. Not that there’s that much to be revealed. I’m not trying to hype it up that much.’

‘A long-term project, you say?’ said Worwal. ‘How long, precisely?’

Garovel bobbed his reptilian head a little. ‘Oh, you know... a couple thousand years or so.’

‘And yet you also say you’ve not made much progress on it?’

‘What can I say? I’m easily distracted.’

Worwal snickered.

Well, that was a good sign, at least, Abbas felt. He decided to jump in again before Worwal’s mood had the opportunity worsen. “Tell us about this project then, if you please.”

‘Okay. Uh. I’m guessing you’re familiar with the name Rathmore, yes?’

Abbas’ head reared back. “Certainly.”

‘Well, one of his Tools is in Atreya. Rathmore’s Gate, to be exact. We were investigating it, and we think a Kag might be able to reveal some of its long-held secrets.’

Holy oasis. “A Kag for one of Rathmore’s Tools... If you’d told me that before, I would’ve made it more of a priority.”

‘Well, you had a lot going on. Still do, in fact. As do we. And I consider this more of a side project, at the moment. While I do want your help, I also don’t want to take up too much of your time. I imagine you’ll at least need to make a trip to the Gate itself for this, yes?’

“Atreya is quite close,” said Abbas, already thinking of putting his armor on right away. “I could knock that out in an hour. Or less, perhaps. And the examination wouldn’t take--” Abruptly, Abbas decided to cut himself off and stop wasting time altogether. He started for the exit of the tent. “In fact, I’ll go right now.””

"3712

“Uh--h-hold on a second there--” tried Hector.

Abbas was already pushing past the flaps into the cool air of the Imara Forest. It smelled rather nice out here, but he paid it no mind at all, instead focusing on where his armor was in relation to their current position. It would have been in the tree with him when--ah.

A worrisome thought. But it should’ve survived whatever mayhem the Core instigated. He turned to his right. The southern horizon. Where the Imara Forest gave way to the grassy landscape of the great tree. Not too far away. He started walking.

New voices arrived in his ear. Familiar ones. His many children and cousins. His beloved Hahl.

He didn’t stop walking.

“I am fine,” he said in Valgan for them. “I will return shortly. Alert me if an attack arrives.”

More voices. Many more. Some raised. But none angry. Just concerned. And none talking to him of imminent danger.

He needed not pay more attention than that. All was well. Or well enough, at least. For now.

He could concentrate on the work to be done. That was good. There was much to do.

Someone was following him. Several people, actually. Worwal was running interference for him, though. Assuaging their worries, no

doubt. Helpful.

His mind was on the suit. On its current specs. He'd been tweaking it little by little. The Core had been intended as a bigger step in that effort, but it seemed to have been a failure in that regard. Disappointing, but not outside expectations. The next attempt would be better. After this trip to the Gate. In fact, depending on what he found, things might speed along even faster.

Shouldn't get his hopes up, though. Too soon to know.

Ah, one of the followers was being persistent. Hector? Of course it was him. He was saying something, too.

Important?

Expressing reservations.

No, then.

Ah, but Abbas realized that he still needed to ask the boy something.

"What are the coordinates of Rathmore's Gate?" said Abbas.

"Oh, I--uh--coordinates? Er, I don't--er--"

"Quickly now, Hector. Time is short."

The boy exhaled. "Agh, I don't know coordinates. Do I look like a map? Garovel?"

'Just bring us with you,' said the reaper. 'Hector can't fly as fast as your suit can, so that'll be fastest.'

"Garovel, please, for the love of--"

"Very well," said Abbas."

"3713

Hector was sighing again. Exasperated, no doubt.

Understandable. A part of Abbas sympathized. Related, even. A shadow of a memory tickled the back of his mind. Time spent with his mentors. They'd often behaved unreasonably in his presence. Been

too caught up in their work to pay much attention to anything else. Dolf, in particular.

So perhaps that shadow of memory should have given him pause. Made him reevaluate his current actions. Made him hesitant.

But it didn't. He gave it almost no consideration at all.

Instead, perhaps there was something ever so slightly invigorating about it. A whisper of nostalgia.

A fondness for those eccentric masters of old.

He could feel, in some small way, a kinship with them. Many times over the course of his life, he had struggled hard in his studies and his work just for the mere opportunity to feel that way. To feel a modicum of worthiness when comparing himself against their incredible legacies.

They'd simply been too great. Too brilliant.

But here and now, despite barely even being able to acknowledge it, he did feel it. Perhaps more strongly than ever, in fact.

The feeling that he was ready. Finally. To match them. To make them proud.

By the time he made it to the tree, he was raring to go. He had a preliminary overview of the suit's working condition already in his head, in accordance with his last memory of its operation. True, that had been a few days ago, but it was still quite clear to him. As long as nothing had changed with it while he'd been unconscious, everything should have been fine.

Overgrown branches were indeed all over the place, but Abbas just pushed through them without hesitation. Was Worwal enhancing his strength? He wasn't even sure. Didn't matter. He reached the armor quickly and set about entering it.

In the past, that had been a point of great difficulty. Laborious and time-consuming. But efficiency had become a priority of late, and in just the past few weeks, he had managed to improve his speed putting it on by over fifty percent.

Hector offered to help him with it, but Abbas refused. It would have been a needless distraction and probably made things go slower.

The donning of the helmet was done last. Allowing it to drill through his skull and into his brain was a sometimes-risky endeavor, rendering him briefly unconscious if he messed it up. Thankfully, that hadn't happened in a while."

"3714 -- CCCV.

When he was ready, Abbas stomped back outside, grabbed the young Lord Darksteel with one hand, pulled him under his arm, and used his strengthened legs in order to gain distance from the grassy earth before rocketing away at a medium burn. No sense in following Hector's example and leaving another fire behind for Raheem or someone else to put out.

Once he had sufficient altitude, he cranked up the burn to eighty percent. He was tempted to go for the full hundred, of course, but after the recent tweaks he'd made to the fusion-propulsion system, he expected the jets to be slightly more powerful than before. And as he had yet to actually test them, it would have been rather irresponsible to do so now, when he had a passenger with him.

...But on the other hand, he was quite certain that the new calculations were correct, and even if they weren't, the built-in fail-safes meant there was zero risk of accidentally instigating antimatter reactions.

Well.

Mathematically zero.

Yeah. He should just go for it. Hector was undead, and time was wasting, after all.

Chapter Three Hundred Five: 'Thy distant coruscations...'

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Well, this wasn't how he'd been expecting the day to unfold. Being carried like a sack of potatoes through the sky was one thing. Doing it while also breaking the sound barrier was quite another.

Hector didn't know much about g-forces, but after feeling like he'd been hit by a truck and passing out--or perhaps dying, actually--and

then later waking back up again, he resolved to add that to his list of things that he needed to learn more about.

In fact, he'd been meaning to do that ever since his flight with Dimas Sebolt back during the battle at the Lorent-Callum border, when they'd flown to Hahl Saqqaf's aid. That had been quite the experience, too--and not entirely dissimilar to this current one. It just hadn't been nearly as intense, though the fight had that followed it more than made up for that discrepancy.

Admittedly, he could have prepared himself a bit better, but Hector wanted to test something of his own during this trip. He figured that they would have to do this twice--to the Gate and then back again--so for the first one, he made the rather haphazard decision to not materialize his newer, more powerful armor."

"3714 -- CCCV.

When he was ready, Abbas stomped back outside, grabbed the young Lord Darksteel with one hand, pulled him under his arm, and used his strengthened legs in order to gain distance from the grassy earth before rocketing away at a medium burn. No sense in following Hector's example and leaving another fire behind for Raheem or someone else to put out.

Once he had sufficient altitude, he cranked up the burn to eighty percent. He was tempted to go for the full hundred, of course, but after the recent tweaks he'd made to the fusion-propulsion system, he expected the jets to be slightly more powerful than before. And as he had yet to actually test them, it would have been rather irresponsible to do so now, when he had a passenger with him.

...But on the other hand, he was quite certain that the new calculations were correct, and even if they weren't, the built-in fail-safes meant there was zero risk of accidentally instigating antimatter reactions.

Well.

Mathematically zero.

Yeah. He should just go for it. Hector was undead, and time was wasting, after all.

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"3715

He wanted to see how his normal iron armor truly compared to the dark suit in this particular scenario. It seemed to him that it wouldn't make much difference at all, since the aforementioned g-forces that his body was being subjected to would be the same.

But again, he didn't know much about g-forces to begin with. So maybe it would have made a difference? Or maybe the suit had some other component to its protective capabilities that he did not yet fully understand?

It did give him a strange sort of feeling in that regard. An extra layer of comfort--in his mind, at least. But that very well could have just been his own messed up head playing tricks on him. In fact, that was quite probably the case, Hector thought. Even his iron armor often made him feel more comfortable than normal clothes did.

There was just something so calming about wearing armor. He didn't know how to explain it. Maybe there simply wasn't a way to.

Regardless, the iron suit worked about as well he'd expected it to. Which was to say: not very.

It didn't take them very long to reach the Carthrace Nature Reserve, wherein stood Rathmore's Gate, but by the end of the trip, Hector felt like his whole body had turned to jelly. It didn't hurt, thanks to Garovel numbing the pain for him, but he'd experienced this type of wobbly sensation many times before, and it always meant that he had a lot of broken bones. Hell, maybe all of them.

That seemed rather unlikely, though, knowing what he now did about how many bones there were in just the hands and feet.

Eh, he was letting these spare thought processes go off in weird directions. Time to focus, he decided.

After being gently set on the ground by Abbas, Hector immediately did his best impression of an unfolded pile of laundry, crumpling into an iron heap. His foremost thought process was disoriented beyond all recognition, but thanks to the others, he was at least able to observe as Abbas moved toward the Gate on his own.

The man seemed to be taking his time in his approach, walking slowly around it before finally getting close enough to touch it. By the time he actually made physical contact, Hector had regenerated enough to walk again.

He double-checked everything he was carrying. Shard. Scarf. Core. Phone. Oh, that was broken. Of course it was. Dammit."  
"3716

How many times did he have to do something incredibly stupid before he finally started remembering that he should leave his phone behind? He felt especially dumb here, knowing that they were already planning to return to the Forge, where he could have safely left it.

He could already picture the judgmental look on Ms. Rogers' face when he told her that he needed another replacement.



Ah well. Problems for later.

As Hector moved toward the Gate, Garovel decided to speak up privately from inside Hector's armor.

'Hey, make the Darksteel Armor before you get any closer. I find it much cozier to hide in.'

'...What did you just call it?'

'The Darksteel Armor. It still needs a name, right? And that one seems pretty much perfect to me.'

Hmm. Well, the reaper did have a point. Hector had been meaning to give it a name for a while now, if only to make it even easier to materialize. Zeff and Asad had both mentioned that naming techniques was good for that purpose, but Hector hadn't fallen in love with any of the things he'd come up with so far. Plus, it hadn't exactly been a priority. The dark armor was already pretty easy to materialize, he felt.

'I don't know,' said Hector. 'Naming it after myself just feels kinda... douchey. Y'know?'

The reaper gave an echoing chortle. 'But it's so fitting, though! It's both dark and steel! Ish!'

'Ish? Steel-ish? I feel like if you have to add an -ish, then it might not actually be that fitting, Garovel.'

'Agh, fine. Name it something else, then. Anything. I just want to call it something other than 'the dark suit.' That sounds way too generic and vague.'

'Uh... hmm...'

'How about the Shadowsteel Armor?'

'I... actually don't hate that.'

'Yeah? It's settled, then!'

'Hold on, I didn't say yes. Just that I kinda liked it.'

'What do you mean? That's the same thing, Hector. Those are equivalent statements.'

'Nuh-uh. Saying that I like it just means that I think you're... er...

heading in the right direction, I guess.'

The reaper sighed. 'Alright. Not Shadowsteel. Just the Shadow Armor, then?'

Hector bobbed his head a little to both sides, then shook it. 'Nah, I don't like that one as much. Sounds kinda... I don't know...'

'Then how about the Nightsteel Armor? You like the steel part of the name, right?'

'I... kinda don't, actually.'

'Huh? You don't? But you just--what? Why not?'

'I dunno.'

'Just the Night Armor, then?'

'...Eh.'

'Hector. Quit being a picky bitch.'

'...No.'

'Oh, my god.'"

"3717

'Garovel, I just feel like it's not that important. The armor's not hard to materialize, so if I don't think a name fits, then I'll just go without it.'

'Yeah, that's fine for you, but what about me? I wanna call it something cool.'

'Wow,' said Hector. 'Which one of us was three thousand years old again?'

'I'll thank you to take your ageism and leave it out of this conversation.'

'Ageism, huh? You've called me young and stupid before. Like a lot.'

'I said THIS conversation. We can both go back to being ageist in the next one.'

That made Hector chuckle.

A brief silence arrived as they both just continued to watch Abbas from this short distance away.

‘But c’mon. Name. While we’ve got time. Let’s figure this out.’

‘You’re really not gonna let this go, huh?’

‘Maybe if you can distract me with something sufficiently interesting. Can you?’

‘Nothing’s coming to mind.’

‘Name, then. I threw a bunch at you. It’s your turn to suggest one.’

‘Well, uh... hmm. I guess... I kinda feel like a good name would pay homage to the shield that it used to be. So maybe Amir?’

‘Amir, huh? Just Amir?’

‘Yeah, why not? Short and simple.’

‘You know Amir is an actual Valgan name, right? For a person? And a fairly common one, too. It’d be like naming your armor Fred.’

Admittedly, Hector hadn’t thought of it that way. He bobbed his head again and rubbed his chin as he gave it more serious consideration.

‘You are NOT naming your armor Fred, right now.’

‘I mean... I could...’

‘Hector.’

‘What?’

‘That’s dumb.’

‘Why? I can name it what I want, can’t I? No one else will ever even hear it, except us. Probably.’

‘What if you become good friends with a guy named Fred at some point, huh? Or Amir, for that matter? It’ll be needlessly confusing.’

‘Hmm. That’s a good point. So I should just always be rude to any Freds or Amirs, then...’

It was the reaper's turn to laugh. 'If you want the name to have some sort of sentimental meaning, then perhaps you should ask Abbas or Haqq about why they named it Amir. Just in case there's some context we're missing.'

'Good idea. Plus, that'll let me put off making this decision for a little longer, too.'

'You're really obnoxious sometimes, you know that?'

'Whoa. That's pretty mean, Garovel.'

'If you don't decide soon, I'm just gonna start calling it the Darksteel Armor on my own, because fuck you.'"

"3718

Smiling to himself, Hector finally did as Garovel initially requested and materialized the dark suit. He stepped a bit closer to Abbas, who had his eyes closed and seemed to be off in his own world.

It wasn't so long ago that Hector would've had no idea what the man was doing, right now. But thanks to the Candle's memories--and from his own personal experiences, of course--he knew that Abbas was examining the structure of its soul power and/or ardor. And that required intense concentration.

So intense, in fact, that Hector didn't even want to say anything aloud, in the off chance that it might distract the Lord Saqqaf. It probably wouldn't, given how well-practiced the man no doubt was at this type of thing, but it still would've been impolite.

It was tempting, though. Worwal was floating right there next to the man, observing silently. Hector might've liked to ask the reaper for his opinion on the Gate, but he supposed that could be saved for later.

As he kept moving slowly closer, however, a different idea entered into his mind.

He pulled the Living Core out of his armor and eyed it for a moment. Then Rathmore's Gate. Then the Core again.

Worwal was staring at him now, Hector noticed. The reaper didn't say anything, though.

Hmm.

'Hector,' came Garovel's private voice again, embedded with a familiarly apprehensive tone. 'You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?'

'Depends. What do you think I'm thinking?'

'I think you're thinking that using the Living Core to interface with Rathmore's Gate wouldn't be an incredibly stupid thing to do.'

'Hah. Well, you're wrong, because I definitely know that it would be.'

'Ah. And you're thinking about doing it, anyway.'

'Maybe.'

'Hector. Haven't we fulfilled our stupid quota for the day? Trying to interface with the Candle when we had so little information was bad enough, no?'

'I mean... yeah. You're right. Obviously.'

A beat passed.

'But what if we just--?'

'Hector, stop. Don't say any more.'

'Why?'

'Because I'll say yes! And I don't want to do that, right now!'

Hector breathed a laugh, trying to keep it quiet.

'Remember that whole speech that you just gave to Abbas about taking a step back and realizing that you're actually a big dumbass? I think you should take your own advice. And so should I, frankly.'

'Aw, c'mon...''

"3719

'Hector, I'm serious,' said Garovel. 'Increasingly, I'm beginning to see

the danger we pose to each other. We're even more alike than I first realized. We both have a very high tolerance for risk. More than that, I think we both find enjoyment in it, too. Like it's slowly becoming our hobby to risk our lives while flirting with the unknown.'

The reaper's heavier tone dampened Hector's spirits a bit, but perhaps that was a good thing. Rationally, he still knew that Garovel was right. And he was being reminded of his meditations again. Of his possible encounter with the Void.

This wasn't the same as that. The danger didn't feel nearly so immediate or threatening.

But it wasn't entirely dissimilar, either.

A background thought process took up the question. Where had these urges come from? Was it from a place of confidence? That seemed wrong, since confidence had always felt like such a foreign concept to him, but... maybe...

He did have a sense that he could control the Living Core. Or at least, keep it in check. And he didn't feel threatened by Rathomre's Gate, either. They hardly seemed comparable to the danger posed by something like the Void itself.

Perhaps, then... yes. He did have confidence in himself. That he could handle whatever crazy shit they might stumble into here.

Wow. That really was it, wasn't it?

Because he didn't feel like he was actually putting Garovel in danger here.

But he was, wasn't he? He was playing with things beyond his comprehension.

And not just that, either. Abbas and Worwal were both here, too. Messing with the Gate in their presence could potentially put them at risk also. Strong as they were, they still deserved consideration for their safety, didn't they?

Not to mention Warrenhold.

He couldn't afford to let himself get put into another coma. Warrenhold couldn't afford it. Not until the Rainlords got back, at the very least.

He was supposed to be a lord. He was supposed to have a sense of responsibility. Not just indulge in whatever sounded fun.

Agh. He could already feel various counterarguments rising to his defense. It wasn't just about fun, surely. These were calculated risks. Necessary ones, even. They needed to obtain more power. To protect Warrenhold. To protect Atreya. From the likes of Abolish. And more, perhaps.

The path forward was not a gentle one. Not a safe or easy one.

But those were just excuses, weren't they? Even if there might've been some truth to them, it didn't change the fact that he'd been getting carried away."

"3720

He took in a deep breath and steadied himself, seeing that Worwal was still looking at him. 'You're right,' he told Garovel, and he put the Core back inside his armor. 'At the very least, we should consult Abbas before pulling another stunt like that.'

'Mmhm. And can you imagine how much shit he and Worwal would give us if we just jumped in there, right now? In the middle of the examination, too? We'd look like huge assholes.'

'Yeah...'

'But I like your thinking, kid. You've got moxie. Don't lose it, just 'cuz I'm fightin' ya on this one.'

Hector frowned inside his helmet. 'Kid? You've never called me kid before.'

'Yeah, I'm tryin' it out. Whaddya think?'

'...I hate it, honestly. From other people, sure. But from you, egh. No.'

The reaper laughed. 'Alright, fine.'

They decided to wait patiently for Abbas to finish his examination. Hector thought about sitting down and meditating, but it didn't take much longer for the man to let go of the monument and walk over to them.

‘So what’s the verdict?’ said Garovel publicly.

“It is a magnificent structure,” said Abbas. “The etchings on the surface are almost invisible to the naked eye, but the flow of ardor through them is still pristine. As if they’d been crafted yesterday. That is how you know they are the work of a master integrator. Eliminating all leakage is a thing that even I still struggle with. Fortunately, my work rarely calls for such precision. Machinery will always be in need of repair or refinement, regardless of how much time is spent perfecting the finished product.”

‘...Alright. I’m not too proud to admit that most of that went over my head,’ said Garovel. ‘Was any of that relevant to the issue of creating a new Kag?’

“Yes,” said Abbas. “The flawlessness of the etchings will need to be replicated in the Kag itself, which will make the project a bit more time-consuming for me. But that is all. I could still manage it in a day. Perhaps a week if I take breaks to work on other projects. You said this was not an urgent matter to you, yes?”

‘We did. Anything else you can tell us about the Gate?’

Abbas’ brow twitched as he eyed Garovel. “You also said this was a long-held project for you. Have you never had anyone else examine this monument?”

Garovel shook his skull. ‘Not this one specifically, no. But others, sure. Many, many years ago.’”

"3721

‘And did you discover anything else after those examinations?’ said Worwal.

‘Not particularly,’ said Garovel with a hint of exasperation. ‘They’re unbreakable, immovable, and typically reach far deeper into the earth than one might expect.’

“Immovable?” said Abbas. “What do you mean by that, precisely?”

‘Oh, did you not know that about them? They can’t be removed from whatever location they are found in. Even if you dig out all the dirt and



rock around them, carve an entire canyon where they stand, they'll actually stay exactly where they are. They'll float in midair, even.'

That was news to Hector. He could see the surprise on Abbas and Worwal's faces, too.

'Truly?' said Worwal. 'You are not making that up, are you?'

Garovel seemed amused. 'Not only that, but the land around them will slowly regenerate into its previous state, too. So even if you did go through all the trouble of carving out a whole canyon, your work would be undone in a matter of... hmm, days? Weeks, maybe?'

"Remarkable," said Abbas. "How have I never learned of this?"

'Heh. Don't feel bad. Instead, feel impressed. By me. And how incredibly knowledgeable I am.'

'I am still not entirely convinced that you are being serious,' said Worwal.

'Oh, I am. Like I said, I've been studying these things for a very long time. I'm familiar with many of the quieter efforts made throughout history to learn more about the Tools--and let me tell you: more than a few of those efforts have ended up largely forgotten by the academic community.'

'Ah. A sadly all too common tale.'

'Indeed,' said Garovel with a nod. 'And it doesn't help that the Tools themselves have also been forgotten by many. But yeah. I'm sure you've seen similar problems in your own research, no? Fierce competition. Information being purposely buried. That sort of thing.'

'Of course,' said Worwal, an abrupt heaviness in tone. 'Along with... much worse things, as well. But I'm sure I do not need to tell that to a Prime Archiver.'

Garovel seemed to match his energy. 'Yes. I've witnessed more collateral damage done to the world for this infuriating reason than I even care to remember. If only it were possible to forget.'

A silence arrived as the two reapers fell quiet.

Hector exchanged looks with Abbas, not knowing if one of them should try to revive the conversation."

At length, Abbas decided to speak up. "While we are here, I would like for you to try interfacing with Rathmore's Gate, using the Living Core."

Hector's eyes widened, and he blinked.

The previous moment of tension had been rather unceremoniously obliterated. Had Abbas not even noticed it in the first place? Or simply not cared, perhaps?

Abbas' expression remained unchanged as he elaborated. "That is, if you are comfortable doing so. I understand that it may seem a bit risky, but Worwal and I will be here to pull you out, should anything go wrong. Just as you did for us."

Worwal jumped in before Hector could respond. "That is a weak safety net, I feel. We were unable to pull Hector out of his coma when he first interfaced with the Candle. Why should he and Garovel believe now that we would be able to retrieve them from a dive into the Gate?"

"Because now we have the Core," defended Abbas.

'But the Core hates us, apparently.'

"I am aware. And that is why Hector should be the one to dive instead of me. He has already demonstrated ample skill in controlling it. You and I will be there to assist and guide him, if necessary."

'Or,' said Worwal, 'we could simply have neither of you do this, instead. And avoid a needless risk.'

"The risk is minimal," said Abbas, looking from Worwal to Hector and Garovel. "If you are worried about accidentally triggering the Gate's power, don't be. Without a Kag, it is dormant."

'You sure about that?' said Garovel. 'Hector and I have both experienced its power once before, when it teleported us here from the Undercrust. Along with several other people.'

"Excuse me?" said Abbas, eyeing the monument another time. "Ah, of course. I believe I have already heard much of that tale. So this was how you returned, then? Interesting."

‘Yeah, so it’s definitely not dormant. Not completely, anyway.’

Abbas shook his head. “No, it is. I’m certain of it. But that means someone else is already in possession of a working Kag for this Gate. Whoever it was that activated it for you. There were multiple strange figures involved, yes? What were their names again?”

‘Malast and Royo Raju,’ said Worwal. ‘Correct?’

‘That’s right,’ said Garovel.

Hector didn’t recall ever telling them that, but he supposed it was only natural that word would have gotten around, especially to the reapers, who were always talking to one another.”

"3723

“That is important information,” said Abbas, “and all the more reason why we should have a working Kag of our own as soon as possible. At the moment, the Gate is a one-way road. If, gods forbid, an invasion were to be launched through it, we would have no ability to mount a counterattack until a new Kag was made. I suppose I should make it a top priority project, after all, just to be safe.”

Holy fuck. That was a scenario that Hector hadn’t even considered before. He held back a sigh as he rubbed his forehead. “It was bad enough when I only had to worry about a war arriving through Lorent...”

Abbas regarded him with a hint of amusement in his expression. “As you grow older, you will no doubt come to understand that, if you are acting as a true lord over your lands, then ‘worrying’ is your entire profession.”

Hector merely frowned, not exactly loving what he was hearing.

Abbas looked toward Worwal, who then chimed in again. ‘As a great statesman once said, “In every Age, the state of the world will drive you mad, if you allow it. And unfortunately, allow it we must, in the hope that our subjects might be spared from some portion of its unending cruelty.’

Hector’s frown didn’t get any better, but he did feel compelled to say

something. "Worwal, holy crap. You're as bad as Garovel."

'I beg your pardon, young man? What is that supposed to mean?'

"It means you're a real downer!" said Hector.

Abbas snorted, then laughed outright.

Worwal did not, instead merely cocking a skeletal eyebrow at his servant.

'For the record, I resent that,' said Garovel. 'I can be optimistic.'

"Yeah, you can be," said Hector. "But you're not."

The conversation continued on that track for a bit longer, with Worwal expressing his displeasure at both Hector and Abbas; and Hector offered a small amount of appreciation for the reaper's words of old wisdom, but for the most part, he held his ground. Because for some reason, he felt as though he had to, or else these ancient, jaded-as-hell reapers would overwhelm him and Abbas both.

The Sunsmith, for his part, merely seemed entertained.

Eventually, however, the subject moved back to the Gate, and Hector and Garovel had to consult with each other privately as they came to a decision about it."

"3724

'Looks like we've got their permission,' said Hector.

'Yup,' said Garovel, though it did come with a sigh.

'You sound disappointed,' said Hector.

'I'm not. At least, not really. If anything, I'm only disappointed with myself for how excited I feel.'

'What? You're a walking contradiction, Garovel. Er. A floating one.'

'Well, when you can acknowledge your flaws and try to change them, only to revert back to your degenerate ways, it can come with some complicated feelings.'

‘Y’know, I remember you calling me a drama king, once. Turns out, I was in good company.’

‘Alright, smartass. Let’s just get on with this, shall we? And if anything goes horribly wrong, this was never our plan. It was purely Abbas and Worwal’s idea. Agreed?’

‘One hundred percent.’

And so it was that they approached Rathmore’s Gate as the sun hung low in the sky, blanketing the natural scenery in a deeply red-orange glow. The monument was cool to the touch, and Hector kept the rest of his armor on, save only the gauntlets for his bare hands. He took a long, slow breath as he cleared his mind and found his concentration.

First, he felt for the Gate with his soul. Easy enough. It was clear as day to him now. Aura, too. Like a great pillar of light shining in his mind’s eye. Then, he felt for the Core in his hand.

And that was when the world around him came alive in an entirely new way.

What an incredible sensation. Like he was suddenly in a car--or motorcycle, perhaps--speeding down a highway when he’d been standing perfectly still only a moment prior.

He felt the world rushing past him. In fact, he might have mistaken it for actual wind, if not for the Scarf telling him the air currents around had not changed a bit. Still the same calm breeze he’d felt before.

Then he felt the circling, too. The spinning. The world, revolving.

Huh.

What was it doing?

He sensed more there now. Yeah. The aura. He sensed intent. Desire.

Whoa.

Distinct. Different. As all auras were, of course. But this one was very different. Despite how powerful it was, it felt much less... sentient. Maybe not at all, even. Unaware of itself? But still waiting. Patiently.

For him?

Yes.

For him to provide it with something. A command? No. A direction? Ah. Maybe so.

Desire, but not awareness. Not intelligence. How weird."

"3725

It wasn't like Cocora's Candle. That thing had a real sentience to it. It could talk to him--or try to, at least. This didn't. This was different.

Heh. Wow. He remembered how strange and overwhelming all of his encounters with the Candle had felt. But oddly enough, this experience here--with this quiet Gate--made those previous ones with the Candle feel somehow more sensible to him. Like it was adding a new context through which he could view a problem that used to befuddle him.

And it also reinforced how truly special the Candle was, by comparison. How much more sophisticated it was. If the Candle was like an animal, then this was like a single-celled organism.

Interesting.

Ah, but still. Careful, he told himself.

Abbas said this thing was dormant, and while Hector did believe the man was correct, he still didn't wish to test that statement too much. If the Gate was waiting for a 'direction,' then that seemed like a somewhat dangerous thing to be providing without due consideration, given the fact that he already knew it was a teleporter.

Hmm.

But there was a lot more here than just that, too. The aura was so receptive to him. So welcoming. And it had such depth to it. The 'direction' that it desired from him wasn't just physical. It would accept a different kind, too.

But what did that mean, exactly?

Agh.

This "aura reading" thing was hard. Messy. Maybe there was some special trick to it that he didn't understand yet. Right now, it was like

trying to grab water with his hands. Technically possible, sure, but one wrong move, and it would slip right through his fingers.

He refocused.

What did it want? What was the true nature of this non-sentient thing's desire?

...To see? No. To show.

It wanted to show him something. Anything, really. Anything he asked it to. Anything within its ability to.

Anything within the ability of its aura.

Whoa.

He knew quite well by now that auras could retain memories. And they could reveal memories in others, too. As auras linked together. Worked in tandem. Or were manipulated by a greater aura. Such as that of a Sparrow.

He sensed a change in the Gate. Because it was sensing him now, too. More specifically, it was sensing an opportunity to provide him with something. To show him. In accordance with its desire.

Did he wish to view a memory? And if so, which one?

Aha. He needed only to provide it with a direction."  
"3726

He understood a little better now. It probably couldn't transport him anywhere, just like Lord Abbas said, but perhaps it could show him something from the past.

Just him, though? What about everyone else?

He pulled himself back a bit, wanting to sense everyone around him again.

Garovel. Worwal. Abbas.

And there they were. Right alongside him. But he maintained his

connection to the Gate, too. It was surprisingly easy.

Because of the Core. Ah. It was behaving. Good.

‘Whoa,’ came Garovel’s silent voice. ‘This is different. What am I even sensing, right now?’

‘Oh, you can sense a change,’ thought Hector. ‘I’m trying to include you guys.’

‘Was that Hector?!’ came another voice, one Hector didn’t recognize at first.

Hector might’ve blinked if his eyes weren’t already closed. ‘Was that Abbas?’

‘We can hear each other’s thoughts!’ said the Lord Saqqaf, sounding quite amazed and pleased. ‘Aha! How are you doing this?!’

‘That’s a good question, uh... I think it’s mainly our proximity to the Gate. Its aura is... kinda huge, actually. Covers this whole area. And I... think I’ve kinda... tapped into it a little. Thanks to your Living Core.’

‘Incredible...!’

‘While it is amazing, I also find it mildly unsettling,’ said Worwal.

‘Me, too, actually,’ said Garovel. ‘Servants shouldn’t be able to communicate with each other like we do. That’s supposed be our thing and no one else’s. What’re you gonna steal from us next, huh?’

Hector snickered. ‘Garovel... shut up.’

‘What else can the Core allow you to do?’ said Abbas.

‘Not sure yet,’ said Hector. ‘But I think the Gate can let us view memories of the past. That’s why I wanted to include you all. With any luck, we can all witness something together.’

‘Memories, you say?’ said Worwal. ‘What sort of memories?’

‘That’s also a good question,’ said Hector with a bob his head. ‘Uh... I think... just about anything? Or rather... anything within proximity of the Gate. Within the aura.’

‘Hmm,’ hummed Abbas. ‘Does that include us?’



‘...I guess so?’

‘A test, then,’ said Abbas. ‘Show me the birth of my son, Raheem.’

Holy shit, uh. Okay. The man was ready to go, apparently.

Hector concentrated, thinking about that request more. How to accomplish it? Hmm. Auras, auras. Uh. They were kinda muddy, still. Hard to read, let alone connect to. Maybe if he... hmm...

‘Er... can you put your hand on my shoulder?’ asked Hector.”  
"3727

A moment later, the man’s palm arrived exactly there, and just as Hector suspected, Abbas Saqqaf’s aura became clearer in his mind’s eye. Along with his soul, too. Both shone together brilliantly, almost indistinguishably from one another, as he peered harder into them. Searching. Thinking of the memory as Abbas had described it.

It should have been obvious. Abbas was probably thinking about it right now, himself. Unless he was being a jerk and purposely trying to make things harder.

Yes. The first thing of substance was there. That seemed right. Felt right. He embraced it with his own aura, let the Core have a bit of leeway. Freedom to help. It wanted to. He could sense its desire.

He felt a change all around him, but in his mind’s eye, he saw not much difference.

So he tried opening his eyes.

A pristine white hallway. A continuous bar of golden paint on each wall. Valgan words on each sign. A floor of polished tile. More white and gold, but with outlines of black, too.

It didn’t quite look like a hospital, Hector thought. In fact, it looked a bit like the Golden Fort, which he and Garovel had visited in Kuros. Not identical, though. Perhaps this was a different area of it? Or it had been remodeled since then? Raheem was probably quite old, so that might make sense.

Then he noticed Abbas. A second one, that was. Visibly younger,

though not terribly so. But perhaps that was due, at least in part, to how utterly haggard the younger Abbas looked. Frazzled hair. Deep bags under his eyes. Pacing back and forth across the floor. And smoking a cigarette, too. That was a surprise.

Meanwhile, the older Abbas was right there next to him, looking on with complete awe, stepping closer, then to the side, as if not wanting to get in the way of his younger self.

A baby's cry arrived, muffled behind a closed door. The younger Abbas instantly turned and bolted through it.

Hector and the other three observers followed.

Young Abbas was bent over the bed, hugging his wife and new child.

And sobbing uncontrollably.

The staff were smiling and presumably congratulating the couple in Valgan, but they were also giving some strange looks to the loud, weeping man in front of them, even as they mopped the floor and wiped down the room. One of them was attempting to apply a stethoscope to the child and not succeeding, because Abbas was in the way and apparently too far gone to even notice."

"3728

'Wow,' said Garovel. 'I know this is an emotional moment in every father's life, but, uh... you really, um... just... wow.'

The older Abbas scratched his cheek. 'Ah... perhaps I should have picked a different memory...'

Garovel chortled. 'First one that came to mind, huh?'

'Indeed...'

'He cried more than Raheem did that day,' said Worwal. 'Far more. It was very heartwarming, I thought. And perhaps a little pathetic, too.'

Abbas shot the reaper a look.

'But there was also more going on in our lives than is made clear by this scene here,' added Worwal. 'It had been... a difficult few years.'

That piqued Hector's curiosity--as well as his hesitation. 'W-what do you mean?'

The vision paused, along with the younger Abbas' wailing. Hector hadn't intended to do that, but now that it was done, it seemed better to keep it that way.

Rather than answering the question, however, Worwal deferred to his servant.

Abbas looked over his captive audience, and for a very strange moment, Hector felt like he could see exactly how old Abbas truly was. That expression on the man's face didn't change much at all, and yet there was still something in his eyes--a tiredness, perhaps--that spoke of many feelings all at once.

Hector had never witnessed the like before. And it made Hector hang on to every word that Abbas was about to say.

'There were many reasons why I... fell apart like this. When I was young--even younger than here, I mean--I never thought much of having children. Of carrying on my family line. I partook in many different hobbies, you see. Many personal interests. And social interaction was... decidedly NOT one such area, to say the least.'

Hector was suddenly trying hard not to relate too much. And failing.

'My reclusive nature caused friction between me and... well, my parents, of course. But also my entire family. Worwal here, included.'

The reaper gave an acknowledging nod.

'I was neglecting my responsibility, they said. And they were right. As a man of Hahl Saqqaf, I had a duty to carry on my bloodline. But I also had eight brothers. All of whom were much more sociable than I. All of whom seemed to be doing just fine in carrying on our family's legacy. And I think my parents probably thought the same, deep down. We all had our quirks. This was just one of mine. They could let it slide. And so this continued on for many years.'

Oh, man. Hector had a dreadful feeling that he knew where this was going."

"3729

‘Over time,’ Abbas went on, ‘my large family gradually diminished. Wars took their toll on us. In more ways than one. And I... ignored it all, for the most part. I grieved, sure. Endured the misery. As we all do. But I never changed my thinking. I focused only on my work. On myself. Whenever I thought of the future, it was in terms of technological development and nothing else.

‘It is to my shame that I did not truly begin to change until there were only four of us left. Four brothers. And finally, I started to view Abolish for what they truly are.’

Hector didn’t follow. ‘What do you mean by that?’

The Sunsmith met his gaze. ‘They are an ideologically-possessed opponent. Exceptions within their ranks can certainly be found, but at their core, they are a cult of death. An enemy of all human life, seeking its destruction wherever and however they can. When I was younger, I viewed them as nothing more than... a physical threat. An enemy to be fought solely on the battlefield. With power. With technology. But then I began to see that fighting them--truly fighting them--can involve more than killing their warriors and protecting innocent life. It can also involve creating new life.’

Hector’s eyes shifted to the illusory floor as he absorbed those words. Huh...

‘When I viewed the world in that context,’ said Abbas, ‘I rather abruptly began to feel that having children was not merely a duty to my own family and bloodline. It was also a moral imperative in this neverending battle against human extinction.’

Damn. Hector had no idea how to respond to that.

‘And so, from there, I became highly motivated to find a wife and have as many children as I possibly could. But in the pursuit of our dreams, life often provides us with more difficulty than we anticipate. While I did manage to meet a lovely woman and get married, we struggled terribly trying to have children. She had four miscarriages within the span of two years. Then she vanished, and I have not seen her since. I have no idea what became of her, though I... I suspect...’ He closed his eyes and shook his head before continuing. ‘I don’t know.’

Hector was at even more of a loss than before.

‘And so we have the scene before you now,’ said Abbas. ‘Raheem’s mother was my second wife. And when he was born, I was indeed... beside myself with relief and joy. In fact, it might well stand as the happiest moment in my life. Embarrassing though it may be, I am also... pleased that I can relive it again like this.’”

"3730

Wow. Somehow, Hector felt like he’d just received a lot more information than he’d expected. And he’d expected a fair bit.

And it wasn’t just in regard to Abbas’ personal history, either. That certainly interested Hector, too, but there was something else. Something in the underlying philosophy that the man had just espoused. The way Abbas described the world.

A neverending struggle against human extinction.

One of Hector’s background thought processes had held on to those words. Brought them close. And now he couldn’t stop examining them.

Why?

Why did they feel so relevant to him on an intimate level? They were summoning two contradictory feelings at once. They made him feel as if he’d never thought that way before. But also as if he’d always thought that way.

How did that make any sense?

It was enough to make all of his thought processes converge together, and he couldn’t help remaining silent for a while, even after the Lord Saqqaf seemed to finish his story.

Thankfully, Garovel was there to keep up the conversation in his stead. ‘Heh,’ the reaper laughed. ‘Thank you for sharing all of that with us. Especially that last part. Think I felt my cold, dead heart warm up just a little. And truthfully, I’m also incredibly relieved by what I’ve learned of you here today, Lord Abbas.’

Abbas tilted his head. ‘Relieved? In what manner?’

Worwal snickered but didn’t say anything, drawing the Sunsmith’s glance.

'There is a certain amount of... shall we say, "historical justification" for worrying about powerful integrators. Inventors, in particular. Strange and brilliant minds. Far too often, with people like you, your work consumes you. Until you lose all connections to the world. And of late, you have been exhibiting some... troubling behavior in that regard, specifically.'

Abbas opened his mouth, then closed it again without retort.

'But I see now that your family does indeed mean everything to you,' said Garovel. 'Until now, I feared that, perhaps, all of these children and grandchildren you have might've merely been the result of some societal obligation that you felt. And that you were still at great risk of becoming lost to us all through your work. So yes, I am relieved and happy to get a glimpse of your deeply held emotional ties.'

Worwal decided to chime in again. 'To be clear, he IS still at risk of that. I worry about it constantly.'

Garovel chortled. 'Of course. I didn't mean to imply that there was no risk at all. Just that there was less than I feared. Which is a comforting thought.'

"3731

As their conversation continued on, Hector remained largely stuck in his own head. Mulling over everything Abbas had just told him. He felt so odd. Like he was having an epiphany. And also not. As if something he'd always known was suddenly being made clear to him. And yet he couldn't even articulate what it actually was.

It was some kind of cerebral stalemate. A knot, struggling to untie itself.

Agh. He wished he wasn't so stupid. Maybe then, he wouldn't have to think so hard to figure this weird knot out. Or maybe it wouldn't have gotten all knotted up in the first place.

Even as he kept listening to the others' conversation, his mind was looking for answers. For clues, even. Anything to help him solve the puzzle that was his own confusion.

Abbas had caused this. It followed, therefore, that Abbas would hold

more answers. The only problem was that Hector didn't even know the questions to ask. And they were still talking, besides.

Interrupt? With what? He didn't know.

Instead, he found himself reaching out. For what? For more memories. Of what?

Abbas' children?

Would that be wrong? Hector didn't know that, either. Truthfully, he still didn't rightly know how any of this was working. Auras, the Gate, connecting with his mind, manifesting illusions from the past. He wasn't sure how much there was to find. Did Abbas have to offer the memory up willingly? Consciously? Probably. And if not, then maybe that wouldn't be--

He found something. Before he could learn anything more about it, the new memory was already manifesting, recasting an illusion over the world around them.

The other three took notice of the change, too. Of course they did. The illusion melted into a completely different scene. The location was blurrier, but the people were not. In it, Abbas was grinning ear-to-ear and holding up a slightly older Raheem, whose little face was already recognizable to Hector as the fully grown man he would one day become.

The baby boy was saying something, Hector realized. Too bad it was in Valgan, so he couldn't--

"Abbi! Abbi!"

No, wait. Now that he thought about it, he did know what that meant, didn't he?

Heh.

He wasn't sure when he'd learned it, but he supposed the dots also weren't terribly difficult to connect, given the context here. Raheem's mother looked just as pleased as her husband did."

"3732 -- CCCVI.

This time, however, the illusion didn't stay long. It shifted quickly into another, similar scene, where Raheem was a bit older again--only this time, he wasn't alone. Another, smaller child was right in front of him, tucked in a small cot and sleeping away while Raheem watched.

Then again, the scene changed, even more rapidly than before--so fast, even, that Hector had trouble making sense of everything. And it just kept going. More scenes, more children, more locations and situations. All in glimpses. The only clear throughline was Raheem himself, growing steadily older as siblings sprouted up all around him, pestering him, making him laugh, making him worry, making him angry, even making him cry.

It was remarkable, Hector thought. Overwhelming and remarkable. Too much to take in all at once like this, certainly, and he couldn't stop trying, either.

The others were saying things now. Abbas and Garovel and Worwal. And he fully intended to listen to whatever they were saying and respond to it.

But for a few moments longer, Hector Goffe simply kept observing in awed silence.

Chapter Three Hundred Six: 'O, long-departed ingenue...'

[Click to display entire chapter at once -- \(mobile link\)](#)

"You have a troubled soul, child."

"Oh, really? Thanks." She knew this wasn't going to be fun. Even with all the training she'd been put through in recent years specifically for this purpose, it would've been foolish to think that this mission was going to be some sort of cakewalk.

Dealing with psychics was always going to spell trouble.

And this was a whole town full of them. A whole society.

Well. Mostly whole.



There was, of course, a non-psychic group at the heart of it all. They were also rather important to this place, to say the least.

“That was not meant as a compliment,” said her tall guide as they walked down a long, green-lit corridor together.

She knew that, of course. That was just how she dealt with rude people. By pretending she didn’t understand. In her line of work, it often made things easier. So she made no response here, instead choosing to let her eyes wander at the verdant surroundings, as if she were barely even paying attention to the conversation.

This guide was a persistent one, though. “Your thoughts seem to be of somewhere else. A homesickness, perhaps?”

Ah, she could respond that. “Yeah. Family issues, y’know? But I miss them. As surely as the sun shines.”

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"3733

“I see,” said her guide, though he left it at that.

Which was a bit surprising, she felt, but she wasn't complaining, either. Thus far, the psychics here were truly a different breed. She had to wonder how much contact with the outside world they actually experienced, because unlike the ones she'd met before, these people were completely unafraid to tell you that they were trying to read your thoughts.

In a weird way, despite how utterly rude it was, she kind of respected it. At least they were being straightforward. Not trying to subtly manipulate her.

As she'd been taught, the main trick to defending against psychics was to create a smokescreen over one's thoughts. There were various methods of accomplishing that, of course, but the easiest one was to use emotion. More complex thoughts could also be used for that smokescreen, but that was obviously going to be harder, since it essentially involved maintaining two different lines of thought at once. She wasn't quite capable of that yet, but she hoped to be, one day.

It had been plenty difficult learning how to summon, harness, and wield her own emotions defensively. Her teachers had been rather ruthless about it, too, save one. But that was just another reason why Captain General Fen Frederick was her favorite. Technically speaking, Captain General Parson Miles might've been the better instructor--and the entire reason why she'd been able to even meet Dr. Frederick in the first place--but in her estimation, the Surgeon Saint truly did live up to his moniker.

That man had some kind of otherworldly charisma to him. And a heart of gold to go along with it.

So when she saw her chance to join one of his divisions, she took it. And now, here she was, traveling around the world on some of the most secretive missions that the Vanguard had to offer.

Her career had only just gotten moving, and yet she already had a fair few stories under her belt. Whether she would actually be able to tell them to anyone was another matter. If her littlest sister ever found out about her work, then the questions would no doubt become incessant.

Assuming she ever returned home, that was.

Gema Elroy genuinely did not know if such a time would arrive. Her reaper kept telling her not to think that way, that there was no telling what the future held, but at the moment, Gema just couldn't see it happening."

That last fight with her parents had been so bad. The memory of it was still dreadfully vivid in her mind. Some of the things she'd said...

And yeah, her parents had said some horrible things, too. Particularly her mother. And yeah, Gema certainly didn't regret everything that she had said. There'd been several years' worth of cathartic release from that conversation.

But there was one thing she felt guilty about above all the rest.

"I wish you were dead! I wish you and your bitch sister had been killed along with everyone else that day!"

It was painful even to think about. Strict as he might've been with her, Papa hadn't deserved that. Nor had Aunt Joana.

The worst thing, though, was that Papa hadn't even gotten mad.

He'd just looked hurt.

That expression on his face. She'd never seen it before.

In the moment, worked up as she was, she'd actually been happy about that reaction. She'd intentionally said the most hurtful thing that she could think of, after all. And she'd succeeded. Achieved her goal.

Then her mother immediately slapped the shit out of her and yelled at her to get out of the house.

It wasn't until later, after she'd left and started to calm down, that she began to feel regret.

Now, all these years later, calling it regret would have been an understatement. That expression on her father's face haunted her.

Especially lately.

News of the turmoil in Sair had done nothing to soothe her heart. And then the greater war, as well?

She'd actually managed to get reassigned to Sair after the war broke

out, working as a scout, but that hadn't lasted long. The call came down that Frederick was in need of agents with anti-psychic training, and so she answered.

There hadn't been anything to see in Sair, anyway. She'd been too late. She visited the family estate in Aguary, but there was no one there. Not even the staff had remained behind. Good thing, too, since the city had turned into a battlefield.

Now she didn't even know if that house would still be there when she returned.

If she returned.

So she'd decided to throw herself into her work. Fully commit to the cause. Few were more just than this one, after all. This war needed fighting. And its warriors needed information, resources, and allies. She intended to do her part and then some."

"3735

The strangest part of it all, however, had to be the fact that her increased emotional disturbance was actually useful to her work. Her worry over her family's circumstances made it easier to summon an emotional smokescreen for her thoughts against psychics. She just had to think about her father for a bit--or her little siblings--and the emotions popped right up, persisting even after she started thinking about other things.

Much of the training had been about achieving that emotional summon on command in one's mind. Entering the appropriate state of mind. Controlling the breathing. Tapping into memories. Or conjuring imaginary scenarios, if memories didn't do the trick. And meditation, too, of course.

Now that all seemed a bit unnecessary. She had a shortcut to use.

Or at least, that was how Miles had reframed the situation for her.

<"Make use of what is useful,"> he'd told her. <"However you can. Even when it's painful.">

She still didn't know to feel about that. Or about him, frankly. He'd always seemed to have an answer for everything. A solution for every problem. But sometimes, those solutions were a bit... unsettling.

She'd wanted to ask him and Overra more about what had really transpired in Sair, before the war broke out, but he'd been so difficult to get ahold of. The one time she'd been able to talk to him had been over the phone, and he'd told her not to worry too much and that it would all get sorted out, eventually.

<"It's all a big mess and too difficult to explain right now, but trust me when I say that your family and everyone else are going to be just fine. Once things settle down a little, I promise to answer all your questions. For now, just focus on your missions. Fen's got you doing important work for him, right? I knew you'd be a perfect fit over there.">

She didn't exactly take that advice to heart, at first. Her trip back home to Aguary had required quite a bit of finesse and favor-providing, especially on the part of her reaper, Ozolos. He was a very old reaper--on par, even, with Axiolis--and so, he had a number of friends

within the Vanguard to ask for help.

He certainly hadn't been quick about it, though. For as long as she'd known him, Ozolos had always been peculiar. Even among other reapers, he apparently had that reputation."

"3736

When she first became a servant and met this enigma of a reaper, it had been more than a little confusing. She'd sometimes heard her parents talk about their reapers and their personalities, but with Ozolos being the very first one she ever spoke to herself, she'd still needed Axiolis to come along shortly thereafter and inform her that they weren't all like that.

'Ozolos is someone who never moves at anyone's pace other than his own,' Axiolis had told her. 'I won't lie to you, girl. He may become a source of regular frustration for you. He may confuse you and annoy you and even cause problems for you with other people, who also find him bothersome. But one thing I have learned about him over the many Ages that I have known him is that deep down, he has wisdom. And when the chips are down, when it really matters, you will be able to rely on him.'

For her part, after five or so years as his servant, Gema still didn't quite know if she agreed with that assessment. She'd been trying to give the reaper the benefit of the doubt, but it was hard, sometimes.

Life was hard, sometimes. And being considerate became all the more difficult.

She'd yelled at the reaper quite a bit, early on. Lost her cool.

It never seemed to faze Ozolos in the slightest. Perhaps that was why she'd stopped. She would've liked to believe, instead, that it was simply because she'd grown more mature and level-headed, but eh. That was probably wishful thinking, she knew.

Here and now, the reaper was attached to her back, just below her right shoulder. Not saying a word, as usual.

This was another of his habits. He often just grabbed onto her with no explanation and went along for the ride. She was beginning to think he

just didn't like floating around under his own power or something.

On this occasion, at least, there was justification for it. Reapers were vulnerable to psychics--not always, but often. Clinging to her like this afforded him a bit more protection against them.

Technically, Ozolos had undergone the exact same training as she had, but it was anyone's guess if it had stuck. The two of them hadn't encountered any problems thus far, so it was probably fine, but still. It was a nagging thought. One of many, when it came to Ozolos."

"3737

'I have a question for you,' said Ozolos publicly.

"Yes?" said their guide.

'Do your people take offense to being compared with the Dulvani?'

The guide fell quiet for a moment. "...Compared to? No, I should think no offense would be taken there. But if you presume overmuch about us because of them, then yes, you may create some awkward conversations. Why do you ask this of me, by the way?"

'Curiosity.'

"No other reason?"

'History, as well.'

"What do you mean by that?"

Unfortunately, however, this proved to be yet another of those instances wherein Ozolos decided not to respond, leaving only an uncomfortable silence behind.

Enough so, in fact, that the guide's head turned one hundred and eighty degrees around in order to look at the two of them, his wooden neck making a crackling noise all the while. He didn't stop walking forward, either.

Not knowing what else to do, Gema just gave a flat smile and then returned to examining the walls and windows.



Play dumb. Just play dumb. Dumb and innocent. Her tried and tested tools.

It seemed to work well enough. The guide gave up and turned back around, making it a full three hundred and sixty degrees.

She'd gotten used to that a while ago. This was not her first encounter with the Methusel.

They were a fascinating people but not exactly the easiest to read. Or learn about at all, for that matter. She'd never even heard of them three years ago, and in the time since then, she hadn't been able to discover much about them or their history.

They all seemed to be quite stoic and soft-spoken. They were still human-shaped overall, but their bodies were noticeably more malleable. She wasn't yet sure if they had any flesh beneath the 'bark' that covered them entirely or if they were actually wooden all the way through; but she did know that said bark could grow and change at will. And quite quickly, too.

At the moment, their guide's bark was a smooth, pale white with an occasional black knot in it, but when she first saw him, it had been a deep brown color full of ridges.

She'd asked Ozolos about them numerous times, because she suspected he knew plenty, but thus far, he'd yet to elaborate. Thankfully, one of the other reapers within the CID, name of Vales, had been able to illuminate a few things for her."

"3738

'They are one of the most well-hidden branches of humanity to ever walk the planet,' Vales had told her. 'Not only are they capable of manipulating minds and wiping memories like Sparrows, but they also possess an impeccable capacity for camouflage. My advice to you, therefore, is to treat them with exceptional compassion and politeness, because no matter how well you develop your psychic defenses, you may never truly know how many of them are in a room with you at a given moment. You should always assume that you are greatly outnumbered and being judged by attentive observers.'

Needless to say, that hadn't been the most comforting thing to hear,

but she'd tried to take it to heart during each of her visits to this place.

They finally reached the end of the long corridor, and a grand view of the main town opened up before her.

The central plaza drew the eye first, being so open and full of foot traffic. The buildings all around it were not uniform at all, varying in not only size and shape but also color, texture, and decoration. Where one was covered in vines and greenery, another looked as though it had been chiseled out of rock by a sculptor obsessed with geometry. Still another building had a decidedly Jesbolese aesthetic with its swooping roof and curving angles, while the one next to it looked more Intarian with how harsh and pointy it was.

There was even a building that just looked like a big pile of sticks thrown on top of each other. Crazier still, Gema thought she might actually know who lived in that one, despite never having gone inside.

Trees were also a common sight here, but perhaps not as much as one might've expected from the Methusel. She'd wondered why that was, and Valess had told her that it was because the Methusel did not care for shelter very much. They preferred to sleep outside, apparently.

Having never witnessed any of them sleeping, she supposed she would just have to take Valess' word on that.

But that of course meant that all the buildings here were not for the Methusel. They were for the island's primary inhabitants. The ones whom the Methusel had been protecting since time immemorial.

And Gema could see them out and about, all over the plaza.

Reapers. As numerous as she'd ever seen. And with nary a servant in sight."

"3739

To her eyes, reapers were pitch-black swordfish with a silvery glow and beady eyes alight with tiny white flames. Ozolos, however, did not entirely conform to that look. Rather than black, he was more of a dark gray, and his eyes shone a little more brightly than others.

Why that might've been, she still had no earthly idea, nor had anyone

else she'd asked about it. The most reasonable explanation she'd gotten was that the slightly altered appearance was a byproduct of reapers with particularly strange personalities. A natural phenomenon observed throughout history.

She felt like there had to be more to it than just that, but at the same time, it did seem appropriate for her reaper in particular.

The reapers here, however, were also special. Maybe not in appearance like Ozolos, but by reputation, because this place was the Wandering Island of Faridel, home of the reaper enclave known as the Old Wardens. And she knew there was yet far more to be seen here, squirreled away in tunnels or behind illusory walls in giant boulders--and probably plenty of other hiding places that she still hadn't learned about.

She'd been trying her damndest to learn more about the history of the Wandering Island whenever she could, but information about it was preciously rare, and trying to get the Wardens to talk about it was like trying to get water from a stone.

The most she'd been able to learn had come from the Prime Archivists in Luugh. She'd been fortunate enough to be given a mission near there a couple years ago and had decided not to waste the opportunity.

There were many mythic tales of this place, such as the one of its origin. Supposedly, the Island was carved out of the small Luughian continent by a great sea turtle, who took the land upon its back in order to rescue the native population from a monstrous horde of invaders that was soon to arrive.

Of course, these days, it was easy enough to see from the air that there was no giant turtle beneath the island. And while its wandering nature was still somewhat mysterious, there were plenty of scientific explanations for it, such as buoyant algae along the underside of the island and large pockets of gas being trapped underground.

Took a bit of the mystique away, perhaps, but on the whole, she preferred science to legend."

"3740

The guide continued onward through the throng of reapers in the plaza. Gema could see a few of them eyeing her, though whether it was out of curiosity or suspicion was anyone's guess. The Old Wardens were a peculiar bunch, to say the least. Personally, Gema had found that many of them were intensely interested in hearing all about the outside world, while many others were decidedly not so.

There seemed to be a divide, of sorts, within the culture here.

Which, she supposed, actually made it no different from most other places in the world.

The journey kept going for even longer than she expected. Each time she'd visited, the meeting place had been different, and indeed, this occasion was apparently going to continue that trend. They ventured all the way through another street full of peculiar buildings and into a more wooded area, where the trail was barely visible.

Soon, the trees grew so thick that she had to push closer to the guide in order make sure not to lose track of him.

Eventually, the guide came to a halt, though not for any obvious reason that Gema could see.

Rather than voicing her confusion, however, she merely waited.

The guide raised his gangly arms over his head, and then the world ahead of them shuddered visibly. The dark forest wavered for a moment like a tapestry caught in a sudden breeze, and then a bright slit appeared down the center of it before transforming into an entire doorway.

An illuminated corridor lay inside, though it thankfully did not appear nearly as long as the last one. She followed the guide through, and soon enough, they arrived in a much larger chamber, one that looked rather like the main hall of a castle.

An invisible castle, she supposed.

Huh.

More reapers were here, of course, but these ones appeared to have been awaiting their arrival. Gema spotted a few more Methusel, as well, which only made her wonder how many others might secretly be observing.

‘Paraya,’ said the centermost reaper as they approached.

That was a word she’d become intimately familiar with over the years. She’d been trying to learn all she could about their language here, but as in all things, they didn’t make it easy. Each time she’d asked for someone to teach her directly, she’d been refused. Even when she asked what a particular term meant, she’d usually been ignored or simply met with silence.”

"3741

Ozolos told her not to worry about it so much, but it was difficult. She had the feeling that the reason she was being refused a teacher was because they preferred being able to talk in front of her without her understanding.

So that they could say all sorts of mean and horrible things, probably.

But the joke was on them, because she was learning. Slowly, but she was learning. Paraya was their term for outsiders. And in her estimation, it harbored a slightly negative connotation.

“Councilors,” said Gema with as much respect in her voice as she could muster. She came to a stop in front of them all and gave a bow. She counted seven of them on this occasion, though she knew there were many more.

The one who’d spoken was named Gardorox, and he continued doing so. ‘What trinkets of the heavenly ones have you brought us this time?’

“No trinkets this time, I’m afraid,” said Gema with a sympathetic smile. “Instead, I bring news.”

The look of disappointment on each of their piscine faces was somehow quite apparent.

She’d been a little worried about that, but there was nothing she could do about it now. “As agreed, Doctor Frederick will soon be sending the first group of reapers here. I have come in order to ensure that you are not surprised by their arrival. And that the transition goes as smoothly as possible.”

‘So you intend to stay a while, then?’ said another reaper, this one feminine. Her name was Atriza, as Gema recalled.

"If the Council is gracious enough to allow it, then yes," said Gema.

The Councilors all exchanged looks with one another, and many more words were exchanged in that mysterious language of theirs. Unfortunately, she still couldn't understand very much of it, but she did pick up a few stray words here and there.

Families? Innocence? Young ones? Fighting? No, war.

Bah. Not enough to go off of.

Once they were finished discussing, Gardorox spoke for the group again. 'The first group will consist of only three, yes?'

"Yes," said Gema.

'And they have been chosen personally by the Ohja, yes?'

The Ohja was their term for Cpt. General Fen Frederick. It seemed to be one of particular reverence, though she still wasn't sure as to its exact meaning yet. "Correct," she said.

'Then you may stay,' said Gardorox. 'In fact, you must. Until these new arrivals are fully integrated, we shall make use of you.'

"3742

Gema hesitated at that. "Ah--fully integrated? Um. How long do you suppose that might be?"

'As long as is required.'

Oh no. These were reapers. And some of the oldest ones on the entire planet, most likely. And she herself was technically immortal, too. So she was suddenly getting the distinct impression that this guy could be talking about decades here--or even centuries, for that matter.

She couldn't just let that go by without addressing it. "I cannot stay indefinitely," she said, stiffening her posture. "My work for Dr. Frederick comes first."

'You will stay as long as you are needed,' said another of the female council members. This one's name was Harilixa, as Gema recalled.

‘The Ohja owes us much. Any demand we make of him will be satisfied.’

Gema’s brow twitched at that, and she struggled to maintain the smile on her face. “Dr. Frederick is also very busy with the war. Many innocent people are relying on him for protection, right now. As members of the Vanguard, our first duty is to them.”

‘All the more reason why he should not refuse us,’ said Harilixa. ‘Without our continued support, the Ohja’s triumphs will dry up like a summer rain.’

Her jaw clenched as she held back the retort on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to tell them that ‘their support’ amounted to little more than a promise. They had not sent any actual troops or aid to the Surgeon Saint’s side. Only a guarantee that he could use this place as a bargaining chip when negotiating with enemy reapers.

Gema had to be careful here, though. Her emotional shield was only so strong. If a new emotion was allowed to take over--such as irritation, for instance--then her thoughts would no longer be protected from all the observing Methusel.

And perhaps that was exactly why Harilixa was saying such inflammatory things. To get a rise out of her.

‘Be mindful how you speak to us, girl. We may adore the Ohja, but you are not he. You are merely one of his pawns.’

Or perhaps she was just a bitch.

“I understand, Councilor,” said Gema, having solidified her smile again. “I can only apologize for any offense given.”

Harilixa said nothing more, and silence filled the chamber for a time.

Gardorox led them out of it. ‘In any case, there is much yet to discuss. Are you hungry from your journey? We will prepare a meal for you.’”  
"3743

A meal, was it? That was a surprising offer. In all her visits to this place until now, she’d never been given food. In fact, with so many reapers and Methusel around, she’d been under the impression that food was

not even a subject that crossed their minds.

Which had made her pity the handful of servants who had to live here.

Granted, none of her previous visits had been for that long. She'd only been allowed to stay for a few hours at a time, if even that.

A look of amusement seemed to cross Gardorox's fishy face. 'You look surprised. You thought us incapable of providing sustenance, didn't you?'

She supposed she could admit that. "Er, yes..."

'Heh. Then you are in for a treat. As is your reaper.'

Gema was confused. "What do you mean?"

'I shall let that be a surprise.' Gardorox's tail fin waved broadly to the side. 'Please escort young Gema to her quarters. Dinner will be prepared shortly.'

And just like that, the reapers all began to disperse, not even bothering to inform each other that they were leaving. They simply flew off at a leisurely pace, going up into the ceiling or through the walls or even into the polished floor. Only a couple of them remained behind to strike up a conversation with each other.

Another Methusel appeared on her right--one she hadn't even noticed a moment ago--and motioned for her to follow.

She did so.

As they walked, she decided to try consulting Ozolos one more time, despite knowing that it was most likely pointless. 'Do you have any idea what they were talking about back there?' she asked.

'Yes,' said the reaper privately.

Which was more of an answer than she'd expected, at least. But she still kept pressing. 'And? Spill the beans, Ozzie. C'mon.'

'They are trying to seduce me.'

She couldn't help blinking. 'Uh... say what?'

'This is how it starts. Appeals to fleshly indulgences. Reminders of mortal pleasures. Things thought long lost to us. 'Tis a potent strategy.'



'Okay, yeah, I get that much. I think. But... "Seduce," though? Is that really the right word for it? I mean...'

'It is. Once seduced, control soon follows. Manipulation. Even slavery. Of the mind. And soul, too, no doubt.'

'Whoa. Um. Alright. Don't like the sound of that.'

'Good. Remember your training. Hold truth. And see this place for what it really is.'

"3744

Gema said nothing more, finding herself abruptly unsettled. It was a rare thing to have Ozolos speak to her so much like this. But it was rare still for him to speak with such clear intensity.

If he was a telling her all of this, then perhaps she had misjudged their present circumstances a bit.

Perhaps this place was even more dangerous than she'd realized.

She recalled the last time Ozolos had spoken to her in such a tone. In fact, she might never be able to forget it, because it had been when the Second Continental War began.

Ozolos had been more vocal--and more irritable--that entire day, even before they had heard about the invasions. He'd told her again and again to pay attention.

'See the world around you,' he'd said privately. 'Do not simply look. See it. Listen to it. Read between its lines. Uncover what it is trying to hide from you.'

And the time before that, it had been when she'd learned about the Rainlords' betrayal of the Vanguard. Ozolos had been especially strange on that day.

'The Veil shudders, my dear. It shudders and cries. It weeps, and it lies. It sells, and it buys. It whispers, and it dies. Listen to it carefully. But don't believe it overly. Our people, our people. Who are they truly?'

And so on. She certainly hadn't understood what he was talking about,

but at the very least, she could tell that he'd been greatly upset. Even moreso after they heard the news.

As had she, of course.

Ever since leaving home, she'd harbored conflicting feelings about her heritage. Not once had she actually told anyone in the CID that she was a Rainlord.

She wasn't trying to hide it, necessarily, and she was certain that plenty of the higher-ups already knew, but it still wasn't something she'd wanted to advertise. Would it have made people treat her differently?

Probably.

Did she even deserve to use that label, anymore?

No idea.

She'd learned the history. Her parents had drilled that into her, most certainly. She'd learned about the larger-than-life heroes of yore. And about the ideals they tried to hold to throughout their difficult lives.

But she'd never really known what to make of all that stuff, never known if she really believed in it like everyone else did. Or like they seemed to, at least.

And yet, when that news first arrived, when she'd heard that her kin had "betrayed" the Vanguard and even fought against the Gargoyle of Korgum, of all people... she'd still ended up feeling profoundly hurt and confused."

"3745

She'd wanted to look into the details more. Find a proper report about what actually happened. But it had been difficult, to say the least. She'd been buried in work constantly. Whenever she returned from a mission, no matter how swiftly she'd been able to complete it, there'd always been another one waiting for her. She'd never found the opportunity to ask her direct superior about it, much less Miles himself, who'd supposedly been there.

...Hmm?

Her eye twitched.

She'd never asked? Never been time?

No. That wasn't right. She'd visited home again, hadn't she? There must've been--

"Are you unwell?" came the voice of the Methusel who'd been guiding them.

She suddenly realized that they had all stopped walking--including herself--and were now in some sort of large, warmly lit dining chamber. Ugh. Had she gotten that lost in thought? How unprofessional. She tried not to cringe as she apologized. "Yes, I'm sorry. I-I was just... not paying attention. It has been a long day, I fear."

"You have a troubled soul," the Methusel said.

Her brow furrowed a little. Again? Wait, was this the same Methusel from earlier? It was horrible to admit, but she couldn't actually tell and was afraid to ask. The shifting colors and textures of their bark made it quite difficult to keep track of who was who.

Rather than questioning it, she elected to say nothing and simply sit down at the long table. Dishes were already arriving from a connecting room. It was a bit surreal to see more Methusel carrying dinner plates full of food. She'd known all along they worked for the Old Wardens, of course, but she hadn't realized that they served as waiters and maybe even chefs, too.

Before she could actually inspect the food, however, the same Methusel spoke up again.

"If you are in a state of emotional distress or discomfort, we may be able to help," said the tree man. "Some among us specialize in treating such conditions."

What the heck?

Ozolos answered for her. 'A kind offer, but we must politely decline. We outsiders have our own ways of handling these things.'

The Methusel seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then he bowed and moved away.

'They may attempt to lay hands on you,' said Ozolos privately. 'Do not

let them.' The reaper's tone wasn't doing much for her anxiety.

'A-alright...'"

"3746

The spread of food in front of her continued to grow until there was a veritable banquet filling the table. Obviously, this was far more than she alone could have been expected to eat, so she could only assume that more people were going to be joining her soon.

Or at least, she hoped so.

As for the dishes themselves, Gema had to lean forward and inspect them more closely, because even at a glance, they looked truly otherworldly. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen food glow before. She'd heard about a couple of entrees in the Undercrust that also did, but she'd yet to actually visit and see for herself.

This was not just a couple of things, though. All of it was glowing. The entire feast. She was looking for even just one portion that looked in some way normal, but she couldn't find it.

On the bright side, however, nothing looked or smelled particularly horrible. In fact, some of the scents she was picking up were quite enticing. The dish closest to her smelled faintly of honey and cinnamon, which happened to be some of her personal favorites.

It was still a bit questionable as to whether or not those two things were actually in the food, though. She had a rather strange feeling that they might not be. Like maybe this was all some sort of elaborate sensory illusion, designed to appeal directly to her psychically-determined preferences.

The temptation was certainly there, though. And a variety of utensils were already laid out in front of her, too.

And as she continued looking and smelling, she couldn't help feeling terribly ill-at-ease by this whole situation. Like she'd been dropped into a den full of psychic booby traps. Like there was nothing she could do and nowhere she could go to escape.

But thankfully, that was just a feeling. And Gema Elroy was quite good at ignoring those.

She'd always preferred to flip a situation on its head, instead of stewing in silent discomfort.

After a few more silent moments of deliberation, she turned to the nearest Methusel behind her and said, "Excuse me. I'm sorry to be a bother, but how many calories are in this dish, right here?" And she pointed.

The Methusel looked at her like she was speaking in tongues.

Gema Elroy was not deterred. She looked to the next Methusel. "Maybe you could just show me the packaging for the ingredients used. That might give me a rough estimate."

Shockingly, still no answer arrived."

"3747

'My dear,' said Ozolos publicly, 'I do not think any of this was bought from a grocery store.'

"What do you mean?" said Gema. "Where would it have come from, then?"

'Apologies for my servant,' said Ozolos, stretching himself over her shoulder to look at the same Methusel. 'She is a notoriously picky eater.'

"I am not!"

'She is also in a denial about a great many things in life.'

Gema made a face--and not entirely as part of their performance. That remark felt like it had a little too much subtext.

Ozolos didn't stop, though. "Tis not entirely her own fault, however. Over the long years among our storied kin, there have been many figures who were infamously difficult to please at the dinner table. I have begun to think that it may instead be some strange byproduct of Rainlord culture. Or Arman culture, perhaps. I hope your masters will not be offended if she does not partake very deeply of this wonderful banquet that you have all so graciously provided to us.'

“...Arman?” said the Methusel. But he did not get the chance to elaborate, because another silent voice interrupted.

‘This banquet is not only for her enjoyment. It is also for you, her noble guide.’

Without the clear direction of audible sound waves to rely on, Gema had to look all around the room before her eyes finally landed on the voice’s owner. It was Gardorox again, and this time, he was joined with someone who had not been present during their earlier encounter.

Someone quite important. Someone she’d only met once before but remembered quite clearly for the impression he’d made.

That was Nixil, the Head of the Warden’s Council--and by extension, the leader of this entire enclave.

Not many reapers within the Old Wardens were individually famous in the outside world, because they rarely ever left, but Nixil was certainly an exception. In fact, his name was one of the most recognizable in the entire world, as he was historically known to have negotiated with servant emperors across every Age.

And when they crossed him, it was often to their great detriment, in one way or another.

Or at least, that was how Ozolos had explained it to her, prior to their very first visit to this place.

On that particular occasion, it had not escaped Gema’s notice that Ozolos had seemed a little different in Nixil’s presence. Here and now, she was already wondering if it would be so again."

"3748

For his part, however, Ozolos was currently still remaining silent.

Gardorox pushed a bit more. ‘Please, do give it a try. It is quite rare that we allow any outsider to experience this, so I am interested to see your reaction to it.’

Admittedly, Gema was a little curious to see that herself, but rather unsurprisingly, Ozolos made neither a response nor a move toward the glowing banquet before them.

And perhaps it was just her, but Gema abruptly felt as though the tension in the room had become thick enough to use one of these strange utensils on.

It was Nixil who pulled them out of the silence. With a chortle, no less. 'I fear we have wasted our time and resources. This one will not be indulging in our generosity, I suspect.'

'Hmm?' Gardorox looked to his leader. 'Why do you say that?'

Nixil did not answer him. 'Your name was Ozolos, correct?'

Immediately, Nixil received his own treatment, as Ozolos elected to say nothing.

Nixil's fishy face remained unbothered. 'You are quite wary of us, it would seem. Not at all like the countless sycophants that my colleagues are so accustomed to dealing with. I find it rather refreshing, honestly. A change of pace, if nothing else.'

'You honor me with more attention than I deserve,' said Ozolos. 'I merely keep to the old ways of my people.'

'Oh, you are too humble by a half,' said Nixil. 'I thought there was something peculiar about you the first time we met, and now, having had time to meditate on it, I think I may know what it is.'

Oh, gosh. Gema was listening even more intently than before.

'You are one who has been reborn,' said Nixil. 'Aren't you?'

Ozolos made no response.

'Perhaps you even went by a different name, once upon a time,' said Nixil. 'Perhaps I would even recognize that name, were you to tell it to me. And perhaps the reason you are so wary is because you are already quite familiar with our customs. Indeed, perhaps you were once one of us, hmm?'

What in the world? Gema wanted to say something, but she had no idea what.

She was not alone in her confusion. 'What are you saying, Nixil?' Gardorox swam nearer, though still not too close. 'Reborn? How could such a thing--?'

‘Be silent, please, my friend.’

And Gardorox did exactly that."

"3749

‘That is an interesting term to use,’ said Ozolos. ‘Reborn. I had not thought of it that way before.’

‘Oh? How would you put it, then?’

‘Scarred. Mutilated, even.’

That left a lingering and tense silence in its wake.

Gema felt her heart beat a little faster as she waited to learn how the leader of the Old Wardens was going to take that response.

‘...I understand,’ said Nixil. ‘That, too, is a reasonable perspective. I only question its productiveness. Moving forward has always been the more appealing way of thinking to me.’

‘Another interesting term,’ said Ozolos. ‘Moving forward. It does not strike me as appropriate for you, however. You, who leads one of the most infamously isolationist societies in the world. It seems, rather, that you and your kin would prefer to move any which way but forward.’

‘Watch how you speak to the Rahja,’ said Gardorox.

‘I said be silent,’ said Nixil, this time with noticeable force. Enough so, in fact, that Gema could feel the words in her chest.

Which confused her further.

After a moment, Nixil’s tone softened again as he addressed Gardorox. ‘I would have our guest speak his mind before us. I tire of mealy mouths.’

Hold on. She was a guest here, too. Did she not count? Eh, who was she kidding? Probably not.

Nixil turned back toward them. ‘So tell me, Ozolos. Were you always called such? Were you once one of us?’



‘Perhaps,’ said Ozolos. ‘Or perhaps not.’

For some reason, that made Nixil burst into laughter. ‘Oho! For a moment there, you seemed without humor! But that is quite the inside joke! I must say! And a telling one, as well!’

‘Then it is as I thought,’ said Ozolos, sounding not at all jovial by comparison. ‘You have had encounters of your own.’

‘Heh.’ It took Nixil a bit longer to settle himself fully. ‘Indeed.’

‘Yet you seem no worse for wear, as far as I can tell.’

‘Yes. I have always been able to negotiate from a position of strength. They have sought me out in every Age, sometimes stealthily, sometimes forthrightly. Always hoping to find me more agreeable.’

‘...To speak so candidly, you must be quite confident in yourself,’ said Ozolos. ‘In my experience, words must be chosen carefully, even in total privacy. To do otherwise is to invite the Unwavering Gaze.’

‘Not here,’ said Nixil. His tailfin gestured broadly. ‘Not among our stalwart friends. You need not fear. Faridel is well-protected from such invasive eyes.’

"3750

‘You will have to forgive me if I do not trust that claim,’ said Ozolos.

‘Of course,’ said Nixil. ‘Your trepidation is understandable. Unburdening yourself of it will take time, no doubt.’

‘Time which my servant and I may not have,’ said Ozolos. ‘Wonderful as this island is, we do have lives that we must get back to. We cannot stay here indefinitely for the mere purpose of helping new reapers integrate into your fold--especially when we are not exactly integrated ourselves. That seemed a strange demand of your kin, if you do not mind my saying so.’

Nixil shook his head. ‘It saddens me to hear you say so, but perhaps that is my failing. I’ve become so accustomed to hearing about how passionately outsiders wish to join us here that it did not occur to me that you might feel differently.’

‘So it WAS on your request that we be ordered to stay here,’ said Ozolos. ‘That Harilixa of yours was quite insistent. And demanding.’

And rude, thought Gema.

‘Was she now?’ said Nixil. ‘She can be rather passionate, at times. But yes, I did mention to the Council that I wished for you to stay a while upon your next visit. You piqued my curiosity.’

‘You honor me, Rahja.’

‘And I would so even more, if you would but stay. There is much I would discuss with you, Ozolos.’

‘We had already intended to stay for a few days after the new residents arrived. Beyond that, however, I’m afraid we cannot linger.’

‘Mm.’ Nixil turned and swam a few paces backward before returning. ‘Then perhaps I should not waste time. Tell me, Ozolos. Can you see them still? Do you know their current faces? Do their strings still pull on you?’

Ozolos fell quiet.

Nixil didn’t push him, though. He merely waited.

And again, Gema felt like the air got even thicker. Much more than this, and she wondered if she would have trouble breathing.

‘...You ask too much of me, my friend,’ said Ozolos.

‘That is why you should stay,’ said Nixil. ‘So you can learn not to fear them. This place will be good for you. It will rejuvenate your spirit, if you allow it. Heal some of those “scars,” perhaps.’

‘They’ve healed well enough on their own.’

‘Then why do you not speak more freely?’

‘Because I know the danger therein.’

‘Again, I tell you that danger does not exist here. The Methusel guard us well.’

‘The danger is also in you.’”

For a time, Nixil merely stared back at the two of them.

And Gema felt a shiver down the length of her body. Despite all their conversing, Ozolos had still never detached himself from her. He was clinging to the back of her shoulder even now.

'My friend,' said Nixil, 'I give you my word that I wish no harm upon you or your girl here. You are free to leave at any time.'

'Harm is not all that concerns me,' said Ozolos. 'This girl, despite her youth, has already endured much. She has become the instrument of forces far beyond her ability to even perceive, let alone control. And you, good Rahja, are yet one more player of a game in which she is only a pawn.'

Wow. Gema certainly wanted to interrupt and defend herself, but on the other hand, this felt like it might be a rare, true glimpse into her strange reaper's heart.

Either that, or he was lying. In which case, she didn't want to ruin his performance.

'I have no designs on your servant,' said Nixil. 'She matters nothing to me.' He spared her a glance. 'Meaning no offense.'

Gema merely bobbed her head and returned a flat smile.

'My only interest is in you, Ozolos. I understand your worry, but from the way you are talking, it sounds to me as though you are already in quite a difficult position. Within the Vanguard, perhaps? Their machinations have been rather concerningly opaque, of late. It would not surprise me to learn that you have become stuck in a troublesome spot of that web.'

Hmm. How much did this fellow know about what the Vanguard was actually up to, Gema wondered? Because she had a feeling that it was quite a lot. The Covert Intelligence Division probably wouldn't be bending over backwards to try and accommodate these people if that weren't the case.

'Your assessment has merit,' said Ozolos. 'Are you offering to help us out of our bind?'

‘Yes,’ said Nixil. ‘But are you willing to trust us in this task? Because if not, then nothing can be accomplished. Regardless of what the caged fools or the wicked birds or anyone else may have done to you, it cannot be undone without your consent.’

What in the world were they talking about now? Gema was completely lost.

But apparently, Ozolos wasn’t. ‘Cannot? Or will not? Is that an expression of your inability? Or your unwillingness to compromise your principles?’

‘The latter. We will not do anything to you without your permission. On this matter, you have my most sincere promise.’”

"3752

‘A noble claim,’ said Ozolos. ‘If only it were the truth.’

‘I can do naught else but give you my word,’ said Nixil. ‘In the end, it is your choice whether to trust it.’

Then there came a long silence.

So long, in fact, that Gema began to think that perhaps she was missing something. Which made sense, she supposed, considering how lost she’d ended up.

She looked around the dining chamber another time and noticed a few more Methusel than before, but knowing what she did of them, they may very well have been there all along.

One thing was certain, though: she was more uncomfortable than ever. She remembered thinking that, if things got any tenser in here, she might have trouble breathing, and yet somehow, it was still a surprise to find that she had actually been right about that.

Her breaths were hard and sharp. Not difficult, necessarily. But she had to concentrate on them a little. Force the air in.

Even if she couldn’t follow what the reapers had been saying, she could follow this feeling. And it didn’t bode well.

Finally, Ozolos spoke up again. 'I'm afraid I must respectfully decline.'

'That is a shame,' said Nixil. 'But I hope to change your mind before your stay here concludes.'

'I think we will also be cutting our stay short,' said Ozolos. 'In fact, we will be leaving immediately, as there is something we must report to Captain General Frederick. Thank you for your hospitality, good Rahja.' And then privately to Gema, he added, 'Stand up and go.'

Oh. Geez. Uh. Crap. She did as she was bid and moved to leave. She made it most of the way across the room before Nixil's next word arrived.

'Stop,' was all he said.

But it was said with force. It reverberated in her mind and body at once, and Gema couldn't help but do so.

She tried, but for some reason, she couldn't take another step.

And it was all she could do to not panic.

Ozolos' silent voice remained as calm as ever, however. 'And so your true colors are revealed. That was surprisingly easy. I thought you would at least let us leave the building.'

'I do not appreciate these games, Ozolos.'

'No. You do. You simply do not appreciate losing them.'

'Hoh! I've lost, have I? Why? Because you've succeeded in irritating me?'

'In part, perhaps. But primarily, because you are out of practice sparring with equals.'

"3753 -- CCCVII.

Nixil paused at that. 'My equal? In what capacity?'

'All capacities.'

'Hmph! How bold! You are all but asking me to test you, you know! Are

you sure that you can handle it? I do not wish to harm you, my friend.'

'That will not be necessary.' Then, in a tremorous voice, he added.  
'Release her.'

And suddenly, she noticed the Methusel there next to her. Their hands had been on her wrists and ankles, apparently. But now they were letting her go and slinking away.

'Go now, Gema,' said Ozolos privately. His voice was not commanding any longer. Only gentle and familiar.

And she went. Through the open doorway and into the corridor.

Nixil gave chase. 'You can command the Methusel!' he said, sounding equal parts shocked and delighted. 'I knew you were one of us! You must tell me your identity!'

'No longer.'

'Do not say that! Were you among the exiled?! If so, then put your fears aside! After such a transformation, I am sure we could arrive at a new arrangement for you! Bygones could well and truly be bygones if you wish it! Do you know how rare of an opportunity that is! Countless of our kind would kill for such a chance!'

Gema just kept going, feeling that she absolutely should not stop walking unless Ozolos told her to.

'I was not exiled,' said Ozolos. 'I left of my own accord. And you, Nix, have gotten much worse in my absence.'

Nixil stopped following.

'Wait,' said Ozolos privately.

And she stopped as well. She looked back toward the other reaper.

Nixil was just floating there, silent. A group of Methusel had followed, though they seemed to be keeping their distance.

'I thought perhaps you might've changed for the better after all this time,' said Ozolos. 'But I see you have become even more manipulative than ever. Power has gone to your head, little brother.'

Nixil was visibly struggling. 'You... which of my brothers are you claiming to be?'

‘Even now, you still cannot tell?’

‘Do not try that. Tell me now or be slain as a liar and imposter of the highest order.’

Ozolos sighed. “Tis I. Skapa.’

Chapter Three Hundred Seven: ‘O, lost dragon...’

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Meditation was helping him to remain calm. To remain sane, even.

Meditation, that was, in combination with pan-forma. If there was one bright side to this sudden and strange captivity, it might have been that. He could delve deep into Axiolis’ memories. He could literally live in the past. In the presence of his many ancestors.

For a time, anyway."

"3753 -- CCCVII.

Nixil paused at that. ‘My equal? In what capacity?’

‘All capacities.’

‘Hmph! How bold! You are all but asking me to test you, you know! Are you sure that you can handle it? I do not wish to harm you, my friend.’

‘That will not be necessary.’ Then, in a tremorous voice, he added. ‘Release her.’

And suddenly, she noticed the Methusel there next to her. Their hands had been on her wrists and ankles, apparently. But now they were letting her go and slinking away.

‘Go now, Gema,’ said Ozolos privately. His voice was not commanding any longer. Only gentle and familiar.

And she went. Through the open doorway and into the corridor.

Nixil gave chase. 'You can command the Methusel!' he said, sounding equal parts shocked and delighted. 'I knew you were one of us! You must tell me your identity!'

'No longer.'

'Do not say that! Were you among the exiled?! If so, then put your fears aside! After such a transformation, I am sure we could arrive at a new arrangement for you! Bygones could well and truly be bygones if you wish it! Do you know how rare of an opportunity that is! Countless of our kind would kill for such a chance!'

Gema just kept going, feeling that she absolutely should not stop walking unless Ozolos told her to.

'I was not exiled,' said Ozolos. 'I left of my own accord. And you, Nix, have gotten much worse in my absence.'

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"3754

Not only did it have a quieting effect on his own mind; it also gave him the opportunity to search through the past for anything that might've been useful in the present day. Perhaps that was a fruitless endeavor, since Axiolis could theoretically just tell him anything that might be discovered here, but Zeff Elroy couldn't help himself.

There was just a feeling he had. Somewhere in the back of his mind. A feeling of unrest. Tension. Like maybe this chaotic world would make a little more sense if he could figure out what he was missing.

Plus, there was the fact that he and Axiolis both now knew that the reaper's memories had been tampered with in the distant past. The sudden remembrance of Kingsparrows during their first encounter with Graves had left a lasting impression on the two of them. Perhaps that was why Axiolis seemed just as keen as he to conduct these meditative dives. The reaper was thinking of it as a kind of personal audit, a search for anything else that might've been suppressed--or perhaps that had simply slipped through the cracks.

Zeff, however, was uncovering a further problem.

Because there were times during their meditation--not often, sure, but they were there--when he could sense an abrupt discord between his mind and Axiolis'. And it was bad enough that it even threatened to prematurely end their hyper-state merge.

He'd discussed the matter with Axiolis multiple times now, but the reaper just kept telling him that it was a matter of continued practice. That it was a sign they needed to refine their skill with pan-forma, perhaps instigated by the immense amount of emotional and psychological turmoil that they had both undergone over the last

several months.

Which, frankly, Zeff did not entirely buy. It was a fair excuse, sure. They had indeed been through much. It made a degree of sense that it might begin to impact their mental performance.

But he'd also begun to think that, perhaps, Axiolis was hiding something from him. Perhaps there were memories which the reaper did not wish for him to see.

And yet, that notion was also a bit peculiar. When it came to the merging of their two consciousnesses within a hyper-state, Zeff had never been under the impression that he should be privy to each and every memory that Axiolis had ever experienced."

"3755

There had always been an understanding between the two of them that some things were simply... private. That they did not need to be shared, much less delved into fully.

Memories of intimacy, for example. When Zeff thought of his late wife, Mariana, there were certainly things there that he did not particularly wish to share with Axiolis. And so of course, there were going to be similar instances for the reaper, who'd lived an almost unfathomably long life. He suspected this was the case for virtually every hyper-capable pairing of reaper and servant in the world.

If Axiolis did not wish to share something with him, then that was perfectly fine and fair, Zeff felt.

Unless there was some other reason for it. Something less personal. Something more troubling.

Zeff couldn't quite pin down what that might be, though. It was just another vague feeling in his mind. Another muted worry for the ever-increasing pile.

If he allowed such concerns to drive his thinking too much, he knew that he would only drive himself mad. Or. Further mad, perhaps.

He'd reached a peculiar state of mind. This calmness from his meditations. This steadiness. It felt almost artificial in nature. A mask that he was wearing. Trying to fool even himself.

And maybe it was even working a bit? He was a fool, certainly. He'd come to understand that quite clearly by now. So what was wrong with simply... letting it be so? Accepting it? If only a little?

Trapped as he was, what other option did he have? Raging hadn't accomplished anything thus far. This way, he could think more clearly.

Theoretically, at least. Was it helping with the task of searching through Axiolis' memories? Of learning yet more about his ancestors? He hoped so, but he wasn't sure.

Agam Elroy had become a frequent focus again. Knowing of Agam's connection to Graves and Bernardino Blackburn--of the supposed "quest" that the three of them had once ventured upon together--Zeff had been hoping to uncover some great revelation, but even now, Axiolis had no direct memory of such a thing.

But of course, Agam had lived a very long life--as had Bernardino--and there had been plenty of opportunity for such an adventure to occur without Axiolis' knowledge. Graves had mentioned "Little Dino Blackburn," which implied that it would have occurred while Bernardino was still quite young."

"3756

And as the two of them continued to dwell on it, they did eventually realize that there was one particularly turbulent time period which might fit the bill.

The Breaking of Korgum.

Or rather, the period leading up to it. The Breaking had been the culmination of several mad years all around the world, and while the Rainlords had not gotten directly caught up in it, the mayhem had still been encompassing enough that many of their kin had gone mysteriously "missing" during it.

That in itself wasn't such a strange thing, historically speaking. Rainlords had always had a habit of sticking their noses in other people's business, and one of the mechanisms they used to cope with that problem was to "disappear" for a time so as not to draw attention back to their families.

It hadn't always worked. And blowback was still a fairly regular occurrence--as were the great campaigns that followed.

After all, when someone decided to strike them, the world needed to know that such actions would not go unanswered. That they would fall upon their enemies with all the fury of a storm. Or else even more enemies would come, after seeing weakness in them.

This had always been their way, ever since the Armans took up the fight against the Lyzakks.

Naturally, it was not perfect. No doubt, many mistakes had been made over the long years of fighting. But despite all the madness their people had endured, they had actually enjoyed more peace.

It certainly didn't always feel like it, of course. Especially these days. But the homeland of the Armans, the People of the Rain, had far more often been peaceful than not. From a pure numbers perspective, their children had almost always been able to grow up in complete safety.

That was small comfort at the moment, however.

Regardless, the timeline for the Breaking seemed to fit, as far as Axiolis could tell. Bernardino would indeed have been extremely young but still a servant, and Agam would have been powerful but not yet in the prime of his fame. Graves, of course, remained a mystery on that front, but if his current age could be estimated at between two and four hundred years, then he would fit in just fine, as well.

And there were plenty of events leading up to the Breaking that could have involved the three of them in some way. Too many, in fact."

"3757

For example, there was the infamous Theft of the Crown Jewels of Yena Maria. That had caused quite the stir, since the Jewels were supposed to harbor incredible, otherworldly power--power which had supposedly been what allowed the royal family of Yena to solidify their rule some four hundred years prior. Axiolis recalled hearing that such claims were overblown, that the noble Hahl Yena had no genuine need of such trifles, but within five years of the theft, their dynasty collapsed, overthrown by rebels.

And then it was a decade of civil war for that little country. Despite its size, Yena Maria had always been renowned for its incredible riches. Even to this day, that aspect of its reputation was not entirely gone. Doubtless, that played a role in the nation's decision to join in the fight against Vantalay. If the Vantalayans had actually succeeded in their conquest of Czacoa, Yena Maria probably felt that it would be next.

Such a grim fate was quite unlikely now, though. With Vanderberk out of the picture and Graves seemingly in full control of the entire warfront, Zeff doubted that the hostilities in this region of the world would last for very much longer.

Or at least, he hoped so.

Another possibility for Agam's secret quest might have involved something closer to Korgum itself. The nation of Azirat, Korgum's northern neighbor, had struggled with a number of high-profile assassination attempts in the years leading up to the Breaking. Many of those attempts had been successful, too, igniting a long-enduring paranoia for an entire generation of the Azirat citizenry. It grew so bad, in fact, that politicians stopped giving speeches in public entirely.

Famously, it wasn't until one newly elected President Herman began giving daily speeches from the front porch of his own modest home--without ever getting shot at--that cultural sentiment began to shift away from those fears.

But how might Agam, Bernardino, and Graves have been involved in such events? Ax could only wonder. Graves mentioned heroism on the part of the other two, but without anything else to go on, it was anyone's guess.

Zeff wished now that he'd gotten more specifics out of the marshal. If he'd known that he was going to end up isolated from everyone else like this, he would have made it more of a priority to learn as much as he could from the Pale Hawk in the short time he had left.

Bah. Strange thoughts."

"3758

He began to feel his concentration wavering, his focus lagging. A sign of fatigue. These heightened meditations were tiring. He wanted to

keep going, but it was probably time to stop--or to take a break and reassess, at least.

It wasn't immediate. Pulling himself and Axiolis safely out of the trance required a bit of patience. A gradual awakening back into the real world.

Although, "real" might not have been the most accurate word, at the moment.

As his eyes eased open, and as Axiolis' soul melted out of his own, Zeff was again reminded of his ethereal surroundings.

The sky was completely dark, though not because it was nighttime. This place had no sun at all, as far as he and Ax had been able to discern. And yet it was not without luminance.

The world itself glowed with a ghostly pale light. Buildings were almost as dark as the sky, but they had flickering outlines to them, highlighting every edge, every corner. The ground, too, was dark, illuminated primarily by lines in the sidewalk and cracks in the pavement.

It had taken a while of frustrated faffing about, but they'd come to the conclusion that this place was actually Ridgemark. Or some shadowy representation of it, perhaps. If they'd been more familiar with the city, maybe it wouldn't have taken them so long to locate some of its more notable landmarks.

The Ruby 88 Hotel & Casino, for example, was standing not far in the distance as Zeff sat cross-legged on a street corner. By now, they'd also seen the Lucky Llama and the Golden Hierophant, too. They'd gone inside each one multiple times--along with most of the other buildings around here--hoping to find something. Or someone. Or just some trace of life, even.

But to no avail.

This phantasmal world was empty, save only the two of them.

And they still had no idea how they'd ended up in this place, much less how to return. Zeff and Axiolis had both woken up here, and that was the last thing they remembered after being with everyone else at their encampment in the defense of Ridgemark.

Which was doubly odd, of course, because reapers did not sleep, other than when they were seriously wounded.

Or being psychically manipulated, maybe.

By now, the notion had certainly crossed Zeff's mind that their new friend, the esteemed Field Marshal Graves, might very well be the one responsible for their current predicament."

"3759

In fact, with each passing hour, he was becoming increasingly convinced that was the case. If anything, he was now looking for evidence that might somehow prove Graves' innocence. It sure would be nice if someone other than one of the most dangerous men in the world was to blame.

He supposed that the Black Scourge was also suspect, but that wasn't exactly an improvement. Nor did it track with what little he knew of Gohvis' motives. Yes, the man had come to him in secret and made negotiations, but those had been an attempt to move all the Rainlords away from Vantalay, not just Zeff.

'Maybe it was neither of them,' said Ax as they wandered around the phantom city again, just trying to kill time. 'Garovel mentioned an experience like this, not so long ago. He, Chergoa, Hector, and Emiliana all became trapped in a pocket dimension during the battle at Dunehall.'

Zeff recalled. 'Is this how they described their experience? A world full of phantom lights?'

'No. For them, it was apparently just total darkness. No visual stimuli whatsoever. But it still bears consideration, I think. They ended up trapped because of an accident. Garovel described it as some kind of phenomenon when the Marauder of Calthos' power clashed with the Shards of the Dry God.'

'I don't recall anything like that happening to us before waking up here.'

'Neither do I, but is it not still possible that some similar phenomenon might be to blame?'

'Are you sure you're not just searching for excuses?'

‘Hmph. For whom? Graves? If he is at fault, then so be it. Our kin have overcome greater foes.’

Zeff actually smiled at that, though only just. He appreciated the reaper’s spirit, but he knew it would take a lot more than a winning attitude to fight someone like that.

‘But truly, I am starting to think it might not be him,’ Ax went on. ‘Which could be even worse for us, actually.’

‘Oh? And here I was admiring your optimism.’

‘We have been here for several days now. I worry that the culprit should have revealed themselves by this point. Meaning that there may not be one in the first place--and that we’ll have to find our own way out.’

Zeff exhaled. ‘More searching, then.’

‘Indeed.’

They’d already found the outer bound of this realm a couple days ago. It was just a veil of thin light, but it was as impassable as a wall of soul-strengthened diamond."

"3760

It wasn’t even that far away, either. They’d walked all the way around the perimeter, searching for any gaps and finding none whatsoever. They’d climbed all the way up most of the buildings as well, looking down on the city from the rooftops for better vantage points.

They’d even tried flying up into the sky, but there was a barrier up there, too. It seemed to be a translucent dome over Ridgemark’s entire downtown area.

Naturally, Zeff had also tried attacking the buildings, too. With his materialization, knocking them down should have been a simple feat, and yet they were entirely unmoved by anything he did, just as the barrier itself was.

Stranger still, they didn’t even get wet. Any lingering water just disappeared on its own, without him needing to dematerialize it.



Quite the concerning little detail, he felt, even if it made no practical difference as of yet. It suggested that his powers were not working entirely as normal in this place.

And so they began yet another search, taking a rather leisurely pace this time, since they had no idea what to be looking for--or if there even was anything to be found.

Remaining attentive was a chore. With no clues or clear plan, Zeff's mind wanted to wander. To return to his many worldly concerns.

But he could do that during meditations. Sort of. That was muddy, too, honestly, but he wanted to stay present. For now, at least.

And at length, to his and Axiolis' shared shock, they finally spotted something.

A great beam of white light appeared in the sky, rising up from the ground. It looked like all the other phantom lights, only much larger and brighter. A faint trembling arrived with it, enough for Zeff to feel it in his feet, which was still more than could be said for any of the heavy impact assaults that he had himself conducted on various buildings during their time here.

The giant light did not linger, however. After only a matter of seconds, it was gone, leaving a reddish afterimage in his retinas behind.

No questioning was necessary. They rushed toward its point of origin, which seemed to be a few streets over.

'Hmm,' hummed Ax as they moved. 'That's unsettling'

'What do you mean? It's the first sign of anything being there other than us.'

'Yes, but I can't sense it. I can see it but not sense it. And in all my experience, that is not typically a good omen.'

"3761

Lakefire. What was the problem going to be this time, Zeff wondered? 'How "not good" are we talking here?'

'Well, considering the fact that I haven't sensed anything at all--other

than you--the entire time we've been here, it could be that my senses are being blocked. And to accomplish that feat would require someone or something quite powerful.'

'Wonderful.'

'But who knows? They could be friendly. Or perhaps my senses simply don't work in this realm to begin with.'

'But if you can still sense me, then shouldn't that mean they're working just fine?'

'In theory. Hence why I haven't been too bothered about it until now. But our connection as reaper and servant might guarantee my ability to sense you regardless of what strange spaces we find ourselves in. It is difficult to be sure.'

It didn't take much longer to reach their estimated destination. With no other clues or senses to rely on, they still had to resort to a visual search.

Before they discovered anything, however, a shout from afar found them first.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing here?! This is private property!"

It took Zeff a second to comprehend the words, because they were Valgan, and while he was mostly fluent in it, he still required some processing time in his head. He turned and saw a figure running over to him from the other end of the road.

He braced himself for hostilities, but after a few moments, he was surprised to discover that he actually recognized who it was.

And judging from the expression on the other man's face, the feeling was mutual. "Wait a minute," the fellow said, still in Valgan. "Is that you, Water Dragon?"

Zeff couldn't conceal his own surprise. He was worse at speaking in Valgan, so he stuck with Mohssian, feeling quite confident that this man would be more than merely fluent in it. "It is. And is that you, Black Artisan?"

Daro Bright the Black Artisan, one of the three most powerful servants within the RPMP, flashed between irritation and amusement. "Yes, it is," he said, now also in Mohssian. "How in the black hells did you get

here?"

'We have no idea,' said Axiolis. 'We simply woke up and found ourselves in this place. Is this... your domain, perhaps?'

"Yes, it's a--" Daro cut himself off and looked over the two of them again, moving only his eyes and not his head, perhaps debating how much he should explain."

"3762

Zeff and Axiolis merely waited for the man to complete his thought. If they had accidentally intruded upon his space--whatever it was--then Zeff didn't feel like the guy had an obligation to tell them anything.

"...It's a workspace," said the Artisan. His bushy black eyebrows settled flatly over his gaze, creating an expression that seemed somewhat stern but not necessarily upset or angry. The man's modest stature made it so he had to look up at Zeff, but the bulk on his frame and the confidence in his tone suggested that he felt in no way beneath the person he was looking at.

'Interesting,' said Axiolis. 'Is this a physical space? As in, are we truly here? Or are our minds merely being projected here while our bodies remain in the real world?'

"It's physical," said Daro. "Partially, anyway. In order to conduct certain tests, I needed it to retain at least some of the same physical properties as reality."

Perhaps this was going to end up a pointless question, but Zeff couldn't help asking it. "How were you able to create this place?"

The Artisan regarded him for a long moment, weighing him with his eyes. "It's complicated."

"I don't doubt it," said Zeff, looking around again. "I'm simply... flabbergasted, I suppose. I thought this was some sort of natural phantom realm. A mere shadow of reality, perhaps, but still natural nonetheless. To think it is actually a man-made construct... I..."

"Hmph. Impressed, are you?"

"You could say that."

“You are a materializer, yes?”

Zeff cocked an eyebrow. “That’s right.”

Daro took another moment to eye them both as he rubbed his chin. “And you really have no idea how you ended up here?”

‘We were thinking maybe it was some natural phenomenon that we got caught up in, but we can’t recall experiencing anything that strange recently.’

“Or that someone kidnapped us,” added Zeff. “But if you’re the founder of this realm and didn’t even know we were here, then I suppose it wasn’t that, either.”

Daro’s chin-rubbing seemed to increase in intensity, and his eyes narrowed. Like Zeff, he also decided to look around. “No. That second guess might’ve been correct, though it obviously wasn’t my doing. I’ve no reason to meddle with you or your affairs.”

“If not you, then who?” said Zeff.

“That is indeed the question. And I fear I know the answer. But I must be sure.”

"3763

“What are you going to do?” said Zeff.

Rather than answering, Daro asked a question of his own. “How long have you two been stuck here?”

‘Several days, we think,’ said Ax. ‘It is difficult to tell.’

“And how do you feel, right now?” said Daro, stepping closer to Zeff and eyeing him up and down.

“Fine...?”

“Fine, you say?” The man looked abruptly annoyed. “Pardon me, but I must inspect you now.”

“What do you mean inspect?”

“Physically. May I have your permission to lay my hands on you? It won’t take but a minute, nor will it be invasive.”

The edges of Zeff’s mouth curled down. “Why?”

“I will explain after. For now, please. ‘Twill be a mere examination. Quick and painless. I promise.”

His frown only deepened, and he looked to Ax for some sort of guidance.

‘Well, at least he is asking for permission,’ said the reaper privately. ‘Just say yes.’

Zeff released a growling sigh. “Very well. Do what you must.”

“Appreciated.”

The man’s hands found Zeff’s face and turned his chin left, then right. He brought Zeff’s head down to his own and then stared directly into his eyes.

Daro’s black pupils and brown irises went gray, then the sclera did, too, making them look almost like they’d turned to stone.

Then Zeff felt the entire world waver, as if it were suddenly closing in around him. A great pressure arrived all over his body, as if he’d been wrapped up in cloth.

His body wanted to panic. Wanted to twitch and flail. But his mind remained firm. Unbothered.

Then Daro’s eyes went from mere gray to pitch black, and the intensity all around Zeff heightened. Doubled. Tripled, perhaps.

Zeff was unfazed, however.

This strange state continued on for a few moments more, and then it abated. Daro’s gaze returned to normal, as did the world.

“Hmph. Interesting.” Daro let go of his face and moved down to Zeff’s left arm, feeling along the wrist with both thumbs. “Sorry about that,” he said without looking up. “That hadn’t been what I intended to test, but I noticed something and grew curious. I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised that a Water Dragon would be in possession of that.”

Zeff wanted to ask what, but he held his tongue. Daro seemed to be

focusing, and questions could wait until this exam was over."

"3764

"Hmph. You said you were fine." The Artisan sounded rather annoyed again, and he held up Zeff's own wrist as if to show the man something he hadn't seen before. "You're not. You have no pulse."

"Oh." That remark, Zeff felt compelled to respond to. "Well, yes, as we said, it's been several days. Without food or water, of course my flesh has died."

"Then you should not have said you were fine," said Daro.

"Why not? It's hardly a bother for the undead."

"Because it supports your claim of innocence."

Zeff was lost. "What? How?"

"Hmph. You really are out of your depth here, aren't you?" He finally let go of Zeff and turned around in order to pace a few steps back, rubbing his chin again as he seemed to be lost in thought for a time. "Perhaps I will share a few things with you, Water Dragon."

"Alright..." He still had questions, of course, but he also had a feeling that this odd man was only going to continue generating new ones, regardless of what Zeff asked.

"This war has put me in a rather difficult position," said Daro. "War tends to do that to everyone, of course, but without hubris, I say that mine is especially so. And perhaps you can already surmise why."

Axiolis answered for them. 'Your technology?'

"Hmph. Yes. You've gotten a few glimpses of my work already, yes?"

'We've seen your 'ramata' weapon. It was indeed impressive.'

A brief silence passed as Daro eyed them expectantly. "...Is that it? Just the ramata? No other works?"

Zeff and Axiolis exchanged uncertain looks.

‘Uh... oh, did you work on those Invisibility rings, too, perhaps?’

“Those? A trifle.” A small smile crossed his face. “Huh. Perhaps my efforts at concealing my work have been going better than I thought, then. Pleasant news! Hmph!”

‘So you are concerned about your ideas being stolen during this conflict?’

“Yes and no. Such theft is, in some ways, inevitable. Ideas must proliferate in order for this world of ours to advance, yes? And theft at a particularly bad time can have terrible consequences, of course. But what I am most concerned about is my work being destroyed.”

‘Ah, of course,’ said Ax. ‘A familiar historical tale.’

“There are those seeking to use the chaos unfolding around Ridgemark in order to move against me. To steal, as you said. Or to destroy.”

"3765

‘In that case, I am surprised you were not much more aggressive upon first seeing us here,’ said Ax. ‘Perhaps I was mistaken, but you came across as more annoyed than truly threatening.’

“Hmph. I do not eagerly resort to violence. Much more can be learned and accomplished through conversation, even with hostile individuals. Sometimes, especially with hostile individuals.”

Ax kept pushing, though. ‘Even so, you are trying to protect your life’s work, are you not? I hardly would’ve blamed you if you considered that more important than virtually anything else and had decided to attack us on sight.’

Daro met the reaper’s gaze steadily. “My friend, you are either very understanding or very much trying to coax something out of me.”

‘Heh. Well, I am a reaper, after all. ‘Twas not my intention to pump you for information in any surreptitious manner, but perhaps my instincts got the better of me. I apologize if I have caused offense.’

“Hmph.”

Zeff eyed the both of them for a moment, then decide to address Ax openly. "If you're curious about something, then just be direct with him. That has always been our way."

Ax returned a look. In the echo of privacy, he said, 'It most certainly hasn't.'

Zeff just furrowed his brow.

After another few silent beats, however, the reaper spoke publicly again. 'Fine. Mr. Bright. I'm quite old. I've known many a powerful inventor in my time. And heard the tales of many more. But never have I known them to be so... calm when the fruits of their long labors have been threatened. Now, I am not saying that Zeff and I are such a threat, of course, but it does strike me as quite strange that you are not MUCH more upset with us for being here, right now.'

Daro's flat expression didn't budge. "So? What of it? Am I supposed to be bothered about being different from all the wackos you've known?"

The reaper chortled. 'I should think not, no. But it does make me question how precious this 'workspace' is to you. It seemed quite a useful and powerful thing to have, at first. In fact, I can say I've never personally seen the like before. But perhaps to you, this place is actually... quite mundane and unimportant? Just one of many, perhaps?'

The Black Artisan made no response.

Zeff was beginning to feel impatient. "Ax, what difference does it make? This is none of our business."

The reaper sighed. 'Why do I feel like the two of you are cut from the same cloth?'

"3766

"If I do not curtail your natural curiosity," said Zeff, "then we will be here until our gracious host decides that he can no longer tolerate our presence. I would sooner leave this place and let you ask your questions later."

'That's understandable, but if there is, as I suspect, some kind of favorable time dilation in this workspace, then it would actually be best



to indulge our curiosity before we leave, while the moments are lasting longer. Would my guess be correct, Master Artisan?’

“Hmph. It would, yes. But I rather appreciate your servant’s desire to not impose. And time dilation is not without its own costs, especially now that our souls are sharing this space. It would still be better not to linger without clear purpose. Plus, I have matters to attend to.”

‘I see. Well, then perhaps I should skip a few of my questions and get right to the objective. Would you happen to know of any item or artifact that could help locate a lost person?’

At that, Zeff’s eyes widened a little. The mere idea of such a thing was enough to spark an almost unwelcome sense of hope in his chest.

“A soul compass, you mean?” said Daro.

‘Or anything functionally similar to one, yes. Anything we could use to find a person whose whereabouts we currently have no clues for.’

Daro scratched his brow. “What is the nature of your need, precisely?”

Zeff could answer that. “Lost children. My own. One kidnapped. Another simply missing.” There was Gema, too, of course, but her circumstances were more questionable and less pressing than those of Emiliana and Francisco, he felt.

The other man’s stony expression twitched.

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Daro Bright’s heart was breaking. Of all things, kidnapping? The mere mention of it was enough to bring on a tidal wave of bad memories.

Vantalay, his beloved homeland, had seen many horrible things over the last half-century. This current power struggle between Ridgemark and the rest of the nation was merely the apex of a long buildup of problems that never seemed to get addressed. Only swept under the rug.

It wasn’t typically Daro’s purview to worry about such things, though. His talents were best spent in the background, toiling away on projects that could aid others in the medium- and long-term. Dealing with the ugly flaws and terrible complexities of the world was more the work of Linus and Kristof.

Usually."  
"3767

Over the course of his long life, Daro had naturally found plenty of opportunities to break from his norms. The recent news of human trafficking near Ridgemark, for example, had not come as much of a surprise. He'd seen it happening too many times over the last few decades.

It just never ended. Linus or Kristof or even Daro himself would ride over to the rumored region--sometimes quite far away from Ridgemark--and deal with the problem, only for it crop up again a year or two later.

Even the dysfunctional Vantalayan government had occasionally been their ally in such endeavors. There'd been times when, through such noble work, it had felt like the tension between the VMP and RPMP could potentially come to an end. That they could negotiate some sort of contract, perhaps, to preserve the peace of the nation.

And then, every time, something horrible would happen in that government. A public humiliation. A loss of confidence. An assassination. An entire regime change, even. And then all those prospects would dry up. Tension would return, greater than before.

Where was the land of his childhood? What had become of it? Even now, he did not understand why it had changed so much.

If anyone would understand, he knew these Rainlords would. Time and again throughout history, their land had been disputed. And now, again. At least Daro still had Ridgemark to call home.

So the temptation was certainly present to aid this poor man in front of him. To help Zeff Elroy in any way that he could think of.

But there were wrinkles. Big ones.

Axiolis had been right, of course. This workspace was but one of many. A lesser domain for less sensitive projects. And a serviceable decoy, besides.

Daro absolutely could not allow anyone to find his main project. Even his benefactor didn't know what he was truly working on. All the things

that he was providing for the RPMP, the weapons and armor and supplies--mere toys, in truth. Quick and dirty projects meant to appease. To keep eyes off of him while he continued his real work.

Not that it was near completion, of course. He didn't know how many more years he might need in order to see it bear fruit. Gods, maybe it never would. That was always a possibility, now wasn't it? Always the struggle when attempting to breach through the Veil into the unknown."  
"3768

Which was why he was particularly concerned about it being discovered during this conflict. He knew the prying eyes and ears were out there. Searching for a way in. The Vanguard and Abolish both. And others, too. The Old Wardens. The Andanatt. Those bastards might well be the greatest threat of all, as far as he was concerned.

And maybe one more whose name he did not yet know. Assuming they even had a name in the first place. He knew so little about their existence that they might not have even been real. It might've just been a feeling in his gut. That there was some unknown extra party out there, observing from some unknown place in some unknown way.

But beyond doubt, Daro Bright knew that if any of those groups found out what he was planning, they would stop at nothing to get in his way. They wouldn't just kill him. They would seek out anything he'd touched in the last thirty years and annihilate it.

Including the Anvil, of course. His Fusion Forge.

Right now, he had to protect that above all else. Creating it had been an undertaking like none other. He had, quite literally, poured his very soul into it. To the point that he had needed two months to recover. And even then, he still hadn't felt the same afterwards.

He likely never would, either. That was what it meant to harness the soul to such an extent. To sacrifice part of it, essentially. Fully recovering from that may've been simply impossible. Even for the undead.

His reaper, Marlizia, had not been pleased when she discovered his thoughts on that. It was her soul, too, after all. And that deal was even more than she'd bargained for, no doubt. It had been difficult enough

to convince her that they should risk their lives in the attempt to construct the Anvil in the first place; so to then learn that they might never again be whole... well, that was just the cherry on top for her.

She had come around, though. Eventually.

The Anvil was his masterwork. It had been what allowed him to create these various “workspaces” for everything. Every future project. Every important idea.

Every single thing that needed hiding from the intrusive eyes of the world.

The Anvil was the beginning of everything. If he could just live long enough, survive long enough, then he could change this world. He could fulfill Marlizia’s dream for her. The one she hadn’t dared tell him about until he’d already been her servant for a hundred years.

He could give mortals a chance."

"3769

Real, living, human mortals. The older he’d gotten, the more he’d learned about the history of the world--the history of how oppressed normal human beings had been by forces beyond their control.

Or more accurately, by reapers.

Which was perhaps a strange point of focus to make, considering he was beholden to one himself, but he knew that Marlizia felt even more strongly on this subject than he did. She was the one who’d convinced him of the truth of it, after all.

Eleg was under a stranglehold. For thousands of years. It was the battleground and plaything of those whose time should have long since passed.

‘We are thieves of the youth,’ was how Malizia had put it. ‘We have all the time in the world, and yet it’s not enough. We have to steal away what little time mortals get by shaping the world to our will. Not just in petty and pointless wars, but also in the organization of society. I thought the Vanguard would be different with their rule of non-interference in mortal governments, but that has proved to be just another placating lie. Each new generation of human beings should

have the chance to remold and reforge civilization anew. But they can't do that when they're stuck under the countless quiet tyrannies of superpowered immortals.'

Which was why, above all else, Daro Bright felt that his work--his true work--was too important to gamble with. Marlizia was obviously not like the rest of her kind. If they discovered what he was trying to accomplish...

It didn't even bear thinking about. There would be no chance of survival. Not for him, Marlizia, or anyone near them.

But the actual task of excising reapers from the world was certainly no easy feat. Cancerous though they were, they still served an important function in the ferrying of souls into the afterlife.

In the prevention of feldeaths from being born, more specifically. Without an alternate solution to that little problem, removing reapers from the world was the same as dooming it. In Daro's estimate, feldeaths would overrun the world and annihilate all of humanity within five hundred years.

He knew the stakes. The fire that he was playing with.

But he was also prepared to abandon the project entirely if a workable replacement for reapers could not be found."

"3770

It was Marlizia's dream, sure--as well as his own, at this point--but he would not succumb to something as moronic as the sunk cost fallacy. Even if he spent the rest of his life struggling for that answer and never found it, then so be it. This was the survival of the human species that they were talking about. Nothing was more important than that. Not even freedom from tyranny.

So to say that the Black Artisan of Vantalay was feeling conflicted at the moment would have been quite the understatement. He absolutely could not do anything that might jeopardize the secrecy of his work, and the Water Dragon's mere presence here was rather strong evidence that someone was already snooping around. Searching for weaknesses in his defenses.

How much did they already know? Certainly not everything, or else Ridgemark would already be a crater.

And it was furthermore obvious to Daro that Zeff Elroy here was not at fault. Whether the man realized it or not, he was a pawn in some greater player's game. But who? Graves? Daro had been intensely wary of the Pale Hawk from the very moment of the man's arrival in Vantalay.

From all of Daro's surveillance of him, Graves appeared to be quite preoccupied with the war effort. It seemed unlikely that he would even have the time for this at the moment, especially considering the risks involved. Toying with his own allies? Endangering their fragile partnership in this corner of the war?

Hmm. It was possible. A hell of a juggling act, perhaps. But possible.

Yet there was another threat that came even more readily to mind. The silent figure in Ridgemark. The one who'd all but disappeared since her arrival here, around the same time as Graves.

Daro had been wondering what she was up to all this time. But perhaps that was her goal. Why bother even revealing herself at all if she was only going to vanish throughout this entire conflict? Or maybe something had befallen her in secret? Neutralized her? Or killed her, even?

He was thinking of Jun. The Wandering Phantom, as some knew her. One of the famed Kubi, which were the five most powerful servants under Sai-hee.

Why, precisely, Jun had decided to come here to Ridgemark after the outbreak of the war, Daro had been trying his damndest to discover."  
"3771

Conventional wisdom suggested that she wanted to keep an eye on this corner of the war for Sai-hee. After all, the servant empress was supposed to be quite influential in Steccat, which was Vantalay's northern neighbor--and also one of the three most powerful nations on the Eloan continent. If the conflict here spread all the way up there, Sai-hee would almost certainly take action.

But if Jun's objective was merely to observe, then why had she made such a show of her arrival? That had not been some accident. The woman had conducted a veritable parade down Mahzuz--or "Lucky Street," as most tourists knew it. She'd even had a small troupe of Sai-hee's famous Wind Dancers escorting her and entertaining the onlookers.

Not exactly the typical *modus operandi* for the Wandering Phantom, as far as Daro knew. She was supposed to be quite reclusive, like all the Kubi, whose names were often not widely known, nor their face recognizable. Even Daro didn't know who each of the current five members were, and he'd been trying to find out for years.

He did know about Leo the Bull Leech, though. And it certainly hadn't escaped his notice that the man was currently working alongside the Rainlords in this very country. It seemed furthermore apparent that Leo was trying to keep a low profile, as well, which begged all sorts of questions.

Daro had been expecting Jun to at least make contact with Leo--or vice versa, perhaps--but if the two of them had done so, then they'd successfully managed to hide it from him. Which was quite the feat, because Daro had eyes on Leo at nearly all times.

There had, however, been a quite public meeting between Jun and Graves, right after her arrival. In fact, it had nearly turned into a fight, until Linus and Kristof intervened.

But after that, Jun had gone completely dormant. Supposedly, she'd just been quietly gambling, sunbathing, attending evening shows, and ordering room service. Enjoying a nice vacation in the middle of this war, seemingly.

Perhaps she was just living up to her moniker. Wandering without purpose. Doing as she pleased.

Daro had to plan for the worst, though. If she was trying to get to him--to his most concealed workspaces--then it was possible that she could've been using Zeff Elroy here as a distraction while she probed his defenses."

"3772

Agh, but what sense did that make? Why announce her arrival so publicly if she'd intended to conduct stealth operations against him?

Perhaps she'd changed her plans partway through. Perhaps she'd wanted to give him something to worry about. Or perhaps she was just one of those mercurial individuals who never really made plans in the first place, much less stuck to them. Daro had known a few like that in his time. They always drove him absolutely mad.

Regardless, he needed to go check on things now.

Or. No. Wait a moment. Did he truly need to do that? Wouldn't that be precisely what his unseen opponent would expect him to do? And even if not, doing so might alert them that he was onto their game.

Yes. The smarter move, therefore, would be to either play along or do something completely unpredictable. And besides, he had confidence in his work. The weaves were strong. They could resist tremendous efforts to damage or otherwise tamper with them. Not to mention, none of the perimeter sensors had alerted him to any unexpected visitors. And while that was hardly proof of security, he had spent considerable labor upgrading those sensors himself.

He should have more faith in himself, he decided. If he panicked over every little wrinkle, he wouldn't last through another year of this secrecy, let alone ten.

What to do with this Water Dragon, though? The man was giving him a look like he was expecting to receive terrible news. Not assuming that Daro was actually going to help him, eh? Sensible. From what Daro had learned of the Rainlords' recent exploits, they must've been growing quite accustomed to things never going their way.

On this day, however, Daro was pleased to surprise. "Very well. I shall help you."

And the ensuing expression on Zeff Elroy's face was as enjoyable as Daro expected. "...You will?" said Zeff.

Daro turned and began walking. "Follow me," he said as he reached into his vest for a pair of devices. A Remapper and Needle, as he'd dubbed them.

The Remapper was a messy cluster of metallic circles connected by thin, flexible rods. To the untrained eye, it probably looked like some of kind of monstrous, janitorial key ring--which wouldn't be entirely



inaccurate.

The Needle, however, looked very little like its namesake. It was more akin to a baton with a sturdy handle, though the mechanical tip did conceal a few sharp points within it."

"3773

The resonance point was only a short walk away. Technically, he could have brought it closer if he really felt like it, but that would bring with it a needless risk of destabilizing the weaves within the workspace's fabric. And repairing that would be a pain in the ass. More than once, he'd ended up merely scrapping a space entirely rather than trying to fix it. At a certain point, it was better to simply move everything important out and then start over from scratch.

The Remapper was good for that task, if necessary, but here and now, he only wanted it for connectivity. As the three of them neared the resonance point, the rings of the Remapper came alive with movement and a soft white glow. Slowly, as he pointed them at the correct location, they positioned themselves into a perfectly cylindrical form. That was their primary function: to aid him in pinpointing the exact spot of geographic resonance within a given domain.

In this case, having built this place himself, he didn't necessarily need the Remapper's help for that, but using it was a force of habit by now. Better to be precise than to rely on his fallible memory, especially if he happened to mix this workspace up with one of the others. Some of them looked extremely similar, after all.

He'd made that mistake once before, actually. And he'd ended up having to scour the domain up and down for nearly two weeks before finding the resonance point again and finally escaping.

Talk about embarrassing. Good thing Marlizia wasn't the type to make fun of him. Most other reapers would've never let him live that down--and probably told everyone they knew about it, too.

The Needle was what actually aided in parting the weaves and opening the doorway out of the workspace. With a twist of the handle, the tip popped open, exposing its multiple small spikes, which crackled with an electric current.

That current, however, was no normal thing. It pulled on his very soul with enough force to knock a younger servant out cold. For him, it was merely uncomfortable, but he knew that if he sustained it for too long, it would become truly dangerous.

Incidentally, he'd been working on a means of properly weaponizing that interaction, but it was proving more difficult than expected.

With a vertical swipe, the Needle ripped a hole through the resonance point. It was merely a pitch-black space at first, which was where the Remapper came in again. He held it up to the hole and concentrated, searching his mind for the correct workspace."

"3774

When he found it, the Remapper's rings became a lens through which he could look at the dark hole in the workspace's weave. To the naked eye, the hole remained unchanged, but when he peered through the cylinder formed by the rings, he could see through to the desired destination, allowing him to visually confirm that he had indeed chosen the correct space with his mind.

Through that clear portal lay his second most advanced workspace. The Black Citadel, he'd dubbed it. Many of his more elaborate projects were placed there--though not the Anvil, of course.

The Fusion Forge was actually an entire workspace unto itself, and he had never taken anyone else there, save Marlizia. Nor did he ever intend to.

With another slash of the Needle, he widened the portal enough for both him and Zeff Elroy to step through. He went first, ushering for the Water Dragon to follow.

The man did so, though not without obvious hesitation. When he and Axiolis were both through, Daro twisted the handle on the Needle again, and the portal blinked shut, leaving the invisible weave untouched.

There were other ways to breach the weave, of course, but the Needle did so without damaging it. Which meant that, in all likelihood, that previous workspace was now damaged by whoever snuck the Water Dragon into it.

Rather annoying. Daro didn't know if he would be able to find the time to go hunt down the damaged sector and repair it. Depending on how subtle the damage was, that could take quite a while. But leaving it that way might also prove dangerous. Like a tunnel that some stranger had dug into his property.

Well, that was why he had so many different workspaces. The lesser ones could serve as decoys. And the greater ones, like the Citadel here, had much more elaborate defenses baked into them.

"...What in the world?" said Zeff Elroy, gawking as they made their way down the enormous portcullis that led up to the Citadel proper. "You made all this?"

Daro had to pause and look around for a moment. Hmm. He supposed it was rather ornate these days, wasn't it? He'd gotten so accustomed to the place that the view hardly even registered for him, anymore. The sky-bending towers. The sweeping, intricate archways. The gargantuan doorways. The sparkling moat. The twinkling stars lighting up the endless night."

"3775

And so many little bells and whistles. Tiny things he'd added over time with nary a thought. A glowing bed of artificial flowers here. A waterless fountain, made entirely of Heartstone. A luminescent bird feeder, even though there were no birds here.

Perhaps he'd gone a bit overboard, now that he was thinking about it.

A stone Border Collie, locked in a running pose.

Yeah, okay. He'd definitely gone overboard. He hardly even remembered doing most of these.

Oh, that's right. Many of them were probably the result of his sleepwalking. Or "sleepworking" as Marlizia liked to call it.

As they passed into the Black Citadel's atrium, the full vastness of the compound became more visible. From this central area, any other location within the fortress could be reached. Every major hallway connected here, and stairways lined each the walls so that the second and third floors could be easily accessed, as well.

Daro didn't linger. Their destination was the Eastern Laboratory.

Before reaching the corridor, however, he noticed that Zeff and Axiolis were lagging behind.

Gawking again, seemingly.

Flattering, perhaps, but also mildly annoying. Were they not the ones who should be feeling a sense of urgency here? He walked back over to them, still deciding on whether or not he wanted to chastise them.

Axiolis spoke up first. 'This material here. Might you tell us what it is?'

Daro raised an eyebrow. They were both staring at a tall stone pillar, one of a dozen that lined the atrium's outer footpath. "Why? What is your interest in it?"

"...We feel like we've seen this before," said Zeff. He touched the pillar with a pair of fingers. "Quite recently, in fact."

Oh? Daro needed a moment to think about that. What might they be referring to? He didn't recall building anything out of this stuff back in Vantalay. Or anywhere in the real world, for that matter.

And while it had certainly been a while since he'd made them, but he remembered clearly enough what these particular pillars had been hewn from. Unlike some of the other decorations around here, it wasn't Heartstone or Luughite or basteria. Not khamarasta or Ardoran angel stone, either.

"You recognize it, do you?" said Daro. "I find that curious. Its formation was from a most ancient recipe. One that I feared might become lost to history. Hence why I went to great lengths recreating it."

'Almost lost to history, you say? Do you even know its original name, then?'

Daro smiled. "Nightrock."

"3776 -- CCCVIII."

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Rarely had the Living Void been pushed so hard. Kallmakk the Nightspinner simply would not die. Crushing blow after crushing blow, the stubborn bastard took them all--and kept moving forward, besides.

Since joining, Dozer had been fighting for two entire days without a true break. And apparently, the battle had already been going on for multiple days beforehand.

At times, it was an exercise in tedium. A battle of incredible attrition. The feldeath's mood was likely to blame. Dozer had noticed that about his encounters with the creatures over the years. Their energy levels tended to fluctuate, even in the midst of combat.

It had to do with the way they became enraged, he suspected. It only made sense that their emotions would subside after a while, if only by a little. And with it, their attacks became slightly less ferocious.

Of course, to the average combatant, such differences would probably be imperceptible. Even their weaker attacks were still capable of obliterating most servants.

Not to mention, the lulls were temporary. In drawn out conflicts like this one, it was only a matter of time before the thing became enraged again.

And then things weren't so tedious, all of a sudden. In fact, things became a little too exciting, even for Dozer's liking.

The conventional wisdom, therefore, was to strike during a lull. If it was less dangerous, then it was more vulnerable, yes?

No. Because it also withdrew into itself during those times, bolstering its defenses. And with particularly powerful feldeaths like this one, doing any kind of damage to it at all became almost impossible.

It didn't help that the blasted Gargoyle of Korgum had joined in the fray, either, along with a host of her underlings.

They didn't really think they could score a kill on him or Morgunov here, did they? Whatever their plan had been with this so-called Blacksong, they had to have realized by now that it was not going their

way. Gohvis had not turned against him--at least, not fully--and Iceheart's half of the Vanguardian forces were clearly running on fumes.

How Lamont was even still in the fight, Dozer did not know. He was almost impressed. Maybe he'd make the man another offer to change sides. See if the winds had shifted at all since the last time they'd met.

Probably not, knowing the man's reputation. But it never hurt to ask."  
"3776 -- CCCVIII.

### Chapter Three Hundred Eight: 'The Crisis in the Luthic...'

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Probably not, knowing the man's reputation. But it never hurt to ask."  
"3777

As for the battle itself, Dozer had to acknowledge that it was indeed a unique one. Over the course of his very long life, he'd never been involved in one quite like this.

The utter chaos that Kallmakk brought to the field meant that different people could obtain the brunt of its pursuit at different times. It would fixate on Gohvis, then on Morgunov, then on Sanko, and so on and so forth. Dozer had yet to get a turn himself, but if this stalemate continued for much longer, then it was probably only a matter of time.

And with each shift of the feldeath's primary attention, there came with it virtually no warning. Nor did the timing seem particularly predictable, either. Sometimes, Kallmakk would change targets within minutes. Other times, it might take hours.

The result of this madness was that the battle had carried them all the

way to the western coast of Ardora.

And beyond it, even.

Gone were the Gettira Plains and the Jaskadan Forest. Which was quite irritating for him, since he still had business left undone there. Instead, they were replaced by the vast and unbelievably turbulent expanse of the Luthic Ocean.

They fought on the open water, amid raging waves as tall as skyscrapers. The sky darkened regularly, sometimes even completely. Such was the Nightspinner's power. More than once, Dozer had gotten tossed around by pitch black waters. Even his soul senses were of little use, much of the time. Ardor permeated everything, rolling just as chaotically as the waves themselves.

And the storm. Their fighting had kicked up a hurricane, and it, too, had been following them since the coast, as if it had also developed a mind of its own.

More likely, it was just a natural consequence of atmospheric disturbance. Storms were a common result when servants of this level clashed, even on land. The ocean just seemed to amplify it.

For his part, the water wasn't such a problem, really. Disorienting, sure. Annoying, of course. But whenever he needed to reestablish himself and get his bearings back, Dozer could do so with ease. The ocean waters around him would break with explosive force, creating a becalmed pocket of air the size of a city block--or even bigger, if he preferred.

That was the sphere of influence at work. The conquering of the environment, using nothing but the strength of one's soul. The others could all do it, too. Even some of the underlings could pull it off, Dozer had noticed."

"3778

And while it was an easy solution when the situation grew too immediately chaotic, it was also part of the reason why the storm kept worsening. Ultimately, the technique only served to heighten the disturbances in the atmosphere, especially when conducted by multiple people in rapid succession.



Almost like they were boiling the sea.

He could already tell that the environmental damage of this battle was going to be a lasting one. And being in the middle of the Luthic Ocean to boot? The coasts of Eloa, Ardora, and Qenghis were all going to feel this one. Maybe the other continents, too, if things didn't conclude soon.

It thrilled him to his core.

Sure, it was annoying. Kallmakk was a bastard. Morgunov was a jackass. The Vanguard were fools.

But dammit if it didn't also feel good to truly let loose again. With as safe as he normally liked to play things, opportunities like this had become genuinely rare.

When it was finally his turn to receive the brunt of Kallmakk's attention, Dozer couldn't help smiling just a bit.

A solid beam of dark energy divided the sea in two, creating a canyon with cliffs of water so deep that the ocean floor became briefly visible in the moments of lightning flashing across the sky.

Dozer didn't dodge it, though. He swatted it away with the back of his hand, and the beam arced off into the distance like a streaming firework, skipping across the water before finally exploding into a black dome of pure energy that kicked up yet more tidal waves.

Dozer's entire arm was smote black, numb, and trembling, but that was all. Not as bad as he expected, honestly. Probably not Kallmakk's full power, then, judging by some of the other mad things that he'd witnessed the feldeath do.

Heh. Or perhaps he was simply stronger than even he himself realized. It had been quite a while since he'd tested his own limits, after all.

Dozer's ability was a rather uncommon one. He'd only met a few people over the course of his life who shared it. Moreover, it was peculiar enough that he'd come to believe some people might have manifested it without even realizing what it truly was, instead believing it to be something else. Vibrations, for instance. Or perhaps velocity as a whole.

But those were too broad. Young alteration users often made that mistake, not understanding the more specific natures of their powers until they were much older. It didn't help that they usually started off pathetically weak, compared to other ability types."

"3779

Historically, however, the confusion had also been something of a boon to himself. The more nuanced his ability was, the more difficulty his enemies would have in trying to understand everything of which he was capable. And of course, whenever he made a breakthrough with it, that only served to throw his opponents for even more of a loop.

Not that he could expect such convenience when fighting a feldeath.

Kallmakk was still giving him its full attention, obviously unbothered by the relative ease with which Dozer had deflected its attack. It was bearing down on him like a battleship.

And it was nearly the size of one, too. To his eyes, the creature was a great serpent with multiple humanoid heads. Each of its gazes was alight with black-and-white fire, and its hulking body moved in utterly impossible ways, tearing through the open water with no resistance whatsoever.

Worse still, its apparent lack of limbs was a deception. He knew only too well that long, stringy arms with razor sharp claws could appear from nowhere and flash across his vision in an instant, threatening to shred him with hardly a moment's warning.

And there was even more to worry about, too, thanks to the other attackers. As much as Dozer had been anticipating this attention from Kallmakk, there could be little doubt that the Vanguardians had been waiting for this opportunity with even greater eagerness.

This was their chance, after all. To gang up on him all at once.

The flash freezing effects of Iceheart were already here, Dozer knew, with stealthier addendums on the way, no doubt. And the blasted Gargoyle was aiming to smother him with a tornado of mud and rock, if only to help conceal everyone else's attacks. And all the little underlings were flinging their attacks at him, too, of course.

Kallmakk charging him head on. And every Vanguardian providing covering fire?

A bit much, even for him.

Thankfully, he had his own subordinates to pull some of the weight off his shoulders.

He could focus primarily on Kallmakk, Iceheart, and Sanko.

The flash freezing was countered easily enough with simple heat generation. That was one of the earlier tricks that Dozer had mastered, but it had of course required considerable refinement in order to repel the mind-numbing oppression of Iceheart's power over absolute zero.

It was a good thing he'd developed that particular technique so much, too, because Dozer's alteration power over inertia might have struggled to deal with such a problem, otherwise."

"3780

In the early days, some half-millennia ago, the very concept of inertia hadn't even been discovered yet. It had therefore been quite difficult and laborious to arrive at any kind of understanding of its nature. In fact, it wasn't until a couple centuries of undeath that he really began to feel as though he'd truly wrapped his head around it. And even now, he occasionally still found himself questioning what he thought he knew.

His younger years had been quite turbulent, as a result. For a while, he'd thought that his power was simply to "adjust the weight" of things. That he could only make things lighter or heavier. Then he went through a period where he thought that, no, perhaps his power was instead to control some otherworldly force and flame, granted to him by the Void itself. There was ancient precedent for that, after all. Some called it the Inferno. Then, still later, he learned about a discovery called friction, and so he thought it might be that, too.

Even after he'd learned about inertia, that hadn't been the end of his uncertainty. While he did indeed settle on it as the most likely candidate over which his power held sway, there eventually came the discovery of subatomic particles, which again threw him for a loop, making him reevaluate everything.

Ultimately, though, he returned to inertia, as it was the most fitting. He decided that even though it seemed like he could manipulate subatomic particles quite freely, everything of which he was capable could still be explained by the manipulation of inertia upon those same particles. The localized generation of heat, for example, might have looked like the result of excitement in particle vibrations, but it also could have been the subatomic application of inertia upon particles within an open system.

The sudden, dramatic change in inertia for certain particles but not others could theoretically create a need for energy transference among said particles in order to reestablish equilibrium. And the more dramatic the change, the more rapid the need would become.

The more heated, in other words.

So Iceheart's ability to remove the heat out of any system, while indeed deadly, was by itself not nearly enough to give Dozer trouble. As long as he could still think, he could create as much heat as he needed. And in this fight, with his soul power added on top of things, he was constantly keeping his entire body heated nearly to the point of bursting into flames."

"3781

If it were only Iceheart's interference that he had to worry about, this whole situation might not have been so bad. He was a threat, of course, but a controllable one. The Gargoyle, however, was proving exceedingly obnoxious. As ever.

Her ability to melt into the environment and--quite literally--turn the world against him was something that had never become easier to deal with. Even after all these years, she was still one of the most irksome opponents he'd ever face. And at this point, he may well have fought more battles against her than anyone else in his life. Rarely ever had she managed to wound him, but she always managed to find ways to make things more difficult. Battles of attrition were perhaps her specialty now, and this one certainly qualified as that.

One might have thought that all these rolling seas and howling winds would be causing no end of trouble for her here, but if they were, it wasn't obvious. Perhaps they were even helping her by masking her

movements. Whenever a surge of water lashed against him or a gust threatened to knock him off course, it could have been her doing. Or it could've just been the chaos of this fight.

He remembered hearing from Ito that she'd recently begun harnessing lightning, too, and indeed, it seemed to be so. The dark skies cracked and flashed constantly, and while it was thankfully not as controlled as Dozer might've expected, it was still quite the hassle, especially for his men. Ito himself was here somewhere, but Dozer kept losing track of him.

Had to stay focused on Kallmakk. The feldeath was still the most pressing concern, of course.

After two days of combat, Dozer still didn't really know how much of the creature's power he could withstand, but he was keen to find out, now that it was finally his turn to be its punching bag.

He met its charge head on. Kallmakk plowed into his becalmed sphere of influence like a thrashing bull, covered in seawater and enormous bulbs of dark energy. Lightning sparked across its hulking form as he drew close, and then there was suddenly a massive claw flying toward him from the right.

Dozer swatted it away, just like he did with the beam, but rather than flying away, the claw exploded apart and disintegrated.

That didn't stop the rest of its body from slamming into him, though."  
"3782

He went for a ride. The feldeath carried him along as if on the nose of a train. Together, they quickly reached the edge of his emptied sphere of influence and splashed through a towering cliff of seawater.

Dozer's fingers sunk into the monster's hulking, ethereal body as he held onto it. The force against his back was even greater than he'd expected, to the point where he could hardly move a muscle as they torpedoed through the Luthic Ocean.

That wasn't right. This force pinning him down was more than just that of speed and water.

Ah. So this was the power of the Nightspinner's domain. Its own

sphere of influence. Was it trying to absorb him?

It was in for a rude awakening, if so.

The torpedoing soon began to slow, until it was more like crawling, and then it stopped all together. He could feel the beast still pushing against him, thrashing ever more wildly with each passing second, like a great eel that had suddenly discovered the wall of its aquarium.

He was that wall. And he would not budge.

With his own body's inertia cranked up this high, the feldeath could have been replaced with a rocket ship for all the difference it would have made here.

But Dozer could still move himself, if he wished. It took immense concentration and effort, but he could. That had been one of the most difficult things to master: how to control his body with such precision that, when inertia was maxed out, it would still listen to him.

How to become one with inertia. How to make the world break upon his immovable form without actually becoming immovable himself.

A delicate balance. More about refining mental precision than about summoning new strength. Fragile. Disciplined. Experienced. Tedious, even.

But the payoff had been enormous.

Because when he moved his body in this state, the world could only crumple before him.

With both of his arms spread wide as he gripped the feldeath's body, Dozer brought his hands together.

And Kallmakk the Nightspinner, this dark serpent of the ocean, combusted like a popped balloon.

There wasn't nearly enough light to see it with his eyes, but he could certainly sense the change. The oppressive interference over his mind, the blanket of ardor covering everything around him, just had a great hole punched through it, and suddenly, the world was much less murky."

"3783

It was much clearer, yes, but not much calmer. The ferocity of the surrounding hurricane only became more apparent. The Vanguard was still after his head, after all.

But how much longer would their fighting spirit last, he wondered?

He couldn't yet tell if the feldeath was dead, but if it was, then the Vanguard were about to become desperate. Which would make them temporarily more dangerous. One last assault. Trying to catch him while he was still on the backfoot.

Once that was broken, though, they would be done. Their morale would plummet, and they would scatter like the roaches they were, hoping and praying for Sermung to show up and save them.

Because they would know that nothing less would suffice. Dozer would make them pay sorely for this overextension.

But that was only if Kallmakk was truly dead. Dozer didn't get the opportunity to check, because Iceheart and the Gargoyle were both bearing down on him at the same time.

Aiming to keep him suppressed at the very least, no doubt. Couldn't very well let him run loose, now could they?

Ah.

But he'd already entered the Void State.

That was what he called it, anyway. Truthfully, he had no idea if it was the Void's doing. It just seemed like the most reasonable explanation for this phenomenon that he'd been experiencing for over two hundred years now.

In the beginning, he'd thought it was perhaps a byproduct of his power. That, somehow, his ability to manipulate inertia could also affect his perception of the world writ large.

Of time itself, even.

As if he'd become so immovable that he could even resist the flow of the future. Watch it unfold more slowly. Perceive it more deeply.

But sadly, that explanation didn't appear to be quite accurate.

‘Wow, nice one!’ came that all-too-familiar voice.

Dozer’s head began turning, though only very slowly. Thankfully, he didn’t actually need to look over in the direction of Morgunov in order to know that the voice belonged to him. ‘Already here, too, are you?’ said Dozer.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Morgunov from afar. ‘All this fighting opened the place up for me days ago. Nice to not be alone anymore, though! Been a while since I got to experience this with you! How nostalgic! We HAVE been through some stuff together, haven’t we? What a couple of cards we are, eh?! Ehehehe!’

‘Do you think Kallmakk is dead?’

‘Mm, probably not. A few days ago, I got the sucker pretty good, too, and he only stayed down for like four minutes.’

Dozer wanted to sigh."

"3784

‘Gave me quite the scare, too, when he suddenly popped back up, even angrier than before! Thrashed me somethin’ fierce! So look forward to that, buddy!’

A part of him was. He wasn’t about to admit that to this fool, though. ‘I cannot sense Kallmakk’s presence clearly any longer. If he is not dead, then where has he gone?’

‘Everywhere. All around us. I think he’s melting into the shadows as we speak. Then, when he’s ready, he’ll spring out again and smack you upside the head. Probably via some kind of sucker punch, too. Real sneaky jerk, this fella. So don’t say I didn’t warn ya.’

Hmph. Morgunov was being oddly helpful. And Dozer had an idea as to why. Before potentially burning that bridge, however, he decided that he should get a bit more use out of it. ‘You’ve been studying these creatures extensively, have you not?’

‘Sure have.’

‘And you have discovered no common weaknesses? Nothing we can exploit here?’



‘Nope. Every feldeath is unique, just as the old masters claimed they were. I really hate it when old wisdom turns out to have been right all along, but I also gotta give credit where credit is due, I guess.’

‘Hmph.’

‘But for Kallmakk here, I’m thinking maybe we need more light. If it’s escaping into the shadows when it’s wounded, then perhaps the solution would be to remove all shadows from the area, eh?’

‘Interesting.’

‘Easier said than done, though, since the bugger can generate its own new shadows. Doesn’t have to rely on the environment.’

‘What do you mean it can “generate” them? Surely, it is merely the suppression of light, not the generation of anything new.’

‘Oh, yeah, if feldeaths were bound by the laws of physics, then sure, you’d be right. But from what I’ve observed, Kallmakk’s shadows have actual mass to them. Which, frankly, is making me slightly worried that it’s going to start slinging black holes at us one of these days, but that hasn’t happened yet. Thankfully.’

Wonderful. ‘So we will be needing a truly overwhelming source of light, then.’

‘That’s what I’m thinkin’. Not quite sure how to pull it off, though.’

Dozer paused. He supposed he’d gotten enough. He could push now. ‘Is that the truth? Or have you simply not been trying hard enough?’

‘Excuse me? You callin’ me lazy? I am offended, sir!’

‘Perhaps because you have been too preoccupied with trying to kill Germal, instead.’

‘Ah...’

‘Explain yourself.’”

"3785

‘Hmm! Gotta be honest, pal. Was really hopin’ you hadn’t noticed that.’

‘You’ve never been known for your subtlety.’

‘Eheh! True! But look. Guy’s a traitor. He’s the mastermind behind this entire operation to kill me.’

‘The entire operation? All of Blacksong?’

‘Oh, I don’t know about all. But this part of it, certainly. Admitted it to me himself, when we had a nice little heart-to-heart of our own. Not unlike the one you and I are having right now, actually.’

That piqued Dozer’s curiosity. ‘Germal can access this space? I do not sense him here.’

‘No, no, it was a different thing. Similar, but different. More hostile, too. Guy really hates my guts. And he might be an ancient Primordial, too. Or possessed by one, maybe. Tough to say for sure. He IS the Liar of Lyste, after all.’

Possessed? Hmm. Now that was an intriguing little revelation. The leader of the Freeman Fellowship, possessed by one of the so-called Primordials?

Questions pooled in his mind as he humored the possibility. Germal had indeed always been something of a curiosity, ever since appearing before him and Gohvis as a sickly child all those years ago. Dozer recalled Gohvis mentioning the child’s oddness many times. The split personality, among other things.

And naturally, Dozer had experienced his own strangeness with Germal, as well. The man’s ability to charm people was certainly no normal thing. The immense utility of it was why he’d allowed Germal to form his little Fellowship in the first place. And it had proved plenty useful, too.

‘If he is a traitor as you say,’ said Dozer, ‘then it is my responsibility to deal with him, not yours.’

‘Oh, believe you me: this is one responsibility I don’t mind unburdening you from, my friend. He needs to die. As soon as possible. And I’m going to make sure that happens.’

‘You do not appear to be doing a very good job of that so far.’

‘Hoho! Now you’re TRYIN’ to piss me off, aren’tcha?!’

‘You have been fighting for many days now, and he yet lives. Do you require my help?’

‘Hah...’ Morgunov fell briefly quiet. ‘And here I was, tryin’ to be nice to you. Tryin’ to keep things light. Pleasant. Tryin’ to not hate you. So why ya gotta say stuff like that, huh? Why can’t you just be a little courteous, instead of slappin’ my hand away whenever I reach out, hmm? What, are you just too broken inside, old man? Can’t allow us to share a nice moment, every now and then?’”

"3786

‘A nice moment,’ echoed Dozer flatly. ‘Now what might that look like for you? Perhaps like the moment when you sabotaged my project that was decades in the making?’

‘Hey, man, that was just, like, a prank. Y’know?’

‘I lost twenty of the brightest minds working under me.’

‘I offered to replace them! You said no!’

‘Tens of thousands of hours of labor. Lost in a single explosion.’

‘Technically, it was more than one. Chain reaction ‘n all.’

Dozer might’ve paused for a deep breath to steady himself, if his physical body wasn’t in this veritable stasis. Instead, he had to satisfy himself with merely ignoring Morgunov and taking a moment to instead reassess the field of battle.

Everything was moving so slowly that it might as well have been motionless. Even himself. That was how this strange Void State worked. It allowed him time to stop and think, even in the middle of utter chaos.

But it was flexible, too. He was still present at the normal speed of the world, as well. It was more like his mind had been divided by two, and this one here, within the Void State, was nearly detached from the thread of time.

It was a supremely odd feeling, one he’d never even attempted to

explain to anyone before. Here, time didn't feel "slow," exactly. Rather, it felt almost non-existent. As if it held hardly any sway over him at all. So even though this half of his mind may have been "dragging" behind the other half at a snail's pace, it wasn't bothersome in the slightest. There was no sensation of having to "wait" or "catch up" to the present.

And not only that, if he concentrated on it, he could actually perceive events across a range of time, both forward and backward. If he missed something amid the chaos, he could go back and inspect it more closely. If he wanted to predict what was about to happen--such as what Iceheart and the Gargoyle were about to do--then he could do that, as well, though it wasn't always as clear or reliable.

Especially against certain opponents. And these two absolutely qualified, even though they were still apparently not on a high enough level to speak to him and Morgunov here. Perhaps they'd already developed some awareness of this space, too, even if they couldn't yet breach it."

"3787

Morgunov was still blabbering on while Dozer hardly listened. Doubtless, the fool would never give up trying to convince the entire world--including himself--of his ultimate and noble brilliance, but Dozer had no patience for that, right now. Even if they had all the time in the world, it wasn't enough.

Dozer had seen and heard that song and dance far too many times. Morgunov was an ally, but only in the most superficial sense. The appearance of their partnership was more important than the actuality of it. In the end, the so-called Mad Demon could never be trusted in any meaningful capacity.

The only thing he could ever be was useful.

'--stick in the mud! I'm offerin' to help you out, y'know! Just like always! And yeah, I might get a little silly with it, every now and then, but I always come through, don't I? When have I not, huh? I mean, besides the rocket prank.'

'Do you know why Sermung is not here?' said Dozer.

'Hmm? That dull jerk? No idea. I keep expecting him to, and he keeps

not showing up. Honestly, it's kind of disrespectful, don't you think? I mean, how often do we give him a prime opening like this? And what, he's too busy to make time for us, these days? Don't make a lick of sense, if you ask me. But I know one thing: if he keeps on leaving us hanging like this, then pretty soon, I'm gonna make sure he's REALLY got somethin' to keep him busy.'

'Is that right?'

'Sure is. Curious? Go ahead and ask. Maybe I'll tell you! If you start being nicer to me!'

'I'd sooner die ignorant.'

'Pah! You're certainly on course for that!'

'What about Sai-hee? Do you know anything of her whereabouts?'

'Maaaybe. Why? Think she'll decide to make an appearance, too? Seems doubtful to me, but I wouldn't mind seein' that old bat again!'

'She will never warm to your advances.'

'Says you! So negative! I'm telling you, one day, she'll come around! And then our children will become the stuff of legends!'

'The stuff of nightmares, more like.'

'Well, that'd be cool, too.' Morgunov broke for a telepathic cackle.

'What about you, old man? Made any new lady friends since I last saw you? Any new kids? Hmm? Hmmm?'

'Even if I had, why would I share that information with you?'

'Uh, because I'm the best godfather ever? Obviously.'

"3788

'Every child I have ever sent to study under your tutelage has come back either unrecognizable or not at all,' said Dozer.

'But not stupider! Never that! And c'mon. Let's not pretend like this is some one-sided thing. You've offed plenty of my little fellas.'

'I've dealt with raving lunatics who you failed to control, yes. That is not the same.'

'Sure it is! And that's perfectly fine by me! Nothin' to be embarrassed about! If anyone is ever gonna finally stand alongside us, then they'll have to be capable of dealing with all of our unfair bullshit! Trial by fire is the only way!'

Hmph. A rare point of agreement between them. Dozer didn't want to acknowledge it, though, so he merely said nothing. That was no problem, of course, because one of the things that made this man so insufferable was his ability to ramble on endlessly with no input from whomever he was supposedly having a conversation with.

'Don't be coy, Dozy! I know you well enough by now! You're just as uncompromising as I am when it comes to disciplining the so-called "rising stars." Sure, I may do it more often, and sure, you may not make as much of a show of it as I like to, but that doesn't change the fact that, ultimately, we're cut from the same cloth, you and I. More in common than not, I'd say. In fact, that's probably why we're so good at getting under each other's skin, eh?'

Nonsense. They couldn't have been more different. But saying as much would only provoke further irritating remarks, no doubt. He wanted to move the subject back to something more utilitarian. The slowed down mayhem before him was still inching closer. He'd have to decide what to do about it soon. 'You should be aware that if you do manage to kill Germal, I will require tremendous compensation. He has proven immensely useful to me. Replacing him will not be a simple task.'

'Hmm! Sounds like a you problem!'

'I will ensure that it is yours, as well.'

'Ugh, come on. What am I even supposed to do for you, huh? Every time I offer you a favor, you tell me to screw off! Kinda hard to compensate you when you're always acting like such an unpleasable ass.'

'That is because your "favors" are always poisoned.'

'They are not!'

'Lies upon lies.'"

"3789

‘You’re impossible to work with sometimes, y’know that? I don’t know how Suresh did it so much. Did he just have a much higher tolerance for your abuse, or were you actually a nicer guy back then, huh? Tell me, please.’

‘Hardly. He hated me far more than you do now.’

‘Psh! That’s difficult to believe!’

‘He plotted my death constantly. You only do that occasionally.’

‘Eheh! Maybe that was just how he demonstrated his affection!’

‘If that is so, then perhaps this entire mess is the same. Perhaps Germal is secretly enamored with you.’

And to Dozer’s muted surprise, that actually gave the Mad Demon pause. A brief silence intervened before Morgunov picked the conversation back up.

‘...Y’know, I hadn’t even considered that.’

Dozer might’ve sighed if he could have. Of course, on the rare occasion when he’d deigned to make a joke, this idiot would take it seriously. He didn’t know whether to feel further amusement or merely pity.

‘I mean, he DID try to recruit me,’ said Morgunov. ‘And he nearly believed me when I said sure! You might be on to something!’

Pity. He definitely felt pity now. What a chaotic fool.

‘Shame I promised I’d kill him. Too late to go back on my word now, even for a secret admirer. But talk about flattering! A Primordial crush, eh?! How adorable!’

‘What makes you so convinced that Germal is one of these so-called Primordials?’

‘So-called? How much do you know about them? I’ve been studying them, on and off, for centuries. But especially recently.’

‘Personally,’ said Dozer, ‘I have never been convinced they were ever real to begin with. It has always been just stories and myths. And we both know how those propagate themselves over the eons. How they stretch the truth and exaggerate. How they become narrative tools, more than anything else. To strike fear in the weak and discourage undesirable behavior.’

‘Oh, so you just think it’s all a buncha hooey, huh?’

‘Even if not, why should we worry over them? In their own tales, they were, in the end, as nothing before power of the Void.’

‘That’s what I’m sayin’! And that’s also why I hope they’re real, too! So I can bring ‘em down a peg! I gotta tell ya, if it turns out that ol’ Germy actually ISN’T a Primordial after all this, then I am gonna be in SUCH a sour mood! Warnin’ ya now, pal! If that happens, ya better not bother me for a while, unless you’re spoilin’ for a real fight!’

Hmph. A tempting notion."

"3790

‘Anyway, I should relax. Shouldn’t get too worked up about something tha hasn’t even happened yet. Tell me what’s been goin’ on with you, old man! We shouldn’t waste this opportunity to bring each other up to speed on everything!’

Ugh. Unfortunately, he was correct about that. This Void State was not something that they could harness at will. It was an emergent phenomenon that only manifested during furious clashes. As much as he might’ve liked to ignore Morgunov’s rambling--or at least postpone it for another occasion after the battle--that would not be a very efficient use of their time.

‘I encountered the Mendocava on the Gettira Plains of Ardora.’

‘Oooh! The skeleton guys?! Our undead cousins?!’

‘You sound even more surprised than I expected. Did your men tell you nothing of what my forces have been up to?’

‘Oh, they probably did. And I probably wasn’t listening. Been kinda busy with my own stuff, lately, y’know? Startin’ a war ‘n all. And besides, I’d rather get the details from the horse’s mouth! Which is



you, big fella!

'Do you know anything about the Mendocava that might prove useful to me?'

'Mm, well, now, lemme think here... Haven't thought about those guys in an Age. But I do recall studying them fairly extensively for a while. Back when I was just an uppity little snot, myself. Historically, the Mendocava are something of an anomaly. They pop up every now and then, cause some sort of ruckus, only to disappear for centuries thereafter. Or longer, even. And this, despite many curious historians' and adventurers' best efforts to locate and learn more about them. I remember reading one sad book about a guy who spent his whole life searching for them. Literally, his whole life. From when he was a child until he penned his final work on his death bed. Never encountered them even once. And yet, here you are, stumbling onto them by total accident!'

'Lucky me.'

'Benefits of living so long, eh? Now you're makin' me want to encounter them, myself!'

'Join my campaign in Ardora, and you will.'

'Huh?! You're really offering me that?! How unexpected! They must be annoying the shit out of you over there!'

'Not just them. The Jaskadan Forest and the Dulvani, too. It has all devolved into quite the tedious affair. One I'd see resolved sooner rather than later, if at all possible.'"

"3791

'Ah. The Dulvani. Hmm. The Dulvani and the Mendocava. Never knew of a connection between them.'

'I do not know if there is one,' said Dozer. 'I've not uncovered any communication between them, but admittedly, matters are still unclear.'

'Sounds like some interrogations are in order.'

'Indeed. I was hoping to employ a softer touch with the Dulvani, but if

you kill Germal, that option may become untenable.'

'Softer touch? You mean like asking them nicely for information? Saying "pretty please?"'

'Better than wasting resources on a needless fight.'

'Bah. Resources, shmee-sources. You're always so obsessed about that. Resources are meant to be used! Not hoarded and hoarded for some rainy day that'll never come!'

'It'll never come, will it? Look around, fool. This very day seems quite rainy indeed.'

'Oh, please. You're not actually worried about this little tussle, are you?'

'I am not, but that is beside the point. Crises have a way of sneaking up on the unprepared and careless, such as yourself. This situation still has the potential to begin spiraling.'

'Mm, I disagree. Now that we've both entered the Void State, these poor saps are all pretty well screwed. Doomed. Hecked, even! Our reaction times are through the roof. We can talk as much as we want. Assess the battlefield as much as we want. Coordinate our attacks as much as we want. Even plan far into the future as much as we want! In fact, I'd say that not only is this fight already over, it's also the beginning of far bigger problems for the rest of the world! Eheh!'

'Your arrogance will be your undoing, one day.'

'Promises, promises! You keep telling me that, and yet it keeps not happening! At this rate, they'll get you before they get me! And then who'll be the fool, huh?!'

'Still you.'

'Hmph! Anyway, those guys are gettin' awfully close to you over there. You gonna do something about that, or what?'

'Still mulling it over.'

'Hah! What, are you thinkin' you can withstand this simultaneous assault from Sanko and Lamont when you're already off balance?'

'I know I can. It is just a matter of whether I want to or not.'

'Tough talk! Wanna make it interesting?'

'...What do you have in mind?'

'I'll bet you two Judicators that they're about to send your old ass flying.'

'Two? Of the winner's choosing?'

'Of course.'

'Do you even have two Judicators in your entire army that I would want in mine?'

'I don't know. Do I?'"

"3792

The fool was playing it up now, Dozer knew. When it came to the men working under him, Morgunov was not nearly as flighty or mercurial as he wanted people to think. It was part of the game that he played as the leader of so many absolute lunatics. An idiotic strategy, to be sure, but one that had somehow managed to keep his half of Abolish from collapsing in on itself dozens of times over.

'Don't try that with me,' said Dozer. 'I know you obsess over all of your men's abilities and accomplishments, down to the middle ranks at least. And Judicators are far above that.'

'Nah, nah, maybe I used to be that way, but I've been out of sorts for years. Too busy workin' on my inventions and stuff. I barely know who's who, anymore!'

'You just don't want to tell me who your best are. Afraid you'll lose your favorites over a trifling wager. Which, to use one of your favorite words, is quite cowardly of you.'

'Hoh. Ahh... The c-word, is it? Resorting to that now?'

'If the shoe fits.'

'Well, too bad! Not fallin' for it, this time! The wager is for the winner's choosing, right? So if I do lose, then that means you have to pick them yourself! Not get me to do it for you! Lazy bastard!'

Hmph. Unfortunately for Morgunov, it would likely make no difference. 'I want the Crazy Bull and the Jackrabbit.'

'Agh, you bastard. Why even say all that, huh? When you already knew who my favorites were!'

'Why would I pass up an opportunity to point out your hypocrisy?'

'Prick! C'mon, sure you don't want someone else?! How about the Man of Crows?'

'The Man of Crows is dead.'

'Ah. Heard about that already, huh? Your spies've been busy.'

Agh. A mistake, Dozer realized too late. He shouldn't have let slip that he knew about that. Morgunov had said that as a trap for him. A fool as always, yes, but the man was still, at times, a clever fool. 'I cannot help it if your men like me more than you. When they come to me with information, should I turn them away? Punish them for their ambition? I think not.'

'Okay, now THAT'S bullshit. My men don't come to you and yours for anything. Or if they do, it's to try and swafferdonk your boys out of some resource or another. You're just tryin' to prevent me from hunting down the moles you've sent over.'

'Delude yourself however you like.'

"3793

'Alright, well, if I win,' said Morgunov, 'then I want the Black Hand and the Demonic Tornado. Everyone already thinks that guy works for me anyway, so we might as well make it official.'

'The latter is fine. The former is not.'

'Whoa, whoa, whoa, we just went over this! You don't get a say! It's my choice!'

'If I told Ito that he now works for you, he would commit suicide. In fact, I recall him telling you as much himself.'

'Oh, I remember! That's why it'd be funny! I wanna see if he'd really do it!'

'Of course he would. I will not abide such wastefulness. Pick someone else.'

'Psh. Fine! Hmm!' The Mad Demon paused for a snicker. 'The Monster of the East!'

'He is not a Judicator.'

'So demote him! C'mon! It'd be hilarious!'

It actually might, Dozer thought. 'No. Pick seriously.'

'The Liar of Lyste, then!'

'He is not a Judicator, either.'

'Eh, he might as well be! Promote him! Hell, it wouldn't even BE a promotion! More like a side-motion! A transfer! C'mon! Imagine the look on his face!'

'Pick someone you actually wish to use and not kill.'

'What if I promised to let him live?'

'For as believable as that would be, you might as well promise to never speak again.'

'Tch! You're as bad as Bool, y'know that? I swear I'm gonna find your sense of humor, one of these days!'

'I am about to move. If you do not choose, the bet is off.'

'Alright, alright! I want Lucky!'

Dozer might've blinked at that if he could have. Lucky? That was probably the least accomplished Judicator in his entire army. His moniker--if it could even be called that--stemmed from his reputation of supposedly failing upward. Why in the world this idiot pick him? Did he know something that Dozer didn't?

Agh. After all this back-and-forth, however, he didn't feel like questioning it, nor did he have any real justification to refuse like he had with the others. 'Fine.'

And he returned the majority of his attention to the present world.

To the avalanche of destruction heading his way.

A torrential wall of mud and water. A dozen spears of jagged ice, all spinning with such force that the wind and water around them distorted with tornadic fury.

Everything fell upon him simultaneously."

"3794

Dozer had said he was "about to move," but the truth was, in fact, the opposite. He intended to prevent his movement entirely. So he just braced himself and took it. The window of response was short, but within it, he pumped the inertia of his body up to even greater heights. As much as he could with what little time was available.

The force against his body was tremendous. A tidal wave crashing against a cliffside, trying to break it apart. Tear off a chunk. Pull it into the ocean.

And it didn't stop, either. After the initial impact, it turned into a storm unto itself, focused entirely on him. Swirling, lashing, swarming.

Dozer barely budged. Even suspended in midair, with nothing to brace himself against but his own power, the attack pushed him hardly a foot backwards before turning into a swarm.

Satisfactory. The bet was his.

Sanko and Lamont did not realize that they had just disappointed Morgunov, however. Nor would they have cared one iota. They resorted to an imprisoning technique, instead.

A wise move. If they could not make him budge, then perhaps they could lock him down.

The temperature plummeted. The water and sediment encased him totally.

A frozen prison, meant to suppress not just his ability to move but even his ability to think.

The numbing of the mind was an especially potent trick against servants. It was the main reason why Iceheart was such a problematic enemy. Wave after wave of servants could be sent against that man, but unless they had a sufficiently powerful method of countering his high-unrivalled ability to manipulate atmospheric temperature, those servants might as well have been normal human beings, for all the damage they would be able to do to him.

What a valuable subordinate he would have made. If only Dozer had found him before Sermung.

Rather than breaking himself out right away, Dozer decided to stay in this prison for a few moments. A bit of peace and quiet was a welcome change of pace in the middle of all this mayhem, he felt.

And he still had the Void State. Which he dove back into.

‘It’s my win, fool.’

Morgunov groaned. ‘You can still talk from in there? Shouldn’t Sanko’s cage be blocking your thoughts from me? What, is she not even empowering it with her soul?’

‘She is. I can sense it.’

‘Then how?!’

‘Because this is the Void State, I suppose.’

‘Because this is bullshit, more like!’

‘Stop looking for excuses to delay your concession. You’ve lost. Admit it.’

‘Agh! Fine!’”

"3795

‘Good,’ said Dozer. ‘Now how much longer should we draw this out?’

‘Mm, getting bored already? We have all the time in the world here. We shouldn’t let it go to waste, y’know.’

‘Yes. So let’s go on with it, then. Tell me of your long-term plans for

this continental war that you started.'

'Long-term plans?'

Dozer wanted to shake his head. 'I knew it. You have none. You started it on a whim, didn't you?'

'Well, I mean, all that geopolitical tension was just sitting there...'

'You really are a fool.'

'Alright, look, man, I wanted to do something that would ruffle a few feathers. And the war provided me with some excellent cover for it. But now I've basically accomplished my objective, so what happens now with the war doesn't really matter to me.'

'Ah. Are you referring to your little escapade in Sair?'

'Got wind of that, huh? Of course you did. How much do you know?'

'Not as much as I'd like. I know you ventured out into the Uego Desert, made Jackson and Lamont look like children, kicked off an incursion into Sair, and then left your incompetent men behind to see things through. Which they have not, of course.'

'What, you disappointed? If you wanted to mount some kind of massive assault on Intar through Sair, then you could have. No one was stopping you from heading over there and picking up where I left off.'

'I have no desire to get involved in your messes. That is almost always how I end up in situations like this one.'

'Oh, come on! I know you're secretly havin' fun, right now! Just embrace it! If I can admit I lost the bet, you can admit to enjoying my company just a little!'

'I'd rather saw off my own hand.'

'That doesn't mean much when you can just grow it back. Anyway, pushing harder into Sair would've been pointless. Yeah, I probably could've conquered it 'n everything, but there's no way I would've held it for very long. Intar would've mobilized once things got bad enough, and I'm sure Sermung would've shown up soon or later and massacred a buncha my boys.'

'Were you not looking to test these "Roberts" of yours against him?'



‘I was, but preferably in a lower-stakes setting, first. Without more data on how they’d perform against him specifically, I’d rather not gamble too much on an all-or-nothing battle. Not yet, anyway.’”  
"3796

‘Good luck with that,’ said Dozer. ‘He’ll never show himself before you unless the stakes are sufficiently high.’

‘Yeah, he’s been a real jerk about that, lately. Even more so than you, actually! And you never do shit! Maybe you could help me test my Roberts out, then!’

‘I don’t think you want me to do that.’

‘Pah! Why? Because you you’d destroy them totally? Big talk, old man! I bet they’re tougher than you think!’

‘Is that another wager I hear?’

‘It might just be!’

‘Interesting. Once we’re done here, bring them to my camp and have them assist against the Mendocava. If they prove useful in concluding my business there, then I will test them for you.’

‘Mm, tempting, tempting! But I feel you’d be getting way more out of this than I would!’

‘We can work out the details of the wager later, once it is assured to occur.’

‘Sure, but I’m still lending you my toys. My toys that I’ve spent years working on, by the way! You gotta give me something more for that kind of assistance!’

‘What do you want?’

‘Hmm! Mmm! How about Lucky?!’

‘Why are you so fixated on him?’

‘Honestly, I dunno! He just seems like a funny little guy! Piqued my

curiosity, somehow!

‘Honestly, you’re lying.’

‘Bah, you always think that!’

‘Because it’s always true.’

‘Is not!’

‘What if I offered some land, instead?’

‘Land? I got plenty of land. What do I need yours for? You’re just being stingy because I expressed an interest in something! That’s so spiteful! Just gimme--’ Morgunov cut himself off, and a beat passed. ‘...You sense that?’

He did. A new presence. Faint but distinct. Even the Void State itself was beginning to shudder. But why?

Because it was preparing.

To welcome another into this place. A third mind capable of existing here.

‘Who is that?’ said Dozer.

‘Can’t tell yet,’ said Morgunov. ‘Ooh, maybe it’s one of these two here. Finally manifesting a presence of their own, hmm?’

Sanko or Lamont? He greatly doubted that, but it was possible, he supposed. Even he and Morgunov still knew very little of this Void State, since it was virtually impossible to study. Neither of them had ever been able to find mention of it in any of the Archives around the world.

Though, admittedly, Morgunov could have been lying about not finding anything. The man liked to claim that he did not hoard knowledge for himself, but Dozer knew better than to take him at his word by now."  
"3797

‘I don’t sense any kind of change in them yet,’ said Dozer.

‘Could still be a ways off,’ said Morgunov. ‘If the Void State is only preparing for the new arrival, then maybe it’s still a few minutes away. Or hours, even! With how long these fights can last, there’s no telling!’

‘If that is so, then it is almost as if the Void State is telling us to kill them both before one of them breaches through.’

‘Eheh. Maybe it is! Do you think the Void cares about the two of us that much?’

Now there was a loaded question. He decided to ignore it. ‘There IS another explanation for this, you know.’

‘Sure. But if it’s Sermung, he wouldn’t already be attuned to the Void State, right? He’d need a bit of time within the fury of battle.’

‘Unless, perhaps, he has been fighting elsewhere.’

‘What, you mean he’s pre-gaming? For a fight against BOTH of us? I mean, that’s just insulting. He wouldn’t want to come into this tired.’

‘Tired? You and I are not tired, and we made it here. Why would he need to be?’

‘Actually, I’m feelin’ pretty winded.’

‘Mm. Pitiful.’

‘Okay, man, I’ve been fighting for like two weeks straight. You don’t get to make fun of me yet. Not until your old ass has been in the fryer for at least as long.’

‘If it is Sermung, then he must be about to teleport in, because I do not sense his presence anywhere nearby.’

‘Tch, I hate that he can do that.’

‘You hate that you were not able to replicate it.’

‘I could’ve! If I’d kept working the problem, I could’ve!’

‘So why didn’t you?’

‘I got distracted.’

‘That is equivalent to failure.’

‘Nuh-uh! A victory delayed is still a victory earned!’

‘Not if Sermung kills you today.’

‘Puh! Worry about yourself, old man.’

‘That was not worry. I assure you.’

‘Whoop. I sense another change. Whoever it is, they’re close now.’

Indeed, Dozer could sense it, too. The Void State was practically trembling. A hidden earthquake, of sorts. Perceptible only to him and Morgunov.

And then there was enough. The new presence began to crystalize, and he could finally tell who it was.

‘Nooo!’ laughed the Mad Demon, disbelief in his tone.

It was a rare moment of shared sentiment between them, because Dozer could hardly believe it himself.

How many years had it been since Sai-hee, the Empress Peacemaker, had decided to make such a bold move as this?"